

# Irish Freethinker

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## The Three Conmen of Corona

*Race and History • Ireland and Slavery • Chernobyl  
Ancient Irish Humanism • Islamic Veil • Normal Sex  
Universal Basic Income • Normality or Alternatives?  
Reductionism • Free Will • Evolution of Morality*

*Freethinker: a person who forms his or her own opinions about important subjects (such as religion or politics) instead of accepting what other people say*



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Deadline for next issue: 12th August**

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### ARTICLES AND DISCLAIMER

Articles will be accepted for publication, in part or whole, according to the space available and at the editor's discretion. 800 words is roughly a page, and so on. Only rarely are articles accepted at more than 2400 words.

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### LETTERS

Letters to the Editor are welcome and need not necessarily be from Humanists. They may be edited for quality and space. Names and addresses will be published unless otherwise requested. Do NOT send text in attachments.

# The Three Conmen of Corona

**T**HE US, the UK and Brazil are the three states with the worst record in coping with the coronavirus pandemic, suffering about half the world's 465,000 deaths. There are many possible explanations for their shared fate, but one major factor is poor political leadership. This crisis has exposed the unfitness to govern of the three main conmen of corona: Trump, Bolsonaro and Johnson.

This slippery trio are demagogic showmen who mistrust experts, scapegoat foreigners, and peddle simple answers to complex problems. Like the Pied Piper of Hamelin who lured children into danger, they can seduce a large number of voters with sweet-sounding promises to 'get things done' and 'make the country great again'. But, unlike the piper who had earlier rid the town of rats, they cannot charm away a real threat posed by a plague.

They clearly failed to display wisdom and competence in dealing with the crisis. All three initially refused to take the Covid-19 threat seriously. Trump compared it to a seasonal flu which would evaporate in the April sunshine. As early as 22nd January he said that "we have it totally under control", a message he constantly repeated over the next two months. On 10th March, as the death toll mounted, he said: "we're doing a great job with it".

Despite the repeated demands of state governors to increase access to testing, the Trump administration failed to respond. About 11,000 people were tested during the first seven weeks of the outbreak — about as many as South Korea was testing every day. A million have become sick, at least 122,000 are dead and 39 million are unemployed partly because of Trump's incompetent leadership, summed up in his suggestion on 23rd April that injecting disinfectant would 'knock it out in a minute'. On 21st June he actually recommended that to avoid bad statistics testing for the virus should be slowed down.

Bolsonaro was even worse. He rejected media 'hysteria' about the dangers and said that Brazilians could swim in excrement and emerge unscathed. He even denigrated the advice of the World Health Organisation to 'test, test, test' on the wholly false grounds that it was encouraging same-sex relationships in four-year-olds and masturbation in children from birth.

This troika of narcissistic clowns is completed by Boris Johnson. In January the government's line was that the risk to the UK was 'low'. In a speech at Greenwich on 3rd February extolling free trade, Johnson attacked Wuhan-style lockdowns. Despite a rising pandemic, a shortage of intensive care beds and inadequate stocks of PPE as a result of 40% austerity cuts, he absented himself from five Cobra meetings and spent late February at the prime minister's country retreat at Chevening. He even boasted on 3rd March that he was still shaking hands with Covid-19 sufferers.

On ITV's *This Morning* on 5th March, he said: "perhaps you would take it on the chin, and allow the disease, as it were, to move through the population" — a clear statement of the fatal policy of herd immunity. He also said that "Things like closing schools and stopping big events perhaps don't work as well as people think". On 7th March he attended a crowded England v Wales rugby match at Twickenham. The go-ahead was also given to a Liverpool v Atletico Madrid Champions League football match on 11th March and the Cheltenham racing festival on 10th-13th March. Both these events were followed by Covid-19 spikes in the surrounding areas.

When the UK lockdown was imposed in March, Opinium found that 65 per cent approved of the government's handling of the crisis, while 23 per cent disapproved — a net rating of plus 42. By mid-June, the figures were: approve 30 per cent, disapprove 48 per cent. A net



rating of minus 18. The 60-point change in the net rating in less than three months is the biggest, fastest shift for any government on any issue. It is clear now that the laissez-faire attitude adopted by Boris was a colossal error of judgment and the UK has paid the price with the largest death toll in Europe.

These three men were elected on the basis of a kind of reality TV politics which appeals to emotion rather than reason, lies rather than the truth, and slogans rather than ideas. A virus is an invisible enemy that cannot be defeated by manipulation, intrigue and fake news. It requires reason, responsibility, hard work and attention to detail — qualities which are totally lacking in these three populist demagogues.

Contrast their inadequacies with the success of a leader like Jacinta Ardern, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, who communicated her message clearly and effectively. On 15th March, when New Zealand had only 100 confirmed cases and no deaths, she closed the country's borders to foreign travellers and made people coming home quarantine for 14 days. Then 10 days later, she introduced full lockdown measures, which were strict by international standards. Only grocery stores, pharmacies, hospitals and gas stations could stay open, vehicle travel was restricted, and social interaction was limited to within households. Testing reached 8,000 a day and a tracer app was released.

By New Zealand's standard of 22 deaths, Ireland — north about 700 deaths and the south 1700 — has not performed well. But they are infinitely better than Great Britain where the rate per 100,000 has been more than twice as high. So we should thank Arlene Foster, Michelle O'Neill and Leo Varadkar for a job fairly well done. They may not have the surface charm of Boris Johnson, but they have displayed a seriousness and competence which he totally lacks. He is simply not fit for political leadership. EDITOR □

# Normal Sex

Roger Kelly

**T**HE recent furore over the TV screening of Sally Rooney's novel *Normal People*, especially from several Catholic archbishops who wanted RTE to ban the series for moral reasons, mainly due to the explicit sex scenes, was quite rightly rejected by Ireland's public broadcaster.

What hypocrisy displayed by the Catholic church considering the history of its use of sex as an adjunct to its religious power. Lest we forget, guilt and sex were, for example, conjoined in the infamous custom of 'churching' which was once widespread amongst Irish women who had children. This meant that before receiving Holy Communion, women who had recently given birth had to be PURIFIED of the stain of sexuality associated with childbirth.

Again, Catholic teaching on contraception and abortion was responsible for a set of outcomes which were as cruel as they were hypocritical. Then there was the creation of the Magdalene Laundries for so-called 'fallen' women, removing them from normal life and using them as a means of turning an economic profit for Catholic orders.

It is totally ironic that historically the Catholic Church which pontificated about the evils of immorality (mainly sexual immorality), contraception, divorce and so on, included all the while – as a shocked public would later discover – many priests and nuns who were buggering little boys, keeping mistresses or burying babies in mass graves.

It is unbelievable and staggering that Catholic clergy and representatives persist with this false morality bashing, considering the damage the Church has inflicted on the emotional and cultural life in Ireland. Even though in the last popu-



Daisy Edgar-Jones and Paul Mescal constructing each other in *Normal People* (BBC/Hulu)

lation census in the Republic, 78.3% stated that they were of the Catholic faith, this does not reflect the vast change in secular and liberal social attitudes towards personal and human relationships as evidenced by the recent referendums on equal marriage, divorce and abortion.

However, to return to the TV series, the love scenes are not pornographic as alleged by clerics but are beautifully filmed and artistic. For once, a young male is portrayed as being sensitive to the needs of his female partner's sexual and erotic desires. Marianne (Daisy Edgar-Jones), the main female character, comes from an abusive family and this has undoubtedly scarred her emotionally, resulting in her feeling unlovable and letting other males sexually abuse her. In contrast, the love making of Connell (Paul Mescal) is not abusive and he refuses to indulge in any S&M out of his love for Marianne.

Rooney's novel explores, not the power of self-determination as many have suggested, but the idea of self as something generated and developed between people or, as Rooney herself has stated, "the way we construct one another".

On a final note, Irish people North and South have a good sense of humour regarding sex. I recall the Bishop Eamon Casey scandal in the 1990s. Casey had fathered a son with the American divorcee Annie Murphy, which led to T-shirts appearing in Dublin with the words: "Wear a condom – just in Casey". □

## *The Planet's Future is up to Us*

(A 'found' poem from Julian Huxley, *The Humanist Frame*)

*IF this seems bleak,  
consider the qualities we can bring:  
the possibilities  
of wonder and delight  
of knowledge and reverence  
creative belief  
and moral purpose  
of passionate effort  
embracing love  
imagination  
and co-operative goodwill.*

[A 'found' poem is a prose passage that with very little or no modification becomes a poem]

# Race and History

## Double Standards

Andy Barr

**T**o many of us, the murder of George Floyd at the hands of a racist cop comes as no surprise. More and more such incidents are being caught on camera and you can only wonder how many more were not filmed. I remember vividly the brutal beating of an innocent black man, Rodney King, in Los Angeles in 2012, when he was hit with the batons of 4 policemen 56 times. They were acquitted, even after the beating was filmed. Rodney was not charged with any criminal offence. On top of a broken leg, multiple bruises, he had burns on his chest from a 50,000 volt stun gun.

Quite rightly, many people have been outraged at the death of George Floyd, with demonstrations all over the world. There is a widespread revulsion and outrage at the contempt of human life shown by the US police force, especially by the racist nature of the beatings and killings, and the long dark history of such violence against Afro-Americans.

However, I've been disturbed by the fact that even worse brutality by police and armed forces in Zimbabwe and South Africa as a form of state oppression is rarely mentioned. I spent 6 years in Zimbabwe shortly after independence from Ian Smith's racist minority regime. Robert Mugabe's 5th brigade slaughtered 20,000 Matabele in a sectarian massacre in 1987. This brutality continued until he was removed and continues with his successor, on an unarmed defenceless people especially opposition activists and protesters. The irrational cruelty carried out by a poorly trained force against the elderly and women is beyond belief.

Are we not seeing double standards here? Is it justifiable to be disgusted by recent events in America, but to remain deafly silent when striking miners in the Marikana mine in South Africa in 2012 are fired upon by black South African police force, killing 34 miners? Imagine the outcry if this happened in the US.

It's about time the world treated the genocide, brutality and atrocities committed by black regimes with the same outrage and condemnation that we are witnessing in the USA today. We are all human beings.



The late Morgan Tsangiria, trade unionist and leader of the Movement For Democratic Change after a beating from Mugabe's thugs



The statue of Edward Colston being dumped into Bristol harbour

## Historical Amnesia

Editor

GO into any bookshop in England and the most popular historical subjects on display are the Tudors and the two World Wars. The fascination with the Tudors seems to lie in indulging the effusions of sex, violence and power which characterised court life in the period. It is also the product of a belief in English exceptionalism, the core of which is a feeling of superiority to other nations that reached its peak in the so-called 'golden age' of Elizabeth. The latest manifestations of this Tudormania are the novels of Hilary Mantel, which sell in their millions. It is a kind of refined soap opera: an upper class version of *Dallas*, *Dynasty* or *Game of Thrones*. It is all very superficial and, in a sense, a way of avoiding any deep historical awareness of the past.

The same applies to the other obsession with the World Wars, especially World War Two. In both, Britain was on the winning side and, in the latter case, for a time, stood proudly alone against Nazi Germany. Again, it feeds the sense of exceptionalism. And, again, it avoids a proper analysis of historical forces. It also ignores the fact that, as far as campaigns are concerned, the British contribution was largely disastrous: the Norway fiasco, the Dunkirk evacuation, the fall of Singapore, Operation Market Garden, and so on. Without the USA and the Soviet Union, it is hard to see how Britain would have had much to celebrate.

And this is the point in view of the current issue of race. The darker side of English history is largely neglected, in particular slavery. Oh yes, we often hear of Wilberforce and the abolition of the slave trade. But there is little emphasis on the previous two centuries and Britain's role in slavery. Similarly, the history of modern British racism is largely buried.

It is surely time for some serious historical restoration.

Historical amnesia is not confined to Britain. John Mitchel, a leading light of 19th century Irish nationalism who escaped to America, was a supporter of slavery, calling blacks 'an innately inferior people'. There is a statue of him in Newry (right). Perhaps a demolition is overdue. There is a petition to take it down at change.org. □



# Normality or Alternatives?

**Tom Woolley**

**W**ILL things go back to ‘normal’ after the pandemic? Many have been asking this question. Governments, inept as usual, have borrowed vast amounts of money which we will all have to pay for through increased taxes and more austerity. Dominic Cummings has been saying openly for some time that the Tories do not care about poor people, but do they care about anyone? Is there a way to organise society that is more people friendly and can alternative ways of doing things actually work?

*“I am sensible, that, according to the past experience of mankind, friendship is the chief joy of human life and moderation the only source of tranquillity and happiness.” – David Hume, Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, 1748*

With a few silly exceptions, the pandemic has shown the positive side of most people, with an increase in volunteering, neighbours supporting each other and a fantastic recognition of the heroism for the many badly paid and badly treated people who work in the health service (not that long since nurses were on strike). This has led some people to ask if the collapse of capitalism is imminent and if the massive reduction in emissions from a reduction in travel can continue or whether things will simply return to normal with increased consumption and overseas holidays. It has leaked out that the failures in the availability of protective equipment were partly due to the creeping and secretive American privatisation of the health service.

There has been an opportunity during lockdown for people to reflect on the state of the world and many idealistic and optimistic ideas have emerged and been discussed. This has been well articulated by *Collaboration for Change* (<https://www.cfctogether.org/>):

*“There is a fundamental tension at the heart of modern society. It is that our ways of being and doing no longer support what we aspire to. We see an abundant future built on a wealth of alternative approaches we know can work, but have yet to find a way for them to be adopted more widely”.*

Originating in Derry, CFC extends out all over Ireland, and aims to provide a platform for progressive organisations. Their co-designed *Reflection for the Common Good* reflects the Tilburg Declaration:

*“We urge for a radical change of our economies, a change that will substantially intervene in the scope and form of our production and trading systems, and money generation and consumption patterns. This change is*



*only possible if supported by a broad alliance of social forces. We invite everyone, ......., to take a part in this alliance and take responsibility for the transition towards a truly sustainable economy based on solidarity”.*

Humanists in particular have always understood the value of putting people first and recognising the value of human collaboration, but is this still a naive and utopian prospect as we are still surrounded by bigotry and blockers particularly from politicians, policy makers and religious leaders who think they know better?

There is no space here to explore all the many possible alternatives that might be possible: co-operative housing, one planet living in the countryside, community owned energy and building and many, many, more (<http://www.coopalternatives.coop/>), but one initiative in Northern Ireland is worth looking at in more detail, and that is the idea of establishing a ‘Mutual Bank’.

A campaign called ‘Our Money’ was launched in 2019 and takes advantage of recent legislation which makes the formation of a fully mutual bank possible, thus offering a different model for banking and financial services. Dissatisfaction with the High Street banks has led many to save their money in Credit Unions while not realising that Government regulations force Credit unions to keep their assets in the high street banks.

A mutual bank will be fully co-operatively owned by its customers and, according to its promoters, will provide lending to Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), which make up most of Northern Ireland businesses. The Mutual Bank can work alongside Credit Unions, complementing their services. The mutual bank, according to its promoters will be ethical because lending and investment decisions will be made in the economic, social and environmental interests of the local region; .....won’t be driven by profit; won’t answer to external shareholders or pay bonuses or incentives to executives; and will have a more equitable salary structure than the high street banks.

‘Our Money’ is working alongside the Community Savings Bank Association (CSBA), a network across the UK with plans for 19 regional banks including Northern Ireland (<https://ourmoney.works/>).

If we are to have a more humane society then we need to support alternative people centred ethical initiatives. Even small co-operative and collaborative steps can create a better future. These challenge conventional institutions, and this will not be easy in Northern Ireland’s conservative society, but many people here are looking for progressive alternatives. □

# The Islamic Veil: Should it be Banned?

Andy Barr

**T**HE Islamic veil is a common subject in media and political debate. Why do women veil? Do they do so freely? Is it good or bad? The Hebrew Bible refers to veiling in Genesis 24:64-65, which suggests that women of Babylonia and Judea veiled and indeed in the New Testament, 1 Corinthians 11:4-15, some Christians requested women to cover their heads. The Muslim Tuareg men of Morocco also veil.

There are over 1 billion Muslims in the World, and some veil while others don't. The majority in the UK do not. Hijab is the most common means of veiling both in the UK and America, and feminists are quick to judge the wearing of the Hijab as oppression of women and that no free woman would choose to wear a veil, though many claim that this is not the case.

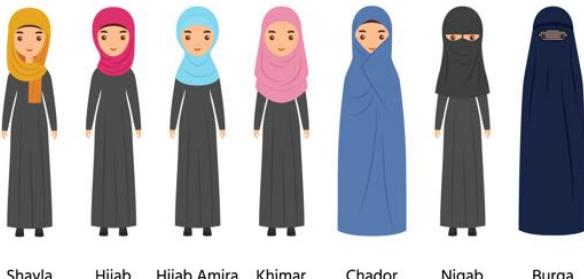
In fact there is little agreement among Muslims about the ethics of veiling. Some argue it is about modesty and shyness rather than obedience. When I have spoken to Muslim men about Islamic women's dress, I am informed that the effect of women's bodies on men and the danger of immoral sexual encounters is the reason. They argue that sex is important but only in marriage and has to be highly regulated. Men's sexual desire has to be chortled and veiling prevents inappropriate arousal. The veil is like a mobile honour zone, and a way to stop men's sexual urges running wild. I would have thought it would have the opposite effect in that what is forbidden is more desirable and the wonder of what is below those robes.

What has the Islamic sacred texts to say on the matter? There are two texts to consider: the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith*. Muslims consider the *Qur'an* as the record of God's word revealed in Arabic to the Prophet Mohammad from the year 610 to 632. The *Hadith* became an important scriptural source, second only to the *Qur'an*, written after the death of the Prophet and based on oral traditions passed down by word of mouth. The *Hadith* is what the Prophet said or did and are used to fill in the gaps where the *Qur'an* is silent.

This is where things get very confusing as the *Qur'an* says little about the veil and few *hadith* deal with women's attire. One *hadith* says that a woman's body should be completely covered, but says nothing about head covering, just as the Biblical interpretations vary between different sects. In fact both the *Qur'an* and *Hadith* simply do not give definitive answers.

Shari'a law is often blamed for the oppression of Muslim women. Shari'a is an Arabic word whose original meaning was "path to the water hole". Today it is the complete, infallible, universal law of God. After the Iranian

Types of Islamic Veils



Shayla Hijab Hijab Amira Khimar Chador Niqab Burqa

revolution the state meted out punishment for improper veiling, including 74 lashes, 2 months jail or a fine of 55USD. The majority Saudi legal opinion is that the entire body should be covered except for hands and eyes. The Taliban state that women should have full body covering with a lace opening for the eyes and men also have a dress code – a beard longer than a fist and a head covering. Punishments, often in public, were severe for disobeying,

During colonial times the European powers controlled 84% of the globe, and so the majority of Muslims alive today live in countries that were former European colonies. For many colonists, unveiling Muslim women was the first step towards civilising them. This didn't work and Islamic dress often became a symbol of the struggle against the colonial power. For the FLN, the liberation movement in Algeria, the veil was a symbol of their liberation cause and their resistance to French occupation.

It was often thought that Islamic dress would disappear with economic development and the advancement of women. What is confounding to even many Muslims is that many newly veiled women are educated, urban and career orientated. Woman would argue that "When I wear these clothes I feel secure; I am a good mother and wife; and men know not to flirt with me".

Veiling in schools in recent years has sparked heated debates. Attempts to ban the headscarf in French schools have been widely discussed, but countries in the Middle East and Asia have had their own share of controversies on the subject. There have been bans on the headscarf in Turkey and Egypt. I was recently in Uzbekistan where religious clothing in schools and universities is banned as in France. This demonstrates the difficulty of ensuring the right to religious freedom and other human rights at the same time. It will be interesting to see how 'The French Veil Affair' pans out considering France's Muslim community is Europe's largest. Its ban includes Jewish, Christian and Hindu religious symbols.

In conclusion, Islamic dress can be confusing to both Muslim and non-Muslim alike. In 2004 *Human Rights Watch* argued that headscarves do not pose a threat to public safety, order, or morals, and they do not impinge on the rights of others. They are not inherently dangerous or disruptive to order, and do not undermine the educational function.

There may be specific circumstances in which state interests justify regulation of religious dress, such as when the dress would directly jeopardise individual or public health safety. These concerns, however, cannot justify a flat prohibition. □

# An Old Idea Whose Time has Come

Eamon Murphy

**A**MONG the many ideas that have received notable airtime over the last few months, as a possible way of doing things differently in the post-Covid-19 world, is Basic Income. The question is being asked in some quarters: is it an old idea whose time has finally come?

There are many different explanations of what Basic Income actually is, but most people can agree on a couple of things. It is a guaranteed payment from the state to every resident of a country and, in theory at least, it should be sufficient to live a frugal but decent lifestyle without additional income.

It is essentially an alternative way for governments to provide welfare to their citizens, in place of the means-tested and conditional welfare systems currently in place in most of the developed world.

Basic Income differs from the current system of welfare provision in both jurisdictions on this island in that neither systems generally ‘do’ universal and unconditional payments (child benefit is a notable exception). Most welfare payments are paid on the basis of a past connection to the labour market or a means test, or else the recipient must be in some other way unable to provide for themselves.

Basic Income is not a new idea, having been proposed in one form or another many times over the last three centuries. Thomas Paine, one of the founding fathers in the United States, was a proponent and even Richard Nixon briefly toyed with implementing a form of it.

The idea gets pushed and proposed in many different guises, but most of these forms share some key characteristics. First, as already noted, Basic Income payments are unconditional cash transfers from the State. There’s no means test, no requirement to seek work, and indeed no requirement or condition of any kind. People receive it regardless of other income or wealth they or their spouse might have. It is always tax-exempt, and in most proposed models, all *other* forms of income would be subject to tax. Most proponents wish to see the Basic Income payment set at a level that allows a decent standard of living.

In the majority of proposals, Basic Income would replace most or all core social welfare payments, and often all tax credits and tax reliefs too. Certain non-core welfare payments might be maintained in order to target specific issues or support certain groups that are particularly vulnerable or at risk of poverty.

As implied above, entitlement to Basic Income is not affected by the acquiring of other income. Indeed, individ-



uals are encouraged to top up their earnings from other sources (mainly employment, of course) and, unlike under traditional welfare systems, the payment of Basic Income is not affected by changes in employment status. In this way, Basic Income differs fundamentally from the traditional welfare state model, giving people the freedom to engage in productive activity (or not) without having to meet any criteria outlined by the welfare provider.

Perhaps almost as important as what Basic Income *is* lies in what it is *not*: it is not intended to be a sole means of alleviating poverty, nor is it an alternative to publicly funded services. Indeed Basic Income would work best in a system where the majority of public services like health and education are free or heavily subsidised, as then the level of Basic Income payment required to give a decent standard of living would be far lower.

Interestingly, Basic Income has found support on both the left of the political spectrum – where proponents view it as an acknowledgement of the right of all citizens to an unconditional share of the wealth of the state – and also on the right, where the removal of unemployment traps and the simplification of the welfare system (as well as the reduced intrusion into citizens’ personal lives by government) appeals to many.

For some, the idea of ‘money for doing nothing’ conflicts with our most basic assumptions about work, income and personal responsibility, and how they interact. Yet forms of guaranteed income already exist to some extent in Ireland, such as in child benefit. More than 90 per cent of older people receive a pension from the State. Disability payments and unemployment benefit assist people in times of lost income. All employed people receive thousands of euros a year in tax credits. Maternity benefit supports those caring for new-borns. Basic Income is, in some ways, a reconceptualisation of these measures. —>

These payments mentioned above, and indeed current welfare systems more generally, were originally implemented because they seemed the most efficient way to target a particular issue or incentivise certain behaviour. The result is the building over time of an unwieldy system of payments, credits and reliefs, with attaching conditions that often discourage productive activity, prohibit the pursuit of altruistic action, or trap people in a cycle of poverty. A system of Basic Income would be more efficient and would remove many of these anomalies.

Other arguments in favour of Basic Income revolve around predictions of what the economy of the future may look like. The structure of work and employment is changing. Many full-time jobs in the modern economy provide neither a living wage nor guaranteed hours. The traditional labour market faces technological disruption, and already we are seeing some skills being made obsolete, and others becoming less valuable. Will this lead to a fall in wages or mass unemployment in the labour market of the future? And if so, can we continue to implement social welfare as we do currently, with individuals forced to engage in employment programmes and meet conditions to get their dole payment? Many see Basic Income as 'a welfare system fit for a 21st century economy' and indeed a system of Basic Income would underpin living standards in a precarious labour market.

Again, our society is gradually ageing. In the future, there will be a requirement for more people in caring roles. A system of Basic Income would allow people to care for family and neighbours without having to account for their time to the State. Other advantages include greater ease of administration, with fewer payment types, reduced means-testing, and no stigmatisation for recipients.

Basic Income would also be good for the environment, as it would facilitate a society and an economy that does not have full paid employment as an overarching goal. Full employment relies on ever-expanding GDP growth, which we know conflicts with our concerns for the environment.

Would a guaranteed income make people lazy? Basic Income pilot projects in societies as diverse as Namibia and Canada have produced surprisingly positive results around employment take-up. And most recently, a trial in Finland among long-term unemployed people showed that those welfare recipients who were told their welfare payment would be unconditional for the next 2 years were actually more likely to take up work than those who continued under the status quo. The explanation for this is simple enough: employment is always worth pursuing under Basic Income, as the payment will be received *in addition* to money earned through employment, rather than withdrawn as under the current welfare system. The status quo often forces people to decide between low paid work and remaining idle, whereas with a guaranteed payment there's always a benefit from taking up employment (interestingly, the Finnish trial showed immigrants were more than twice as likely as the wider

test group to take up work compared to the control group).

The idea of Basic Income buys into the notion that our shared moral responsibility means meeting the basic needs of others. It also is a way of acknowledging that all citizens contribute to the common good of society and are therefore entitled to the proceeds of that society.

Many Basic Income trials have also produced impressive improvements in well-being for participants. In the aforementioned Finnish trial, recipients reported better mental health, less stress, more self-confidence, more confidence in their future, greater trust in other people and in social institutions, and even better cognitive functioning than the control group. A trial run in Canada in the 1970s showed an increase in people (mainly young men) continuing in education, and a fall in hospital admissions and mental health consultations among participants. There was also a fall in crime rates.

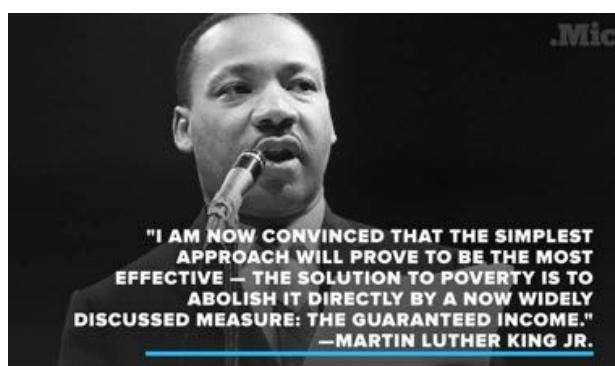
These findings make sense. Instinctively most people would assume that areas such as health, education, poverty and crime would improve if basic needs are being catered for. If you have a guaranteed Basic Income you're capable of taking better care of yourself, you have less incentive to leave education, and less incentive to engage in criminal activity. You are also likely to be less stressed, all other things equal.

### ***Basic Income would also be good for the environment, as it would facilitate a society and an economy that does not have full paid employment as an overarching goal***

The standard objection to Basic Income is that it is unaffordable. But this depends largely on what parameters are set. Affordability depends on the level of the payment, which other benefits it replaces and which remain, and what the eligibility conditions are.

Certainly, there would need to be changes to the income tax system. But a well-structured system could create an income guarantee than is income-neutral for many groups (such outcomes depend on the policy goals of the implementing government). And remember, the idea is that Basic Income would *replace* core social welfare payments; Basic Income is instead of, not on top of, pensions, the dole, child benefit, maternity benefit and so on.

No social policy initiative is inherently unaffordable. Everything depends on how it is structured. It often simply a question of values. So where do ours lie? □



# The Evolution of Human Morals

Peter O'Hara

**L**INE FRIEDLICH and Flannery has discussed how humans have moral rules, and their origin within the humans themselves – how a god is not necessary for humans to be moral. Moral thoughts and moral behaviour are due to evolution.

Still, many people who believe in god(s) say in public that humans can only be moral if they follow the moral rules from a god. Some people think that otherwise each individual person would just be limited in their choice of moral codes – so they would each choose different moral paths. In this view, if religion has little or no influence on society, society's morals will deteriorate, and this will lead to moral anarchy.

We humans face this claim often. We need to show in a fairly simple argument how moral principles and humans acting morally have developed through evolution, that the moral behaviour of humans will continue when religion has no influence, and that there is not a risk of moral anarchy. I give such an account here.

Humans evolved morals because we live as a very social species. And we manage to be so social because we communicate by speech, which can give a huge variety of messages. We also communicate by facial expression, and humans have a much more complicated set of muscles of facial expression than any other animal.

## 1. SPEECH

We humans began to speak some hundreds of thousands of years ago. Speaking may have begun as accounts of the day's actions in gathering food, which our ancestors would give to other humans at home in the evening. Early speech may also have included instructions on how to do this gathering, and how to do other tasks. The accounts on returning home would likely include when one of the humans was killed or injured, or came close to some danger. The subsequent conversations would likely include comments on the awfulness of the death or the near miss. This would result in people talking about how they think people should not die, about how to reduce the chances of this happening on future trips out of the village or camp, and about which (if any) individual human did or did not do the things that would save another human from death or injury.

This kind of talk was, I think, the start of moral speech and the formulating of moral rules. It is clear that animals other than humans behave morally, so our ancestors just before the start of speech also had moral behaviour. Talking about morals was most likely a very early topic of conversation. Our ancestors likely became much more conscious of morals after they began to talk.

Talking, including using words to refer to things, followed by composing abstract words, leads to thinking,

which may have started as humans for the moment alone talking to themselves about subjects of previous conversations with others. Speech probably led to thinking.

## 2. NOT TO MISTREAT A CHILD

This is the strongest moral rule among humans. With a weaker principle, a species would go extinct, so the rule exists because of evolution. Of the many in the news that arouse very strong emotions among people, I have noticed that what arouses the strongest anger and concern is when somebody has harmed or neglected a child. This appears, for example, after news of individuals sexually or physically abusing a child, and after news of organisations covering it up, delaying or obstructing prosecution, and not preventing further abuse.

Now suppose that there had been a species of primate, a primate, a hominid primate, with speech, in every respect much like us Homo sapiens. Suppose that this species had a slightly weaker version of the moral rule to look after and protect the children that we the present humans have. I am fairly sure that this species would have become extinct. The adults would have been slightly less or carefree on some occasions, and their children would have died more often. A sufficient amount of 'lethality' in the moral rule about looking after children, compared to us humans, would have led that species' population to decline at each generation, and they would have become extinct.

The moral rule to protect and not to harm children is the strongest moral rule among humans now, as judged by people's emotional responses when someone sharply and seriously breaks that rule. The moral rule to protect children receives favour from evolution, which would cause species with weaker rules to become extinct. This moral rule exists because of evolution.

## 3. LOOKING AFTER OTHER HUMANS

While not as strong as looking after children, the moral rule to look after other humans also has been selected naturally; it has evolved. We humans are social and we have lived in groups, both in the time for which we have accounts preserved in history and, as far as we can determine from archaeology, in the longer time before that.

Many animals that eat other animals have both eyes at the front of the head, to have binocular vision, and to judge the distance of the animals when they want to eat. Many of the animals who are prey have the two eyes looking small to the sides, so that they can see in nearly all directions at once, to detect an animal intending to eat them. This is more important to those animals than detecting distance by sight. We humans binocular other animals and other animals hunt us. We have both eyes at the front of the head, so we cannot alone look all around at once. We survive from our predators in spite of

that by living in groups. We look out for each other against predators and other dangers.

Suppose again that there were a species of animal very nearly like us, with speech and thus discussing their actions and so developing moral rules, but with a weaker moral rule about looking out for the other individual adult humans. More of the adult humans would have died young than died in our species. Fewer adults to look after children would have led to less food, less care, and more deaths among their children. Such a species would most likely have become extinct.

So the moral rule to do good for other humans and to look out for danger to them is nearly as important for our survival and reproduction as the rule not to harm children. This moral rule also exists because of evolution.

#### 4. EVOLUTION OF MORAL RULES

As the strongest moral rule is not to mistreat children, it has one of the most powerful drives within humans to talk and debate about that subject; and thus, about moral things generally. When we evolved speech, we came to talk about what we have done and about what we may do next. We evolved debating the relative merits of different (alternative) moral laws, and also thinking our individual thoughts about morals when we are alone.

This came to include composing moral rules on completely new subjects. Now natural selection caused the rule to protect children to evolve (in other animals as well as in *Homo sapiens*). But because we evolved to

#### We humans have evolved moral rules to look to the safety and survival of our children and our fellow humans

speak, we evolved the ability to change our moral rules from those that were naturally selected under evolution before we came to speak and think.

As we evolved to be good to our children and also to other humans, that benevolent attitude has guided the way in which we compose new moral rules about situations that we never encountered before we began a settled civilisation. We are not under a very close pressure from evolution to be moral about how to allocate money and resources for expensive treatments for diseases that used to kill or seriously disable us, and similar modern moral questions; but we still have the benevolence towards other humans that evolved when our moral rules made the difference between survival and extinction of our species.

#### CONCLUSIONS

So we humans have evolved moral rules to look to the safety and survival of our children and our fellow humans, and in parallel with that we have evolved a benevolent attitude to other humans which informs and guides our new moral rules to have the same benevolence. Humans are the only basis for good moral rules.

When only a few people continue to see moral rules as revealed by a god, the other humans will continue to

follow the rules that they follow now. There is no reason to fear a moral vacuum if many more people believe evolution is correct or if many more people do not believe in a god or in revealed moral rules. Evolution has caused moral behaviour in us. This moral behaviour has been relatively stable over history, or perhaps improved; and so it will continue.

I hope that an account such as this will also help people to have confidence in their own moral capabilities, which will help them in gaining freedom from the perceived need to have a religion. □

#### Us Two

*Wherever I am, there's always Pooh,  
There's always Pooh and Me.  
Whatever I do, he wants to do,  
"Where are you going today?" says Pooh:  
"Well, that's very odd 'cos I was too.  
Let's go together," says Pooh, says he.  
"Let's go together," says Pooh.*

*"What's twice eleven?" I said to Pooh.  
("Twice what?" said Pooh to Me.)  
"I think it ought to be twenty-two."  
"Just what I think myself," said Pooh.  
"It wasn't an easy sum to do,  
But that's what it is," said Pooh, said he.  
"That's what it is," said Pooh.*

*"Let's look for dragons," I said to Pooh.  
"Yes, let's," said Pooh to Me.  
We crossed the river and found a few-  
"Yes, those are dragons all right," said Pooh.  
"As soon as I saw their beaks I knew.  
That's what they are," said Pooh, said he.  
"That's what they are," said Pooh.*

*"Let's frighten the dragons," I said to Pooh.  
"That's right," said Pooh to Me.  
"I'm not afraid," I said to Pooh,  
And I held his paw and I shouted "Shoo!  
Silly old dragons!" - and off they flew.*

*"I wasn't afraid," said Pooh, said he,  
"I'm never afraid with you."*

*So wherever I am, there's always Pooh,  
There's always Pooh and Me.  
"What would I do?" I said to Pooh,  
"If it wasn't for you," and Pooh said: "True,  
It isn't much fun for One, but Two,  
Can stick together, says Pooh, says he. "That's how it  
is," says Pooh.*

A.A. Milne

# Reductionism: A Dirty Word or an Essential Tool?

Alan Tuffery

**T**HE term ‘reductionism’ is often used as a ‘stop word’ to close off discussion and to dismiss some scientific statement. Like all ‘stop words’ – such as homophobic, anti-Semitic or islamophobic – it is regarded by its users as requiring no further argument: the discussion is at an end and the opposition crushed. Reductionism is often given as the reason for resisting the introduction of biological ideas into the social sciences. In both general and specialist uses there is an intention to convey the idea that scientific studies are reductionist and somehow missing something essential which is outside the domain of science. In general discourse that something is often identified as something ‘spiritual’. The social sciences consider that biology misses the critical cultural dimension.

I will start by giving the scientific view of reductionism and explaining its value in investigating the natural world. I will argue that the objections common in the social sciences are based on a misinterpretation of reductionism. Then I’ll consider the objections in more detail and try to show that the social sciences should not fear reductionism: all reasonable forms of reductionism leave adequate freedom within complex systems, such as brains and societies for experience and other cultural influences to act.

## WHAT IS REDUCTIONISM?

Reductionism is the idea that something complex can be largely explained by looking at the elements from which it is made up. There is a hierarchy of complexity in biology. Genes are at the lowest level, followed by the proteins for which they are the instructions. Above them come the various sub-cellular pathways, leading up the cell. After that comes the aggregation of cells into tissues (such as fibrous and lining tissues), which in turn combine to form the various organs which go to make an individual organism. The hierarchy can be extended both upwards and downwards. Moving downwards, we would come to molecules, atoms and finally sub-atomic particles in the weird and wonderful world of quantum physics. Moving upwards, we would come to collections of individuals, societies or ecological communities.

Many phenomena, perhaps especially in biology, are extremely complex. This means that in order to be able to study them, we have to make simplifying assumptions. This use of simplification is common in many forms of enquiry, from philosophy to biology to cosmology. Reductionism in this form is a way of getting a handle on a problem and being able to make useful enquiries (investigators should not lose sight of the fact that they have made a simplifying assumption in the first place).

Generally scientists study the next level down the hierarchy from the phenomenon in which they are interested. Thus neuroscientists interested in the responses of the whole brain may examine the connections between different regions of

the brain, or the activity of the different regions in specific tasks. Richard Dawkins (in Segerstråle, U, 1992, “Reductionism, ‘Bad Science’, and Politics: A Critique of Anti-Reductionist Reasoning”, in *Politics and the Life Sciences*, 11, 199-214) quotes Peter and Jean Medawar who describe reductionism in this sense as ‘perhaps the most successful research stratagem ever devised’.

The principal charge against reductionism is that it maintains that the lowest levels of the hierarchy will explain the highest levels. In other words, that behaviour of an individual human being or a collection of humans could be explained in terms of the behaviour of atoms, or quantum fluctuations of subatomic particles. This is what Daniel Dennett calls ‘greedy reductionism’. It turns out that virtually no scientists are reductionists of this type. Using the reductionist ‘stratagem’ is not the same as commitment to the fundamentalist philosophical idea of ‘greedy reductionism’.

There may be a few extreme particle physicists who argue that, in principle, if we could measure the properties of every atom (or perhaps subatomic particle), we could predict complex phenomena, such as decision-making, intelligence or introversion/extraversion. In fact, this is to misunderstand the nature of a hierarchy. Information from one level is not repeated, point by point, in detail at the next level up. Rather the information is ‘chunked’ or summarised in a relatively crude way with loss of detail. That is, there is a degree of imprecision or ‘noise’ at each stage, so that more than one outcome is possible from a given set of starting conditions.

Dawkins has criticised ‘greedy reductionists’ in characteristically trenchant terms: “*Why do [some] find it necessary to reduce a perfectly sensible belief (that complex wholes should be explained in terms of their parts) to an idiotic travesty (that the properties of a complex whole are simply the sum of those same properties in the parts)? ‘In terms of covers a multitude of highly sophisticated causal interactions, and mathematical relations of which summation is only the simplest. Reductionism, in the “sum of the parts” sense is obviously daft, and is nowhere to be found in the writings of real biologists*” (quoted in Segerstråle, op. cit.).

This ‘misrepresentation’ of reductionism by some social scientists arguing against ‘biologisation’ may be wilful. It is the classic device of stating a rival argument in an extreme or ridiculous form in order to discount it. This is sometimes called ‘setting up a straw man’. Francis Crick, co-discoverer of the structure and coding of DNA: ‘I am getting rather tired of all this talk about reductionism, because much of it is shooting at straw men.’ He rejected the naïve view of reductionism. ‘No reductionist,’ he claimed, ‘would want to explain everything as “merely the nuts and bolts.” It’s the nuts and bolts of how a number of things act together, and, of course, in our brain, it’s a very complex interaction.’ —>

### The Opposition to Reductionism

The essential problem for those who oppose reductionism is that they see it as *determinist*, leaving no room for the effects of experience or culture to affect the development and behaviour of the individual or societies. If we examine the views and motives of the ‘anti-reductionists’ in detail we can see that much of the most vehement objection to the determinist nature of reductionism — at least in biology — seems to have a political basis. Those who are influenced by Marxism and are concerned to maintain a space for society to act upon individuals (‘historical materialism’) regard reductionism as inherently political and conservative, supporting the *status quo* and therefore to be opposed in principle.

Since this argument relies entirely upon the idea that reductionism is determinist, i.e. inflexible, it can be addressed by showing that it is not 100% determinist and that there is room for the environment etc. to influence individuals. This may be called the ‘intervention space’. So let us now consider the degree to which individuals are determined by their genes and hence how big the intervention space is.

### Genetic Determinism

This is the idea individuals are wholly determined by their genetic inheritance. If true, it would leave no space for experience to act — the intervention space would be closed. KJ Mitchell (*Innate: How the Wiring of the Brain Shapes Who We Are*, 2018) has given a very clear and useful discussion of the role of genes in determining behaviour. In fact, rather than genes *determining* a particular trait, they result in a *predisposition* to that trait. The instructions are not minutely detailed and precise but are only general. How a gene is interpreted depends upon all the variability in the cellular and organ systems that interpret the genes. The formation of proteins from genes can be influenced by the cellular machinery responsible for reading the genetic code, and also the environment in which the proteins work.

Thus there are only general instructions for connecting the different parts of the brain. Small, local variations within the brain will lead to local variations in the wiring. This leads to considerable variation of outcome, even when starting from the same set of genetic instructions, as in identical twins. It is clear that identical twins, while extremely similar, are not identical. Not only are there differences in facial symmetry but also in many other traits, physical and behavioural. For example, it is known that in twins with the same genetic predisposition to schizophrenia only one may develop the condition. The difference in outcome from the same genetic starting point is due to ‘noise’ in the system of genetic information, right through to differences in the twins’ subsequent experience.

### The Role of Experience

We have established that the same genes may produce different outcomes because of all the local variations in the biological ‘machinery’ and the effects of the individual’s experience. By ‘experience’, I mean the totality of events that happen to an individual, many of which arise from social interactions. Much of this evidence comes from the study of identical and non-identical twins and adoption studies which have allowed an estimate of the influence of genes, familial environment or the ‘non-shared environment’.

There is plenty of evidence that different experiences alter the wiring/connections within the brain. Thus animals raised in a visually-deficient environment have a poorer ability to interpret visual signals. In humans, a linguistically poor environment at a critical stage of development will lead to a poorer language skills.

The experiences of individuals vary greatly. Even within a family, birth order may be important. The first-born is an only child and later siblings enter a family where there are already children. These may be important differences. As children grow, they spend more time away from the family, perhaps at different schools or doing different after-school activities. The individual’s reaction to these different experiences contribute to the formation of the individual.

Although Mitchell has pointed out that it is misleading to refer to genes ‘determining’ traits, rather than ‘predisposing’ to a trait, I will continue to use the term ‘determine’ for convenience, but with this caveat in mind. At most, genes contribute 50% to the ‘determination’ of a trait. This means that about 50% of the ‘determination’ of a trait is susceptible to modification by experience. This is the ‘intervention space’.

Even those who argue that free will is a fiction allow that the ‘chain of causation’ may be altered for future events by the different experiences. In other words, we can *choose* experiences (pace determinists of a philosophical kind) and as a result reframe the events of our lives and alter our

future behaviour. This intervention space is critical to human progress because it is the space in which education and the talking therapies operate: these are the processes which allow us to alter our patterns of thinking and behaviour to meet different circumstances.

To conclude, I argue that ‘anti-reductionists’ are wrong to fear reductionism. A significant part of the fear is based on a misinterpretation. Reductionism is a useful, if not essential, research stratagem when dealing with complex phenomena. Asking questions at the next level down on the scale of complexity may enable approaches that shed light on the phenomenon of interest. Of course investigators should always keep in mind the limitations of the reductionist method and avoid over-interpretation of results. But that’s just good scientific practice.

Some sociologists seem to be clinging —at some visceral level — to the dualist idea that consciousness, mind or other complex phenomena are somehow beyond the material world. Or perhaps they hang on to the idea that humans are special and reject the irrefutable conclusion of modern biology that humans are derived from and related to the rest of the animal kingdom, and hence to all living things.

Perhaps the social sciences would do well to embrace the important ideas of biology, such as evolution by natural selection. After all, human behaviour, whether of individuals or of societies, is a product of the biology and it seems perverse to exclude the ideas that that discipline offers and to maintain — however subliminally — that human behaviour is not subject to examination by scientific methods. □

# Ireland and Slavery

Brian McClinton

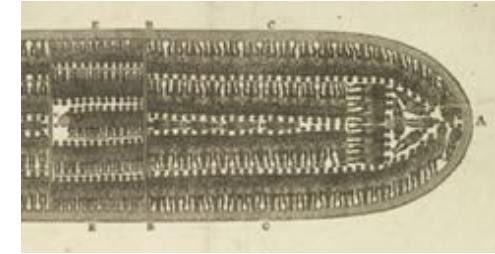
**W**HITE Slavery was widespread in early Ireland, even before the Vikings arrived. There was a thriving slave market in Dublin, where the Irish kings traded in slaves, who were often prisoners of war or victims of a debt bondage. Male slaves did farm work, while the females carried out domestic duties. The practice stepped up when the Vikings arrived, and in the 11th century Dublin became the biggest slave market in western Europe. The Normans largely killed it off by replacing slavery with feudalism. The 1171 Council of Armagh freed all Englishmen and women kept as slaves in Ireland.

During a debate on slavery in the British House of Commons in 1831, two years before it was abolished in the British Empire, Daniel O'Connell reminded his fellow MPs that Ireland "has its glory, that no slave ship was ever launched from any of its numerous ports". But this was only half true. It is recorded, for example, that two Dublin-based ships, the *Sylva* and the *Sophia*, were slaving in the Gambia in May 1716. The Africans being transported to Jamaica on the *Sophia* revolted, killing all of the crew except the captain. In July 1718 a Limerick ship, the *Prosperity*, transported 96 slaves from Africa to Barbados. In 1784 Limerick became the first Irish port to try to promote a slave trade company.

Irish merchants were also involved in providing goods for the West Indian sugar plantations, which proved to be one of the chief factors in the development of some of Ireland's major ports. Beef, pork, fish, butter, shoes and linen were all exported, while imports included sugar, tobacco and rum. In effect, Irish merchants came to be almost as dependent on slavery as their colleagues in England.

There was of course no black slavery in Ireland, but some Irish people were involved in the Atlantic slave trade in African slaves from the late 17th century when the Royal Africa Company (RAC) was established to supply slaves to the British West Indies. Among its most successful employees was William Ronan, a Catholic Irishman who effectively ran Cape Castle, one of the world's biggest slave trading ports in modern day Ghana. In the mid-18th century the Frekes, an offshoot of a County Cork landowning family, could be found among Bristol's leading slave merchants.

In 1780s Liverpool there were several slave merchants with Irish names, most prominently David Tuohy who had arrived as a young man from Tralee. From the 1750s onwards he and his brother-in-law, Philip Nagle, captained ships to Africa. By 1771 Tuohy was able to write to a friend in Cork that he had "been in the African trade



for many years in which I have made a pretty fortune". He declared that he was now inclined "to go no more to Africa but follow the business of a merchant in Liverpool". Another ship's captain was Clement Noble of Ardmore, who commanded the famous *Brookes* slave ship (above) during the American Revolution.

In Ulster, Belfast's trade with the West Indies in the 18th century was more important than its trade with continental Europe. A prominent slave owner was Waddell Cunningham, the founding president of the Belfast Chamber of Commerce. He owned a slave plantation in Dominica, and unsuccessfully tried to set up a slave trading company in Belfast in 1786. He was also a trustee of the Second Presbyterian Congregation.

Yet there was another side to Presbyterianism which condemned slavery and the slave trade. Cunningham met with opposition from Martha McTier and Mary Ann McCracken, two Presbyterian women, who formed the Belfast Women's Anti-slavery League. At the Presbyterian General Synod in 1792, a motion was passed which called on all church members to support those activists who would 'rescue from a state of slavery and wretchedness, an oppressed race of our fellow creatures.'

Slavery and the slave trade were denounced by the likes of William Drennan and Samuel Neilson, both sons of Presbyterian ministers, and another Presbyterian, Henry Joy McCracken, as well as the Anglican Thomas Russell – all of whom were founding members of the Belfast Society of United Irishmen.

Unfortunately, this liberal Protestantism did not last. Move on to the mid-19th century and we find that in 1859 the 89-year-old Mary Ann McCracken writes that "I am both ashamed and sorry to think that Belfast has so far degenerated in regard to the Anti-Slavery Cause". In the 1860s a Presbyterian nationalist like John Mitchel, who supported the confederates in the American Civil War, was a fierce defender of slavery and a racist who described Black people as 'innately inferior'.

After slavery was banned in the British Empire in 1833, no fewer than 107 people living in Ireland were compensated at the time for the supposed losses they incurred. They included Several Irish clergymen, one of whom was Rev Richard Wynne of Drumcliffe, Co Sligo, who claimed for the ownership of 30 slaves in the Virgin Islands.

It is clear that racism and support for slavery has deep roots in Irish history and culture. And many of its strongest advocates were prominent Christians. □



# After Θ God

**Joe Armstrong**

*explores the religious mindset – once held by its author – and examines transitioning from belief to unbelief, a journey that involved rethinking everything*



**T**HE departure of my friend from the novitiate in March 1981, and of a second novice the next day, precipitated existential questions.

*'I thought religion would satisfy my every need,'* I journaled. From my sexual awakening, I realised that it wouldn't.

So convinced had I been that I only needed 'God', I had, two years earlier, stopped studying. From one of the highest achievers in my school in the Intermediate Certificate, I got a pedestrian Leaving Cert.

My mother hadn't known I wasn't studying. When she returned from the next parent-teacher meeting, she said nothing. All my life, she'd received good feedback from teachers and come home glowing. Not this time. Silence persisted for days. Either teachers hadn't been honest or mother decided to say nothing. Then, out of the blue, she came to my bedroom.

'I have never been so humiliated in my life!' she spat, handing me a letter reinforcing her response. There was no discussion about what I was thinking or doing and how it might damage me. It was all about her.

Whereas many teenagers underperform because they have discovered sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, my adolescent fix was religion and the highs and hugs of charismatic renewal. I chose to sabotage my Leaving Cert lest, doing well, I'd abandon my religious path.

Despite doing well in the Inter, I lacked confidence in myself academically and my crazy adolescent thinking went that it was better to do badly than be mediocre. More positively, I observed the calm of a clever friend of mine at school minutes before an Inter Cert exam. Seeing his equanimity, I wanted to define myself less by academic achievement and enjoy a more balanced life. He embodied a person at ease with himself, which may have been more educational for me than had I studied for the Leaving Cert.

Remembering all this in novitiate, I journaled: *'I'm such a docile twit. I've thrown my chances away.'*

Docile foolishness apart, at only 18 I had hardly thrown my chances away. Freed of my religious fix, I could have left and taken my chance in the world. However, I was not free of religious thinking and still clung to the assertion of the vocations director that many souls would be saved through my ministry.

*'Why am I staying?' I asked in my novitiate journal.  
'I'm afraid that by leaving I'd be rejecting God and go*

*to Hell.'* While this may seem silly, consider this from Luke's Gospel: 'No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of Heaven.' Many religious believers fear damnation. It's why millions of Catholics went to weekly confession lest they die in a state of mortal sin.

*'I'd feel ashamed, leaving.'* I journaled. *'So many people gave me such nice gifts and good wishes. I'd be embarrassed. I was so convinced priesthood was right for me.'* Leaving wouldn't only involve changing job, career and home. My identity as a person and my philosophical worldview were inextricably interwoven with my desire to be a priest.

I reflected, *'I'd be afraid that I'm not mature enough to form a lasting relationship.'* At 18, I wasn't; but few people would be.

I decided it was better to stay in Milltown and to give my vocation at least three years, although my choice of language suggests an element of calculation: *'It would look better if I left after three years.'* Look better to whom? Other people? My superego? Between an imagined, jealous and threatening deity, and real or imagined other people, I caught myself in a bind.

Besides, I loved this vibrant and intellectually stimulating community; its concern for what mattered in life; and its values of compassion, justice and love. And I was drawn by my literary interest to the poetry and promise of parts of the Bible, such as that God would do infinitely more in us than we could ask for or imagine (Ephesians 3:20).

Moreover, while two novices had left, three female friends of mine had entered convents during my novitiate and two scholastics at Milltown were ordained priests. Following his ordination, Father Paddy Stanley said his first mass in his home parish of Castledermot. Having a son of the parish ordained a priest was still a big deal in the 1980s, especially in rural Ireland. Bunting in the Vatican's yellow and white festooned the streets and a brass band led a parade through the village of happy townsfolk.

In contrast, I heard the true story of an Italian who left the priesthood immediately after his ordination, to widespread consternation. He had been seeing a psychotherapist who had advised him to proceed with ordination 'to get it out of his system' and then leave, which he promptly did.

The holy oil hardly dry on his hands, he legged it.

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# The Illusion of Free Will

Noel Byrne

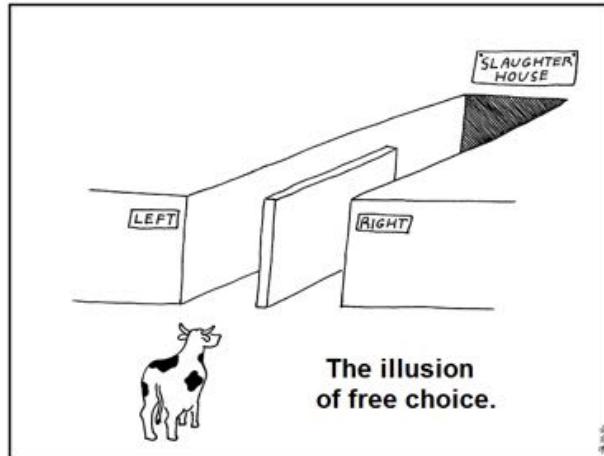
**B**ARBARA Smoker, the great British Humanist and Freethinker who died recently aged 94, put the notion of Free Will very succinctly when she said: " You choose to act the way you wish, but you do not choose the way you wish to act."

Free will is a concept that has been discussed for centuries. For my purposes here it is the ability to do other than what one did in precisely the same circumstances. In other words to have made a decision other than that which you made, assuming nothing else has changed. Logically it's a simple situation: either we have Free Will or we don't. There is no evidence whatsoever or even a plausible theory explaining how we can have Free Will. The only argument for it is that it feels as if we have it. Many people confuse freedom of will with Free Will. Freedom of will is our ability to act on our will i.e. to say or do what we want, or go where we want. Free Will is also often used incorrectly in the sense of the absence of external coercion whereby one feels one is free to make a personal choice. Many others confuse Free Will with choice.

Logically at the end of the day we only have two choices: do or don't. Choice is part of life and what we are. As conscious beings we are aware of options and so must choose. Not to choose is also an option. If the choice is tea or coffee, we can choose neither, but that is also a choice. Other sentient creatures also have options and make choices, but are not aware of having made the choice. We however are aware of the options and the choices we make. Most then assume that because we made a choice and were aware of so doing that it was a free choice. At the end of the day you make a decision because you wanted to or were forced to – there really is no other alternative. If the decision is forced, then it is obviously not free.

If all events are caused then they are determined. That is the principle of determinism. You cannot have an event that happens without a cause. That would make the event random or chance and therefore not freely chosen. If there is such a thing as an uncaused or acausal event it cannot have anything to do with Free Will as for any event to be willed there must be someone doing the willing. There must be a willer. The actual feeling of Free Will and the concept of Free Will are completely separate issues and, although Free Will is an illusion, the feeling of Free Will is not. It is a genuine and possibly necessary illusion. Will power is about learning to control habits and craving. It is when the logical and conscious mind overcomes the emotional and subconscious mind.

Free Will is an imagined and impossible concept. We don't actually choose our needs, wants or desires and our will is what we desire when we choose. For our will to be free it would need to be free of our needs, wants and



desires. People generally don't understand how and what motivates them. Will is the desire for a certain outcome. Our goal is always to be as happy as possible and that is the goal of the will. Sometimes there is a battle between emotion and logic in the brain. We generally make decisions for a reason, either emotional or logical. Past events and knowledge stored in our brains lead us to particular conclusions. To make a Free Will choice there can be no determining causes. That means no needs, wants or desires. Your wants, needs and desires determine your will. If you are gay you cannot be attracted to the opposite sex, if you prefer apples to oranges you can't detest apples and enjoy oranges. Our needs and desires are subconscious and determined.

They can be affected by stimuli which release hormones such as adrenalin and serotonin and over which we have no control. Our beliefs, needs and desires can and do change, but the change is always due to an external event, experience or stimulus. We have no control over our DNA, our parents, gender, upbringing, or culture. All of these affect who we are, as well as our wants, needs and desires. Am I free to choose my want or desire? No. Conscious behaviour is always determined by a combination of nature and nurture. We do not choose our subconscious compulsions. Reflex actions are instinctive and not chosen nor willed.

Determinism is a scientific fact. There are no exceptions, even at the quantum level. We may not know precisely which particle in the atom is going to decay, but we do know the cause of the event, which is that the nucleus becomes unstable due to the fact that it has insufficient binding energy caused by an excess of either protons or neutrons. Indeterminacy at the quantum level is often used as an argument against Free Will. What this indeterminacy actually is, is a limit on our knowledge at the Quantum scale. The correct term here is unpredictability. It is similar to weather forecasting or chaos theory. It is extremely difficult to make precise weather

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forecasts more than a week or so in advance due to the number and scale of the factors involved. In the 1960s Edward Lorenz, during the course of experiments regarding weather forecast modeling, was using calculations to six places of decimals. Later in checking his calculations he only used three places of decimals and found this small difference gave him a vastly different model. This became known as 'the butterfly effect' or chaos theory, whereby a very small change in initial conditions can actually create a significantly different outcome. Determinism does not of necessity imply predictability.

The free will debate generally categorises into three camps. Firstly there are determinists, who believe nothing can interfere with cause and effect and thus we cannot have Free Will. Next are the libertarians who believe we have some form of liberty or freedom to choose that overcomes cause and effect. This is classical Free Will. Finally we have the compatibilists who believe in determinism but also believe in Free Will. Determinists and libertarians are classified as non-compatibilists. Religious generally are libertarians in that to sin requires Free Will and demands punishment. To believe in sin you must believe in Free Will.

The biggest problem to me in this debate is that Free Will is generally conflated with responsibility and consequences. That is because possibly all societies, and legal systems in particular, are lived and based on the assumption

***Without free will we would not be personally responsible for our actions nor would there be any need for praise or blame***

of everyone being held freely responsible for their actions unless coercion or mental disability is shown or proven. Without Free Will we would not be personally responsible for our actions nor would there be any need for praise or blame. However, were a society or group to accept the illusory nature of Free Will it would still be necessary in that society or group for an individual to be responsible to that society for their actions or deeds, and that might require some form of control or action consequent on the particular deed. Although they may not be personally responsible for their actions they would necessarily need to be responsible to their group or society.

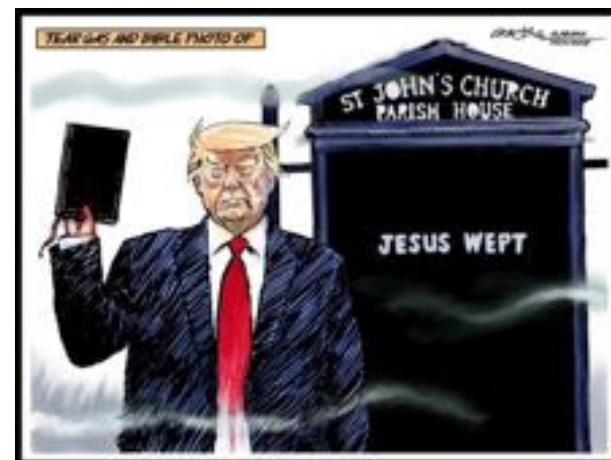
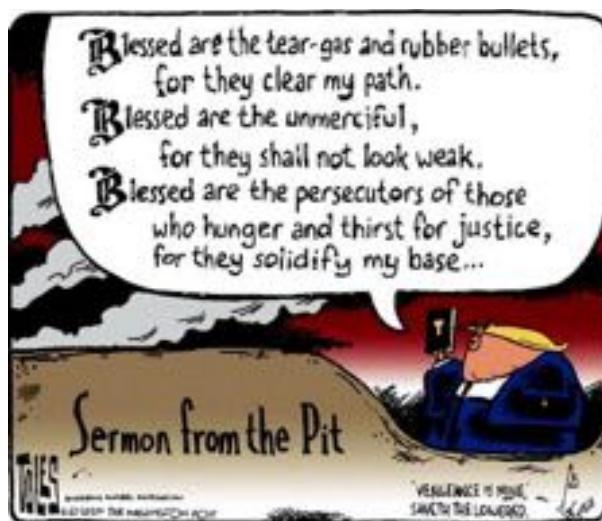
Either our decisions are freely made or they are not and the consequences of those decisions should not affect the debate. The debate is whether or not Free Will exists. It is about truth. The consequences are an extraneous issue. Most of our decisions are not moral decisions and without moral consequences, and accordingly this should not be an issue in the debate.

Free Will, however, is a philosophical concept. It only applies to humans and generally to judgment and morality. Philosophy is holding back in many instances in this debate because of the perceived probable consequences if society as a whole were to become aware that Free Will is an illusion, although I accept it may be a necessary illusion. The fact that Free Will is generally accepted as being true does not in any way make the belief true. I

know of no evidence to support its truth. The scientific evidence points otherwise. Philosophy, science and particularly neuroscience is pushing the boundary back all the time and showing that free will is an illusion. In many experiments neuroscientists can now show the area of the brain involved in the particular decision being made lighting up electrochemically seconds before we ourselves are aware of the decision made.

The idea of Free Will is only sustained by the unwillingness to ask where our decisions come from and by the reluctance of some scientists and philosophers to suppress our current philosophical and scientific knowledge on the subject, because they fear society would be unable to deal with the reality. They consider the illusion is necessary for the functioning of civil society.

In the Universe which has existed for over 13.8 billion years and where every non-living and living thing is in a chain of cause and effect, how did humanity manage to break that chain? Did our ancient Hominid ancestors have Free Will or our recent cousins the Neanderthals? When did Free Will arrive for humans? If we had Free Will, we would be going around doing things for no reason and with no rational intention. If the Universe is deterministic, and there is no evidence it is otherwise, and we, including our brains are made of atomic matter, then Free Will must be an illusion. □



## World Socialism, Oscar Wilde and James Connolly

Chris Butler

**I**T has been said, and it is true, that Oscar Wilde's last essay *The Soul of Man under Socialism* is not only his best but also one of the greatest in the language. Socialism he saw as a means to divest the individual of those burdens of property and power which prevent themselves from realising their own nature. "Each man", declares Wilde "should seek to make himself perfect". To this one belief he held consistently in all his apparent inconsistencies of life. It became the standard by which he measured all life and thought and art; it became his single rule of conduct and determined his philosophy. He had a genuine concern for social justice and a deep consciousness of the essential corruption of the society in which he moved and lived. In his own way he did what he could to expose that injustice and remedy that corruption by satire and polemic.

Another extraordinary character of our heritage, who displayed the same consistency in favour of the poor and oppressed of the world, was James Connolly. His thought was often a response to developing circumstances but the originality of his writings reflects a sharp clarity and intelligent honesty in a rapidly moving social world he sought to change as a socialist organiser, syndicalist militant, radical republican and anti-war activist.

I was just reading the writings of James Connolly on the working class fate in the war ahead, because recently the chief of European diplomacy, Josep Borrell, has outlined the destiny for Europe and Africa, and it will be expensive for the well-being of ordinary folk in Ireland and Africa, as the military capacity of Europe emerges to exploit the new frontiers of Europe which is beyond the south of the Sahara, Josep Borrell reminds us. For you to hear the view of James Connolly I will, as they say, spell it out.

War is inevitable under capitalism. Socialists are opposed to war and to capitalism. This opposition follows from our opposition to capitalism because we understand that modern wars are caused by capitalism. We tackle not the effects of war – armies, conscription, violence, nuclear weapons etc – but the cause of war, which is the capitalist system.

What is meant by capitalism? It is only a name for a type of society characterised by the way people living under it have certain dealings and relations with each other in everyday affairs of life. It is called by this name, capitalism, because the means of production and distribution of commodities under it; and the land, factories, transport etc.; are owned by capitalists, that is by people possessing large amounts of money, capital, that they have invested so as to acquire ownership of these means of production and distribution. They may be landlords with their money invested in land or buildings, and draw their income in the form of rent. They may be owners of factories or trading concerns, or they may have shares in a large number of companies and receive their income in the form of profits. Lastly, they may have invested their money by making loans to manufacturing or trading capitalists, or by lending it to governments. They then receive on these loans 'interest' as income. All these groups are alike in that they live by receiving income from their investments; a private property income. Capitalism is the system of society organised by these people for their benefit. James Connolly said: "governments in capitalist society are but committees of the rich to manage the affairs of the capitalist class" (*The War on the German Nation*, 1914).

This is the way the world is today and has been since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Capitalism is a single world system, a single world economy. This means that there is no such thing as the 'Irish Economy', the 'French Economy', the 'American Economy', and so on. There is only one economy, world capitalism. Within this world economy nation states play an economic role: they try to distort the market for the benefit of the local group of capitalists they represent. The stronger the nation state machinery the more its ability to distort the world market in favour of the interests it represents. So it is this that explains the militarisation of the world, and by implication the futility of expecting disarmament while world capitalism exists, because continually around the world the contending sections of the world capitalist class are arguing over trade routes, raw materials and areas of control, boundaries, territorial rights, and markets for their commodities. All these circumstances can and do result in violent conflicts, personal aggression, terrorism, and finally the horrors of war.

To confirm that all nation states are imperialist, and not just the superpowers, one need look no further than Indonesia, Israel, India, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, Australia, etc. It is also not the case that if there were no nation states there would be no wars. The existence of the nation state is not the cause of war, it is the competition between the individual capitalists for markets and economic rivalry that is the cause.

To encourage the majority working class to fight for the interests of the minority wealthy capitalist class, we are manipulated and seduced by falsehoods; 'Ruling by Fooling', James Connolly called it in 1914. For example, we are told that war ennobles and military service gives discipline to men. These arguments are false. War does not ennoble; it elevates force into the position of arbiter in place of the common human desire for mutual peace and happiness. The effect of war is wholly evil. It depraves all the participants by forcing them to concentrate upon the best methods of producing misery and annihilating each other. It elevates lying, cheating, disabling and murdering opponents into virtues and praises those who practice these means most successfully.

Young men and women, in their most impressionable years, have the vile methods of warfare impressed upon them so thoroughly that they lose a balanced outlook on life. They are disciplined only with the idea that force and not reason is the final solution to all problems; and reason is crucial to establish socialism, for it is a rational, worldwide, classless society, organised democratically by the majority, a society of mutual cooperation. Oscar Wilde wrote:

"Socialism, Communism, or whatever one chooses to call it, by converting private property into public wealth, and substituting cooperation for competition, will restore society to its proper condition of a thoroughly healthy organism, and ensure the material well-being of each member of the community. It will, in fact, give Life its proper basis and its proper environment".

For James Connolly it was the same: a democratic system called socialism abolishes profit-taking capital, abolishes private property, abolishes the wage system, and makes all common property – a co-operative commonwealth of freely developing women and men.

It is now time to investigate, and to reject the control of the thought police and media propaganda and reclaim our socialist heritage for ourselves. Think for yourself, read *The Soul of Man under Socialism*; and to read the bulk of the writings of James Connolly, edited by Donal Nevin and published now by SIPTU. Contact them for a good deal at Liberty Hall, Dublin. Read and think, so that we can all advance together freely. □

# Take Time to Make the Time

Janie Lazar

**T**O say the past few months have given us all much to think about would be an understatement. Now that we're beginning to emerge and use our judgement on with whom we socialise and what level of social distancing to maintain, I felt the need to vocalise some thoughts I've been rattling around inside my head about what I've seen, what I've heard and felt, and I'd invite you to also reflect. Because now is the time for critical thinking. And not only thinking. The old maxim 'actions speak louder than words' has never rung louder.

Allow me to put this in context from a personal perspective. In February I was just about recovering from major surgery, feeling delighted with myself as yet again I dodged a second serious bullet in 20 years. Then BANG. Along came Covid-19. I wouldn't say what I saw it was mass hysteria – more a state of disbelief. No one could really take in what impact this would have on us here in Ireland and across the world. Italy opened our eyes – made us see the enormity of what lay ahead. But let's be honest here. It somehow became a distant reality. Italy bought us time, but we did not HEAR her message. We opened our hearts but closed our ears even as we saw coverage on social media of massive death tolls. We cried as many Italians turned to music, their balconies bringing their communities together and us into theirs, but still we did not feel the insidious nature of the unseen enemy, this deadly virus. Then almost overnight, Ireland stopped.

So just what did I see and what did I hear? Probably the same as you. What I saw were people scurrying around, following the guidelines as our neighbourhoods emptied of life. People were almost too scared to look people in the eye, as if even smiling could put us and them at risk. People were panic buying. The fear was palpable. Get home, lock the door. Stay safe. Stay alive. BE GRATEFUL.

It was and still is an emotional rollercoaster for many and the longer term impact is as yet unknown. Parents suddenly found themselves 'Parenting from Home' rather than 'Working from Home' – if they still had paid work. Home schooling, getting families fed three times a day, a different kind of treadmill. There was anxiety over cancelled hospital appointments. Frustration, anger and grief ran through me and I'm sure many others as the reality sank in. Wasn't I thankful I had a roof over my head? Of course I was.

This crisis was highlighting how vulnerable and at risk homeless people were and how their desperate situation was jeopardising the lives of countless others who like those in Direct Provision had no way of 'keeping safe' – what was becoming absolutely clear to me was that our hitherto two-tier health system had become a single tier where, if you were sick with Covid-19, you would be treated. The question remains what happens afterwards? Is a human life only worth saving during a pandemic? Let me just repeat that: is a human life only worth saving during a pandemic? How we grieve for our dead as heartbreaking stories continue to fill our radio waves. How people survive without jobs, without money for essentials raises questions for the longer term – no better time for the Universal Basic Income to be reconsidered (see pp 8 and 9 – ed).

As acceptance settled in with a feeling of 'it is what it is' becoming almost 'de rigueur', as was the need for keeping a cheery countenance of sorts, which in itself creates its own form of anxiety in the body too, no matter how thankful we are. No wonder we're weary and exhausted as we gather the strength to put energy into this next phase of living differently.

As I moved on from what I felt was the negative emotional impact, I could see just how resilient people are, how thoughtful and kind to one another, and how creative they are in using their time. This time with their families has been developed into something incredibly rich in many cases, like butterflies in their chrysalis, transforming into something incredibly beautiful and precious, relationships deepening that would not have happened without this pandemic.

Some businesses are 'pivoting' and flourishing. Just as small businesses are reimagining and restructuring to stay afloat, sadly though many others will have to close. The impact on the Irish economy and global economy is beyond the grasp of most of us and finally we're realising how interconnected we all are. We see that we need each other and that together no one need be left behind. But this can only happen when we as enlightened citizens make the changes in our lifetime from which only future generations will benefit. Politics is already getting in the way and unless we are strong in our demands on what we want, in what we inherently know benefits the whole of society, then our country, known for its kindness, will simply return to the way it was, a land of 'haves and have nots'. The 'have nots' have almost always shared what they have because they've known what it is to go without. They know that 'enough is more than enough' and the value of being part of a community.

So what's my point amidst this deconstructed rant? There IS a gap. And it is a critical space in time and that time is now. It is perhaps the only time we have to really think about what we want for our world and the benefit of the sacrifices we are being asked to make. We're not all movers and shakers and hardly know where to start dealing with the bigger issues of homelessness, universal access to healthcare, education and all the things as humanists we fervently believe everybody has a basic human right to expect. But we can make a difference at a local level. Within our communities, where and how we use our skills. As part of how we earn a living, as volunteers. This much we can all do.

As we begin to socialise and carefully re-engage with family and friends, the fear will of course remain beneath the surface. Like smallpox, this virus and others like it will be something we have to learn to live with and we'll be making judgement calls every day. Life will be different and for generations to come. Hopefully the good calls we make in our everyday lives will also help create stronger, more compassionate communities.

Maybe the future will see people moving back into the cities, with office blocks returning to residential use, less reliance on public transport and use of cars as people work closer to home, from or partly from home, and lower incidences of mental health problems as people become more connected in their local communities. There may be greater connection between the generations as we revisit our values and recognise the human value of intergenerational connection and cross generational learning. Gandhi's alleged words – "be the change you want to see in the world" – are ever more urgent. My hope is that each of us, based on what we have seen and learnt during this pandemic, will take the time to reflect and that, each in our way, will take the good out of what's been so devastating as the building blocks for what can be ONCE AGAIN a most wonderful world. Yes, as the African proverb says: "it takes a village to raise a child". Now I believe it takes a country's citizens to create lasting change. □



# Ancient Irish Humanism

**Brehon Laws: The Wisdom of Ancient Ireland**

**Jo Kerrigan • The O'Brien Press • 2020**

**Bob Rees**

**T**HREE thousand years ago, the pagan people of Ireland lived by a set of laws, The Brehon Laws (after *breitheamh* – judge), that were in many ways more enlightened than those we live by today.

The antique vellum texts have practically all disintegrated, and the ancient Irish language is unrecognisable to modern Irish speakers, but scholars (in particular Eugene O'Curry and John O'Donovan in the mid-nineteenth century, to whom the book is dedicated) have studied the manuscripts fragment by fragment, and they have recaptured the lost language and the ancient laws, and the amazing society that existed in Ireland at a time when the rest of northern Europe was still ruled by the Law of the Jungle.

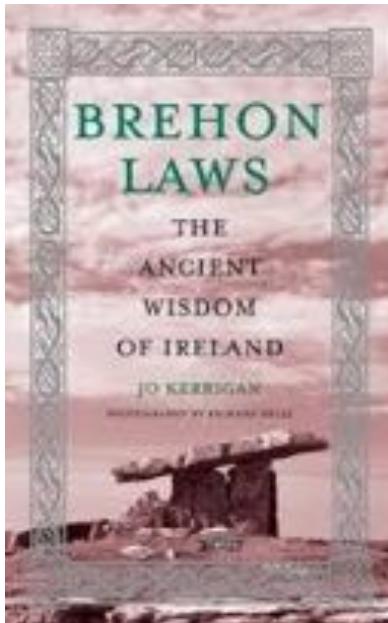
In those days, Ireland consisted of maybe a hundred and fifty separate

small kingdoms (*tuaths*), each of a few thousand inhabitants consisting of related kin groups whose lives revolved around agriculture, and each group loyal to the local king, who was chosen by the people according to his qualities of leadership and decision-making. The king usually kept a senior brehon (judge) by his side for guidance.

For each individual, being recognised as an upright member of the community was fundamental. Status was important, and every person had his or her honour price, measured in cows; a rural king's honour price was typically 21 cows, for example. Citizens were motivated to climb the social scale by working hard and amassing land and livestock, as their honour price was taken into account when determining what restitution was due after an offence had been committed.

The defining characteristic of brehon law was its emphasis on restitution to an injured party and rehabilitation of the offender, rather than the revenge and punishment favoured by later Christian lawmakers. Jo Kerrigan explains that the laws evolved over time in the light of experience of things going wrong, with disputes over the consequences, as happens every day of the week in every society. They were the laws of the people, by the people and for the people. They took the form of down-to-earth courtesies and codes of conduct, adjudicated when necessary by a brehon (judge), that were mutually enforced by social pressure from all people of the community.

Some time between 1000 and 700BC, the great judge Ollamh Fodhla collected the various judgements together



er, and subsequently they appear to have been commonly used in every community of Ireland (though individuals had no legal rights outside their own particular tuath). Much later, in the sixth century, Christians would try to impose their laws, but the popular brehon law survived and was still practised in Ireland alongside Catholicism, until Queen Elizabeth I forcibly imposed the English law and language in the sixteenth century.

Being remotely located at the very edge of the known world, Ireland was unaffected by the violent events in northern Europe, while the wise and peaceful brehons concerned themselves with harmony and justice among their citizens. Full compensation plus a fine on the offender was a deterrent, but with every opportunity for the offender to work hard, climb back up the social

ladder and thus rehabilitate himself. If the offender refused to pay, his family were expected to meet the obligation, and the ultimate fate of a persistent offender was to be put in a boat without oars and towed out to sea 'beyond the ninth wave', where he stood little chance of survival.

The laws covered just about every conceivable aspect of life in Ireland 3000 years ago, and the book contains a variety of examples which give a very real feeling of being there. Accidents and injuries were covered, including maintenance of a victim during his recovery. Personal dignity was particularly important in a closed community, so derision and satire were regarded as serious offences. Forcibly entering someone's house and causing damage was similarly regarded as an attack on the householder's honour. Disturbing the peace was unacceptable, especially disrupting a game of hurling by firing a spear into the park!

There were extensive laws about the ownership and care of the land, and great stress was laid on the erection and maintenance of cattle-proof fences, access to water and the protection of trees. Theft, especially cattle rustling, seems to have been common, and the laws concerning property cover a wide range of circumstances, even down to flotsam and jetsam found on a beach. However, it was okay to help yourself to a handful of fruit from a stranger's trees during a long journey, just as it was acceptable for a starving person to steal a loaf of bread (compare later Christian judgements during the Famines). —>

There is a fascinating chapter about animals, which were obviously central to life in an agricultural society. Ten species were important: cows, pigs, horses, sheep, goats, hens, geese, dogs, cats and bees, and the laws betray a deep understanding of all of them, their ways and their foibles. The question of bees stealing nectar from neighbours' land was settled, for example, by giving the neighbours a share of the honey.

Dogs were kept as guard dogs, sheepdogs, pets and even lap dogs for chiefs' wives, but the penalty for letting your dog defecate on someone else's land was:

*To take away the hound's ordure from the land, and settle the land after it; and three times the bulk of the ordure to be paid as its fine: its bulk of butter, and its bulk of curds, and its bulk of dough [Judgements of Co-Tenancy].*

Further, the cavity left after removing the poo was to be filled with 'good earth and cowdung', in recognition of the toxic nature of dog poo vis-à-vis cow poo.

Cats were valued for their skills in controlling rats and mice in the grain stores, but they too were kept as pets. A cat that caught vermin and also purred 'for the pleasure of its owner' was valued at three cows, no less! What's more,

***Humanists will enjoy the chapter describing the rights that women in ancient Ireland took for granted, at least until the coming of misogynistic Christianity.***

*... the cat is exempt from liability for eating the food which he finds in the kitchen owing to negligence in taking care of it. [Book of Aicill]*

....So woe betide the cook who leaves the lid off the cooking pot. Cats were also excused for accidentally injuring passers-by when they were engaged in mousing, due to the 'excitement' of their task.

Humanists will enjoy the chapter describing the rights that women in ancient Ireland took for granted, at least until the coming of misogynistic Christianity. St. Albertus Magnus epitomised the attitude: "One must be on one's guard with every woman, as if she was a poisonous snake and the horned devil himself." A barrel of laughs, those Christians! Under brehon law, women were free to inherit land and pass it on to their children, divorce was perfectly acceptable, women were protected from gossip and courtesy, and there was no illegitimacy because every child and every mother was accepted without question. Trial marriages for a year and a day were normal, in order for the couple to confirm that they could live happily together before formally marrying. The law insisted that the woman must be a willing partner, so there were no forced unions or marriages of convenience.

The final chapter describes a day in the life of two girls in ancient Ireland. It sounds idyllic, thanks to those laws which ensured civility and cooperation, even when things went wrong.

This short book is as entertaining as it is instructive, and Jo Kerrigan has an easy way of putting things. □



## Questions of Survival

MY thanks to Alan Tuffery (*Irish Freethinker*, May/June 2020) for taking the time and effort to try to allay my 'dark night of the soul' musings on the survival chances of Homo Sapiens.

We were the hippie generation who were going to change the world, remember? But in the long run we couldn't even change ourselves, the character of our own species. As a species, we constantly grab for short-term solutions, and like binge-drinkers wake up the following morning and vow not to make the same mistake again. Our discontent arises, I think, because we have the conscience of angels and the DNA of Neanderthals; both excellent things in themselves, but uneasy bedfellows in the tight confines of a human skull.

Rather than enflaming my arthritic knees in solidarity with the young demonstrators of the 2020, perhaps it's time to pose the question "Can science help us change our own fundamental nature? Can we use our knowledge of evolution to fast-stream homo sapiens to a more compassionate future?" 'Extinction Rebellion' as a global environmental lobby is highlighting the extreme urgency of our plight. In order to change our behaviour towards our planet, might we also have to change our own human character? And if so, would we be willing to do so?

We are, individually and collectively, "space monkeys" – highly evolved rational brains in bodies surging with primitive hormonal instincts. The problem is not with our intelligence – Alan rightly points out that IQ test scores have improved over the last century or so. Notoriously, just like the dreaded Leaving Cert or A Levels, the more IQ tests one sits the better the results become. I would doubt if, in real life, I'm 30 IQ points smarter than any of my four Grandparents who probably never heard of an IQ test, never mind sitting one. They couldn't Google the answers to their problems in the same way I can. Encyclopaedias were cumbersome and expensive back then. I share with my grandparents the same surges of fear, anger, greed – and kindness. If I am more intelligent than they were, which I doubt, doesn't that imply I also have greater potential to fulfil my own basic instincts?

My question to Alan and any other specialist in evolutionary biology who may be capable of providing an answer: "Is it possible to fast-stream human nature to a more humane and compassionate place by scientific means?" What is possible, of course, may not be desirable. A surge in the capacity for compassion might mean Sapiens evolving into a new species. And at the same time as coping with that, we need to grapple with a series of difficult ethical dilemmas, such as what does it mean to be human?

My answer is that the human attribute I've grown to appreciate most is compassion, not intelligence. Maybe I'm being stupid, but I would not want to live in a world without compassion. My life would become dark and meaningless if deprived of that essential spark. Compassion is the best of what we are. Fundamentally, most humans want to contribute to making the world a better place. Promoting compassion and reason is what we should be about – MUST be about, if we are to survive.

I suppose the beautiful thing about being a Freethinker is that no question – or logical answer – is beyond the Pale. Well done to our esteemed editor for allowing me to raise these questions, and to Alan Tuffery for attempting to provide some answer. *Tom White, Knock, Co Mayo* □



*Art*

# Beach Pebbles

Colin Corkey



Colin M. Corkey

**F**Ollowing my previous article featuring a stony beach with gentle waves lapping the shoreline, I thought this painting to be an appropriate progression, especially during these 'unreal' days of lockdown when there has been much focus on listening more and taking note of those things which so often go unnoticed. Although this was painted some time back I feel its relevance more so today.

As a painter of still life I'm invariably focused upon the subtle nuances of colour, texture and form. The sheer magical joy of that inexplicable emotional connection when one is in such close proximity with subject matter never ceases to evoke a special stillness and state of 'quietude'.

Painted in acrylics on board and measures 61cms x 74cms.

Colin Corkey

Nothing like poetry when you lie awake at night. It keeps the old brain limber. It washes away the mud and sand that keeps on blocking up the bends. Like waves to make the pebbles dance on my old floors. And turn them into rubies and jacinths; or at any rate, good imitations.

Joyce Cary

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# Chernobyl

Brian McClinton

**A**T 1:23:58 a.m. on 26th April 1986 the Unit 4 reactor at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant 2 miles from the purpose-built Ukrainian city of Prypiat exploded during a safety test. The level of water in the reactor had dropped too far, causing it to boil and turn to steam which then escaped into the external cooling system, destroying the reactor's casing. Its 200 tonne concrete lid – its 'biological shield' – was blown through the roof of the building and radiation then spat into the atmosphere. A second and bigger explosion followed, destroying much of the building and firing chunks of burning radioactive graphite into the air and across the surrounding area.

In *Chernobyl* (Penguin 2018), his acclaimed account of the worst nuclear disaster in history, Serii Plokhy states that "the immediate cause of the Chernobyl accident was a turbine test that went wrong. But its deeper roots lay in the interaction between major flaws in the political system and major flaws in the nuclear industry" (p347). These factors are glimpsed in the Sky/HBO miniseries directed by Johan Renck which, at the time of writing, has been nominated for no fewer than 14 awards at the BAFTAs (to be announced on 31st July). But if there is one major weakness in this grim and engrossing production, it is that the writer Craig Mazin cannot resist the Hollywood habit of finding heroes and villains in every story.

Anatoly Dyatlov (Paul Ritter), the assistant chief engineer and test supervisor is portrayed as a bully and a coward, treating his assistants with disdain and sending plant workers in his stead to check the reactor, thereby exposing them to deadly levels of radiation. Those who knew the real man state that he was strict but fair. The plant workers were not scared of him as presented in the miniseries, nor did he let any of them take the blame for what went wrong.



Indeed it was he and not the investigator Valeri Legasov (Jared Harris) who apportioned blame where it truly belonged. Six managers and safety officials at the plant were put on trial for violation of safety rules and negligence of duty. The 'prime' suspects included Dyatlov and Nikolai Fomin, the chief engineer. Fomin blamed Dyatlov and Aleksandr Akinov, the head of the shift. Dyatlov, however, stated bluntly that "the accident was conditioned by the state of the reactor". As Plokhy says, he was in effect pointing the finger at the designers of the RBMK reactors, which turned out to be anything but explosion-proof because of their positive void effect, meaning their capacity to accelerate a reaction when control rods were inserted into the active zone.

If this sounds too technical, it is necessary to make clear that the six men put on trial in 1987 were made scapegoats for a failed system, and it was one of them who exposed it and not Legasov as the TV series presents it. But this is not its only invention. The makers create a Belarusian nuclear physicist – Ulyana Khomyuk (Emily Watson) – who didn't actually exist but who, according to the closing titles, is a composite of the dozens of scientists who helped Legasov investigate the

causes of the disaster. She is determined to find the truth and is not afraid to speak her mind, even in the presence of President Gorbachev (David Dencik). This fiction is totally unrealistic, but it provides the series with a complementary female hero.

The miniseries does depict many of the real heroes of Chernobyl, including the firefighters who risked their lives and suffered high levels of radiation, and the miners, brought in to excavate under the reactor to prevent a meltdown, stripping naked in the heat to get the job done. And it has some compelling scenes: the horror of dead birds dropping from the sky and deer rotting in the forest; adults playing with children under flakes of deadly nuclear ash; a baby's bubbling skin; and recruits having to shoot irradiated pets left behind after the population has evacuated the area and then burying them in concrete pits.

*Chernobyl* is a brilliant drama and fully deserves its awards, but let us not lose sight of the fact that it is fiction and not a documentary. Unfortunately, most people don't read non-fiction books and get their knowledge from the media, and they will absorb the series as THE truth. Dramas which reduce the real world to a place of heroes and villains only perpetuate a simplistic black and white perspective on reality. We can but hope that the series acts as a stimulus to its viewers for more thorough research, rather than be taken as the last word.

One final thought, which is not directly related to the series. Writing in the *Guardian* in May, with the coronavirus in mind, Serii Plokhy notes that the only effective responses to international disasters, no matter which state they occur in, are international. As the world's reaction to Chernobyl showed, co-ordinated efforts can bring real change, making us all safer – whether we live in Beijing, Moscow, London or New York. □



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### Kilkenny Humanist Group

2nd Sunday of month, in the Langton House Hotel, Kilkenny at 11.00am  
Contact Patrick Cassidy at 0894630005; [patrickacassidy@gmail.com](mailto:patrickacassidy@gmail.com)

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