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Rules are only for the little People



"Equality before the law is probably forever unattainable. It is a noble idea but it can never be realised, for what men value in this world is not rights but privileges"

- H.L. Mencken

"Equality under the law is the slow triumph of hope over history"

- Jim Cooper

ALSO:

**Divided Nations • Debating Irish Unity • Dublin Rules
The New Eugenics • Dying with Dignity • The Ethics of Chimeras
Humankind • Casablanca • The Dissident • The Mauritanian**



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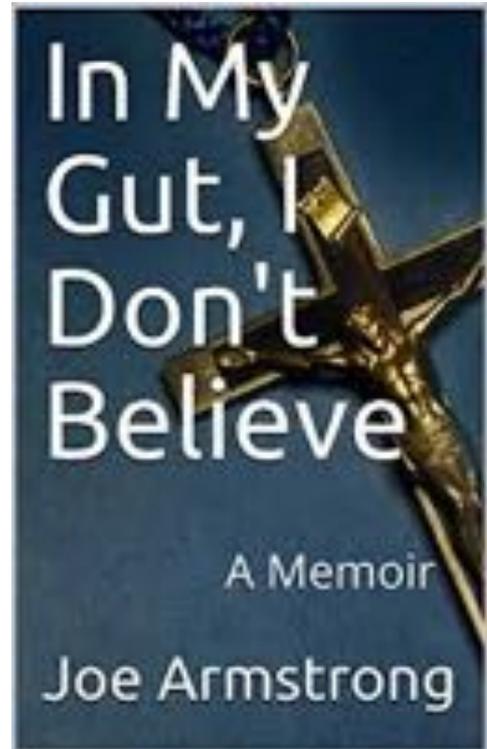
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“Human decency is not derived from religion. It precedes it.”

— Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*

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

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Rules are for the Little People

Editor

ARTICLE 7 of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states: "All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law". The implication is that everyone should be treated equally under the law regardless of race, gender, religion, belief, disability, and so on. In modern times, we have seen groups representing people with these characteristics campaign for this equality, with some measure of success, though in most cases the battle is far from won.

And yet there are two other areas where massive inequalities remain and seem to be on the increase. And these areas affect the extent of the other inequalities listed above. Yet we do nothing to reduce them. On the contrary, we have actually made them stronger, even while also expressing anger when individual cases receive publicity. These are the inequalities of wealth and power.

In many countries the rich are becoming richer, thanks in no small part to tax cuts introduced by elected governments. Take the UK. In the 1970s the basic income tax rate was 33% and the top rate was 83%. Today the basic rate is 20% and the top rate is 40%. In Ireland the rates are the same, having been 35% and 65% as recently as 1985. As for corporation tax, it has fallen in both countries: 19% in the UK and 12.5% in Ireland. Thus the rich in both personal and corporate terms keep more of their income after tax than they did 50 years ago.

They may then hire clever lawyers or find tax havens so that they pay even less to the state than their income warrants. Greed drives them to assume that, as Leona Helmsley said, "only the little people pay taxes". It is at least good to hear that President Biden wants to see a minimum universal corporation tax rate (see p17).

As far as power is concerned, breaches of the rules, both legal and ethical, are becoming ever more brazen. The American government commits an extra-judicial killing in Pakistan of Osama bin Laden and tortures prisoners in Guantanamo (see p23). It also invades other countries with impunity in defiance of international law. The then President Trump incites a mob attack on Congress and goes unpunished. The Saudi government commits a brutal extra-judicial killing of a dissident journalist in a Turkish consulate (see p22) and the international 'community' imposes no punishment.

The UK government is ruled by the Supreme Court to have illegally dissolved Parliament in 2019, yet there are no sanctions. Instead it gets re-elected. Northern Ireland Secretary Brandon Lewis announces that a new bill to amend the UK's Brexit deal will 'break international law'. Dominic Cummings, Johnson's chief adviser, breaks Covid guidelines by travelling hundreds of miles and going on a trip to 'test his eyesight' and is not punished.



Cartoon from the *Beano*, 18th November 2020

Nearer home, Sinn Féin breaks Covid rules by staging not one but two funerals of a convicted ex-IRA gunman attended by thousands and takes over Belfast's only crematorium for an afternoon, depriving 8 other families of its use, yet the Public Prosecution Service decides there is not enough evidence to charge 24 Sinn Féin MLAs for this despicable breach of the guidelines.

As with the rich, the powerful are beginning to think that they are subject to different rules from the rest of the population. And of course when this power is combined with wealth or the prospect of wealth, the sense of entitlement increases. In the UK, top politicians are not particularly well paid. But it is the favours they dispense, such as knighthoods for chums and rich supporters, and what happens afterwards that are ethically dubious. Ex-Prime Ministers of Britain from Blair to Cameron seem to think that they deserve their millions, whether from extravagant public speaking fees or secret lobbying. It is a system of sleaze and the UK suffers badly from it.

The question has to be asked: what ethical code do the rich and powerful follow? Are the common good, the pursuit of justice, human rights and peace the guiding principles? Alas, it seems not. It does appear that morality, integrity and decency are hypocritical veneers behind which lie self-interest, whether on behalf of the individual or the country. And here is where much of the public get what they deserve. If you want your nation to put itself first, then you will vote for governments that sell arms to dictators who kill journalists and use the weapons to slaughter women and children – and look forward to the oil and investments as your reward.

One Rule for Us...

Shelley Leggett

I AM being investigated by HMRC. But before I explain why let me outline the political backdrop in which this is happening.

Currently, former British Prime Minister, David Cameron, who once said there was a ‘far too cosy relationship between politics, government, business and money’ that has ‘tainted our politics for too long’, has been found to have been lobbying on behalf of a company he went to work for (in truth he was hired for his contacts book) after the disastrous Brexit vote that he pushed for saw him resigning as PM.

He was set to make somewhere in the region of £60 million. He was turned down for the loan he was seeking to save the company during the pandemic and it has now folded, but not until after he had secured meetings with ministers to try and access public funds using his contacts in government.

Health Secretary, Matt Hancock, is also currently in the news because it has emerged that he was gifted shares in a company that won a tender competition as an approved contractor with the NHS in Wales in 2019. It was two months before Hancock declared his interest in the company, and then didn’t declare his sister was the owner.

And then there was the landlord of his local pub who won a contract to produce vials for NHS Covid-19 tests without any previous experience of producing medical supplies.

Speaking of tests, Hancock’s friend Dido Harding was appointed to oversee the Test & Trace roll-out that is set to cost around £30 billion when it’s finished. It never really worked, and the company Serco that runs it was previously fined for misconduct in a past government contract. Serco’s boss is Rupert Soames, brother of former Tory MP Nicholas Soames. But if you don’t like it you can complain to the PM’s Anti-Corruption Champion, John Penrose, Dido Harding’s husband. Randox received £133 million for Covid testing kits that had to be recalled. Randox is a Tory party donor employing MP Owen Patterson on a £100,000 a year contract as a consultant.

There are many more such arrangements from faulty masks by a company with links to Liz Truss to PPE contracts given to Deloitte, where once Cabinet Office minister Chloe Smith was a consultant.

In previous news, businesswoman Jennifer Arcuri, said she had been paid thousands from the public purse during her four year affair with Boris Johnson. She received a £100,000 cyber skills grant intended for UK operating businesses even though she had relocated to California. The inquiry concluded that the grant was ‘appropriate’.

I could go on, but I won’t as you may already know of these scandals anyway. So why am I being investigated? When the pandemic started, I was working in a university as a self-employed student supporter. Said university was where the

first case of Covid in Northern Ireland was discovered in early March 2020. Being immunosuppressed I left, and a week later lockdown was called. Eventually Rishi Sunak announced measures to help those unable to go to work or whose jobs had disappeared, but to qualify applicants had to have submitted their tax returns by a certain date. I’d done that, so I applied and received over the course of the next few months three grants. I also received a letter from the Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Michael McBride, advising me to ‘shield’ due to my immunosuppression.

Fast forward to April 2021 and I got a phone call from HMRC querying why I had claimed the grant since I had put on my tax return that I had ceased ‘trading’. I pointed out the question was a yes or no: are you still trading or have you ceased trading? I was told several people had made the same mistake but, as I hadn’t worked since March 2020, what else could I put? ‘Ceased trading’ means the business has closed, apparently. Despite this clear misunderstanding, I was asked to provide proof of shielding and trading 2019 to 2020 with copies of my bank statements for a whole year. It all had to be sent by email and inside five weeks, which I duly did.

A week later I got a letter from HMRC saying that as I’d ceased trading I wasn’t entitled to the self employed grant and would have to pay the money back. I rang the number that had rung me the week before, and was told the evidence I had provided wasn’t enough. It’s true I couldn’t find the original shielding letter and may even have sent it to HMRC with my first application, but the letter I did send had my name on it and referred to people like me who’d been advised to shield and due to the new variants should continue to do so. I was also told that I hadn’t sent any receipts, so I explained all the work I do for the boards is submitted through an online system to the education boards via the university and they then credit my bank account. I’m now waiting to hear if a committee will decide if I need to provide further proof.

I know that government departments can’t hand out public money without any sort of checks and balances, but my point is that the scrutiny I’ve come under – as a registered carer the government limits what I can earn – is so much more stringent than that afforded to wealthy government ministers and their friends and donors.

One article I read on the subject of Tory cronyism otherwise known as corruption was entitled ‘The scandal is that there is no scandal’. There was a time when lying in the House was a resigning matter (and Johnson has done a lot of that), but I can’t remember who said that when wealthy men are in power for a long time they surround themselves with laws and structures that mean they can get away with whatever they want. Have you ever noticed the way Tories always smirk – especially Priti Awful Patel? Even they can’t believe what they’re getting away with! And that is: one rule for us, and another for them. □

Debating Irish Unity

Roger Kelly

CHRIS Donnelly, educationalist and political commentator was spot on when he said on the *Stephen Nolan Show* on Radio Ulster on 1st April that no matter how Sinn Féin apologised about the Bobby Storey funeral it would make no difference to hard-line Unionists and Loyalists.

He went on to say that Sinn Féin had undoubtedly made a major mistake in the debacle surrounding their involvement in the funeral and that more importantly, they need to address their own shortcomings in appearing arrogant and above criticism. Sadly, this whole foray has come at an unfortunate time especially when the debate around a United Ireland was gaining some impetus.

The *Claire Byrne Show* in March on RTE1 debated the question: *A United Ireland What Would It Mean?* Many anticipated an explosive discussion between the likes of Sinn Féin leader Mary Lou McDonald, Táiniste Leo Varadkar, the DUP MP Gregory Campbell, Alliance MLA Naomi Long, Loyalist blogger Jamie Bryson, and others. However, viewers were left surprised and impressed that the show produced a balanced and measured debate.

Mary Lou McDonald pointed out that, between the Brexit vote and the subsequent N.I. Protocol and the Covid pandemic, the issue of the Northern Ireland border had been thrust into the spotlight in a way that it had not been before. Leo Varadkar agreed and both of them also concurred that it was important to start a detailed conversation with all political, economic, social and cultural groups on the island of Ireland as to what a new Ireland could possibly look like.

Their main difference was around setting a specific date for a border poll. Unsurprisingly, the two main Unionist/Loyalist representatives

were the most negative about having a discussion to consider the consequences of Irish Unity. Jamie Bryson, who once remarked that he would rather 'choke on his own blood' than be part of a United Ireland, said it didn't matter how a 'New Ireland' is packaged or what is done to try to accommodate unionists: "a New Ireland, an Old Ireland or I can't believe it's not a United Ireland Ireland, is never going to be tolerable to unionism".

Gregory Campbell made similar comments, and while he acknowledged that a border poll was inevitable as outlined in the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), he was nevertheless unimpressed with the need to consider the possibility of any new all Ireland dispensation.

It is an inescapable fact that in the next 10/15 years Unionism will be an electoral minority

It is an inescapable fact that in the next 10/15 years Unionism will be an electoral minority and it can't go on saying no, no, no to meaningful discourse about future working relationships that may lead to a united Ireland.

Many Unionists/Loyalists still fail to accept that the GFA gives legitimacy to the desire for reunification and that this aim will be decided by discussion, debate and a democratic vote via a border poll when the Secretary of State of Northern Ireland deems it appropriate to call it.

Also in March this year, the Fianna Fail TD Jim O'Callaghan delivered a speech at Sidney Sussex College, England, outlining his thoughts on the political, economic and legal consequences of Irish reunification. He is to be commended for producing a 24-page paper that is the first

overarching analysis of what a new united Ireland might look like.

O'Callaghan speaks respectfully of unionists and their tradition but argues that they would have more influence in a united Ireland than in the UK. Currently, they have about 1% influence in the political structures of the UK but would have 11% in a new Ireland, thus having a greater influence in the governance of a new united Ireland than they enjoy in the governance of the UK.

The paper also proposed other interesting ideas. The new state would have two national languages and a regional system of policing that would include An Garda Síochána and the PSNI.

There should be a 10/15 year phasing out of the current up-to-£10bn UK government subvention with EU regional development funding accessed during the transition period. A high-speed rail system between Belfast and Dublin could be built and extended to other cities.

Religious references or affiliation should not form any part of a new constitution. It is acknowledged there would be contentious issues around flags, emblems and anthems which it is suggested that could be dealt with outside of the political framework through an all-island citizens assembly.

While O'Callaghan's paper does not fully address every possible scenario it does provide at least a template for a rational, meaningful discussion as to the merits of contemplating a united Ireland.

Sinn Féin needs to be a bit savvier in their role in any future campaign and debate around a possible border poll and what a new Ireland would look like and not be viewed as ourselves alone but as part of a broader civic national movement that is respectful of all traditions in attempting to build Irish unity. □

Dublin Rules

Eamon Murphy

RECENTLY I sat down to re-watch *Players of the Faithful*, a documentary about the Offaly team that won the All-Ireland football championship in 1982. The show was interesting not just to sports fans (or Offaly people) but also to anyone interested in the idea of balanced regional development.

A number of the analysts and past players interviewed noted that the 1982 success came about in large part because a 'golden generation' of Offaly footballers coincided with increased employment opportunities for men in their 20s and 30s in the midlands in the 1970s and 80s. Bord na Mona in particular provided an opportunity for young Offaly men to remain in the locality with well-paid work and good career prospects, and eschew - at least for a while - the well-worn path of emigration.

Football fans will tell you there is more to Offaly football's present woes than the state of the local economy or emigration trends, but the decline in their fortunes and the decline in local employment are probably not unconnected. While Offaly's three All-Ireland championships (1971, 1972 and 1982) coincided with two golden generations and an upturn in the Midlands economy, Dublin football has always been competitive, in large part because of the significant population residing in the capital and the economic advantages therein.

With many top players from around Ireland living in Dublin for work and playing for Dublin clubs, the country's senior championship has become laden with powerhouse clubs, while at county level the Dublin team can train together early on weekday mornings because they have a luxury that no other county football team has: every player on their panel is based within the county. In addition to these logistical advantages, no other county commands anything like the financial resources of the Dublin football team, thanks to a large population and the resultant marketing opportunities.

The slow-creeping imbalance within the GAA towards Dublin in terms of money, talent pool and success is another symptom of an imbalance that is developing socially and economically in Ireland - it's not just footballers who move to where the best employment prospects and career opportunities are. The result in GAA terms is the loss of local star players and sometimes a struggle for rural clubs just to field a team. The broader socio-economic results are much more severe, as young people leave the towns, villages and rural townlands they grew up in, possibly never to return.

The outcomes are not entirely positive for Dublin either. In the GAA, the problem usually amounts to no more

than native Dubliners being deprived of a place on their local club teams. Much more serious is the economic imbalance this migration creates, with a heavy strain on Dublin's already overburdened transport and accommodation infrastructure. One need only look at the capital's property market to see where the key issues lie.

Unbalanced economic growth hinders Ireland's overall potential for economic and social development and has an adverse effect on the overall standard of living in our society. There is a huge social cost to half-empty villages and towns around Ireland while Dublin is thriving to the point where people cannot find affordable places to live or deal with long commutes in heavy traffic.

I use the GAA analogy because as an institution it is so central to Irish identity and community wellbeing. And while it can't be denied that - just like the Irish economy, pre-Covid - the GAA was thriving before the pandemic, no sporting competition or organisation can fulfil its potential while being continually dominated by the same team or teams, and no society can fulfil its potential with an imbalanced growth path and an overconcentration of resources on one small part of the country.

No society can fulfil its potential with an imbalanced growth path and an overconcentration of resources on one small part of the country

The imbalance caused by Ireland's current economic trajectory and the years of austerity after the financial crash has left GAA clubs from Dingle to

Dunfanaghy struggling to field teams. Data show that the labour force of many regions in Ireland over the last decade fell significantly, while pre-pandemic Dublin was back to where it was 10 years previously (or performing better) by many measures. Covid-19 may lead to some rebalancing of this, but how much of a rebalance remains to be seen, and government will still need to take pro-active measures.

A sustainable society requires balanced regional development, both for the sake of the economy and for social wellbeing. The proportion of the population of Ireland living in and around the capital city is already very high by international standards, and is growing. Dublin already accounted for half of all economic output in Ireland, pre-Covid.

This must change. We need a strategy to develop regional economic hubs, serving wider regions and creating employment in places that allow people to remain in or near their locality. This will require - amongst other things - a frontloaded investment to complete the rollout of the National Broadband Plan, investment in decent rural transport, and integrated supports for rural entrepreneurs, micro-enterprises and SMEs. Better balance would be good for the GAA, and good for Irish society. □

Dying with Dignity Bill

— The Time Is Now

Alan Tuffery

THE Dying With Dignity Bill is now before the Oireachtas. Its provisions apply to anyone over the age of 18 resident on ‘the island of Ireland.’ If passed, it will raise some problems in Northern Ireland because no part of the UK has a dying with dignity law, although active debates are in progress.

In this article, I argue that the time is right for the enactment of this Bill because of the rate of social change in Ireland. Even since the Dying With Dignity Bill was first presented in 2015, Ireland has continued the pattern of change of the last few decades. Ireland was a country in which one narrow framework applied to everyone. Now it has become a more compassionate society which recognises diversity; a society that increasingly recognises that different people have different needs.

The Republic of Ireland has had two momentous referendums. First, the 2015 marriage equality referendum and then the 2018 referendum to repeal the 8th amendment to the Constitution which prohibited abortion. Both were passed very comfortably and reflect the continuing shift in Irish society towards a society which recognises and respects a higher level of individual autonomy. It is no longer a case of one rule for everyone. Individuals may take the decisions that are best for them, in terms of their ‘most cherished values and beliefs’ — a key part of the concept of personal autonomy.

The common theme here is compassion — society’s compassion for individuals and our compassion for one another. Both lead us to a desire to live in a kinder world and to reduce suffering.

The Dying with Dignity Bill aims to allow individuals with a terminal illness to be helped to end their suffering. At present we do not grant to our fellow citizens the same merciful end to suffering that we grant to the animals in our care.

Laws like the Dying with Dignity Bill are in place in many jurisdictions. In recent times, over thirty countries have legalised some form of voluntary assisted dying, so that, in effect, over 200 million people worldwide now have a legal provision that allows them to end their suffering at the end of life.

Some jurisdictions have only recently passed their laws on voluntary assisted dying. This means that detailed recent arguments are available to us many times over and

can speed up our discussions. How many times do we need to hear the same arguments and the same evidence before we are convinced.

Some jurisdictions have had laws on voluntary assisted dying for well over 20 years now. This means that there is a great deal of experience of operating the safeguards and the procedures. We do not have to start from scratch in Ireland. We can learn from the experience of other jurisdictions and adapt existing procedures to suit our society.

International experience shows that when individuals with a terminal illness know that voluntary assisted dying is available to them, their quality of life is greatly improved. It removes much stress and anxiety, both for themselves and for their loved ones. It provides an

‘emotional insurance’ — as it has been called — that allows them to live out the life that remains to them, without the fear of great pain outside their control. They are also free of the emotional pain that comes with knowing that those who care for them and for whom they care will not have to watch

them die in suffering and degradation.

This ‘emotional insurance’ also removes any need for the terminally ill person to consider suicide — a lonely thought because, in principle, any discussion with others might implicate them in the serious crime of ‘assisting a suicide’. If they decide to travel to end their lives — a complicated and expensive business — they may have to do so alone and may have to end their lives early while they still have some decent quality of life left. It is time to end the practice of ‘exporting our problems’. We have been doing that for far too long.

In every country where voluntary assisted dying is available, surveys show that it is massively popular among the population at large. In no case has such legislation been repealed.

Voluntary assisted dying works. Surveys here show that Irish people support the policy. Now is the time to enact appropriate legislation in Ireland and end suffering for the terminally ill, and the people who care about them.

(Alan Tuffery is a member of the End of Life Ireland (EOLI), a voluntary organisation aiming to foster conversations about end of life and to support the Dying With Dignity Bill. This article was based on a presentation to an EOLI event in early April). □

Divided Nations

Bob Rees

THE prefix ‘un-’ before a word draws attention to the absence of a specified quality, as in ‘undependable’ and ‘unfair’. It is just a coincidence that many of the agencies of the United Nations Organisation bear the prefix UN, though the very concept of nations united is an oxymoron: in the real world, sovereign nations compete against each other, each pursuing selfish national interests.

Nevertheless, humanists must applaud the UN’s claimed political ambitions: to safeguard peace and security; to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights; to uphold respect for international law; and to promote social progress and better standards of life. Unfortunately, all multinational institutions are currently threatened by the worldwide rise of sovereign nationalism and petty dictators, and the UN in particular is further hamstrung by its own structure and biased voting systems which seem to have been mischievously designed to prevent it from ever achieving anything much, beyond producing reams of statistical data showing in fine detail how bad things really are in the spheres of peace and security, human rights, international law and social progress; and clearly demonstrating why someone urgently needs to do something about it.

The Security Council in particular is rendered impotent by its permanent members, USA, China, Russia, France and Britain, known as the P5. They rarely agree about anything much, yet they are each empowered to veto any resolution of the Council that doesn’t happen to suit them individually. This situation exists out of a fear that they might simply walk out if they can’t have their own way, just as the US President Donald Trump arbitrarily dumped the World Health Organisation when it contradicted him about the Covid pandemic. Nor has the Council any way of enforcing any of the resolutions that it does



Geraldine Byrne-Nason

manage to pass: it has no army or air force, just subcontracted peacekeepers, including mercenaries, who are only allowed to operate when the warring parties agree to it, and who usually arrive after the worst fighting is over. Yet despite its dismal failings, the Security Council overshadows the whole UN Organisation - it even nominates the Secretary General.

Needless to say, the Security Council has never passed a resolution critical of the US involvement in Vietnam nor the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, nor of any similar conflicts involving the P5, because it would simply have been vetoed by the guilty party. The Rwandan genocide and the ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia took place despite the presence of the UN, and the proliferation of nuclear weapons is evidence of the dismal failure of the original UN intention of abolishing them. The Security Council has brought discredit to the whole UNO.

On 1st January this year, the Republic of Ireland won/bought a 2-year term for ambassador Geraldine Byrne-Nason to sit on the UN Security Council. We join St Vincent and the Grenadines (pop 0.11 million) and Estonia (pop 1.3 million),

among eight non-permanent others, to champion the interests of small nations by stressing the need for powerful states to “*adhere to international law standards ... that protect small and weaker states as well as keep powerful and dominant states in check*” (Simon Coveney – Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs).

However, our Department of Foreign Affairs is currently preoccupied with problems posed by Brexit and the opening of several new embassies around the world, so it seems UNlikely that we will achieve much, least of all anything that doesn’t suit the P5, despite our record as peacemakers (which we achieved by dependably avoiding contentious topics like refugees and inequality). It seems UNlikely, for example, that Ireland will challenge Britain’s continuing sales of bombs and missiles to Saudi Arabia for use in its ongoing attacks on Yemen, the poorest country in Arabia, in a conflict described by the UN itself as “*the world’s worst humanitarian crisis*”, where 85,000 children have already starved to death, and where Britain is both arms supplier and self-proclaimed peace broker – and one of the P5.

The General Assembly is where each of the 193 member states (plus the Vatican, which is a non-member member) can debate topics of concern, under a president and (a mere) 21 vice-presidents. Here, each state has one vote, regardless of its size, giving each of the 39,000 citizens of Monaco (2 sq km) more than 37,000 times as much voice as any of the 1,444 million of China (9.4 million sq. km) – a simple device which clearly disempowers the big eastern countries like China, India, Pakistan and Indonesia which together represent over half the world’s population.

However, the UN does exert strong economic influence through the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Unlike the →

General Assembly, voting power here is weighted according to each country's financial contribution. Here, the rich countries, notably the USA, call the shots, which they have openly used to promote their own interests by, for example, imposing free-market capitalism on emerging debt-ridden Third World countries that actually need protected economies. Consequently those poorer nations regard the World Bank and IMF, and hence the UN itself, as untrustworthy agents of western imperialism.

Most of the various ongoing programmes and activities are administered by the UN Secretariat, which is staffed by civil servants from each of the 193 member states around the world. The Secretariat is therefore notoriously hampered not only by red tape and a reputation for corruption, but also by poor linguistic communications and inter-cultural clashes among the staff, each promoting his/her own competing national interests.

Routine Work

Elsewhere, the UN does useful practical work in scores of diverse technical activities involving just about every topic from Agriculture (FAO) and Aviation (ICAO) through Education (UNESCO) and Energy (IAEA), to Intellectual Property (WIPO) and Population (UNFPA), and Tourism (UNWTO). It also hosts several pre-existing organisations such as the International Telecommunication Union (founded 1865) and the International Postal Union (founded 1874).

When global emergencies such as the current Covid pandemic, global warming, or overpopulation arise, the UN is the organisation we turn to. In the case of the pandemic, the UN's World Health Organisation (WHO) gathers statistical data, publishes expert advice and tries to coordinate national responses. Global warming is addressed through the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which was initiated in 1994 and which is currently coordinating attempts to advance the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris Agreement. Overpopulation is being addressed by POPIN, the popula-

tion information group which is actively pushing a world population plan for sustainable growth. ECOSOC is coordinating work on globally harmonising taxation and eradicating offshore tax havens, and so on, through every topic of international concern.

Success Stories

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, upholding the 'inherent dignity' of all human beings, was seen by humanists as a great victory for humanist ideals. At the time, not everyone agreed that all humans necessarily had rights, and the UN's acceptance of member States' claims of national sovereignty is tacit acknowledgement that States still violate the rights of their own citizens.

The UN inspectors' (rapporteurs') hands are tied: they are permitted to visit only those states that have invited them; and they may only entreat a government in the hope of shaming it into respect for its citizens' rights, but they have no powers of coercion. Despite this, Irish president Mary Robinson held the post of High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR, which had been established in 1993) from 1997 to 2002, successfully and fearlessly promoted the notion of human rights, as did Secretaries General Boutros Boutros-Ghali (1992 – 96) and Kofi Annan (1997 – 2006), and today, human rights have become generally accepted as real entities, not dreams; and abusers, such

as the Myanmar military, face worldwide censure.

The UN Children's International Emergency Fund (UNICEF) works in over 190 countries to save children's lives, defend their rights, protect them from exploitation, and help them to make something of their lives. For clothing, vaccinating, feeding and educating children, it won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1965. UNICEF receives typically \$6.4 billion annually in the form of voluntary contributions from governments and private individuals, though it has been criticised for overpaying its staff.

Similarly, the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) works to uphold the notion that everyone has a right to a safe refuge with the option eventually to return home. With a budget of \$8.6 billion, and 17,000 staff in 135 countries, it currently helps to provide clean water, sanitation, shelter, and blankets for 20 million refugees (there are currently 70 million forcibly displaced persons in the world – a measure of the scale of the failure of the Security Council). Since its inception in 1950, the UNHCR has helped more than fifty million refugees, and it has been widely praised, with several awards, including Nobel Peace Prizes in 1954 and 1981.

Nevertheless, the UN is a structurally-flawed bureaucratic institution in need of reform: development aid is going to the wrong places, duplication and overlap between UN agencies are causing waste, human rights are trampled on, war and terrorism are rife, and it is clear that the USA in particular is using the UN as a cat's paw for its own foreign policies. The Security Council in particular needs to abandon the P5's veto but, Catch 22, any attempt to do so would inevitably be vetoed! The urgent call for more resources to fund a rapidly deployable peacekeeping force goes unheard. And we must acknowledge that member states will inevitably prioritise their competing national interests. Scepticism is justifiable. Yet the UN is indispensable, and humanists should always remember that its goals are, for the most part, our goals too. □



The New Eugenics

Noel Byrne

EUGENICS is a noxious word, stemming principally from its historical connotation with Hitler's genocidal and Lebensborn policies as well as the various heinous national negative eugenic policies carried out in the 19th and 20th centuries. The concept of eugenics however goes back as far as Plato who spoke of such ideas in his *Republic*, but the actual term 'Eugenics' was coined by Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin. Galton's idea was to increase the genetic quality of the human species. The etymology of the word is Greek and means 'good creation'.

'Liberal eugenics' is a term coined by Nicholas Agar (pictured), a Professor of Ethics in New Zealand, in a 2004 book titled *Liberal Eugenics: In Defense of Human Enhancement*. The Human Genome Project had just been completed in April 2003. The term as used by Agar relates solely to the protection and extension of reproductive freedom. It relates to the current powerful and future potential genetic technologies that will enable prospective parents to make choices by use of these technologies. It is eugenics at a parental level and not at state level. It focuses on genetic change or enhancement at the individual level only. This essay is not a review of Agar's book.

Liberal eugenics as the term is now currently used distinguishes between traditional authoritarian or coercive eugenics and a new Liberal Eugenics based on free individual choice and pluralistic values. It has nothing to do with population genetics. It is an argument for choice. Modern genetic technologies simply allows a couple, or individual, voluntarily, and motivated by their view of what is good and desirable, to choose a heritable trait in their sperm, egg, embryo or fetus or to remove a gene which carries a heritable illness or propensity to a physical or mental disease. These technologies also allow their use as a therapy to correct genetic defects. Although there are major bioethical issues involved in these genetic technologies, they are principally about bettering human life.

The desire or need to pass on our genes is one of the most powerful biological urges. According to some, the sole purpose of life is to pass on our genes. It is natural for parents to want the very best for their children and to give them the best advantage they can in life. If such technologies are available and cost effective they will be used.

Presently prenatal scans and blood tests can show up deformities and potential heritable diseases that allow parents a choice as to whether to proceed with a preg-



It is eugenics at a parental level and not at state level

nancy. IVF treatment and artificial insemination currently allows parents with infertility problems to have children. Sex is no longer necessary for conception.

In relation to these technologies, it is necessary to understand the difference between somatic cells and reproductive cells. Somatic cells are most of the cells in our body. Reproductive cells are sperm cells, egg cells and cells from very early embryos. Somatic cells are diploid, that is, they contain two sets of chromosomes. Reproductive cells are haploid,

that is, they contain only one set of chromosomes. Mutations in somatic cells can affect the individual, but they are not passed on to offspring. Genetic changes in a reproductive cell would be passed on to a person's offspring.

Genetic technologies are differentiated by their use. Gene therapy refers to altering genes to correct genetic defects and so prevent or cure genetic diseases such as cystic fibrosis and hemophilia, whereas genetic engineering aims to modify genes to enhance the capabilities and potentials of the organism beyond the normal. Genetic engineering is not yet used on humans.

Let us look now at some of the arguments for and against liberal eugenics. In general, as an ethical principle there is no real reason to condemn individual genetic goals. One of the principal arguments for the technologies relates to the principle that if certain genetic arrangements or traits are currently accepted and left unchanged, then we are entitled to introduce that trait or genetic arrangement and enhance it. Also, we shape our children's environment to the best possible degree to give them the best chance in life.

As it stands many people try constantly to improve themselves both physically and mentally by education, exercise, diet and even plastic surgery. They also do what they can to improve their children's opportunities and potential. If we make these improvements and enhancements via nurture, why should we not do it via nature is the argument. There is no real moral objection to accomplishing these aims through genetics.

When choosing a mate we are often conscious to choose someone who will give us smart, attractive children over another who might give us less desirable children. There is nothing wrong in so choosing and as such there is no reason not to aspire to have children with the best genes through genetic enhancement.

The principal argument in favour of gene therapy →

is that it gives the opportunity to cure some diseases and disorders and prevent disease in those whose genes may predispose them to certain illnesses and diseases and perhaps even the elimination of some diseases. If these technologies are used on reproductive cells, it could keep children from carrying unfavourable genetic diseases and disorders which they might inherit from their parents into the future. Morally this appears unobjectionable.

One of the principal arguments against gene therapy is that it may be technically too dangerous. Because of its newness, the full consequences of the therapy may not be known for some time and with reproductive cells the full consequences may not be known until the altered genes have been passed to the next generation. Another argument is that Gene Therapy might discriminate against people with disabilities. At present, people with disabilities or impairments may be discriminated against by having fewer opportunities in life and gene therapy might in fact help remove some of this discrimination. However, some disability groups consider that its use implies that those who are impaired through genetic factors need to be treated and made normal.

Genetic engineering is currently used extensively in agriculture, principally in crops and food, but also in animals. Enhancing humans is still in the future. However, in 2020 two ladies named Jennifer Doudna, a biochemist, and Emmanuelle Charpentier, a microbiologist, won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry for a gene editing therapy called Crispr. It is referred to as a molecular scissors. It was first developed in 2012 and is revolutionising gene editing. Although it is not yet being used for human enhancement it is being trialled successfully on humans for various genetic conditions and disorders. This therapy is being used at a hugely increasing rate even though it is in its infancy.

Although enhancing humans is still in the future, the technology is now there for human enhancement. Enhancement may make human life better in significant ways by enhancing certain characteristics in people. The principal arguments against genetic engineering are the same as those above for gene therapy. However, further arguments such as that it is against the natural or supernatural order are also used. It is also contended by some that this technology is dehumanising. The argument from obsolescence is also used in the sense that this year's gene enhancements may be superseded by next year's enhancement.

Another important issue regarding these technologies is the complicated social and legal repercussions. Among these are issues regarding parenthood such as when surrogate mothers are used, or when sperm donors are fathers. A child may have a mother whose egg was used in a surrogate mother and a sperm donor father. Or even a child of a double donor arrangement who may have no genetic connection with their social parent or parents.

Another of the arguments against both these technologies is the possibility of coercion, whereby governments or societies might coerce a person's reproductive behaviour. The major concern would be to ensure that these technologies are used at a parental level only and for the state to have no say in these matters. An entitlement to

reproduce without interference is a fundamental freedom recognised by International Law and might need to be strengthened. A further argument relates to inequities that might arise as a result of allowing eugenic choice whereby society may finish up with a 'superior class' with unfair advantages because of some parents being able to afford specific traits or enhancements for their offspring. We currently live in a very inequitable world where children are brought up in all sorts of differing circumstances. There will always be some inequities. Making the world more equitable is certainly something we must all aspire to by ensuring that liberal eugenic choices will be more readily available. It is not however an argument against personal parental choice.

Some of the questions which are going to arise are, will there be a distinction between allowing for negative selection as in the case of disease as against positive selection for desirable traits? Should gene therapy be strictly confined to the prevention and treatment of disease? How will these technologies be controlled?

If in the future these technologies were readily available and acceptable throughout the world, then the gene pool might change very quickly over a few generations. It could possibly result in the complete elimination of lethal diseases such as cystic fibrosis and sickle cell anemia. Genetic engineering in a safe and efficient manner will no doubt be developed in the near future. We are now in a position to fast forward our evolution. But not everything that can be done should be done. As these technologies become feasible and relatively inexpensive and are generally as beneficial, they will be used.

The biologist Professor Lee Silver of Princeton University in his Book *Remaking Eden: Cloning, Genetic Engineering and the Future of Humankind* talks about genomic enhancements "that today may seem outlandish but must lie in the realm of possibility because they have evolved naturally in animals". Such attributes include the ability to see in the ultraviolet or infrared range, magnetic detection systems from birds, to see in the dark as bats do, to enhance our sense of smell as in dogs. These are just some of the potential enhancements in the distant future.

Human cloning is another issue that could arise in the future through these technologies. It is also important to note that it is through the manipulation of genetic material that most of the vaccinations against Covid 19 are being developed and manufactured. Culture generally has been on a positive curve. There is no doubt that our health, wealth and overall wellbeing have improved from pre-history to today. Genetic tools are extremely powerful and like all technology can be used for better or worse, but clearly they may bring about an increase in the human life span and elimination of much disease.

As Humanists, we need to be aware of the potential of these emerging technologies, both positive and negative, as they are the moral and bioethical issues that will be to the fore in the near future and we will need to be in a position to discuss them and form opinions. As these technologies increase and become less expensive and more refined and sophisticated, so the ethical and moral consequences will also have to keep up. □



Humanist Masterpieces No 43

Casablanca (1942)

Brian McClinton

ASK who directed *Psycho* and chances are that the response will be Alfred Hitchcock.

Ask the same question about *Jaws* and the reply may well be Stephen Spielberg. But inquire who directed *Casablanca*, the most famous Hollywood movie of them all, and few will have any idea. It is even stranger when you realise that, as well as *Casablanca*, Michael Curtiz directed nearly 100 Hollywood films, not to mention the 80 or so he made earlier in Hungary, his native country, and then others in Austria in the early 1920s. Yet this prolific and versatile master of movies is largely the forgotten man of cinema. There is even a 2012 documentary entitled *Michael Curtiz: The Greatest Director You Never Heard Of*.

Curtiz has suffered in part because of his versatility. The works of many directors display a recognisable visual and/or thematic hallmark. Thus Hitchcock is a great horror director, Spielberg is a great director of suspense, Fellini a great director of fantasy, Leone a great director of spaghetti westerns, and so on. Curtiz's output, however, runs the gamut of genres and styles: melodramas, historical epics, westerns, crime dramas, musicals, romances, horror, religious epics, and comedies. And because he directed exclusively for Warner Brothers from 1926 to 1952, it is assumed that he was essentially a studio workhorse doing whatever was asked of him.

Yet he directed many classics: *Captain Blood*, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, *Kid Galahad*, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, *Angels with Dirty Faces*, *The Sea Wolf*, *The Sea Hawk*, *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, *Mildred Pierce*, *White Christmas*, *We're No Angels*, *King Creole*, *The Comancheros*. The list goes on. When you make it seem easy, you may be taken for granted.



Here's looking at you, kids: Michael Curtiz directing Bogart and Bergman

It is also sometimes forgotten that Michelangelo, the greatest artist of them all, often did what was asked of him. He was commissioned to sculpt *David* and to paint the Sistine Chapel. Curtiz once compared a film scene with characters and background to an artist's unfinished canvas and saw himself as mixing the paints to finish the canvas properly.

Auteurism is the theory that the director is the 'author' of a film, the artist whose 'vision' permeates the work. Critic Andrew Sarris called *Casablanca* 'the most decisive exception to the auteur theory'. Yet, for example, what is Hitchcock's 'vision'? Or Leone's? In neither case does it really amount to a hill of beans when you think about it. Ultimately, theirs is a particular style but hardly high art.

Also, as Curtiz himself pointed out, the cinema is essentially a mongrel muse, a blend of architecture, literature, music, painting and sculpture. The 'greatness' of a film therefore depends on more than one creator. The actors, the director, the photographer, the script writer, the composer, all contribute to the finished

product. It is essentially a collective enterprise.

Casablanca has been described as a great movie but not a great film. The latter is defined by its depth and vision whereas a great movie is ultimately just a piece of popular entertainment. By that criterion, America has produced very few great films. It is in any case a false dichotomy. Films are not ends in themselves but means to other ends: entertainment, education, philosophy, documentation, propaganda, profit, and so on. *Casablanca* is a great film because it successfully combines art and entertainment. It engages both our brains and our emotions.

After seeing *Hamlet* for the first time, a theatregoer reputedly pronounced that the play was full of clichés. The same can be said of *Casablanca*. Of course, as with *Hamlet*, they have only become clichés as a result of repetition after seeing or reading the work. As Umberto Eco wrote in his essay *Casablanca, or, the Clichés Are Having a Ball*, two clichés make us laugh but a hundred clichés move us. "For we sense dimly that the clichés are talking among themselves, and celebrating a reunion".

These clichés are not only in the dialogue but also reside in the film's hodgepodge of romance, morality tale, comedy, suspense and intrigue. It is not just one film but many films, an anthology of genres brilliantly congealed. As for archetypes, the usual suspects include: the passage to the promised land (out of Morocco to America); a magic key (visas and letters of transit); unhappy love (Rick and Ilsa); redemption (Rick and Renault); and sacrifice (Rick and Ilsa). The inclusion of every archetype the creators could think of makes for an unforgettable work of art. —>

Eco also singled out sacrifice as a theme – “the myth of sacrifice runs through the whole film”. It was this theme which resonated with a wartime audience reassured by the idea that painful sacrifice and going off to war could be romantic gestures done for the greater good.

We often hear it said that they made *Casablanca* up as they went along – accidental perfection, one critic has called it – but clearly that is an exaggeration. The director certainly knew what he was doing. He was clear that he was making a melodrama in the middle of a war and that he had to convey the passions and the moral dilemmas engendered by it.

Ethics is central to *Casablanca*. To elucidate, we need to consider the background. The film is based on a mediocre unproduced 1940 play by Murray Burnett and Joan Allison entitled *Everybody Comes to Rick's*. In December 1941 after America's entry into the war the play was purchased by Warner Brothers for \$20,000 and the film was shot between May and August 1942. The premiere took place in November to correspond with the invasion of North Africa by the Allies, and the general release in January 1943 corresponded with the Casablanca Conference of Roosevelt and Churchill.

Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) is the owner of the Café Américain, a café-nightclub in Casablanca, a city in the Vichy controlled state of Morocco, which is home to refugees and criminals from Europe. Rick claims that he doesn't care about the war because “your business is politics, mine is running a saloon”. But his cynical shell is shattered by the arrival of Ilsa Lund (Ingrid Bergman), a woman with whom he had an affair in Paris a couple of years earlier.

At the time, she was married to Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid), a Czech resistance leader, though she believed him to have been killed in a German concentration camp. Rick was not aware of the marriage and cannot forgive her after they had planned to flee Paris but she failed to turn up at the station. As we and Rick now learn, she had discovered that in fact he was still alive and needed her help. They are both in

Casablanca seeking letters of transit that will enable them to leave for neutral Portugal en route to America.

Rick can help them as he has acquired the means, and that constitutes his dilemma: does he try to win back Ilsa or help her and Laszlo to escape and continue their work fighting fascism? Which is more important: personal relationships or the good of humanity? It is succinctly summed up in his words to Ilsa: “*Where I'm going you can't follow. What I've got to do, you can't be part of. Ilsa, I'm no good at being noble, but it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world. Someday you'll understand that*”.

Casablanca is a propaganda movie posing as just popular entertainment. It is propaganda for the war and it is propaganda for America. Although public opinion had shifted towards intervention even before Pearl Harbor, there was still a reluctance by many Americans to become involved. At the start of the film we see Rick playing chess with himself – a symbol of this continuing isolationism.

Rick is not, however, a natural cynic but rather a disillusioned idealist who, as the more cynical Chief of Police Louis Renault (Claude Rains) reminds him, ran guns to Ethiopia in 1935 after the country was invaded by Mussolini and a year later fought on the loyalist side in Spain against the Franco-led fascist rebels. Following these failures, Ilsa's apparent betrayal was a further blow to his faith in humanity.

He proclaims: “I stick my neck out for nobody. The problems of this world are not in my department. I'm a saloon keeper.” But he has not totally abandoned his altruism. A Bulgarian refugee and her husband desperately searching for visas to the United States are approached by Renault. Rather than allowing her to obtain the visas by selling her body to him, Rick rigs the roulette wheel so that the couple win the money to buy their passage.

The turning point for Rick comes in the famous *Marseillaise* scene. The Gestapo's Major Heinrich Strasser (Conrad Veidt) conducts his soldiers

as they start singing the patriotic German song *Die Wacht am Rhein*. Laszlo goes to the band and demands that they play the French national anthem. The band leader looks towards Rick and he gives him the nod. Soon the Germans are drowned out. It is a powerful scene that brings tears to the eyes even on repeated viewings. Nearly all of the 75 cast themselves cried while making this scene because they were themselves immigrants or refugees.

The German actor Conrad Veidt, although not a Jew himself, had a Jewish wife. He insisted that in American films he would only play a German if he was a villain and remarked that he was praised for portraying the kind of character who had forced him to leave his homeland.

Indeed, we should note that both Curtiz and S.Z. Sakall, who plays the head waiter, were Hungarian Jews. Sakall's three sisters and niece died in concentration camps. Curtiz was at the time smuggling family members out of Hungary. Hal Wallis, the producer, who had a major input into the film (he and Curtiz met at the latter's ranch for planning sessions), was Jewish, as were the Warner brothers, the script writers Julius and Philip Epstein and Howard Koch, and the composer of the score Max Steiner. All were clearly determined to make the film an effective vehicle for encouraging reluctant Americans to support the war against the Nazi menace. The message was: personal desires must be subordinated to the task of defeating fascism.

For Rick, to understand all is to forgive all. He realises that Ilsa's abandonment of him had a justifiable reason and that, even if she still loves him, she is fully supportive of her husband in his fight for a good cause. Now he too must join the fight, consoling himself that they ‘will always have Paris’. At the end of the film his new-found friendship with Louis Renault perhaps in the Free French forces is symbolic of the United States' alliance with France and with Europe as a whole.

What makes *Casablanca* a great film? We could start with the acting. Humphrey Bogart arrived on the set, declaring: “I'm not up to —>

this stuff and don't know just what to do". His parts before were gangsters or private eyes. But Curtiz coaxed him around and drew out a brilliant performance. Ingrid Bergman, whom the director bathed in a luminous glow, also exudes passion as one of the two star-crossed lovers. They are backed by a cast at the top of their game. The film endures not least because of the stunning quality of the acting throughout. Everyone is throwing their whole heart and soul into the project, believing it is worth it.

Then there is the brilliance of the script. In 1943 *Casablanca* was nominated for 8 Academy Awards and won 3 Oscars: best film, best director and best screenplay. The Epstein twins Julius and Philip, Howard Koch and (the uncredited) Casey Robinson came up trumps with a witty and memorable script. In the Writers Guild of America West it comes top of its list of 101 best screenplays. The story itself, as rewritten from the play, has a clear and satisfactory beginning, middle and end, and the dialogue sparkles with quotable lines that are familiar to everyone interested in the movies.

Last, but not least, there is the inspired direction. A film set mainly in a café runs the risk of being stagey, but *Casablanca* zips along at a breathtaking pace. Curtiz already had the experience of directing Errol Flynn in swashbucklers like *Captain Blood* and *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. Here he never lingers: there is always something else happening to keep us interested. And here he adds a German expressionist *film noir* atmosphere with use of light and shadow, painting a seedy environment in the twilight zone of morality, full of corruption, brutality, sexual favours, psychological conflict, alienation and menace. Indeed, in this respect *Casablanca* is the ultimate *film noir*.

Of course, ultimately love, reason and duty triumph. In his essay *Of Love* Francis Bacon writes that wanton love corrupts and embases mankind but friendly love perfects it. Paris was wanton or romantic love. Yet Rick and Ilsa finally achieve friendly love and share it with others. They then set out to rid the world of hatred, prejudice and cruelty, which are love's enemies. □



What is a Freethinker?

I AM not an atheist, but I confess that I do not know 'God'. I think the term 'freethinker' is presumptuous. I would see myself as a nonconformist, disillusioned, enquiring thinker. I find myself religiously and politically homeless – nobody's child.

Intelligent life has existed on this planet for a hell of a long time before we happened. That intelligent life accumulated a body of wisdom which happens to be recorded in the Bible. Modern intelligence would dismiss most of its records as bunkum. I see it as a body of wheat and chaff. It takes effort to find good grain. As a searcher for good grain, I was given hunger by the church, and then also by the 'law'.

When I die, I will be separated from worldly concerns. In accordance with my status of a 'disvoiced' and banished by state and church, I leave no request, no instruction and no authority over my corporal remains or material estate.

Eamon Farrell,
Waterford

EDITOR'S NOTE

A FREETHINKER doesn't presume to think whatever he or she likes. The liberty implied is freedom from being influenced by others, especially in religious and political matters. As Bertrand Russell wrote in *The Value of Free Thought*:

"What makes a freethinker is not his beliefs but the way in which he holds them. If he holds them because his elders told him they were true when he was young, or if he holds them because if he did not he would be unhappy, his thought is not free; but if he holds them because, after careful thought he finds a balance of evidence in their favour, then his thought is free, however odd his conclusions may seem".

Bridgerton Bias

MY copy of the March/April *Freethinker* arrived this afternoon. While eating my supper I perused the *Home Movie* page. I got severe indigestion.

I wondered what evidence there was for the assertion in the review on *Bridgerton*: "For many, mostly women, it is all the rage and several have confessed to watching all eight episodes more than once. For others, mostly men, it is a trashy aristocratic soap opera". To whom and under what circumstances were these confessions made?

I attempted to find figures for the gender breakdown of the audience, alluded to in the review. I was unsuccessful. Please let me know where you found that information. I did find figures for critic reviews of the series on *Rotten-Tomatoes*. There were 90 reviews: 30 by male reviewers, 53 by female reviewers and 7 by reviewers who I could not assign a gender to by their name or photo.

To my surprise the reviews were overwhelmingly positive. Having seen the trailer myself I had dismissed *Bridgerton* as 'tedious tosh'. Of the 30 male reviewers, 26 were positive and 4 negative. Of the 53 female reviewers, 48 were positive and 5 negative. Of the unassigned gender reviewers, 6 were positive and 1 negative. These figures do not accurately reflect the assertions made in the *Freethinker*.

Brigid Carlin,
Whitegate, Co. Clare

EDITOR'S NOTE

AS THE author of the article, I based that comment on a combination of the reviews I had read (three women in the *Sunday Times*, *Observer* and *Guardian* who all lavished praise on it, and two men in the *Sunday Independent* and *Spectator*, who trashed it), and the opinions of friends. It would seem that they were not as representative as I had assumed.

CORRECTION

An article by Owen Morton on John Le Carré in the January-February issue had an inconsistency. It was written before he died. The editor inserted a reference to his death early on but failed to correct a later implication that he was still alive.



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



Chapter 21

IN July 1981, novices attended a charismatic youth jamboree in Artane, close to my home. A neighbour saw me and rang my sister, who arrived and told me Dad's health had deteriorated that morning.

I went home immediately. My father was in bed, looking better than I expected. He was able to chat and sit up. I had in my pocket the rosary beads he had given me when I joined the Marists. We used them to pray together, him holding them for one decade and me taking them for the next. There was a tangible shared sense of finality.

An ambulance arrived and he was taken to Mercers Hospital. I spoke to a nurse, worried that they mightn't realise how unwell he was because he looked all right.

'Mr Armstrong, we realise your father's condition is serious.'

That night when I returned to Milltown, I updated the Superior but shrugged off confrères' queries. Alone in the chapel, I cried my eyes out and thought of the letter that I had written to him so recently and his treasured reply.

Father Hannan told me I could visit my father as often as I liked, despite the normal seclusion of novitiate.

It was a difficult time. Fear erupted every time the phone rang. Once, while hitching a lift to the hospital, Charles Mitchel picked me up. He was the first ever newscaster on RTE television in 1961 and he had cried announcing the death of US President Kennedy.

'You looked desolate. I couldn't pass you by.'

I wasn't certain it was him.

'You sound like Charles Mitchel.'

'That's because I am.'

I visited my dad frequently during those weeks. He shared chocolate, biscuits and sweets with me. One day, as we both sat on the side of his bed, he said he had a headache. His words were slurred. Unable to cope that day with his decline, I left shortly afterwards.

Next morning, my school friend and fellow novice John told me my mother had phoned.

'Your dad took a bad turn during the night. Come on, I'll drive you in.'

My father was lying in bed. When the nurse told him I had arrived, he tried to rise from the pillow and talk. He rose but fell back, letting out a loud, bellowing groan. Horrible words arose in my mind describing that sound which I thought I could never express. Dad's face was sunken on one side. When a doctor opened his eyes, his pupils were like pinpricks. He had taken a massive stroke.

I was distraught to see and hear my father, once strong and physically powerful, this manly man who had lugged Guinness barrels about and worked on their

trucks, barges and cranes, struck down. Outside in the corridor, I wept.

A neighbour told me to stop and be strong for my mother. Although she meant well, I resented her intervention. I needed to express my distress, not bury it.

Back in the ward, my mother took my father's stroke disarmingly well. She joked with him about the garden and the dog. He smiled, showing he understood. My Uncle Joe and I sat beside him. Dad became restless and tried moving his arm. He manoeuvred his hand to his right eye and tried to open his eyelid but couldn't. Uncle Joe did it for him. Dad smiled. I held his hand and he tightened his grip. But by later that day, we lost more of him: he could no longer indicate even if he could hear us, or whether he knew we were there. At one point, tears fell from his eyes.

With no change in my father's condition, I returned to Milltown that night. Recently ordained Father Paddy Stanley came to my room.

'Talk to me,' he said.

I couldn't speak.

'Get it out.'

Here was the permission denied me earlier.

'Come on,' he persisted.

I spoke aloud those horrible words conceived earlier: 'He brayed like a donkey.'

As I write this, aged 56, those words still have not lost their power to upset me.

'Good man,' whispered Paddy.

Father Denis Green arrived in my room and sat beside me. I lay my head on his shoulder and cried. A confrère arrived with tea and toast. I learned prayers had been said at mass and Evening Prayer and the community had gathered to say the rosary for us. Next day, when I came back from the hospital, my room had been tidied, the bed made, my shirt had been washed and ironed, and an unsigned card lay on my pillow: 'We are with you, Joe, at this difficult time.'

I don't know who did these kindnesses but I was buoyed up by them. The support of the community deepened my sense of belonging and wanting to remain, all my life, in the Society of Mary.

Prompted by the *After God* column in *The Irish Freethinker and Humanist*, Joe Armstrong's memoir *In My Gut, I Don't Believe* is available in paperback (£11.36/€13.30) and Kindle eBook (£6.99/€7.77) editions on all Amazon sites and Book Depository (€11.13 paperback to Ireland). ISBN:9780954661014.

"A fascinating, courageous and moving account of an individual leaving the trammels of religion for the good light of humanism – an educative story on many levels, well told."
– Professor A. C. Grayling

Atheism or Agnosticism?

Bob Rees

THE In the last issue of IFH, Noel Byrne pointed to the illogicality of the Christian Omni-God. Unfortunately Atheism, the assertively-held belief that there is no God, is logically unprovable too.

Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, and in an argument, Agnosticism (the observation that nothing is known about the existence or nature of God) is the only logically defensible stance. However, in his book *A Very Short Introduction to Atheism*, Julian Baggini disagrees: he concedes that dogmatic disbelief in God is logically untenable, but he claims that this merely means that atheists must abandon their dogmatism and admit that they *could* be wrong.

This, he claims, is not agnosticism. Baggini's point is that the evidence for atheism is overwhelming. It is the experience of living in a natural world that is governed by natural laws, where everything that happens throughout the universe is (or will ultimately be) explainable according to those laws. The absence of logical proof for the veracity of atheism is balanced by the overwhelming evidence for atheistic naturalism. We are *obviously* mortal biological animals and not embodied souls – who needs logic?

It is certainly a better explanation of our experiences than belief in some magic God that interferes in human affairs. But naturalism is not necessarily incompatible with the possibility of, for example, a non-intervening creator-god which originally defined the natural laws and constants, as some deists believe. It really all depends on what you mean by 'God'.

Baggini goes on to show that the evidence for the religions is extremely weak, being subjective and anecdotal. It is not hard to reject any of the irrational religious creeds that teach a variety of contradictory

dogma, such as you would expect of belief systems invented by men of different eras and cultures. "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed" (John 20:29), for example, is clearly a convenient component of an improbable religion for which there is no good evidence.

Atheists' claims that all religions are false and usually harmful, incompatible with happiness, and obsessed with money and self-survival, are founded on observation and experience. Religion has contributed absolutely nothing to humanity's store of knowledge, nothing but false hope, false guilt and misery.

I'm an atheist, but in an intellectual discussion I'm agnostic

Baggini asks us to look religion in the eye, claiming that under the cool light of reason, its falsity will become self-evident; and its superstition, myth and ungrounded authority will be exposed as purely human devices.

But debunking the major religions is not a disproof of God, even though most religions are parasitic on such a belief. God and religion are different things – God is an undefined metaphysical concept which is not disproved simply by exposing the falseness and sophistry of the religions. It's much harder than that – I'm an atheist, but in an intellectual discussion I'm agnostic.

On the topic of ethics, I have argued that there is no ethical dimension to atheism, which is a mere disbelief in God. Baggini agrees that atheists must confront the notion that atheism is amoral, mentioning that opponents of atheism often point to the 'godless' Soviet Union as an example of what happened when people denied God. He claims that the

fact that the Soviet Union was an atheist regime was as irrelevant to the gulags as the fact that Hitler was a vegetarian; and if Nazi war crimes are used as a refutation of atheism, then the atrocities of the Inquisition and the crusades equally refute Christianity, and 9/11 invalidates Islam. Baggini observes that very few atheists would elect to live in an atheist state, preferring a secular state where all matters of disbelief are freely chosen.

Nevertheless, the charge that atheists are amoral clearly touches a nerve because it turns out that most 'practising' atheists' distaste for religion is such that it has motivated them to campaign against religious influence in government, especially in the areas of education and human rights, two areas of interest also to Irish humanists.

The Atheist Alliance International supports and coordinates atheist groups worldwide by helping with local campaigns against religious indoctrination in primary schools, promoting secular education, upholding the rights of non-believers, and supporting individual atheists whose lives are threatened or diminished by religious laws and practices.

Unfortunately, the Humanist Association of Ireland (HAI) has legally debarred itself from any such campaigning, even against obviously biased laws such as the Civil Registration (Amendment) Act 2012, that discriminates directly against the HAI, as a result of its Board's decision to prioritise HAI's Ceremonies activities – a Catch 22 situation.

This means that, in the Republic, it is left to Atheist Ireland to do the serious campaigning against religious, especially Catholic, influence and interference in government, particularly in education and health, but also against the Civil Registration (Amendment) Act. Thanks for that, Atheist Ireland. □

Counter-Enlightenment Thinkers:

Johann Gottfried Von Herder

JOHANN Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) was born in Prussia and attended the University of Königsberg, where he became a student of Kant but was drawn instead to the philosophy of Johann Georg Hamann, a patriotic Francophile who championed emotions over reason and faith in a god over philosophy. Herder's philosophy, which has been more influential than is often realised, is a kind of anti-philosophy.



He rejected the Enlightenment ideal of universal, rational standards in favour of the unique and particular in a specific time and place. He attached great importance to the nation and to patriotism and maintained that "there is only one class in the state, the Volk (not the rabble), and the king belongs to this class as well as the peasant".

Each nation should feel deep inside itself and proudly proclaim its singularity, derived from its distinct geography and climate, language, customs and traditions. Although he was not a nationalist in the modern sense, Herder was the intellectual father of modern nationalism, a term which he himself coined. He rejected the philosophes' cosmopolitan model of modernity, which he believed is the shedding of all that makes us most human, and dismissed Enlightenment rationalism as the 'cold philosophy of the age' (*Another Philosophy of History*, 1774). Human beings, he argued, were moved by the simplest of delights and to belong to a given community is a basic human need no less natural than that for food or drink.

Some scholars have seen Herder's ideas as containing the roots of Nazism, especially because he advocated the idea that Europeans are the descendants of Indo-Aryan people who, he believed, were advanced peoples possessing a great capacity for wisdom, nobility and science. Jews were alien to Germany and to Europe.

In *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity* (1774) he wrote: "For thousands of years, since their emergence on the stage of history, the Jews were a parasitic growth on the stem of other nations, a race of cunning brokers all over the earth. They have caused great evil to many ill-organised states, by retarding the free and natural economic development of their indigenous population".

He thought that Judaism as a religion had degenerated from the time of Moses but that Jews should have a homeland in Palestine, which indicates that his reflection was ambivalent, defending Jews against persecution while also producing an ideology to support their exclusion. Of course, it was the negative aspects which helped to fuel the antisemitism that developed in the latter half of the 19th century. □

Let's Not Forget Compassion

Alan Tuffery

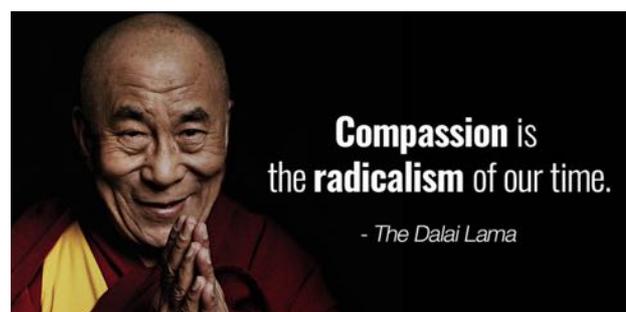


AN ESRI study was reported as indicating that "more than one-fifth of children could be left living in poverty in Ireland if the economy fails to recover". As usual, the tone of the report suggests that the increase in child poverty is an inevitable consequence of difficulties in 'the economy'. But it is not inevitable: it is a *choice* that we can make.

If we have learned anything in the last few months of unprecedented and drastic social change, it is that nothing is impossible. A way can be found. The Irish Government has managed the pandemic pretty well. Very much against the grain of its traditional ideas, the biggest change was a switch in emphasis from the 'economy' to compassion.

The government behaved as if it was more important to save lives and to mitigate the suffering of people, rather than to have pretty economic figures about 'budget deficits'. That said, more could have been done to protect the vulnerable, especially the self-employed, those with mental health issues or disabilities, and the elderly in care.

Other countries have chosen to set the balance between compassion and the economy in a different place. The USA, England, Wales and Brazil, appear to have made the choice to put the economy first and as a consequence they have the highest covid-19-related death rates. □





Art

Unresolved

Colin Corkey



RECENTLY I decided to do something of a clear-out of clutter in my workspace. Intentions were well meaning initially, but I was soon distracted by something which I felt could potentially serve as material for a future painting.

It happened to be a sheet of discarded plywood, split in two, and at one time used for mixing cement. I liked the grey, dry textured surface, while the gap between the split revealed part of an old red-stained piece of palette wood lying behind it. The visual effect had the immediate appearance of a nasty gash, or wound.

As a result I set about constructing the work using the individual components. Whether or not the art work makes tentative reference to, for example, the state of a torn and damaged society, I decided to develop the notion of a wound by introducing some deliberately coarse and unsatisfactory stitching, a suggestion perhaps of the feeble and temporary measures to address society's wounds and scars of the past.

Needless to say a full scale clear-out has been temporarily suspended!

Title: *Unresolved* (Dimensions - 22" x 22")



Prospero's Diary

MAKING THE WORLD A FAIRER PLACE

IN April the Biden administration proposed a plan to reduce global inequality in a reversal of the neoliberal philosophy of free market competition and government indifference that has dominated official American economic policy since the 1980s. The Biden plan would establish a global minimum tax rate, agreed by the world's biggest economies. It would also force big companies to pay taxes where their revenues are earned, not where the profits can be shifted.

Leona Helmsley, the infamous American hotelier, was once heard to remark that "only the little people pay taxes". For years, big American companies like Amazon, Facebook, Google, Netflix, Apple and Microsoft have proved her point in avoiding tax by shifting revenue and profits through tax havens or low-tax countries, and for also delaying the payment of taxes they do incur. According to the Tax Justice Network, the sums lost to exchequers around the world have risen as high as £311bn annually.

There has also been a race to the bottom by countries aimed at attracting big companies. The average corporation tax rate across 109 states assessed by the OECD dropped from 28% at the turn of the millennium to 20.6% in 2020. The UK's rate has been cut in the last decade from 28% to 19%, while the Republic of Ireland's rate is a paltry 12.5%. These rates are lower than the global 21% that Biden wants. Would Ireland in particular lose out from a global rate?

TRINITY'S SLAVERY LINKS



TRINITY College, Dublin, has launched a two-year investigation into its colonial past. It will examine funding, curriculum and scholars, including George Berkeley, an 18th century slave-owning philosopher and bishop after whom the Berkeley Library (above) is named. The front entrance to the college was also built with money from tobacco and other slave-related revenues. In a statement the university stated: "By the mid-19th century it had evolved into an exporter of colonial ideologies and servants".

THE ASCENT OF WOMAN

THE feminisation of the earth has gathered pace in the last decade. In the *Irish Times* (10th April) David McWilliams drew attention to this development, pointing out that by 2030 there will be more female millionaires in the world than male and women generally will hold 55% of global wealth. In developed countries they have been doing better than boys in school and outperforming young men in universities.

McWilliams lists several examples in the former bastion of 'extreme maleness' that is economics. The US treasury secretary, president of the European Central Bank, chairwoman of the International Monetary Fund, director-general of the World Trade Organisation, chief economist of the World Bank, and chief economist of the IMF are all women. Again, some of the most successful political leaders during the pandemic have been women, notably Jacinta Ardern, Prime Minister of New Zealand.

As McWilliams suggests, an economy with more successful women will be one that spends more on health, education and insurance. In short, it will be a better world.

RACING'S UPS AND DOWNS

ANOTHER example of the ascent of women is the great victory of Rachel Blackmore on *Minella Times* in the Grand National, 40 years after the first woman jockey in the race. It is a mixed blessing, though, for horse racing can be a cruel sport. One horse in the race – *The Long Mile* – had to be put down after breaking a hind leg. The photo of trainer Gordon Elliott astride a dead horse didn't help the sport's image, nor does the use of the whip or the neglect that many ex-race-horses suffer. However, they are animals of great grace and power and many of them enjoy racing. One of the finest displays of the will to win by man or beast was by the great *Desert Orchid* in the 1989 Cheltenham Gold Cup.



PRINCE PHILIP: SHAKESPEARE HERETIC

PRINCE Philip often said that he hated any fuss, but both the BBC and ITV ignored his words with over-the-top coverage of his death. With a record 110,000 complaints, the BBC decided to set up a complaints form, only to receive complaints that it encouraged complaints! Among Philip's many intelligent insights was his view that William of Stratford didn't write Shakespeare. Stanley Wells, orthodox scholar and co-editor of *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt*, gave Philip a copy of the book, but when he later asked him if he was still a heretic, Philip replied, "All the more so after reading your book!" **PROSPERO**

The Ethics of Chimeras

CHIMERAS – organisms formed from cells of two distinct species – are controversial. For example, questions surround the legal status of an organism with one human genome and one non-human genome. Development of such things raises all sorts of moral questions, which is why most western countries tightly regulate such experimentation, with the most advanced work in the area currently being done in China.

Creatures that are effectively part goat, part sheep have already been developed, as have mouse-rats. Now progress is being made in China, with local researchers assisted by American and Spanish peers, to create chimeras using human cells, combining them with those of monkeys.

It is another example of our species' increasing ability to dabble in the basic structures of life – something which makes many uncomfortable. However, there is great potential, if ethical dilemmas can be solved. Among the proposed purposes for such tinkering are that the research could lead to new treatments for congenital diseases, or to grow human organs in the bodies of animals (from where they could eventually be used for transplants).

Yet there are many questions. What effect might human cells have on animal brains? Where are the lines (looking increasingly blurry) between species? What is the meaning of such developments for concepts such as 'human rights'? Will there be a backlash from religious people who oppose interfering with 'God's work'?

It is worth pointing out that several biological developments and technologies that were originally denounced as reckless meddling with the natural order of things turned out to be much less frightening in practice than in theory. In vitro fertilisation was once seen as 'unnatural'. So too genetically modified crops. But while human-monkey embryos are not intended to grow to maturity, it is right to wonder what might happen if they did – and what should be done if, or when, someone decides to try.

Ethical debates on this matter have been occurring for years. The trouble is that they have mostly been taking place in scientific journals or at academic conferences, where the 'average' person rarely ventures. If the drivers of this technology wish to win public support and avoid a backlash if and when they begin to demonstrate their progress, it is time the conversation moved into the mainstream. □

Convincing the Evangelicals

BY some estimates, suppressing the coronavirus effectively requires 70 per cent or more of the population to be vaccinated. This is a high bar, given no country currently intends to vaccinate children, and it means that anything that further reduces vaccine take-up makes achieving herd immunity even more difficult.

While the United States has been doing very well in terms of rolling out vaccinations, it may well run into a problem in the not-so-distant future. White evangelicals represent approximately a quarter of America's population, and almost half remain obstinately opposed to vaccination.

In February, a poll by the Pew Research Centre suggested that only 54 per cent of them were likely to take the vaccine, compared with 64 per cent of non-white evangelicals, 69 per cent of Americans overall and 72 per cent of white non-evangelicals.

One possible reason is that evangelical opposition to abortion causes them to reject the vaccine on moral grounds, as vaccines currently distributed in the US were developed and tested using aborted foetal tissue. This has not stopped the Vatican endorsing their use. However, evangelical culture is more individualistic and anti-authority than Catholicism. While Catholics have the pope, evangelicals do not believe people need mediators to speak with their god.

The Book of Revelation prophesies that a beast will 'force his mark' on people. Some believe that this is a foretelling of the vaccine

More worrying are those who refuse the vaccine on the grounds of certain biblical interpretations of 'the end times'. The Book of Revelation prophesies that a beast will 'force his mark' on people. Some believe that this is a foretelling of the vaccine.

Evangelicals are also more likely to believe vaccines are not effective in preventing infection, and to rely on media sources that feed such beliefs. There is no doubt that politics plays a part in this. Vaccine hesitancy in the United States is split along partisan lines,

and some polls suggest that Democrats are more than 50 per cent more likely than Republicans to seek a vaccine.

Four in every five white evangelicals voted for Donald Trump in 2020, compared with only a third of non-white evangelicals. Trump originally suggested that the coronavirus was more like a bad case of the flu than a killer virus to be worried about.

This kind of nonsense no doubt reinforced the perception that vaccines are unnecessary. Otherwise convincing a group of people disinclined to trust science will likely prove difficult.

Eamon Murphy



Humankind

Rutger Bregman • Bloomsbury 2020 • Paperback, May 2021

Dutch historian Rutger Bregman's *Humankind*, out in paperback in May, is a companion work to Steve Pinker's *The Better Angels of our Nature*. Like Pinker, he is an optimist who believes that, in his own words, "Most people, deep down are pretty decent" (p2). He rejects what Dutch biologist Frans de Waal calls the 'veneer theory': the notion that civilisation is nothing more than a thin veneer that will crack at the nearest provocation. He maintains instead that the opposite is true. "It's when crisis hits – when the bombs fall or the floodwaters rise – that we humans become our best selves" (p4).

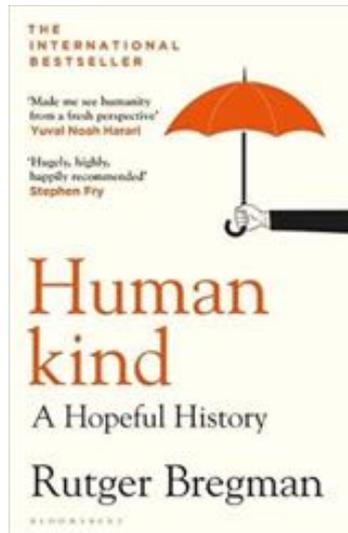
He presents an impressive array of stories and illustrations to support his thesis. Take William Golding's classic dystopian novel *Lord of the Flies*, for example. It is often cited as proof that when children are left to themselves, they ultimately descend into savagery. As Golding put it elsewhere, "man produces evil as a bee produces honey". Yet Bregman digs out an example of the exact opposite in the real world.

In 1965, six boys aged from 13 to 16 from a boarding school in Tonga were marooned on the deserted island of Ata for more than a year after being shipwrecked in a storm while out fishing on a stolen boat. The boys formed a strong bond, despite deprivations and injuries, and survived on coconuts, fish and sea birds. They set up a small commune with food garden, hollowed-out tree trunks to store rainwater, a gym, a permanent fire, and agreed to work in teams of two, drawing up a strict roster for garden, kitchen and guard duty. They kept one another safe and sane.

When finally rescued, they were found to be in peak physical and psychological condition. Yet, while the story of the boys of Ata has been consigned to obscurity, *Lord of the Flies* has sold millions of copies and been translated into more than thirty languages.

In chapter 4, Bregman takes a swipe at *The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins, which he calls 'a depressing read' because it concludes that people are 'born selfish'. Yet for 40 years after its publication in 1976 the British public voted it the most influential science book ever written. In 1981, however, a Russian geneticist called Dmitri Belyaev claimed the opposite: people are domesticated apes. For tens of thousands of years, the nicest humans had the most kids, so that the evolution of our species was predicated on 'survival of the friendliest'.

Like the tamest animals, such as pigs, rabbits and silver foxes, human beings have become smaller, cuter. This



began to happen about 50,000 years ago around the same time that Neanderthals, who had bigger skulls, disappeared. Our faces and bodies have grown considerably softer, more youthful and more feminine, and our brains have shrunk by at least 10%. What dogs are to wolves, we are to Neanderthals. Individually, they may have been smarter but collectively they weren't as bright. We survived the Ice Age because we had developed the ability to work together. We are ultra social learning machines who are born to learn, to bond and to play. Bregman calls us *Homo puppy*.

As he points us, in subsequent additions of *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins scrapped his assertions about humans' innate selfishness. Although struggle and competi-

tion clearly factor into the evolution of life, every first year biology student now learns that cooperation is much more critical.

This seems to me pretty irrefutable, but Bregman doesn't leave it there. That only takes us to page 72 of 400 pages of text. Much of the book provides further evidence of our mixed nature: we are a bit of Hobbes and a bit of Rousseau. For example, he relates the accounts of the discredited Milgram and Stanford Prison experiments, which were manipulated and rigged to show the researchers what they wanted to see: that we all have a wellspring of potential sadism lurking within us, waiting to be tapped by both the instructions and the roles that authorities provide. Bregman relates several stories which indicate that it is actually very hard to make soldiers want to kill their enemy.

But what about the Holocaust? The perpetrators, he says, believed they were on the right side of history. Adolf Eichmann, for example, convinced himself that he'd done a great deed, something historic for which he'd be admired by future generations. He had swallowed the Nazi propaganda. By contrast, Denmark was steeped in humanist spirit and everywhere protected its Jewish population.

Bregman's general position is that we are basically good and have to be bullied or brainwashed into doing evil things. Unfortunately, this leads him down the path of arguing that 'civilisation' is the primary cause of our fall from grace. I don't buy the notion that we were once angels in some pre-agrarian idyll before we discovered agriculture. Progress has given us many positives as well as sources of despair. Nevertheless, Bregman's book is a welcome antidote to all the authorial doomsters who argue that we are going to hell in a handcart. There is still hope for the human race after all.

EDITOR □



The Dissident

Brian McClinton



AT 1.14pm on 2nd October 2018 Jamal Khashoggi (far right), an exiled Saudi journalist, walked into the Saudi consulate in Istanbul to obtain divorce papers that would enable him to marry his Turkish fiancée Hatice Cengiz. He didn't come out again. Instead, he was sedated, suffocated for seven and a half minutes, dismembered with a bone saw and disposed of, possibly in a kebab well in the consul's nearby garden.

This ghastly barbaric act was committed by a 15-member death squad, allegedly on the orders of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (above left), known as MBS. Most of them arrived in Istanbul in two private jets hours earlier.

Bryan Fogel's investigative documentary *The Dissident* examines the murder as well as its background and ramifications. Khashoggi was a thorn in the flesh of the oppressive Saudi regime over several years. He was fired in 2010 as editor of the pro-government newspaper for what he described as 'pushing the boundaries of debate within Saudi society'. Inspired by the Arab spring, he openly spoke out in opposition.

In 2017 he was banned from writing and went into self-imposed exile in America. His wife was forced to divorce him. He became a regular columnist in the *Washington Post*, for which he wrote a score of hard-hitting articles in the year before he died.

Newspaper journalism was not the only weapon of external criticism of the Saudi autocracy. In 2017 Khashoggi became online friends with Omar Abdulaziz Alzahrani, a young Saudi video blogger living in exile in Montreal under the protection of Canadian intelligence. Abdulaziz, whose family and friends in



Saudi Arabia have all been arrested, features prominently in Fogel's documentary, frequently moving about in subways or sidewalks to avoid detection because he had received several warnings of attempts on his life. Days before the murder, he and Khashoggi had started secretly collaborating on a social media campaign to fight MBS's army of Twitter trolls.

The head of the hit squad asks: "Has the sacrificial animal arrived yet?"

There is no free speech in Saudi Arabia but 80% of the people have a Twitter account, and it became their Parliament, both inside and outside the country. To counteract online dissent, MBS used high-tech spyware and took over Twitter. Thus began a social media battle to the death between MBS's 'Flies' and Abdulaziz's 'Bees', which Fogel has fun depicting in CGI. I'm not sure, though, that this childish cinematic thriller element is appropriate in a documentary. If anything, it detracts from the seriousness of the project.

It isn't really necessary anyway as the facts speak for themselves and generate enough emotional impact. Fogel was provided with material by the Turkish authorities, including footage of the police search of the Saudi consulate and – having rou-

tinely bugged the building – transcripts of recordings in which the perpetrators discuss the grisly enterprise. A minute before Khashoggi enters the consulate, the head of the hit squad asks: "Has the sacrificial animal arrived yet?" A doctor suggests that "joints are not going to be a problem". Another asks: "Will the body and hips fit into a bag this way?"

These and other chilling transcripts are accompanied by testimony from a Turkish prosecutor and Agnès Callamard, the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions. She concludes that Khashoggi was the victim of a premeditated execution, for which the state of Saudi Arabia was responsible.

The Dissident is a powerful film whose emotional core is provided by Khashoggi's fiancée Hatice Cengiz. She describes the deep loss she suffered on the verge of a new life and how she has turned her grief into a determined quest for justice. However, subsequent events do not presage such an outcome.

President Biden has reneged on his promise to make Saudi Arabia 'pay the price' for its action. There was no bidding war for the film, though it is being shown in the UK on Amazon Prime, whose owner Jeff Bezos also owns the *Washington Post* and was a friend of Khashoggi. He allegedly had his phone hacked by the Saudi government, though of course it has denied the charge.

In 2019 a Saudi court sentenced 5 men, probably mere foot soldiers, to death for the killing. Amnesty called the verdict a whitewash. The men were later pardoned by Khashoggi's children. A ruthless dictator has apparently got away with a brutal extra-judicial murder in a foreign embassy. Whatever next? □



The Mauritanian

Brian McClinton



GUANTANAMO Bay in South East Cuba was leased to the United States as a coaling and naval station when Cuba became independent in 1902. A hundred years later, despite Cuban protests, the US still controls the area and in 2002 it established a detention centre there as part of the ‘war on terror’ in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

Being classified as outside the territorial jurisdiction of the country, US governments have argued that the normal legal rules don’t apply. So suspects were detained indefinitely without trial and tortured in breach of basic human rights. The justification of these violations of the Due Process Clause of the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments of the American Constitution is, of course, a nonsense. Obama promised that he would close the camp but he met with bipartisan opposition in Congress. However, the number detained there has fallen from about 245 to 40. In 2018 Trump signed an executive order to keep the camp open indefinitely, but the Biden administration has announced its intention to shut it down.

Mohamedou Ould Slahi was picked up in his home country of Mauritania, which borders Morocco and Algeria, shortly after 9/11 and eventually taken to Guantanamo where he spent 14 years without charge on suspicion that he was one of the key recruiters for the attacks.

In 1991 Slahi had become involved in the fight against communism in Afghanistan, going into battle with the mujahideen, on the same side as the United States, who financed billions of dollars of weapons and aid to ‘freedom fighters’ like Slahi. Al-Qaeda were one of the jihadist groups involved in this activity and Slahi trained in their camps. His cousin, although a spiritual adviser to Osama bin Laden, advised against the 9/11 attacks. When his



cousin left Al-Qaeda he twice arranged for Slahi to send money through to his family. This was used as ‘evidence’ that Slahi was funding Al-Qaeda activity, and US intelligence claimed to have heard him talking to his cousin on a phone owned by bin Laden. Hence his incarceration in Guantanamo.

Slahi wrote a lengthy memoir while in captivity, but it took six years for the government to declassify and heavily redact it. *Guantanamo Diary*, finally released in 2015, became an international best-seller, and now has been adapted into the film *The Mauritanian*, starring Tahar Rahim, the Algerian-French actor who played the prisoner in *A Prophet*, and Charles Sobhraj, the French serial killer, in the BBC miniseries *The Serpent*.

Slahi was subjected to ‘special interrogation techniques’, including being force fed during Ramadan, head-butted, groped, threatened with rape, waterboarded, starved of food, subjected to strobe lights and taken out to sea blindfolded in a mock execution. He was even threatened that, if he didn’t confess, his mother would be brought to Guantanamo and raped. Inevitably, he confessed: who wouldn’t?

In 2005 defence attorney Nancy Hollander (excellently played by Jodie Foster) and her associate Teri Duncan (Shailene Woodley), took up his case despite protestations of the people around them. Stuart Couch, the military prosecutor, was a friend of one of the pilots killed on 9/11 and was keen to secure the

death penalty for whoever was responsible. Played by Benedict Cumberbatch with a jarring southern twang, he resigns from the case when he finally becomes aware that the confession was elicited by torture. But, despite the fact that Slahi was cleared by the court in 2011 on the grounds of insufficient evidence, an appeal against the verdict by

the Obama administration meant that he wasn’t finally released until 2016.

This is a story that should arouse indignation and a desire for justice, but Kevin MacDonald, the Scottish director, has a different ambition, namely to show that Slahi is able to show grace under duress and forgive his captors. He himself appears at the end, back home in Mauritania, laughing and singing along to the Bob Dylan song *The Man in Me*.

This is all very well, but it rather lets America off the hook. Guantanamo was a ripping up of the American Constitution and a crime against humanity. There is no questioning here of the system that produced this barbarity. Instead we are presented with not one but two white American saviours: Hollander and Couch – except that they didn’t actually save him at all since Slahi remained imprisoned for 11 years after Hollander took up the case. That said, it was Hollander who persuaded Slahi to write his memoir and its publication was the main reason he was released.

This is not to say that *The Mauritanian* is a bad film. It is good when it centres on Slahi himself and there is no doubt that Tahar Rahim portrays the character superbly. It’s just that, if Guantanamo was a crime, where are the criminals? Unlike *The Dissident*, there is no equivalent of an MBS. All the leading characters are well meaning goodies. Yet Guantanamo existed and still exists. So, who is responsible? *The Mauritanian* offers no answers. □



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Humanist Meetings in Ireland

Humanist Association of Ireland

Monthly meeting at rotating venues, mostly Dublin.

Details of next meeting at humanism.ie or HAI Facebook Page

Humanist Association of Northern Ireland

Second Thursday, 8pm. Holiday Inn, University St, Belfast

Contact: Roger at 07778583435 (roger.kelly.2@ntlworld.com)

Irish Freethinkers and Humanists

Second Thursday, 8pm. Holiday Inn, University St, Belfast

Contact: Brian at 07962122038 (brianmcclinton@btinternet.com)

North Dublin Humanist Community

Meetings on the third Monday of each month.

Contact Alan Tuffery (atuffery@tcd.ie)

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Contact Janielazar@gmail.com, 086 8572005

Mailing List: southdublinhumanistcommunity@gmail.com

Westport Humanist Group

Second Sunday of month at 12 via HAI Zoom facility

Contact Séamus O'Connell 087 245 35 36 shayoc37@gmail.com

Cork Humanists

Contact Geraldine O'Neill on 086 812 8892

<http://corkhumanists.weebly.com>

Humanists West (Galway)

Last Sunday of month, 12 noon, Anno Santo Hotel, Threadneedle Rd.,

Salthill, Galway. Contact Garry O'Lochlainn at 0872222726

Kilkenny Humanist Group

2nd Sunday of month, Langton House Hotel, Kilkenny at 11.00am.

Contact Patrick Cassidy at 0894630005; patrickacassidy@gmail.com

Mid-West Humanists (Limerick, Clare, Tipperary)

3rd Wednesday in Limerick. Email info@midwesthumanists.com

Check midwesthumanists.com and contact Peter at 086 8155102

North West Humanists

Radisson Hotel, Sligo. 8pm, second Tuesday of the month.

Contact Gill Bell at humainstgb@gmail.com; +353 87 295 8206

Waterford Humanists

Meetings third Monday of month, Phil Grimes Pub, 60 John Street,

Waterford, 7 30pm. Contact Teresa at grahamt22@gmail.com.

**Phone or email to
check when meetings
will resume after the
lockdown**

