

13. ATHEISTS, AGNOSTICS AND SECULAR HUMANISTS

Before the modern era, atheism was largely unthinkable and certainly unspeakable, but in the wake of the Philosophes and the French Revolution many of the most important writers in philosophy, politics and literature were sceptical or even openly anti-religious. The 19th century was an age which, perhaps more than any other in history, believed in ideas and in change through the power of ideas. And, as the century progressed, the labels atheist, agnostic and secular humanist were attached to some of the most prominent figures who wanted to make the world a better place.

PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

Percy Bysshe Shelley, a confirmed rebel against all authority, was born into the landowning aristocracy in 1792, the son of Timothy Shelley, a Whig MP. He went to Eton and then Oxford in 1810. On 25th March 1811, just 6 months after entering the university, he was 'sent down' for the publication of a small, 14-page pamphlet entitled *The Necessity of Atheism*. It had been secretly printed in Sussex and distributed to bishops and heads of colleges by Shelley and an undergraduate friend. An Oxford bookseller had also agreed to display copies in his shop, but when seen by Rev Jocelyn Walker, a Fellow of New College, they were ordered to be burned, except one, which was sent to the university authorities. Shelley was interviewed by the Masters and Fellows of University College but refused to answer questions about the authorship on the grounds that it had been published anonymously.

This allowed the college to expel him immediately for 'refusing to answer certain questions put to him'.

Shelley's pamphlet starts by stating that proofs are required in attaining the truth of the existence or non-existence of a Deity: "God is an hypothesis, and, as such, stands in need of proof". Why do we believe anything? There are, argues Shelley, three sources: the evidence of the senses; our own experiences; and the testimony or experience of others. In the case of God, however, our senses do not tell us he exists, nor does our own physical experience. Some say that the world must have been created but it is equally reasonable, and indeed easier, to suppose that it has existed from all eternity than to conceive a being beyond its limits capable of creating it. As for the testimony of other people, it is required that it should not be contrary to reason, but since it is invariably about miracles and other unreasonable occurrences, it just will not do.

From these three sources of conviction, it is obvious that no proof of the existence of the Deity is obtainable. In any case, belief and its antonym disbelief, which is only another form of belief, are passions of the mind and not capable of volition. So disbelief, to which some people would wish to attach a degree of criminality, can not by its very nature be an act of will and is therefore blameless. So ultimately Shelley is simply seeking proof of God's existence, and is politely asking the college masters and fellows to answer his arguments and show him where his reasoning is wrong. That is a flavour of how innocuous the work really was. Yet of course Shelley had written the first avowedly atheist pamphlet ever published in England and directly challenged the

religious establishment by thrusting it in their faces. They were determined not to tolerate such impudence.

Whether Shelley really was an atheist depends on our definition of the term. Stating that there is no proof of the existence of a deity implies agnosticism rather than atheism, though the label 'agnostic' did not exist at that time. He was certainly an atheist in the sense that he rejected the idea of a creator God. However, in a note to the words 'there is no God' in his long poem *Queen Mab* in 1813 he writes: "This negation must be understood solely to affect a creative Deity. The hypothesis of a pervading Spirit co-eternal with the universe remains unshaken". This suggests an element of vague pantheism in which he believed in a universal spiritual force of which man is a part. Man may change, decay and die, but his spirit will join the eternal Spirit of the Universe, which continually creates new life.

Shelley's attitude to nature can be compared to that of Wordsworth who linked the spirit in Nature with a God, whereas he identified it with love. In *Adonais*, his elegy on the death of Keats, he refers to this power that 'wields the world with never wearied love'. In the poem *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, he praises:

*"The Awful shadow of some unseen Power
Floats though unseen among us, – visiting
This various world with as inconstant wing
As summer winds that creep from flower to flower"*

When once asked why he described himself as an atheist, he replied: "I used it to express my abhorrence of superstition. I took up the word, as a knight took up a gauntlet, in defiance of injustice". So perhaps there was a certain amount of posturing in his defiant use of the label 'atheist'.

Shelley later decided to launch a campaign 'to illuminate the nations of the world' on politics and religion, and to start with the Irish. He reached Dublin at the start of February 1812, and found lodgings over a draper's shop at 7 Sackville Street (now O'Connell St.) He had a pamphlet *An Address to the Irish People* printed in Dublin, and distributed some 400 copies of it, many of which he threw from the window of his lodgings to any man in the street whom he considered 'looked likely'.

On the last day of February he attended a meeting in Fishamble Street Theatre, addressed by Daniel O'Connell on 'Catholic Emancipation'. Shelley spoke in response by agreeing with the idea but was hissed by the mainly Catholic audience when he suggested that all religious opinions should be tolerated. Eventually, he returned to Britain, writing: "Prejudices are so violent, in contradiction to my principles, that more hate me as a freethinker than love me as a votary of freedom". In March 1813, he came back to Ireland for an unpolitical visit, staying in Killarney, the beauty of the lakes remaining with him for the rest of his life.

Unfortunately, most of his references to science and atheism in his poetry are in his longer poems – *Queen Mab* and *Prometheus Unbound* – not in his lyrics, which make up the most quotable of his poetry. He continued to preach his message – 'to illuminate the nations of the world' – but the fruitless results of his efforts are well illustrated in Matthew Arnold's description of him: 'A beautiful and ineffectual angel beating in the void his luminous wings in vain'.

JOHN STUART MILL

In England Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-73) were key figures in 19th century thought. Bentham campaigned for democracy and equality and the utilitarian principle of 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number'. He did not base his ethics on a god-given code but argued that human beings must work out their own morality. In *Analysis of Natural Religion on the Temporal Happiness of Mankind* (1822) he attacked what he called 'Jug' (juggernaut), his private nickname for religion, claiming that it was irrational and so damaging that it created the 'greatest unhappiness for the greatest number'. Even if God did exist, religion would be 'impotent for the purpose of resisting any temptation, and efficient only in the production of needless and unprofitable misery'.

John Stuart's father had an aversion to religion, regarding it, as his son wrote in his Autobiography, as a great moral evil, setting up fictitious excellences and causing these to be accepted as substitutes for genuine virtues; "but, above all, by radically vitiating the standard of morals; making it consist in doing the will of a being, on whom it lavishes indeed all the phrases of adulation, but whom in sober truth it depicts as eminently hateful". John Stuart himself wrote *Three Essays on Religion* in which he attacked Christian morality for its use of rewards and punishments to motivate behaviour and warned of the danger of 'ascribing a supernatural origin to the received maxims of morality'. The Christian conception of God he thought was illogical and unpleasant and he objected to 'ascribing absolute perfection to the author and ruler of so clumsily made and capriciously governed a creation as this planet and the life of its inhabitants'. He added: "The author of the Sermon on

the mount is assuredly a far more benignant being than the Author of Nature". Mill preferred a 'religion of humanity' - in other words, what we today call Humanism.

Both Bentham and Mill were utilitarian in outlook, arguing that 'utilities' were the things that made life worth living. For Bentham, the greatest utility was happiness which he equated with pleasure, and therefore the question of how to live is answered by increasing the amount of pleasure in life. But what is pleasure? Mill distinguished between higher and lower pleasures, the practical and the spiritual, and maintained that both were necessary for the good life. Lower pleasures include food, clothing and shelter, while higher pleasures include the arts, music and friendship. Philosophical theories should also take the discoveries and insights of modern science into account.

Mill, the leading English philosopher of the 19th century, was born in London in 1806 and educated at home by his Scottish father James Mill, himself a philosopher, historian and economist. John Stuart was a child prodigy, learning Greek at 3, Latin at 8 and beginning philosophy at 12. His father, a follower of Jeremy Bentham, had as his explicit aim to create a genius who would carry on the cause of utilitarianism after he and Bentham died. As a non-conformist who refused to subscribe to the 39 Articles of the Church of England, Mill was not eligible to study at Oxford or Cambridge and instead followed his father to work for the East India Company, where he remained for most of his working life.

In the winter of 1826-7, at the age of twenty, he suffered a nervous breakdown, which in his Autobiography he claims was caused by the great physical and mental arduousness of his studies that had suppressed any feelings he might have developed normally in childhood. He felt that he would never be happy because his over-rational education had rendered him incapable of emotion, and he contemplated ending his life. Eventually he pulled himself together, with the help of poetry, music, and the philosopher and feminist Harriet Taylor, with whom he fell in love. She was already married but for 21 years the two were close friends and inspired each other and worked together. Harriet's husband died in 1849 and in 1851 Mill became her second husband. In the autumn of 1858 the couple went to France where the climate was better for Harriet's tuberculosis, but she died of respiratory failure in Avignon in November that year. Mills' *On Liberty*, which they had written together, was published in 1859 and was dedicated to Harriet. It is a major work of enlightened humanism.

Mill returned to England in 1865, when he was elected a Member of Parliament for Westminster. In 1866 he became the first parliamentary representative to call for women to be given the vote, vigorously defending this position in subsequent debate. He also became a strong advocate of such social reforms as birth control, land reform in Ireland, trade unions and farm cooperatives. In *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861) he called for various reforms of Parliament and voting, especially proportional representation, the Single Transferable Vote, and the extension of the suffrage. He lost his parliamentary seat in

1868, so he returned to Avignon, where he died in 1873 and was buried alongside his wife.

His great work *On Liberty* begins with an introductory chapter in which Mill points out that whereas in the past defenders of individual liberty had been most concerned with opposing the tyranny of political rulers, we now need to guard against the tyranny of the majority. A democratically elected government can become a vehicle for the majority to tyrannize the minority: “there needs protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling; against the tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them; to fetter the development, and, if possible, prevent the formation of any individuality not in harmony with its ways, and compel all characters to fashion themselves upon the model of its own”.

In his Autobiography Mill said that *On Liberty* was “a kind of philosophical textbook of a simple truth”. It is usually described as the harm principle, but that is really only part of it, and to stress it alone is to put a negative spin on Mill’s highly positive endeavour. For he is seeking, above all, to champion individual flourishing in which each person is free to develop to the fullest of his own potential. The harm principle is the sole restriction on this individual liberty. So he writes: “the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their member, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which can be rightfully exercised

over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others”.

Mill does not, however, believe that we all have a natural right to liberty. His harm principle is underpinned by his adherence to utilitarianism rather than natural rights as such. Thus he maintains that the right action is calculated by judging its consequences: will it give rise to the greatest happiness? “I regard utility as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions; but it must be utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being”. What exactly these interests are is, of course, open to considerable debate.

Chapter 2 is entitled ‘Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion’. Mill is a passionate exponent of free speech. He writes: “if all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind”. He offers three main arguments against repression of opinion. The first is the argument from fallibility: the repressed opinion may be true. “We can never be sure that the opinion we are trying to stifle is a false opinion”, he writes. Thus a certain scepticism even about our own convictions is one of the basic justifications for freedom of expression. No government or social group should be permitted to claim infallibility for the limited perspective which any given group must hold towards events. If a controversial opinion is true, then we can never exchange truth for error so long as discussion is curtailed. On the other hand, if the controversial opinion is false, by silencing discussion we prevent more

lively truths from gaining by healthy collision with error. Free speech is therefore essential because the truth can only emerge from constant argument, discussion and debate, from the free competition of differing opinions.

Mill also emphasises that open discussion is significant only if it includes extreme cases. Thus we should allow even the speech we hate because truth is most likely to emerge in a free intellectual combat from which no idea has been excluded. He notes how learned persons joined with those who persecuted Socrates and Christ for holding 'extreme' opinions which later won many adherents.

Mill's second argument for free speech relates to its value in keeping established truths and doctrines alive. The presence of a 'devil's advocate' compels us to know the reasons for our beliefs. Without challenge, even accepted beliefs and moral codes become lifeless and may even be held in the manner of prejudice or dogma, with little comprehension of their rational grounds. Organised suppression of opinions which conflict with the official views destroys 'the moral courage of the human mind'. With no enemy at hand, 'both teachers and learners go to sleep at their post'. In short, free speech is educational.

Mill's third argument rests on the possibility that competing views may share the truth between them. Opinions may not be wholly right or wholly wrong. By airing all sides, we can pick and choose the best parts of each and form a more complex, sophisticated and truthful opinion. He points out, for example, that the accepted moral codes of the

modern era are not purely Christian but also stem from pre-Christian Greek and Roman influences. Many of our modern ethical codes and political philosophies are based on compromises over time. So free speech and compromise are often inextricably connected.

Mill rejects any argument for suppressing opinion on the grounds of sensationalism, insults or offence. No one can be trusted with such censorship because he will label whatever he disagrees with in such terms. A law against offensive criticism would also tend to favour the politically powerful against the weak. In the third chapter, 'Of Individuality, As One of the Elements of Well-Being', he states that to hold an opinion never constitutes a harm to others, and so should never be suppressed. To express an opinion *almost* never constitutes a harm to others, and so should only be suppressed in rare circumstances.

Behaviour is clearly different and can often constitute harm to others. "No one pretends that actions should be as free as opinions. On the contrary, even opinions lose their immunity, when the circumstances in which they are expressed are such as to constitute their expression a positive instigation to some mischievous act". He gives as illustration the difference between writing in the press that corn-dealers are starvers of the poor and delivering this message orally or on a placard to an excited mob assembled before a corn-dealer's house. In such circumstances the words become actions specifically designed to incite violence. Incitement to violence, then, is the one exception that Mill gives to free speech because only in this case will there be genuine harm to others.

As far as actions are concerned, Mill argues that it is not for the state or the church or any institution to dictate what is the good life. Each person should be allowed to realise their potential in their own distinctive way. "Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign". Individuality is also a prerequisite for creativity and diversity. Society as a whole benefits if people are allowed to experiment with behaviour that is contrary to custom and the opinion of the majority. Every positive advance in history that has added to human happiness was at one time contrary to custom. Moreover, to develop one's individuality, one's capacity for autonomously choosing one's own path in life, fosters happiness in and of itself. In short, "the grand, leading principle towards which every argument in these pages directly converges, is the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest variety".

Chapters 4 and 5 are largely concerned with objections to and applications of Mill's thesis. They do not, however, really address some of its basic problems, not least what Mill actually means by the notions of harm, utility and happiness. Take harm, for example. Very few of our words or actions do not affect others in some way. How do we decide if they are 'harmful' to them? Mill rules out being offended as not an aspect of being harmed, but this seems arbitrary. If we hurt someone's feelings, are we not harming them? And might not a utilitarian argue that in certain circumstances silencing some opinions could lead to an increase in happiness, for example in the face of imminent death or other tragedy?

We may also feel that Mill has over-estimated the ability of many people to know what is likely to promote their own happiness. Being seduced into short-term pleasure at the expense of long-term happiness is a common human failing, as are human self-deception and irrationality. Nor is there any guarantee that freedom of speech will ensure the triumph of truth over propaganda. In a society where the media are controlled by powerful interests, the balance between competing opinions that Mill seems to think will automatically arise from free speech may not in fact exist at all. The overwhelming support of the British media for the invasion of Iraq and the marginalisation of opponents is a case in point.

Mill's account of liberty is actually a defence of negative freedom: freedom from. As such, it is a powerful argument, though we may well question the wisdom of relying on only one vague principle, that of harm, as a restraint on liberty. But he seems to believe that ensuring this negative liberty will by itself create the conditions for positive liberty; that is, the freedom to achieve what we want in life. Unfortunately, freedom *from* does not guarantee freedom *to*. No one individual is stopping me from owning a Lamborghini Veneno, but the lack of £3m is. Our freedom of action is determined by many things, including material, physical, intellectual and educational resources, and in these respects some are clearly more 'free' than others.

Mill acknowledges that freedom of action can never be as complete as freedom of speech. So it is possible to suggest that his defence of the latter is formidable and is as relevant now as when he wrote it. Freedom

of action, on the other hand, may require more interventions and restrictions by the state than he perhaps would have wished. British liberals in the 20th century recognised this truth in committing themselves to a mixed economy and the welfare state.

After Mill, utilitarianism often took the form of pragmatism, especially in America. Indeed, pragmatism has been called the American philosophy. Its proponents, especially Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), William James (1842-1910), John Dewey (1859-1952) and Richard Rorty (1931-2007), stressed the importance of deriving theories from practice which then forms the basis of intelligent practice. Something may be said to be true if it works, which basically means that it makes people happy. But, although it is in many ways humanistic, such a theory could be used to justify anything, including a belief in a god or even Nazism, which for a decade or so made millions of Germans happy. Most Humanists therefore would not want to abandon all objective criteria of truth.

Utilitarianism is today an active Humanist ethical theory, though it is by no means the full picture. For example, a purely utilitarian approach to torture might argue that it is justified if it provides information about an impending atrocity or a terrorist suspect. Torturing one individual might save the lives of many. But most Humanists would maintain that torture is wrong on both consequentialist and deontological grounds. It is not only ineffective but also wrong in itself because deliberately inflicting extreme pain on another human being is barbaric and inhuman. It is a violation of the rule of law and a crime against human rights, human

autonomy and human dignity. To use a quasi-religious metaphor, torture destroys the soul of the torturer even as it destroys the body of its victim.

KARL MARX

Karl Marx was a humanist. It is easy to forget this truth when the focus has been on his economic and political ideas and their revolutionary impact on large parts of the world. But Marx was first and foremost a humanist, not only because he rejected religion but also because he wanted to see it replaced with a more humane alternative.

He was born on 5th May 1818 in the city of Trier in the Prussian Rhineland into a wealthy middle class family. His father, a lawyer with rational Enlightenment views, was nominally Jewish but converted to Protestantism in 1824 in order to avoid the effects of antisemitic legislation. His father clearly played a part in Marx's rejection of religion early in his youth. His atheism was sealed when he studied philosophy at Bonn and later Berlin, where he came under the influence of the philosophy of Hegel, who had been Professor of Philosophy and then Rector at the University until his death in 1831.

Hegel was an idealist in that he believed concepts and ideas are fundamental to the world and material things are expressions of ideas. In particular, there is an underlying 'universal spirit' or 'absolute idea'. Marx joined a group known as the Young or Left Hegelians, who in the decade or so after Hegel's death were not only disciples but also critics of the

philosopher. Hegel believed in what he called freedom and reason and also thought that they had reached their embodiment in the Prussian state. The Right Hegelians followed their master in believing that the dialectic of history had indeed come to an end. The Young Hegelians also believed that freedom and reason can and should exist in the world, but they rejected any suggestion that they had come to fruition. And, although they agreed that the division between mind and matter is a fundamental question, they argued that matter is basic and that ideas are expressions of material circumstances.

They also rejected Hegel's view that philosophy and religion go hand in hand: that religion represents the truths of philosophy in immediate form. For them, the central task of philosophy is the critique of religion. As Marx wrote in his doctoral dissertation, the struggle is "against the gods of heaven and earth who do not recognise man's self-consciousness as the highest divinity".

He was also influenced by another Young Hegelian Ludwig von Feuerbach, whose major work was *The Essence of Christianity* (1841). Feuerbach argues that God is a human invention in which we take all our best qualities and project them onto God as an ideal model. Inevitably, however, we fall short of this impossible standard and so, rather than being life-affirming, religion alienates human beings from themselves by reinforcing a negative image. Feuerbach's alienation is spiritual, whereas Marx believed it was basically economic. The projection results from an unjust, inhuman society. Poverty prevents most people from finding true

happiness in this life, but religion tells them to accept their lot because they will find true happiness in the next.

Marx developed his ideas more fully in a manuscript written in 1843, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, which remained unpublished during his lifetime. In it, he declares that "the criticism of religion is the foundation of all criticism". It also contains his famous assertion that "religion is the opium of the people". Here is a fuller extract:

"The foundation of irreligious criticism is: Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again. But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man – state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual point d'honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realisation of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion.

"Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

“The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo”.

Marx is asserting that an understanding of religion should go in conjunction with an understanding of the social conditions that give rise to it. Religion is the symptom of more fundamental and oppressive realities, not the disease. It is created as an escape from life’s miseries. In describing it as the heart of a heartless world, he is implicitly suggesting that the study of religion is not a mere philosophical exercise but the first step in giving the world a new heart. As he put it in his unpublished *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845), in the words engraved on his tombstone in Highgate Cemetery: “the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point however is to change it”.

That required, first of all, an analysis of the nature of the heartless world in which most people lived. Its main characteristic after the early stage, according to Marx, was a class struggle between the rulers and the ruled. These ideas were discussed in later works, especially *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), co-written with Frederick Engels, and *Kas Kapital* (1867-1894). In Europe he identified six basic stages. The first was primitive communism in which all was shared by the tribe to ensure its survival. The second stage was slave society, in which the idea of class appeared and the major division was between the slave-owning ruling class and the slaves themselves. The slave society eventually collapsed because of the

need to build up empires and capture more and slaves to do most of the work. In the third, feudal, stage, corresponding to the Dark and Middle Ages, land was the basis of wealth and power, and the ruling class was the aristocracy at the peak of which were monarchs and lords, while the serfs at the bottom of the pyramid were little more than slaves.

Eventually trade with other states threw up merchants from whom a new capitalist class emerged. They were driven by profit but held back by the feudal system where the serfs were tied to the land. The result was an epoch of revolution in which capitalism succeeded as the fourth stage, the epoch in which Marx lived. Workers in factories now work for wages, but they are not paid the full value of their labour. The surplus value is instead appropriated by the owners as profit. As the drive for profit increases, wages are driven down, the rich get richer and the poor poorer, until eventually the workers will rise up in revolution and overthrow the capitalist system, thus inaugurating the fifth stage, socialism. Here the means of production are controlled by the democratic rule of the workers – the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’. This was a transitional period before the final stage of communism in which classes are abolished, there is common ownership of resources, and the state has ‘withered away’. As he suggested in *The Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875), the principle is: from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs”.

Marx was therefore following Hegel in believing in a dialectic or conflict view of history and in thinking there was an endpoint, after which there would be no more fundamental change. But he utterly rejected Hegel’s notion that reality was the embodiment of the Idea; instead, ideas are

determined by the character of economic life. He also argued that he was no Utopian but a scientific socialist who had discovered the laws of history. Of course, we have the history of the world since Marx by which to judge his predictions. It was not inevitable that capitalism would give rise to socialism. Indeed, it was nascent capitalist countries like Russia and China that became socialist, not the mature capitalist societies. Nor did they necessarily herald a 'fairer' society. Far from the state 'withering away', it grew stronger and the result was militarised elites enforcing a new authoritarian form of feudalism on the people, the opposite of what Marx predicted. There is a quip attributed to JK Galbraith and others that under capitalism man exploits man, whereas under communism it is the other way round.

As for capitalism collapsing under the weight of its internal contradictions, it still endures, even if at times it seems to be on life support. Yet none of this implies that Marx's analysis was worthless. After the Great Depression capitalism was greatly modified by extensive state intervention and many western countries became essentially mixed economies in which the state and the market shared ownership and control of resources. In the last 30 years, however, there has been a marked reversion to an unregulated capitalist system. But again it has proved to be inherently unstable and crisis-ridden, as the recession since 2008 has indicated. Resources are more unequally distributed than ever and the ecology of planet earth is threatened by human greed. Few are fooled by the British government's mantra that "we're all in this together".

One of the reasons for instability is the paradox of capitalism, namely that each employer wants to pay his workers as little as possible to reduce costs and increase profits, but he wants other employers to pay workers more, because if all employers do what he does, then wages fall, general spending collapses and goods remain unsold, so that profits also fall. In the face of this paradox, large multinationals are relying more and more on overworked, underpaid foreign labour in Asia and China, and there is a curious irony today in the dependence of global capitalism on the Chinese Communist party that provides foreign companies with cheap labour to lower prices and deprive workers of their rights.

The collapse of Soviet-style communism led to the frequent claim that Marxism was dead and buried but, on the contrary, it is still very relevant today. Arguably, it is now liberated from its association with totalitarian regimes and Stalinist gulags and can rethink its role in a more liberal and 'humanistic' form. For Marx was essentially right in demonstrating that some are more free than others. In our world there is widespread exploitation by the few, and the many whom they exploit are not really 'free'. Are the starving and the sick 'free' in any meaningful sense? Freedom from poverty, freedom from ignorance, freedom from discrimination and freedom to work are arguably as important as freedom of speech and freedom to make money. To paraphrase Francis Bacon, freedom and money, like muck, are not good unless they are well spread. In a real sense, freedom only has coherence if there is at least a fairly equal share of it.

The implication is the continuing relevance of socialism, whose core is, as Marx realised, a vision of human beings as social creatures united by a

common humanity and a desire to co-operate and live at peace with their neighbours. But Marx also believed in freedom, and any modern enlightened political system must try to reconcile the two basic concepts of liberty and equality. Too much individual freedom leads to the law of the jungle and the denial of freedom to the least powerful; too much equality leads to the destruction of individual freedom.

The balance between freedom and equality, between liberalism and socialism, between the collective and the individual, is the main political question of humankind for now and the future. Even if Marx was wrong in his predictions, he was right in his diagnosis of the illusory nature of religion and its use in upholding exploitative capitalism. He was right too in seeing that we need a fairer and more just system. For these reasons he is one of history's most important humanists.

CHARLES DARWIN

Charles Darwin (1809-82) is central in the development of Humanism because he represents that point in time when the human race first became aware of its place in the evolutionary process. The implication of Darwinism, as Richard Dawkins puts it, is that "slow, gradual, cumulative, natural selection is the ultimate explanation of existence".

The idea that life on earth evolved from a common source was not new. Ancient Greek philosophers like Thales and Anaximander suggested that life originally developed in the sea and only later moved on to land. But their ideas were effectively buried for two thousand years. Aristotle

argued for an unchanging hierarchical ladder of nature in which there is a progression from simple, undeveloped types of inanimate matter to the highest, which are humans with rational souls. When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, Aristotle's notion was given a Christian slant in the concept of a great chain of being, vertically extended, in which matter in the form of the earth is at the bottom of the chain and man, who is both matter and spirit, is a higher link. God, the ultimate spirit at the top, was assumed to have created this rigid hierarchy as described in Genesis.

For hundreds of years no further scientific thought was devoted to the origin of life and it was generally accepted that the earth was fairly young in modern terms. In Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, Rosalind says, "The poor world is almost six thousand years old". Even as late as 1650, James Ussher, Archbishop of Armagh, published his *Annals of the Old Testament*, giving a chronology which dated creation from the night preceding 23rd October, 4004 BC.

Yet religious orthodoxy was already under scrutiny. The Copernican revolution had cast the earth and man out of the centre of the universe. Newtonian physics demonstrated that nature obeyed objective laws and that a God was no longer needed to maintain planetary motion. The next stage on the voyage of discovery was to displace humans as the epicentre of the natural world. In the 18th century Kant speculated that organisms may have come from a single ancestral source. The French mathematician Pierre-Louis Maupertuis, the French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Erasmus Darwin, Charles Darwin's grandfather,

also had inklings of the truth. It was, however, Darwin who conducted the necessary research and collected the empirical data to demonstrate that evolution occurred and then made the idea acceptable for scientists and the general public.

He had formulated much of his theory as early as the 1830s after returning from a voyage around the world aboard HMS *Beagle*, a 90-foot Royal Navy survey barque. Darwin, a naturalist, had been invited as a gentleman-companion of the captain, a natural history enthusiast, on the ship's second expedition to chart the coast of South America. It was planned to last two years; it took nearly five, from 1831 to 1836. While the ship and her crew surveyed and charted coasts, Darwin spent much of the time on land investigating geology and making collections, keeping careful notes of his observations and at intervals sending specimens home. He made some of his most crucial observations on the Galápagos islands where the ship was anchored for a month.

Yet he largely sat on the idea of evolution for two decades, although the second edition of his account of *The Voyage of the Beagle* in 1845 contained allusions to the theory without naming it. The reasons for his hesitation included concerns about the public reaction and about upsetting his wife Emma, who was a conventional Christian. Also, he thought his theory would be more acceptable if he had a reputation as a biologist as well as a naturalist.

By 1854, and established as a biologist of the first rank, he began arranging his notes and was writing up his theory in 1858 when Alfred

Russel Wallace sent him an essay outlining a similar idea. He and Darwin agreed to introduce the theory in joint papers in July 1858. There was little reaction, but when Darwin's masterwork went on sale in November 1859 the initial supply of 1250 copies sold out.

He argued that, instead of a ladder or a chain, all life is descended with modification from common ancestors through the paradigm of an irregularly branching tree of life with the same roots and the human species being just the tip of one branch. He drew a diagram in the margin of his notebook to illustrate his meaning. Each new species establishes itself as new roots springing off from the parent tree.

He also provided a mechanism for the process. It is in the title of the book: *On the Origin of Species by means of natural selection*. This is the process that drives the branches of the tree apart. Darwin himself described natural selection as "the preservation of favourable variations and the rejection of injurious variations". In nature there is a 'severe struggle for life', and organisms show variations in character that influence their success in this struggle. Natural selection is the process by which the most advantageous heritable traits become more common in successive generations, and disadvantageous heritable traits become less common.

Darwin begins the *Origin*, not with natural selection, but with a chapter called 'Variation under Domestication' in which he discusses plant and animal breeding – in other words, *artificial* selection. If readers could accept artificial selection, which has caused big changes in a very short

period of time, then the leap to accepting natural selection over thousands of generations would not be so difficult.

Take the domestic dog, of which there are now possibly hundreds of breeds, from chihuahuas to great danes. It was domesticated about 10,000 years ago and, although Darwin thought it was probably descended from several wild species, advances in molecular biology have led to a consensus that all dogs are descended from a single species, probably the Eurasian gray wolf. Clearly, artificial selection can produce great diversity from a common ancestor in a relatively short time. Although natural selection is gradual and takes much longer, we now know that life on earth began about 3.5 billion years ago and the diversity that could have been created over this vast expanse of time is astounding.

In chapter 2 Darwin discusses individual, slight differences in a species which afford materials for natural selection to accumulate, later creating more permanent varieties, then leading to sub-species and eventually, when they become so different that they can no longer breed together, to different species. All these results, as he says in chapter 3, follow inevitably from the struggle for life.

Any random variation, however slight, if it is profitable to an individual, will tend to the preservation of that individual and will generally be inherited by its offspring. They in turn will have a better chance of surviving. So nature preserves favourable variations and rejects injurious variations. This is what Darwin calls natural selection, defined by Richard

Darwin as “the non-random survival of random variants”. Compared to artificial selection, it is, Darwin says, a force which is “as immeasurably superior to man’s feeble efforts, as the works of Nature are to those of Art”.

The main concern of chapter 3 is the struggle for existence. This inevitably follows from the high rate at which all organic beings tend to increase. More individuals are produced than can possibly survive. Here Darwin applies the ideas of Thomas Malthus, whose *Essay on the Principle of Population* first appeared in 1798. Malthus argued that populations have the power to grow geometrically (exponentially an annual growth rate of 2% would double in 35 years), while the means of subsistence grew only arithmetically or linearly, so that the growth of population outstripped the means of subsistence. Darwin applies this doctrine ‘with manifold force’ to the whole animal and vegetable kingdoms; “for in this case there can be no artificial increase in food, and no prudential restraint from marriage”.

Given limited resources, all lifeforms compete for food, sex and territory. The struggle means that there is cruelty and suffering everywhere. As Darwin wrote in a letter to Asa Gray, a Harvard botanist and devout Presbyterian in 1860, “I cannot see... evidence of benevolence and design on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidæ [parasitic wasps] with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice”.

Another American, Robert Ingersoll, the 19th century lawyer and agnostic who suggested that “this century will be called Darwin’s century”, put it graphically: “Would an infinitely wise, good and powerful God, intending to produce man, commence with the lowest possible forms of life; with the simplest organism that can be imagined, and during immeasurable periods of time, slowly and almost imperceptibly improve upon the rude beginning, until man was evolved? Would countless ages thus be wasted in the production of awkward forms, afterwards abandoned? Can the intelligence of man discover the least wisdom in covering the earth with crawling, creeping horrors, that live only upon the agonies and pangs of others? Can we see the propriety of so constructing the earth, that only an insignificant portion of its surface is capable of producing an intelligent man? Who can appreciate the mercy of so making the world that all animals devour animals; so that every mouth is a slaughter house, and every stomach a tomb? Is it possible to discover infinite intelligence and love in universal and eternal carnage?”

Evolution by natural selection has been dubbed by Daniel Dennett as ‘the single best idea that anyone has ever had’, and also as ‘Darwin’s dangerous idea’. It was dangerous, first of all, because in arguing for a mindless, blind, mechanical process, it removed the need for a designer. Human beings are not specially created by a God but are a part of the natural world and subject to its laws and processes. And if we are physical creatures like the rest of life, then we do not possess a soul and have no afterlife.

Of course, today there are many who still do not accept Darwinism. Some creationists, for example, argue that Darwin only established that there

were changes within species, not that there were developments of new species. The former they often call microevolution, where the natural selection is horizontal, which they accept, while the latter is designated as macroevolution, where natural selection is vertical in producing entirely new species, which they reject. Darwin, they say, seemed to assume that the former type eventually leads to the latter. Thus the new organisms would be unable to mate with their ancestors, if we were able to bring them together.

Most biologists, however, do not use these terms because for them there is no relevant difference between microevolution and macroevolution, since both happen in the same way and for the same reasons. Creationists have a point in saying that Darwin did not explain the *mechanics* by which a new species evolves when one species splits in two, separated by reproductive barriers. It has actually been suggested that *The Origin of Species* is misnamed because it does not explain the origin of species. Even Jerry Coyne (*Why Evolution is True*) thinks a better title would have been *The Origin of Adaptations*.

Yet Darwin describes the main factors influencing what is now called speciation without using that modern term (he never uses the word 'evolution' either, though the last word in the book is 'evolved'). He refers to isolation which, by checking immigration and consequently competition, will give time for any new variety to be slowly improved; and the size of a species' geographical range – if a species covers a large range it is likely to encounter a number of different habitats or environments, in

which case natural selection will favour local adaptation and hence promote speciation.

In singling out isolation and local adaptation Darwin laid the foundations upon which later biologists have built. We now recognise the main mechanisms based upon these two factors. The first is allopatric speciation, or geographical isolation, such as the island barrier Darwin proposed. The 13 species of Galápagos finches deriving from a single species reaching the islands from Central or South America over a few million years are a classic example. The other main type is sympatric speciation, which occurs when a species splits into two groups that diversify and become genetically isolated while remaining in the same place. The individuals from each group may have a unique mutation that prevents them from breeding with the others or they may breed at different times.

Opposition to Darwin arose not only because he seemed to remove the need for a God but also because of what he seemed to put in the place of a deity. Herbert Spencer coined the term 'survival of the fittest' to describe the theory, and the concept of social Darwinism soon developed, in which the ideas of struggle and selection shifted from the world of biology to human society. Racism, cruelty, eugenics have all been seen as the end product.

On the one hand, the 'selfish gene' seemed to provide a biological basis for a laissez-faire social morality, in which competition, struggle, success and failure are regarded as not only inevitable but also desirable. In America

especially, it provided an underpinning for capitalism and the ideology of extreme libertarianism. John D. Rockefeller claimed that his fortune from Standard Oil was “merely the survival of the fittest... the working out of a law of nature and a law of God”.

On the other hand, it also seemed possible to use natural selection to glorify group superiority, which is exactly how it was employed in Nazi Germany. Darwinism was seen as providing Hitler and the Nazis with a scientific justification for their policies in which the Aryan race and the German nation were treated as superior and other races were regarded as grossly inferior.

Both views were mistaken. In terms of evolution by natural selection, ‘fittest’ is the kind of fitness of a key to a lock, not necessarily sporting prowess, and can mean most loving and selfless rather than the most aggressive and selfish. It can also mean the best camouflaged, the most fecund, the most clever or most co-operative. In other words, forget Rambo; think Einstein or Gandhi.

The racism charge is particularly inappropriate, though it was unfortunate that Darwin’s publisher John Murray added the subtitle, “Or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life”. Since the work demonstrates that, far from being separate and different, all human beings belong to one biological race, evolution actually refutes racism. In America in the 19th century it was the biblical creationists who generally supported slavery. Darwin’s whole family were abolitionist and it was his

grandfather Josiah Wedgwood who produced the famous cameo depicting a kneeling slave begging: *Am I not a man and a brother?* – a motto Darwin himself used in his notes.

In nature, it is not every animal for itself. Co-operation and altruism are as essential as competition. All social animals are dependent for survival on group life. Blackbirds and thrushes give warning calls when hawks fly overhead, even though it puts them in danger. Wolves and wild dogs often hunt together and bring meat back to other members of the pack. In many human societies, free health care and a welfare state have greatly weakened differences and the process of mechanical natural selection.

In his *Descent of Man* Darwin argued that we evolved from a long line of animals that care for the weak and build co-operation with reciprocal transactions. He argued for a strong continuity between human and animal behaviour and that human morality would be impossible without certain emotional building blocks that are clearly at work in chimp and monkey societies.

In fact, far from individualism, nihilism or racism being the ethical implications of Darwinism, the relevant philosophical inference for humanity is existentialism. We have no proven purpose or fixed essence but instead we make up our own meanings and purposes. Evolution implies that we are part of nature and that we change. Like other creatures, we are not essentially good or bad but have the potential to be either. We are not static creatures but have the ability to evolve.

It is true that ethical progress has not been entirely upward. Europe's dark period in the 20th century is a moral blight on humanity. But if we had followed Darwin's true message instead of being enslaved to distortions and travesties of it, then we would have taken a far better path. Darwin's legacy is not therefore merely confined to the fields of science or medicine. It is thanks in no small part to Charles Darwin that we have the insight and the power needed to rework the human paradigm and evolve our better natures.

THE SPREAD OF SCEPTICISM

Many of the leaders in the British Cooperative and socialist movements, such as Robert Owen, William Thompson, Thomas Hodgskin and later George Holyoake were secular or atheist. In 1842 Holyoake, who coined the term 'secularism' in 1851, was the last person in Britain to be imprisoned on a charge of blasphemy. Charles Bradlaugh founded the National Secular Society in 1866. In 1880 he was elected an MP but, as an atheist, he refused to take the religious oath. He was expelled but re-elected regularly until 1886 when he was allowed to take the oath. Two years later he secured passage of a new Oaths Act which allowed Members of both Houses to affirm.

Humanist organisations in the UK were initially called ethical societies. The first Ethical Society was established in 1888 when the congregation of a dissenting Unitarian chapel in South Place, London, led by its American minister Moncure Conway, rejected belief in the existence of God. Other Ethical Societies followed, coming together to discuss ethical

issues, to do good works, and to provide alternatives to church on Sundays in the form of concerts, lectures and dances. In 1896, led by another American, Stanton Coit, they united to form the Union of Ethical Societies, which became the Ethical Union, and was eventually renamed the British Humanist Association in 1967.

In English literature, Charles Dickens, while ethically a Christian, attacked church dogmas and rituals and temporarily joined the Unitarians, who reject the divinity of Jesus. George Eliot, the pseudonym of Mary Anne Evans, was noted by one of her contemporaries as 'the first great godless writer of fiction' and was not buried in Westminster Abbey partly because of her denial of the Christian faith. Thomas Hardy gradually moved from the Christianity of his boyhood to become an agnostic. His novels and poetry reflect his view that man is alone in the universe, which is neither malevolent nor benevolent but simply indifferent. Others who expressed religious doubt in their work included Matthew Arnold, Samuel Butler and John Ruskin.

In America, many of the Founding Fathers were atheists, agnostics or Deists. George Washington rejected Christianity and was a Deist. Benjamin Franklin, who wrote that "lighthouses are more helpful than churches", also called himself 'a thorough Deist'. John Adams, who rejected the divinity of Jesus and was contemptuous of orthodox Christianity, wrote to his son John Quincy Adams in 1816: "Let the human mind loose. It must be loose. It will be loose. Superstition and dogma cannot confine it". He was another Deist who thought there was evidence of a God as designer of the universe but he was 'an essence

that we know nothing of'. Of Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams wrote in 1831: "If not an absolute atheist, he had no belief in a future existence. All his ideas of obligation or retribution were bounded by the present life". Jefferson was scathing about Christianity. He wrote that in the Gospels we discover 'a groundwork of vulgar ignorance, of things impossible, of superstition, fanaticism and fabrication'. James Madison, equally scathing, wrote: "Religious bondage shackles and debilitates the mind and unfits it for every noble enterprise, every expanded prospect".

American writers who questioned religious belief included Ralph Waldo Emerson, a former Unitarian minister who renounced Christianity. He wrote: "As men's prayers are a disease of the will, so are their creeds a disease of the intellect (*Self-Reliance*, 1841). Henry David Thoreau, who often contradicted himself, built a hut on Emerson's property beside Walden Pond and lived in it for two years and, while there, refused to pay his poll tax in protest at the government's militarism and tolerance of slavery. He was jailed overnight, thus becoming a pioneer of civil disobedience. He declared that churches were 'a lifelong hypocrisy' and "it is a sad mistake to acknowledge the personality of God".

Robert Ingersoll (1833-1899) was a lawyer and powerful public speaker who crisscrossed America in the decades after the Civil War giving lectures, mostly on religion. Their titles included: *The Gods; Heretics and Heresies; Origin of God and the Devil;* and *Why I am an Agnostic*. Illinois Republicans tried to pressure him into running for governor on the condition that he conceal his agnosticism during the campaign, but he refused on the basis that concealing information from the public was

immoral. His controversial views on religion, as well as the fact that he had been a strong opponent of slavery and supporter of women's suffrage, probably precluded him from high office. In the eulogy at the grave of his brother Ebon he said: "Happiness is the only good, reason the only torch, justice the only worship, humanity the only religion, and love the only priest".

Another agnostic was Mark Twain (1835-1910), but his views were largely kept secret for half a century after his death. His daughter Clara suppressed works such as *Letters from the Earth* and other anticlerical stories. *The Mysterious Stranger*, which denies the existence of a beneficent Providence was first published only in 1916, and it was not until 1962 that Clara allowed the *Letters* to be released. He wrote: "Man is the religious animal. He is the only religious animal. He is the only animal that has the True Religion – several of them. He is the only animal that loves his neighbour as himself and cuts his throat, if his theology isn't straight. He has made a graveyard of the globe in trying his honest best to smooth his brother's path to happiness and heaven".

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

In his *Autobiography*, written in 1876, Darwin wrote: "The mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble by us; and I for one must be content to remain an Agnostic". This term had been coined in an 1869 lecture by Thomas Henry Huxley, a biologist known as 'Darwin's bulldog' for his advocacy of Darwin's theory of evolution. The term comes from the Greek words 'agnostos' which means 'ignorant', and 'gnosis' which means

'knowledge'. Huxley explained it as follows: "Agnosticism, in fact, is not a creed, but a method, the essence of which lies in the rigorous application of a single principle... Positively the principle may be expressed: In matters of the intellect, follow your reason as far as it will take you, without regard to any other consideration. And negatively: In matters of the intellect do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable".

Agnosticism is thus the view that the truth of certain opinions is unknown or unknowable. In the religious context, it is often suggested that an agnostic is someone who neither believes nor disbelieves in God. But agnostics, while not knowing if a god exists or not, have tended to be highly sceptical of the idea. This scepticism has a long history, going back at least to ancient Greece and philosophers like Protagoras, though open expression of it was often dangerous and therefore rare even into the 18th century, with the notable exception of David Hume. After Darwin, agnosticism developed rapidly and even became almost respectable, with agnostics being regarded as reasonable people, in contrast to atheists, who were often regarded as closed-minded and dogmatic.

It is thus frequently argued that atheism springs from the same deluded and potentially dangerous quest for certainty as the dogmatic tendencies in the religion it opposes. But this is only one interpretation of atheism, which is simply an absence of belief in the existence of gods. The certainty or lack of it varies from one atheist to another. Not believing that something is true is not equivalent to believing that it is

false: we may simply have no idea whether it is true or not. This is basically the same as agnosticism. Some people make the distinction that agnosticism is not about belief in a god but about knowledge though, logically, agnosticism is compatible with both theism and atheism. A person can believe in a god (theism) without claiming to know for sure if that god exists – the result is agnostic theism. On the other hand, a person can disbelieve in gods (atheism) without claiming to know for sure that no gods can or do exist – the result is agnostic atheism. Indeed it is quite common to be an agnostic atheist, which merely goes to prove that the words are ultimately just convenient labels, and it is what we mean by them that is important. Since a Humanist goes further than mere agnosticism or atheism in believing in a positive god-free philosophy, it is entirely possible to be an agnostic atheist Humanist.