Liberatheism:
On Freedom from God(s)

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To
Darren Slade and John Loftus, two partners in my intellectual journey.

A Selection of Publications by David Eller

Beyond Liminality: Ontologies of Abundant Betweenness (Routledge, 2024)

Introducing Anthropology of Religion: Culture to the Ultimate, 3rd Ed. (Routledge, 2021)

Trump and Political Theology: Unmaking Truth and Democracy (GCRR Press, 2020)

Psychological Anthropology for the 21st Century (Routledge, 2018)

Cruel Creeds, Virtuous Violence: Religious Violence Across Culture and History (Prometheus, 2010)

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Foreword

John W. Loftus

David Eller's luminous works contain important perspectives you won't find from anyone else in today's world. We are all in his debt. You aren't a fully informed person if you're not reading them, and this new book is no exception.[1]

Let me highlight just a few of his perspectives, those I found to be brilliant, important, and persuasive. First, as a professor of cultural anthropology, Eller has challenged me to think outside my cultural box. Rather than thinking exclusively in terms of westernized notions of faith, religion, and culture, he has forced me to adopt a global perspective. This global perspective has been a game changer for me. I used to think exclusively in terms of the westernized theistic gods of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. And while I don't have a very deep knowledge of the other religious cultures and their gods, my consciousness has been raised to consider these other religious cultures more than ever. When that happens you will see the problem of religious diversity for what it really is.

From Eller, I was forced to acknowledge it is not the case that westernized notions of religion have any superiority to them. That was a shocker to me, but then at that time, I was still in my ignorance. Again, when we adopt a truly global perspective on religion, none of them have anything more going for them than the others. This means for me as an atheist that when I choose to argue exclusively against one deity over the others, by my very choice I'm acting as if one particular deity has more going for it than the others. That assumption is false. The reason it's false is because all religions are subjective, cultural, tribal, and relative. Our inherited religion is just a different expression of the same kinds of hopes and fears over the problems we face with life and death, morals, and society itself.

[1] I am thrilled he graciously wrote a Foreword for one of my books and several chapters for my anthologies.

Since the dawn of human history, religionists have been arguing over competing and even mutually exclusive religious faith claims. These claims on behalf of gods, goddesses, and other superhuman beings, along with their commandments, prophecies, and promises cannot all be true. If we try to strip religious claims down to an agreed-upon commonly shared bare minimum, what we might have left is the belief in a superhuman being, or beings, and/or superhuman force, or forces, the ground of all being, or the subjective feeling of transcendence. Even that bare minimum shared belief, variously described, is not such a bare, minimum, or shared belief though. Religionist beliefs differ over the existence of one paranormal being (i.e., one God) or in many paranormal beings (i.e., gods, goddesses, angels, spirits, ghosts, demons), or in one paranormal force (i.e., panentheism, deism) or many paranormal forces (i.e., karma, fate, reincarnation, prayers, incantations, spells, omens, voodoo dolls), or some sort of combination of them all. Religionists who agree with one another on these beliefs also disagree over who these beings and/or paranormal forces are, how they operate, and for whom they operate.

So if we were to use one word to describe what we know about religions, that word would be *diversity*. When dealing with such a diverse phenomenon where no religion has an advantage over others, we must treat all religious faith-based claims the same, privileging none. Eller points out that "The diversity of religions forces us to see religion as a culturally relative phenomenon; different groups have different religions that appear adapted to their unique social and even environmental conditions."[2]

Eller's works convinced me of the cultural and relativistic nature of religion. Given the historical track record to date, no religion based on faith will ever rise above the heap of them. For this would require something they cannot provide: sufficient objective evidence that can convince reasonable outsiders.[3]

Second, because of the above perspective, Eller helped change my view of the philosophy of religion. Although I was trained in that discipline and taught it at the college level, I now see clearly its irrelevance and inadequacy.[4] If atheist philosophers and students want to truly

[2] Eller, *Atheism Advanced: Further Thoughts of a Freethinker*, 233.

[3] It's from this perspective that religionists should approach their indoctrinated culturally adopted religion as outsiders. It's the best way to test whether any one of them is true, if there is one. On this see my book *The Outsider Test for Faith How to Know Which Religion is True*.

[4] See my 2016 book, *Unapologetic: Why Philosophy of Religion Must End*.

understand my call for the end of philosophy of religion, they must read his works.

Third, Eller has also challenged me to consider what it means to be consistently atheist in an atheist society. Of his book, *Atheism Advanced*, I called it "The Best Damn Atheist Book on the Market Today, Bar None, Hands Down, Without Question!"[5] Among other things, he effectively argued that Christians believe in a local Christianity or no Christianity at all. When I started writing my books, I wrote against a specific religious viewpoint, likened to a small limb growing out of the very large tree of religion. I wasn't arguing against animism, animatism, ancestor worship, ethical non-theism (like Buddhism), nor the many polytheistic gods and goddesses, nor did I argue against other monotheisms like the several branches of Judaism or Islam, nor against whatever original Christians believed, nor liberalism, nor deism. No. My focus had been against a small sect in time, evangelical Christianity. And among evangelicals themselves there is no consensus about true Christianity, relegating certain other branches as "cults." Christianity is best understood as a "local Christianity," one situated in a particular time and place held by particular localized people. What a particular Christian believes is a hybrid coming from schism after schism and the conclusions of hindsight through the process of syncretism.

While I have argued specifically about the dominant American fundamentalist or evangelical view in my book, Eller argues against religion itself. Along the way, Eller advances our understanding of just what atheism is. According to him, atheism is not just a view that stands in contrast with the dominant religious view of any particular society. Atheism in Hindu countries would be a-Hinduist, while atheism in Christian countries would be considered a-Christian. But this cannot be what atheism is about. We atheists have allowed the dominant religious view of our societies to set the definition for what atheism is, and even the language we use to debate the issues, Eller argues. Why is it that most debates in Western cultures are debates on such topics as "Christianity vs. Atheism"? Eller wants us to think in larger terms than that. According to Eller, the real debate should be set in terms of "Christianity vs. Itself," since there are so many branches of it, or "Christianity vs. All Other Religions," since that's the proper way to think about religion. Can you imagine a Christian wanting to debate that topic with an atheist?

Consequently, says Eller, "Nothing is more destructive to religion than other religions; it is like meeting one's own anti-matter twin. Other religions represent alternatives to one's own religion: other people believe

[5] "The Best Damn Atheist Book," http://tinyurl.com/49duxzj5.

in them just as fervently as we do, and they live their lives just as successfully as we do." He goes on to rhetorically ask the question: "But if their religion is relative, then why is ours not?[6]

Fourth, Eller convincingly argues that Western cultures are dominated by Christian language, rituals, symbols, arts, music, habits, and so forth. It's as if we are almost imprisoned in it. He writes:

> We find in practice that atheists in Christian-dominated societies speak and think in Christian terms just as surely as Christians do. We let Christianity set the agenda, identify the questions, and provide the language of the debate. We quite literally "speak Christian" just as fluently and just as un-self-consciously as they do.[7]

Eller continues:

> We need to stop speaking Christian so as to loosen the grip of Christian language on our thinking....We do well to begin our debunking of religion with a debunking of religious terminology.[8]

Eller calls upon atheists to eliminate our use of words and phrases like "heaven," "hell," "sin," "angel," "devil," "bless," "soul," "saint," "pray," "sacred," "divine," "baptism," "purgatory," "gospel," "the Mark of Cain," "Garden of Eden," "patience of Job," "a voice crying in the wilderness," "wolf in sheep's clothing," "wars and rumors of wars," "lost sheep," and others. They have no corresponding referent in other non-Christian parts of the globe. This Christian language only serves to continue the cultural domination that Christianity has in Western society; much like chauvinistic language does with respect to women.

Fifth, Eller argues that there is no specific "Science vs. Religion" problem, since some religions do not believe in any personal god, and because religious believers are not against most scientific disciplines. Believers are only opposed to those scientific disciplines that come into direct conflict with their own specific religious claims. Some religions don't even have a creation theory! Surely religious believers are not opposed to quantum theory, gravitational theory, meteorology, botany, or gemology (the study of gems), for starters. They are only opposed to specific claims within physics and biology when science crosses over into the arbitrary and sacred/profane boundary of specific religious claims.

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[6] Eller, *Atheism Advanced*, 233.
[7] Eller, *Atheism Advanced*, 35.
[8] Eller, *Atheism Advanced*, 36.

Religious believers are not opposed to science as a whole, just some aspects of it. So the debate is not about science vs. religion but rather about specific local religions vs specific scientific claims.

These are all very important perspectives readers need to understand and articulate. Pushing the envelope of our understanding farther is the impact of this volume. In the front matter essay, Eller asks,

> What comes after atheism? My answer is liberatheism, not against god(s) but free of god(s). We can think of liberatheism as liber-atheism (free-without-gods) or liberate-theism (freedom from theism), but either way, the message is the same. The battle over god(s) is finished. We move on to a life and a world freed from god(s).

In his Introduction, Eller deals with the complexities, paradoxes, and contradictions of freedom, then focuses in on the responsibilities of freedom at the end. He wants us to consider the responsibility to liberate ourselves from masters, from god, history, or human beings:

> If no man or woman, no historical force or "law of nature," and no god dictates what we think, what we value, what we do, and what institutions we construct, then it is up to us to decide. We do not make such decisions in a vacuum; we are creatures of a particular culture, historical experience, and historical moment, overdetermined to choose some things and avoid others … But in order to extricate ourselves from old, tired, ill-fitting, and often pathological social realities, we must liberate ourselves from old, tired, ill-fitting, and often pathological authorities, including especially religions and their god(s).

Then he outlines the rest of the book by sharing the three steps in this process:

> The first step in this process, in theism-dominated societies, is atheism—saying no to god(s). The next step is liberatheism—getting free of god(s). The final step is not talking about god(s) at all.

This book finishes his trilogy, to which I say, bravo! We are in his debt. May his work gain a very wide audience. It can help lead us into an era where gods and goddesses can be ignored, along with their caretakers and spokespersons(!). Ignoring prescientific superstitions and paranormal pretend beings is our best hope for achieving human and animal

flourishing on this pale blue dot of ours. Based on scientific literacy without gods, and our own capabilities for empathy, there is hope we can bring it about eventually. But if not, we might as well die trying. “Light a candle in the dark,” Carl Sagan said. Adopt that as your purpose in life. It’s one that can transcend all that we do, until such time as we can ignore religion altogether.

Preface

This book completes a trilogy begun almost twenty years ago. The 2004 *Natural Atheism* was an explanation, examination, and defense of atheism on the premise that humans are born without any religious ideas or beliefs and hence "natural" atheists. The 2007 *Atheism Advanced: Further Thoughts of a Freethinker*, as the name suggests, pushed atheism in new directions, especially beyond argument about the Christian god, for instance emphasizing that there are many other theisms and many other gods than Christianity and its god and noting how arguing about god(s) in a Christian context still has us "speaking Christian." The current book pushes further still, envisioning a future when we no longer fight about god(s) because we are free of god(s).

The central theme of the book, then, is freedom, and the book offers various ways on various subjects to free ourselves of idols. The introduction explores freedom, launching from the famous but foolish prejudice—best formulated by Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*—that god-free people, liberated from the thrall of a supernatural authority, will commit every crime and atrocity. Instead, we explore the complexities of freedom, including what is called "ugly freedom" or the harm that free individuals do to themselves and others. We reason that freedom does not equal anomie or license and that discipline, maturity, and responsibility are not anathema to freedom. Rather, freedom is not really possible without discipline, maturity, and responsibility, so there is nothing to fear from god-free people—and plenty to fear from god-ful people.

The first chapter turns to another common and highly motivated bias against atheists; that is, that it must be impossibly difficult—and impossibly unpleasant—to be without god(s). I call this the "(melo)drama of atheism" because it portrays atheists as lonely, depressed, and anxious people, cast adrift in a meaningless and hostile universe. The current generation of atheists is often accused of trivializing the crushing existential burden that earlier atheists like Nietzsche or Sartre understood. Rather, I argue that atheism is not so hard and has either become easier to imagine existence without god(s) or that our predecessors exaggerated the angst of godlessness, perhaps because the idea was so new to them.

The second chapter aims to free us from many other misconceptions about atheism, too many of them promoted by our own main spokespeople. Primarily, atheism is commonly presented as a "belief" that there is no such thing as god(s), while it is not a "belief" at all. The chapter surveys major writings by contemporary atheists, identifying their misunderstandings, which necessarily leads us to sort out the concepts of belief, faith, and atheism.

The third chapter, like any "encyclopedia," is a summary of knowledge on the principal topics of atheism. It serves as a microcosm of the book and of the entire subject, a book-within-a-book if you will, and if readers read nothing else in the present volume, they will get a clear sense of how I view atheism and how I think it should be viewed.

The fourth chapter opens a series of chapters on the confusing and misguided state of theism, a state of which rank-and-file believers are probably blissfully unaware. In the fourth chapter, we meet a wide variety of theisms, not only the obvious non-Christian religions like Islam and Hinduism but a myriad of sophisticated Christian theisms building up to powerless-god theism, Christian existentialism, and death-of-god theology. A propos of the first chapter, Christian theists are not spared the burden and anxiety of freedom, and many sensitive Christian thinkers have already surrendered to the impossibility of a personal, powerful, and caring divine being. The fifth chapter introduces the related but distinct concept of anti-theism or the reasoned *preference* for the non-existence of god(s), for freedom from god(s), refuting once and for all the assumption that everything is better with god(s).

The next three chapters continue the critique of the beneficence of religion in general and theism in particular. The sixth chapter discusses the topic of "religious trauma" or the psychological, emotional, and often physical injury that ensues from religion. The seventh chapter dives more deeply into the question of non-knowledge or ignorance, investigating how and why religions (and other domains of society) often quite intentionally preserve and promote ignorance through the process of "agnomancy." The eighth chapter describes the profound damage that religion has done to philosophy, the oldest form of rational inquiry. It condemns the academic field of philosophy of religion as little more than an adjunct to Christian theology and apologetics. An ultimate betrayal of the commission to analyze and critique our pet ideas and concepts, as well as a colossal waste of brainpower and resources, philosophy of religion is encouraged to liberate itself from its role as a defender of Christianity to become a genuine philosophical approach to the question of religion.

The final two offer a bit more "practical" guidance for atheists. The ninth chapter illustrates how diverse atheism can be and is across cultures and religions, revealing just how completely encumbered mainstream American and Western atheism is with Christianity, how it is anything but free of the Christian god. The chapter begins with nonbelief in Islam, which is almost an oxymoron not only to biased pundits but to many well-known atheists. It is also looks at nonbelief in Hinduism and the alleged irreligiosity in Japan. Finally, the chapter argues that, far from the standard impression that atheists lack morality, in most if not all religious settings the complaints against religion are less propositional (less about "belief") than moral--that is, that religion fails the test of human beings with functional moral compasses. Last, the tenth chapter provides some practical advice on how to change people's minds from theism to atheism, taking advantage of the best knowledge and practices in psychology, education, marketing, and behavioral economics. The chapter invites us to think in terms of "attitude change" and away from conventional confrontational tactics like argument and debate.

This last chapter brings the project full circle, warning about the danger of confirming theists' worst impressions and stereotypes of us as bitter, angry, and condescending. Our standard practices of arguing and debating (not to mention ridiculing and insulting) tend to reaffirm the (melo)drama of atheism and the assumption that people who are free of god(s) are not the kind of people that our interlocutors want to be. In the end, the information and insights in the book call us to free ourselves of many of the things we say about ourselves and about and to others—and to accelerate toward the day when we no longer argue *about* god(s) but live *free from* god(s), when god(s) are simply not worth talking about anymore.

One note on usage in this book. Readers will have observed that I consistently say "god(s)" rather than "God" and also refer to god(s) in terms of "he/she/it/they" instead of merely "he." The word "God" is the proper name of the Christian god and should only be used as such; the preferred form "god(s)" is a constant reminder to theists that theirs (whichever god is theirs) is not the only god that people believe in out there. Likewise, "he/she/it/they" (and its other forms like "him/her/it/they," etc.), although a little clumsy, stresses the fact that some theisms posit a masculine god, some a feminine god, some multiple gods, and so forth. The effect of this usage is to decenter and "provincialize" the Christian mono-god and to force Christian theists to cope with rival theisms. I ardently urge others to adopt this usage.

Introduction:
The Problem of Freedom

> Free *from* what? As if that mattered to Zarathustra! But your eyes should tell me brightly: Free *for* what?
>
> —Friedrich Nietzsche,
> "On the Way of the Creator," *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

So there is no such thing as god(s). Now what? We could continue to argue about god(s), but there are no new arguments, for or against. Not that apologetics—making excuses for god(s)—or philosophy or theology or the devotion of the rank-and-file believer has ceased. But the debate is over: there is no reason to think that there is any such thing as god(s).

Atheism, literally "no/without god(s)-*ism*," has been, throughout Western/Christian history, not *without* god(s) but *against* god(s). (-*Ism* as a suffix does not always mean "belief": patriotism is not "belief in patriots" any more than vegetarianism is "belief in vegetarians" or "belief in vegetables." Both, like atheism and many other *isms*, are positions or practices but not *beliefs*.) However, just as Nietzsche also warned that when you gaze too long into the abyss it gazes back into you, so arguing about god(s), especially when god(s) have been repudiated—when those god(s) are dead, to quote Nietzsche yet again—keeps those god(s) on our tongues and in our minds. Arguing about something is still talking about it, and like a ghost, the idea or memory of god(s) haunts us still.

What comes after atheism? My answer is *liberatheism*, not against god(s) but *free of god(s)*. We can think of liberatheism as liber-atheism (free-without-gods) or liberate-theism (freedom from theism), but either way, the message is the same. The battle over god(s) is finished. We move on to a life and a world freed from god(s).

What does this freedom entail? What does it offer us, and what does it demand of us? People, particularly American people, speak a lot about freedom, but not all of this speech is entirely sensible or consistent. The two silliest things I have heard recently about freedom, written 140 years apart, come from Dostoevsky's classic 1880 novel *The Brothers*

Karamazov and Christine Rosen's review of Elisabeth Anker's 2022 book *Ugly Freedoms*. Most readers may be familiar with Dostoevsky's infamous meme, "Without God, everything is allowed." The implication is that, freed from god(s), humans would run amok, perpetrating—and justifying—any and all crimes and perversions. In other words, as most theists, and even some nontheists, will tell you, a god is the source and the guarantor of morality (humans, presumably, being naturally immoral, like Lucifer in the Rolling Stones song, "in need of some restraint"). This is of course nonsense, but first it is worth noting that this is not what Dostoevsky said. Rather, in the key passage a fictional character recalls a conversation with the fictional atheist character Rakitin, in which he *asked Rakitin the question*, without God (i.e. the Christian god), "What will become of men then? Without God and immortal life? All things are lawful/allowed then, they can do what they like?" Rakitin never answered—other than to point out that "a clever man can do what he likes"—nor did anyone else in the story.

So we are left to grapple with the question ourselves. Or are we? Must we take every question, every frivolous accusation and baseless slander, seriously? There is no evidence to suggest that atheists are more "immoral" or generally worse people than theists, and if there were such evidence it would be easy to demonstrate (by crime rates and such). The allegation is part of what we will call, in the first chapter, "the (melo)drama of atheism" that theists are inclined to think the worst of atheists: it does not make theism *true*, but it promises to make it *preferable*. Further, the "divine command" theory of morality has been amply debunked. Actually, it has been more than debunked and most passionately so by a suffering theist, the anguished Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard struggled with Yahweh's instruction to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. How (hopefully Abraham wondered) is it moral to kill my son, but how is it moral to disobey my god? And why would this god issue such an immoral order? Kierkegaard realized that a deity *who is the source of morality and law is himself not bound by morality and law, is beyond good and evil*. In other words, Dostoevsky's characters—and everyone who thinks that the lesson is that without god(s) everything is permitted—have it exactly backwards. For a god, everything is permitted. Who can say no to him/her/it/them? Who can even, like Job, hold the god accountable without a browbeating? And in the final analysis, as history has shown with a vengeance, if the god(s) can establish any law, dictate any moral code, order any action, then for the human devotees anything and everything is permitted, and more than permitted but *compelled* if they believe their god has approved or required it, from polygamy and animal

sacrifice to murder, holy war, and terrorism. After all, even the apostles recognized that "With God, all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26; also Mark 10:27)—including really bad things.

Which brings me to the second silly remark. In reaction to Anker's book on the uglier aspects of freedom, which we will discuss below, Christine Rosen of the right-wing magazine *Commentary* declared, "Freedom is freedom."[1] Whenever I hear such an unequivocal statement my anthropologist's ears prick up, since I know that almost never is anything so simple and straightforward. In this case, a more sophomoric attitude is barely imaginable. As much as Americans prattle on about freedom, there is hardly any concept less obvious, less simple, and less unequivocal. Two centuries ago, the great philosopher Hegel opined, "No idea is so generally recognized as indefinite, ambiguous, and open to the greatest misconceptions (to which it therefore actually falls a victim) as the idea of freedom: none in the common currency with so little appreciation of its meaning."[2] Almost sixty years ago philosopher Alan Ryan asserted that freedom "is not open to any simple definition," although he still clung to the vain hope that it is "not ambiguous."[3] Much more recently political scientist Wendy Brown contended that freedom "is neither a philosophical absolute nor a tangible reality but a relational and contextual practice that takes shape in opposition to whatever is locally and ideologically conceived as unfreedom."[4] Sixty years ago anthropologist David Bidney added the controversial but probably valid judgment that freedom, "in itself, is not an absolute good: one must define the conditions under which it is exercised."[5]

Carolina Humphrey provided an illustrative case of "alternative freedoms" in Russian variations of the concept. She found three non-synonymous words in Russian that could be translated as "freedom," none of them identical to the English word. *Svoboda*, she explained, appears in the context of political freedom or liberty but originally related to the group or "the security and well-being that result from living amongst one's own people."[6] Just as it did not apply to "me" but to "us," so it also clearly demarcated the "not-us" and entailed freedom from those unlike us and their foreign ways. *Svoboda*, she continued, "indicates the society of the people who are *not unfree*, but apart from that it suggests little about what

[1] Rosen, "The Foolishness of 'Ugly Freedoms.'"
[2] Quoted in Dudley, *Hegel, Nietzsche, and Philosophy: Thinking Freedom*, 1.
[3] Ryan, "Freedom," 105.
[4] Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 6.
[5] Bidney, "The Varieties of Human Freedom," 22.
[6] Humphrey, "Alternative Freedoms," 2.

that society might be like."[7] A wider concept is *mir*, meaning all humankind, the world, or the universe, although it too had a more limited reference to the Russian peasants' local community, which was their whole world. *Mir* is not cognitive but more affective and emotional, providing "a feeling (*oschuchenie*) of freedom, which is given by self-realization" but still collectively rather than privately.[8] The third term is *volya*, "will" or individual freedom, particularly when a person is unfree or oppressed and yearns for release. It is freedom of action, which she warned carries a dark side, associating will or desire with demand and command. One can impose one's *volya* on others and bend them to one's own. Such freedom is not even necessarily healthy for the person exercising it: the sense of "everything-is-permitted-ness" (*vsedozvolennost'*)—powerfully reminiscent of Dostoevsky's quotation—can consume the person and result in great frustration if it is thwarted.[9] More poignantly, as we will consider again shortly, freedom (*svoboda* being the dominant term today) can be and regularly is abused, since it is available disproportionately "to anyone with the wealth or resources to exercise it":

> The present-day svoboda-freedom is thus associated with the arrogance of political-financial clout, with corrupt little islands of energy and agency, and it tends to be resented or frankly rejected, by everyone else….
>
> People are worried that this new "freedom" is not really freedom at all, but the downside of endless openness, namely "limitlessness" (*bespredel*), a new slang word that actually means unbridled-ness, lawlessness, mayhem, chaos.[10]

We do not have to travel around the world, though, to confront diversity and complexity in the idea of freedom. In this seminal essay "Two Concepts of Liberty" Isaiah Berlin distinguished "negative freedom" from "positive freedom."[11] The former comprises roughly *freedom from*, that is, the absence or removal of constraints on and obstacles to freedom of action, while the latter names *freedom to*, that is,

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[7] Humphrey, "Alternative Freedoms," 3.

[8] Humphrey, "Alternative Freedoms," 3.

[9] Humphrey, "Alternative Freedoms," 6.

[10] Humphrey, "Alternative Freedoms," 7–8. Humphrey noted in closing that Western invocations of freedom are likely to be ineffective or counterproductive when filtered through Russian ears.

[11] Berlin, *Liberty: Incorporating* Four Essays on Liberty. (Essay originally published in 1958.)

what the person can do with her freedom or the potential or capacity to master one's life and determine one's destiny. Berlin did not suggest that there are no limits to freedom (i.e. there is no perfect "freedom from") nor that negative freedom grants absolute positive freedom (i.e. one cannot automatically do all that one is "free" to do).

Bidney, in his cross-cultural study of freedom, discovered four different types or categories—natural, cultural, normative/moral, and metaphysical. *Natural freedom* is the very ability to commence and complete independent action (with its negative and positive forms); it further consists of *biological freedom* or what we are physically and socially (e.g. in competition with others) able to do and *psychological freedom* which depends on our individual will, intelligence, and imagination. *Cultural freedom* is "the system of historically acquired rights and privileges prescribed on the authority of a given society" or more simply how society and culture construe and organize freedom, as in the Russian case above.[12] *Normative/moral freedom* in Bidney's analysis is freedom of action structured by reason and its ideals, laws, and principles. Finally, *metaphysical freedom* refers both to the "irreducible" (existentialists would say "inescapable") condition of choice—that human beings *must make choices and decisions*—and also to the practical/technical, historical (i.e. at any given time), and cultural conditions of "what is possible."

We could no doubt multiply categories and classifications of freedom, but the point is made that freedom is not a single or simple thing. More importantly, the discourses and uses of freedom will always be constructed from historical and social experience. In the case of Western notions of freedom, that experience, as Bidney and many others have understood, boils down to the struggle first against the church and then against the state. Martin Luther fatefully introduced the idea of freedom of conscience as a tactic for extricating Christians from the grip of the Catholic Church; individuals should be free to read scripture and decide for themselves what it means and requires. However, Luther fervently assumed that everyone, taking advantage of that freedom, would share *his* conclusions on the matter; instead, we soon had not two (Catholic and Lutheran) but three (add Calvinist) and eventually thousands of interpretations and their resultant sects and denominations. Either way, "freedom" was a weapon against religious authority (or at least religious authorities with whom you disagree); once committed to a particular sect, denomination, or biblical exegesis, talk of freedom tends to dissipate.

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[12] Bidney, "The Varieties of Human Freedom," 12.

The other nemesis of freedom was (and is) "the state" but more specifically the king or emperor or monarch. As in the American Revolution, monarchy was inherently associated with tyranny (even a good king was bad), an encumbrance on our negative freedom to be thrown off. This was also John Stuart Mill's main argument in his celebrated 1859 essay *On Liberty*, where he characterized liberty as "protection against the tyranny of the political rulers," which was achieved through constitutional checks on government's power and through "certain immunities" from government interference that we call *rights*.[13] For him, freedom covered three different realms—freedom of thought or consciousness, freedom of tastes and pursuits (that is, to live our lives as suits our character), and freedom to assemble. Crucially, the only legitimate reason for curtailment of individual liberties in a modern "civilized" community in his view was "to prevent harm to others"; in other words, a free person should not be forced to do something or prevented from doing something against his will for his own betterment even if "to do so would be wise, or even right."[14]

Yet, while the Declaration of Independence from British autocracy reserves the right and the duty to alter and abolish any form of government that is destructive of citizens' life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness, once a new government is instituted it is much less congenial to rebellion and revolution (notice that the republic did not honor the Confederacy's wish to escape from the perceived tyranny of the federal government). Accordingly, Bidney sagely observed that, "Those who do not accept a given authority are inclined to contrast 'authority' and 'freedom' as if they were two opposing principles; on the other hand, those who do accept the authority of a given person or institution see no such conflict and find their freedom in conforming to the established authority."[15]

The effect of this history is a unique Western—and most intensely, American—conception of freedom, highly individualized to be sure but more precisely viewed as "self-reliance, as unconstrained agency, and as unbound subjectivity. It combines these interpretations together as normative expressions of a sovereign subject, one who obeys no other authority but one's own, who can determine the future and control the vagaries of contingency through their sheer strength of will."[16] This variety of freedom is unusually prickly and defensive, perceiving virtually

[13] Mill, *On Liberty*, 6–11.
[14] Mill, *On Liberty*, 14.
[15] Bidney, "The Varieties of Human Freedom," 26–27.
[16] Anker, *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom*, 9.

any authority or rule or norm or even neighbor's need as an affront to the individual's liberty. As a result, freedom is brandished as absolute and as absolutely simple and self-evident. We have seen already that freedom is anything but absolute, simple, and self-evident, as there are inevitably at least two conflicts—the conflict between the individual's freedom and the social order, and the conflict between the individual's freedom and some other person's freedom (or well-being or very life).

It goes without saying that every law, regulation, norm, moral, or tradition is a restriction on someone's freedom, and such is the nature of living in a society. (One can retreat to the mountains or the woods to evade these limitations, but one also foregoes the benefits of modern civilization.) It bears saying, however, that, like all principles that sound good on the surface, freedom leads us into paradoxes and contradictions. Three of these paradoxes and contradictions bear closer inspection.

The first is what Elisabeth Anker called (much to Rosen's consternation, as we mentioned earlier) "ugly freedoms." In her book, Anker considers the noxious aspects of freedom, which is generally regarded as an unmitigated good in American culture. Tersely stated, freedom more than occasionally "entails a dynamic in which practices of freedom produce harm, brutality, and subjugation as *freedom*."[17] Slavery is a key example in American history: the freedom of some Americans to own property subsumed certain other people—African people—who were treated *as property* and whose freedom was explicitly and legally stripped from them. She mentions political thinker and slave-owner John C. Calhoun, who held that

> slavery was necessary for freedom. It entailed the freedom of local control and citizens' self-rule. Slavery comprised the freedom to improve the land in an orderly fashion as well as the freedom of private property, as it authorized white property owners to use the labor of their Black human property largely as they decided. Slavery was the basis for free white institutions, and it provided his fellow enslavers the freedom of mastery, prosperity, and leisure, including the leisure to write treatises of liberty.[18]

This is another instance of conflicting freedoms, in which the freedoms of enslaved black people—who were not viewed as fully human at all—were sacrificed for the freedoms of slaveholding white people. She also names the freedom to lease one's property to a renter as a relationship of ugly

[17] Anker, *Ugly Freedoms*, 9.
[18] Anker, *Ugly Freedoms*, 4.

freedom, which American law has sought to moderate with "renter's rights" legislation. In his critical analysis of free speech and the First Amendment, Stanley Fish retells a shocking example of the weaponization of freedom. A leading figure of the 1977 neo-Nazi march in Skokie, Illinois, Frank Collin,

> boasted that his strategy was to use the First Amendment "against the Jew." He counted on the amendment as a cover for his efforts to inflict damage, a damage vividly described by one of his followers: "I hope they're terrified … because we're coming to get them again. I don't care if someone's mother or father or brother died in the gas chambers. The unfortunate thing is not that there were six million Jews who died. The unfortunate thing is that there were so many Jewish survivors."[19]

To drive home their point, the marchers carried signs demanding "Free Speech for White People," as if White People were somehow deprived of freedom and Black people did not deserve it.

We could add the freedom of management to hire labor and thus control the terms of employment in regard to wages, hours, working conditions, and the very opportunity to work (ripped from workers when jobs are "offshored" or businesses are "downsized" or "right-sized"). In earlier days in some parts of the country, "company towns" compromised the freedoms of laborers by compelling them to rent their houses, buy their food, and obtain all of their other services from the same company that provided their jobs. One more example that observers have highlighted is the freedom of modern families to work outside the home and to enjoy their leisure, which is purchased on the backs of underpaid and precarious (and often foreign if not undocumented) housekeepers, nannies, cooks, gardeners, and other "help" who can barely afford to keep their own homes and families—and if undocumented, are afforded none of the protections of regular workers and can be deported at any time.

Anker also recognizes a second kind of ugly freedom, by which she means the sorts of freedoms exercised by disadvantaged or oppressed peoples that are discouraged and condemned by the dominant and "decent" segments of society. This "second valence" of ugly freedoms—what we might construe as freedoms that the society wishes they would not practice—includes resistance and protest, adaptation through "gamesmanship, sex, and theft," the creation of alternative and parallel social systems (perhaps like gangs), and diverse "self-destructive"

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[19] Fish, *The First: How to Think about Hate Speech, Campus Speech, Religious Speech, Fake News, Post-Truth, and Donald Trump*, 31.

behaviors of the very sort that Mill insisted the government had no right to stop.[20] One could think of the urban African American culture described by Carol Stack in her classic *All Our Kin* as a window on second-valence ugly freedoms.[21] What mainstream society castigated as a "broken family" and a "culture of poverty"—single motherhood, temporary sexual partnerships, sharing of property, and swapping of childcare—were, in Stack's estimation, "strategies for survival" and reasonable expressions of freedom to cope with difficult living conditions, *many of those conditions generated by the ugly freedoms of mainstream society*.

A second paradox, and one of the uglier sides of freedom as stressed by Bidney, is the chronic "failure to differentiate clearly between self-destructive abuses of liberty and life-promoting uses of liberty."[22] In a word, *freedom can be self-destructive*. Of course, in Mill's highly libertarian view, the government or society has no authority to restrain citizens' self-destruction, even if it has an interest to do so. Nevertheless, Bidney's and Anker's points raise the deeper issue of the price we pay and the pain we suffer for freedom. At the most superficial level, my freedom may injure me (and the world) through overconsumption (and consequent obesity and weight-related medical conditions), personal debt, pollution, environmental degradation, etc. At a much more profound level, though, freedom itself can be burdensome, hurtful, indeed objectionable.

No one made the case more bluntly than Erich Fromm in his chilling 1941 *Escape from Freedom*. Fromm was one of many mid-century scholars who were stunned by the rise of fascism and authoritarianism, particularly in societies where democracy was presumably advancing if not secure. More troubling, a large percentage of citizens seemed to endorse or choose fascist/authoritarian leaders; after all, Mussolini and Hitler attained office legally through the ballot. Fromm reckoned that, although "European and American history is centered around the effort to gain freedom from the political, economic, and spiritual shackles that have bound men," the consequences were not as desirable as philosophers and revolutionaries expected.[23] Freedom from church and state, the aspiration of freedom fighters everywhere, shattered social bonds and dissolved age-old truths. Surely, the free person was "more independent, self-reliant, and critical" but simultaneously "more isolated, alone, and afraid."[24] For the citizen of modernity this social and intellectual isolation, Fromm

[20] Anker, *Ugly Freedoms*, 16.
[21] Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*.
[22] Bidney, "The Varieties of Human Freedom," 21.
[23] Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 17.
[24] Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 124.

concluded, "is unbearable and the alternatives he is confronted with are either to escape from the burden of his freedom into new dependencies and submission, or to advance to the full realization of positive freedom which is based upon the uniqueness and individuality of man."[25] Demonstrably, many twentieth-century (and early twenty-first-century) members chose the former, which is frankly easier and arguably more reassuring, and its most virulent form was (and is) surrendering and attaching to a demagogue and autocrat, a populist savior who promises meaning, order, and "greatness" while stroking the wounded pride of the declining or humiliated nation or its forgotten majority.

Interestingly but not surprisingly, another passage in *The Brothers Karamazov* has received less attention than the fretful question about the permission to do anything. In the fifth chapter, titled "The Grand Inquisitor," Dostoevsky through the Inquisitor asserted that

> nothing has ever been more insupportable for a man and a human society than freedom….In the end, they will lay their freedom at our feet, and say to us, "Make us your slaves, but feed us…." They will marvel at us and look upon us as gods, because we are ready to endure the freedom which they have found so dreadful and to rule over them—so awful it will seem to them to be free. But we shall tell them that we are Thy servants and rule over them in Thy name.

At least Dostoevsky and Fromm offered people an escape from the affliction of freedom. For existentialist thinkers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus—who lived through World War II and its disorienting disillusions—there was, as Sartre put it in the title of one of his works, no exit. Sartre diagnosed humanity as *condemned to be free*, without any option other than to make a decision (literally, "cut-off/from") and to chart a course. One could, hypothetically, hand the decision-making over to another party, but paradoxically that was still a decision, and disappointingly it still did not solve the problem or absolve the responsibility: one had to choose *which* demagogue and autocrat to bow to, and even the most totalitarian regime could not make every choice for you. Prostrating to a god him/her/itself saddled abject believers with the burden of interpretation and application, desperately searching for a verse in scripture or a model in history to obey or emulate. Freedom then is understood as the congenital defect of humanity and all sentient beings, and religion is no relief.

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[25] Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, viii.

The third paradox, a source of the others, is the relation and tension between freedom and what we might variously call structure, rules, order, law, or society itself. A tradition stretching from Rousseau through Marx, and equating church and state with "society," posits society as the chains that bind (in positive and negative senses) otherwise and naturally free persons. In the ideology of absolute and uncompromising freedom rampant in the United States, any kind of obstruction of individual action is unfreedom at best and despotism at worst, even something as inoffensive and beneficial as wearing a mask during a pandemic; it is all "treading on me," intolerable to those who would "live free or die." This kind of freedom that Americans valorize is not only individuating but also atomizing and ultimately anti-social (which, for some people, is the point).

According to the *New World Encyclopedia* entry on freedom, scholars distinguish between freedom and *license*, that is, "anything goes": "In the modern world many people mistake license for freedom and become angry when they are censured for being selfish, rude, irresponsible and immoral."[26] This includes actions that are patently bad for the actor as well as for neighbors, compatriots, and the planet. Friedrich von Hayek, a dean of modern libertarianism, elevated freedom above all other virtues including happiness, arguing that freedom might make us (or those around us) miserable but was worth it nonetheless. Clive Hamilton indeed dubbed such an attitude *the freedom paradox*. However, he also counseled that "a certain level of social and psychological maturity is needed if we are to make proper use of the liberties that have been won."[27]

Maturity is one way to express it. Another is discipline. In their essay on freedom across cultures, Moises Lino e Silva and Huon Wardle declare that freedom (they use the word *autonomy*, literally self-rule) "is as much a mode of self-discipline as it is a rejection of external rule."[28] Aristotle himself taught that discipline facilitates freedom rather than negating it. It is a truism, but no less true, that structure or discipline makes free action possible: without the rules of grammar, there would be no free speech (or any intelligible speech), and without the rules and standards of, say, ballet, dancers would not be able to express themselves freely through dance.

If it is true that structure and order, even the oft-despised "society," enable freedom as much as they constrain it, it is equally so that freedom depends on other factors that are often neglected or denied. Two of these factors are money and power on the one hand and resources and

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[26] *New World Encyclopedia*, "Freedom."
[27] Hamilton, *The Freedom Paradox: Towards a Post-Secular Ethics*, 18.
[28] Lino e Silva and Wardle, "Testing Freedom: Ontological Considerations," 18.

technologies on the other. As the case of Russian *volya* illustrated, people with the wherewithal have degrees of freedom that poorer citizens lack (and they can—and liberally do—indulge that wherewithal in ugly freedoms). Likewise, in a depressing study of young Americans, Fred Alford discovered that most "define freedom as the possession of money and power" and were comparatively uninterested in highfalutin principles like freedom of speech.[29] Consequently, in the land of the free, few of them felt very free: "I have a right to do anything I want, anything that's legal anyhow," one subject confessed, "But I can't *do* anything I want. That takes more than freedom. Freedom is concerned with my rights. What I get to do with them depends on how much money and power I can get."[30]

Anker tells another story of the unequal distribution of freedom. During a previous drought in California, rich inhabitants refused to reduce their water consumption since, they contended, their *ability to pay* for water guaranteed their *freedom to use* water. Anker calls this "consumptive sovereignty," the attitude that those who can afford it are free to take whatever they want from the world, public good be damned.[31] Such an ugly freedom denies—or just doesn't care—that others without the means cannot make the same choices and thus do not have the same freedom; in fact, it literally takes water out of their neighbors' mouths. It is freedom but selfish, privileged, and irresponsible freedom. It conveys the message, to paraphrase George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, that all of us are free but some are freer than others.

Along with the money and power to choose certain courses of action, the available resources and technologies open new avenues of freedom. As Maggie Nelson chides us, much of our modern freedom and the democracy that sustains it depend on abundant cheap oil.[32] Or to be more precise and thorough, such freedom depends on oil, the internal combustion engine, affordable automobiles, and the national highway system. Certain freedoms are simply not available until the technical means emerge to create them. Women became freer to control their reproduction once the birth control pill was invented (and that freedom will be severely reduced as abortion clinics disappear from the landscape). Cars and apartments gave young people more freedom to date and explore premarital sex. Medical knowledge and technology grant us the freedom to extend life (and force us to confront the decision to end life by "pulling

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[29] Alford, *Rethinking Freedom: Why Freedom Lost Its Meaning and What Can Be Done to Save It*, 1.

[30] Alford, *Rethinking Freedom*, 12.

[31] Anker, *Ugly Freedoms*, 156.

[32] Nelson, *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint*.

the plug"), to resist infectious diseases, to donate our organs or receive organ donations, and many more—also opening abundant new moral dilemmas. Tomorrow's advances and discoveries will undoubtedly provide new vistas of freedom, like the freedom to migrate to another planet or to clone ourselves or our loved ones (again, if we have the cash).

Recalling Anker's despicable example of irresponsible freedom, another way to think about not the *limits* but the *contours* of freedom is in terms of responsibility, even dare we say obligation and duty. Bidney believed that "the right to freedom in the modern state is based on considerations of justice and responsibility to the public good."[33] I am not so sure that is true, other than as an abstract ideal. All the same, whether or not freedom expects or demands any responsibility to the public, it does unavoidably expect and demand responsibility of us. Nietzsche asked and answered the central question: "For what is freedom? That one has the will to assume responsibility for oneself."[34] But responsibility for oneself is only half—or much less than half—of the issue. Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas insisted that *both freedom and responsibility* characterize the human condition, that responsibility is not just responsibility to self but *responsibility to others*, and that such responsibility is the very *source and form of freedom*. Interpersonal responsibility, social responsibility, "does not limit but promotes my freedom, by arousing my goodness. The order of responsibility … is also the order where freedom is ineluctably invoked. It is thus the irremissible weight of being that gives rise to my freedom."[35] Indeed, in the strongest possible language, Levinas asserted that not only my freedom but my *self*, my *being*, is produced by being-with-others, that the person does not entirely *exist* independent of and prior to responsible social interaction.

Levinas can perhaps be forgiven for waxing a bit theistic about freedom and responsibility to others. For him, his god is the ultimate other, the Absolute Other, the personification of otherness. But we do not need to summon a god to understand otherness, and the god-lens may not be the best way to understand it anyhow. Gods, at least anything vaguely like the Christian or Abrahamic god, do not need us, and we have no immediate responsibilities to him/her/it/them, certainly none that affect his/her/its/their existence. In classical Christian theology, its god is entirely self-sufficient and without needs (except perhaps for adoration and occasional burnt meat). Besides, if ethics—using freedom responsibly and using responsibility freely—is the essence of the human condition for

[33] Bidney, "The Varieties of Human Freedom," 22.
[34] Kaufman, *The Portable Nietzsche*, 542.
[35] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, 200.

Levinas, Kierkegaard's analysis above demonstrates that gods are not bound by ethics nor by responsibility to humans or other creatures (after all, Shakespeare and the ancient Greeks believed that the gods kill us for their sport). For humans, the only other we require to complete our humanity is another human—or even another creature, like a cat or dog—with whom we can and must enter a responsible relationship.

We have reached the supreme paradox, which brings us full circle to the end of this introduction and onward to the chapters of the book: if we are free, *how do we choose what we do with that freedom, and why*? Let us take Mill's two primary individual/personal freedoms (other than the freedom to meet and assemble), which he described as freedom of thought and freedom of taste/pursuit. The question is, why does one think this or that, why does one have a taste for and pursue this or that? Freedom is often read as autonomous (self-ruling) action, as choice and decision without external determination, but on what basis does one choose this action or decision over another? And what rule does one dictate to oneself? We accepted earlier that freedom does not equal license, or what we might more forcefully call anomie (no-rule), anarchy, or libertinism, doing whatever we feel like and whatever our base and animal impulses drive us to do. So freedom is always to some minimal extent self-limiting; to rule oneself is *to rule out some choices for and some facets of the self*. Further, though, the idea that freedom means and could ever mean complete liberation from external forces is a pipe dream, and not an especially pretty one. In fact, Lino e Silva and Wardle remind us that one possible etymological source of the word "liberty" is primitive Indo-European *leudh-*, people, belonging to a people, growing up in a community (reminiscent of Russian *svoboda*). "From this viewpoint," they reason, "liberties derive from growing with, and hence having rights in, a community."[36]

The fact is that personal freedom and interpersonal relationships and responsibilities are not in conflict but are mutually dependent and co-constitutive. We are not, as some romanticists sing, born free but become free as we grow in subjectivity (as a subject and not an object, as a being with its own will and perspective) and intersubjectivity (in reciprocal relations of knowledge, action, and care). Clifford Geertz made the point a half-century ago that humans are incomplete creatures, unfinished animals, who are completed and constructed out of external public resources (culture) through participation in a group (society).[37] In the process of *enculturation*, cultural beliefs and values are internalized by

[36] Lino e Silva and Wardle, "Testing Freedom: Ontological Considerations," 17.
[37] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 46.

individuals, furnishing their capacity to act *freely and responsibly*. Indeed, the word "education" (*ex-,* out + *ducere*, to lead) derives from roots that evoke guidance and preparation for participation in society, and the German word for education, *bildung*, still more overtly suggests the social construction or building of the free and responsible, the free-responsible, person. This is why Levinas insisted that the intersubjective and social dimension be incorporated in philosophical accounts of human knowledge and action, in contrast to the standard portrait of the solitary and self-made knower and actor.

So the free individual is the being who has learned to be free and has learned what to do with that freedom. Put another way, our autonomy or self-rule is decisively (and paradoxically?) informed by others, and this is as true for theists as for atheists; the only real difference is that atheists do not include a god or supernatural other. As philosopher Susan Wolf opined, reason or the ability to think well and logically and to arrive at true knowledge and good values (whichever those are!) is one basis for our autonomous choices, but reason is allegedly objective, universal, and thus *external* and in a way compulsory—even if the free person chooses to act *unreasonably*, that is, in disregard of the true and the good.[38] Closer to what we have been discussing is Wolf's second basis for freedom, namely one's own true self or values, but again, we have just established that a "self" and its values are social constructions and therefore products of the enculturation/education/*bildung* process, not only formal schooling but every experience in which we interact with others and the world. In other words, *by the time the free individual is ready to choose and decide, to act autonomously, she is already a product of external forces*, namely society and culture (including, for most, religion). Succinctly, most (if not all) of our individual tastes and pursuits, our values, wants, and ideas *are acquired*—we are not the author of them—and they are acquired during, through, and from social interaction. René Girard said roughly the same thing in his influential concept of "mimetic desire": humans imitate the desires of members of their society, which inevitably pits them against each other in competition for culturally-defined goods. Interestingly, he theorized that religion was not the cause of such mimesis but the effect of it, as a means to prevent society-destroying violence.[39]

Each "free" human being thus is the assemblage of ethically-oriented freedom-responsibility relationships with other people that

[38] Wolf, *Freedom within Reason*, 53–54.

[39] Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*. In Girard's theory, sacrifice is the original form of religion and is an outcome of mimetic desire, as the group's projection of hostility onto a scapegoat. Unfortunately, his hypothesis about sacrifice is totally wrong.

Levinas envisioned. Or as Oscar Wilde colorfully phrased it, "Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation"[40]—except instead of "most people" he should have said "all people" or "humanity essentially." (Wolf's third basis for action was pure arbitrariness, undetermined by either reason or one's self and culture. This would be sheer chaos, rendering the individual's behavior utterly unpredictable and trampling the freedoms of neighbors.)

No matter how you look at it, freedom never is and can never be utterly unfettered. Or better, the view that education, training, character-building and person-building, reason, truth, and society are somehow insufferable—and optional and removable—domination of the individual is an immature, irresponsible, and frankly foolish position. It is a selfish and isolating kind of freedom, a pugnacious kind of freedom, and one that can quickly devolve into what Alford characterized as paranoid and conspiratorial freedom that fears that "the government" is keen to take away your rights, your property, your guns, and maybe your life.[41] It is also the kind of freedom that partisans usurp as theirs and theirs alone, that their "enemies" (domestic, like liberal elites, and foreign, like Muslims and immigrants) allegedly seek to destroy, and that "has become a cudgel with which to pummel political opponents."[42] We find ourselves back in the domain of ugly freedoms, what Brown considered the appropriation, including in democracies, of freedom "for the most cynical and unemancipatory political ends."[43] She was harshest in her assessment of the propensity of right-wing parties and leaders to advocate "an increasingly narrow and predominantly economic formulation of freedom" and then to promote themselves as freedom's only real ally, indifferent to any appeal to justice or equality.[44] For such freedom fundamentalists and fetishists, concerns about justice, equality, social or environmental responsibility—what Nelson calls "caring"—only cramp their rights to use (and to monopolize) property, wealth, and power for their personal advantage. At its zenith, which is not beyond our perception, this radical freedom-ism "rejects the view that promotion of human wellbeing is self-evidently good and should be the principal objective of any society"; to the contrary, if "society" exists at all, it is only a playing field or game board on which individuals make their moves and either win

[40] Wilde, *De Profundis*.
[41] Alford, Rethinking Freedom, 6–7.
[42] Alford, *Rethinking Freedom*, 2.
[43] Brown, *States of Injury*, 5.
[44] Brown, *States of Injury*, 10.

or lose.[45] The outcome of this intensely egocentric and juvenile approach to freedom is, in Anker's estimation, *unfreedom*, which we observe in contemporary society as

> mass political disenfranchisement, experiences of being overpowered by the agentless forces of globalization, increasing economic in equality and financial precarity across populations, tightening norms for acceptable individual behavior, and decreasing political agency for influencing collective governing decisions. Unfreedom refers to contemporary experiences in which citizens are continually demobilized and demoralized, excluded from politics, and made into consumers rather than active players.[46]

In this light, Hamilton was probably correct that the kind of freedoms we celebrate today "have actively worked against our freedom to choose to lead more fulfilling lives."[47] The freedom of the market—the freedom to buy what we want—is a trivial freedom, which is often bought at the price of surveillance, invasion of privacy, and production of shoddy and dangerous if not toxic goods. Many of our freedoms, and the ways we use them, are narcissistic, avaricious, pestilent, and downright deadly to ourselves and others. (As I write, the United States has just finished a weekend with thirteen mass shootings, thanks at least in part to our vaunted "freedom to bear arms." Is that merely the price of freedom?)

One more word that might be added to the qualifications for freedom, along with maturity, discipline, and responsibility, is humility. In his treatise on ignorance and liberty, Lorenzo Infantino postulated that the justification of liberty "rests on the recognition of human ignorance" or what he called *fallibilism*, the fact that no one has perfect knowledge and that we all get it wrong sometimes.[48] Americans and free-marketeers are happy enough to file this charge against the government: central planning or socialism should not be allowed because no government official is wise enough to make such complicated decisions. (But are we any wiser or better informed as individuals? Aren't "government officials" individuals too?) As Infantino summarized it, "Improvement in the conditions of our lives, therefore, does not come from the omniscience attributed to some enlightened legislator or planner," whether this "privileged point of view," this perfect planner and decider is a president,

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[45] Hamilton, *The Freedom Paradox*, 7.
[46] Anker, *Orgies of Feeling*, 15.
[47] Hamilton, *The Freedom Paradox*, 8.
[48] Infantino, *Ignorance and Liberty*, n.p.

a Founding Father, a culture hero (such as Gilgamesh or Moses), or—although Infantino does not carry his argument this far—a god. Even a god cannot foresee every contingency or balance every interest; besides, whatever a god decides or ordains must be interpreted and applied through the eyes of the present. Infantino held that liberty itself "is bestowed by a normative network that marks the boundaries of our actions, indicates what we cannot do and leaves us free choice of how to act,"[49] in short, the rule of law and the equality of all citizens before that law. What he failed to grasp is that *humans put the law in place, that we* are *the lawgivers*. We also ultimately put truth in place; we are the truth-givers, and any notion of a monopoly of truth "destroys all systems of liberty."[50]

But what is a religion, at least the kind of religion we are most accustomed to like the Christian religion, other than a systematic monopoly of truth? We have reached the end finally, where we can engage with Dostoevsky's challenge to live without god(s), with these lessons in hand:

- freedom is complex, unstable, and malleable (didn't Daniel Dennett aver that "freedom evolves"?[51])
- freedom can be contradictory and paradoxical
- freedom in the form of decision and choice is unavoidable (we are, as the existentialists stated, condemned to be free)
- freedom can be ugly, self-serving, rapacious, even lethal—in other words, not every exercise or consequence of freedom is "good"
- freedom is not the absence or antithesis of order, structure, and rule and certainly not of society or culture—it is not anomie—but rather it is made possible and given shape by those forces
- freedom deployed positively requires much of us, including maturity, self-discipline, humility, and responsibility.

It is to responsibility that I want to return one last time. Wendy Brown condensed the paradox of freedom to the reality that "liberation from masters—god, history, or man—constrains us to an extraordinary responsibility for ourselves and for others."[52] That explains why she titled her book *States of Injury*, because freedom used irresponsibly can be and often is injurious to oneself and others. Freedom is a liberation but also a

[49] Infantino, *Ignorance and Liberty*, 31.
[50] Infantino, *Ignorance and Liberty*, 133.
[51] Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*.
[52] Brown, *States of Injury*, 24.

liability, since those who *can* choose *must* choose. If no man or woman, no historical force or "law of nature," and *no god* solves the riddle of humanity, then it is up to us to decide. We do not make such decisions in a vacuum; we are creatures and constructions of a particular culture, historical experience, and historical moment, overdetermined to choose some things and avoid others.

So the point is not, as Dostoevsky or his characters fretted, whether without god(s) all things are permitted. The point is that without god(s)—and, ultimately, even with god(s)—*humans do and must decide what is permitted*. We give ourselves the law and then conveniently forget that we are the authors of our own order. David Graeber and David Wengrow dissect freedom into three constituent parts. The first two are freedom to say no to authority and freedom to move, to get up and leave the system and society where we reside (to "get off the grid" if not to emigrate altogether). Both of these freedoms have eroded almost to the point of non-existence in the modern world, with the tightening of borders and the penetration of technologies of governmental knowledge and control. The third freedom is "the freedom to create new and different forms of social reality," to radically re-imagine how we live and what we value (Nietzsche's "revaluation of all values") and to put those alternatives into practice.[53] If we can actually do that—and in ways that are respectful of ourselves, our society, and our world—then the first two freedoms potentially come within our reach. But in order to extricate ourselves from old, tired, ill-fitting, and often pathological social realities, we must liberate ourselves from old, tired, ill-fitting, and often pathological authorities, including especially religions and their god(s).

The first step in this process, in theism-dominated societies, is atheism—saying no to god(s). The next step is liberatheism—getting free of god(s). The final step is not talking about god(s) at all.

[53] Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*, 525.

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