



“Download This!”

An array of awesome aphorisms

David Roman Churchtown

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1. The one basic struggle of humanity: between rationality and irrationality.
2. Voltaire: I am still a fan of his electrifying atmosphere.
3. Always seeing “historic parallels” indicates you don’t understand the nature of reality.
4. “Fucked at birth” is the reality for millions and millions, and if we don’t change that reality we are going to be “Fucked in the end”.
5. Evolution: the perfect mix of physical laws and historical accidents.
6. Studying economics: the road to permanent brain damage.
7. Best Brief Boris Johnson Branding: career psychopath (hat tip to John Crace).
8. I always thought the loss of adequate learning opportunities for the gifted without money was the greatest harm of the way the UK organizes education. However, sometimes I wonder whether giving a boost to self-confidence and the sheen of private education to the inherently dull and totally unimaginative, such as Nigel Farage, is actually not the more disastrous consequence.
9. As I cycle over bicycle paths set in meadows, I often notice other cyclists being annoyed when they have to slow down for sheep. You cycle through their living room and you get annoyed?
10. “Inalienable rights”: why should one organism amongst legions have such rights? However, every human being has just as many “rights” as every other.
11. Accepting that all the most important things in life are deeply affected by “the role of the dice” might be rather difficult at first, but turns out to be rather liberating later.

12. It has to be said: discussions hardly ever change minds. Our positions on important matters are fixed by the environment we grow up in. Intelligence only seems to have the auxiliary function of making ever more complex arguments to maintain the position originally taken. “What sheer unadulterated luck to have grown up with people that were actually right”, he stated unironically.
13. I am a “western consumer”; we have been conditioned to want as much as possible, as cheaply as possible. Can’t we see that we are thus responsible for climate change, mass extinction, exploitation of people and resources, and have been so for centuries?
14. The US: slave state for over two centuries and then apartheid for another. Is that not one of the most important things to know?
15. Stupidity kills, murders, mutilates, maims, devastates, damages, despoils and injures. But “unintelligent” and “stupid” are not the same thing.
16. Why do “these people” not do the right thing in society? But what if society and its institutions never worked for them?
17. In a certain sense the life of the “overbrained ape” feels unliveable. Just “be”, and the result is unbelievable.
18. The philosopher’s dilemma: be down to earth and right, and you will remain unknown as you are stating the obvious, but take things to their extremes and you will gain the adulation of fanatics and, being wrong, the opprobrium of those having common sense.
19. 18-12-2020: America’s future looks bleak, because it does not seem able to loosen the republican/plutocratic stranglehold on its institutions, levers of power, and yes, its very imagination. Unbelievably, these people are incumbents: Georgia senators Loeffler and Perdue are obscenely wealthy and heedlessly using the stock market to make even more money, while in office. They are also on the record as incredibly despicable.

20. Harold Evans is an inspiring example of the rare kind of journalist that allow us to still talk about the value of the “fourth estate”.
21. Cults: from brain worrying via brain washing to brain wasting.
22. Surprising that this still has to be said, but for the record: Freud was a rather good writer, a bad doctor and a terrible scientist. Psychoanalysis is the religion of a somewhat silly cult.
23. Religious texts contain so many exhortations, that statistically some must be worthwhile (though they have rather low batting averages). But still (from the Talmud): “We are not expected to complete the task, but neither are we free to desist.”
24. Philosopher: pretentious hardly intelligent o, so phony, howling error receptacle?
25. As we cannot seem to face certain stark realities inherent to the human condition, our self-delusions can make us our own worst enemies.
26. “Free speech” is an important basic principle to start with, but not an end in itself or an end to the problem of how to implement it.
27. The new (?) politician: disavowing responsibility for what goes wrong on their watch, while claiming credit for successes they have nothing to do with.
28. The vicar who tells me I am not welcome to tell his congregation that religion is a rather silly way of looking at the vastness of the universe, is NOT applying censorship.
29. Finally, something that can really be stated without any qualifications and with absolute certainty: Brexit is a disaster, and the Brexiteers are, and always were, either dumb, immoral or both.

30. Bob Dylan (freewheeling or freeloading?) versus Neil Young (“Ain’t singing for Pepsi, ain’t singing for Coke”); what a relief I consider Young a better artist...
31. Humanity drives one crazy, because it seems anyone, really anyone, can drive humanity crazy.
32. “Brainwashing”; the only kind of washing that makes you filthier...
33. The statistics regarding policing in the US are indeed “breath taking” (breathtakingly bad that is), but confidence is high: Hollywood and TV have a lot to answer for.
34. Fall 2020, and people are discussing whether prosecuting president T., when he has left office, would be harmful to democracy, destabilizing the country, and coming across as ‘vengeful’. The polar opposite is the case: Not prosecuting would be an egregious mistake, showing that the rich and powerful can be criminal and lawless, while the poor and powerless are subjected to merciless, draconian punishment. Decades of this kind of lawlessness (Nixon should never have been pardoned) has gnawed at the roots of democracy, so people will vote for “anybody but a normal politician”, giving us this president. Only exposing his rampant criminality, followed by legal punishment will begin to mend democratic confidence.
35. “Cosmetic politics”, having people that look different do exactly the same thing again and again, will only deepen societal scars. However, the acronym (severe cutaneous adverse reactions) should give us pause.
36. That the English consider The Spectator a quality journal tells you a lot about the standards of English journalism.
37. We are hardwired to be the centre of our universe. However, the universe has no centre, and if it had one, we would certainly not be it.
38. A.N. Wilson - Catholic “mess maker”.

39. One should always be willing to compromise, except for the few cases where one absolutely should not. Politicians, how you identify these will define your legacy.
40. Power and wealth are inseparable and, thus, extreme inequality and democracy are incompatible.
41. “L’homme est il bon?” (In honour of Moebius).
42. Most people I meet are rather decent, while most world leaders are heinous characters. Now I know both are not exactly unbiased samples, but certain character deficiencies seem to ease your way to the top. Could we alter democratic procedures to take that fact into account?
43. The parables in the bible are drab and uninteresting, however I have a weak spot for the parable of talents, mostly because it makes me feel bad.
44. The richest country in the world has a horrific prison swamp at its centre (remember, most people swallowed up are victims, not perpetrators).
45. Xi Jinping is becoming a “worthy” successor of Mao.
46. Racism is really a very stupid idea, as illustrated by the fact that we are universally racist.
47. When members of a cult do something atrocious (as they so often do) we invoke “brainwashing”, in that sense, and that sense only, all adherents to religions have an excuse.
48. I think the track record of Eton alumni in public life on its own should already bring about Eton’s immediate closure.
49. “Tradition” can never be an argument to retain something that is obviously wrong, but that is the traditional way of using it.

50. The whole discussion about the phrase “defund the police”; is there any possible description that people would not misconstrue so that they can get away with not doing what should be done? Or did this slogan indeed make it easy to (instinctively) interpret “defund’ as “abolish”? A naive alternative suggestion: “bring law to order”.
51. Beyond brilliance, bravura, and bliss: Barbara Hannigan in Benjamin Britten’s Les Illuminations.
52. What really characterizes America is its completely merciless “justice” for the weak, and the absence of justice for the powerful.
53. Is “Ich will doch nur dass ihr mich liebt” an accurate description of our most fundamental impulses?
54. In light of the inherent trade-offs in evolution and life, “absolute freedom” becomes a rather stupid concept.
55. Relegation of Religion, Royalty and Republicans (the American variety): steps towards a better future with Reason, Righteousness and Republics (the original variety).
56. The dynamics of power and principles: that is everything.
57. Evolution is not teleological, see exhibit number one: “Homo sapiens”.
58. The tell-tale sign of gifted writers: wanting to convey conflicting emotions and being able to do so.
59. Bolsonaro’s ecocide: accelerating destruction of the Amazon rainforest.
60. The vicious reasoning of capitalism: we cannot have basic income because then people would not work anymore and we cannot stop doing useless, destructive, things because of the loss of jobs associated.

61. Trying to justify the actions of your group by saying “but look what the others did” is a dead giveaway of immoral behaviour.
62. A minimum of imagination will make clear that for the super-rich moral bankruptcy is hard to avoid, and I am of course not talking about the large group that became extremely wealthy because of moral bankruptcy to begin with.
63. “Tories”: Totally Oriented Regarding Incinerating Equality in Society; aka “barbarian kleptocrats”.
64. Spin doctors and world wide webs: a horrifying combination.
65. Elon Musk versus Robert Reich: “that’s rich” versus “that’s right”.
66. Symphony number 1: Shostakovich, Walton, Brahms, Prokofiev, Sibelius...
67. Without individual integrity communities disintegrate.
68. Alas, religion teaches you not to trust your sense(s).
69. Unicorns, morally consistent evangelicals, environmentally friendly SUVs, and moderate Republicans...
70. “Money laundering”: why are so many people trying to clean up?
71. When you are young you have many flashes of insight and they stick with you, as you grow older, they become rare and fleeting. At least I think I thought so a moment ago...
72. Greed is the most corrosive of sins.
73. What is so difficult to understand about universal rights?
74. “Conservative”; it all depends on what you find worthy of conservation.

75. “Liberal”: indicating either the economic freedom to screw over the planet and every living thing on it, or the personal freedom to express, think and be. The two have absolutely nothing to do with each other.
76. After 4 years of a Trump wreck, more than seventy million people voted to repeat the experience: we surely are doomed.
77. Strange: getting money out of politics is the only road towards a creditable democracy.
78. If there is one thing I am certain about: the less you know the more certain you are. Yes, I know...
79. The Dow-Jones index measures a weighted average of greed and lunacy.
80. The “gig” (lower cast version) economy is only about unmitigated worker exploitation. GIG (capital version) stands for Getting Ill-begotten Gains. “Independent contractor”, you must be joking.
81. We often seek validation for our deepest held convictions in the flash of redeeming regret from those whose behaviour always went against all we stand for: that way madness lies.
82. FRUSTRATION: Far Right Utterly Shameless Tactics Revolving Around Totally Inactivating Open-minded New-borns. SOLUTION: Sound Outright Left-leaning Upbringing Towards Inherent Overflowing Nobility?
83. Prosecuting clearly criminal behaviour by politicians in power before you, is NEVER “partisan”, while not investigating or pardoning will only undermine democracy and the rule of law (Ford should never have pardoned Nixon).
84. Free enterprise is not a cost-free enterprise.
85. In the final analysis, personal integrity is the only safeguard of universal values.

86. “The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I’m from the government, and I’m here to help.” I am Satan and I approve this message.
87. Constitutional monarchies, with severely restricted roles for the monarch, are still a bad idea. They instill the notion that some citizens are “higher” than others by way of birth right, and they “bridge” between democracies and atrocious absolute monarchies, such as the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, giving ammunition to their apologists.
88. Eeeee, it is such a small step from appealing to appalling.
89. When it comes to human beings having a disastrous influence: how high on the list is Rupert Murdoch? His wealth percentile is a good place to start, but probably still represents an underestimate.
90. “Colonizing space” is pie in the sky, while we have a good earthly meal here; and what is worse, this vision gives some of us the notion that one can shit all over the dinner table.
91. China has much to justifiably complain about when we look at its historic treatment by western capitalism. But, taking back Hong Kong, retaining “production at all costs”, while completely crushing democracy and human rights is to emulate, not to repudiate.
92. Is part of the appeal of “letting the market decide” coming from the fact that you don’t have to think for yourself or make real choices and release yourself from responsibility? “Yes”, “No” or “Let the market decide”.
93. The great shame of our age: it is only for the powerless, while the powerful are shameless.
94. CPAC - Where stupidity and malice come to breed.
95. Why does the US struggle to be lawful? Because organizing justice according to free-market principles is incompatible with fairness.

96. Overstating it, politicians are either in it for ideals or for power. Alas, while you want the first ones, the latter ones are more effective in getting on top. Could incorporating sortition (look it up) improve democracy?
97. Atheists hold many things “sacred”: for instance, other people, art, science, literature and the common good.
98. No, “Darwinian economy” is not an accurate description of cutthroat capitalism, as the latter does not encompass cooperation, care or altruism. Please, read “The Descent of Man”, you shallow and superficial “thinkers”.
99. James Dyson: Air Bag or wind Bag?
100. As an “old white guy”, I am glad that Bernie Sanders shows that not all OWG’s are terrible. However, I must admit there are so many horrible exemplars in the public eye that I understand the common perception.
101. The eighties should be known as the “RT period of human history”, in which “RT” stands for “retrograde” or Reagan (yes, he really was the reactionary racist you thought he was)/Thatcher (brighter, but just as deluded). O, the damage this dominating duo did together, persisting till this day.
102. Don’t punish addicts, help them.
103. Come on America, stop being so relaxed about guns and uptight about drugs. Try it the other way around for a change...
104. EVERUNCAPITODI! (“Everything unregulated Capitalism touches, dies”): a battle cry for the ages.
105. The right is always wrong.
106. Capital punishment: a capital mistake.
107. Perfect Pleonasm: Repugnant Republican Reputation.

108. It is not Trump, the extreme pathological outlier, who gives rise to soul-crushing despair, it is his huge group of voters and enablers.
109. "Follow the money" does not explain all behaviour, but it explains quite a lot of bad behaviour.
110. Milton Friedman won the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences: one of the strongest arguments to show that this is not a real Nobel Prize and "Economic Sciences" is an oxymoron.
111. The ABC of the left: "Altruism is abundant"; "Bonding is better": "Caring is common" versus the EFG of the right: "Empathy is evil"; "Fascism is freedom"; "Greed is good".
112. If we will end up with future historians (and chances are getting slimmer by the day) the so-called "Chamber of Commerce" institutions will be seen for what they truly are: places celebrating the monotheism of money and ante-chambers of hell.
113. If criticizing policies of Israel is considered anti-Semitic, about half of its Jewish population would have to be thus classified.
114. One cannot have a rational "hierarchy of the arts", but personally I cannot but put Music (it deserves a capital) on top.
115. Gerrymandering not only redistricts, it also opens up avenues (to dictatorship, to be precise).
116. Karma as a metaphysical concept is nonsense, but as a guide for personal conduct, it serves as a reminder of the danger of Faustian bargains; every tiny dishonesty making the next one both more likely and bigger.
117. Trying to get money out of politics is like trying to get rid of airborne pathogens: just as healthy as it is difficult.

118. Irony? In some of the societal results Neo-Liberalism is indistinguishable from Neo-Fascism: the large majority of people are given only the illusion of power.
119. Economists, the only “scientists” who are too dumb to understand the second law of thermodynamics.
120. Large banks should be busted-up.
121. In science, one learns to distinguish facts from opinions, which is less easy than one might think. However, here are some objective facts: Lindsey Olin Graham, Newton Leroy “Newt” Gingrich, William Pelham “Bill” Barr, Rafael Edward “Ted” Cruz and Addison Mitchell “Mitch” McConnell are criminals, endangering the future of democracy and humanity.
122. Without stopping to always side-line people in favour of real redistribution of wealth and power (like Bernie Sanders or AOC), the Democrats leave the US open to a horrifying “Trumpian” resurgence.
123. Evolution has shown how to get intelligence fast: create a runaway process where problem-solving power is selected within the group, thus concomitantly making the group better at selecting problem-solving power.
124. When asked about climate-change Amy Coney Barrett answered “I’m certainly not a scientist”; if she would be asked about whether it is not dangerous to select members of the judiciary only because they support the ideology of the executive that selects them, as illustrated by, let’s say, Nazi Germany, she would probably demure: “I’m certainly not a historian”.
125. BANK CEO - Beyond Amoral Nasty Kleptocrat Creating Economic Ordeal?
126. Twitter, tweets, twats.
127. The Trump presidency of the last 4 years and the behaviour of the GOP over the last 40 have proven American exceptionalism: exceptionally evil.

128. Just to state the obvious: on balance religion is a source of evil, but true believers can be heartbreakingly good. Who does not feel their own many imperfections when compared to Martin Luther King or Sophie Scholl?
129. Everybody using the term “Darwinian economy” to describe cutthroat competition is completely unaware of what Darwin actually wrote and thought about (human) cooperation, and, even more detrimental, makes the possibility of educating about one the greatest scientific insights in schools everywhere, a bit slimmer.
130. The American Dream, “climbing to the top from the bottom” actually is the American Nightmare, stepping on everybody else along the way.
131. Pray tell, what praying ever did.
132. Again: the minimum requirement for a functional democracy constitutes of a well-educated, physically healthy population without large-scale poverty. Thus, affordable public schooling, healthcare and some kind of redistributive taxation are essential. Check party programs to see which of them are really committed to democracy.
133. Watching TV makes one journalistless.
134. The state of the fourth estate has contributed to our current state.
135. Equating all criticism of Israel with antisemitism might be an effective ploy, but the consequence is that the immoral policies of several Israeli governments towards the Palestinians cannot be openly commented upon. How will that help to resolve the conflict in a non-violent, just, way?
136. Religious UPbringing = Intellectual DOWNfall.
137. It is hard to estimate the amount of damage our innumeracy and fragile grasp of statistics has done, and is doing.

138. There is no problem of wealth creation, only a problem of wealth distribution. Greed (wanting more than your fair share) is at the root of almost all societal evils.
139. Genetics and modern science tell us that the reason certain groups do not fulfil their potential is to be found in societal structures: thus, the problem is us, not them (I clearly have a potential for self-righteousness).
140. The redemption of (the) Sundays: “when you’re coasting along and nobody is trying too hard”.
141. USA: stating that “The Republicans are not democrats” is more meaningful than one might think.
142. District system or equal representation? Just the many ways in which the first can be manipulated are disqualifying.
143. ACB - All Christian Berserk - Awful Churchgoing Bigot - Amy Coney Barrett?
144. AOC- All Outreaching Competency - Amazing Outgoing Cheerleader - Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez?
145. “We only use 10% of our brainpower”: a statement mostly made by people who use 0%.
146. “Sir Jim Ratcliffe, UK’s richest person and high-profile Brexiteer, has quit Britain for tax-free Monaco.” The rat leaves the white cliffs because his black soul has become too easily discernible.
147. Pascal’s wager: I bet you can see that it is really silly.
148. After more than 2000 years, the stoic ideal of “trying to understand the world, working together and treating everybody fairly and justly” is still unsurpassed (but of course, the difficulties come with applying the maxim in day-to-day reality).

149. How many public debates have been ruined by stupid ‘essentialists’, discarding useful terms, because they are fluid and cannot be absolutely defined? But also, how many public debates have been poisoned by dangerous ideologues, using useless terms, because they can be wielded as weapons though nothing in reality corresponds? Now distinguish between instances of both.
150. Humanity, more the pity, is much and much less rational than it considers itself.
151. Alas, I tend to position myself in “the party of one”: pure, principled, powerless.
152. Misers spread misery.
153. “The greatest country on earth”, hahahahahahaha.
154. When it comes to the hypocrisy of religion, American white evangelicals are unbeatable.
155. The pen is deadlier than the sword.
156. The three original sins of the USA: racism, religion and rapaciousness. And boy, they were synergistic!
157. Ethics: how to apply “absolute” principles to a messy reality.
158. Do not underestimate the destructive power of imaginary entities.
159. Getting older: from neurons to neuroffs.
160. Pity, “mankind” is not commutative (“kind man”)...
161. Everything has an expiration date (“the second law of thermodynamics dominates the first”).

162. Of the anarchists, the right-wing ones (also known as free-market capitalists) have done immeasurably more damage.
163. I would like to formulate this aphorism originally myself: “Power corrupts, absolute power absolutely”. What a shame, both its truth and its pithiness cannot be improved upon. Please people, prove me wrong (on content, not on form).
164. Companies and advertising agencies using “all-natural ingredients” as a selling point should be fined for allowing the disastrous misconceptions of vitalism to fester.
165. The ideal to strive for: a politician’s constituency is all of humanity.
166. Not only is constituency voting much less democratic than equal representation, but constituency voting plus gerrymandering equals dictatorship.
167. “Libertarian” or “Anarchist”; these people might think they are completely different, but their core belief is the same: let me act as if I am alone on the planet.
168. Of course, huge inequality hurts the “have-nots” most severely, but the possible psychological damage of growing up with extreme wealth and power should not be underestimated either, especially because the damaged will become parents in turn, perpetuating misery.
169. Alas, I cannot come up with anything better than: “To thine own self be true”.
170. All living creatures evolve, with the exception of creationists.
171. Interesting to see that some Russian internet sites are upholding the proud tradition of the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion”: still flooding the public domain with disgusting forgeries to completely derail humanity.

172. Though in power, right wing nut-jobs still complain about being bullied, and, surprisingly, they are correct: reality itself bites back.
173. The default position when meeting someone who voluntarily chose to study economics: they are either intellectually or morally flawed. You sometimes have to change your mind (when it is both).
174. Repeat after me: OMG, FMG (Facebook, Myanmar, Genocide).
175. Referring to yourself as “Palestinian” now can be experienced as being offensive to others. Can one overdose on irony?
176. No, the most lethal compounds are not “man-made”, but all concocted by organisms. Nature is not your fairy god-mother.
177. The most dangerous political leaders have a “feet of clay” personality, i.e. outer confidence and power masking deep inner uncertainty. This also explains why, on average, male politicians are more threatening than female ones.
178. In science, occasionally, old insights are replaced by new ones, in philosophy the same (whether true or false) are just reappearing in new guises.
179. Shocking to hear: a compulsion to pun can be a sign of brain damage. I already started when I was still really puny...
180. Something is nagging me: my brain is more intelligent than I am.
181. “Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.” — Lev Tolstoy. But: “Is it possible to improve on perfection?” — The Kid.
182. Our “can do” attitude: as soon as we develop a new technology, we use it. This lies at the root of untold misery.

183. To demonise by the dynamics of discussion: for every just cause you can always find people expounding them in a horrible way. Let's invite (only) them! Also known as: modern journalism.
184. Facebook logic: invoking "free speech" to enable the end of free speech.
185. "GOD", the most useless term ever invented.
186. Context is everything.
187. Afraid of dying? Talk to a true believer and you'll start welcoming it, only not in the way they intended.
188. The love of wine is the only possible justification for alcohol consumption. Well apart from beer, port, eau de vie, and a lot of others, that is.
189. I love most people, but from a safe distance.
- 189a. We suddenly need extra context: That "AA" (aphorism above) was written before the pandemic.
190. If the future holds a human civilization their historians will describe Rupert Murdoch and News Corporation as a criminal (enterprise).
191. We probably have no future. Thank goodness our predictions are so often wrong.
192. Our intelligence came about as the, in evolutionary terms, extremely rapid result of some kind of positive feedback loop; is the concomitant lack of balance the reason why we are not clever enough to save ourselves?
193. In most instances of the application of the death penalty I can give many rational arguments that prove it to be unjust in the specific case, but to be honest, it just fills me with a deep emotional abhorrence, every goddamn time.

194. Want to explain the term “Astroturf”? Just mention that, surprisingly, tea can grow without roots (but at least it is still a plant).
195. “The end justifies the means” is probably the worst possible justification, as using it almost always just stresses how indefensible the means are.
196. The Trias Politica is a “necessary condition” for Democracy. Alas, the mind-set of many American Republicans has shown it not to be a “sufficient condition”.
197. What is an oxymoron? “The religious right”. What is a moron? A religious right-winger deprived of oxygen.
198. I have to make a very emotional statement: “Only science and rationality can save us”.
199. The limits to exponential growth: you only see where it will end when it is too late (for the mathematically challenged: look it up).
200. Seeing that every conceivable god-like creature has to be incredibly evil, the GOP (God’s Own Party) starts to make sense.
201. “All lives matter”: both absolutely right and absolutely wrong. You can figure it out, can’t you?
202. Voting Republican to improve society is like watching Fox to improve your mind.
203. From an open letter to Fox News: “The basic purpose of news organizations is to discover and tell the truth.” That’s News to Fox!
204. Not clever enough for Mathematics? Not curious enough for Science? Not industrious enough for Law? Not gifted enough for Art? Not emphatic enough for Medicine? Not tenacious enough for Engineering? Economics!

205. Free Market Capitalism = FMC = Fuck Mankind for Capital.
206. Democracy and expertise are not at odds: expertise allows informed decision by the non-experts (most of us by far).
207. As a white male, who thinks of himself as emphatic and not unimaginative (hey, I think of myself as emphatic!), a month of living as a woman, or black, or both, would certainly still be absolutely shocking.
- 207a. Update: if you reach the end of the month...
- 207b. Update on the "Update": a black person wouldn't have needed that update.
208. Democracy does NOT simply mean: "the majority decides", which is why referenda are political tools for which, in most instances, the drawbacks outweigh the advantages.
209. "RACE" = Reliably Accessed Conceptual Eyesore.
210. O, Washington! Exitus acta NON probat.
211. An aphorism a day keeps Alzheimer's at bay.
212. "Supreme court"; always remember "supreme" is an adjective, not a substantive, word form.
213. Far right: their level of competence is inversely related to the level of certitude and sense of entitlement.
214. Libertarianism = a lethal lack of imagination.
215. The half-wit is more dangerous than the nitwit (exception: Donald Trump).
216. He has a fine choice of books and chooses not to read them (in honour of Constantijn Huygens).

217. Religion: the road to hell.
218. Billions of people: if you love children, don't have them.
219. Think-tanks, where thinking tanks.
220. Even Goya's series "The Disasters of War" did not reduce conflict. Thus, probably nothing will.
221. The strength of your convictions is not a measure of their correctness (Frau Goebbels and her children).
222. O, irony; the "Citizens United" ruling has degraded the meaning of "citizen" and tore society apart.
223. "Corporations are people too"; a succinct expression of moral collapse.
224. Members of parliament in the UK refer to each other as "Right Honourable", which is odd. They are not often honourable and even less often right. Please use the odd term such that you get even!
225. Arguments in favour of "intelligent design": the best examples of bad faith reasoning.
226. I tell you in good faith: "there is only bad faith".
227. Deeply felt is not deeply known.
228. Some artists feel very modern, like Voltaire or Goya. Alas, these are not optimists.
229. "Homo sapiens": animal species, completely out of its depth.
230. If there is still somebody around to read this in 500 years, I would: a) be surprised; b) urge that person to find better reading material.



The social animal and socialism.

David Roman Churchtown

Detrimental ideological prejudices.

A few weeks ago, I was reading Sebastian Haffner's "The Meaning of Hitler", a relatively old analysis, as it was written more than forty years ago. I thought it a rather well-written and thoughtful book, that is, until I was about 50 pages in, when the author starts discussing the "socialism" of Hitler's national-socialism. The remarks made over two pages perfectly illustrate some of the detrimental ideological prejudices that plague the modern discourse up to this very day. I will paraphrase what I consider the author's offences below, while at the same time acknowledging here that most of the rest of the work is a rather good description of a terrible subject.

So, what does the author say in the context of Hitler's national-socialism? He states that the socialism part was an important, integral part of Hitler's approach, because the dictator organized society in such a way that the populace had to take part in all kinds of organizations instituted by the state, from early on in life. He draws correct parallels with the same kind of organization in communist east Germany (the so-called DDR). He then implies that both these systems are instances of "socialism" (implicitly linking it to dictatorship). To be able to do this he makes some highly disputable claims. Let's review them.

First, he has to undermine the common notion of socialism as a system under which everything revolves around wresting control of the "means of production" from a privileged class (as defined by Marx; we will get to him later). But that fair distribution of power and wealth is the essence of socialism. The crux of this sleight of hand is seen when Haffner later on says that the opposition "capitalism versus socialism" is either incorrect, or at least less important than "individualism versus socialism". Wow, that is some kind of "umwertung aller werte". One redefines socialism by taking away the liberating force of giving individuals fair chances and opportunities in society, just tacks on the complete control of ever-present societal organizations and "ho, presto" the original, fundamentally true "individualism versus totalitarianism" has been magically supplanted by "individualism versus socialism". And the nice thing about prejudices? I don't think that the fundamentally

decent Haffner was aware of what he did in this passage. These kinds of filters keep pestering his analysis. Later on, while playing the parlour game of “right” and “left” in politics, he states that he does not find Hitler to be a representative of the extreme right and distinguishes between the fascist ideas of Mussolini and the national-socialist ideas of Hitler, stating that Hitler did not strive for a class-state, with layers of “natural” rulers. But might one not say that the extreme hierarchy of one absolute ruler and completely right-less subjects is the culmination of a layered society? And what to think of Hitler’s most idiotic and disgusting trait: racism? Is that not the most extreme pseudo-scientific embodiment of hierarchy? Of note, nationalism is, in essence, also completely irrational, hierarchical thinking (which does not mean that patriotism can never be a force for good). When comparing Germany in the eighties of the last century with the Weimar Republic Haffner states that a major shift has been the “democratization of the antidemocratic right” in the form of the CDU. In passing he states that this was just as important as the shift of the socialist SPD, thirty years before. Thirty years before! Might this not have triggered some reflection that maybe socialism, with its stress on equal distribution of wealth and (political) power is easily compatible with, and possibly a strong force for a democratic, just society? For those interested in reading Haffner’s book: it also is a window on the western worldview in the eighties, but because of its subject matter, still very hard to take. Alas, even if we are able to make a much more just and less violent future, it will never be able to eradicate what went on before. Remember the multitude of victims, for instance by listening to Weinberg’s gripping Symphony No. 21, subtitled “Kaddish”.

Reclaiming “Socialism”.

The rest of this essay will deal with the constant vilification of the term socialism (which should be released of its scare-quotes), why this occurs (the reader can guess), and what aspects of its history make it such an easy target (the spurious link with national-socialism discussed above being a first example). To be able to do so I have to spell out what I consider to be the basic characteristic of socialism (which I already hinted at above): to strive for a fair society with basic possibilities for every human being to fulfil their potential (which means the right to health, housing and education for everybody). This implies some restrictions on individual wealth (which, as it often implies claims regarding ownership of parts

of our common environment, are untenable to begin with anyway). Also, a well understood socialism should operate on the insight that while individuals differ, group differences, whether defined by “race” (whatever that may mean), nationality or class, are only superficial (which is, scientifically speaking, beyond doubt). With “superficial” I do not mean that there are no outspoken differences: e.g. the poor are less educated and much unhealthier than the rich, but such differences are purely the result of societal effects, and not of intrinsic differences between those groups at the outset.

An important aside: “the fulfilling of potential”, mentioned above, implies freedom of expression and political liberties. In as far as there would be a tension between democracy and socialism, my personal inclinations would be for the primacy of the first. However, I should stress that (as anybody could have predicted) “free-market capitalism” is turning out to be, and always was, the real threat to democracy.

The tragedy of Marx and Marxism.

In this part, I am going to skirt details and paint only the broadest outlines. However, I think a description of Marx as an uneasy amalgam of journalist/activist on the one hand and philosopher on the other might be illuminating. The journalist noticed incredible discrepancies in wealth, power and liberty between individuals, and as a journalist, often analysed society as he found it realistically and accurately (such that quite a lot of his descriptions are still apt today). Society, Marx felt (as most normal human beings would), was fundamentally unjust, giving birth to the activist. But, because of the ever-increasing examples of real scientific insight and the lure of all-encompassing metaphysical philosophies (which were very much part of the permeating intellectual landscape of the time, and, alas, still are), he tried to devise a complex theory to describe how that societal imbalance came about and why this had to change. Note that the “had to” changed from a moral imperative to an outcome based on some kind of natural law. This build-in dichotomy is the original sin of Marxism. Of course, there are no “natural laws of society and history” as anybody who understands something about complexity and the role of chance must be able to quickly apprehend. However, German philosophy had entered the post-Kantian phase of completely irrational, unfounded, metaphysics characterized by Hegel and his followers, which gave us the “dialectics” of seemingly important,

overarching, and recurring categories of thesis, antithesis and synthesis (a kind of culmination obtained by integrating the other two). With Marx, this shapeshifted into the idea that the development of capitalism, via a necessary “dictatorship of the proletariat” had to lead to a class-less state. Which is, not to put too fine a word on it, utter nonsense. Here we can find one of the sources of so many of the tragedies associated with Marxist experiments: the misplaced, cult-like certainty leading to atrocities. Marxism thus became a cult/ideology/religion (and for me, in essence the terms can be used interchangeably). One of the tragedies resulting from this is that the spurious theoretical framework dragged down (and most of the time actively hurt) the basically decent and rational impulses and analyses. This makes, what I now will just refer to as “social-democracy”, much harder to implement. Why was the framework (apart from being unfounded) such a disaster? I’ll briefly discuss that next.

Demonization and examples of vilification.

It is abundantly clear that when trying to rectify large imbalances in power and wealth, the powerful stand to lose. Thus, the incarnation of justified demands as Marxism has been one of the greatest gifts to those who happily exploit others. Firstly, they can easily point out the logical weaknesses of the ideology, and via their connection to the framework discredit the basic impulses as well. Secondly, there are a string of horrible examples of so-called “socialist” experiments (to name but a few: The Soviet Union with Lenin and, even worse, Stalin; China with Mao; Cambodia with Pol Pot), which can be easily used to vilify the term. Let’s look at the US for example. Whatever justified and utter rational demand people make (higher, progressive, and/or estate taxes; the right to unionize; the right to healthcare and education delivered by society as a whole), giving an inch is weaponized as incremental steps towards enslavement of a so-called free society: beware, this all reeks of socialism! But in fact, only the wealthy, powerful elite remains free, while the large majority is severely restricted in the choices they have. Even the many examples of efficient, superior, “socialist-light”, solutions in Scandinavia and western Europe are constantly painted in the bleakest way possible. How deeply dishonest this position is, can be illustrated by the fact the most plutocratic of both US parties (do I really have to point out that I am talking about the GOP here?), while stating that the socialist threat would lead to the loss of democracy, has been steadfast in

suppressing the votes of the poor and specific racial groups at home for decades. At this specific moment, the fact that the wealth and power elite (and I want to stress here that their elite status is clearly limited and does not include claims to superior intellect, morals or artistic merit; far from it) owns and weaponizes most of the media, is endangering our very existence. Denying or downplaying climate change and ecological collapse for short term gain also follows from ignoring the notion of interconnectedness and solidarity which are central to the idea of socialism.

Lions and unicorns.

After finishing writing the previous section, I was reminded of the fact that George Orwell wrote rather brilliantly about non-dogmatic socialism. I decided to read “The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius”, which he wrote while England (Great Britain) was under German air attack in February 1941, and Germany had not attacked the Soviet Union yet (which Hitler would do in June of that year). This is a highly enlightening extended essay, not only because it is the work of a gifted writer, but also because we can look at his analysis with the hindsight of almost 80 years of further historic development. It goes without saying that he was wrong about quite a few things, but, surprisingly, he was spot on about the most essential points of his analysis. Because I am interested in the “necessity of socialism” here, I’ll only quote the passages that are relevant for my own line of reasoning, while I’ll exclude many interesting aspects of his analysis. For those who want to broaden their horizons: go directly to the source.

Orwell states: “What this war has demonstrated is that private capitalism – that is, an economic system in which land, factories, mines and transport are owned privately and operated solely for profit – does not work. It cannot deliver the goods.” Free market capitalism is clearly found wanting when it has to achieve important goals outside of its immediate objective of personal wealth creation. Ever increasing inequalities and the destruction of natural resources (taking the role of Nazi Germany as the menace from outside in the here and now) cannot be solved within that system. Who could doubt it? Wars (Weinberg’s Symphony No. 18: “War. There is no word more cruel”), probably have very few positive side effects, but they sure focus the mind. Another quote: “War is the greatest of all agents of change. It speeds up all processes, wipes out minor distinctions, brings realities to the surface. Above all, war brings it home to the individual that he

is not altogether an individual.” The great irony here is that war, which is often seen as the culmination of a struggle for life, shows up the inherent nonsensical nature of “social Darwinism” (see below) as it is a struggle between groups and not between individuals. At the deepest level, we are social animals and a just socialist state would reflect that. Another important passage, which I cannot resist quoting in full, defines socialism: “However, it has become clear in the last few years that “common ownership of the means of production” is not in itself a sufficient definition of Socialism. One must also add the following: approximate equality of incomes (it need be no more than approximate), political democracy, and abolition of all hereditary privilege, especially in education. These are simply the necessary safeguards against the reappearance of a class-system.” I do not have to point out how diametrically opposed this (fundamentally correct) description is to the one given by Haffner roughly 40 years later. Alas, this was one of the things Orwell was wrong about: winning the war did not bring the long-term overall change to society he was hoping for (and even sure of, in case the war would be won). Yes, there were quite a few very positive developments (e.g. Labour Governments brought in the NHS and tried to democratize education; Social-democratic parties helped change society in Western Europe and Scandinavia; the US had New Deal policies and the civil rights movement, and direct Western colonialism came to an end), but the eighties ended most of that. I should point out some important aspects of Orwell’s ideas. First, one has to love his clear focus on making high level education freely available to everyone (which makes the current level of entry fees and student debts in the democracies all the more painful). Secondly, it is clear that Orwell had no illusions about totalitarian systems, whether they called themselves socialist or not, as so sharply depicted in “1984” and “Animal Farm”. I emphasize this because he still clearly saw socialism as the only honest way of organizing society, putting a lie to the link between socialism and authoritarianism. He is fully aware of the confounding terminology so beloved by modern plutocrats: “The liberty of the individual is still believed in, ... But this has nothing to do with economic liberty, the right to exploit others for profit.” He is also scathing about Marxism: “Marxism ... a German theory interpreted by Russians and unsuccessfully transplanted to England” and “Marxists ... looking at the modern world through nineteenth-century spectacles.” Lastly, Orwell wrongly predicted the long-term development because he of course could not have foreseen some of the great ironies of modern history, that when the Soviet Union collapsed due to internal forces, stemming from corruption,

a petrified ideology and totalitarian control making it completely non-adaptive, this was seen as the victory of the unadulterated free-market capitalism personified by Reagan and Thatcher, who happened to be in power at that moment in time. Also, the overwhelming allure of western capitalism that many in the former Soviet Union felt is actually due to the softened form it still retained from the socialist contributions I discussed earlier, which are being dismantled by the political right at this very moment. Thus, we ended up with thieving oligarchs that have deep links to the ultra-rich ruling class in the west, everywhere, with London as one of the money laundering centres of the world. The difference between the present-day ostentatious rich and the world's poor is so incomprehensibly large that even Orwell, who had precious little illusions about certain aspects of human nature and was justifiably upset about the fact that "...common soldiers risk their lives for two and sixpence a day, and fat women ride about in Rolls-Royce cars, nursing Pekingese" would probably not have believed these latest developments.

One might say that the organized output at all costs of the allies could not be put back in the box, and morphed into the military-industrial complex that Eisenhower warned against as a danger to democracy in 1961. Alas, after him came politicians with less fore-sight, bequeathing us unhindered free-market capitalism conglomerates, that indeed are eating away at democratic structures and leading to the rampant inequalities in wealth and power of today.

Something about "social Darwinism".

I want to end by pointing out a dangerous example of how deeply our whole worldview has been infiltrated by these kinds of anti-social, anti-socialism prejudices. Nobody in their right mind would deny that human beings are animals that operate at the extreme end of the social interaction scale. But in our discourse that aspect is downplayed and forgotten underneath of layers of "competition", "the struggle of existence" and "survival of the fittest".

I use the last term to introduce "social Darwinism" and Herbert Spencer, who came up with the expression. Currently, we keep using the term "Darwinism" in only this most basic competitive sense. But using "Darwinian" as a description (and thus implicitly as a justification) of cutthroat capitalism is completely unjustified as this dismisses cooperation, care or altruism, which are stressed as natural outcomes of selection by Darwin himself (!) in "The Descent of Man". Evolution is

about trade-offs, not absolutes. The pernicious, shallow use of “Darwinism” even occurs all the time with people who do not in any way share the unimaginative and fundamentally unjust “dog eat dog”, libertarian worldview. Thus, this unthinking interpretation limits our concepts and imagination (if this is the natural order of things, how can one go against it?). It also superbly illustrates how far we have been bamboozled by a tiny group of individuals who contribute little but take without reservation from our common wealth. However, humanity, and one could even say, nature, is in it together. This is what a proper understanding of socialism tells us. But if we need to change the term to get this across, by all means rename it “justicism” or whatever else might be effective. As long as the basic impulse of mutual dependence and fairness the term invokes, will be allowed to help shape our common future. Without it, we don’t have one.





Why religion is terrible.

David Roman Churchtown

Some background to the essay.

All my life, I have been an atheist. I also have to confess that when I was (much) younger I used to think that this was an indication of the fact that I was brighter and more capable of critical thought than those who accepted stories that were so patently childish and absurd, as to beggar belief. In as far as I thought about the effects of organized religion, it was clear that believing in things that were preposterous, false, and outdated, could not have much positive influence on day to day society. This was made abundantly clear by historical examples and further illustrated by the political influence of religions when I grew up. But, as I was born in a democracy with a “separation between church and state”, rational thinking would soon overcome these things of the past, I believed. How have these convictions fared? As I mentioned, I never wavered in my atheism, though I did not always call it that. However, I lost my belief in the inverse correlation between intelligence and being a believer (and, I should say, I am not so convinced of my own critical faculties anymore either). But my ideas about the continuing influence of organized religion have undergone a more fundamental and radical change: far from it being on the “natural” way out, it poses an imminent danger to the future of humanity. Big words, indeed. But only this sense of urgency induced me to write up an appeal about a subject, for which such appeals seem doomed to absolute futility, as hardly anybody ever changes their mind concerning religion. And that is of course precisely the problem.

Before I start explaining why we should be acutely aware of the current dangers of religion, I should make a few things clear. This essay does not try to convince the religiously inclined to give up their beliefs. I find the arguments Richard Dawkins brings up in “The God Delusion” or the reasoning of Christopher Hitchens in “god is not Great” absolutely convincing, and if these treatises do not change minds, I am sure I will not be able to come up with a better, more effective, one. Rationally speaking, the case against articles of faith is overwhelming, and I will leave it at that. In this essay I will concentrate on some salient aspects of religion that I find especially interesting and which could make life very difficult in the near future. I

do not take special issue with any of the religions in particular and do not consider Islam a greater evil than any of the other (monotheistic) belief systems. Much of the current violence associated can be understood more easily in light of political, rather than religious considerations. Also, based on its track record, Christianity has done most harm so far. A further proviso: there are many who subscribe to religions and do not display any of the behaviours and more fundamental beliefs I criticize below. I am not arguing that all of these things are inescapably bound up with being religious. But I use the term “inescapably” intentionally. One really has to escape from these intrinsically negative traits, and that is a hard thing to do. Completely discarding a religious upbringing might be even harder. As will become blindingly obvious, none of the following ideas are in any way original.

The tragedy of religious indoctrination in early life.

I shall start out by briefly describing how our biological makeup makes us highly vulnerable to all kinds of indelible influences from the day we are born. In a sense “learning” and “indoctrination” can only be distinguished from each other by the specific content of what is being poured into the highly receptive brain of a new-born individual. We arrive as highly fragile, helpless, organisms with outsized brains. It goes without saying that we are not able to take care of ourselves and need an astonishing amount of time to grow up (unparalleled in the animal kingdom). Such a highly vulnerable being must be protected. Within that context certain characteristics coevolved: infants will soak up as much information about the world they inhabit as possible in the first period of life. That information is to a large extent filtered by older individuals (especially those in parenting roles). To state things rather harshly: if we want to survive we have to blindly follow our elders, with the first decade probably being the most influential. Our formative experiences are thus deeply influenced by the beliefs prevalent in the environment we grow up in. This simple truth explains why the best predictor of your faith is the faith of your parents. As there is a surfeit of religious beliefs, that basic fact is more telling than one might at first glance think. Such a plethora of beliefs also allows us atheists to tell adherents of the great monotheistic sects: “Hey, we just believe in one god less than you do.”

Let me stress again, none of this is very original or exceptionally well formulated. That the single most important determinant of one’s religion is found in

the religion of one's youth was already implicitly pointed out by Darwin. This gives me an excuse to quote from one of his great contributions to human understanding, "The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex" which appeared in 1871 (!). He explains it thus: "How so many absurd rules of conduct, as well as so many absurd religious beliefs, have originated, we do not know...but it is worthy of remark that a belief constantly inculcated during the early years of life, while the brain is impressionable, appears to acquire almost the nature of an instinct; and the very essence of an instinct is that it is followed independently of reason."

How did all of this play out in my personal upbringing? As one might have guessed my parents were non-believers (though not extremely vocal about it). I had some family members who were practising Roman Catholics, and these I sometimes stayed with for small visits. They, it goes without saying, talked about god. I now realize that when my mother quoted me as coming up with spontaneous (?) questions regarding enigmatic behaviour of the supreme being, such as "why does god not show himself?", I will never be able to disentangle the influences and subtle reinforcements that were at work in such instances. It is of course completely clear that I was strongly influenced by the prevalent beliefs in my own background as well (as I mentioned earlier, in some sense learning and indoctrination can hardly be distinguished). However, I am still convinced that letting a child discover and think for itself is more an integral part of normal upbringing in families of nonbelievers. In that sense, we are lucky. I am reminded of that fact, whenever I am confronted with much trumpeted instances of "atheists" finding god (especially when this concerns scientists). At first sight this might seem to counter what I just posited. However, it turns out that in practically all instances we are talking about people that had a religious upbringing, rebelled (e.g. during puberty) and became atheists. Later on, they return to the beliefs of their childhood, or something akin.

In conclusion, though Richard Dawkins often has been criticized for seemingly singling out Islam as "worse" than the other monotheistic religions (a tendency, if true, he shares with some of the other "new atheists"), his constant outspoken focus on the detrimental effects of a religious upbringing should be applauded. The term might be considered too strong, but I think that describing it as "child abuse" conveys certain of the detrimental aspects. Personally, I would not infringe upon parental rights with regard to religious upbringing, but I am in favour of a general obligatory education for children on schools without a religious background, in order that they encounter many people with differing points of view.

Loss of critical thinking and moral faculties.

What are the great losses one can suffer due to an upbringing in the shadow of religious certainty? I would say that one of the most pernicious effects could be a loss of deep critical thinking regarding the nature of reality and morality. Our natural sense of wonder regarding the makeup of the world is brought up short against the “answers” of religion, whether in the guise of “we already know” (compare for instance creationism versus evolution by way of natural selection) or “stop asking” (about the fundamentally enigmatic, unknowable, nature of god). That does not seem easily conducive to a scientific career or nourishing one’s critical faculties. The political and moral effects are probably worse. First of all, the belief in an absolute supreme being meshes well with authoritarianism in politics. Secondly, and I realise I am getting into hot water with this, religion blunts moral faculties. “How can you say that”, the true believer asks, “I who agonize over, and vehemently oppose, abortion (the taking of human life) and euthanasia or suicide (again, the taking of human life), while you atheists often seem to be fine with that?” I’ll try to elucidate by stating my position regarding capital punishment (another instance of taking human life). This is something I vehemently oppose, while believers in most cases are in favour. What reasons can I give for my position? Quite a few are rational: it seems to require absolute guilt (but there are always mitigating circumstances; when can we truly say someone is completely responsible for anything?), even very low percentages of innocent people punished in this quite irreversible fashion are already unacceptable (and such cases turn out to be far from exceptional!), sentencing is often severely racially biased, etc., etc. Some are more emotional: putting oneself in the position of the convicted individual as the months become weeks, the weeks become days, the days become hours, the hours become minutes, the minutes... But, does this mean that in very specific instances nobody could ever make a sound moral case for capital punishment? Considering my deep emotional abhorrence, I would still oppose it, but I would acknowledge that decent, moral, human beings could come to a different conclusion.

Why did I go into so much detail? Because I wanted to demonstrate that coming to moral choices (between opposing claims) is difficult and that our morality evolves over time as we gain new insights. When, at about age fourteen, I started to think about such things, I was sure I had to have absolute principles from which I could unequivocally derive the correct moral position, because these were

really matters of life and death. I struggled with the fact there are no such rules and no such absolute principles. Denying this characterizes the, thus completely understandable, mindset that many believers never seem to lose, because for them it implies moral relativism regarding good and evil. But realizing that good and evil are human constructs does not make them any less important or basic. Another way of saying this? I never understood how anybody can say: without final justice after death nobody would act morally. Does that not just show that you seem to be devoid of morality yourself? Ironically, it is the belief in the absolute moral prescriptions of their holy texts that can make believers so deeply immoral. This was much better described by the great physicist Steven Weinberg when he stated in 1999: “With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil—that takes religion.” I want to end a bit facetiously by asking the question: is it a coincidence that Josh Hawley and Mike Pence, who, both in their own way, have contributed so much to endangering the US democratic system (flawed as it may be) are such bible enthusiasts?

The yawning, and ever increasing, chasm between articles of faith and societal reality.

I have come to the crux of the argument regarding the danger religion embodies at present. Why is it more dangerous now? First of all: there are more believers than ever. Overall, they are also more fundamentalist in their outlook. These more fundamentalist representatives are more often in positions of power as well. This means that texts written millennia ago, reflecting misogyny, racism, paternalism, homophobia and fundamental misunderstandings regarding the nature of reality, can form the basis for decisions in the rapidly changing, challenging environments that pose threats humanity has never faced before. The religious mindset is incapable of adapting to the rapid, large scale changes of the moment (“How can it even be considered possible for one of god’s creatures to change the climate HE* created? It is just unthinkable.”).

Especially at this moment in time, the bad mental habits of religion, such as the “us versus the non-believers” automatism and the rigid ideological and societal

* Let me point out (though it should be superfluous by now): of course, the supreme being is male.

frameworks which have been imprinted for life, are a recipe for disaster. Just think about the way religions treat women, some minorities, non-believers, and people who believe in the wrong god(s). This is not only a source of incredible suffering, but a waste of vast resources of talent and possible collaborations which we will desperately need. The enormous disparity between what the faithful believe and reality is further reflected in their attitudes towards abortion, and other rights of normal self-determination (think about euthanasia) which they so easily want to take away from other adults. The total prohibition of abortion they hanker after, nicely fits in with doing nothing about birth control on a dangerously overpopulated planet, and the misogynistic control of women. Need I go on?

Aesthetics, the mixing of wonder and insight, and positive aspects of atheism.

I want to end with a more positive message than “religion is terrible”. Many people state that they need religion because of the moral certainty, the promise of life everlasting, and, especially, because of the deep emotional connection during communal services. They see atheism as negative, cold, and empty. In that sense, their response reminds me of how they think analysing, and possible subsequent understanding, subtract from a direct emotional response to beauty. But for instance, beauty in nature, only becomes more multi-layered and deeper in the light of evolutionary theory. I so often encountered this negative response to the “atheistic” moniker, that I started to describe my own position as “agnostic” (though still completely convinced of the non-existence of god) because of the idea of cold-hearted certainty regarding something one can never be absolutely sure about, according to real agnostics. That those who are in direct personal contact with the supreme being also regard atheism as a form of arrogant certainty, is one of the more delightful ironies in this context. There are three reasons why I am never describing myself as agnostic anymore: I) looking at the universe, the existence of a benevolent god has always been absolutely untenable; II) “agnosticism” resembles a logical cop-out (for those interested, a nice explanation was given by the philosopher Bertrand Russell with his famous teapot analogy); III) I do not consider “atheism” a negative term, but a liberating concept telling us to make the most of the temporary gift of life.

Let us come back to the moral certainty, the promise of life everlasting, and the deep emotional connection promised by religion. The moral certainty of religion, I

pointed out, reflects a dangerous misconception. The promise of life everlasting is hollow as any decent biologist will tell you. I am listening to the duet “O death, where is thy sting?” from Handel’s Messiah as I am writing this, followed by the majestic choir joining in. In a sense it is completely true: death can never sting, as we are absent when death has arrived. But what is more, at this moment I am experiencing exactly that deep emotional connection we all crave due to the wonder of music, one of the greatest gifts to humanity. Just do not mistake that wonderful depth of feeling for knowledge or insight as great music might give you the illusion of deeply understanding everything. And, alas, religion illustrates perfectly where that will get you.





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