



SCOTT DOUGLAS JACOBSEN

CONATUS NEWS

VOLUME XI

IN-SIGHT PUBLISHING

Published by In-Sight Publishing
In-Sight Publishing
Langley, British Columbia, Canada

in-sightjournal.com

First published in parts by Conatus News,
Not a member of In-Sight Publishing, 2016-2019
This edition published in 2019

© 2012-2019 by Scott Douglas Jacobsen. Original appearance in Conatus News.

All rights reserved.

No parts of this collection may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized, in any form, or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented or created, which includes photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without written permission from the publisher.

Published in Canada by In-Sight Publishing, British Columbia, Canada, 2019
Distributed by In-Sight Publishing, Langley, British Columbia, Canada

In-Sight Publishing was established in 2014 as a not-for-profit alternative to the large, commercial publishing houses currently dominating the publishing industry.

In-Sight Publishing operates in independent and public interests rather than for private gains, and is committed to publishing, in innovative ways, ways of community, cultural, educational, moral, personal, and social value that are often deemed insufficiently profitable. Thank you for the download of this e-book, your effort, interest, and time support independent publishing purposed for the encouragement of academic freedom, creativity, diverse voices, and independent thought.

Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

No official catalogue record for this book.

Jacobsen, Scott Douglas, Author

Conatus News: Volume XI/Scott Douglas Jacobsen

pages cm

Includes bibliographic references, footnotes, and reference style listing.

In-Sight Publishing, Langley, British Columbia, Canada

Published electronically from In-Sight Publishing in Langley, British Columbia, Canada

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Designed by Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Contents

i	Acknowledgements.....	4
	a. Biases, Individualism vs Collectivism, and the Philosophy of Psychology	5
	b. Quebec is Currently Leading a Secular Revolution in Canada. Here's How. ..	9
	c. Ghada Ibrahim: Sharia is a Threat to Human Rights and Democracy.....	14
	d. African-American Theology Can Serve To Lead People To Humanism. Here's How.	16
	e. Secular Therapy: Ending the Dogma of Alcoholics Anonymous.....	18
	f. Black Nonbelievers, Inc: Can Atheist Black Women Beat Back Fundamentalism In America?	21
	g. Anti-Vaxxers and the Persistent Myth of Harmful Vaccinations	24
	h. Md. Sazzadul Hoque: A Call for Help for an Inhumane Persecution.....	27
	i. We Need to Change How we Think About Refugees and Migration.....	29
	j. Dr. Sven van de Wetering on Augustine, Free Will and Psychological Analysis.....	32
	k. Angelos Sofocleous: Free Speech, Political Correctness, and Academia	34
ii	License and Copyright	41

Acknowledgements

I express gratitude to Benjamin David, Benedict Nicholson, Kevin Jenco, Dominic Lauren, and the editing team at Conatus News, and Nicola Young Jackson, Pat O'Brien, Reba Boyd Wooden, Eric Adriaans, Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, Roslyn Mould, Stephanie Guttormson, Alejandro Borgo, Tara Abhasakun, Kate Smurthwaite, James Underdown, Maryam Namazie, Tehmina Kazi, Rebecca Hale, Dana L. Morganroth, Angelos Sofocleous, Emile Yusupoff, Terry Murray, Pamela Machado, Nicola Young Jackson, Terry Sanderson, Anthony Grayling, Stephen Law, Nicole Orr, Jim Al-Khalili, Ali Raza, Linda LaScola, Bob Churchill, Jennifer C. Gutierrez, Vic Wang, Marieke Prien, Caleb W. Lack, Dr. Saladdin Ahmed, Sikivu Hutchinson, Haras Rafiq, Scott Blair, Andrew Copson, Matthew Rothschild, Nicole Orr, Adalet Garmiany, Roy Speckhardt, Anders Stjernholm, Tyler Owen, René Hartmann, Shari Allwood, Margaret Mitchell, Mikey Weinstein, Emmanuel Donate, Rob Boston, David Niose, and Marieme Helie Lucas, and Alida Thomas, Danielle Erika Hill, Ashton P. Woods, Waleed Al-Husseini, Ariel Pontes, James Croft, John Perkins, Jason Frye, Kim Gibson, Dr. Alexander Douglas, Amanda Poppei, Wade Kaardal, Simon Ørregaard, Marie Alena Castle, Julia Julstrom-Agoyo, Pamela Machado, Armin Navabi, Tim Whitmarsh, Andy Ngo, Hugh Taft-Morales, Yasmeen, Sven van de Wetering, Marie Alena Castle, Phil Zuckerman, Waleed Al-Husseini, Paul Knupp, James Adeyinka Shorungbe, Houzan Mahmoud, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Ex-Muslims of Sri Lanka, Alexander Douglas, Dan Fisher, Sarah Mills, Carline Klijnman, Scott Davies, Lucas Lynch, Beatrice Louis (Linda Louis), Rebecca S. Markert, Dan Barker, Maija Ahrentlöv and Tim Ahrentlöv, Andrew Seidel, Dave McKee, Daniela Wakonigg, Dr. Darrel Ray, Andrew Copson, Faisal Saeed Al Mutar, Mina Ahadi, Seyran Ateş, Trabelsi Zeineb, Amardeo Sarma, PJ Slinger, Waleed Al-Husseini, Frank Mols, Tom McLeish, Ghada Ibrahim, David Rand, Ghada Ibrahim, Anthony Pinn, Caleb W. Lack, Mandisa Thomas, Claire Klingenberg, Md. Sazzadul Hoque, and Gissou Nia. It was a valuable initiative to me. I feel honored to contribute to, participate in, interview and write for, and see Conatus News grow with each passing week. Now, I look forward into the transition into Uncommon Ground Media Limited.

Scott

Biases, Individualism vs Collectivism, and the Philosophy of Psychology

July 3, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Conatus News speaks to Dr Sven van de Wetering about ecological validity in psychology, in part 4 of an ongoing series on the philosophy of psychology.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You have an interest in ecological validity and critical thinking from a psychological perspective. Psychology requires a Swiss army approach to problem-solving, as you have noted in other conversations with me, which is exemplified in the number of disciplines and sub-disciplines within the field. The external validity amounts to the extent that one can extrapolate and generalise the findings of psychology. Ecological validity is one aspect of the extrapolation and generalisation. It looks at the extensions into the real world. From a psychological perspective, how can the apparent simplicity of a research finding become troublesome when taken into the real world?

Dr Sven van de Wetering: I think your phrasing captures the problem: “simplicity of a good solid psychological research finding” is a delightful phrase because it captures so succinctly what is wrong with the way many research psychologists (including me in my less reflective moments) think of their research findings. Findings in physics are often satisfyingly simple and reliable. Think of Newton shining light through a prism, Galileo dropping stuff off of towers, or Robert Boyle goofing around with a vacuum pump. In this model of science, you find a result, you assume that the physical reality underlying the result is fairly simple. Furthermore, you assume that that physical reality will not change over time, and you feel free to draw sweeping generalisations based on the simple experiment (though it turns out Boyle was pretty cautious about doing that, an example we could probably learn from). That approach has gotten us far in physics, presumably because the assumptions of simplicity and changelessness correspond fairly well to the physical reality. A similar approach seems to be less useful in psychology, and I would argue that that is because the subject matter of psychology, human behaviour, is neither changeless nor straightforward.

To take a straightforward example, any good social psychology textbook, and most bad ones as well will talk about the Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE), which is also called correspondence bias, a term which I much prefer. In its simplest form, FAE is the tendency for people to assume that other people’s actions tell us a lot about their inner traits, beliefs, and values while ignoring the fact that many of the influences on people’s actions are situational in nature. The thing that irritates me about the name “Fundamental Attribution Error” is the word “fundamental” seems to imply that the error is anchored in a core aspect of human psychological functioning, one that is universal across individuals, cultures, and situations. When this assumption is examined, it is found that the tendency fails to occur in some situations, that there are individual differences in the degree to which people fall prey to this bias, and that members of individualist cultures are much more susceptible to the bias than members of collectivist cultures. In short, many investigators of the FAE seem to assume that people’s behaviour in a small number of fairly contrived situations tells us something important about the way they behave all the time. To maybe highlight the illogic of this, it almost looks like many of these

investigators engaged in more egregious examples of FAE than the people in their experiments. If I were more psychodynamically inclined, I might even accuse these researchers of projection.

As I said above, I am probably as vulnerable to this tendency as anyone else. I wonder if part of the problem is linguistic. Research psychologists often formulate their hypotheses as universal generalisations, something like “People do X.” It is certainly true that some people, some of the time, under some circumstances, do X; if they didn’t, the results of the experiment wouldn’t have come out the way they did. Researchers are aware that universalism is an assumption, but it’s not problematised as much as it probably should be. Usually, if the phenomenon is replicated with a few slight procedural variations and a couple of different populations, the assumption of universality is considered provisionally acceptable. I don’t really want to be too critical of this; the time, energy, and money necessary to really thoroughly explore the limits of the phenomena studied by psychologists are often not available. Psychologists do what they can, and perhaps are too busy and harried to really take a long, hard look at the intellectual baggage that psychology has picked up that leads to those assumptions of universality.

Jacobsen: What research findings seem to show robust findings – highly reliable and valid – in the ‘laboratory’ but fail to produce real-world results? Those bigger research findings one may find in an introductory psychology textbook.

van de Wetering: I’m certainly not in a position to give a comprehensive list, but here’s one I find a little ironic. One of the cornerstones of the critical thinking course you cited above was confirmation bias, which is a cluster of biases centred around the tendency to selectively test one’s hypotheses in a way that makes it relatively easy to confirm the hypothesis one already has in mind but difficult to disconfirm that same hypothesis. Some of my best students started to look into the literature and found that the whole intellectual edifice of confirmation bias was based on only a small number of experimental paradigms. Snyder and Swann developed one of the research paradigms in question in 1976. They asked people to prepare to interview another person. Their job in that interview was to find out whether the person in question was an introvert or an extrovert. It found that people often used what is called a positive test strategy; that is, if the interviewer was trying to find out if the person was an extravert, they chose a lot of questions that an extravert would tend to answer “yes” to. This has been taken to indicate confirmation bias on the part of the research participants.

What doesn’t get emphasised when most textbooks cite the above study is that the research participants did not create their interview questions from scratch. Instead, they were asked to choose some from a list. My students wondered if research participants would do the same thing if they could make up questions. We ran a small study on this question, and we did weakly replicate the original study; that is, people asked to find out if someone was an introvert were slightly more likely to ask questions that an introvert would say “yes” to, and people asked to find out if someone was an extravert had a nonsignificant tendency to ask more questions that an extravert would answer yes to. What we found striking, though, was that a substantial majority of the questions our participants came up with were not yes-no questions at all, but rather open-ended ones that at least had the potential to be informative regardless of whether the hypothesis was true or false. Thus, confirmation bias was, at best, a minor undercurrent in the test strategies used by most of our participants.

Jacobsen: How can those former examples become the basis for critical thinking and a better comprehension of ecological validity?

van de Wetering: One thing I take from these examples is that human behaviour is highly context-dependent. The issue in these examples is not that people have made a false universal generalization about human behaviour that needs to be replaced with a true universal generalization. The issue is that universal generalizations may not be the way to go in order to explain most facets of human psychological functioning. Nor do I think that we can see people as passive recipients of cultural influences or some other form of learning. Any given person does have neural hardware, an evolutionary history, a history of learning experiences, a social milieu, a set of goals, of likes, of dislikes, of behavioral predispositions, and so on. Most psychologists recognize that this is so, but their hypothesis-testing methods tend to be designed with the assumption that all these different factors operate independently of each other, without interacting. This is probably not a useful assumption to make. I also don't know what to replace it with, because I'm not mathematician enough to know how to cope with the sort of complexity one gets if every factor interacts with every other factor. I know that some people advocate for a turn from a hypothetico-deductive psychology toward a more interpretive one, but no one has yet shown me a version of this that is disciplined enough to give investigators a fighting chance of overcoming their own biases. So I'm kind of stuck in a methodological cul-de-sac. My own tendency is to more or less stick with existing methodological precepts, but to try to be a little bit skeptical and aware that things may go badly awry. Situations matter, and should be in the forefront of the investigator's mind even when there is no way of actually accounting for their influence.

Jacobsen: Let us take a controversial example with the pendulum swings within the educational philosophies. Some are fads, while others are substantiated. In either case, the attempt is to make a relatively controlled setting, e.g. a single school's educational environment in one community or standardized tests, extrapolate into improved school performance on some identifiable markers such as those found on the PISA tests, university English preparedness or – ahem – university preparedness, or even training for citizenship in one of the more amorphous claims, and so on. What educational paradigms, within this temporal and cultural quicksand, stand the test of time for general predictive success on a variety of metrics, i.e. have high general ecological validity for education and even life success?

van de Wetering: I confess I find this a thorny issue. Once again, culture matters. In the US, asking children to work on problems they have chosen themselves is very much more motivating than asking them to work on problems chosen by their mothers. In some collectivist cultures (maybe most or even all, this hasn't been tested a lot) the reverse is the case. This sort of thing makes me wonder how important something like child-centred education is.

One fad we probably shouldn't get too excited about is the idea that all important learning is procedural, and that it is, therefore, unimportant to learn about content. In the area of critical thinking, it turns out that the most important single tool (if you can call it that) is lots and lots of domain-specific knowledge. Once a person has that, procedures may increase that person's ability to use that knowledge effectively, but without the knowledge, all the procedures in the world don't seem to do any good. Reading an article from Wikipedia doesn't cut it; those bullshit detectors that are so important to critical thinking only develop as a result of fairly deep engagement with a body of material. That said, procedural knowledge is tremendously important; my issue is with the assumption that because knowing how is important knowing what is unimportant.

Probably the number one most important factor in education is an attitudinal one. If we think of educating our children and young adults as a sacred mission, we have a reasonable chance of success. This goes along with reasonably high social status for educators, though not necessarily money. If we think of education as something we do because it keeps kids off of the streets until they are 18 or because it enhances people's "human capital" for the sake of the job market, then we may be trouble. Then you risk having educators going through the motions; if your educators are not passionate about what they are doing, it is pretty much guaranteed that your students won't be, either, and then you've got a real problem.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Sven.

van de Wetering: Thank you, Scott. As always, a thought-provoking exercise.

Dr. Sven van de Wetering is an associate professor at the [University of the Fraser Valley](#). He is on the Advisory Board of [In-Sight: Independent Interview-Based Journal](#). Dr. van de Wetering earned his BSc in Biology at [The University of British Columbia](#), his Bachelor of Arts in Psychology at Concordia University and his Master of Arts, and a PhD in Psychology from [Simon Fraser University](#). His research interest lies in conservation psychology, lay conceptions of evil, relationships between personality variables and political attitudes. [Session 1](#), [Session 2](#), & [Session 3 can be found here](#).

Quebec is Currently Leading a Secular Revolution in Canada. Here's How.

July 10, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

David Rand, President of the Atheist Freethinkers of Canada, speaks to Conatus News about secularism and the challenges facing secularists in Quebec.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: David, let us start with definitions, what defines “Quebec secularism?” There was the proposed Bill 60 or, otherwise called, “Charter affirming the values of State secularism and religious neutrality and equality between women and men, and providing a framework for accommodation requests”. This encouraged some debate statements relevant to the idea of “Quebec secularism.”

David Rand: When I say “Quebec secularism” I simply mean secularism. I refer to Quebec because it is the only jurisdiction in Canada or the USA where a serious attempt at implementing state secularism has been made. The First Amendment of the US Constitution, which established that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” is undoubtedly better than anything in Canadian federal legislation, but it does not implement secularism. As Shadia B. Drury has pointed out (*Free Inquiry*, vol 32, #3), “The establishment clause is not an endorsement of secularism but of nonsectarianism.”

What Drury calls nonsectarianism, I would call religious neutrality. It means that the state does not favour one religion over others; that there is no state religion. Very good so far. But secularism is much more than that. Secularism starts with religious neutrality and adds separation between religion and state, i.e. rejecting all religious interference in its affairs and legislation. That is, religion's influence in politics and education is nonexistent. Secularism is universalist: the secular state refuses to recognize religions and treats all citizens equally, regardless of religious affiliation. It does not give religions any privileges and it does not accommodate religious practice.

A simple example will illustrate. Recently a Montreal city councillor suggested that the Montreal police force allow police officers to wear religious symbols such as Sikh turbans and Islamic hijabs while on duty. This is an atrociously bad idea, for many reasons, and Quebec secularists in general immediately stood up and said so. In the vanguard of this opposition was the organisation AQNAL (Quebec Association of North Africans for Secularism) many of whose members lived through the dark days of the 1990s in Algeria. Our organisation, AFT, issued a [press release](#) in support of AQNAL.

“The establishment clause [of the First Amendment of the US Constitution] is not an endorsement of secularism but of nonsectarianism.”

[There are so many reasons why allowing police to wear religious symbols is a bad idea](#), but the most important is that it violates religion/state separation because police officers are agents of the state and should present a neutral image. Not only would such a measure violate secularism, it would even violate the weaker principle of religious neutrality, unless a similar accommodation were provided for every religion that wants one. If Sikhs and Muslims have their special uniform, why not a special one with a huge crucifix for Christians, or a colander as hat for

Pastafarians, or some other accouterment for Hindus, Jews, Scientologists, etc., and why not accommodate Marxists, Friedmanites, and other ideologues too. There is no end to the variants that would be required. But some of these “religions” I have listed are not really religions, you say? Well then, who is to decide which are “true” religions and which are not?

The only reasonable solution is to respect religion/state separation and not to introduce such symbols to be worn by police. They can wear whatever they want when off duty.

But what happened when secularists made this very reasonable point? They were publicly accused of all sorts of sins, just as were those who supported the Charter of Secularism back in 2013-2014. Quebec secularists are regularly demonised. Justin Trudeau and other anti-secularists bring out their usual nonsense vocabulary about “diversity” and “tolerance” – by which they mean exactly the opposite of what those words signify: no diversity of opinion will be tolerated. If you disagree with them then you must be a horrible person. Slander and defamation are the norms because the anti-secularists have no reasonable arguments to support their views.

There is no secular movement in Canada outside Quebec. That probably sounds like an extreme statement, but it is a simple observation. There are some isolated secularists in Canada, and many more who would probably rally to secularism if the subject could be debated openly and fairly, but they are cowed into silence by the very vocal pseudo-secularists who join the chorus of demonization. Secularism in Canada outside Quebec has been neutralized. The only exception I know of is the editorial board of the magazine *Humanist Perspectives* which dares to publish articles which criticize multiculturalism and discuss related issues. Only in Quebec is there still a truly secular movement, and proponents of cultural relativism (a.k.a. multiculturalism), in an objective alliance with political Islam, are trying to kill it in Quebec too. They have not yet succeeded. The battle is raging.

Has any so-called “secular” organisation in Canada outside Quebec recently (since Bill 60) taken a position against the wearing of religious symbols by public servants while on duty, especially those with coercive power such as police? Did any such organisation outside Quebec criticise the court decision that granted Zunera Ishaq the “right” to wear a niqab during a state ceremony? Did any such organisation criticise Quebec’s Bill 62 for *not going far enough* (as we at AFT did: [Blog 089](#), [Blog 078](#)) in banning face-coverings?

Pseudo-secularists in Canada outside Quebec chose prejudice and conformism over principle. They chose to throw Quebec secularists under the bus.

The final death knell for secularism in Canada federally, as well as definitive proof of the complete incompatibility between secularism and multiculturalism, was marked by the recent publication of the report “Taking Action Against Systemic Racism and Religious Discrimination Including Islamophobia” from the parliamentary committee whose mandate was to study the implications of Motion M-103. This report’s first recommendation is to update anti-racism programs, extending them to include religious discrimination. This conflates religion (a personal choice) with race (an immutable attribute), meaning that criticising religion can henceforth be denounced as racist. Wow.

Did any ostensibly secular organisation in Canada outside Quebec show any opposition to this extremely dangerous recommendation (as [we at AFT did](#))? If they did, I am unaware of it.

Pseudo-secularists in Canada outside Quebec chose prejudice and conformism over principle. They chose to throw Quebec secularists under the bus.

Finally, a clarification about the Quebec Charter of Secularism (Bill 60) which was abandoned when the government which proposed it was defeated in 2014. [We at AFT supported it](#), but critically, because it had one major failing: it did not address the important issue of religions' economic privileges. Also, it did not mention the crucifix hanging in Quebec's National Assembly. However, the Quebec Liberal Party (QLP), which ferociously opposed the Charter and won the election, took an explicit position, during the election campaign, to *maintain* the crucifix where it is, an obvious play for traditionalist voters. If the Charter had been adopted, the crucifix would have had to go eventually, because its continued presence is incompatible with the Charter's secular principles.

Jacobsen: There were responses to the form of secularism, Quebec secularism, enshrined, in part, in Bill 60. One from what you call multiculturalists. Another from what you call Islamists. What is the problem with multiculturalism and Islamism allied there, against Bill 60? How does this intrude on the many decades-long progress towards further secularisation in Quebec?

Rand: Quebec has been secularising ever since the beginning of the so-called "Quiet Revolution" in the mid 20th century when the right-wing Duplessis government (which put the crucifix in the National Assembly) was definitively defeated. The omnipresence of Catholicism in schools and hospitals was mostly eliminated. A Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms was adopted in 1975, and sexual orientation was added to it in 1977, earlier than any other province in Canada or any state in the USA. The secularisation process is not complete, but major progress has been made.

The Charter of Secularism was a natural next step in this continuing process. The QLP betrayed its liberal principles by opposing the Charter, and it did so with much support from a small number of very vocal proponents of political Islam. Together they have done enormous harm, and they continue to do so. Québécois, in general, are very sympathetic towards secularism. But the QLP has adopted multiculturalism which opposes secularism. This dovetails with the goals of Islamists whose highest priorities include defeating secularism, which is why they particularly target France, for example.

Jacobsen: Can you give an example of how identity politics intrudes on the active work of secularists or impinges on the principle of secularism with the state via, for example, restraint and neutrality?

Rand: There is nothing inherently wrong with having an identity. Valuing identity, like nationalism and populism, can be good or bad, left or right. But all three are currently being denounced and even demonised for a dubious reason: neoliberalism. Weakening the nation-state serves the interests of international free-market capitalism. Political Islam has latched onto this issue as a way to promote its agenda: Islamists demonise Quebec secularists for being "identitarian." But in reality, no-one could be more obsessed with identity than Islamists themselves; they claim to speak for all Muslims, assert religious identity over all others (such as citizenship) and promote the veil in its various forms to impose that identity, with the goal of making it omnipresent.

Furthermore, being a Québécois or being a Canadian are two competing identities, two competing nationalisms. Choosing one over the other is more a matter of personal taste than anything else. The Quebec identity is just as legitimate as the Canadian identity.

Jacobsen: Parti Québécois (PQ) is a centre-left political party. You describe how the PQ has a sovereignty orientation policy and a secularism policy, but these policies merge. The critics of the PQ proposed Charter used the term “racist,” sometimes. How does the use of the epithet ignore the thrust of the Charter and fail in furthering the dialogue about secularism, Quebec sovereignty, and the Charter itself, as well as acknowledge the individuation of each topic in the larger discussion on secularism?

Rand: Secularism and Quebec independence are two completely distinct issues – or at least they should be. However, they have become inextricably linked. The Quiet Revolution which began the secularisation process also saw the development of a strong independence movement, and the partisans of one are often partisans of the other.

Furthermore, criticism of and opposition to the Quebec independence movement is often highly unprincipled. Instead of using rational arguments to oppose Quebec separatism, anti-separatists often engage in slanderous discourse, accusing separatists of “racism” and similar nonsense. This habit of vilification has been recycled to oppose secularism in Quebec, thus mixing the two issues even further. Islamists have taken full advantage of this for their purposes.

Jacobsen: You also talk about traditionalists in the province. Have they changed at all regarding the perspectives on the PQ proposed Charter or Quebec secularism generally? Or are the main groups – the traditionalists, the purported multiculturalists and some Islamists, and secularists – mostly stuck in their paths?

Rand: Traditionalists still exist in Quebec, but they are marginal. They suffered a major defeat with the 2015 decision of the Supreme Court of Canada prohibiting prayers at municipal council meetings. This was a major victory for Québécois secularists who had been fighting this battle in lower courts for years. However, the recent successes of political Islam – which include motion M-103 and the recommendations of the subsequent parliamentary committee – tend to awaken quiescent traditionalists who, whether out of resentment or opportunism, see the successful promotion of one religion as a reason to promote their own.

Jacobsen: You talk about conformity and the overriding of principle, and “betrayal” of the principle of secularism, for the preference of conformism to reign. Can you expand on this point, please? Also, can you provide any relevant updates to the developments of the conversations in the public sphere around Quebec secularism?

Rand: I think I have already answered that question in large part in my previous comments.

Those in Canada outside Quebec who claim to be secularists need to swallow their pride and admit that Québécois are way ahead of them on this one issue: secularism. But so far, many Canadians have not given up their strong attachment to Quebec bashing, a sort of virtue signalling on steroids. Ironically, smearing Québécois by accusing them of “racism” is itself racist; here I am using that word in the general sense of bigotry against an ethnic group, as explained in my article [“Racism: Real and Imagined”](#).

Secularism is a progressive, left-wing political program, but it has been abandoned and is even opposed by the postmodernist “left.” The anti-secular voices in Canada, including some who hypocritically claim to be secular, constitute an expression of that regressive, postmodernist left, a degenerate form of left-wing politics which panders to religion, wallows in cultural relativism, discredits the left and ultimately strengthens the right and the far-right.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Rand: Several points that need to be stressed:

You cannot have secularism without some restrictions in some contexts. If bans on wearing religious symbols are *never* acceptable, which is apparently what pseudo-secularists promote, then that means a great victory for religious privilege and a smorgasbord of religious identitarianism everywhere, in particular in public services.

Any attempt to assign collective guilt to Québécois in general for the crimes of Alexandre Bissonnette (the massacre at the Quebec City mosque in January of 2017) is a form of hate propaganda, as odious as blaming the Jewish people for the death of Jesus.

Slander is censorship. The vilification of Quebec secularists has one goal: to silence them by making it difficult or impossible to express their very reasonable ideas in public debates, and thus, to deny Québécois their right to choose secularism.

The term “Islamophobia” is simply the new blasphemy for the 21st century, but concentrating on one particular religion. The word is unacceptable if used as an accusation, is unrelated to racism and should never be used in government legislation, regulations or programs.

Islamism is indeed dangerous in Canada, although it has not yet progressed nearly as far here as it has in Europe. We have the Atlantic Ocean to thank for that. But it is just a matter of time.

Favouring Islam by suppressing criticism of it will inevitably increase both hostility towards Muslims and the aspirations of competing religions, especially Christianity, for similar privileges. The result will be to strengthen the political right wing, on the far-right of which lies Islamofascism, a.k.a. Islamism or political Islam. The federal government continues to enable Islamism by pandering to some of its demands.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Mr. Rand.

David Rand is the president of Atheist Freethinkers (LPA-AFT) based in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. The organization participates in a local coalition Rassemblement pour la laïcité(Quebec) and is affiliated with two international associations: Atheist Alliance International(AAI) and the International Association of Freethought (IAFT).

Ghada Ibrahim: Sharia is a Threat to Human Rights and Democracy.

July 13, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Ghada Ibrahim is a Saudi Arabian activist and ex-Muslim. She speaks to Conatus News about Sharia Law and how it affects Islamic societies.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Could you please define what Sharia Law is?

Ghada Ibrahim: Sharia means ‘law’ in Arabic. In this context, it means Religious Law or Islamic Law. It is a set of laws inspired by the Quran and Sunnah (the life and teachings of the prophet Mohammad), the two primary sources of Islamic law.

Jacobsen: Why do so many individuals in Muslim-majority countries want this form of religious laws implemented over secular ones? I’m curious as to their arguments, rather than more Western/soft interpretations of what preachers and jurists state in an open forum with believers in the faith.

Ibrahim: Because it is the only form of law they have ever been exposed to. They also look at secular laws, i.e. man-made laws, as inferior to divine law, which is, according to them, a law that comes directly from God. Religious law is final and true, as it is the word of an omnipotent God, the Creator, as seen by Islamic theology.

If the religious law isn’t imposed, individuals in Muslim-majority countries think, then all hell can break loose in the world. Some of the things I’ve heard about secular law is that it wants to “Strip your mother’s sister” and “Allow you to marry your mother” among other utterly ridiculous arguments. Of course, they have a misconception of what secular law really is, as they have never been exposed to it.

Jacobsen: How does the public deal with those who do not want Sharia in their lands?

Ibrahim: Public smear campaigns if they are from within the community. They’re usually called ‘Western Agents’, ‘Atheists’ – a very derogatory term for Muslims– things along those lines. If they are from outside the community, they are called ‘Dirty’, ‘or “Immoral”’. It is considered blasphemy to speak against God or Sharia law.

Jacobsen: In more secular, democratic countries, it is the case that such people need to live alongside ordinary Muslims. How does this attitude carry over into minority sections of immigrants who live in Muslim-majority communities, when minorities have no intention of integration?

Ibrahim: I think you are referring to minority sects within Muslim populations. In Muslim-majority countries, there are small courts that deal with minority issues. How does that attitude carry around? I don’t really know. I like to think minority sects see the damage a religious law does and how it discriminates against people, but I don’t believe that is the case. There are, indeed, problems of integration for minorities within Muslim-majority communities, as they need to fully adapt to the standards of these communities.

Jacobsen: How does the Islamic system of jurisprudence manage or deal with women?

Ibrahim: The biggest issue with the Islamic system's treatment of women is in family law. Women are not given their fair share of inheritance due to their gender; divorce is on the side of the man along with custody. Men are allowed to beat their wives and there is no concept of marital rape. I don't believe an Islamic court system would ever be fair to a woman. This is simply because Islamic courts follow Islamic teachings, mostly the Quran and the Sunnah, which are inherently against the rights of women, meaning that an Islamic court cannot claim to be fair towards men and women if it is Islamic.

The biggest issue with the Islamic system's treatment of women is in family law [...] I don't believe an Islamic court system would ever be fair to a woman.

Jacobsen: How many women religious jurists and legal professionals are there, and what is their ratio to men? If there's a difference, is this due to a simple difference of choices based on professional and individual preferences or explicit bias and barriers well-known to objective observers?

Ibrahim: There are no women religious jurists or legal professionals. In Islam, jurisprudence and religious law is a man's job. One of the requirements of a religious jurist is to be 'a male of sound mind and age' and possess religious knowledge.

Jacobsen: Any feelings or thoughts in conclusion?

Ibrahim: The concept of religious law is not entirely foreign to the west. Religious extremists of all stripes will always want to implement "*God's Law*" over "*Man's Law*". They warn people of the evils of secular laws. There are, indeed, cases in Western countries where God's law is being imposed on top of Man's law, and some Muslims are no different in this regard.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Ghada.

African-American Theology Can Serve To Lead People To Humanism. Here's How.

July 15, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Professor Anthony Pinn speaks on the intersecting philosophies of African-American Theology and advocates a new approach to spread humanistic thought.

[Professor Anthony Pinn](#) is the Agnes Cullen Arnold Professor of Humanities at Rice University. He earned his B.A. from Columbia University and M.Div. and PhD in the study of religion from Harvard University and specialises in African-American theology. He is an author, humanist, and public speaker. Among other sterling accomplishments, Prof. Pinn is the Founding Director of the [Center for Engaged Research and Collaborative Learning \(CERCL\)](#) at Rice University.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Your specialisation is in African-American religion, constructive theology, and humanist thought. Where do these source themselves in personal or professional life?

Professor Anthony B. Pinn: I'm not sure what you mean. If you are asking if there is something both personal and professional about these interests, my answer is yes.

Jacobsen: As the executive director of the Center for Engaged Research and Collaborative Learning, what tasks and responsibilities come with the position? What are the main research questions of the centre?

Pinn: I developed the Center some years ago as a way to promote critical thinking skills and effective communication strategies both on and off campus. Our work, both in terms of programming and research – involves recognition of the necessary relationship between the University and the larger city of which it is a part. In this way, we promote active learning and scholarship that is informed by and responsive to the conditions/concerns of given communities.

Jacobsen: You did doctoral work in the study of religion at Harvard University. What was your main research question? What were the main findings from your doctoral research? What have been the general findings of subsequent but associated research initiatives in professional life?

Pinn: My initial concern was with the ways in which Christians response to the issue of theodicy; that is, what can be said about God in light of human suffering in the world. I was particularly interested in how humanism challenges typical answers to this question, and how this mode of humanist challenge to theism develops within African American communities. This initial research interests developed to include attention to forms of cultural expression, such as hip-hop, that tend to receive limited attention, as well as more in-depth examination of the nature and meaning of humanism in the United States.

Jacobsen: What is black religious aesthetics? How does this differ from other religious aesthetic tied to ethnic or race groupings? What are the criteria for demarcation between different types?

Pinn: By black religious aesthetics I mean to highlight the style, the tone, the 'mood' that informs religious thinking and doing within African American communities. It is my way of

highlighting the importance of cultural production and embodiment for a “think” understanding of religiosity. I think there are cultural codes embedded in the workings of various racial groups – certain styles presentation associated with various groups. One gets a sense of this by examining the cultural production of particular groups. However, it is important to remember that I am not essentialising these various groups. I’m not saying, for instance, that all African Americans do this or that, or, all white Americans do this or that.

Jacobsen: What is the sole definition or soul, if you will, of African-American Humanism?

Pinn: African American humanism is an approach to thinking and doing that privileges materiality and understands life to be confined to historical contexts – no transhistorical realities, no divine forces. African American humanism says “YES” to the humanity, the importance, and vitality of black life within the context of a world conditioned to disregard blackness. It embraces certain elements of the Enlightenment and the Modern world while also pointing out the manner in which modernity also entails deep damage and disregard of non-European peoples.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Professor Pinn.

Secular Therapy: Ending the Dogma of Alcoholics Anonymous

July 20, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Dr. Caleb W. Lack talks to Conatus News on the dangers of some cult-like Alcoholics Anonymous groups and how secular therapy can help.

Dr. Caleb W. Lack, Ph.D. is a licensed [clinical psychologist](#), an Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Central Oklahoma, and the Director of the [Secular Therapist Project](#). Dr. Lack is the author or editor of six books (most recently [Critical Thinking, Science, & Pseudoscience: Why We Can't Trust Our Brains](#) with Jacques Rousseau) and more than 45 scientific publications on obsessive-compulsive disorder, Tourette's Syndrome and tics, technology's use in therapy, and more. He writes the popular [Great Plains Skeptic](#) column on [skepticink.com](#) and regularly presents nationally and internationally for professionals and the public. Learn more about him [here](#). Previous sessions can be found here: [Session 1](#), [Session 2](#), [Session 3](#)

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Now, I want to do some systemic comparison between Alcoholics Anonymous and secular therapy. What is the meta-theme, the big sky, that envelopes each practices' therapy?

Dr. Caleb Lack: The overall theme of Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step groups, and this is going to be controversial as they would vehemently argue against this, is that people who have problematic levels of drinking are inherently flawed and bad people who need to rely on something outside of their own abilities in order to improve their lives. AA, and other similar groups, conveniently provide the thing on which you *must* rely, which is their dogmatic and rigid system of specific acts you must engage in. This is reflected in the ideas they have such as “one drink, one drunk” and the idea that you must abstain from all drinking or you will “fall off the wagon” as well as the insistence of relying on someone else (such as your sponsor or people at the very frequent meetings) to monitor your behavior.

AA, and other similar groups, conveniently provide the thing on which you must rely, which is their dogmatic and rigid system of specific acts you must engage in.

Contrast that idea (that something is wrong with you and will always be, so you need someone else to tell you exactly how to live your life) to the work of evidence-based, secular therapists. In this model, you are taught and practice various tools to use that we know help to achieve particular outcomes. Those tools and skills, when implemented and used regularly, put you back in the driver's seat of your life, enabling you to cope with the various stressors thrown your way in a healthy manner. My job as a therapist is, as I tell the people I work with, to put myself out of a job. In other words, I'm trying to make sure that you don't need me any longer, that you have all the skills you need to have a healthy, productive life.

Jacobsen: How does religion become a force for good and evil in each, if at all, in either evaluative case?

Lack: For secular therapy, religion and religious beliefs are aspects of a person's identity that need to be taken into account, considered, and worked within the larger context of therapy. For

example, if someone comes to see me and they are struggling with problematic substance use, I would try and find what support networks they have or can tap into in order to increase their social support. That may be a friend group, a family unit, or something like a church family.

A good, ethical secular therapist would not ignore or discount someone's religious beliefs, they would find a way to use those to help someone achieve the desired change, if possible. But there would not be any insistence that someone needs to declare a new belief system, or pushing changes onto an existing belief system, with a secular therapist. Instead, the therapist would let the empirical and clinical data guide them in what methods would likely help achieve desired change for the individual.

For secular therapy, religion and religious beliefs are aspects of a person's identity that need to be taken into account, considered, and worked within the larger context of therapy.

This is pretty different from a system like the 12-step programs, which declare that you must believe in their system, and their way, and that that is the only way that you can be helped. This dogmatism may actually serve as a new belief system that becomes either grafted onto an already existing one or perhaps even supplants it. So it's not that religion, or religious belief *per se*, are in any way "good" or "evil" from these viewpoints (or in life in general). Instead, it's that you have the difference between "we have good evidence to suggest this will work, so let's try it" compared to "we believe this works, and if you don't agree it's because you are a bad person."

Jacobsen: How do those who come from deeply fundamentalist religious traditions describe their overall experience going through AA and secular therapy, respectively?

Lack: I'd say that depends on if they are still in the hold of that fundamentalist belief system or they have escaped it. For those raised in and still enmeshed in that kind of environment, then the declarations and rigid, controlled system of the 12-step programs familiar and safe. If you've been raised in a system that focuses on external controls for your behavior and decisions, then AA and the like could be like putting on a well-worn glove.

The only difference is the specifics of what behaviors you are allowed or forced to do, and what sort of thoughts would be considered proper rather than improper or "sinful." For someone who has left a fundamentalist tradition, I would say that moving into AA or a similar program would likely cause a huge amount of discomfort, likely activating negative emotions and thoughts because of the similarities.

On the other hand, someone embedded in a fundamentalist system still would likely be a bit taken aback by some of the concepts used in say, cognitive-behavioral therapy. Ideas such as how we can actively evaluate and challenge our thoughts rather than just accept them as true often lead to questioning other things as well. If you've been taught to not question authority or "revealed knowledge," this can be a big shift in your worldview, and could potentially lead to conflict within the system you are. For those who have left such a system, there really shouldn't be any inherent conflict, although they may still have some of those beliefs and schemas (such as, "You cannot question authority" or "There is only one true way to live") that may need to be processed during treatment.

Jacobsen: If you removed the higher power portions from AA, as I believe you indicated before, would you be left with many aspects of secular therapy?

Lack: Taking out the reliance on a higher power from AA would still leave a highly rigid set of rules and guidelines. This is a problem for several reasons. Our secular alternatives to AA – programs like SMART Recovery, LifeRing, or S.O.S. – focus on providing that new, healthier community via peer support while learning effective coping skills that place the emphasis on increasing your self-efficacy. These are strict rules that you “must” do, but instead flexible skills that allow you to better cope with obstacles that come up, regardless of what they are. Being able to roll with the punches of life in this way typically leaves people more able to effectively navigate any difficulties they face. These programs also emphasize that recovering from addiction to something is a process that will not always go in a positive upward line, and so you need to accept any setbacks for what they are – temporary and an opportunity to push forward using your newly learned skills.

Black Nonbelievers, Inc: Can Atheist Black Women Beat Back Fundamentalism In America?

July 21, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Black Nonbelievers, Inc. founder Mandisa Thomas on black atheism, how sexism hurts activist communities, and empowering the next generation.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: I want to ask a more personal line of questions around being a black woman in America who is a nonbeliever. I know Maryam Namazie uses the phrase “minority within a minority” to describe ex-Muslims within the Muslim community within the United Kingdom. What are some of the more emotionally difficult circumstances you have had to overcome in that positions?

Thomas: One is the idea that all black women are believers. The culture of black community, particularly the black church, even though it is misogynistic; women have been the backbone of the church.

Women are the ones who organize, but the men are the ones who get the credit. We see the same within the atheist community. As for myself, I started Black Nonbelievers. I am the face of the organization. There has been a significant amount of coverage.

Jacobsen: Do you feel there is a lot of sexism for women who are atheists and want to propagate their message to overcome?

Thomas: Men are viewed as the spokespersons. Our views are obscured as well as our work. I still battle that. Somehow, my voice isn't as valuable as a black pastor who may have left church, even if they do not identify as an atheist.

You see some men who are detracting from Christianity, pastors leaving religion, but, yet, people are looking into these default spokespersons for atheism.

Their journey out of religion seems more amplified than a black women atheist founder of a national organization.

Jacobsen: What are some other barriers?

Thomas: Some are openly identifying, trying to get people together. So many people have gotten used to this sense of social ostracism. You are afraid to venture out and meet others. We understand that life gets in the way, but it is still a matter of getting people together, as well as help out and volunteer.

The idea of getting people comfortable with that open identification. That is where the open support comes in.

Jacobsen: Are there social tools or epithets in place to derogate or prevent open identification?

Thomas: I wouldn't say there's anything in particular. That is, there is nothing in place that inherently prevents people from doing it. There is a lot implied. The fear of the ostracism. The fear of alienation, the fear of people abandoning them.

That is more prevalent. It is a matter of making people comfortable with not simply speaking out, but also finding likeminded individuals and connecting with them. It is overcoming the fear.

Jacobsen: How does being a mother of three influence your long-term thoughts about the prospects for the nonbelieving movement in the future? We are noticing a broad phenomenon of religiosity on the wane in America, but also more open fundamentalism in some respects.

Thomas: Right, I want my children and other children to know that they have choices. This isn't something that they should have to fight as they get older. Open identification as an atheist shouldn't be stigmatizing for them.

They shouldn't have to fight with their peers or other adults if they or their parents openly identify as an atheist or have a different point of view. They shouldn't have to worry about religious ideals being imposed in a public setting or in their schools.

They have the power to fight that. For me, the purpose of doing this is that whatever they become passionate about, they should have the right to speak up. No one should have the right to silence them. I try to be an example for them.

Jacobsen: Recently, you transitioned from full-time work to full-time activism. You also have a Patreon page to support you in this effort. Where can we find this Patreon page?

Thomas: The Patreon website is as follows: www.patreon.com/mandisalateefah. It isn't a searchable link or a searchable page because it contains adult content.

You can also reach me by email mandisa@blacknonbelievers.org. You can reach me at our website www.blacknonbelievers.org for more information. I decided to resign from my full-time job to pursue activism full-time because there was a need to continue to grow the organization as well as grow my activism to a new level.

Jacobsen: How can people donate funds? How can they provide exposure to your new full-time activism?

Thomas: The most important thing would be to support Black Nonbelievers. We are a 501(c)3 organization. The more you donate, then the more we are able to create full-time positions. In the meantime, Patreon is a donation website where you can pledge as little as dollar a month to support my activism. Or you can do both! [Laughing]

Jacobsen: With the funds people will no doubt be giving or donating to you, what would you hope to do with it in the next 12 months?

Thomas: In the next 12 months, we will be supporting Black Nonbelievers as an organization. We recently launched a chapter in the Cincinnati, Ohio area. We look to establish, on the ground, chapters, where people are hosting meetups, hosting in-person events, and collaborating offline wherever we are needed.

We are always looking for people who are willing to work and volunteer with us. Those dollars would, of course, go to supporting myself and the work that I do.

Black Nonbelievers, myself included, donate to other secular organizations and entities, as well as our members, that need help. There is the potential to support a podcast for us. Also, it will allow me to be able to travel to places where I am requested because I get a lot of requests to speak.

That would keep overhead low. Also, when these presentations are recorded, they are made available for later viewing and for information. There is *a lot*. I have, hopefully, covered some in that response.

Jacobsen: Also, you are part of a radio program. That should be something people should take note of because you have experience with audio presentation of news of the day and conversation topics, which would make the podcast a natural transition.

Thomas: Absolutely, oh yes.

Jacobsen: What are other ways people can get to know you?

Thomas: You can find me on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/mandisalateefah>. Patreon really is the place to get to know me a lot better. I shared a lot of unfiltered thoughts, and unfiltered guidance and advice on leadership and community building.

These come from a more practical standpoint. At my previous job, I was an event services manager, which plays a lot into why Black Nonbelievers has been successful – particularly with interacting with people in person.

I have experience engaging with people extensively. This is something people in the atheist community can benefit from considering a lot of the problems that we're seeing now with regards to interactions with others, particularly women.

There is a lot of people can learn about basic human interactions, which they are not learning from the regular activism and the intellectual aspect. I bring that to the table.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Mandisa.

Thomas: No Problem! Thank you.

Anti-Vaxxers and the Persistent Myth of Harmful Vaccinations

August 7, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Claire has a background in law and psychology, and is currently working on her degree in Religious Studies. She has been involved in the skeptic movement since 2013 as co-organizer of the Czech Paranormal Challenge. Since then, she has consulted on various projects, where woo and belief meet science. Claire has spoken at multiple science and skepticism conferences and events. She also organized the European Skeptics Congress in 2017, and both years of the Czech March for Science.

Her current activities include chairing the European Council of Skeptical Organisations, running the “Don’t Be Fooled” project (which provides free critical thinking seminars to interested high schools), contributing to the Czech Religious Studies journal Dingir, as well as to their news in religion website. In her free time, Claire visits various religious movements to understand better what draws people to certain beliefs.

Claire lives in Prague, Czech Republic, with her partner and dog.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: The epithet used against those who reject the vast evidence on the effectiveness of vaccines is “anti-vaxxer.” What do they stand for? Why are they a threat to the public health?

Claire Klingenberg: Their idea is that all medical choices should be the decision of the individual or, when it comes to children, the decision of the parent. That is one of their main arguments.

The reason why they are applying this argument to vaccinations is that they believe a lot of misinformation and lies about the harmfulness of vaccinations. They do not understand how serious it is for an epidemic to spread. They don’t understand that it is not just a personal choice that won’t affect anyone else.

Even though, there is an epidemic of measles spreading through Europe right now. Anti-vaxxers do not see that as a consequence of non-vaccinations. They play it off or see getting measles as an inconsequential thing.

Jacobsen: What are the reasons for their pushback to legitimate scientific and public health concerns?

Klingenberg: It is the same as conspiracy groups. They believe the scientists have been paid by pharmaceutical companies or some other secret or shadow organizations.

They believe that true information comes from individual doctors or individuals who are [laughing] no longer doctors or scientists, or even gurus or alternative medicine people. Those people play into that fear.

They are more likely to believe an emotional story of one parent than heaps of data. At the same time, though, it has to be a parent that toes their party line. If it’s a story of a parent who regrets

not vaccinating after their child died of a preventable disease, they think that it must be a made up story, or the parent was paid to say that.

Jacobsen: How do parents fall into this other than through emotional appeals?

Klingenberg: There are mainly emotional appeals because there is no cumulative data for vaccine harm. Of course, many people have mild reactions to vaccinations. And yes, there is a small percentage of people who have serious negative reactions.

I do not deny that because to deny that would be to deny reality. But it is such a small percentage, compared to the harm caused by the disease itself. The threat of not vaccinating or of getting a serious disease or of spreading the agents of this disease makes the chances of getting the disease much higher.

There is a big misunderstanding here about the importance of herd immunity. Anti-vaxxers do not understand that it is not just about them. It is not a personal medical choice, but a choice that influences and has an impact on the whole society.

Jacobsen: How can people become more informed about vaccinations in general? How can we contribute to the conversation on anti-vaccination views?

Klingenberg: For quality vaccine information in general, look at the website of the World Health Organization. When it comes to getting information about your nation, it is best to look at the ministry health of a particular country or official health organizations within your particular country. Always use sources which cumulate the most data. Websites and blogs built around one or two stories are not reliable.

When it comes to spreading the message about vaccinations, there is the Twitter campaign: #provaxchallenge. We invite people to take pictures from when they get themselves, their kids, and animals vaccinated. I'm sure you'll see my tweets there, too.

Now, unfortunately, the anti-vaccination rhetoric has now spread on to concern pets as well. There is talk of autistic dogs, and how rabies is just a puppy disease you don't have to vaccinate against.

When we talk to people to get them off the conspiracy train, we cannot reason someone out of something they did not reason themselves into.

You can ask them, "When you were vaccinated, did you have any reactions?" You can make them realize that we do not have polio anymore [laughing]. Ask lots of questions. Be gentle when correcting their point. Show them videos of how kids with serious diseases like measles look like. There is this belief that measles and all of these diseases we vaccinate against do not do great harm. Show them it isn't true.

At the same time, you need to be careful not to manipulate the other person. Of course, showing heartbreaking videos is a type of emotional manipulation, that is why it should not be the crux of your argument, more like an illustration. Make sure all of the information that you are giving is all correct. No hyperboles, no exaggerations, no matter how well-meaning there are.

First, you cannot afford to lie and manipulate the same way anti-vaxxers do. Second, you don't have to because the facts are on your side. I understand that it is easier and faster to gain a person's agreement by manipulating them. However, if you are caught once manipulating

information or giving false information, you (and not just you) will lose all credibility and never have a chance to convince that person again.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Claire.

Md. Sazzadul Hoque: A Call for Help for an Inhumane Persecution

October 17, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Md. Sazzadul Hoque, a Bangladeshi blogger, human rights defender, and online activist, is in trouble. He is a member of the [Humane First Movement](#) and the founder of [penman.in](#). Here is his current status.

For activist work and writing, Hoque has suffered on a number of levels, including receiving death threats. In 2017, he was forced to leave Bangladesh out of safety concerns. He has been living in India since May 2017 under inhumane conditions and circumstances.

Despite surviving through those death threats and now living in a relatively safe environment, Hoque faces barriers in his access to education. Hoque was expelled from college because of his activist work. Now, he lives with a stalled academic progress, uncertain about his future.

In a recent encounter, Hoques mentioned, “I don’t know what will happen to me or how long I will survive”, and then stated, “I do not know whether I could ever go back to my country. I do not know when I would be able to meet my mother again.”

Fighting for minorities and the use of freedom of expression lost Hoque paternal connection, postsecondary studies status, and death threats tied to messages of violence. Hoque is now under ‘tourist’ status in India and, fortunately, had his visa extended recently. He is in a tight situation, nonetheless.

Hoque has been on the run from place to place. The Imams or the Islamic Priests from a variety of mosques have been calling for the murder of Hoque. Why?

He is an atheist. He is a *kafir*. Imams interpret this, through Islamic law, to mean that the death penalty needs to be imposed to Hoque. He has a good relationship with an uncle of his, who informed Hoque of the call made to be on the hunt for him, by the mullahs. Thus, the run continues, and there is a worry that this hunt extends beyond Bangladesh.

“Realizing I could no longer stay in Bangladesh safely – I would be slaughtered like cattle if I did -, I fled the country and moved to India on May 30, 2017,” Hoque states. “On June 6, 2017”, Hoque continues, “I posted an article on [Facebook](#) explaining my situation and the post went viral.”

His Facebook account was suspended, not those inciting public violence and making calls for murder: either as individuals or as a group.

More than one thousand people reacted to the post with about 700 comments on the post. 90% were death threats. Various fundamentalist groups since 2017 continue to make the same threats. The most recent arose on September 17, 2018. What was the result?

His Facebook account was suspended, not those inciting public violence and making calls for murder: either as individuals or as a group.

Hoque continued, “One of the popular online news portals covered my situation with the headline: *Blogger Md. Sazzadul Haque was thrust to death, thus he had to leave the country*”

Now, the publisher has faced death threats too. The trend is that, those with activism or writings against some Imams and mullahs, and some of the public, become justifications for declarations of violence against the activists and writers, if not outright murder demands on the parts of the followers of the Imams and mullahs themselves.

“Furthermore, now I am voluntarily involved as an administrator in Istishon, a social networking group of a community blog. I am also working as a graphic designer and programmer for the blog’s website,” Hoque said.

Now, Hoque is campaigning through [Humane First](#). The purpose of the organization is to promote the civil liberties and rights of individuals without regard to their identity or background.

This, by implication, works in contradistinction to the efforts of the religious fundamentalist ideas through respectful and civil conversation, discourse, dialogue, and debate.

It can be found through #behumanefirst. With help from the Protecting Belief Fund and the Center for Inquiry, Hoque has been staying in a temporary shelter. His activism and writing, as per the story, left him homeless, as a freethinker.

[Hoque’s work is] in contradistinction to the efforts of the religious fundamentalist ideas through respectful and civil conversation, discourse, dialogue, and debate.

“My life is in danger due to speaking about Humanism, Secularism and LGBT Rights. In spite of having immense threats, I haven’t stopped my writing,” Hoque concluded, “I have been living in inhumane conditions since May 2017. That’s why I am becoming mentally ill... My family has disowned me due to speaking about the rights of LGBT and other activities. I have no relation with my family since 2017. They do not support me. I can be I attacked by fundamentalist terrorists at any time even in India.”

This is solely the result of Hoques’ activist work, which embodies atheism and secularism. Hoque is just one of many bloggers who has had to flee Bangladesh because of their activism. Bloggers in Bangladesh are being [attacked, imprisoned, and executed](#), for their views.

We Need to Change How we Think About Refugees and Migration

November 7, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Jacobsen speaks to Gissou Nia about migrants, refugees, the international community, climate change, water scarcity, and more. Ms Gissou Nia is the Board Chair of the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center and the Strategy Director of Purpose.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Migrant and refugee issues are continually arising along with concerns from the international community relating to these issues. Increasingly, they reveal some problems as well. What are the problems being faced at present by migrants and refugees around the world?

Gissou Nia: I do not mean to be US-centric with this. But the thing on the centre of my mind is a decision issued by the Trump Administration in late September on the refugee admissions cap. In the US, ever since President Reagan, there has been a refugee cap set for each fiscal year, usually announced in September.

It is rubber stamped by the Congress. It is approved. But there is not much deviation from what the administration decides. That sets a limit on the number of refugees who are allowed to settle in the US each year.

For the past year, the decision announced in December 2016 that dictated how many people can come into the US in 2018; that was already at a historic low. It had been set at 45,000 individuals. You could have to compare that to the prior numbers, which were more than twice that.

Now, there was a recent decision only to permit no more than 30,000 people to enter the US; in fact, it has been reduced by 15,000, which makes it the lowest ever. I think there is a sense that what the Trump Administration would ideally want is to reduce the number to 0.

Even from the number of folks who would be permitted into the country in 2018, which was 45,000, we haven't reached that number in terms of actual people settled. With only a few weeks remaining in the fiscal year – the Administration, they only admitted only 20,000 refugees, so not even half of the number that it said that it would take into the country.

That is what is front of mind for me. As we reduce the number of people who are allowed to come in through the formalised resettlement process, we are denying people from war-torn countries. People who have been persecuted due to their lifestyle, beliefs, and professions, or individuals who have been forced to leave their country as staying posed serious concerns for their life.

“As we reduce the number of people who are allowed to come in through the formalised resettlement process, we are denying people from war-torn countries.” Source: VOA News

We are saying these people cannot legally come to this country. It leads to what is going on at the southern border. Many people are seeking protection. They are allowed under international law to seek protection from the violence they are fleeing from.

The narrative being presented is that people are coming here 'illegally.' That they are lawbreakers or doing things that are not allowed. Truly, a lot of these people who are coming are coming to seek protection from violent regimes in their home country.

That is what they are allowed to do under asylum laws. It is something the US has adhered to. Now, we are also seeking to reduce the number of refugees who can come to this country. That is really in front of mind for me.

As our political leaders demonstrate a lack of leadership and stoke the flames of xenophobia and contribute to that with othering rhetoric, we are not really on a track to be able to welcome people and successfully integrate and assimilate people who are truly seeking refuge.

We will need to be focused on what solutions are, because nobody, right now, can say it is a problem that doesn't concern them. It touches all of us. So, we have to be really mindful of it.

Those who we have had a decades-long history of welcoming. That is a disturbing turn of events. I find in this country. It is something we see across the world as we see countries closing borders and becoming hesitant to accept newcomers.

I am concerned that it is becoming entrenched along political lines. That is, it is not seen as a human or a humanitarian issue. That is of great concern to me. There are the UN Global Compacts of Refugees and Migration.

That should be formally adopted in December if I am not mistaken. That is going to be the first time that there is ever a global agreement on migration. Of course, there have been global agreements on refugees but not on migration.

We have a lack of political will from the Trump Administration withdrawing from the process. I think it is vital that other countries and the international community continue to invest in that process and really come to some logical solutions on how to deal with what is going to be an ever-increasing flow of people – leaving their origin countries.

People are also forced to leave their countries of origin due to climate change. This is going to continue unless we are in a place to reach the political solutions and the solutions needed for climate change to prevent natural disasters and different people from having to leave their different countries due to lack of water.

We will need to be focused on what solutions are, because nobody, right now, can say it is a problem that doesn't concern them. It touches all of us. So, we have to be really mindful of it.

Jacobsen: With climate change worsening, are the projects such that there will be more refugees and migrants around the world as climate change becomes worse, e.g., as the problem of water scarcity worsens due to climate change, as you mentioned in the response?

Nia: Yes, of course, it is hard to predict the future. But, at the moment, we are on track to have some serious water shortages because that will lead to different people leaving and seeking quite literally greener pastures, because they will be dealing with incredible challenges at home. Already, we see this in Iran with some severe water shortages. It is causing draught and impacting subsistence farmers. We will see that pattern globally.

Of course, there is evidence to show the civil unrest in Syria and the initial protests were stoked by drought and by farmers being very unhappy with certain circumstances. I think there is evidence of that globally.

We see a negative trend when it comes to that. I do not see that resolving anytime soon; unless there are serious global solutions being proposed to counter it.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Gissou.

Dr. Sven van de Wetering on Augustine, Free Will and Psychological Analysis

November 14, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

In Part Five of this interview series, Dr Sven van de Wetering speaks to Scott Jacobsen about free will, Augustine and psychological analysis.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Do the psychological sciences assume Freedom of the Will? How do you define Freedom of the Will?

Dr Sven van de Wetering: The concept of freedom of will seems to have arisen in a theological context, and was well articulated by St. Augustine. The argument went something like this: God is all-powerful, and therefore capable of making people do whatever He wants.

Nevertheless, people frequently do things that displease God. This makes sense only if one assumes that God creates little zones within people's minds in which He does not exercise the control of which he is capable. Hence, freedom of will is the ability to make choices independently of God.

Psychology has mostly moved away from this theological mode of thought and tends to be materialist in orientation. In other words, the phenomena that laypeople think of as mental or spiritual are the results of processes taking place in the brain, in accordance with physical and chemical laws.

If freedom of will implies a rejection of that materialism or implies that mental processes can somehow violate the laws of physics and chemistry, in the way that Augustine thought that humans had the freedom to violate the laws of God, then I would have to say that psychology does not endorse free will.

If, on the other hand, we mean by freedom of the will that human beings are complex creatures that, thanks to their well-developed prefrontal cortices, are capable of deciding to engage in actions that run contrary to the biological programming postulated by evolutionary psychologists or the cultural programming postulated by many other psychologists, then I would have to say that most psychologists do endorse a version of free will. Although, it is a version that does not create a little gap in the omnipotence of the laws of nature in quite the same way that Augustinian freedom of will creates a little gap in divine omnipotence.

Jacobsen: In the natural world handed to us, through the natural philosophical tradition seen in the sciences and tied to Descartes, we face the passive, naturalistic, and moving world external to our minds connected to the concept of an active but freely selecting – while constrained – mind with various psychological dynamics.

How does psychology link the first conceptualisation with the second? What seems to make sense of the issue more than others?

van de Wetering: This is mostly a levels-of-analysis issue. At the level of neurons, processes are invariable and, in your terminology, passive. At the level of organisms, though, especially of human beings, the very complexity of the interlocking systems allows them to produce the types of processes we call selecting, deciding, thinking, and so forth.

I see the disparity of these levels analysis when I, for example, play a game of chess against my computer. I know that what is happening inside the computer is just electrons running through processors according to the laws of physics, but that does not change the fact that it is actually more useful for my chess game if I interpret the computer as choosing lines of play, deciding on specific lines of attack, and thinking about its options. It is this way of thinking about the computer's behaviour that Dennett called the intentional stance. The intentional stance is an angle of view, not a rejection of determinism or materialism.

Jacobsen: How does epistemology work in the light of the linkage between these two ideas?

van de Wetering: Thinking of yourself as a deterministic, material system when trying to make epistemological judgments is not going to get you very far (except that it may instil a certain useful humility). You get much further in epistemology if you again take the intentional stance, thinking of knowledge in terms of the goals that are served by knowing.

There will be times when one's understanding of human beings will be furthered by thinking of them as material systems; I certainly would not want to undo all those lovely fMRI studies. At the same time, the connection between the material substrate and the phenomena we think of as mental or intentional is sufficiently loose that I will continue to endorse the use of multiple levels of analysis in psychology and numerous research techniques based on multiple sets of epistemological assumptions.

Cultural anthropologists and economists both study human beings, but do so using very different epistemologies from most psychologists (and each other); nevertheless, I find that both are a lot of fun to read because their different angles of view allow them to supplement the varied psychological perspectives through which I usually look at human behaviour.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Sven.

Dr Sven van de Wetering is an associate professor at the [University of the Fraser Valley](#). He is on the Advisory Board of [In-Sight: Independent Interview-Based Journal](#). Dr. van de Wetering earned his BSc in Biology at [The University of British Columbia](#), his Bachelor of Arts in Psychology at Concordia University and his Master of Arts, and a PhD in Psychology from [Simon Fraser University](#). His research interest lies in conservation psychology, lay conceptions of evil, and relationships between personality variables and political attitudes. [Session 1](#), [Session 2](#), [Session 3](#), & [Session 4 can be found here](#).

Angelos Sofocleous: Free Speech, Political Correctness, and Academia

December 5, 2018

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Scott Jacobsen speaks to Conatus News editor Angelos Sofocleous about free speech and political correctness in academia and society.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Angelos, you got in trouble, recently. It was over a phrase tweeted from an article, an article included in the controversy as well. You, due to the created circumstances, resigned as the president-elect of Humanist Students and were fired as the assistant editor of Durham University Philosophy Society's journal, *Critique*, and as co-editor-in-chief of *The Bubble*, a university magazine. Let's start: what was the tweeted statement?

Angelos Sofocleous: As part of some gender-critical articles and comments that I had made in the previous months, I retweeted a tweet which read "RT if women don't have penises". The original tweet also had a screenshot from an article by *The Spectator* titled [‘Is it a crime to say ‘women don’t have penises?’](#) Apparently, as I have experienced, it is a crime. Christopher Ward, who was Chair of LGBT Humanists in the past, tweeted about my retweet, pointing the fact that I, as president-elect of Humanist Students, was tweeting, in his words, 'transphobic shit'. He had also pointed out that he had faced a lot of 'transphobic' behaviour when he was involved in Humanists UK. He did not give any evidence for his claims, nor he engaged into a conversation when I asked him to and failed to provide counter-arguments in the arguments that I had made supporting my position following his tweet. Calling me a 'bigot' and as 'suffering from cognitive dissonance' was certainly not a way to have a fruitful discussion. I had calmly tried to engage him in a conversation by linking him to [a recent article that I had written](#), in which I explain my position on sex, gender, and the transgender movement. He ignored it, basically revealing that his real intentions were to make a fuss about his view of Humanists UK.

Following that, I was blamed, by Humanists UK officials for 'disreputing' the organisation. They didn't hold any discussion about it and did not show any willingness to engage in a civilised debate about the political statements that I had made. Given their insensible reaction and also the fact that they demanded, in the future, that if similar controversies arise, I have to ask what the official stance of Humanists UK is before I voice my opinion, I felt compelled to resign from my position. This was not a point to which I wanted to reach. However, I couldn't cooperate anymore with people who, despite their claims that they belong in an open-minded organisation which is driven by science and rational thinking, their actions have proven that, in certain cases, Humanists UK cannot avoid dogmatism.

Angelos Sofocleous resigned from his post as president-elect of Humanist Students after the backlash within the organization due to his retweet 'women don't have penises'.

That week, I had also been appointed Assistant Editor of Durham University Philosophy Society's journal, *Critique*. A few days after I was appointed, I received an email from Ryan Lo, the President of Durham University Philosophy Society, telling me that I was fired from my position as my comments 'belittled trans experiences'.

A few days later, I got an email from my co-editor-in-chief at *The Bubble*, a student magazine at Durham University, in which I was informed that I was removed from the position of co-editor-in-chief due to the recent controversies.

In October, Durham Students' Union [had ruled that my firing from Critique and The Bubble was unfair and undemocratic](#), as they did not follow the procedures outlined by Durham Students' Union, did not give me an opportunity to explain my views, did not gather a vote of no confidence from their members, and did not give me an opportunity to appeal the decision.

The reactions from the three organisations unveiled a big problem with freedom of speech in academia. As shown in a [petition started by Conatus News](#) a few days after my firings, dozens of academics expressed their concerns about where academia is heading; academics who had experienced fierce criticism for their views. Political correctness has, indeed, gone too far in universities, especially when it is combined with identity politics.

Jacobsen: What was the intended message of the tweet? What was the interpreted message from the tweet?

Sofocleous: In that tweet, and in my previous statements and articles, I expressed some concerns for the transgender movement, offering, at the same time, some suggestions for improvement. I agree with one basic principle of the transgender movement: that gender stereotypes need to break. But my critique is on their actions; particularly on the fact that the transgender movement makes gender stereotypes more concrete instead of getting rid of them. And that critique was not well-received, evidently.

Therefore, I made the retweet as part of the critical statements in which I pointed out that we need to distinguish between sex and gender. Based on this distinction, I claimed that one could not claim to be a woman solely based on how they feel, or behave, or act, or dress, or 'identify'.

This is the crucial point in the discussion and in my criticisms. We need to define what it means to *identify* as a woman or a man. I have not received a satisfactory answer to that question yet. All answers that I receive are either a) Circular, i.e. 'a woman is anyone who sincerely identifies as a woman', or b) Promoting gender stereotypes, i.e. 'A man is whoever performs/feels/behaves like a man'. This is what I wanted to address with the retweet and my gender-critical statements. Remember, we do not speak about individuals who have undergone surgery and claim to have become women and, thereby, female. Some claim to feel like a woman or claim to be a woman because they behave like a woman or have some behavioural aspects that are normally associated with being a woman. Thus, they enforce the stereotypes. Intersex and transsexual individuals, however, are often left out of the discussion.

So, with this retweet, I wanted to challenge the notion of 'feeling like a woman'. There is no such thing as feeling your gender, or sex, or age, or any part of our identity. True, you might actually feel some things which are *stereotypically associated* with an identity. But, I want to say three things here. One, aren't we supposed to get rid of these stereotypes? If you conform to certain stereotypes, it is damaging if at the same time you claim to belong to the identity group to which those stereotypes apply. Two, in case you claim to not belong to any identity group and be, instead, gender-fluid or non-binary, then you must understand that by leaving your group (man/woman) you actually strengthen the stereotypes that apply to those groups as the only individuals who belong in that group after you left are individuals who satisfy the stereotypes. Three, following from the previous two points, if you are going to challenge stereotypes

associated with your identity group, it is incredibly important that you stay in your group while fighting these stereotypes. Women who feel marginalized are not doing any favour to themselves by calling themselves 'womxn'. If you actually believe that you are oppressed by other women, as a woman, then express these challenges from within your group. By alienating yourself from the group, you only confirm your beliefs about the group itself. But this only takes place because you have decided to alienate yourself from it.

Gender, sex, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnicity, age. We just *are* those things. There is no separate feeling that is associated with any aspect of one's identity.

People, I believe, should be able to express themselves in any way that they can. There is no reason to have men's clothes or women's clothes, for example. One should be able to wear whatever they want to, without having to worry that they identify as something. Any label you put in your behaviour is restrictive, especially when this label hijacks science.

Jacobsen: Of those individuals who read the tweet and the full article, so far as you can tell, what was the interpreted message by them – those who took the time to understand the arguments and statements within the specific context?

Sofocleous: Unfortunately, those who have read the article were much fewer than those who just saw the retweet. But a general criticism I have gotten is concerning individuals who have gender dysphoria and, even though they are males, for example, they feel like they are women. To deny their claim means, for them, denying their existence. However, no one denies anyone's right to exist. Trans individuals are human beings and, as human beings, they deserve to be treated with love, respect, and kindness. Me not agreeing on how you label yourself has nothing to do with your existence.

The comments were not at all on the personal level but purely on the ideological level; they were not based on attacking any particular individual.

I believe that the transgender movement would be much more able to achieve its aims not by creating more genders but by eliminating gender as a concept.

Jacobsen: In one of the first responses, you gave the reasons as to the resignations and firings. Outside of the philosophy journal, the student magazine, and the president-elect position, what were other resignations or firings at this time?

Sofocleous: No. But I faced further problems at University. At the beginning of the academic year, I was worried about the reaction of the philosophy department here, and whether the events would impact my studies and academic career, as I know that the department is not particularly friendly to my views.

I met with this lecturer who is an assistant professor. Before the meeting, she had told that she was open to gender-critical views within the department. At the meeting, I realised that that was not the case. She tried to lecture me on what freedom of speech was, and that my retweet did not fall under freedom of speech. This affirmed what I think about some transgender activists. They police some things people think or say.

She had also said, "You had misgendered someone in your Twitter account." It goes beyond the academic and into scolding someone in a personal capacity based on what they said in their Twitter account. The fact that she actually went back into my Twitter feed and found an instance where I had 'misgendered' someone, and told me off about it, is beyond me. Furthermore, when

I said that 'we should distinguish between the personal and the ideological' she said that 'it's easy to say this when you're privileged', twice. It's a tactic of anti-gender-critical individuals, to shut down speech because of someone's 'privileged' position. They start the discussion with a privilege check and they will deny you the right to speak or voice your opinion if they find that you are too privileged.

Of course, she did not care to ask anything about my background, my past, my ideas. It is extremely sad that some people shout 'privilege!' on their sight of a white heterosexual male, and discussion stops there.

We need to have conversations on gender, on race, and other controversial issues without having the debate shut down because some people take it personally. Facts do not care about your feelings.

As a threatening act, she also had the Gender Identity Policy of Durham University in front of me when I entered the office. The Policy reads:

Transphobic abuse, harassment or bullying (refusing to use a correct pronoun, ignoring a person because of their trans status, intrusive questions) will be dealt with under the University's Respect at Work or Respect at Study Policy and may lead to disciplinary action which could include expulsion/dismissal.

It is like going to Saudi Arabia and have them showing you the part in their Criminal Code which says that it is an insult to criticize Islam. It is the same thing. Someone showing you a legal document or a penal code and not getting to the root of the discussion or the debate, of whether it is right to insult the Prophet Muhammad or to have a discussion on gender issues. The radical left's tactics are incredibly similar, if not identical, to religious fundamentalism. In today's political climate, the radical left and the far-right are connected through this wormhole of similarity of tactics.

Further to that, I had expressed the view that when a foreigner, such as myself, comes to the UK to study, s/he is often unaware of the beliefs, customs, and traditions of the UK. Therefore, even if Brits disagree with a foreigner on an issue which they think that they are absolutely right, they should take the time to explain why they are right, and not just force their opinion. Their colonial past certainly does not help – they're used to forcing their traditions and their views. Coming from a country which suffered from British colonialism, and which still suffers from it, it was particularly ignorant of her that she simply dismissed my statement by saying "I know, I'm from Ireland".

Jacobsen: John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty*, made a point. He made many points. One of the points made was the idea of someone wanting to restrict the right to freedom of expression of another person. The idea being: the person who wants to restrict the person's freedom of expression believes they have some absolute knowledge ahead of time about what is a correct answer on the topic to be discussed.

With the threat of expulsion from a university, especially for someone about to enter graduate school, post-graduate work, can be particularly threatening coming from the department. Also, you made a point about a separation between the personal and the ideological. In a philosophy department, in particular, a person should have the capacity to speak on even sensitive issues at an ideological level through critical thinking and logical analysis rather than this being 'misgendering'.

This is the big separation and the point you're making insofar as I can tell.

Sofocleous: Exactly, it's quite worrying and concerning that this took place in the philosophy society and the philosophy department, when the general aim of philosophy is to discover the truth through debate and discussion. I see that their approach was wholly wrong. But, which is the right approach? Let's take a step back. Let's say you have a dangerous view or a view considered dangerous in your community. How do you deal with that view? How do you deal with a threatening or an immoral view?

Let's take someone who is a white supremacist, or someone who argues that women are subordinate to men. Confronting such views is a three-dimensional process. The first is changing the mind of that person and like-minded people. The second is stopping the harmful view from spreading into society. And the third is spreading the right view into society, not through enforcement, but through society itself finding the right approach.

What happens, however, is that white supremacists, for example, are simply punished. Of course, in punishing those individuals we assure that their views are blocked from spreading into society. But, we do not change the mind of those individuals and we do not make sure that the right view spreads in society. Punishing those individuals does not reveal to them what the right position to take is. They are not convinced that their ideas are wrong. In fact, by punishing them, you even make them believe in the ideology more deeply. Getting at the issue in this way, we are not getting to the core of it. Punishing someone does not ensure the idea goes away.

Their punishment, which might just be physical punishment or punishment affecting their mental wellbeing is received in a way in which those who are punished want to fight back.

Dangerous ideas must be taken to be a virus. However, they can't be treated just like a virus, for the following reasons:

One would think that we need to restrict the idea to a certain area in society in a way that it cannot spread through society, as we would do with a virus. The thing with viruses is that they are not able to organise themselves in a way which is similar to how human societies organise. A virus can simply be marginalised to a certain part of the body where it affects healthy cells at a minimum level, and subsequently be exterminated. The viruses themselves are not going to organise and fight back to the healthy part of the body.

But with human individuals, if you restrict or marginalise a group in society, those individuals are still given the opportunity to organise themselves and fight back against the healthy part of society. Of course, our first inclination when we face a dangerous idea is to punish and marginalise it from society. However, simply marginalising a dangerous view does not help. It helps no one; neither the individuals, nor their groups, nor society.

What is the right approach, then? Education. The right approach is educating those individuals and trying to convince them through healthy debate that they are on the wrong side – if they actually are on the wrong side. There is a caveat here, however. If we debate or discuss with those individuals, where do you put the boundary? Do we need to make this a debate between a creationist or an evolutionist, or a human rights activist and a white supremacist? I do not think it goes to that level where you need to put both in a boxing ring let them fight each other through debate and see which side wins. However, even if those ideas are not debated publicly, individuals who hold those views must not simply be punished, but one should approach them

conversationally and convince them of the wrongness of their ideas or show where their way of thinking is fallacious.

There should be a debate or a discussion, or understanding, of my ideas. If those individuals believe I am wrong, I am open to them convincing me otherwise. There is a concern when some individuals are not allowed to voice ideas which some deem controversial. Because you do not know what their controversial ideas or opinions are if you do not allow them to voice them.

You can only attack the ideas when you know what the ideas are. It is important. We cannot treat a dangerous view simply as a virus. We should debate those individuals in the public sphere and the private sphere to convince them of our ideas if we are so confident that we are right.

Jacobsen: Looking forward, what is happening with the student union, the publications, and so on? What is happening with this public dialogue at this point around a particular colleague of mine, Angelos Sofocleous?

Sofocleous: Durham Students' Union decided to uphold my complaint by concluding that my firings from *Critique* and *The Bubble* were unfair and undemocratic. However, the investigation said that my freedom of speech was not violated, which is not the case. Freedom of speech means you are free from consequences related to your speech. There's no free speech when you face the consequences for what you say.

It is, however, saddening on the personal level as well. I knew the people who were involved in the two publications and considered them good friends of mine. We have a lot of common interests, views, and ideas. This is the first time in my life that I am not on speaking terms with someone. It is simply sad that people reach this level in their relationships simply because they disagree on some issues. I do wish they would be more accepting of people with different views.

As regards other stuff that has been happening, this gave me the opportunity to talk to other organisations or groups about freedom of speech, transgender rights, and where academia is heading. A few weeks ago, I gave a talk in the UK about whether academia has been impacted by political correctness and people who have been policing what has been happening in academia.

[P]eople are scared to be hurt, to be offended, to have their ideas criticized and their worldview shaken.

Jacobsen: Any final feelings or thoughts based on the conversation today?

Sofocleous: I would like to touch on the subject of truth, especially in philosophy. We have reached a point where feelings seem to matter more than facts and conversation on some subject is shut down based on the feelings of some people because the conversation is seen as too controversial.

We should not fear threatening opinions or even dangerous ones, but be ready to oppose them and support our ideas against the ideas of the other. But, sadly, this does not seem to be the case in academia. This environment is creating people who are too fragile. Or, anti-fragile, as Jonathan Haidt puts it as young people today are overprotecting themselves by being scared to be fragile – people are scared to be hurt, to be offended, to have their ideas criticized and their worldview shaken.

They feel that there should be someone who protects them all the time. It is the law or some policy. However, I would say: it is a good thing to be offended. When someone is offended, they

know that they have gone outside of their bubble. We will, of course, feel offended outside of our bubble.

It makes you visit other bubbles and try to convince other people of your truth. Even if we can be open, we can be challenged and change our views on some issues. But, of course, this will not happen if we keep residing inside of our bubble. We should be welcoming to other people's views.

We should value the duty of having a conversation with people whom we have opposing views. Because this is not only an opportunity and to listen to the other person's views. But if we care about the truth, then we can convince them of what the truth is.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Angelos.

License and Copyright

License



In-Sight Publishing and *In-Sight: Independent Interview-Based Journal* by [Scott Douglas Jacobsen](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#).

Based on a work at www.in-sightjournal.com.

Copyright

© 2012-2019 by Scott Douglas Jacobsen and *In-Sight Publishing* 2012-2019. Unauthorized use and/or duplication of this material without express and written permission from this site's author and/or owner is strictly prohibited. Excerpts and links may be used, provided that full and clear credit is given to Scott Douglas Jacobsen and *In-Sight Publishing* with appropriate and specific direction to the original content.