

Nietzsche, Free Spirits, and the Marginal Culture of Atheism¹

Rule? Press my type on others? Dreadful. Is not my happiness precisely the sight of many who are *different*? Problem. [(1982a), p.441]

In Hans Christian Andersen's *The Emperor's New Clothes*, the townspeople, out of fear of appearing foolish, observe that the Emperor's "new garments" are "marvelous" and "beautiful." But a child, seeing what is in plain view and not being victim to such fears, boldly proclaims, "The Emperor is naked." The child's claim represents an obvious fact about the world and the denial of that claim, among the townspeople, represents public opinion and group pressure.

The Free Spirit or atheist in America has long viewed herself in an analogous situation.² She boldly proclaims, with Nietzsche in *The Gay Science*, that "God is dead," but no one seems to want to notice or accept this brute fact, even though it is in plain view of everyone. While everyone around the Free Spirit claims (or assumes) certain things to either be "divinely" inspired or affected or part of a divine plan, the Free Spirit sees the world as shaped by, and mainly the result of, human choice, physical law, and chance occurrence. The Free Spirit sees herself as one who is, in Nietzsche's terms, *above*, or at least beyond, these divine attitudes. Intellectual integrity (expressed through the will to truth³), not God, is the key to the Free Spirit's world, accompanied by a clear understanding of the scientific method.

¹ Thanks to Steven Alford and Deirdre Fagan for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

² The point here is not to completely identify atheists with Free Spirits, but to only claim that the views of atheists overlap in important ways concerning the function of God in the world, especially in matters of morality. They can and should be interchanged for the purposes of this paper.

³ "At every step one has to wrestle for truth; one has to surrender for it almost everything to which the heart, to which our love, our trust in life, cling otherwise"[(1982a), p.632]. See also, (1993), p.43.

I do not want to believe it although it is palpable: *the great majority of people lacks an intellectual conscience*....I mean: *the great majority of people* does not consider it contemptible to believe this or that and to live accordingly, without first having given themselves an account of the final and most certain reasons pro and con, and without even troubling themselves about such reasons afterward... [(1974), 2]

That it does not matter whether a thing is true, but only what effect it produces – absolute lack of intellectual integrity. [(1987), 172]

...[W]e must become the best learners and discoverers of everything that is lawful and necessary in the world: we must become *physicists* in order to be able to be *creators* in this sense – while hitherto all valuations and ideals have been based on *ignorance* of physics or were constructed so as to *contradict* it. Therefore: long live physics! And even more so that which *compels* us to turn to physics – our honesty! [(1974), 335]

Conviction is the belief that on some particular point of knowledge one is in possession of the unqualified truth. This belief presupposes that unqualified truths exist; likewise that perfect methods of attaining to them have been discovered; finally, that everyone who possesses convictions avails himself of these perfect methods. All three assertions demonstrate at once that the man of convictions is not the man of scientific thought; he stands before us in the age of theoretical innocence and is a child, however grown up he may be in other respects. [(1996), 630]

The Free Spirit is therefore surprised to find that the notion of a dead god is not apparent to all.

The “Legend of Nietzsche,” by scholar R. J. Hollingdale, embodies Nietzsche’s legend of the Free Spirit. Hollingdale claims:

The modern legend of the isolate and embattled individual: the hero as outsider. He thinks more, knows more, and suffers more than other men do, and is as a consequence elevated above them. Whatever he has of value he has created out of himself, for apart from himself there is only “the compact majority,” which is always wrong. When he speaks he is usually misunderstood, but he can in any case be understood only by isolated and embattled individuals such as himself. In the end he removes himself to a distance at which he and the compact majority become mutually invisible, but his image is preserved in his icon: the man who goes alone. [Hollingdale (1996), p.87]

While this passage sets forth that the Free Spirit is a loner, it also demonstrates why she is on the fringes of society not solely by choice, but by necessity. Those unlike her, i.e. “bound” spirits who believe in and are constrained by the edicts of God and traditional religion,⁴ are unable (or unwilling)

⁴ Clearly, the claim is not meant to apply to *all* religions. (Nietzsche’s traditional target is Christianity.)

to hear her claims, just as the townspeople cannot hear the child's in *The Emperor's New Clothes*. Owing to this gap in communication and the Free Spirit's attitude toward life, she is forced to keep the majority at a distance, and to become invisible to them. At the same time, she gains strength and an attitude of elitism through her loner-status. Hollingdale's assessment of the contemporary Free Spirit is fairly accurate in one sense (i.e., through the consequence of *elevation*), but the necessity of remaining a loner is largely owing to society's false impressions of her perspectives and impressions rather than elitism.

While the Free Spirit embraces the qualities of intellectual integrity and truth, her character is falsely assumed to embody less admirable qualities as well. Bound spirits or theists assume she lacks a moral code, and her existence is thereby meaningless. In the sense of bound spirits or theists, she is assumed to act without a conscience and without an awareness of consequences, since she does not live in fear of eternal punishment.⁵ They expect her to irrationally succumb to worldly appetites and desires, and to give no thought to acting barbarously. Owing to these misunderstandings, theists view her suspiciously. Further, since the playing field for a discussion of traditional beliefs in God involves the human soul and the afterlife, and since the Free Spirit *qua* materialist (i.e. one who claims there is nothing over and above the physical body) believes in neither of these things, she is assumed, from the perspective of bound spirits, to not only be "damned" (Romans 14:23) but, in the spirit of Socrates, to also be corruptible to youth.

Along with this attitude of bound spirits, the characters of Free Spirits and atheists have been historically attacked in Western culture. Not only was an avowal of the death of god quickly followed by the death of the speaker in the Middle Ages (formally characterized as heresy and

⁵ Again, the target here is narrowed to traditional Western religions.

justified by Thomas Aquinas⁶), but diluted attacks remained among Western culture throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. In the sense of Free Spirits and atheists, English critic and philologist Richard Bentley vowed in 1724 that, “No atheist as such can be a true friend, an affectionate relation, or a loyal subject,” and John Locke, a noted philosopher of liberty, stated (somewhat ironically) in his *A Letter Concerning Tolerance* that, “Promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no effect on an atheist.” [Martin (1992), p.4-5]

Attacks on the atheist’s character continued throughout the 19th century. Before the Evidence Amendment Act of 1869, atheists in England were considered incompetent to give evidence in a court of law, and in an Illinois court case in 1856, one Ira Aldrich was disqualified as a witness in a trial after testifying he was an atheist. The Supreme Court of Tennessee, in 1871, stated that:

The man who has the hardihood to avow that he does not believe in God, shows a recklessness of moral character and utter want of moral sensibility, such as very little entitles him to be *heard* or *believed* in a court of justice in a country designated as Christian. [Ibid.]

While these are historical accounts of atheists and Free Spirits, such theistic views, prejudices, and inaccuracies are still very much alive today. Some recent statistics from *Gallup* show that:

Being an atheist ... is still not widely acceptable to the American public. The latest poll shows only 49% of Americans would vote for an atheist for president, making this the most discriminated-against characteristic ... in the research. [Gallup (2002)]

And when atheists were asked by *The Closet Atheist* to agree or disagree with statements about their beliefs, clearly patterns of exclusion remained.⁷ Additionally, 60% of atheists in the United States agreed with the statement, “When religion comes up in a conversation with casual acquaintances, I hesitate to tell them I am an atheist,” and 43% in the United States agreed with the statement, “If my co-workers and supervisor knew I was an atheist, it would adversely affect my career

⁶ *Summa Theologica* II, Q.11, Art.3

⁷ *The Closet Atheist* (2002).

opportunities.” Further, 78% of atheists had parents who were believers, making their loner or isolated perspectives and attitudes more immediate.

The view that Free Spirits have no morality because they do not believe in an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving being is absurd. It blatantly ignores human reason or the human capacity for intellectual integrity and empathy. And, somewhat ironically, historical examples teach us the opposite lesson – i.e., while there are some isolated examples of atheists doing bad things (Stalin, Pol Pot, and Mao Zedong), there are numerous examples to show that theistic beliefs problematize the question of moral motivation.⁸ Clearly, religious people have excluded, condemned, and murdered others of different faiths repeatedly throughout history (and continue to do so). However, in contemporary efforts toward tolerance and acceptance, many theists have been trying to embrace others, or at least to leave them alone. But atheists and Free Spirits are not of a different faith, they are of *no* faith, and they are excluded from current popular discussions of tolerance. An example of such exclusion can be found on the floor of the House of Representatives, where Congressman James Traficant from Ohio delivered statements regarding the *National Academy of Sciences* survey in *Nature* magazine:⁹

Mr. Speaker, a new report says only 7 percent of scientists believe in God. That is right. And the reason they gave was that the scientists are “super smart.” Unbelievable. Most of these absent-minded professors cannot find the toilet.

Mr. Speaker, I have one question for these wise guys to constipate over: How can some thing come from no thing? And while they digest that, Mr. Speaker, let us tell it like it is. Put these super-cerebral master debaters in some foxhole with bombs bursting all around them, and I guarantee they will not be praying to Frankenstein.

Beam me up here. My colleagues, all the education in the world is worthless without God and a little bit of common sense. And I yield back whatever we have left.[House (1998)]

⁸ It becomes more difficult when one tries to show these acts were due to *atheism*, rather than, say, Marxism or communism.

⁹ Nature (1998).

In the midst of all these popular misconceptions, one should instead familiarize oneself with Nietzsche's descriptions of the Free Spirit for a more accurate depiction of the atheist and society. In his various texts, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *Daybreak*, *Human All Too Human*, *The Gay Science*, *The Will to Power*, and *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche distinguishes between the Free Spirit and religious believers, referring to the latter as the "common herd." He argues that the Free Spirit demands reason and truth, and is characterized by her intellectual integrity. She embraces *this* world (in all of its complexities and naturalistic aspects), and through an awareness and re-evaluation of customary assumptions, discovers that values come from both our reason and will. Because of these qualities of worldliness, skepticism of custom, reliance on the intellect, and a rejection of any transcendent realm, Nietzsche holds that she disturbs commonly held notions of the "botched and bungled masses," and is feared because of such disturbances.¹⁰ While making these arguments on behalf of the Free Spirit, Nietzsche likewise points out that the "common herd" demands faith, and holds that the truth of beliefs is guided by the "beneficial" effects of those beliefs.

That it does not matter whether a thing is true, but only what effect it produces – absolute lack of intellectual integrity. [(1987), 172]

As a rule, though, he [the Free Spirit] will nonetheless have truth on his side, or at least the spirit of inquiry after truth: he demands reasons, the rest demand faith. [(1996), 225]

The [bound] spirit takes up his position, not for reasons, but out of habit; he is a Christian, for example, not because he has knowledge of the various religions and has chosen between them... [Ibid, 226]

The herd does not have intellectual integrity, and posits and embraces a fictional category (i.e., the "next" world, the transcendental realm) to the degradation of this world.

We have measured the value of the world according to categories *that refer to a purely fictitious world*. [(1987), 13]

This *world of pure fiction* is vastly inferior to the world of dreams insofar as the latter *mirrors* reality, whereas the former falsifies, devalues, and negates reality. [(1982a), p.582]

¹⁰ "To make the individual *uncomfortable*, that is my task." [(1982a), p.50]

Reality has been deprived of its value, its meaning, its veracity to the same degree as an ideal world has been *fabricated*. [(1993), p.4]

In this sense of falsification, the herd rejects value in this world and instead embraces both morality and values as “given from above.” With this clash of conceptual approaches between the herd and the Free Spirit, and the Free Spirit’s radical nature from the point of view of the herd, Nietzsche rightly characterizes the Free Spirit as claiming, “I am not a man, I am dynamite.” [Ibid, p.96]

Given the Free Spirit’s character and her relation to the common herd, definite relations and commonalities of attitude and epistemology exist among Free Spirits and atheists as members of a given marginal culture.¹¹ One might even go so far as to say an *inherent* or *essential* relation. It seems inevitable, given what Nietzsche has written about the distinction between Free Spirits and bound spirits, that Free Spirits have marginal perspectives. Nietzsche characterizes these perspectives through his account of philosophy:

Philosophy, as I have hitherto understood and lived it, is a voluntary living in ice and high mountains – a seeking after everything strange and questionable in existence, all that has hitherto been excommunicated by morality. [(1993), p.4]

I do not wish to persuade anyone to philosophy: it is inevitable, it is perhaps also desirable, that the philosopher should be a *rare* plant. [(1987), 420]

That is, if one is to value what the Free Spirit values, and not adhere to the notion of faith that bound spirits deem essential, one must, inevitably, expect to find oneself on the periphery. This is expressed through his attitudes toward the mediocre:

Hatred for mediocrity is unworthy of a philosopher: it is almost a question mark against his “*right* to philosophy.” Precisely because he is an exception he has to take the rule under his protection, he has to keep the mediocre in good heart. [(1987), 893]

At the same time, the claim that individuals who demand reason, truth, intellectual integrity, and embrace this world are devoid of any moral characteristics is clearly unreasonable. Free Spirits and

¹¹ “Marginal” here could mean (a) how they are *treated* by society, or (b) how they *think* as compared to society. Both senses are clearly applicable here.

atheists remain just as capable of moral feelings as the theist; he only has learned to think and feel *differently* about them:

It goes without saying that I do not deny – unless I am a fool – that many actions called immoral ought to be avoided and resisted, or that many called moral ought to be done and encouraged – but I think the one should be encouraged and the other avoided *for other reasons than hitherto*. We have to *learn to think differently* – in order at last, perhaps very late on, to attain even more: *to feel differently*. [(1982), 103]

No longer joy in certainty but in uncertainty; no longer “cause and effect” but the continually creative; no longer will to preservation but to power; no longer the humble expression, “everything is *merely* subjective,” but “it is also *our* work! – Let us be proud of it!” [(1987), 1059]

The 1954 addition of “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance, the motto on our currency (“In God We Trust”), the qualifications throughout history for testifying in court, or for being admitted to specific “American” groups such as the Boy Scouts of America, all exclude Free Spirits and atheists not so much on the basis of their “different” religious orientation, but on their *absence* of religious orientation.

Given the way Western society (i.e., the “common herd”) is generally viewed by Nietzsche and how Americans in particular hold such attitudes, Free Spirits and atheists will likely remain on the periphery in such societies, as Nietzsche did. There may always be a need to be invisible, and to present something of a façade. According to Hollingdale:

The life [Nietzsche] led was an unusual one, certainly, but there are many witnesses to the groundlessness of the legend which depicts him as a remote, self-enclosed ascetic wholly devoted to a solitary pursuit of the higher truth. On the contrary, almost every report we have speaks of him as being to an uncommon degree urbane and civilized. Everyone who remarks on the matter, for instance, notes the attention he paid to his dress: he never appeared in public without being well turned out. [Hollingdale (1996), p.85]

The general claim that Hollingdale provides about how Nietzsche acted in social circles and dressed tells us little, if anything, about Nietzsche as the Free Spirit. Given his views on Free Spirits and their relation to the common herd, Nietzsche was clearly a member of marginal culture in a similar

way to today's atheists.¹² But Hollingdale's claim has missed the main thrust of Nietzsche's thought concerning the social relation between the Free Spirit and the rest of society, although it provides some insight into how Nietzsche dealt with his marginal-status.¹³ In keeping with the characterization of Nietzsche given by Hollingdale, the Free Spirit and atheist may continue to "dress" appropriately, but this is merely a practical way to get around, nothing more. Often the atheist remains "in the closet," invisible, and undiscovered, not out of elitism or a desire to remain on the outside, but out of necessity.

Nietzsche makes this clear when he refers back to Zarathustra in *Ecce Homo*: "For this is *our* height and our home: we live too nobly and boldly here for all unclean men and their thirsts" [(1993), p.19]. In this sense of affirmation and nobility, Free Spirits and atheists in America are much like the child in *The Emperor's New Clothes*. But in a different and more subtle sense that embraces discretion, protection, and themselves (due to their marginal attitudes), they are also much like the "new clothes" of the Emperor: invisible – and assumed to be something else.

Robert M. Seltzer
Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
Western Illinois University

¹² This would refer to the *first* sense of "marginal."

¹³ This would refer to the *second* sense of "marginal."

Works Cited

- The Closet Atheist (2002). "Statistics." <www.geocities.com/closetatheist/stats.htm>
- Gallup (2002). "Americans Today Much More Accepting of a Woman, Black, Catholic, or Jew as President." <www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr990329.asp>
- House (1998). "Congressman Mocks Atheists on House Floor." <www.infidels.org/wire/stories/traficant_speech.html> (also at <www.gpoaccess.gov/crecord/index.html>)
- Martin, Michael (1992). *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press).
- Nature (1998). "Leading scientists still reject God." <www.stephenjaygould.org/ctrl/news/file002a.html>.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich (1974). *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage.
- (1982). *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale. Boston: Cambridge University Press.
- (1982a). *The Portable Nietzsche*, edited and trans. By Walter Kaufmann. New York: Penguin.
- (1987). *The Will to Power*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale and Walter Kaufmann. New York: Random House.
- (1990). *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale. New York: Penguin.
- (1993). *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale. New York: Penguin.
- (1996). *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale. Boston: Cambridge University Press.