

# **Liberation Philosophy**

**From the Buddha to Omar Khayyam**

Human Evolution from Myth-Making to Rational Thinking

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**Series in Philosophy**



**VERNON PRESS**

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[www.vernonpress.com](http://www.vernonpress.com)

*In the Americas:*  
Vernon Press  
1000 N West Street,  
Suite 1200, Wilmington,  
Delaware 19801  
United States

*In the rest of the world:*  
Vernon Press  
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,  
Malaga, 29006  
Spain

Series in Philosophy

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019936322

ISBN: 978-1-62273-531-0

Cover design by Vernon Press. Cover image by Sundar Basnet.

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To the Nobel Laureate of 1901 Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen (1845–1923),  
a remarkably selfless and unassuming man whose discovery  
and invention of X-ray changed the course of health  
by saving a countless number of lives.

This modest book is written in his honor and remembrance.



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# Acknowledgements

Without my partner, Allison, whose inexhaustible focus on this manuscript cannot be measured, I don't truly know how I could have accomplished what I did. She remained ever-present to support me, and our conversations about the content of the book proved to be a leap in our own intellectual growth.

It is my pleasant duty to thank my friend and erudite colleague, Reinhard Margreiter. The ongoing dialogues I enjoyed with this unique professor, altruist, and genuine practicing philosopher was like having 'Epicurus' showing up in my life as a mentor. He read the entire manuscript, made wise suggestions, and constantly referred me to more sources. I am, as always, indebted to Michael Morony of UCLA, a highly critical thinker and a well-accomplished scholar, who despite his busy schedule read the final version of the manuscript. I am humbled by his supportive words.

I am grateful to other professionals who took the time to read and comment on parts of the book along the way: A brilliant colleague and prolific scholar, Marie-Luisa Frick, read multiple chapters of the book and provided constructive feedback. The chapter of the Buddha, as well as chapters 5 and 7, were read and critiqued by Stephen Batchelor, a world-renowned scholar of Buddhism. In his constructive critique, both compliments and criticism were equally uplifting. Mehdi Aminrazavi, a scholar of religion and philosophy and author of one of the best existing books on Omar Khayyam, read the chapter on Khayyam. His endorsement and helpful comments are highly appreciated.

My old-time friend in India, Raj, a reader and teacher of Sanskrit and Tibetan Buddhism, was gracious enough to read the entire Philosophy section. He sent me his handwritten pages of notes, offering additional insights regarding several key themes about the Buddha and the Çārvākas. It is a pleasure to thank another friend with a talented mind, Farhad Rostami, whose education and interests range from mechanical engineering to neuroscience. He read multiple chapters of the book and provided me his enthusiastic encouragement. My long-time and insightful friend, Shahrzad Esfarjani deserves lasting thanks for her engagement with and support of this research project. This brings me to mention my childhood friend, Oscar Feizi. Our dialogues involving conversations about the topics of this and other books have borne fruits difficult to describe in words. Last but not least, Uta Maley, an incredible friend in Innsbruck, has been nothing but an engine of energy and support for my research.

The free-lance editor, Ms. Margaret Puskar-Pasewics, is to be thanked for her editing of the first draft of the manuscript. The Acquisition editor of Vernon Press, Dr. Carolina Sanchez and Argiris Legatos, deserve gratitude for their enthusiasm and diligent guidance for bringing this project to light.

I am grateful to all the individuals mentioned here, as well as those who offered kind words and moral support but whose names are too numerous to mention here.



## Author's Remarks

Among the many scientific milestones that have guided the evolution of human society, two of them stand tall and magnificent. The first came in 1953 when James Watson and Francis Crick discovered the molecular structure of double helix DNA, a revelation that changed the course of biological, medical and pharmacological research and the exploration of life. The discoveries revealed how genetic information is stored, how biological life is stabilized, and how genes mutate. This led to the mapping of the human genome some fifty years later, confirming the exact content of human genes, establishing which part of our DNA is responsible for what. Eventually, DNA research also led to the discovery of the genetic tree, elucidating the interrelationship of species and all living beings and revealing the interbreeding of modern humans with other hominids such as Neanderthal and Denisovans. Thus, DNA became a blueprint for unprecedented knowledge about the human past and our kinship with other primates. DNA also became the basis for a non-parochial and non-anthropocentric historical awareness. It overthrew the old understanding of humans as a wholly separate and divine creature in the animal kingdom. DNA was shown to be the common biological currency among *all* life, which belongs to humans as well as other beings.

The second milestone event was the orbiting of the earth in 1961 and 1962 when, for the first time as human beings escaped the bonds of gravity, Yuri Gagarin and John Glenn saw the earth from beyond. The view of the earth as a round planet floating unsupported in its orbit became yet another crucial crack in the old Christian cosmology that the earth was flat and unmoving. The public was shown how cosmic physics behaves, showing our own planet suspended in midair, an image which caused an irreversible paradigm shift. Even more radical was when the Hubble Telescope was launched in 1990, revealing to us billions and billions of stars, planets and galaxies that could not be observed with the naked eye – something unimaginable for our ancestors. This view of the Universe made Ptolemy's geocentrism seem a child-like astronomy, a remote past. It also altered the power of the argument of heliocentrism, as we had to accept viscerally that the sun and our solar system are but a miniscule sliver of the Milky Way, let alone the universe. The infinitesimal size of the earth and the inexhaustible size of the Universe render our previous and parochial myths of the earth as the center of the Universe nothing but a fragile sand castle. In the same way, a radical shift occurred in our self-absorbed and arrogant psychology when we learned about the existence of billions of distant galaxies, comets, suns and asteroids

out there living for themselves. Our earth stands to be a trivial dot lost in the overwhelming juggernaut of existence.

These two paradigm shifts, from the subcellular to celestial, have compelled us to absorb such discoveries without resorting to ancestral cultural or religious beliefs. DNA and genetic discoveries challenged the mythical and religious belief that humans had appeared in the biological world as a distinct species created from the 'image of god', and instead proved that the human species is tightly connected to and is a product of biological evolution. And cosmological discoveries have taught us that our earth and humans are not the center of the universe. No matter whether mythical beliefs are interpreted literally or figuratively, it does not change the factual results of what we know today about cosmology and evolutionary biology. Thus, the facts about our life status on earth can be seen as liberating – liberating from the old myths and gossip-laden superstition. Knowing that the earth is round and that the laws of physics govern the earth and the planetary and interplanetary systems create an awareness that our earth and stars do not function just based on arbitrary magic or random acts of the gods. This orderly and universal knowledge in itself offers liberation from subjectivity and credulity.

More examples of such empirical liberation abound: For example, for centuries the old and outmoded understanding of deadly diseases such as diphtheria, tuberculosis and the stigmatizing condition of leprosy, among hundreds of other diseases, had been blamed on the devil or viewed as god's punishment (and some may still believe this in certain cultural traditions). People sacrificed animals to the gods in order to be granted mercy and cure. These depressing and hopeless conditions were eradicated by the isolation of the bacteria-causing agents of such deadly diseases. Doctors Emil von Behring, Robert Koch and Gerhard A. Hansen isolated the etiologies and developed the scientific basis for the treatment of these diseases, saving countless lives and prevented premature deaths. Such medical awareness was and still is simply an example of liberation from old parochial superstitions and beliefs.

It may be argued that liberation in the philosophical realm is not as precise as in the scientific realm and has no universal methodology. Liberation is indeed subjective, but can be universal as well, as in the case of agreeing on the principles of empirical sciences. The cognitive dissonance between the laws of nature and our subjective beliefs can drive us to sincerely seek clarity and liberation, particularly from our own failed opinions and the unsubstantiated proclamations of dogmatic sources. Liberation can find meaning when the deceptive, romantically-oriented mind is scrutinized and rewired, when the inner workings of cause and effect of our decisions and behaviors are put to the test insightfully, when the observation of the workings of nature itself becomes revelatory. The realization we often encounter is that the fetters within our

closed-ended dogma and self-convincing ideas were acquired from our religious and traditional surroundings from childhood onward.

In order to live in the safety of our intelligence, everything we have believed, often at face value, and stored in our memory, needs to be reexamined and backed by sound reasoning and experiential proof. For every error, we make there is a consequence, so to speak. If we have perceived religion to be an emancipator of the human predicament, the price of the complete take-over of religion has come with it as well. In many instances, religion has become the captor rather than the liberator, preventing creative or alternative thinking. Meanwhile, those who thought to seek solace in public religion find themselves bewildered, either consciously or unconsciously antagonizing and even harassing other groups of the population who believe in other religions or may be secular or atheist thinkers. In this case, one is obliged to recognize what is harmful as well as what is beneficial in one's ongoing beliefs. It is analogous to medicine, in which we know very well the harm that is combined with the benefits of the medical enterprise. Many medicines can cause harmful side effects even though prescribed by caring doctors, inadvertently causing new problems for the patient. A hospital itself often becomes the source of new infections - the very place where vulnerable and desperate patients have gone to take refuge from illness. Thus, there are errors and failures even in the good things we believe to be helpful.

The philosophers of reason put forward compelling arguments in order to emancipate the human mind from the abyss of unknowing or miskonwng. It was the psychiatrist-philosopher Karl Jasper (d. 1969) who proposed that a universally valid philosophy could even surpass science<sup>1</sup> in offering a glimpse of our true being, in order to debunk the indoctrinated interpretations and harmful beliefs that have entangled the human mind for thousands of years. The dangerous power of indoctrination, no matter in which culture or religion, compounded with the danger of modern racism and national-chauvinism, all have produced separation and hostilities among humans. Konrad Lorenz put it right when he said, "The thoroughly indoctrinated person does not notice that he has been deprived of a constituent feature of true humanity- the freedom to think."<sup>2</sup> The age of ignorance ("we didn't know"), dogmatism and imprudence can shift to an age of universal reasoning, dialogue and kindness, but only with awareness first, and by personal choice.

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<sup>1</sup> See James O. Bennett, "Karl Jaspers and Scientific Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 31/3 (Jul., 1993), 437-453.

<sup>2</sup> Konrad Lorenz, *The Waning of Humaneness*, trans. Warren Kickert (Boston and Toronto: Little Brown and Co., 1987), 161.

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In an age that dawned with space travel, we are now going back in time to meet our 'lost cousins' from the time we left Africa some 60,000 years ago. As we drifted around the globe, we developed distinct languages, skin color, religions and cultures. Despite the sharp differences that developed over the millennia of forgetfulness of our common origins, it behooves us to come closer to each other again and try to establish the common and appealing logic that we all honor. The fundamental separateness which needs to be bridged comes from the dogmatic interpretations of our common empirical reality and space. This crucial time will have to be the century of solutions, not just to find better techniques for making life more fortified and safer but also to rectify the dogmas and misunderstandings our ancestors created. Sound and universal thinking is a great "technology," so to speak, which can save us from the foolishness and superstitions of our narrow-minded ancestors. Instead of being fixated on our differences, there is a need to bridge our powerful commonalities.

Finding human liberation from conflict, hostility, and indoctrination essentially means pledging to a common and unbreachable universal logic, a universal dialogue whose content defends the wellbeing of everyone, not just one tribe or one nation. This does not necessarily mean leaving behind our traditions and customs. It is not even about education, putting more and more knowledge on top of a precarious dogmatic foundation. It is about becoming truly literate in our most vital century by learning, unlearning and relearning (to borrow the words of Alvin Toffler) the most innovative, mind-blowing and edifying findings. It is about reinventing ourselves by valuing all humanity, not just one's own group and belief system. The enlightened minds have always altered civilizations and have been able to help others. There is no end in sight when it comes to living an innovatively cogent and interesting life.

This book, with its forthright and daring premise, challenges and exposes many timeworn insidious beliefs by embarking on new levels of intercultural and rational conversations. In the course of writing this book, I realized firsthand that the content of 'liberation philosophy' is almost identical with the 'philosophy of self-reliance' or cultivation of pleasure by oneself as it was succinctly presented by the sharp thinkers and practitioners in the Indo-Greco-Roman-Iranian world. This interdisciplinary book is perhaps the first attempt to integrate the Indian, Greek and Iranian philosophical traditions, bringing them closer to each other by elucidating their common denominators. The substance of such philosophical traditions is about freedom from the captivity of superstition that developed over millennia of human development, as well as from one's own illusive certainties.

Liberation is perhaps when we take the first step to learn about the fascinating revelations of the sciences, to study philosophy, to build a stronger logic over emotions, to build a resilient body to resist hardship, to loosen the grip of the dogmas that have been preached to us from childhood, and to drop the ultimate 'truth' themes that have entangled us without having left room for cognitive fluidity and individual development. Personal transformation, philosophical therapy, and enlightenment deal with and safeguard these issues. Such rewiring of our brain, letting a new philosophy refashion our lives, is only possible if the first step is taken. The Persian poet, 'Attār (d. ca. 1220), appeases our anxieties and emboldens us to be the innovator of our own life through taking that first step, and then the path shall gradually appear by itself:

If you are an authentic wayfarer, then prepare for a ferocious journey,  
Lose your attachments and annihilate your ego.  
Trust and take the first step,  
The chain of steps will then teach you how to tread the path.<sup>3</sup>

**Mostafa Vaziri**

Innsbruck, November 2018

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<sup>3</sup> Fariddin 'Attār, *Mokhtār Nāmeḥ*, Section 18. Translation of the poem from the original Persian is by this author.



# Prologue

## **The Contour of the Path Leading to Liberation Philosophy**

Throughout the course of history, the intellectual campaigns of philosophers and maverick thinkers have offered fresh, inspiring, and liberating perspectives to replace religious beliefs and mindsets that had led to a misreading of reality. This book investigates that process of liberation of the mind, in addition to the biological and cognitive reasons behind the invention of myths and consuming beliefs that often trapped the trusting minds of the population. Through the lenses of biological, cognitive, and philosophical evolution, this book takes an unconventional look at that path of evolving thought, from natural freedom to mental entrapment, and back to freedom again. It asks the question: How did beings possessing a mind born with natural intelligence and freedom become beings with minds seized by mythical and superstitious thinking, thinking that would take them far from their vibrant and free original minds? And what solutions have been found over the centuries that offer liberation to the entrapped mind?

In order to trace the path of the necessity and the intervention of philosophy, it behooves us to backtrack to the time of ‘pre-philosophy,’ when human beings were doing what they needed to do to survive in the rawness of nature. In this book, first, we will take a look at the possible cognitive and behavioral effects of interbreeding among hominids such as Neanderthals and *Homo sapiens*. The genetic mix resulting from that evolutionary phase may have been a factor in critical cognitive changes that emerged in *Homo sapiens*. Chapter 2 then follows the continuing trajectory and consequences of that cognitive development as humans began to invent myths and create religions. Chapters 3 and 4 explore the biological roots of fear and the apparent need for truth-seeking, myth-making, and religion. In the final and pivotal part of this book, chapters 5, 6, 7 and the epilogue, some of the most powerful “liberation philosophies” are presented with their aim of offering a more natural and skillful outlook on the reality of life and how to overcome the fear and dogma laid in us from the past.

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## **1. The Method and Goal of the Book**

The narrative of the book engages with three major themes: the biology, mythology, and philosophy of human development. At first glance, the

subject of biology does not seem to be directly correlated with philosophy. Here we have taken a detour to enter the gate of philosophy from the back door of the human past, a time of pre-philosophy, when humans were beginning to intellectually evolve, trying to construct the “facts” of reality using their new (in evolutionary terms) mental mechanisms.

### **a. Biology and Pre-philosophy**

There was a time when philosophy never existed because it was not yet part of the human toolkit of survival. Philosophy eventually emerged out of curiosity and as a response to confusion and ancestral dogmatic errors. Needless to say, philosophy also developed as a means of exploring the deepest inspirations about life.

The relationship between philosophy and biology that we will focus on is the phase of existential chaos within the ‘survivalist’ or ‘traumatized’ brain until a time when deeper intellectual clarity gradually began to emerge. The traumatized brain comes from the havoc of the human evolutionary process, including competing with other hominids for survival but also interbreeding with them. This biological condition entailed the very slow formation of consciousness and perceptual thinking and ideas about the workings of nature. The emerging self-awareness of the brain of *Homo sapiens* became the source of anthropomorphized interpretations of nature.

The human brain also experienced millennia of different kinds of fear, ranging from object-based fear to non-object-based anxiety. Object-based fear was an expected reaction to natural challenges to survival such as predators and natural events like thunderstorms, earthquakes, floods, and droughts. Non-object-based fear was oriented towards the invisible force of nature like death or diseases or towards invented gods who seemed to run the world, sometimes bestowing their grace upon humans, other times unleashing their wrath. Humans operated under the influence of such object- and non-object-based fears, which led to the development of supernatural beliefs, myths, and religions as a way of soothing their fears.

Through the emergence of agriculturalist communities, certain peculiar characteristics of the human brain’s tendencies became prevalent, including a religious response to fear, a sentimentalized anthropomorphizing of the world, and the development of fixed, written language that would preserve stories and information. These phenomena eventually become part of ordinary human consciousness in nearly all cultures. They resulted in the construction of our own human narratives of nature, including invented realities that we could understand. Gradually these neural pathways became the basis for fixed and conditioned religious thinking. Through the neural



programming of fear, the pattern of development of cognitive habits and overpowering beliefs continued to repeat in emerging cultures. Along these lines, Epicurus was right when he pinpointed fear as being rooted in ignorance. And inversely, ignorance is rooted in fear.

The restrictive and often detrimental nature of counterintuitive and superstitious thinking eventually inspired the intervention of grounded and more didactic thinkers who challenged their own and laypeople's beliefs. The challenge was (and still is) whether learned beliefs, with their psychologically entrenched pathways in the brain, could be altered to interpret and experience the world the way it is, not the way one was conditioned or taught to understand it. Such preconditioned brain pathways are subjective and religiously-cultural adjusted.<sup>1</sup> These preconditioned and indoctrinated pathways are the result of the human propensity to follow, imitate and to be obedient. Fixity of habits and beliefs by and large became the rule for conformist individuals and communities, whereas plasticity and creativity seemed to be the exception – but still always possible.

Modern neuroscience and the study of neuroplasticity tells us that brain pathways are not permanently fixed at all – they can change and be rewired. There is the potential to change mental habits, whether from a lifetime or from centuries-old cultural and religious beliefs. That means the brain is prepared to change if the individual is consciously prepared to do the work of raising awareness. This is the change of consciousness by changing the brain pathways. To study and learn a new philosophy as well as unlearning the old mental habits and ancestral beliefs are all within the brain's power. Philosophers and maverick thinkers have been able to change their way of thinking, demonstrating the brain's plasticity. So even though the biology of the brain goes back to the genes, epigenetics, the fetal stage, childhood, adolescence, and the formation of many habits, behaviors, and beliefs while growing up in a group within a culture, the fixed behaviors due to human neuroplasticity can turn around at any age,<sup>2</sup> if not one hundred percent, then enough to change a person through thinking and deciding to act, without compromising psychological balance.

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<sup>1</sup> The objective evaluation is when nature, the world, and natural laws are explored according to their laws and mechanism not the way we arbitrarily approximate them. One needs to step out of oneself in order to see things the way they are. Science investigates the parameters of the world the way they are not the way our consciousness is conditioned to understand them.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Merzenich, *Soft-Wired: How the New Science of Brain Plasticity Can Change Your Life*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Parnassus Publishing, 2013).

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