

Research Article



Gods and Dictatorships: A Defence of Heroical Apatheism

Ian von Hegner

University of Copenhagen, Karen Blixens Vej 4, DK-2300 København S

Abstract | Democracy is usually contrasted with the concept of dictatorship, and is defined as a type of government in which power flows from the citizens to the leaders of government, who are selected through free elections. This article argues, that if the concept of democracy is generalized to be universally applicable, then the concept of hypothetical gods' right to rule results in dictatorship. Whereas the concepts of dictator and tyrant originally had a more positive meaning, those meanings have changed. However, the concept of the gods in the philosophical debate has avoided a similar redefinition in light of democracy, despite the fact, that it involves the same negation of modern fundamental rights. The basic democratic idea posits that all of its members have a full and equal status. If this status is generalized to be universally applicable, then it follows that humankind likewise are not second and first class among hypothetical gods. The existence or nonexistence of the gods is here defined as the secondary question, whereas the principal acceptance of hypothetical gods' right to rule in a democratic context with respect to concepts of freedom is defined as the primary question. The position of heroical apatheism is argued as an alternative to positions such as theism, atheism, and agnosticism. These positions only concern themselves with the ontological or epistemological question of whether the gods exist, whereas heroical apatheism concerns itself with the primary component missing so far, namely democratic rights and dignity. This is a discussion that I consider as having been overlooked in modern philosophical discussions.

Editor | Gregg D. Caruso, Corning Community College, SUNY (USA).

Received | June 10, 2016; **Accepted** | June 22, 2016; **Published** | July 29, 2016

Correspondence | Ian von Hegner, University of Copenhagen, Karen Blixens Vej 4, DK-2300 København S; **Email:** tellus@live.dk

Citation | von Hegner, I. (2016). Gods and dictatorships: A defence of heroical apatheism. *Science, Religion and Culture*, 3(1): 31-48.

DOI | <http://dx.doi.org/10.17582/journal.sr/2016/3.1.31.48>

Introduction

Human beings have a great need for explanations. That is one of the reasons that religion is so universal: religion attempts to provide explanations. Human beings enter their individual consciences in a mystical universe that they yearn to understand. This primal need to explain the universe and our place in it has created a vast number of religions worldwide. One source notes that globally, there are approximately 10,000 different religions today (Barrett et al. 2001). Such numbers are always open to debate of course,

but they are the only ones available. If we also include all of the religions that no longer have followers, the number will naturally increase.

There is no credible estimate of how many gods the human imagination has produced. Ever since the beginning of recorded history, which is often placed at the beginning of the Sumerians' written language approximately 6,000 years ago (Woods 2010), thousands of deities have been recorded. *Godschecker's Encyclopedia* currently contains more than 4,000 gods (Saunders et al. 2015). The real number is obviously much

higher because that encyclopedia includes only the gods we know since the beginning of recorded history and that its writers have had the time to catalogue. If we were to add the number of gods in which humankind has believed throughout its existence as *Homo sapiens*, tens of thousands of gods would be included.

The literature contains an almost consequential consensus about speaking of deities in the singular. I will disregard this custom because I consider it a mistake. First, there is a basic understanding in the field of comparative religion that there are thousands of religions and, by extension, thousands of gods (Rudolph 2000). Thus, it is standard scientific practice here to speak of gods in the plural.

Second, the modern claim that different religions' gods are merely different interpretations of the same deity is openly a *non sequitur*. An application of elementary conceptual analysis to various religions shows that it is not possible to derive a single generic deity in light of the various religions' own doctrines. To provide one simple example, we note the postulate, that the god of Christianity and the god of Islam are merely different interpretations of the same god. According to Christianity, Yahweh allowed himself to be incarnated as a human being or, alternatively, had a son with a human being (Burkett 2011). According to Islam, Allah never allowed himself to be incarnated as a human being or, alternatively, had a son with a human being (Sirry 2014). A simple analysis with premises and conclusion leads to, that either these religions speak of two different gods or one of those gods is false.

Third, it could be claimed, that one way to avoid the previous conclusions is by attempting to separate discussions of the gods from the various religions, thus avoiding disagreement between how the different religious doctrines define their deities. Here, the justification for referring to the gods in the singular is founded especially on the same basic assumptions used in the ontological proofs of gods, such as perfect being, greatest conceivable being, transcendent being, infinite being, etc. As a starting point, however, none of these basic assumptions have demonstrated any convincing strength (Oppy 2006). Furthermore, these assumptions are alien to many believers who are attached to specific god doctrines. Finally, the belief in pantheons makes this claim an automatic *non sequitur*.

I will not proceed further with the notion of a sin-

gle god in this article, but simply note, that because no single deity or religion can convincingly be said to possess a higher probability than any other, it follows that the most adequate way to speak from the perspective of comparative religion and philosophy of religion is to use the plural term gods. Therefore, I will henceforth strictly use the terms gods or deities.

Philosophical terms addressing the various views of the gods fall within the following isms. The first is theism, defined as the belief that a deity exists. It is usually argued that polytheism (i.e., the belief in the existence of multiple deities) is a special case of classical theism, that is, where one defines theism specifically as the belief in at least one deity (Thompson 2014). However, considering that polytheism historically has been the dominant point of view, from comparative religions perspective it is more reasonable to define theism as a special case of polytheism.

The direct response to theism is atheism, the belief that there are no deities. This ism originates from the Greek *atheos*, where "a" means without or not and "theos" means a god (Martin 1990). From the etymological meaning of the term, an atheist is, strictly speaking a person without a belief in a deity, but not necessarily a person who believes that deities do not exist. This is called *negative atheism*. The more well-known version of atheism is different and states that an atheist not only simply does not believe in deities' existence but also actively believes in their nonexistence. This is called *positive atheism* (Martin 1990).

Finally, there is agnosticism, a term advocated by T.H. Huxley in 1869, although previous thinkers also advanced agnostic views. Agnosticism can be defined as: "The vigorous application of a single principle. Positively the principle may be expressed as, in matters of the intellect, follow your reason as far as it can carry you without other considerations. And negatively, in matters of the intellect, do not pretend the conclusions are certain that are not demonstrated or demonstrable. It is wrong for a man to say he is certain of the objective truth of a proposition unless he can produce evidence which logically justifies that certainty" (Stein 1980, 5).

There are several interesting variations of the above positions that emphasize either weak versus strong versions or direct couplings of the terms. Those variations are irrelevant to this article, however, and hence-

forth will not be mentioned again. Instead, I will argue, that a different type of position can be formulated, a position based not on ontological or epistemological arguments about the existence or nonexistence of the gods, but on rights and dignity.

Historically, many abilities, actions and attitudes have been attributed to the gods, and there is no consensus regarding what constitutes a god or what attributes gods possess (Bullivant and Michael 2013). Accordingly, there is no generic definition of the gods which can claim to put a commitment on all religions. However, one common quality attributed to gods by the majority of human beings in most god-based religions throughout history seems *prima facie*, that the gods have an influence on human lives and that human beings stand in a submissive relation to the gods, that is, human beings owe the gods obedience and respect. As the saying goes: “For a theist, a man’s duty is to conform to the announced will of God” (Swinburne 1974). Thus, it implicitly follows that hypothetical gods have a right to interfere in human lives and existence and even to judge and punish them. This continuing right to influence the lives and actions of human beings will henceforth be designated as “the gods’ right to rule”.

Primary And Secondary Importance

Bertrand Russell was reportedly once asked what he would say to a hypothetical god on judgment day if he were to come before this god. Russell was delighted with the question and replied that he would tell that god: “Not enough evidence God, not enough evidence” (Salmon 1978, 176).

This answer illustrates what we could call the “gods of philosophers”, by which I mean gods who welcome those who honestly remain sceptical in the absence of evidence, and punish those who embrace belief in the gods on the basis of tradition or self-interest. This answer represents not only core, but also symptomatic opinion throughout time. For Russell, it was all a question of the evidence. The implication here is that given sufficient evidence, Russell would *ipso facto* have accepted that god.

In discussions, the existence of the gods has apparently always had primacy, where the view has been that arguments for or against the existence of the gods are of primary importance. Here, I will argue that with

regard to fundamental democratic values and rights, the question of the existence of the gods must assume secondary importance, whereas the question of the importance of the gods must assume primary importance.

Discussions of the gods are roughly based within either a ontological frame, for example the various forms of ontological proof of a god, which can be defined as follows: “arguments for the conclusion that God exists, from premises which are supposed to derive from some source other than observation of the world—e.g., from reason alone” (Oppy 2016). In addition, the discussion of the gods is based on an epistemological frame, in which one as Russell inquires into the available evidence and how that evidence is evaluated. However, I will argue that one vital point is overlooked in essentially every discussion about the gods’ existence: that the question of whether gods exist is irrelevant. It is in fact very strange, that so many throughout history have placed the question of the gods within an ontological or epistemological frame, because those, *sine qua non*, lack a prime component.

The primary question of the gods’ importance formulated above should be grounded in the normative discussion of democratic concepts of freedom. This is a discussion that I consider as having been overlooked in modern philosophical discussions. Thus, what Russell should have said was not, that there was insufficient evidence. Instead, he should have asked, why exactly he should come before a god to begin with? Coming before a god implies that a human being is held accountable to that god, that a human being must explain himself to that god. I will posit, that this continuing acceptance of “the gods right to rule” *eo ipso* is the same as an acceptance of dictatorships.

Dictatorships

A dictator is a malevolent immoral ruler who wields absolute authority. Today, the term dictator has a negative meaning, but this has not always been the case. The concept originated as the designation of an extraordinary supreme magistracy in Rome, applied first in military crises and later in domestic ones. A dictator was publicly empowered by a magistrate following the authorization of the Roman senate. The dictator’s duty was either to lead the army or to head a particular task, such as holding elections or suppressing rebellions (Hornblower 1998). Initially, it had an overall positive meaning. In an almost similar fash-

ion, we have the concept tyrant, which was originally a more neutral title by which the Greeks referred to a person who had seized authority in a free state, where it mattered that: “There was in fact no absolute distinction between *turannoi* and orthodox leaders in Greek *poleis*. The former aimed to dominate established oligarchies, not to subvert them. It was mainstream oligarchic leadership in its most amplified form, conventional *de facto* authority writ large” (Anderson 2005, 173-222).

That said, over time, both tyrant and dictator have come to be used almost solely as a term for oppressive, even abusive rule. Originally, however, dictators stepped down as soon as their task was accomplished, and were allowed to stay in office for six months at most (Hornblower 1998). Our modern concept of a dictator is understood in comparison to democracy, and the term is generally used to describe an illegitimate leader who, even if he governed in accordance with justice and fairness, holds an extraordinary amount of individual power, especially the power to decree laws without effective restraint by an existing legislative assembly. Modern conceptions of dictatorships are often characterized by some of the following traits: overturned civil liberties, rule by decree, the repression of political opponents in a manner inconsistent with the rule of law, and the maintenance of some level of popular support (Popper 2000).

The concept of the gods is likewise an old concept. I will argue, that whereas the concepts dictators and tyrants have a changed meaning today in the light of democracy, the concept of the gods in the philosophical debate has avoided a similar redefinition, despite the fact that the concept of the gods encompasses the same negation of democratic rights as the concept of a dictator. Historically, of course, the concept of the gods is an obvious concept. Human societies have primarily gathered around leaders. Throughout history, they have been led by chieftains and medicine men, princes and kings etc., and the gods are a natural mental extension of this hierarchy. Therefore, the concept originates from a time when it was commonly accepted to be led by a single individual. In later periods, kings ultimately justified their right to rule as “the divine right of kings”, a political and religious doctrine of royal absolutism (Burgess 1992). Overall, this concept asserts that a monarch answer to no political authority, deriving the right to rule solely from the gods’ award of temporal power. Thus, a king is not

held accountable to the will of either his people or the nobility: only the gods have that authority.

At the dawn of the Enlightenment, questions were asked about the monarch’s superiority and legitimacy, and kings were slowly subject to punishment or removal for breaking the laws. Since the Enlightenment, the divine right justification has thus fallen out of favour. However, what is especially interesting here is that those who asked critical questions about kings’ rights to rule not simultaneously asked critical questions about the gods’ right to rule. They did not make the extrapolation that I do here, in which I question the right to rule not only of kings but also of hypothetical gods. The primary question of absolute gods ruling unrestricted remain unaddressed in the philosophical debate, despite that fact that in principle, absolute gods are no more different than absolute kings and thus conflict with democracy.

Leadership in a democratic system can be defined as follows: “Government is based on the consent of the governed. In a democracy, the people are sovereign—they are the highest form of political authority. Power flows from the people to the leaders of government, who hold power only temporarily. Laws and policies require majority support in parliament, but the rights of minorities are protected in various ways” (Diamond 2004). We have eliminated kings’ right to rule, but are left with gods’ principal right to rule. Where does that right come from? What gives the gods the right to rule? Their status as deities? Their greater power? Greater wisdom? Their creation of human beings? Even if the secondary question – whether the gods exist – is answered in the affirmative, none of these attributes seems to have any fundamental relevance with regard to democratic concepts of freedom.

Pascal’s Wager

One of the most common and most simplistic reasons to accept “the gods right to rule” seems historically, *prima facie*, to be based on punishment or reward. An illustration of this is given by Pascal’s Wager; the Wager and Anselm’s Ontological Argument are perhaps the most well-known arguments in the philosophy of religion. Pascal’s Wager is a practical choice argument positing that human beings all gamble with their lives either that a god exists or that he does not. Although reason cannot settle which alternative we should choose, a consideration of our various interests sup-

posedly can. Based on the assumption that the gains are infinite if a deity exists and that there is at least a minor probability that a deity actually exists, Pascal postulates that a rational person should try to decide to believe in and worship this god (Hájek 2012). If it turns out that the deity does actually exist, one gains the infinite reward of truth and happiness in Heaven; if it turns out that the deity does not exist, one only has a finite loss, one's existence simply ends completely. However, if one gambles on a god not existing, and spends one's earthly time on pleasures, luxury, etc. without bothering with religion, then if it turns out that the deity does exist, one will have lost one's chance for salvation and be destined to an eternity of misery in Hell. Pascal concludes at this point that as a practical matter, it is overwhelmingly reasonable to wager in favour of the deity existing.

This argument has rightfully been dismissed by pointing out that even if its reasoning was somehow sound it should then become a major obstacle to convincing an unprejudiced individual to believe specifically in Pascal's Christian deity. As Diderot (1746) notes: "An Imam could reason just as well this way" (Diderot 1746). By definition following the Christian deity requires the follower to actively negate the existence of all the other hypothetical gods. Pascal's Wager can then be viewed as a case of selection bias towards one's particular cultural background.

It has also been noted that even if for the sake of argument one agrees with Pascal's conclusion that rationality requires us to wager for a deity, it still does not *ipso facto* follow that one should wager for this or any other god. This is because all that has been granted is that this one particular norm, rationality, prescribes wagering for a god. It is entirely possible that some other norm might prescribe wagering against deities (Hájek 2012). For instance, it could then be said, that if faced with a plurality of gods, a democratic person should wager for those gods who are most passive towards democracy and human beings' right to autonomy. Examples include the belief in a deistic god or Epicurean gods in which after death, human beings are in the same condition as before their conception, and where the gods are uninterested in human beings' existence.

Nevertheless, all of this once again overlooks what I consider the primary point. Wagering for or against the gods implicitly assumes, that these gods have a

right to rule to begin with, and that is the quality that I claim the gods do not possess. Once again, the dismissal of Pascal's Wager addresses only the secondary question, that is, whether the gods exist, not the primary question of whether their existence is relevant. Why should a democratic person have any interest in the gods? Let us assume for the sake of argument that there are indeed gods. Even if the gods are assumed to exist, why should we worship them? This is a point that most discussions rarely address and which Pascal overlooked. Do the gods deserve worship? Do we agree with them? The line of thought is that either one submits and worships, or else is punished. Those gods that advance such choices, are they truly worthy of our worship? From the perspective of modern ethics, the issue can also be raised of, whether sentient beings should worship other sentient beings at all, even if they can obtain goods in such a manner? There seems to be an ethical immaturity in the whole idea of such a worship and submission relationship.

Divine Command Theory

Pascal's Wager is vulgarly based on punishment or reward, reasons that are philosophically irresponsible and therefore immoral. The more sophisticated reason for accepting "the gods right to rule" is often based on divine command theory (many variations could be used, but Pascal's Wager and divine command theory are representative enough for the present purpose). Divine command theory is a moral theory with definite metaphysical assumptions that states that an action's status as morally good is dependent upon a deity and moral obligation consists of obedience to this deity's commands. The theory thus claims that what is morally obligatory, forbidden or permitted is fundamentally based on the commands of such a deity and that the morally right action is the action commanded by that being. In other words, the theory asserts that to be moral is to follow a deity's commands (Austin).

Past and present adherents of various god-based religions have often agreed to the notion that the gods' commands are important to morality. Although the content of such commands have varied according to the views of the specific religious follower, all variations of the theory commonly postulate however that morality and moral obligations fundamentally depend on the gods. In some versions, this theory even goes as far to entail moral anarchy if the gods do not exist. More modern versions include, for instance, divine moti-

vation theory, which has attempted to moderate the politically improper word commands, instead arguing, that deities' motivations are what we should understand as the foundation of morality (Zagzebski 2004).

Many obvious objections have been made to divine command theory. For example, Wainwright (2005) has made the semantic argument that to be commanded and to be morally obligated do not contain an identical meaning. In addition, he has pointed to the epistemic objection that, because divine command theory requires knowledge of the gods in the first place, atheists and agnostics cannot have moral knowledge, which they clearly do. Divine command theory also entails that followers of godless religions (e.g., Buddhism and Daoism, which in their core are independent of gods (Gethin 1998; Fasching and de Chant 2001) also cannot have moral knowledge. In an irony twist, divine command theory also entails that nobody in praxis can have moral knowledge because the objection to Pascal's Wager also applies here: given the sheer number of hypothetical gods, how does anyone know which one's commands or motivations to follow? Worse yet, even if a divine command theorist believes that his specific religion is correct, he continues to confront a plurality of understandings within this single religious tradition (Austin). How can one separate the gods' genuine commands from those that are only apparent? It is not easy to see how one can avoid selection bias. It follows in praxis that nobody can be said to be a moral being because most human beings do not know the true gods, and the few who do cannot know this themselves, thus rendering the theory useless.

Although the above objections all have merits, once again we have overlooked the point that even if divine command theory were to be true, it would remain a dictatorship. Just as Russell's answer overlooked the primary point about democratic concepts of freedom, in the discussion of divine command theory one likewise *sine qua non* overlooks the vital point of democratic freedom. This theory is a clear example of a dictatorship because it negates any form of democracy and moral autonomy. At no time in the discussion does it become clear why the gods have a right to demand moral commitment based on their commands or motivations. That the gods have a right to command because they exist, because they are gods is a circular argument that is missing its foundation. Just because the gods gives commands, it does not *eo ipso* follow

that their morals are satisfactory or that members of a normative democracy will agree on those morals.

It has been postulated that moral terms such as "should" and "ought" have obtained a legalistic sense because of the Christian religion's historical influence (although it is acknowledged, that a legal conception of ethics was not limited to a particular religion) (Anscombe 1958). These terms seem to imply an absolute verdict, and this entails a judge. A divine law requires, of course, that one believe in a deity. However, because human beings have eliminated this from the law, they should also eliminate the use of moral terms from a religious worldview in philosophy itself.

I will reformulate this point and say that the important thing is not that we have abandoned the existence of the gods and thus cannot reliably base moral terms on them: instead, it is important to note that in a democracy the gods have no right to give commands to begin with. They have not been chosen in an election, they are not governed by a law-giving assembly, and therefore they have no place in a democratic system. This normatively stands regardless of the gods' existence or nonexistence. Morality cannot be derived from a dictatorship. The important point is that in a modern democracy, every human being has fundamental rights that cannot be undermined. These rights are secured under global law. Every adult human being has the right to follow his or her own path, have his or her own opinions, and to say and write what he or she wants. No one can dictate to others what to think, feel, believe or say (Diamond 2004).

The real reason to question such terms is therefore not that we no longer prioritize the secondary question. Instead, we answer the primary question in that we no longer accept dictatorships as a societal order. Thus, the role of the gods in a democracy violates the fundamental principles of democracy itself. In a democracy we might not have an absolute ontic or even an epistemic funded ethical system that is applicable at all times. However, in a democracy this might *pro tanto* not be a necessity. Through rational debate, laws are chosen by elected politicians: these laws secure rights and protection to all citizens. Such rights and protection are the very foundation of moral commitment.

Democracy

Democracy is usually contrasted with the concept of

dictatorship and is defined as a type of government in which power flows from the citizens to the leaders of government, who are selected through free elections and hold power only temporarily (Diamond 2003). The concept first appeared in political philosophy in the city-state of Athens during classical antiquity. Led by the aristocrat Kleisthenes, the creation of what is generally considered the first (restricted) democracy took place in 508–507 BC. That democracy had a council of 500 members, with rotating membership and limitations on re-election, and every respectable citizen eventually spent a day as the leader of the state's official executive body (Dunn 1994).

Popper (2000) defined democracy in contrast to dictatorship or tyranny, stating that every dictatorship is morally wrong, which he defined as the basic moral principle for democracy, understood as the form of nation in which the people control their leaders and can remove them without the need for a revolution and bloodshed. The power and appeal of democracy comes from its promise to render the life of a human society as something willed and chosen, and a dictatorship is morally wrong because it forces human beings to disregard their better judgment and violate their freedom and moral beliefs to collaborate with unjust actions thus essentially eliminating human beings' moral responsibility.

Modern democracy can be thought of as a political system defined using the following four key elements: "1. A political system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections. 2. The active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life. 3. Protection of the human rights of all citizens. 4. A rule of law, in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens" (Diamond 2004). More precisely, a democracy is a system in which the people have the power and control by a majority vote, that is, the majority periodically chooses their political leaders.

The idea behind modern democracy is that it is not only a local but also a global system. Since its origin, modern democracy has continuously expanded to encapsulate an increasing number of nations and cultures (Diamond 2003). The goal has been to generalize democracy as a global system applicable everywhere and at all times on this planet. Democracy today is the dominant and increasingly the exclusive form of government, clamming to set the standard for legitimate

authority. The ancient conception of state's autonomy is dissolving under the weight of the international scrutiny of domestic leadership (Franck 1992). The growing interdependence of nations is increasingly demanding a shared normative expectation that all nations seeking international political legitimacy must govern with the permission of the governed human beings. Because the fundamental principles in democracy necessitate, that all leaders be chosen by citizens and that it must be possible to select new leaders at the next election, then it follows *ipso facto* that democracy is incompatible with a dictatorship, in which a leader has unrestricted power independent of elections.

The Gods as Dictators

We see once again that the concepts of gods, as opposed to dictators, have not kept up with modern times: hypothetical gods' right to rule clearly conflicts with the points set forth above. With the exception of an up-scaled power, what separates a god from a normal dictator? Does power give the right to rule everything? That the gods have the right to rule because they are gods has the status of a tautology and requires a justification that goes beyond the fact that they are gods. That the gods have a right to rule because they possess greater power or greater knowledge is not a sound argument in a democracy. A right to rule is not conditional on such qualities in either a democratic or an argumentative sense. The gods' right to rule is definitively undemocratic. A world founded on what the gods want will always be a dictatorial world in clear conflict with democracy and rights. The gods cannot really be considered democratic because they have not been elected and their commands do not have a formal constitution. Furthermore, they cannot be removed from office. There are no controls on their power: those who oppose their authority are condemned and punished.

A previously noted, a democracy is a system of rule by laws, not by single beings, regardless of their power. In a democracy, regardless of its ontic or epistemic status, the rule of law protects the rights of human beings, maintains order and safety, and restricts the power of government. Some might object that we cannot apply human standards to the gods. However, this is an argument from authority that states that the gods' standards must be applied to humankind instead of the standards of human beings being applied to hu-

mankind, with no justification other than the gods' authority.

A more sophisticated attempt at an objection might be that gods are not individuals in the same way that we understand human beings as individuals, which should mean that we cannot discuss democracy and rights on an equal level between human beings and the gods. Thus, we make an ontological distinction: that is, in metaphysics the different kinds of being are defined as categories of being (Thomasson 2013). A deity is thus not just "a being", but a "Being Itself", not merely singular as one, even a supreme and self-existent one, but as the "Power of Being" by which any finite thing exists. A human being is limited in space and time, finite, conditioned on something else, whereas the deity must be absolute at the top. Anything less than the absolute, the unconditioned, cannot really according to this line of thought be a god.

Long complex discussions of what a god should be defined as have been attempted. However, as stated in the introduction, none of the arguments for the gods' attributes have been successful, or even obtained a generic status among the gods' followers worldwide. More importantly in this discussion, from the perspective of normative democracy, all this is irrelevant. Why should a distinction between such categories, in defining being, be important? In principle, it is no more important than a discussion of how a hypothetical alien species with a different being than humans stands. Regardless of whether gods or powerful aliens with the attributes of finite beings, infinite beings, first beings, perfect beings, etc. make demands to rule, there is still no commitment. In terms of leadership, there is no explanation about why one being should possess a right to rule another being.

Moreover, the application of such categories of being again represents an example of selection bias towards one's own deities. A concept from existing religions is that of a belief in demigods, an individual with one human being as a parent, and one god as another (York 2015). Where exactly should these demigods be placed in the categories? What being do they have?

Universalization of Equal Status

As noted above, the principles underlying democracy should not cease from being local to become global, but must proceed further from being global to be-

come universal. By being universal these principles encapsulate the entire universe, or all universes. This universalization extends the expansion of and argumentation for democracy. Because democracy applies globally, it also does so universally: all leaders must be chosen and can be replaced by new leaders in the next election. Both in global and in universal democracy, it follows that dictators have no right to rule. Both globally and universally, the gods' right to rule is viewed as a violation of democratic principles. The members of a democracy have equal status, and if this status generalizes to universal applicability, then it follows that human beings are not second class compared to the gods. The ontic or epistemic status of human beings and gods is irrelevant when we discuss democratic rights.

However, the supporters of the gods' rights might object that I discuss only the rights in the world of the living whereas they believe that the gods have a right to rule when human beings supposedly steps into the world of the non-living. Nevertheless, the answers to this objection are that philosophical justification only changes in light of new philosophical arguments, not by human beings moving to a new "environment", as the believers in an afterlife somewhat unclear seems to think. Even in this scenario, we continue to lack a normative justification of the gods' right to rule.

A common reason to this right is stated as follows: the gods created human beings and thus have a right to rule because human beings are, so to speak, their property (Swinburne 1974). However, this is not a sound argument in a democracy, and as an argument, it does *eo ipso* not follow that the gods should have created human beings and thus have a right to rule humankind. It seems that hypothetical gods' right to rule is ultimately founded on power. However, is a power-based justification an ethically justified argument?

Let us consider first an example from tauromachy. In bullfighting, a bull will be forced to fight against a matador de toros, surrounded by a cheering crowd. The event ultimately will end with the death of the bull. The bullfighter's action is justified from power. He tortures and kills the bull simply because he has the power to do so. All other attempts to appeal to ethical arguments seem quite doubtful. Because the entire situation is founded on a justification from power, then let us analyse the situation from the bull's perspective. What if the bull succeeds in killing the bullfighter instead, and further, that the bull is clever

and daring enough to kill everyone in its way (including those who breed it, its creators, so to speak), such that it can escape the arena and flee to safety in the countryside? Is this an ethically justifiable action? The bullfighter's justification from power allowed him to torture and kill the bull, whereas the bull's justification from power allowed it to defend its life and gain its freedom. The ethical justification appears to be in favour of the bull. However, an objection can be made that the bullfighter and the bull belong to two different species and thus different beings, and that an ethical analysis should take this into consideration. In this case, one can ask why? Both scenarios are founded on a justification from power. If the tormented manages to kill its tormentor and achieve its freedom, then the very same justification from power should apply.

An argument with a similar structure – but that embodies a more Hobbesian understanding could involve a seventeenth-century plantation owner who decides to torture and kill a slave. The people in Hobbes' *Leviathan* had no rights whatsoever against their sovereign. This sovereign or dictator could do as he pleased with them, even deliberately harm them, and the people would have no morally valid grievance against the dictator (Hood 1964). If the slave were to succeed in killing the plantation owner and fleeing to safety in another part of the world, then the ethical justification would appear to favour the ex-slave. In a Hobbesian understanding, however, this is not the case. According to Hobbes, the dictator had a certain duty to treat people well, but this duty was owed not to the people themselves but to a god, similar to how people might have a duty to others to treat their property well. Of course, they would have no duty to the property itself but merely to its owner. Depending on the outcome either the plantation owner or the ex-slave would stand accountable to the god for killing its property.

If we simplify the situation by removing the middleman, that is, the human dictator, and rerun the same argument again, with real-life gods doing the same to human beings and the human beings repeating the action of the bull or the ex-slave, would those beings, despite belonging to two different beings, not have an ethical right to fight for freedom? All of these arguments are founded on a justification from power anyway.

In summary, a fundamental principle in democracy is that all of its members have full and equal status. All

of the various privileges that throughout history have been given to individual humans and families have systematically been phased out in democratic societies. In other words, there are no longer second classes and first classes of human beings among humankind. If this fundamental principle is generalized to be universally applicable, then it follows by extension that human beings are not second class compared to hypothetical gods or aliens.

It might be objected that the discussion of democracy is based on a normative foundation, whereas the discussion of the gods' right to rule is based on a factual or ontological foundation. However, no claims regarding gods can be said to find factual support. Nor has any convincing ontological foundation been established for the gods (Oppy 2006). What remains is that "the gods' right to rule", perhaps like democracy, is based on a normative foundation. And because democracy secures freedom of religion (and consequently freedom from religion) then it follows that democracy automatically arranges the supporters of the gods' normative rights as a part itself, but not above itself, and thus normative democracy takes precedence. Furthermore, even if the gods existed, the response would be that the gods' right to rule would still not be obvious, except from being based on a justification from power.

A democratic human being, there on the one hand accepts democracy, but on the other hand also accepts the gods' right to rule, thus finds himself in a contradictory position, lacking support of democracy.

Rights and Dignity

It can be stated that the principles of democracy are derived from the basic idea that each individual human being has a right to both liberty and political equality. Democracy is thus an extension of the general idea that each human being should to be the ruler of his or her own existence. A legal system can be viewed as a distribution of personal freedom that establishes rules specifying which citizen is free to act in which ways and which citizen should be free from undesired actions and conditions. Drawing on a long tradition of thought produced over centuries by legal philosophers, a legal system can be viewed as a complex, layered structure of guaranteed rights (Wenar 2015).

Ancient people did not uphold the same conception of global rights as people do today. The beginning of

rights was most likely that even the most rudimentary social order must encompass rules specifying that some individuals or groups have special permission or restrictions related to the performance of certain actions (Wenar 2015). The true forerunner of individual human rights discourse was, however, the concept of natural rights that achieved dominance during Europe's Enlightenment. This rights theory has continued to advance, viewing rights such as life, liberty, and property as fundamental and applicable everywhere and at all times in the sense of being global.

The idea of rights has proceeded from a local to an increasingly global perception. Therefore, if we proceed further from a globalized idea to a universalized one then it again stands, that the gods' right to rule will be viewed as a violation of these rights. As in the case of democracy, it is especially interesting, that those who fought for the introduction of rights did not simultaneously question the gods' right to negate these very rights. For example, we have Jefferson's Declaration of Independence (1776): "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness" (Becker 1970, 5). They did not perform the extrapolation made here in which I question the right to violate the rights of not only humans with power but also gods to violate human beings' rights. A god apparently has the right to negate these rights by virtue of simply being a god analogous to a king negating these rights by virtue of simply being a king.

Furthermore, a right or quality beyond the realm of rights of conduct that can be mentioned is dignity, which expresses the concept that a human being has a right to be valued and respected (Rosen 2012). Dignity is not simply a word: it also represents a hope or declaration that human existence in the reality in which it takes place may come to be more of a question of internal and external respect and less of a question of enforced obedience to interpersonal and external legal demands. In many ways, dignity is an extension of the Enlightenment's ideals of rights, from which it follows that human beings owe each other a certain inviolable respect and right. In other words, dignity entails that sentient beings shall not submit to or worship each other, regardless of their power and knowledge.

It is not easy to justify the inherent dignity of a spe-

cies compared to another species, considering that we now know that all life shares a common origin (Kampourakis 2014). Although perhaps dignity need not be inherent, but assumed because we choose to take the existential leap, that it shall be thus. There are no gods that give us our dignity or more correctly, that have a right to either give or take our dignity.

Heroical Apatheism

Based on this discussion, it follows that it is unnecessary for those who agree with the presented conclusions to designate themselves as either atheists or agnostics because the existence of the gods as discussed is not the primary question. In a sense, designations should be unnecessary: however, if they are necessary, then I would suggest the term "heroical apatheism" for the apatheian principle that I advance. In a sense, this term simply refers to the democratic values, *fundamentalis democratia*, rigorously applied.

Apatheism

A lack of interest in the existence of the gods most likely has a long history. Thus wrote Diderot in response to Voltaire: "It is very important not to mistake hemlock for parsley; but not at all so to believe or not in God" (Herrick 1985, 75). It appears that the term apatheism first appeared in an article by Rauch (2003). It is a combination of two words: "Apathy" and "Theism" or "Apathy and "Atheism." Apatheism is here defined as: "a disinclination to care all that much about one's own religion, and an even stronger disinclination to care about other people's. Apatheism concerns not what you believe but how. In that respect it differs from the standard concepts used to describe religious views and people, apatheism is an attitude, not a belief system" (Rauch 2003).

This type of apatheism is thus a form of indifference that fundamentally represents an absence or lack of interest in questions involving deities and religious postulates. An apatheist has no interest in accepting or denying any postulates regarding the existence or nonexistence of deities. Apatheism can fall under pragmatic atheism (Robinson 2012) if by this one means *negative atheism*, whereas it cannot be said to fall under *positive atheism*, because this notion strictly expresses that gods do not exist, whereas apatheism can entail beliefs in gods (Rauch 2003). Apatheism can fall under pragmatic agnosticism, but it is im-

portant to emphasize that once again there exists an asymmetry here. Most agnostics are apatheists, but many apatheists are not agnostics. It is entirely possible for apatheists to be believers (Rauch 2003). However, these definitions of apatheism are in many ways different from my own definition. The above only addresses the secondary question: “This is the view that millennia of debate has neither proven nor disproven the existence of a god or gods. However, even if one or more deities exist, they do not appear to be concerned about the fate of humans. Thus, their existence has little impact on humanity and should be of little interest” (Robinson 2012). Thus, it takes the shape of a pragmatic agnosticism, which provides that because the gods do not seem to have importance in the lives of human beings, there is no reason to dedicate time to the matter until their existence or influence has been demonstrated.

As noted above, my approach is different because it addresses the primary question. My definition is directed more specifically toward the god concept and the gods’ status in comparison to human beings. My position is, as I have stated so far: it is not a question of whether the gods seem to have little impact on humankind, but that the existence of the gods is irrelevant, and this is what I mean by apatheism. I will henceforth refer to my own definition and position as heroic apatheism. A heroic apatheist considers the question of the existence or nonexistence of deities to be fundamentally irrelevant in every way that matters. It is very important to specify that a heroic apatheist shall not be understood as someone who doubts, a sceptic, in a manner similar to that of, for example, atheists or agnostics who question the existence of the gods or what we can know about the gods. A heroic apatheist is precisely not a sceptic because the primary question is not the gods’ existence, which is the secondary question. The primary question is the gods’ importance.

One of the most common religious postulates for the gods’ importance is that only in deities can human beings find true and lasting happiness. The gods provide purpose to human existence and loving such deities fulfils us as human beings (Nielsen 1973). A more vulgar postulate is that the gods are the creators of human beings who thus somehow have an obligation to please their benefactors. Because the gods are the creators of this world and in all likelihood have not ceded ownership of it, then the gods are also its own-

ers, that is, both everything and everybody are their property (Swinburne 1974). Thus, it is only by having faith in and pleasing the gods that human beings can find purpose in their existence.

The obvious *prima facie* reply to this is, for example as Nielsen note that we simply do not have any evidence for the existence of deities. Thus, Nielsen (1973, 22-41) rightfully places himself in line with Russell. Because of the lack of such evidence or proof, the religious believer’s postulate that human nature is fulfilled only in relationship to deities is unjustified. Unfortunately, from this line of reasoning it *ipso facto* follows that, if one day we do in fact possess evidence of the existence of the gods, then it would follow that the gods provide purpose to the existence of human beings.

However, the fundamental attitude of a heroic apatheist is that the gods’ existence will not provide purpose to human beings regardless, and they certainly do not consider themselves property. Human beings are not second class in the universe, which juridically, ethically and existentially is ruled by others. Therefore, the existence of gods is not rejected for ontological or epistemic reasons – for democratic or existential reasons, it is deemed unnecessary. This is not an arrogant, hubris-like attempt to elevate human beings above the gods, as might be objected. It is simply universalization of the fundamental democratic principle that there are no first- and second-class humans and that among other species or beings (including hypothetical gods or aliens elsewhere in the universe), human beings also are not second class.

The unique attitude of a heroic apatheist is that if one day it were possible to obtain proof that the gods in fact exist, then their attitude and behaviour would not change. Likewise, there would be no change in their attitude and behaviour, if we obtained proof that the gods do not exist. A heroic apatheist considers the existence or nonexistence of deities as neither providing meaning nor purpose to their own existence: the gods neither give direction to life nor have any right to influence. That the gods can possess greater power, knowledge, be eternal, etc., is stringently irrelevant from the heroic apatheists point of view. According to the heroic apatheist, it would not be meaningful to live according to another’s meaning. If meaning were dictated to us by others, then it would *ipso facto* not be a meaning for us, it would be meaning for others. According to this apatheian principle, hu-

man beings would be degraded, not elevated, by having their purpose and existence dictated by the gods.

It could be objected, that if we do not submit to the gods' right to rule, there is no basis for any meaning or hope of justice, safety or better times. The opposite question could be asked, however. If there are gods and their right to rule is accepted, what basis is there for any meaning or hope of justice, safety or better times? If the gods' rule is accepted, then human beings are slaves or puppets. All of the strings, even our lives, are in their hands. In that situation, there is no hope of enlightenment, freedom and protection of equal rights and dignity. The gods would set all of the rules, without input from others. That is dictatorship. The answer to the question is simple and obvious for anyone who does not consider human beings wholly worthless: things can become better because of human effort. Things have become better because of human effort, and there are virtually unlimited amounts of hope and justice, safety and every other aspect of better times as long as we are willing to fight and make sacrifices for both ourselves and our fellow beings.

Insight from evolutionary biology has taught us that living beings, including human beings, do not seem to have any ultimate built-in function that they must fulfil, humans were not made for anything with a teleological direction. Nevertheless, this insight need not lead to, say, nihilism. As noted by Nielsen (1973), a separation can be made between two types of purpose. First, one can respond to the claim regarding a built-in purpose as follows: "that if man were not made for a purpose, his life must be without purpose actually is offensive for it involves treating man as a kind of tool as merely serving a purpose". According to Nielsen (1973) the standard objection that there must be deities in order to have a purpose for human existence trades on confusion. Because second, it is important to understand that there can be purpose in life even if there is no purpose to life. There does not seem to be a purpose for human beings qua humans, but human beings can have purpose in their existence because human beings have goals, intentions, emotions, and motives, all of which remain intact regardless of the apparent fact that existence is purposeless in the larger sense. In this more specific sense, things matter to sentient beings, regardless of the gods' existence or nonexistence.

Furthermore, even for sake of argument, if we assume

that there indeed is an inherent purpose in life itself, why equate it with the gods? I could reformulate the Euthyphro dilemma to concern itself with meaning or purpose instead of morality, and then it would follow that purpose is independent of what any of the gods thinks, wants, or prefers.

For a heroic atheist, the existence of the gods is thus not one of the so-called grand questions in life. Their lives would not change at all if anyone could provide evidence of the gods' existence. Of course, they would recognize the gods' existence in this case – and properly find it exciting, but they would not submit to their authority, precisely because human beings are not second class compared to the gods. Heroic atheism is thus not based on a lazy attitude towards the god question in which one is not interested in the questions of the possible existence of the gods. Instead, it is based on a consequentially thorough consideration of the idea of equal rights.

Heroical

What about the term "heroical?" Why is a term that describes indifference paradoxically described as "heroic," an active adjective?" In truth, the designation "militant atheist" could also have been applied (Von Hegner 2010, 240), but the term heroic signals more positive and personal qualities, that are not necessarily warlike. Heroical means having or displaying qualities appropriate for heroes. The word is fitting to use here because it is an ancient term from the Latin word *herōs*, derived from Greek, which itself is likely even older with a Pre-Greek origin (Beekes 2009). The term literally means "protector" or "defender" (Harper 2001-2016). This very ancient term represents qualities showing the best and (in this specific case) that which is the most important in human beings. A *herōs* is an individual who, when confronted with danger or injustice, fights adversity through impressive feats of strength, courage, resolve and pride, often disregarding their own personal concerns for a higher good, such as the right to be one's own lord in one's own existence with dignity.

The term heroic is a pragmatic response to the following two scenarios:

The Political Objection

In an ideal world, that is, a world in which religious freedom and (by extension) freedom from religions

are upheld and respected, it would be sufficient to be an atheist. Sadly, however, the world is not this way. In many countries, there are demands regarding the upholding or respect of numerous traditions or rules based on the local god or religion. For instance, in the USA, there is a custom many places that before testifying in court or taking a political office, one must swear an oath on a holy book (Epstein 1996). If one swears alliance to the country, this likewise involves swearing alliance to a god and so forth. This custom continues in many places, although as a matter of constitutional law, one has the right to declare non-belief or take an oath based on a solemn affirmation, if one requests this in advance (Epstein 1996).

One situation in which this freedom of choice does not exist involves “In God We Trust”, the official motto of the USA since 1956 (Epstein 1996). This motto was first legally challenged in 1970, but the Court ruled: “It is quite obvious that the national motto and the slogan on coinage and currency “In God We Trust” has nothing whatsoever to do with the establishment of religion” (Aronow V. United States 1970). This conclusion makes no sense, of course, considering that gods are a concept from religion and in this case from a specific monotheistic religion, thus violating the religious freedom of both nonreligious peoples and followers of other religions. This motto is also frequently exhibited in the courtroom itself, where it can be seen behind the judge. A person requested to appear at a trial at which this motto is displayed will have his freedom from religion implicitly violated by the very institution that should protect it.

Similar examples can be found in most Western societies. In Denmark, for instance, section 4 of the Constitution provides that: “The Evangelical Lutheran Church shall be the Established Church of Denmark, and as such shall be supported by the State” (The Constitutional Act of Denmark of June 5th 1953). Each year before members of the parliament meet for their official opening and the prime minister’s opening speech, all are expected to meet at Christiansborgs church to hear the opening sermon. This is not mandatory by law, but it is considered proper behaviour toward one’s colleagues. Of course, some politicians have objected to this mingling of politics and religion (Qureshi 2009).

Notwithstanding the formal existence of religious freedom (and by extension, freedom from religion,

and in extension thereof, freedom from the gods) in Western societies, in praxis, most humans remain obliged to abide by diverse religious injunctions. Although one is indifferent to the existence of the gods, it does not follow that one automatically does not care about personal freedom and self-respect. To be an heroic atheist in this case simply means that one stands by one’s right to freedom from the gods, first by politely refusing to participate in diverse rituals and if this still is not sufficient, then to make a more active and less polite refusal. Thus, the purpose of this term is to indicate that one is ready to stand firm or fight for one’s democratic right or dignity, analogous to, say, a heroic democrat ready to fight against a tyrant. Being indifferent to something also means an increased chance of exploitation, providing a foundation for tyranny. Therefore, to be a heroic atheist means that one will not accept the dictation of religious rules about what and what not to do. Although we should maintain respect for people’s right to believe what they want, this is not the same as maintaining respect for the content in their beliefs. No violations of the right to freedom from religions and gods will be respected.

The Religious Objection

In an ideal world, that is, a world in which the threats of (hypothetical or factual) dictators taking power does not exist, it would be sufficient to be an atheist. What if, however, one or more of the gods actually showed themselves to humankind tomorrow and their existence became a fact? If they were conclusively shown to exist, then heroic atheists would obviously recognize their existence. However, it would be interesting in the same way as if humankind finally made contact with an alien species. However, they would not submit themselves to those gods, they would not worship them, and they definitely would not trust them because they do not agree with the gods’ antidemocratic ideals and actions. Heroic atheists would continue to exercise their personal freedom and be the best human beings possible. The simple reason is that those heroic atheists exist in a democracy, which is something that they intend to continue to do. In other words, they deny the gods’ right to interfere in their lives or in world events. Because, are the gods different from dictators? Have we chosen the gods? Will they resign from office if a majority of human beings would have them removed?

The next issue that arises is what if despite our pro-

test, real-life gods take control anyway, perhaps with the dictum, say, that their will is the causally necessary and sufficient condition of the existence of contingent human beings, which leads to the gods' worth as subjects of worship, that is, the conjecture, that there is somehow a type of relation between existence and submission, that they have an demand on absolute devotion and unconditional commitment, regardless of democracy and rights. What happens in that situation? Well, such gods will be tyrants, wordy of neither respect nor worship, but only contempt from any democratic life form. As ethical beings, we would be obliged to find a way to slay such tyrants. Such beings should not be obeyed, but instead should be fought with all our strength and put on trial, accused of crimes against humankind. That democratic rights have been suppressed by the use of force does not entail that the philosophical status of democratic rights have been undermined, only that they have been suppressed until heroic freedom fighters have restored them.

In this manner, heroic atheism becomes heroicalism. Rights deprived by force can also be retaken by force. In modern times, many dictators have experienced a similar end to their dictatorships when freedom fighters instituted democracy. In principle, there is no reason that this situation could not be repeated here. Whether it is human dictators or god dictators, play, as this discussion has made clear, no principal difference. In this case, to be a heroical atheist means to stand up for one's rights regardless of whom one is standing against. Of course, supporters of the gods will claim that such a fight for democracy is absurd because the gods possess greater power than human beings, and such a fight will not result in success. The proper response to this objection might be that this is a question of a leap of faith on behalf of the freedom fighters, and faith, as the saying goes, is beyond reason.

Discussion and Conclusion

Despotism is a political form of leadership in which a single individual rules with absolute power. The attraction of democracy, in contrast, comes from the idea of autonomy, of sentient beings choosing freely for themselves. It has been claimed that: "Today, there are no global rivals to democracy as a broad model of government. Communism is dead. Military rule everywhere lacks appeal and normative justification.

One-party states have largely disappeared. For what single party, in this day and age, can credibly claim the wisdom and moral righteousness to rule indefinitely and without criticism or challenge?" (Diamond 2003).

There is in fact one remaining: the acceptance of the gods' right to rule is, in praxis an acceptance of a theocracy. Although there is philosophical debate regarding the rights of religions to allow religiously-based law to influence the political system, this debate is primarily based on how this can be done without violating religious freedom. Those who posit that democracy today is confronted by no serious threats might say that a democratic society regularly passes laws independent of what hypothetical gods are postulated to command. They are partially correct in this and in truth, democratic societies are forced to do so, otherwise a violation of freedom from religions would result. Nevertheless, freedom from religions also entails freedom from the gods. Therefore, my approach focuses on the notion that the very idea of gods as rulers itself equates to dictatorship. In the Western world, supporters of theocracy may belong in a minority, so in that regard there is no practical threat against democracy. However, the fact that the acceptance of the gods' right to rule is so commonly accepted by democratically minded citizens, and is not meet with objections represents a challenge for democratic thought and philosophy itself.

In this article, I have argued that if the concept of democracy generalizes to a universal status, then the concept of hypothetical gods' right to rule will assume status of a dictatorship. The many and diverse justifications for the gods' right to rule are all irrelevant in the democratic context just as justifications for dictators are irrelevant.

Some supporters of the gods' right to rule might consider the previous analyses as representing defiance or rebelliousness. However, defiant implies the definition that there is someone to be defiant against: the relation to be defied and to be a defier necessitates that the one being defied has a right resulting in defiance. This is the point that is being questioned. There are no rightful rulers to begin with. Naturally, some modern supporters of "the gods' right to rule" might say that there is a choice, that one can submit to the gods' dictatorial will or not. However, this can be discussed. Pascal's Wager and divine command theory exemplifies the orthodox attitude. The choice consists

of either letting oneself be ruled by the gods or punished, either being moral or not being moral. There apparently is no third option, namely to live in peace and lead one's own existence. The heroic atheist will disagree with all of these possibilities because he or she does not recognize the gods' rights to begin with. The atheist principle marks that these three possibilities cannot be established to begin with because this implies some sort of negotiations with the gods. However, the gods have no negotiation right.

A possible objection to equate the rights of gods and human beings, and my subsequent inquiry about, what right the gods should have to rule, could be that rights and wrongs should arise out of an external law in relation to which actions stand. What this should mean is that there then must be a juridical imperative outside the system of democracy itself that dictates that one should follow this specific democratic system, which means that the system of democracy is not justified by itself.

To this, one can as a first answer practically note that if a well-ordered world society is to work, human beings must not only participate in and exercise their rights but also must observe core principles and rules of conduct. Every human being must value the rights and dignity of his or her fellow humans as sentient beings. This value is essentially upheld in the most advanced democratic societies, thus demonstrating that democracy functions excellently without an external imperative. Perhaps more importantly, it functions even without a rigorous philosophical justification. In a modern democracy, laws are passed completely independent of dictates from hypothetical gods, where laws emerge from rational discussion and are passed by elected politicians in majority decisions.

Democratic laws already principally disregard the rights of the gods. Thus, an Abraham attempting to kill Isaac, or an Agamemnon actually killing Iphigenia, would today be arrested and convicted regardless of any justification based on the gods' commands. Whether the command to kill comes from divine command or from schizophrenia, the demands of human rights in a democracy take precedence. Suppose, however, we take one additional step further and eliminate the middlemen in that scenario, resulting in real-life gods attempting to kill children. Such an action should be justified by the gods' right to a suspension of what we consider ethical? Will citizens

in a democracy continue – in principle – to attempt to protect the children? In this case, when the commands, motivations or actions of gods, regardless of their ontic status, collide with the demands of morality, *res ipsa loquitur*, in a just and democratic society, morality should take precedence regardless of its epistemic status and the children be protected.

Nevertheless, what the above objection, that there must be some type of juridical imperative outside the system of democracy that justifies adherence to this specific system really mean, is that the discussion could be different, if there is a separation between the gods that exist under the same conditions as the rest of the universe's inhabitants and the gods that exist outside the universe. The first group could have created human beings, whereas the latter could have created both human beings and the universe. However, does a conception outside of the universe have any meaning? This notion originates from the assumption that a transcendental point of view is possible. A classic example of such a view is Pierre-Simon de Laplace's example. Niels Bohr considered this view a philosophical mistake. Thus, he argued that both idealism and materialism are mistaken conceptions derived from the conception about a last subject that should be able to view the universe from outside (Favrholdt 1994).

Bohr's philosophical point is that one's surroundings are always observed under conditions determined by the fact that everyone is part of the universe. This means that we must apply our concepts in a certain interdependent way to think and communicate unambiguously. We are a part of the reality that we observe: therefore we must continuously draw a line between subject and object if we are to describe anything. Thus, human beings are in the universe and cannot see it from without. It is not even possible to ascribe any meaning to this word. We are forced to describe the universe as being part of it, one could attempt to say, as "seen within," but the whole point is that both the expression "seen outside" and the expression "seen within" are meaningless. Thus, it follows that one must follow certain conditions for descriptions dictated by the structure of the world. It is not possible for us either to transcend them or to suggest alternative conditions for description (Favrholdt 1994). These fundamental conditions for description are not a contingent fact: instead, everybody – human beings and gods alike – must abide by them in

order to have meaningful communication. However, even if (for the sake of argument) it was granted that there somehow are gods outside the universe, it still would not be clear at all why those gods should possess a right to bypass the democratic autonomy that is agreed on within democracy.

There remains much to discuss. Are democracy and rights truly sufficiently justified and self-sustaining? This notion has been criticized in different ways: one of the main objections is that in the democratic system, there are often major disagreements, and the political system is capable of enforcing solutions over the objections of the minority. This represents a problem with rights and freedom for all. Perhaps the primary strength of democracy is only that it ultimately prevents dictatorships, whereas rights will always seem like a cogent argument?

Furthermore, that different species have different rights also raises fundamental questions (MacClellan 2012). Both versions of natural law – divine and Aristotelian natural law – ground natural rights as moral demands derived from the nature of things itself instead of from agreements. As has been discussed up to this point, hypothetical gods have no right to rule over human beings. However, it is also not easy to justify human beings' inherent rights compared to other animals. Thanks to natural science, it is now well known that there is no real dividing line separating human beings from their nonhuman ancestors. Six million years ago in Africa, a non-human ape had children that went on to evolve along three divergent lines into humans, chimpanzees, and bonobos, but nowhere along those lines of nearly a million generations did any offspring appear to be particularly different from the parent generation. Nevertheless, there were non-human apes at the beginning and there are human (apes) beings at the end of one line of descend in the present day (Silver 2006). This clearly represents a problem for the discussion of inherent rights. There is no fixed nature that defines human beings and dictates what will be morally appropriate for the realization of human essence. On what are these rights based? Why should only one species on this planet have them? This represents unclarified questions that we do not have time to address here; however, perhaps sentiocentrism points in a fruitful direction.

Democracy is a very simple idea in its appeal and power: perhaps it is too simple. In some ways, my

treatment might have been too rough and as is common in philosophy, much of the presented analyses and discussions could have been longer. Nevertheless, if one considers overall that democracy represents the best political and ethical system that we have, by extension, it follows that one must agree that dictators, regardless of their nature, must be disregarded. If one does not consider democracy to be sufficiently justified and self-contained one likely will not agree with this discussion. In that event, it is up to the dissenter, in the philosophical and juridical debate to explain why dictatorship is better than democracy.

I have attempted to keep the discussion within the frame-work of a normative democratic juridical argumentation. Nevertheless, it is likely that the argumentation for heroic atheism could also have been advanced as a declaration of independence or a manifesto in which one takes a leap in a kind of existential declaration, *dignitas humanitas*, and outright *pro tanto* proclaims that human beings shall choose freedom and follow their own path, simply because we choose to do so. The slave killing his tormenter achieves his freedom: does he really need anything more than a *pro tanto* justification for this act?

Are there things greater than human beings? Of course. The universe is greater than human beings, and this is something that each of us confronts every day. However, something being greater does not entail it being worshipped. In short, there is no relation between existence and worship. Where does this misunderstanding come from? One can draw attention to two distinct evolutionary features in human beings that are relevant to this connection. The first is that throughout history, human beings have instinctively been social animals (Van Vugt, Hogan and Kaiser 2008). This instinct has first created pack leaders and in accordance with our increasing intelligence and more complex culture, this instinct reasonably led first to chieftains and medicine men and then to kings and hypothetical gods. Second, human beings have an instinctive need to experience awe and wonder in their lives, to feel connected to something greater (Keltner and Haidt 2003). Throughout history, this need has led to our greatest creations: science, philosophy, art and poetry, etc. However, over time these two instincts have become confused with each other, have become so entangled that almost no one can tell the difference anymore, and the instincts to follow and submit become intertwined with the need to feel awe

and wonder. Thus, when our instinct to follow is superimposed on our instinct for awe, worship emerges, and dignity upon which increasing intelligence makes claims is mutilated. To worship thus represents a misunderstanding of our attraction to wonder, where our genetic instinct as pack animals is superimposed on our genetic instinct for awe.

The time has long since emerged to dissolve this entanglement. Our instincts are older than our intelligence and while time has passed, the sophistication of our intelligence has grown beyond our instincts and the time has come for us to overcome our confusion of worship with wonder. Democracy has come a long way since its beginning almost 2500 years ago. In some respects, it is overwhelmingly close to being complete. We need only take the last step and embrace democracy not only in action but also in thought.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, G. 2005. "Before Turannoi Were Tyrants: Rethinking a Chapter of Early Greek History," *Classical Antiquity*, Vol. 24, No. 2. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/ca.2005.24.2.173>
- Anscombe, G.E.M. 1958. "Modern Moral Philosophy". *Philosophy* 33 (124): 1–19. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0031819100037943>
- Aronow, V. 1970. *United States*, 432 F. 2d 242, 243 (9th Cir. October 6, 1970).
- Austin, M.W. *Divine Command Theory*. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
- Barrett, David, B. Kurian, George, T. Johnson, Todd, M. 2001. *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in The Modern World 2*. 2nd edition, Oxford University Press.
- Becker, C. 1970. *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas*. 1922. Revised edition, Vintage Books, New York.
- Beekes, R.S.P. 2009. *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*. Brill.
- Bullivant, S. and Michael, R. (eds.). 2013. *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*. Oxford University Press.
- Burkett, D. 2011. *The Blackwell Companion to Jesus*. John Wiley and Sons.
- Burgess, G. 1992. The Divine Right of Kings Reconsidered. *The English Historical Review* 107 (425): 837–861. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ehr/CVII.CCCCXXV.837>
- Diamond, L. 2003. *Can the Whole World Become Democratic?* Center for the Study of Democracy.
- Diamond, L. 2004. *What is Democracy?* Lecture at Hilla University for Humanistic Studies.
- Diderot, D. 1746. *Pensées philosophiques*. In: *Euvres Complètes de Diderot*. Hrsg. J. Assézar, ed. [Paris 1875] Nendeln 1966. Band I. LIX.
- Dunn, J. 1994. *Democracy: the unfinished journey 508 BC – 1993 AD*. Oxford University Press.
- Epstein, S.B. 1996. "Rethinking the Constitutionality of Ceremonial Deism". *Columbia Law Review* 96: 2083–2174.
- Fasching, D.J. and deChant, D. 2001. *Comparative Religious Ethics: A narrative approach*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Favrholt, D. 1994. *Niels Bohr and Realism*. In: Jan Faye & Henry J. Folse (eds.), *Niels Bohr and Contemporary Philosophy*. Kluwer Academic Publishers: 77–96. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-94-015-8106-6_4
- Franck, T. 1992. "The Emerging Right to Democratic Governance". *The American Journal of International Law* 86: 46–91.
- Gethin, R. 1998. *Foundations of Buddhism*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Hájek, A. 2012. "Pascal's Wager", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/pascal-wager/>.
- Harper, D. 2001–2016. *Online Etymology Dictionary*. etymonline.com.
- Herrick, J. 1985. *Against the Faith*. Glover & Blair, London.
- Hood, F.C. 1964. *The divine politics of Thomas Hobbes – an interpretation of Leviathan*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Hornblower, S.S.A. (eds). 1998. *Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization*, Oxford.
- Kampourakis, K. 2014. *Understanding Evolution*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, NY. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139542357>
- Keltner, D. and Haidt, J. 2003. Approaching awe, a moral, spiritual, and aesthetic emotion. *Cognition and Emotion* 17: 297–314. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02699930302297>
- MacClellan, J.P. 2012. "Minding Nature: A Defense of a Sentio-centric Approach to Environmental Ethics". University of Tennessee.
- Martin, M. 1990. *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Nielsen, K. 1973. *Ethics without God*. Prometheus Books, Buffalo, N.Y.

- Oppy, G. 2006. *Arguing About Gods*. N.Y.: Cambridge University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511498978>
- Oppy, G. 2016. "Ontological Arguments", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/ontological-arguments/>.
- Popper, K. 2000. *The Lesson of this Century: With Two Talks on Freedom and the Democratic State*. Routledge; 2 edition.
- Qureshi, K. 2009. *Afskaf åbningsgudstjenesten. Demokratiet skal fejres uden religiøs indblanding*. Kristeligt Dagblad.
- Rauch, J. 2003. *Let It Be: Three Cheers for Apathism*. The Atlantic Monthly, May 2003.
- Robinson, B.A. 2012. "Apathism: Does God exist? I don't know & I don't really care". [Religious Tolerance.org](http://ReligiousTolerance.org).
- Rosen, M. 2012. *Dignity: Its History and Meaning*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674065512>
- Rudolph, K. 2000. "Some reflections on approaches and methodologies in the study of religions" (231-47). In: *Secular Theories on Religion: A Selection of Recent Academic Perspectives*, T. Jensen and M. Rothstein eds. The Museum Tusulanum Press, Copenhagen.
- Salmon, W. 1978. Religion and Science: A New Look at Hume's Dialogues. *Philosophical Studies* 33: 143-76.
- Saunders, Chas, Allen, Peter, J. (Editors). 2015. *Godchecker's Encyclopedia*. www.godchecker.com.
- Silver, L.M. 2006. *Challenging Nature*. Harper-Collins Publishers.
- Sirry, M. 2014. *Scriptural Polemics: The Qur'an and Other Religions*. Oxford University Press.
- Stein, G (Editor). 1980. *Anthology of Atheism and Rationalism*. Prometheus Books.
- Swinburne, R.G. 1974. Duty and the Will of God. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 4(2): 213-227. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00455091.1974.10716933>
- The Constitutional Act of Denmark of June 5th 1953; The Act of Succession of March 27th 1953, Amended on June 12th 2009, Revised translation Birgitte Wern, Published by the Folketing Copenhagen 2013.
- Thomasson, A. 2013. "Categories", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/categories/>.
- Thompson, S. 2014. *Encyclopedia of Diversity and Social Justice*. Rowman and Littlefield.
- Van Vugt, M., Hogan, R., Kaiser, R. 2008. *Leadership, Followership, and Evolution*. American Psychologist. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.63.3.182>
- Von Hegner, I. 2010. *Hertugen, Anekdoter fra ven-skabets rejse*. Underskovens forlag.
- Wainwright, W. 2005. *Religion and morality*. Ashgate Publishing.
- Wenar, L. 2015. *Rights*, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/rights/>.
- Woods, C. 2010. "The earliest Mesopotamian writing", in Woods, Christopher, *Visible language*. Inventions of writing in the ancient Middle East and beyond Oriental Institute Museum Publications 32, University of Chicago, Chicago.
- York, M. 2015. *Pagan Ethics: Paganism as a World Religion*, Springer.
- Zagzebski, L.T. 2004. *Divine Motivation Theory*. Cambridge University Press, New York.