



The Freethought Society News

Editors: Margaret Downey and the Freethought Society Board of Directors
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Mailing address: P.O. Box 242, Pocopson, Pennsylvania 19366-0242
Phone: (610) 793-2737 | Email: Ezine@FtSociety.org

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The Freethought Society News
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The 2018 Attempt to Display The Tree of Knowledge

by Margaret Downey

Each year since 2010, the Freethought Society (FS) has requested that the nontheist symbol *The Tree of Knowledge* be given a space within the public Winter Holiday display in Chester County, Pennsylvania. The annual display is located on the grounds at the Chester County Old Historic Courthouse. Appearing on the lawn each year are a menorah, a crèche, a Chamber of Commerce Christmas tree, a wreath dedicated to veterans, peace banners, toy soldiers and a wire choo-choo train.

In 2010, the [Chester County Commissioners](#) passed Resolution 58-10. The resolution gave the Commissioners full control over the display. The well-known free speech zone became the “Chester County Commissioners Zone.” The Commissioners claim that the secular community is represented by toy soldiers and the choo-choo train — and those items are sufficient to balance out the overtly religious displays. The nontheist community disagrees. We resent that the Commissioners decided childish symbols are appropriate representations for the nontheist community.

Over the years, many people have attended the Chester County Commissioners Sunshine Meeting to express their desire to have *The Tree of Knowledge* represent the nontheist community. Past speakers included representatives from the [Society for Humanistic Judaism](#) (Glen Loev), [Hispanic American Freethinkers](#) (David Tamayo), [Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers](#) (Jason Torpy and Jason Heap), [Ethical Culture](#) (Hugh Taft-Morales), and the [Indian Rationalist Association](#) (Dr. Sam Ilangovan). Many other citizens have testified on behalf of *The Tree of Knowledge* display. They include Tom Schottmiller, Tracy Lockwood, Jill McDevitt, Dr. Robert Kay, Emily Bryne, Debbie Hodies, and many other people who were compelled to voice their endorsements.

In 2010, FS circulated an online petition in favor of the inclusion of *The Tree of Knowledge*. The petition garnered over 400 signatures. When it was delivered to the Chester County Commissioners they completely ignored it. Signatories included authors, scientists, journalists, and national group leaders.

Since 2010, FS has held two public rallies at the Chester County Courthouse in an attempt to bring attention to the fact that the nontheist community is effectively left out of the government-sponsored winter holiday display. The “Human Tree of Knowledge” rallies were well-attended. Passersby stopped to get information, participate in a sing-along and listen to speakers. Rally speakers have included (besides myself) Dr. Robert Porter, Carol Everhart Roper, Bob Lemon, Loren Corley, Tracy Lockwood, Andrew Barrett, Bill Wisdom, Stacks Rosch, Shaun McGonigal, Christopher Evans, Susan O’Connell and many other others who participated during the cold-weather gatherings.

On November 13, 2018, I spoke at a Chester County Commissioners Sunshine Meeting to promote the inclusion of *The Tree of Knowledge* (see video [here](#)). In my comments I requested that the Chester County Commissioners revoke or amend Resolution 58-10 “...to include not only the symbol of nontheism but to also include other minority symbols.” Several weeks later, I received a letter from the Chester County Solicitor Thomas L. Whiteman. He stated, “I have reviewed your request with the Commissioners and, following our discussion, I write to advise you that they will take no action to amend or revoke the existing Resolution.”

2018 marks the eighth year that the nontheist community has been prevented from participating in a public community event. The FS board is examining all options, which may include a discrimination complaint with the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission and/or legal action. FS welcomes feedback from supporters about *The Tree of Knowledge* project. Please send commentary to: TreeofKnowledge@FtSociety.org

Photos of the 2018 Philadelphia Tree of Knowledge



Pictured left is Pennsylvania resident and world-famous sculptor **Zeno Frudakis**.

The first ornament Frudakis chose to hang on the tree was a color copy of one of his favorite books written by **Christopher Hitchens**.

Pictured right is **Marjorie Goldman**. Her first book ornament choice to hang was *Judaism in a Secular Age* by **Yehuda Bauer** and **Sherwin Wine**.

Goldman is a theater artist and has helped the Freethought Society with many artistic and theatrical endeavors.



Pictured above (left to right) are **Bob Steinfeld**, **Drew Snyder**, **Ron Coburn**, **Chuck O'Neil**, **Maureen Clarke**, **Lelah Marie**, **John Marshall**, and **Henry Pashkow**. Together they form the "Philadelphia Ethical Society Pop-Up Chorus." They sing regularly, at least once a month, at the Philadelphia Ethical Society Sunday platform. Since the members of the chorus never know when they will be performing, the term "Pop-Up" has an intentional reference in their chosen name. On Sunday, December 2, 2018, the group sang a cheerful song, *Give A Little Whistle* by **Leigh Harline** and **Ned Washington**. The song was selected to go along with the theme of **Hugh Taft-Morales's** platform speech "Do You Listen to Your Conscience?" reprinted elsewhere in this publication.

More Photos of the 2018 Tree of Knowledge



Pictured left is **Dan Hoffman**. He is a former Freethought Society board member and a longtime supporter. Hoffman helped to install the first *Tree of Knowledge* on the lawn of the Chester County Courthouse in 2007. Hoffman is holding a **Carl Sagan** book cover as he reminisced about how Sagan inspired him to learn more about science when he watched the original *Cosmos* television series.

Pictured right is **Cheryl Desmond**. She is the Philadelphia Ethical Society (PES) Administrator. Desmond helps maintain *The Tree of Knowledge* during its display in the lobby of the Society. She proudly greets the public as a representative of PES.



Pictured above in the left photo is Freethought Society (FS) president **Margaret Downey**. She is depositing athletic shoes that were donated during the December 2, 2018 PES/FS *Tree of Knowledge* event into the box created specifically for display in the lobby.

In the above middle photo, PES leader **Hugh Taft-Morales** and Downey are holding jeans that were donated by attendees to the event. The contents of each box will be delivered to the Safe Harbor of Chester County homeless shelter in West Chester, Pennsylvania. The “Sole Searching” and “Jump Into The Jean Pool” efforts are creations of FS’s Helping Hands Committee. The donation efforts are ongoing and are announced periodically as part of an FS gathering.

In the above right photo, Downey and Taft-Morales are standing in front of the 2018 *Tree of Knowledge*. It is displayed in the lobby of the Ethical Society Building for a full month during the winter holiday season (December 2-January 2). The public is welcome to visit the lobby during regular business hours. See the PES website (<https://phillyethics.org>), or call ahead for lobby hours (215-735-3456).

Do You Listen to Your Conscience?

by Hugh Taft-Morales



Pictured above is **Hugh Taft-Morales**. He is the Leader of the Philadelphia Ethical Society. Taft-Morales is a regularly featured writer and a long-time supporter of the Freethought Society.

I want to thank **Margaret Downey** and the Freethought Society (FS) in general for their work to defend the separation of religion and government and to give humanists and freethinkers a voice in our politics and culture. I also thank them for bringing their *Tree of Knowledge* to the Philadelphia Ethical Society.

We have enjoyed displaying the *Tree of Knowledge* ever since 2010 when the Chester County Commissioners passed a biased and discriminatory resolution in order to exclude freethinkers from the public winter holiday display.

2018 marks the eighth year of co-hosting events with FS and we all look forward to sponsoring many more educational and entertaining events together.

When we started to advertise the installation of the 2018 *Tree of Knowledge*, we encouraged everyone to help us decorate *The Tree of Knowledge* with stories of conscience — stories which tell of our human capacity to think deeply about ethical issues and, against all odds, strive to live more in accordance with our ideals. Some of the stories of conscience that have influenced me include stories told by **Felix Adler**, **Anne Frank**, **Mahatma Gandhi**, **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** and **Thomas Paine**. These are some of my heroes. Do you have heroes who you respect because they listened to their conscience? Do you listen to your conscience? Do you try to let your conscience be your guide?

My talk today will start with an exploration of some philosophical and religious approaches to conscience. I will move on to an overview of some psychological theories, including rational, emotional, and animal factors. I will conclude by emphasizing the importance of will power allying with conscience to guide our behavior.

To begin exploring some philosophical and religious approaches to conscience, I turn to one of my life-heroes, **Mahatma Gandhi**.

This man of discipline and principle was guided by his conscience. He once said, “The only tyrant I accept in this world is the ‘still small voice’ within me.”

Isn’t that how many of us experience what we call our conscience – a still, small voice within? It’s not totally clear what Gandhi meant by this, however. He once explained that this still, small voice was hard to define.

In 1933, however, in pre-paring to fast in protest of the mistreatment of the lowest caste in Indian society, he

described it in strikingly concrete terms:

*“For me the voice of God,
of conscience, of Truth,
or the inner voice,
or the ‘Still Small Voice’ mean
one and the same thing.
I saw no form...what I did hear
was like a voice from afar
and yet quite near.
It was as unmistakable
as some human voice and
definitely speaking to me,
and irresistible.
I was not dreaming at the time.
I heard the voice.”*

I’m not sure what to make of this passage. When I “listen” to my con-science, so to speak, I don’t actually hear any voice. Perhaps the neural firings in my brain evoke memories of words spoken by parents or teachers about being good. I interpret this voice as more of an intuition. This is how actress **Ingrid**

Bergman explained it. She said, “train your intuition — you must trust the small voice inside you which tells you exactly what to say, what to decide.”

Huffington Post contributor **Anne Naylor** suggests we try to “listen” to this voice, even if we don’t mean it literally. To capture the “essence” of this voice, Naylor suggests we find a peaceful, quiet place to meditate on our moral intuition. It could lead us, Naylor suggests, to what Gandhi sought: insight about a moral truth that must be obeyed. Gandhi called it “truth force.” The force of such insight — the fact that it pushed Gandhi to act, even against his natural inclinations — is why he described the voice as a “tyrant,” the only tyrant he would obey.

For most of human history, religious believers thought this voice was nothing less than the word of god. The *Koran* (91:7-8) says that god teaches the conscience about right and wrong. Sixteenth century theologian **Bishop Joseph Butler** called conscience the “constitutional monarch” of our mind that carried god’s authority. **John Calvin** said that god pushes us to do what’s right.

Martin Luther King Jr. observed that “[t]here comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must take it because conscience tells him it is right.”

Since much of western religion supports a metaphysical dualism, the “force” at play in conscience has been described as a force that resists bodily pleasure. Western religion divides reality into two realms — the perfect, pristine, and good world of heaven and the corrupted, soiled, and evil world of the flesh. This is why we’ve given to conscience the role of

resisting temptation — don't eat that dessert, don't steal that bread, and don't covet your neighbor's house.

Those with a strong conscience, strong desires, and poor self-control can develop a guilty conscience that can make them feel depressed, frustrated, and anxious. Satisfying our desires is often condemned as a deadly sin, proving that you are controlled by lust, greed, gluttony, and sloth. Deep remorse can grow if you can't achieve a truce between desire and conscience. This dynamic leads many religious people to be tormented by guilt.

It drives some people to confession, doesn't it? They enter into a small private room, speak to a priest, ask forgiveness for transgressions, and absolution earns them at least temporary relief from the pains of a divided conscience.

Adler, the founder of Ethical Culture, said that a divided conscience was one of the great "spiritual pains" of life. He was particularly aware that our conscience was divided between public declarations and private practices. While we all know how to talk the talk, we do not all walk the walk. And while Adler rejected the notions of a punishing god and the torments of hell, he nevertheless used guilt to encourage personal and civic ethical growth.

As part of his evolving life mission, Adler encouraged us "to go out to help arouse the conscience of the wealthy, the advantaged, the educated classes, to a sense of their guilt in violating the human personality of the worker." (*In the Shadow of the Bomb: Oppenheimer, Bethe, and the Moral Responsibility of the Scientist*, Princeton University Press, 2000.) I think he was aiming at nurturing responsibility more than guilt, but nevertheless I would choose a different approach.

Guilt — within both theistic and secular life — can be quite painful. One admirer of Adler and a graduate of the Ethical Culture School, scientist **Robert Oppenheimer**, paid a price for the conscience he developed in Ethical Culture.

After answering the call of duty during World War II and helping the military make the atomic bomb, he was racked with guilt. One of his classmates, **Daisy Newman**, described Oppenheimer as being torn in two directions — to serve his nation and his conscience. For Oppenheimer it was a painful psychological and, if you will, spiritual experience.

Having grown up in a secular environment, I was more affected by psychological explanations of conscience, though one strong link to the religious model exists — the internal battle between ethical rules and physical pleasure.

Sigmund Freud had a profound impact on how modern western culture approached the conscience. In Freud's system, the psyche consisted of three separate authorities: the "id," representing bodily desires; the "super-ego," representing internalized authority figures; and, "the ego," the conscious center trying to negotiate a truce between the id and the super-ego. Many of Freud's patients felt

beat up by the battle between id and super-ego, their own ego strong enough to get between the two but too weak to end the internal war. People seek therapy when they can't achieve inner harmony.

They want to feel whole, not torn in different directions. Those with an active conscience, acutely aware of right and wrong, can feel particularly uncomfortable. Psychologist **Martha Stout**, who wrote much about the divided conscience, appreciated how deeply her patients craved a sense of psychological wholeness and peacefulness, often described as "having a clear conscience."

Bonhoeffer paid the highest price for pursuing a clear conscience. While he could have lived a long life safe in the United States, he returned to Nazi Germany to help the oppressed. His conscience called him to this ministry. It called to him from "depth which lies beyond a man's own will and his own reason and it makes itself heard as the call of human existence to unity with itself."

In a more mundane fashion, I believe we all crave this sort of unity. Looking back on my childhood, Freud's paradigm helps explain my inner divisions. Whether it involved sneaking a cookie from the cookie jar before dinner or infantile explorations of erotic pleasure, my ego was too anemic to control either the bubbling physical desires of animal life or the stern Calvinist judgment. Despite growing up in a tolerant environment, I suffered from a divided adolescent conscience.

While differing in details, my story seems similar to the stories of friends and family. Many were raised to have high moral standards. We couldn't live up to the high ethical expectations pressed upon us, but we couldn't let them go.

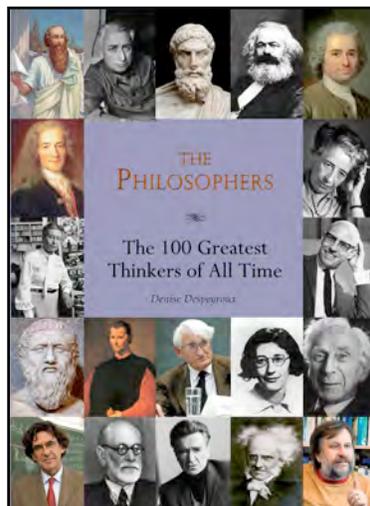
The conflict between id and super-ego produced a guilty conscience. The conflict, when made public, produced shame, a prevalent and damaging feeling. Shame is so basic and so infantilizing. Do these dynamics feel familiar to you? Is this what conscience is all about?

Another interpretation of our ethical development involves the idea that deep inside us is a particular moral sense of right and wrong. This rings true to me. As a young child I might not have had sufficient vocabulary to discuss injustice, but I knew it when I saw it.

In **Charles Dickens'** classic book *Great Expectations*, the main character, a boy named Pip, knows that the world hasn't treated him well. Orphaned and struggling, Pip's sense of victimhood fueled the growth of a strong conscience. Dickens writes, "In the little world in which children have their existence, there is nothing so finely perceived and finely felt, as injustice."

I felt that too. Psychotherapist **Carl Jung** puts it this way:

"...deep down below the surface of the average conscience a still, small voice says to us, 'Something is out of tune.'"



Profiles of the many names mentioned in this article can be found within the pages of *The 100 Greatest Thinkers of All Time*

(ISBN-13: 9781568528106).

This book is available at your favorite bookstore or online.

Please shop at: smile.amazon.com

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As a young boy, I saw that the world was out of tune. Some might describe this recognition of injustice as being a very particular type of ethical sense. A group of 20th century philosophers, such as **G.E. Moore**, argued that the understanding of justice can't be reached through common knowledge and can't be defined adequately or rationally. Rather, they said that justice, good, and evil can only be intuited directly. These philosophers were well known as "intuitionists," and their perspective is appealing.

As I grew older, I became more certain, and probably more sanctimonious, about my moral proclamations. Much like many privileged liberal folks, I condemned racial segregation, praised women's liberation, and criticized the war in Vietnam. Along with my certainty grew a sense that my conscience was grounded not just in intuition but also in knowledge about the world and reason.

Reason did not replace my intuition of injustice. It strengthened it. Gandhi felt that intuition was the heart of reason. He wrote, "the inner voice does not suppress reason but rather sanctifies reason."

In his *Meditations*, the Roman Emperor **Marcus Aurelius** wrote that conscience was the human capacity to live by rational principles that were congruent with the true, tranquil and harmonious nature of our mind and thereby that of the universe.

Benedict de Spinoza urged us to improve our reasoning abilities so that we could elevate our emotions from the specific to the universal, allowing us to view moral decision-making from "the perspective of eternity." To me, reason and moral intuition support each other.

This was very much at the very heart of **Lawrence Kohlberg's** moral development work. He inherited admiration from **Immanuel Kant's** "the moral law within me." To Kohlberg, the moral law was evident in the universalizing principles that arise in what he saw as fully developed people. For example, a young child might see "right and wrong" in terms of punishment, and as an adolescent one might see "right and wrong" in terms of agreeing with and following the rules of society. But mature ethical development, according to Kohlberg, led to an embrace of ethical ideals. These ideals were behind universal proclamations, such as, "All theft is wrong."

Early in my study of philosophy, I thought that reason could solve most ethical problems through such universalization. Growing from relying on a self-centered focus on getting "justice for me," I began craving more general "justice for all." It didn't matter who was the victim of injustice. It mattered that someone was being violated.

Here was the seed that would grow into the core of my Ethical Culture faith — what some might call a "religious" conviction to treat every person as having inherent worth.

I think that it is misguided, and even dangerous, to put reason on too high a pedestal. In and of itself, reason should not be relied on to be the primary or sole active ingredient in conscience.

Some forms of reason can be used to justify horrible behavior, especially when the goal is a "higher cause," whether that cause is secular — as in political extremism — or religious, such as evangelicals who eagerly invite the End Times. Rational certainty can lead to ugly results.

It was the work of philosophers **Hannah Arendt** and **Phillip Hallie** that brought this home to me. Arendt wrote of

Nazi war criminal **Adolf Eichmann** who justified his horrible actions by rationalizing them away. He did not see himself as a monster without conscience, but merely as a good soldier doing his job. When escaping to Argentina, Eichmann reassured himself that his conscience spoke with a "respectable voice."

Similarly, Hallie wrote that **Heinrich Himmler**, head of the Nazi SS, went further and praised the ability of his troops to remain cold, calculating, and above the sympathy for the lives they destroyed. He said, in so many words, that the glory of those supporting the Nazi regime was in their ability to kill millions while suffering no harm in their essence, in their soul, in their character. He spoke as if his conscience was clear.

Hallie concluded that Himmler displayed a "commitment that overrides all sentimentality" which in turn "transforms cruelty and destruction into moral nobility." (*Vice & Virtue*, page 13.)

How many others use rationalizations to live — on the surface at least — without the guilt and shame that plague so many of who are guilty of lesser sins?

Let me now turn to how conscience is involved in our emotional and animal nature. What seems missing in these people with "clear" consciences but ruthless behavior is a compassion for others. Doesn't it seem almost obvious that conscience is grounded in feelings?

Psychologist **Martha Stout** defines conscience as "an intervening sense of obligation based in our emotional attachments." But often the justifications behind the horrible behavior of those who drank the fascist Kool-Aid seem devoid of emotional attachments, especially to their victims.

Eleanor Roosevelt saw the horrors of the holocaust from the outside. She displayed an emotional awareness and active conscience. Roosevelt knew well about the many compromises of politics, but she did not ignore the importance of compassion.

Too often we confront injustice after it has already done great damage. Roosevelt, on the other hand, asked this important question:

"When will our consciences grow so tender that we will act to prevent human misery rather than avenge it?"

A "tender conscience" seems even more important than a "clean conscience." A tender conscience calls us to remain connected to the victims of injustice, to feel linked on a basic level with those suffering.

Conscience may involve a rational principle and the acquisition of knowledge about the world. Any conscience worth having seems to require also a sense of empathy and even obligation. This empathy can be seen as a form of love. As the Second Vatican Council describes, "Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love...."

In the Pali scriptures, the **Buddha** discusses conscience as being not just about "a calm, well-directed mind" but also about having "a pure heart." Shouldn't compassion and empathy be minimal requirements for having a conscience? When most of us see someone suffering, our very animal nature seems to impel us to reach out and help the suffering person.

Interestingly, it wasn't long ago that many people argued that only humans had a conscience. Many philosophers, like **René Descartes** and Kant, argued that animals were mere robots with no internal states at all. It seems pretty clear to me that not only do animals have internal states, but some animals seem to display signs of conscience: like the emotions of regret, remorse, shame. Our most domesticated "best friends," dogs, seem particularly transparent in displaying guilt when you return home soon to discover they ate that whole fruitcake you were planning to bring to your neighbors.

Animals displaying deep empathy for one another might be the foundation for conscience. If you observe group behavior of one of our close genetic cousins, the chimpanzee, you'll likely identify tenderness, care, affection, and even love. Apes strive to make up after fights, heal divisions in the family and reassure all that relationships will survive occasional misbehavior.

Charles Darwin himself saw how such behavior — how righting wrongs and consideration for others — had evolutionary roots. While moral principles are probably not articulated in some animals due to cognitive limitations, many animals display sympathy, empathy, and even a rudimentary appreciation for norms of behavior that facilitated survival and proliferation of the gene pool. For Darwin, conscience served an evolutionary purpose in reinforcing constructive cooperative social instincts.

As I turn toward my conclusion, I suggest that conscience must ally itself with an often-underrated aspect of personality: willpower. Willpower relates to our responsibility, as Ethical Humanists, to nurture our conscience and to try, at least most of the time, to let our conscience guide our behavior.

At its core, Ethical Humanism is a commitment to live a more ethical life. It's a commitment that admits that it's sometimes hard to know what's ethical. And it's a pragmatic commitment that maintains a skeptical eye and admits our individual limitations and needs. Nevertheless, Ethical Humanism urges us to try to live more ethically by treating others well and creating a society that honors the worth of all people. This commitment explains in part why Ethical Humanism supports democratic forms of civic and social engagement. Conscience is important to our democratic experiment. The founders of our nation believed that without ethical citizens we cannot expect the center to hold. It's why at birth our country emphasized inculcating virtue in our young people, a tradition made concrete in Ethical Societies and Ethical Culture Schools.

Philosopher **Ronald Dworkin** wrote how our idealistic yet pragmatic democracy requires freedom of conscience. Allowing individual conscience to flourish creates citizens who accept their duties to society as a whole. He wrote:

"Freedom of conscience presupposes a personal responsibility of reflection, and it loses much of its meaning when that responsibility is ignored. A good life need not be an especially reflective one; most of the best lives are just lived rather than studied. But there are moments that cry out for self-assertion, when a passive bowing to fate or a mechanical decision out of deference or convenience is treachery, because it forfeits dignity for ease."

Dignity is at the heart of many stories of conscience. This August I had the privilege of visiting the wartime home of **Anne Frank** who maintained her dignity despite menacing, degrading, and oppressive fascism. She wrote of the importance of developing conscience:

"You try to improve yourself at the start of each new day; of course, you achieve quite a lot in the course of time. Anyone can do this, it costs nothing and is certainly very helpful. Whoever doesn't know it must learn and find by experience that a quiet conscience makes one strong."

Oppenheimer shared how the Ethical Culture school "inculcated in its members a commitment to social action and humanitarianism: 'Man must assume responsibility for the direction of his life and destiny.'"

Oppenheimer took this commitment seriously because he was "surrounded by men and women who thought themselves as catalysts for a better world."

In *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* authors **Kai Bird** and **Martin Sherwin** disclose that Oppenheimer was "driven to do his duty" and to live a "life of moral striving." (page 14)

The fact that Oppenheimer helped build one of the most destructive weapons ever does not mean he didn't have a conscience. Like millions of good people, he thought long and hard about his duty to stand up to fascism. As a physicist, he felt ethically bound to lead the Manhattan Project that built the bomb. The fact that he had grave doubts and anxiety, and that he engaged in post-war peace advocacy, are testaments to how fully he developed his conscience.

We are all mortal and flawed — and frankly just about any of us might have been caught up in the military-industrial complex in a time of war — we can aspire to develop a conscience as deep and active as Oppenheimer's. Conscience doesn't guarantee that we will do what is right, but without it chances are we will do little to make the world a better place. Conscience is necessary, but not sufficient, to live an ethical life.

The important question today is not the title of my talk, "Do You Listen to Your Conscience." The important question is, does your conscience help you live more ethically? That question — about how we live — is why we gather at Ethical Societies every Sunday. We meet so that we may grow as ethical people. We know we'll never be perfect, but we try to nurture an effective conscience.

How we treat others is more important than any declaration of values or moral proclamation. For those who suffer, whether they are refugees seeking protection at our borders or a parent, sibling, or a child struggling with depression, they need more than thoughts and prayers — they need action. If we are to act effectively, we need reason, compassion, willpower, and a good, healthy, active conscience.

Your conscience is the measure of the honesty of your selfishness. Listen to it carefully.

~ **Richard Bach**

2018 Trees of Knowledge Around the United States

Pictured right is a *Tree of Knowledge* created by **Krista Cox**. She is a kindergarten teacher in Roanoke, Virginia. When she submitted the photo, she wrote the following:

*“In 2016, I helped my friend **Margaret Downey**, set up and decorate The Tree of Knowledge for the Freethought Society’s booth at the Reason Rally. That was the year I became inspired to create my own version of The Tree of Knowledge for my classroom. This year, I created a Tree of Knowledge using many of my favorite children’s books from my classroom. I stayed late one evening after school to put the tree together. I couldn’t wait to see the excitement on my students’ faces when they arrived the next day. It was a very chilly morning, so I projected a video of a fireplace with a burning fire on the whiteboard. Instrumental holiday music also greeted the children. The Tree of Knowledge was lit with colorful lights. The smiles on their faces as they entered the classroom were priceless. The children couldn’t wait to get closer to the tree to look at every little detail. I received many positive reactions from my coworkers, friends and parents about the tree. This has been a wonderful way to celebrate the holiday season and our love of learning in an inclusive way for all students.”*



The photo at left was sent to the Freethought Society by **Tony Hudson**. He wrote:

“For several years in a row, a cooperative of several secular groups has installed multiple displays in the Rhode Island Statehouse. This was done in response to an invasion of nativity scenes. Among these displays has been a Tree of Knowledge. The 6’ tree that has adorned the Statehouse year after year was inspired by the Freethought Society. My own 3’ tabletop version is constructed like the one at the Statehouse, but with the lower branch section removed. After installing the Statehouse Tree, we just had to have one of our own at home.”



Pictured right is a *Tree of Knowledge* displayed at the West Chester, Pennsylvania home of Freethought Society president **Margaret Downey**.

During the day, *The Tree of Knowledge* reflects the sunlight, making the colorful ornaments both interesting and beautiful. At night, the book cover ornaments look radiant as they shimmer in the path of a spotlight. The laminated ornaments reflect the light well and the entire tree is glowing with enlightenment.

Members of *The Tree of Knowledge* Winter Display Committee hand make all the ornaments. The ornaments are for sale through the Freethought Society website. For more details, please see *The Tree of Knowledge* section at:

<https://www.ftsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/Tree-of-Knowledge-Scan-Project-Information-1.pdf>



Californian, **Sheldon Helms** sent the above photo with the following message:

*“I have watched for many years as my friend **Margaret Downey** battles local government over the right to erect a Tree of Knowledge in a public setting to represent nontheist citizens and to counter-balance the many religious symbols allowed.*

Each winter holiday season, I create my own version, in silent solidarity, choosing a few books from my collection that have assisted me in my ongoing attempt to become a better freethinker.”

The Declaration of Independence and Thomas Paine's Influence

by Gary Berton

2019 marks the 282nd birthdate of **Thomas Paine**, and the 243rd anniversary of the publication of *Common Sense*, a founding document of the United States of America. The Thomas Paine National Historical Association can now declare that Paine played a major role in the creation of the Declaration of Independence.

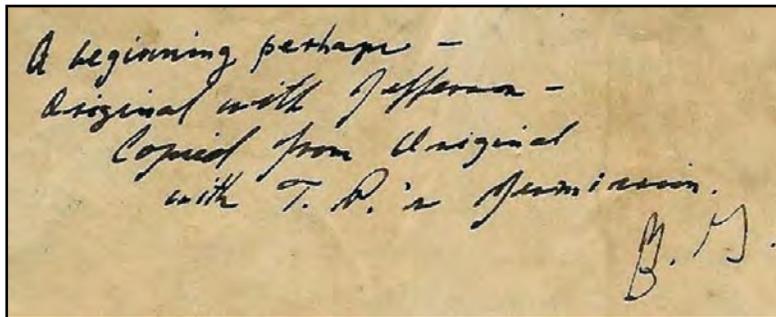
After six years of research, which authenticated an early draft of the Declaration containing a note on the reverse side, there is sufficient proof that Paine had a position of authority within the Committee that produced the Declaration. To be clear up front, he did not write the Declaration; it was done by Committee. But from what this document reveals, his role was just as important.

The document was discovered by an amateur historian, who found an early draft of the Declaration in a box of miscellaneous historical material. Because of the note on the back, he contacted the Thomas Paine National Historical Association to help with the context and meaning of the document. The Declaration Resources Project at Harvard University accepted the document in 2018 as authentic. They added it to their material of other Declaration documents. The amateur historian prefers to remain anonymous.

The document is the first of two pages, the second page being lost to history. It is a draft created early in the process of creating the Declaration. **Julian Boyd**, the great Declaration historian, said it was the draft which **Thomas Jefferson** used to create the Rough Draft. That original first draft has been lost, but now we have three copies of it: the **John Adams** copy held at the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Jefferson copy which is the text beneath the Rough Draft, and now the **Roger Sherman** copy (or the first page of it) which is this document. The document appears to have been meant for **Benjamin Franklin**, and then passed along to Sherman as his copy, who initialed it and dated it June 24, 1776. Adams, Sherman, Jefferson, and Franklin were the Committee of Five to draft a Declaration, along with **Robert Livingston**, whose copy has still not been found. With the pressure of time, they recirculated this document for two of the members of the Committee. Note that Paine was not an official Committee member, nor did he hold any official role at the Congress.

The text of this document is identical to the Adams document, before the Rough Draft of Jefferson was created from cross-outs and substitutions he made. The Slavery grievance was removed by Congress and it was edited by Jefferson to change a few phrases; for example, "that all Men are created equal and independent; that from that equal Creation they derive Rights inherent and un-alienable", became "that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights" — a creator replaced equal creation. Adams and Franklin changed a couple of words on Jefferson's Rough Draft as well.

The note on the back of this document (pictured above right) states:



A beginning perhaps -
Original with Jefferson -
Copied from Original
with T. P.'s permission.
G. B.

"A beginning perhaps —
Original with Jefferson —
Copied from original
with T. P.'s permission."

The document and the note on the back are in the handwriting of Adams and the Declaration Resources Project at Harvard confirmed our findings that the only "T.

P." of note in Philadelphia in June of 1776 was "Thomas Paine."

The note was initialed by Franklin, as an indication that he read, or approved, the status report of the process. Franklin was the assumed leader of the Committee, as he was the leading figure of the Congress in this period. He was being kept abreast of the work on the Declaration because he could not be there in person, as he was suffering a severe case of gout at home. Paine, his close ally and friend, was put in place undoubtedly by Franklin, and would have been unknown to others in the Committee except for Adams, Paine's life-long opponent. "A beginning perhaps" was a statement by Adams that he regarded the composition of this draft as being in need of revision, since the radical democratic sentiments of the Declaration would have irked Adams. As will be addressed below in this essay, this document formed the culmination of the work led by Paine since January of 1776 to not only get a Declaration of Independence, but also a Pennsylvania Constitution, that set the world on a long and arduous path towards democracy. That path was built over the roadblocks that Adams put in the way.

The reasons that no one disclosed Paine's position in the Committee are two-fold: Paine was not a member of Congress, so he should not have been doing its business, a point that further strengthens the notion of how crucial he was; and secondly, Paine already had many enemies in Congress because of his revolutionary politics, and it would have made passage of the Declaration that much more difficult. But what it does demonstrate is that the revolutionary politics of Paine were in charge of crafting the Declaration.

In order to put the note on the back of this document into perspective, it is necessary to see it in its full context, namely the politics of 1776.

The work for liberation (not only externally, but also internally) began for Paine after the publication of *Common Sense*. It was necessary to organize politically to achieve these ends. **Karl Marx** had declared that the first modern revolutionary party was the Social Circle in Paris in 1791, a party that Paine participated in and was integral to. But there is an earlier one that formed unofficially in the spring of 1776 in Philadelphia, and formally in January 1777 when Paine returned from the battlefield — the Whig Society. The Declaration was their first achievement, the Pennsylvania Constitution its second. Its third achievement was to establish a political means to carry on what the Declaration calls the right "to alter or abolish" existing governments that don't satisfy the rights and needs of its citizens.

These achievements, led by Paine theoretically and practically, have been ignored or overlooked by all historians of Paine — until now. The note on the back of this historic document puts an exclamation point on the necessity to shed proper light on this time period.

The leadership of this group of revolutionaries were Paine, Franklin, **Charles Willson Peale**, **David Rittenhouse**, **Timothy Matlack**, **Dr. Thomas Young**, and **James Cannon**. We know this from newspaper articles by them, sometimes collectively; by letters; by their addresses to Congress; and by proclamations posted around Philadelphia. We know who Paine was, and we know of Franklin, but not in this context. Peale was known as the artist who captured most of the founders in portraits, and the scene of the Committee presenting the Declaration to Congress. Rittenhouse was the most famous of the American scientists of the time, and allied with Paine in writing articles in newspapers about making saltpeter used in gunpowder, along with Paine's essays on that topic. Matlack became known as the Scribe of the Declaration, making several copies for the newspapers and Congress and became a militia leader as well as secretary to various committees of government. Young is the most important unknown founder: a militant deist, the leader of the Boston Tea Party, hunted by the British until he fled to Philadelphia to join Paine, a doctor to the army who died from disease on the battlefield in 1777. And Cannon, a mathematics professor who wrote as Cassandra in the pamphlet wars, and became the leading force along with Franklin on the committee to write the Pennsylvania Constitution. After achieving the Declaration, Paine went off to serve in the Revolutionary War; Franklin, after the state constitution was ratified, left for France as Ambassador; and Matlack also went off as a leader of a militia detachment. They all reunited in Philadelphia in January 1777 (except for Franklin), a year after *Common Sense*, to form the Whig Society.

The political situation in January 1776 was tense and chaotic. The path forward to resolve the issues of Britain's oppression were cluttered with various oligarchs standing in the way of separation. Several oligarchs supported separation, but with a British style form of government, hereditary succession and all, and many of the rest of the wealthy sided with the Tories. And many, along with their sycophants, supported independence in the hopes of cashing in on it or "making themselves great by it" (Paine's comment about Adams). The American Revolution was fought by a united front of a large section of the people uniting with a section of the wealthy classes. Since the victors write the history, both sides were stuffed into one ideological box by historians of the wealthy and their representatives, and this revolutionary wing has been either marginalized or ignored. The myth of the founding was forged by confusing the politics and the goals of the wings of the united front, and is reflected in the histories written of this period, deliberately confusing "republic" with "democratic." Most of the members of Congress opposed democracy. This confusion is on display at Independence Mall in Philadelphia which emphasizes only the wing of the anti-democratic forces hypocritically using the political positions of the democratic wing.

The fight that Spring of 1776 was basically between those who wanted to seek reconciliation with Britain, to make better terms and compromise with them, and the revolution-

aries who wanted a clean break by force of arms in order to create a new type of government. The latter group was composed of the revolutionary wing; and the conservative, anti-democratic but pro-separation, wing was composed of the likes of Adams, **Benjamin Rush**, **John Dickinson** and many nervous merchants and estate landowners like **John Jay**. The revolutionary wing became the dominant wing and had the opportunity to write the Declaration because they had the force of the people's support behind them. After the war, these wings split into groups that would become the parties of early America — the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans. **Alexander Hamilton** and Paine were both officers under Washington, and both went on to lead opposite and contending political positions.

The fight between Adams and Paine started right after *Common Sense* was printed and represented the opposing wings of the united front. Adams answered with his *Thoughts on Government* in April in the middle of the pamphlet wars, as Adams declared that *Common Sense* was "so democratical." Adams supported separation (we were to learn in the 1790s that the separation he had in mind was temporary as the Federalist Jay Treaty turned back over to Britain most of America's sovereignty), but his end goal was an elitist at least, monarchical at worst, form of government.

In Adams' letter to **Francis Vanderkamp** in 1790 he declares the following:

"We were compelled against our Inclinations; to cutt off the Bands that United Us with England, and that We should have been very happy to have had our Grievances redressed, and our Dependance continued...I will candidly confess, that an hereditary Senate, without an hereditary Executive, would diminish the Prerogatives of the President and the Liberties of the People. But I contend that hereditary descent in both, when controuled by an independent Representation of the People, is better than corrupted, turbulent and bloody Elections."

What "compelled" them was the radical movement led by the revolutionary group described above. This defined the battle emerging: hesitancy by some of the leaders for independence, which was then only achievable by a strong radical democratic trend with support from the people. It was this revolutionary trend, through the organizing of this group of revolutionaries, that made the Declaration possible, and that gave the content to the Revolution, and turned a squabble over taxes into a social and political revolution.

Paine had gone directly to the people and declared in *Common Sense* that only a Declaration of Independence would move America forward. In fact, the end of *Common Sense* outlines, in the same order as the Declaration, what would be needed in a Declaration. Now that we have this document, it explains why the Declaration followed *Common Sense* so closely, and how much of the language from *Common Sense* is used in the Declaration, which had been mimicked by some 90 city, county, and state declarations of independence in the spring of 1776, and that language was transferred to the national Declaration. Without *Common Sense* there would not have been a Declaration of Independence. The pamphlet wars were won.

The nascent Whig Society participants' goal in the Spring of 1776 was the Declaration, and there is a plethora of information (never printed or analyzed) that deal with the pamphlet wars. *Common Sense* started the pamphlet wars. The first public letter to the newspapers in early February was from Candidus, which was Franklin using a pen name. It showed that an obvious collaboration was going on. Then Cannon as Cassandra (a pen name) started his series in support of *Common Sense*, then Cato (a pen name used by Tory Reverend **William Smith**) wrote his first of eight articles defending Britain, at which time Paine was called upon by the group to write using the pen name Forester to counter Cato. This battle of words lasted until May of 1776, at which time the revolutionary group and their thousands of supporters overthrew the British puppet government in Pennsylvania, and effectively provided space for creating its replacement and space for preparing for a Declaration. Smith later fled to New York City to live under the British occupation during the war.

June 1776 saw Paine and Franklin active in the creation of the Declaration, followed by support for a democratic constitution in July. Before he left for the battlefield, Paine left *Four Letters on Interesting Subjects* to be printed, as Young left *Genuine Principles of the Anglo-Saxon Constitution* under the pen name of Demophilus, to support the democratic principles of the constitution which Franklin and Cannon then applied. It was probably Franklin who created a plural executive for Pennsylvania with no senate, the first time in history at such a scale.

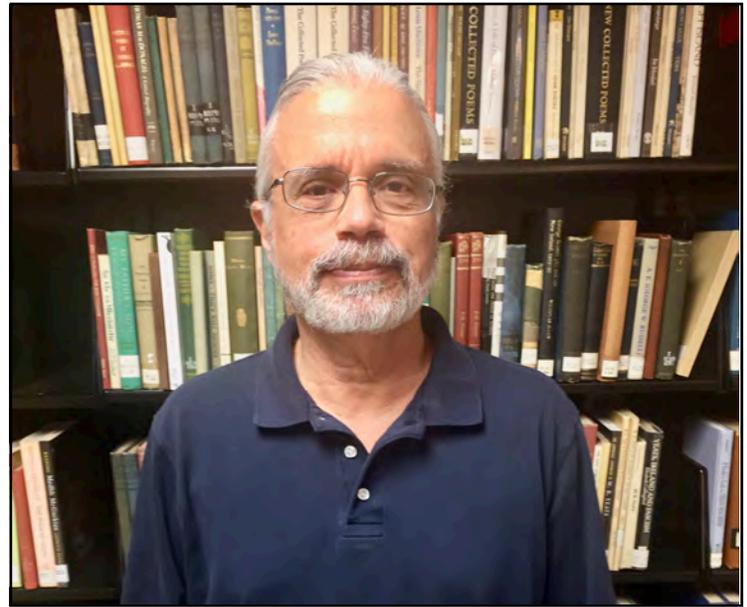
The Whig Society was formed in early 1777 to counter a move by conservatives (this is a modern term, but the similarity in ideology and purpose translates well to that time) to overturn the new Constitution of Pennsylvania. The Constitution was being used as a model for other states, and it was far too democratic for the likes of the landed gentry and wealthy merchants. These maneuvers by the conservatives were led publicly by two "founders" who also had opposed the Declaration: Rush (he signed it after the fact, but opposed it strenuously leading up to it) and Dickinson. They allied with various closet Tories in the middle of the war to disrupt the new government. The Whig Society led a public campaign to defeat them in 1777 and 1778, which they did. They addressed Congress to demand suppression of these disruptors and other Tories, and they had enough impact to save the Constitution as written and for extending it in 1783.

The achievements of the Whig Society were the most impactful of any political group in the American Revolution. It led the fight for a Declaration and its composition. It also created the Pennsylvania Constitution which served as a model for the Age of Democratic Revolutions. Paine used the Pennsylvania Constitution as the model for the 1793 French

Constitution which was delayed by The Terror. The French Constitution was then abandoned by the coup of 1795.

The Pennsylvania Constitution was mainly written by Cannon, with Franklin's guidance. Then the Whig Society led the fight to not only defend and maintain the Pennsylvania Constitution, but to initiate loyalty oaths to isolate the Tories, to lead citizens committees in fights against the hoarding of merchants, and to lead militia committees to defend the rights of soldiers. Eventually the Whig Society spread to other states. They faded away only after the national constitutional convention in 1787, after which Paine left for Europe.

So this one line, "Copied with T. P.'s permission" written by Adams, is a weighty, meaningful four words, reflecting the hidden politics and ideological war taking place. Adams was forced to bow to the leadership of the revolutionary wing, until he had time to subvert their momentum. The impact of the leading ideology of the American Revolution was completed before the counter-revolution ensued, and the Declaration of Independence still stands as a clarion call for democracy.



Gary Berton is a Coordinator of the Institute for Thomas Paine Studies at Iona College. He is also the Secretary of the Thomas Paine National Historical Association and a member of the International Society for Historians of Atheism, Secularism and Humanism.

For additional information, please read another article about Thomas Paine and the Declaration of Independence written by Berton at the following link:

www.thomaspaine.org

From Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*: *"To conclude, however strange it may appear to some, or however unwilling they may be to think so, matters not, but many strong and striking reasons may be given to show, that nothing can settle our affairs so expeditiously as an open and determined **DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE**."*

From Thomas Paine's *Crisis 13*: *"It was the cause of America that made me an author. The force with which it struck my mind and the dangerous condition the country appeared to me in, by courting an impossible and an unnatural reconciliation with those who were determined to reduce her, instead of striking out into the only line that could cement and save her, a **DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE**, made it impossible for me, feeling as I did, to be silent: and if, in the course of more than seven years, I have rendered her any service, I have likewise added something to the reputation of literature, by freely and disinterestedly employing it in the great cause of mankind, and showing that there may be genius without prostitution."*

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(assist Secular Coalition for America gathering reports)

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(locate tabling opportunities)

Diversity Outreach Committee

(brainstorming about and developing programs to appeal to minorities)

Free Speech Zone Committee

(research and implement displays in public venues)

Helping Hands

(provides helpers to seniors in emergency situations)

Jump into the Jean Pool

(collection of jeans for the homeless)

Meetup Committee

(social events and improving online communications)

Monthly Meeting Coordinators

(schedule and manage speakers and venues)

Secular Celebrations

(develop, organize, and implement new nontheist celebrations)

Speakers Bureau

(provide FS a resume, photo and speech subjects/titles)

Special Events

(coordinate unique events of interest to nontheists)

Sole Searching

(collection of athletic shoes for donation to the homeless)

Thomas Paine Memorial Committee

(assist with assemblies, city proclamations, and work on themed events)

Tree of Knowledge/Winter Display Committee

(make ornaments, find venues, write articles, and support the winter symbol concept nationwide)