



On Democracy and the 2015 Greek Referendum by [Douglas R McGaughey](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#).

On Democracy and the 2015 Greek Referendum

Douglas R McGaughey
Host: criticalidealism.org

Disclaimer: I am neither a psychologist, nor a sociologist, nor a political scientist, nor an economist. I am a philosophical theologian who, fortunately, doesn't have to be the messiah (enough have come already) and who refuses to (because I can't) generate programmatic schemes to solve the world's problems. My ungrounded (!), speculative sense is that genuine solutions are going to come from individuals and small groups, not power brokers and corporations (although they, too, are individuals and small groups). By that scale, Greece voted for freedom on Sunday, not just liberty. The question for me is did they vote for practical reason? Because that is a theme that is so far off the table that no one knows what its implications are, probably not, but I can't know that, of course. My task is to "see things that aren't there" in the actual phenomena and to identify what difference they can make (either as mere fantasy, clever speculations, or inescapable necessities) not just for solving problems but for understanding the place of our species in this world. I have absolute confidence in humanity's capacities. I have (almost) absolute confidence that human liberty will destroy its own freedom (as well as the planet) – either we're going to do ourselves in or the sun is going to do it for us. The canary is singing. Just what the miners' response will be must be our decision as individuals and as a species.

Democracy appears to be only as secure as its rhetoric. We have a classic example with the Greek referendum in the 2495th anniversary year (on September 29th) after the victory of the Greeks over Persia at Salamis that is taking place on this weekend that celebrates the 239th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence by the North American British Colonies from England. Both anniversaries are heralded as milestones of the promise that is democracy, and both have inspired peoples to pursue democratic rule far beyond the borders of Greece or the United States. Yet, the Arab Spring has demonstrated that merely the ability to vote does not mean democracy.

As is *always* the case, the call to decision placed on the shoulders of Greece this weekend is a call to decide *in the dark* no matter on what side of the issues that the individual voter comes down at the moment of voting. Since the Sophists (beginning of the 5th century BCE), we have known but continually failed to benefit from our knowledge that rhetoric is no guarantor of truth but the cloak of self-interest. If there is anything that everyone can agree on with this referendum, it is that no one *knows* what the "Yes" or "No" alternatives actually mean. We all know only that, not only is the reality behind the vote concealed in the mist of ambiguity but also that the future that the vote is supposed to determine is as ambiguous as ever. However, to simply vote one's self-interest is itself ambiguous because it is so difficult to discern just what one's self-interest is.

With this stark reminder that reality includes shoals that lurk just beneath the surface of our so-called certainties, it is perhaps valuable to contemplate what our *un*-knowing teaches us about ourselves. Lying in wait beneath all our “clear and distinct” perceptions and self-serving rhetoric that purportedly guarantee our certainties is a set of conditions that are as solid as the Rock of Gibraltar – even as we know that one day the Rock of Gibraltar will succumb to the sea. This set of conditions are what makes it possible for us to be capable of experiencing ambiguity in the first place no matter what the source of that ambiguity. As long as there is a member of our species yet alive, this set of conditions will remain as the ground upon which any and all hope is anchored precisely because it is these originating conditions upon which all of our capacities and capabilities depend, not just whatever knowledge we have come to possess or will acquire through experience.

The set of conditions that serves as our ground involves two different kinds of necessities. One kind of necessity is imposed upon us whereas the other kind of necessity we must impose upon ourselves *as individuals*.

Imposed necessities confront us wherever we turn. They are a set of necessities that as far as we can tell distinguish human beings in degree (but not kind) from all other species. All other species are predominantly determined by natural instincts to respond to their environment by means of biologically determined strategies. Their necessities are biologically determined. A key to humanity’s unusual status in the animal kingdom is that we don’t just respond instinctually to our environment. In fact, if all we had were our instincts, we would be extremely vulnerable because our instincts are incredibly lousy in comparison to other species. That which compensates for our poor instincts is our capacity to insert symbols (language, mathematics, music, etc.) into the midst the stimulus/response structure that we share with other species. Unlike the case with instincts, we do not come into this world already in possession of these symbol systems. We come into this world with the capacity to acquire them, but they are what make education *necessary*. The ubiquitous symbol systems of our world makes them appear natural, but, in fact, each of us has to learn them for her-/himself. Remember drilling multiplication tables? We don’t possess our symbol systems naturally, and no one can learn them for us. We don’t come into this world already in possession of the symbol systems that we need to *become* an architect, an engineer, a physician, or a lawyer. We don’t even come into this world in possession of our native tongues. It is obviously necessary, however, that we learn our native tongue even if we have forgotten that we once had to learn it. This kind of necessity is not only demanded for our material survival, but it is also demanded by our personal ambitions.

No other species engages its environment with symbol systems in any way approximating the degree to which humanity does. As much as it is (often) experienced as unpleasant, we submit to the demand to acquire these symbol systems in order to achieve things in the future that we could never achieve without these symbol systems. Here we are confronted by a *negative freedom* that requires that we sacrifice a range of choices in the present (going to the beach rather than learn the multiplication tables) in order to open up a wider horizon of choices for us in the future. The most strident Libertarian has to bow down to this *negative freedom*, and s/he can easily forget that the acquisition of the symbol systems that make technical and professional achievements possible in the first place are the consequence of one’s being the

beneficiary of cultural/social, symbol systems *not of one's own creation*. In fact, failure to grasp the importance of this *negative freedom* early enough in one's life can lead to severe restrictions on one's liberties (choices) later in life. Here we encounter an important lesson with respect to the *necessary* conditions of life: liberty can be a hindrance to one's freedom.

Here, then, we have the first kind of *necessities* over which there is little ambiguity because these necessities make everything else that we do possible in the first place. Symbol systems are the *necessary* condition for us to grasp the *necessary* professional skills, much less creatively employ, the *necessary* technical skills that make it possible for us to pursue whatever we come to call for ourselves *the good life*.

In addition to the *necessity* of symbol acquisition for the exercising of technical and personal skills, there is another dimension of necessity that distinguishes us in degree (if not kind) from all other species. More importantly, without this dimension of necessity, we would not be able to pursue technical and personal skills enabled by *negative freedom*. The *necessities of negative freedom presuppose another necessity*. For us to be(come) the species that we are, it is *necessary* that we be able to do things that nature on its own otherwise cannot begin to do. In short, we must be able to cause things to happen that natural causality alone cannot accomplish. This *necessity* is neither an invocation of a "God principle" that can ignore natural causality nor the ground to view nature as an adversary. Humanity's creative causality is the *necessity* of a *positive freedom*. As much as it transforms nature, *positive freedom* can only function successfully *in conformity with* natural causality, not contrary to it. Furthermore, there can be no creative causality that does not *necessarily require* a physical body that situates creative causality at a particular place and time, which in turn establishes the material conditions for the achievement of one's creative potential. Nature, then, is neither to be ignored by creative freedom nor is nature in itself a debilitating hindrance to creative freedom.

Positive freedom, paradoxically, is *necessary* for us to be(come) the species that we are. For good or ill, *we cannot not exercise* this freedom. It is the ultimate condition that makes it possible for us to acquire and apply symbol systems to create the traditions and novelties that we constantly encounter wherever we find humanity. However, the reference to "for good or ill" indicates another, easily overlooked, *necessity* about ourselves. It is *only because* humanity possesses *positive freedom* that we are capable of holding ourselves accountable for what we do with our *positive freedom*. We do not hold other species accountable for their actions precisely because they do not possess positive freedom to the degree that makes accountability anywhere near meaningful. Nonetheless, it is all too easy for us to generate excuses to ignore this responsibility.

There is no aphorism that grasps more succinctly our ability to ignore responsibility for our actions with our embracing of the notion of "innocent until proved guilty." As important as this aphorism is for protecting the innocent, its dark side is that I can get away with injustice as long as I don't get caught. This is because we can hide behind the cloak of appearances and no one but the self can know the motivations and principles guiding her/his decisions. Here we encounter another *necessity* about experience. External appearances can only hint at motives and principles. They can never determine them absolutely. The possibility of deception is part of the inescapable *necessity* that is our *positive freedom*.

The *necessity* that confronts us with motives and principles is a *self-imposed necessity* that we pursue proper motives according to moral principles. No one can establish for us the motives and principles that are to govern our decisions and actions. Furthermore, the *necessity* involved here constitutes the condition that makes it possible for us to act *contrary to our self-interest* by holding ourselves to a moral principle that is universal. This raises the question: If our motives and principles are concealed from everyone else and we must determine them for ourselves, why wouldn't we simply pursue our particular, selfish interests rather than act on the basis of universal, moral principles that can require us to act contrary to our selfish interests? There is only one answer: "Because we can!" As far as we know, no other species even contemplates this possibility, much less values its *necessity*. We can satisfy this dimension of *necessity* in our experience only if we each embrace it for ourselves.

One (popular) strategy of excuse for ignoring the *necessity* of our (self-imposed) responsibility for the exercising of our *positive freedom* is to maintain that there are no absolute or universal moral principles that we could use to qualify our responsibilities. 1) (So-called) ethicists generate "thought experiments" like "The Fat Man on the Bridge" to illustrate the absence of absolute universals (even the principle "not to kill someone"). 2) (So-called) empirical ethicists provide evidence that everybody lies. 3) (So-called) evolutionary morality argues that ethics is just a set of adaptive skills that make social life possible whereas 4) (so-called) neuroethicists "explain" these adaptive skills to be the consequence of chemicals such as oxytocin and a "healthy" amygdala region of the brain. 5) (So-called) virtue ethics propose that moral character is the product of habits (that is, morality is something learned) by pointing out that much of moral character is concerned with determining what is "excellent" for the individual with respect to those things in life of which one can have excess and deficiency (e.g., food, exercise) for which there is no absolute, universal standard. 6) (So-called) Utilitarians argue that what is "right" is what brings about the greatest good for the greatest number, and that even justifies the torture of individuals.

Practical reason (a label for moral reason) answers just as succinctly: 1) Scenarios like "The Fat Man on the Bridge" are fanciful circumstances that rarely are encountered in life, and, more importantly, they isolate the situation from any concrete life-world reality. 2) The "fact" that everyone lies is no ground that makes lying right. It only confirms that not-lying is a possibility that can be ignored. 3) If morality is simply the successful negotiation of a social world, then every drug cartel and mafia clan is moral. 4) As essential as it is for us to understand the material conditions of our behavior, decision taking and actions are not reducible to chemical processes or brain activity *at the moment of* decision and action. 5) Virtue ethics overlooks the significance of the universal, moral standard of "excellence" that is presupposed by the search for the virtuous "mean" between excess and deficiency. 6) Utilitarians ride roughshod over human dignity, which they acknowledge only for the majority, and presume a form of omniscience unattainable for humanity (that is, that we can calculate out the "greatest" good in any circumstance). Even John Stuart Mill's proposal that we can learn from the past ignores the very *necessary condition* that makes it possible for us to be moral in the first place: *our positive freedom* that makes it possible for us to create new, life-world conditions that neither nature can create on its own nor have been achieved in the past.

Practical reason acknowledges: 1) The *necessities* that govern the conditions of experience are not of our making. When it comes to our symbol systems, we create the symbols but not the necessities that they articulate. We embrace/learn or ignore those necessities, but we do so at our own peril. 2) Morality involves an invisible, universal dimension of principles not created by humanity. This does not claim that an anthropomorphic deity communicates these moral principles, for example, on Mt. Sinai. First, it is frequently overlooked that there are two sets of Ten Commandments in Exodus (Exodus 20 and Exodus 34), and, despite the text's claim that they are, they are clearly not (!) the same. What makes them the "same" is precisely why they are not moral principles: Each is a set of basic civic laws governing the external affairs of a nomadic or, alternatively, a sedentary/agrarian community. In other words, civic laws are external rules to govern behavior, and, given the differences in external circumstances, those rules are relative to social and cultural contexts. They are and cannot be universal. As a set of civic laws, however, they require a citizenry that holds itself answerable to a "higher" moral law because we all know that one can adhere diligently to the civic law and perpetrate great injustice. At the core of all the historical manifestations that constitute the different religions of the world, then, is the "givenness" of the *necessities* that constitutes the conditions for the moral improvement/effort of humanity that is religion. It is in light of this core "givenness" of *necessities* that we can understand why humanity is the only species that is capable of religion. We are the only species capable of being aware of such *necessities*. Like the New England fisheries biologist, Nathaniel P. Hitt, said in response to the environment encyclical by Pope Francis a few weeks ago, "'Science [empirical data] is like a compass. It can tell us where north is, but it can't tell us if we want to go north. That's where our morality comes in.'" (NY Times, June 21, 2015) However, our personal morality is not something that is handed over to us by some external reality – either divine or political. Morality must be self-imposed from *within*.

Morality trumps even honor. Honor seeks status and prestige in the eyes of others. It has two dangerous limitations: 1) Depending upon the morality of the community within which one seeks honor, the pursuit of status and prestige can motivate one to great achievements or to great destruction. 2) Like desire, status and prestige are determined by their "objects," not by the individual. As a consequence, the individual is dependent upon the reliability of those who bestow the status and prestige. In other words, honor presupposes a community committed to morality. It is in itself no guarantor of morality.

It is not necessary that humanity be even capable of, much less achieve, perfection for humanity to be(come) the moral species that it is. The expectation of perfection is a powerful motivation in historical religions for humanity to turn to "external" sources for its religion rather than the individual assuming personal responsibility for her/his *positive freedom*. Given our limitations, such an expectation of perfection readily encourages the speculation that there *must* be a perfect being capable of making us perfect. This kind of religion turns into an exercise in fulfilment of self-interest rather than an exercise in the cultivation of our imperfect, moral capacities. We insist on the reality of perfection that we have never encountered, and we encourage ourselves to hope that this perfect reality will make us as individuals perfect by forgiving us – without considering our responsibility for those whom we have harmed in our imperfection. Such a vertical forgiveness is a second-wounding of victims even as it fulfils a deep self-interest.

All too succinctly, then, humanity is in the precarious position of not having created the conditions that are necessary for it to be the creative species that it can be. These necessary conditions include universal moral principles that we are incapable of proving any more than we are capable of proving that there are universal, physical laws that apply to all times and places. Not only does physics today speak of “lawfulness” rather than laws, but also Newton was careful not to claim absolute status for the laws of nature (e.g., the “law” of gravity). Nonetheless, if we are to be(come) the species that we have the capacity to become, we have to self-impose these uncreated *necessities* upon ourselves without certainty that they are absolute. To be sure, this “uncertainty” is of an entirely different caliber than the uncertainties that we face when it comes to the rhetoric of politics and the ambiguities that is the future. These *necessary* uncertainties are grounded in a *wager of necessity* with respect to those things/capacities that make it possible for us to be(come) human. They are not concerned with the outcomes of our decisions and actions, that is, with what is to happen in the future. In short, we are not moral beings because we *must be*; rather, we are moral beings because we *can be*.

What does this discussion of morality and religion have to do with democracy and the 2015 Greek referendum? Democracy is not a condition that can be guaranteed by military force or a constitution, much less an international agreement. It is a system of government grounded in the dignity of the individual. That dignity is concerned with the one natural right possessed by each individual regardless of her/his physical or mental capabilities: the possession of the *positive freedom* that makes it possible for each of us to do things that nature on its own cannot accomplish and that makes it possible for us to assume responsibility for our actions. If democracy is to work, it must respect dignity and limit political powers so that no one aspect of government (the administrative, legislative, or judicial) can interfere in the affairs of the other. Note, please: Democracy does not consist merely in the rule of the majority. Once again, we are confronted with the recognition that *unbridled liberty* on the part of individual citizens or the branches of government can interfere with the exercising of *positive freedom*.

What is Greece called to decide this auspicious weekend? It is called to decide its fate not on the basis of the shrouded mists of political rhetoric about the future. Changing the metaphor, it is called to decide its fate as if on a mountain path socked in with clouds that make the way forward precarious. Salamis was a military wager for democracy in the face of overwhelming odds. This referendum is a social wager in favor of democracy in the face of the ambiguities of rhetoric. The *necessary* ground for the decision to be made in the voting booth can be found in the precariousness that is the human condition that makes it possible for us to hope: by voting in favor of creative capacities and the assumption of moral responsibility for those actions regardless of one’s self-interest, Greece can vote in favor of the human species and for a future aimed at justice. Neither *positive freedom* nor justice can be given or guaranteed by political and social institutions. Positive freedom is *necessary condition of possibility* for each individual to be(come) the creative, moral individual that s/he can. Justice is achievable only when all individuals develop their talents according to self-imposed, universal, moral principles. Justice and virtue are beyond rhetoric, constitutions, and armies. They are grounded in the hearts of individuals ready to roll up their sleeves to take responsibility for their decisions and actions. Were that to be the ground for one’s casting of one’s vote in the Greek referendum or in the taking of any decision it would mean that the Greek referendum would be truly an epoch

breaking moment. It would be a vote not just for Greece but for humanity and in favor of a real hope for justice. It would be a vote for a new humanity and a new moral order.