

Anthony Comegna ([00:22](#)):

Stephen Pittz is an Assistant Professor of Political Philosophy, International Relations and American Government at the University of Colorado's, Colorado Springs College of Letters, and Arts, and Sciences, and today, he has a really special treat for us all. Professor Pittz' book, which is out right now for pre order, so be sure to snatch one up, is essentially a handbook for freeing your spirit, and living more authentically. Although, of course, this is far from an easy process, and many of us may not want to do it in the first place, Professor Pittz' book is easily the best academic treatment of the subject I've ever seen, and it's a terribly fun, and yet difficult read, and you'll emerge from the experience far better versed on a series of important authors from Thoreau, to Herman Hesse, and perhaps along the way, you'll find pieces of yourself you didn't recognize before. Let's get straight to it then, it's Steven Pittz' *Recovering The Liberal Spirit: Nietzsche, Individuality and Spiritual Freedom*.

Right off the bat here, let's get into this concept of the free spirit, because the whole book revolves around it. I kind of thought at first it was going to be a book on Nietzsche, and I expected sort of an intellectual biography that repositioned him somehow like crypto, classical liberal, but really your book is about this broad concept of the free spirit. I'm wondering what exactly does that mean for you? Specifically, like are you born a free spirit, or is it kind of something that you can train to be? Sort of like in the, I think of like *The Karate Kid* style movies, where you pick up volumes of Nietzsche, or [inaudible 00:02:08] or something, and use them as your own personal Mr. Miyagi.

Steven Pittz ([02:13](#)):

Yeah, well, so why don't I try to answer both those questions, but maybe I'll start by talking about the free spirit as a concept, how I came to it, and then, what some basic characteristics of free spirit are, and then, I'll try to answer that question about whether it's just something you're born with, or something you can cultivate, or train yourself into.

Anthony Comegna ([02:35](#)):

Sounds great.

Steven Pittz ([02:36](#)):

Okay, yeah. What I'm wanting to talk about, the way actually I approached the project initially, was I wanted to sort of tap into an idea of freedom that maybe was a little different, probably, it's overlapping, but a little distinct from the way that we talk about liberal freedom in general. I looked at the way that scholars, and public intellectuals talk about liberalism, and liberal freedom, and there's two basic categories. It's political or economic, so you have your political civil liberties; freedom of religion, freedom of speech, the right to vote, all these stuff, that's political, then you have economic liberties; right to work, right to choose your occupation. Let's look at the tax structure, how free are you to own your property, and own the money, the fruits of your labor. That's economic liberty as well.

And, those are very, very important, but I felt like man, that's not the whole picture when we talk about liberal freedom. I feel like there's a more... in some sense, intuitive idea about freedom that's being missed there. Which is just this kind of freedom to be yourself, not have people changing how you think, how you act, who you are, and that's all a little bit broad. It's hard to really narrow down what that means, but I started to think, "Well, maybe there's a category of liberal freedom that we might call spiritual freedom, or spirit freedom, and, this is something that might add to the debate." And then, as I thought about that, I realized, man, it's really hard to talk about spiritual freedom in any way that isn't

so abstract, as to be almost meaningless, or to be just such a broad concept that anybody could put whatever they wanted into it.

And so, to solve that problem, or at least to try to mitigate that problem, I thought, "Well, what about talking about a particular person who embodies these characteristics?" A free spirit is an example, or an ideal, an embodiment of this spiritual freedom, this category of liberal freedom that I would call spiritual freedom, so that's a way to just start off thinking about a free spirit, and so, let's just talk about that now. What I think about the free spirit is that it's an ideal, it's aspirational. It's not something that's ever fully, or finally realized. It's rather something that we aspire to. It's also a relative concept, meaning you are more of a free spirit, or less of a free spirit relative to others, so man stranded on the deserted island, plane crash on the deserted island. It would make no sense to ever call that person a free spirit, even though in fact, all they would be doing is independent thinking, and independent living, but there's nothing to relate that to.

And then, so let's talk a bit about the characteristics of the free spirit. They're going to be skeptical, detached and free from convention and contemporary norms. That's very important. We'll probably talk more about that later. I also am interested in aesthetics and aesthetic appreciation. This one's a little bit more optional for a free spirit, but one thing that a free spirit does, because they're skeptical, because they're detached from convention, they tend to also be detached from community, and associations, and the sort of norms, and sources you might say of meaning that most people tap into, and so, free spirits might be a little bit left out at sea without kind of an anchor, and I think aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic perspective, which I can talk more about later, if you'd like, is a place where free spirits can actually achieve what I call spiritual fullness, and sort of tap into a source of meaning.

So, that's the last thing I would say about, is that a free spirit, there's an intellectual and a spiritual component to it. The intellectual component as much as you would you imagine, as I mentioned, they're skeptical, they're independent minded, and they don't follow dogmatic ways of thinking, or authoritative ways of thinking, and doing things, and then, on the spiritual side though, they actually find their meaning in doing just that. Nietzsche talks about a free fearless hovering over a convention, but the idea is that you actually become spiritually fulfilled by detaching yourself, and by, as it were being elevated above the sort of conventional norms and harmful associations, harmful attachments, because that's the thing. These things are just conventional so, "Oh, we got to hate them, because we want to be a nonconformist." They're harmful to your spirit, and that's why you want to get away from them.

I know that's a lot to just put out there right at the start, but that's what I think about this free spirit, is they embody all of these characteristics, and one way to think about them as well is to, when we talk about the free spirit, as Nietzsche did, and then, as I do, they're a little different than the free spirit we might have seen in Hollywood movies or novels. In the sort of 20th, and 21st century, there's this idea of a free spirit as someone who just kind of leaves bourgeois middle class lifestyle, and I don't know, starts reading tarot cards, and doing astrology, and they become mystical, living in the present [inaudible 00:08:33]. There's an aspect of that, I think, in the free spirit that I talk about, but that's definitely minimized. The free spirit as Nietzsche talks about, and his idea is much more focused on ridding themselves of illusions, trying to see reality as clearly as they can, and really detach themselves from all of the social pressures, and ideas, and conventions, and norms that are telling them that this is what's happening, and they're trying to figure it out for themselves.

Anthony Comegna ([09:05](#)):

Now that makes me wonder, though, that it seems like a particularly thorny problem, because in trying to be a free spirit, according to the way you just described it, you very well might run the risk of just merely being an iconoclast, and in its way, then you're defined by the status quo still, and driven still, just by your reaction against it, whatever the prevailing norms and institutions are. I'm wondering, is it good enough to just be sort of a skater punk, or something like that who... One of my ex girlfriends, I used to joke with her saying she'd like to be different just for the sake of being different, and she didn't like that at all. I'm also wondering do free spirits have to operate in opposition to the rest of the world, all of the unfree spirits out there? And, is there any way to sort of rise above that kind of constant comparison of yourself to the rest of society?

Steven Pittz ([10:20](#)):

Yeah, so I think there's a couple ways I try to answer that. I mean, it's not the sense that the free spirit is actively attempting to set themselves up against convention. It's necessary for them to detach from it in order to actually pursue their own spiritual pursuits as they would. The fact that it's a relative concept is really, let's say this, and I say it's a relative concept, because you want to actually judge it, and evaluate it versus others in society, but that's not how the free spirit is doing it. That's sort of a third party judgment or evaluation of what's going on. The free spirit himself or herself is doing this precisely because they are filled in a sense with purpose, and meaning, and ideas about the world, and they find these in conflict with, I don't know, what they learn in school, what their peer groups are telling them, what the news media is telling them, what social media is saying all the time.

And, they recognize that they actually have to divorce themselves from that stuff or detach themselves from that stuff in order to find themselves in a sense. Another way to think about this is, it's not the case... let's say if I rephrase your question this way, and the question is whether one should always push back against convention, that just being a free spirit is about always pushing back against what you see out there? And, as you put it, as sort of being a nonconformist for the sake of being a nonconformist, which can make you a conformist, of course. That's not what it's about. You might be a free spirit, and we'll talk about some of the examples I use in the book, but you could find a religious person who actually is a believer in Scripture. Now, this would be a hard sell to say you're a free spirit, but you're a believer in revelation, in teachings that were given to you from some Holy book, an authoritative manual.

But, if you were able to get away from everything, detach yourself, think about the world in a certain way, come to your own understanding of things, and I know I'm talking abstractly, but maybe pick some moral principles, and then, you also find those moral principles to be in line with something you're reading in the Old Testament. You can become, and a believer in the Old Testament, and still, in a sense, be a free spirit, because of the way you arrive there. I hope that kind of answers your question, but it's not about being just anti everything that's out there. It's about finding things independently, and then, following those, and if those match up with things that are already out there, there's nothing wrong with that, if that makes sense.

Anthony Comegna ([13:03](#)):

Yeah, I think it does, and now I'm wondering, also, if you could put the concept in some sort of historical context for us. Is it possible, for example, to really pin down who came up with the idea? And, I mean, you discuss a lot of different figures in here, literary figures, and philosophers mainly, but they're from the 19th and 20th centuries, and I'm wondering, can you really push that back further, and further? Like, are there signs of the free spirit concept in Renaissance Italy, for example, or the English Civil Wars when

the world was turned upside down, and culture just exploded, and all sorts of directions? Or, maybe, in the ancient philosophers? How far back does this idea go?

Steven Pittz ([13:48](#)):

Well, let me try to answer that, and maybe I'll go back to that idea whether you can be born with it, or cultivate it, because maybe we can put those together. The short answer would be, I would say that there've been examples of free spirits all throughout history, and both Western and Eastern, take your pick, we can certainly find people. Nietzsche himself calls Socrates a free spirit, actually calls Jesus a free spirit. There's examples of free spirit we might find in Eastern philosophy as well. When it comes to the actual idea who gets a lot of the credit, I probably give a lot of the credits to Nietzsche, simply because of his really, really rich, and thorough discussion of this. Three of his books, *Human, All-Too-Human*, *The Gay Science*, and *Beyond Good and Evil*, all contains significant discussion of the free spirit.

In fact, I know, there's probably not that many Nietzsche scholars out there, but we've heard so much about the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, the Superman. The Superman, or the *Übermensch* is actually only discussed for eight pages in Nietzsche's book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, but that's all anybody ever talks about with Nietzsche. That's the popular culture theme that Nietzsche supposedly is all about, but really, compared to the free spirit, he probably wrote 20 times as much about the free spirit, and when it came to me putting this book together, it became very clear. It's like, okay, I'm trying to put this idea together, and put this free spirit together. Nietzsche is a pretty smart guy, and he's written a lot about it, and I think I can just use what he says, because there's just so much there.

And so, I give him most of the credit for actually creating the concepts. Obviously, I make some changes to the concept that broaden it a little bit, but I give him credit for the concept, but then again, in terms of finding examples, you could find them all throughout history. The ones that I chose, were chosen for different reasons, but partly because they float into the sort of scholarly trail I was going on, or that I was on at the time, but I think you can find them all over the place, and then, when it comes to whether that's just down to temperament, or character, or whether it's possible to cultivate this, I think it's a little bit of both, and I follow Nietzsche mostly here, that a lot of it does come down to temperament or character. When we talk about the free spirit, he talks often about, they have this cheerful temperament, or a cheerful disposition, and it allows them to sort of leave these sources of meaning I was talking about before. Like, traditional morality, or religion, and belief in God, belief in heaven and the afterlife, belief in, basically, the popular [inaudible 00:16:39] the time, because that gives you a sense of community.

It's scary to leave all those things, and what Nietzsche says is, you have to be a person with a cheerful temperament, or a cheerful disposition to be able to do that, but that doesn't mean that temperament is completely fixed, because what we can do is, when Nietzsche used the word temperament, he means something more like character or disposition. Contemporary psychologists, if they talk about temperament, it's actually something quite fixed. It's kind of how you're wired. Back when Nietzsche was writing about it, it's not quite so much. It'd be something more like disposition or character. You can actually develop your character in a particular way by cultivating the different drives that you have. We're not able to just create who we are out of nothing, but we are able to sort of, he uses that metaphor of a gardener. Just like a gardener can kind of trim a tree to have it grow in a certain way, we have drives.

We have a sex drive, a hunger drive, so we have basic physical appetites, but we also have drives for higher things. I don't know, drive towards excellence, or towards honor, and esteem, or towards love, or towards friendship, or honesty, and what you do when you create your characters, you sort of take these drives that you have already within yourself, these are given to you. This is something you're

born with, but then, you sort of garden them. You tend to them, and hopefully, trim down some that you don't like so much, and fertilize the others that you do like, and then, ultimately, out of that you create a character, and so, there's a sense in which you can create the character of a free spirit, but you're probably not going to be able to if the raw material you're using with is just really, really incompatible with it.

But, assuming that you have some of these basic characteristics, you're able to sort of move them in a direction, and then, throughout history, there's been many, many people who have been able to do that, and so, we can train ourselves, and I would argue, too, I think part of your question is, where would one go to try to become more of a free spirit? I think the answer is, Nietzsche was a good guy but not close to the only one. There's good guys all over the place, and really engagement with any high quality thinking independent minded people, whether this is in your life, or in books, or in the media. Obviously, I've given examples of older historical thinkers, but I think a good example today would be something like comedians. Comedians are a good modern day example of free spirits. They tend to be pretty anti-convention, they see things differently, and especially, the really good ones.

You can tell there's, like, I love Dave Chappelle. He's just a brilliant comedian, and when you watch Dave Chappelle, even other comics say, he just sees things very, very differently than other people. The way he creates his jokes, and the thought process he goes through, it's just completely different than what other people do, and it makes other people think differently, and then, so that's a modern day example of one as well, on top, of course, of the other examples I gave in the book.

Anthony Comegna ([20:04](#)):

Yeah, let's talk about some of those examples, because there were a whole lot of them that you gave and discussed, and I think my three favorites though, were probably Henry David Thoreau, no surprise. I'm a historian of Jacksonian America, but then, also, C.S. Lewis and Herman Hesse, and I kind of want to focus on Lewis and Hesse here the most, because I don't think that many people would think of somebody like C.S. Lewis as a free spirit given that he was a dogmatic Christian at least of a type, and I'm a godless pagan atheist, but I absolutely love C.S. Lewis' writing. I fell in love with *Chronicles of Narnia* when I was a kid, and when I read them now they just completely transport me back into what it was like to be a child, and it's just an amazing thing. I really liked *The Screwtape Letters*, and a lot of his smaller essays.

I mean, he's just [inaudible 00:21:05] absolutely fantastic writer, and even in an example of something that is clearly, and obviously, a Christian allegory like *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the real power of that text is that it almost literally frees your spirit from its adult confines, and transports you back into your childhood, like I said. Like, it does help you in that process of freeing yourself from the way that you normally feel, and other conventional ways of thinking, and acting, and feeling. Maybe you can talk us through how C.S. Lewis is a free spirit.

Steven Pittz ([21:43](#)):

Okay, absolutely. I think there's two questions there. The first is like, how does C.S. Lewis' writing, the way he does it, get us to our free spirited place, and then, the second one is how does he maybe match up with the free spirit criteria, and I think those both great questions. The first one is, what C.S. Lewis does is uses stories and myths to get away from contemporary conventions, and toward discussion of more eternal things, things that they're always in every age, every historical age, and so, it was a sense in which in general novels are a literary device that are almost tailor made to get us away from contemporary norms. He's taking us into another world, which allows him to talk about different ideas,

and different moral principles, and what have you, without the baggage of any current political, or cultural, or social issue.

And so, that, just by itself, as you basically just said yourself, I mean, that right, there is a spiritually freeing thing, and I think too, we might say, where do we go to get more free spirited? Probably, away from our time and place is a really good idea, so whether it's into a novel, whether it's into thinkers in a much different time in history that were facing very, very different circumstances and problems, or going maybe across the world to another culture that's very, very different from ours, and we read or watch something that they put out. That's really important. C.S. Lewis does this very, very well. Also, just, on the side totally agree with you about bringing you back to childhood, and his ability to do that is pretty remarkable, and I can still read his kids novels today, and get a lot out of it.

And then, as far as him, you're right. He is a dogmatic Christian in a sense, but he's also a liberal Christian, and I write about this a lot in the book. I probably wouldn't spend a lot of time on it right now in the podcast, because it could get skewed a little bit long, but C.S. Lewis actually was a very liberal political thinker, and the best book, and if [inaudible 00:24:12] to read a book about that, Justin Dyer and Micah Watson wrote a book, I can't remember the exact title, but it's basically about the political thought of C.S. Lewis, and really show that, I mean, he's a Lockean. He has more in common with Locke and Mill than many, many thinkers, and certainly, more in common with them than any sort of theocratic, or sort of theological sort of thinkers that might say we need more religious doctrine to be guiding politics. He's actually very, very liberal.

And, one reason he is this way, is because of how modest he is, or humble he is in terms of epistemology. He thinks that human beings, and this is part of our fallen nature, this is the doctrine of the fall, Adam and Eve, eaten the apple, that we just can't know very much. Our knowledge, whatever we get to is just the tip of the iceberg. The universe is so complex that we just know almost nothing. That means that we should be very, very wary of making dogmatic and authoritative claims, so while he is actually a religious thinker, and you're absolutely right, he writes books that talk about how we need to bring the religious model back into our lives in different ways. There's no doubt about that, but he also is a sort of quasi skeptic. We don't have time in this podcast to go, I talk a lot about skepticism in the book, and the difference between modern skepticism of the Cartesian variety, and [inaudible 00:25:49] skepticism, or just an older Greek skepticism.

The older Greek skepticism of [inaudible 00:25:54] really it's not like, "Oh, God, we just know nothing, and we shouldn't doubt absolutely everything, even the person that we're talking to actually exists, or the chair we're sitting on exists." It's rather, we're very, very skeptical of dogmatic claims, dogmatic claims in general, whether they're scientific, religious, moral. Dogmatism is the problem, and actually, Lewis mirrors that skepticism in many ways, with his idea of the fallen nature of man, and the fact that we just really don't know much, and we can't come to firm knowledge of things, and the way that we like to think.

Anthony Comegna ([26:36](#)):

Now, you mentioned, not only Lewis' ability to transport you to another time and frame of mind in your life, and that being a freeing experience, but also, just going to another place in the world that you're unfamiliar with, and I'm sure that if most people in our audience know of Herman Hesse, it's from the book that many of us read in high school, Siddhartha, and that also, I imagine, made a lot of impact on his being categorized as a free spirit here, his studies in Buddhism, but the particularly interesting theme with him in your book that I found was, his living through Nazi Germany, and kind of having this balance between low level resistance to the Nazi regime, and a sort of low level acceptance to the Nazi regime.

Tell us a little bit about that story, and how that factors into you situating him within this free spirit paradigm.

Steven Pittz ([27:39](#)):

Okay, yeah. I think that the best way to talk about it is like why he decided to do what he did with his writing. He's a brilliant writer. For those people who don't know Herman Hesse wrote many novels. He was in Germany and Switzerland, and they always dealt with the sort of difference between the material world, and the spiritual world as he saw it, and then, you're right, he had a Buddhist influence, but he also had a Western influence. He was actually really heavily influenced by Nietzsche as well, which is one reason I picked him, is that he uses Nietzsche, and [inaudible 00:28:18] and actually talks about things in a very similar way.

But, he decided not to directly oppose the Nazi regime that was growing in Germany at the time. Though, ultimately, he doesn't escape it. He's exiled, and his books are banned by the end of his life in Nazi Germany, so that's important and a key. His resistance was high enough that he ultimately was banned, but though, of course, the Nazi Germany, you didn't have to resist very hard to be kicked out, but to go to the other side of it, he didn't directly resist in a way that many people wanted him to, and the rest of the intellectual class, where he's part of the intellectual class in Germany, and he's actually really good friends with Thomas [Mon 00:29:15] which will come to the story a little bit later. The rest of the intellectual class was rebelling against the Nazi advance, and then, seeing what's happening culturally, and they're putting their weight against it.

And Hesse does not jump into that. Hesse does not jump into that, and there's a reason why. It's because he says, "If I do that, then I can't do what I'm really good at, and what I really want to do." Which is explore the human condition, and explore the human spirit through literary and cultural projects, whether it's analysis, or novels, or writing, and this is the same thing we saw with [inaudible 00:29:53]. I wrote about this in the book, but it's not that they're not against the Nazis, or they didn't have [inaudible 00:29:59], but Hesse not against the Nazis, but rather, there's a cost and a price you pay by engaging in politics, and engaging in public life, and you need to weigh that against something else on this other side, and on this other side is his spiritual life, and his ability, using his literary gifts to talk about human spirituality, and to affect people in that way.

And so, he makes this decision that, and, much like C.S. Lewis did, "I'm going to use novels, I'm going to use poems, I'm going to use my writings." And, he does actually write in some contemporary publications, something like, you might say, the Atlantic Monthly today, but he doesn't make direct attacks against the Nazis. Instead, he talks about like, universal brotherhood, and peace, and how the human spirit has evolved over time, and where we are without taking the direct political opponent on, and this is something that he thought was very important, because it made him more effective, but there's also something else. It's not just that it was more effective, he also says this in so many words, "I'm not going to directly oppose the Nazis, because the very little that I can do to actually change society and where it's going as one individual..." Even though, he was a fairly well known public intellectual.

"The very little I can do to change society is not worth the spiritual harm to myself." And, I think that's incredibly important insight right there. We don't all have to be martyrs, especially when the world's going one way, and we can't really change that direction, and perhaps it's better to maintain your own spiritual freedom, and your own spiritual power in a sense, than to uselessly throw yourself into that fray. Those are two things that I would say about why he chose to do it the way he did it, but also, I just want to add to that. There was resistance. He actually housed Thomas Mon and his wife, they

were Jewish, and he actually let them stay with him for quite a while, early on when the Jews were starting to be rounded up, so he wasn't completely a spectator either.

Anthony Comegna ([32:21](#)):

Yeah, Magic Mountain is on my reading to do list here, whenever I can get back to reading fiction again. That's the first on there. Now, setting Hitler and the Nazis aside here for the rest of this, I'm wondering though, how do we use this concept today? Let's go through the list. We're at maybe the tail end of a pandemic, but perhaps, awaiting a second spike. We've got all sorts of severe, and some even still unknown social problems which have either burst out into the open already, or are still waiting there to spring themselves on us, unknown in the future. We have institutions and individuals sort of running wild, committing all sorts of damage, and evil in the world. There's confusion and corruption of identities, there's structure, after structure, after structure all bearing down on the individual trying to shape them into something they're not.

And, it makes me think how much I love The X Files, and one of their regular mantras, "Trust no one." I'm wondering, given that, that's the kind of world we live in now, how do we keep ourselves free when we can't even be sure of all the ways that the world is enslaving us?

Steven Pittz ([33:40](#)):

Yeah, this is tough question. I mean, there's a couple of levels to this, and one is like, how does this concept work in a theoretical sense? [inaudible 00:33:47] like a practical sense, you're an individual, you're having a tough time, and you don't want to be engaged in all this stuff, and what do you need to do about that? And, I think that, I'm going to take the first one first. If you're sitting in this world you think, "Man, there's so many forces just kind of bearing down on me. What can I do?" I don't think I have a great answer for that. It's actually just simple advice that anyone could give. For example, maybe you should start listening to some of your favorite music from different time periods., maybe you should read books from different time periods, maybe you should get your hands on high quality movies and TV shows, and stuff that aren't quite so infected with maybe what's happening right here and now.

And also, even maybe in [inaudible 00:34:40] I find myself doing this. I listen to talk radio sometime in the car when I'm driving, whether it's NPR, or other, on the other side as well. Sometimes I'll turn talk radio on, and in times like this I realize, if I just put music on every time I get in the car, and spend that 20 minutes each way, just kind of decompressing a little bit rather than listening to this stuff, it can actually have a profound effect on my spiritual state, as you might say. I know that's not very exciting any of that, but I think those things are important just on a personal level. On a theoretical level, how can this concept of the free spirit help us here? Well, I guess I follow someone like John Stuart Mill here, and if you think about On Liberty, and the way he thinks about how truth comes to light, and really one thing that you see in that book, is that power and truth are very, very rarely aligned.

They're usually unaligned, and power can keep truth, or freedom suppressed for long, long periods of time. In fact, most of history, we see power keeping down truth and freedom, and that's just a fact. As I said, historical facts, and so, actually, I know I'm using truth here, and I don't like to use truth too cavalierly. I might actually say something, if we're talking about the free spirit, and talking about Nietzsche, we might say something like intellectual honesty, but there are social forces that are constantly opposed to intellectual honesty, and that is the norm, not the exception, and I'm not sure in times like these, I mean, especially these last few months that we're talking about here. I'm not sure how much the free spirited ideal can push against this, and the most you might be able to say is that, we need liberal ideas, we need strong independent minded people to persist, and to be around when historical conditions become more favorable for liberty and for liberalism.

So, that tradition needs to stay alive, and there's a sense in which that stays alive through the free spirit, but I don't think, there's just going to be times in history where social forces are just so much stronger. I'm not sure how much you can do, but I also talk about in the book about how the demonstration of spiritual freedoms, so being a free spirit in public, and this is not something that they necessarily seek out to do. You don't even have to seek to do it. You could be in your peer group, and you're just the one who tends to be a little bit more independent or contrarian, and you bring up different points of view. That's important stuff to do. It's important stuff to do all the time. It's important to have people who are out there presenting different viewpoints, or at least being skeptical of what is just commonly accepted at the time.

And so, that little bit can probably help as well, and I have one, I think actually that's where I'll stop with answer, and I know that it's not a super optimistic answer, but I think that it's realistic.

Anthony Comegna ([38:05](#)):

Well, maybe you could close this out here by just giving me your reflections on this, admittedly goofy thought of mine. Just indulge me here for a second listeners. I and many others of us are annoyed often at the caricature of classical liberals that we sort of champion the atomized individual, or that we think of ourselves as somehow separate from the rest of society, and therefore, we don't care about society. We're like preppers and survivalists types, and we make decisions based purely on our own personal interests. I've been sort of tongue in cheek, and somewhat jokingly lately been thinking to myself, well, the worst the world gets out there, and the more awful people prove themselves every day on Twitter, and Facebook, or something, or out in the streets, the more I've been thinking, "Hey, you know what? It's a caricature, because no serious classical liberals have actually argued that, but maybe it's time someone did."

I think, I would be perfectly happy if you strap me into my own personal rocket loaded up with like Fritos, and Mountain Dew, and video games, and podcasts, and just shoot me off into space like Elon Musk's car, just fire me out there, and I'll be fine, and the rest of the world might be happier to have me gone, because I'm sort of a gadfly, and nobody likes the Socratic gadfly around. I might well be better off, and people here won't have to conflict with me as often. Maybe at least to some degree the Larry David's of the world, maybe we should be atomized individuals, and I wonder, what are your thoughts about that?

Steven Pittz ([39:55](#)):

Yeah, I mean, there's so much here I'm like struggling to answer it all, because it's so at the heart of what I'm trying to do, and there's a lot of different ways to talk about it. I think the first thing I would say is, a big part of this book, the motivation for writing it, and actually, not even just motivation for writing, but the conclusions that I came to while writing it, is that people who are this way, to some degree, it's a matter of degree, but to a substantial degree are this way, are a free spirited type. You need to distance yourself from society in many ways. You need to be really cognizant of what social pressures from all different places. This can be at just the family level, it can be at the school level, it can be at society level, it can be at the level of the state, and politics. There's so many ways that it's coming at you. You've got to know what's happening, and you have to know how it's harming you, and where it's harming you.

Like, I think that I am trying to answer one of your question in a fundamental way, which is, the first point is that you need to detach yourself from all these potentially harmful forces in order to find your own spiritual fulfillment. That's number one, and then, the second part of that actually happens to be, as I kept writing and kept discovering, this is actually really good for everybody if you do this. It's good for everybody in a lot of ways, and what free spirits do is they provide these very beneficial effects

to society, especially democratic societies that are heavily, heavily influenced by public opinion. I'm not going to go into all the details, I talk about this a lot in the book, but the very existence of free spirits is a check on the authority of public opinion, in lots of different domains.

But, public opinion is an incredibly strong force. Tocqueville talks about this, Mill talks about this, even contemporary democratic thinkers talk about this. You could look at somebody maybe like Jason Brennan, some of his writings about what democracy and the way that democratic opinion is formed, and how much it harms us, but then, we can actually see these beneficial effects that free spirits play. It's a double whammy, and it's double good. It's a win-win, but the first idea is that you should become more atomized as you say, because that's what you need to actually protect your spirit, and I'll say something about that atomization as well. I mean, in the book, I won't go into it here, but in the book I write two chapters taking on this criticism by progressives, and by communitarians saying, "Look at this liberal individual, completely atomized..." Which means separate from any sorts of meaning, "... cut off from society. They're pathological, they're lost at [inaudible 00:42:52]. This is a big, big problem to be this kind of person."

I try to argue against that in several ways, but one way that we might just break it apart really quickly, is that there's different levels of association we might have, and so, if we just think of society in general, we could break it down into three things. The state itself, so like the political state, which certainly has an effect on us, then the community, the political community, which is kind of civil society, but not really... in the book, I talk about how communitarians talk about community. Like, community is where you get the evaluations, the morals, the ideas, the possibilities to what we could be, how we should act, how we should think about life. That all comes at the community level, for communitarians. I go against that idea, but that's the communitarians think. You've got the state, you've got the community, but you've also just got friends. Just associations of friends, and all the free spirits, I try to show this in some of the examples I use. Like, I know we talked about it in the [inaudible 00:43:57] section.

For a free spirit, it's very important to protect yourself from the damaging, and harmful effects of society, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't be looking for like minded individuals that you can bounce your ideas off of, and frankly, just share an emotional bond with, what have you. There's all sorts of ways in which friends are super important even for the so called atomized individual. I guess I would actually push back a little bit against your suggestion that you could be happy flying out an Elon Musk car with a bunch of Fritos, and Mountain Dew, because I think you'd get a little bit sick of that. Like, you'd want some friends ultimately, but anyways, I think it's important to break it down into those different levels, and recognize that making the atomized individual is boogie man, which is what the progressives and communitarians do.

It's a straw man, is what it is, ultimately, we're not that. However, as I said before, just to reiterate, I still think that the first goal of the free spirit should be to protect themselves from those harmful social forces.

Anthony Comegna ([45:15](#)):

There you go, folks. Don't just be a mindless angry iconoclast, but definitely, also, don't be a mindless drone, following whatever rules history and society has given to you. In many ways, both America and the modern world were created by a combination of those horrible, forced labor prison camps we call the early colonies run by managers who corralled together hordes of suffering humanity solely to enrich the company, but it was also created by the constant frontier zone, and those free spirits who escaped there. In fact, if it weren't for all the free spirits constantly running away from places like Jamestown, to live, and to trade, and to love with Native Americans and escaped slaves, there likely would not have

been the kinds of liberalization that eventually characterized so much of modern life, and hey, what would the world right now, today, be like, without people like Larry David? Whatever the answer is, I don't even want to know.