

# HIS OWN WORDS

Huw Spanner talks to **Johann Hari**



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**C**ould you say a little about your upbringing and the specific values it instilled into you that you have retained in adult life?

Well, my father is a bus driver – he was a chef – and my mum works in a refuge for battered wives. They both grew up in fairly poor backgrounds but they have very different politics (though they only voted for the first time in 1997, because I threatened to divorce them if they didn't). My father is from a very small village in Switzerland, where his parents were subsistence farmers, and is very conservative.

My mother is from Scotland and is very liberal. But her mother was a much bigger influence on me than either of them. She is a completely unpolitical person – she has never voted and would probably be hard-pressed to tell you who the Prime Minister is – but she is deeply concerned about the people around her. I'm not saying that I'm like her – I wish I was, but I'm not at all, sadly – but I have got that kind of social awareness from my gran.

My mother gave me a kind of instinctive egalitarianism – 'Don't let anyone treat you like they're better than you' – and my dad, for all his reactionary attitudes, definitely thinks that if you work and study hard you will be as good as anyone. He left school at 15, as my mother did at 16, but they both love reading and always knew the value of learning even if they didn't have any themselves.

I didn't get any intellectual inheritance. I've got an older brother and sister but I was the first person in my family to go to university.

**You obviously have a lot of confidence in your own opinions. Where did that come from?**

My parents enjoy arguing, both with each other and with the world. And they're certainly the kind of people who would challenge any injustices they saw in their everyday lives. Also, they have the self-confidence of that generation of working-class people, who had a strong sense of their own values.

I think that kind of inheritance gives you a certain attitude. When you see someone like [the *Sun* columnist] Richard Littlejohn who you know has never been to a council estate in his life, who probably hasn't travelled on a bus in the past 20 years, and you hear him talking about fumigating council estates or cancerous asylum-seekers, it does give you a strange kind of confidence to challenge that.

**Why did you decide to go into journalism?**

The honest answer is that I couldn't think of anything else to do. I didn't have any grand plan. When I was at university I did a load of interviews and I sold quite a lot of them on, and just before I graduated the *New Statesman* offered me a job. I was phenomenally lucky. I don't think I could have got into journalism if it hadn't been for that – the industry is insanely nepotistic and it's dominated by one very small social stratum, the children of privilege.

**You have remarked that we live in a 'media-driven' society. How exactly do you see the relationship between the media and society? When we interviewed John Humphrys, he said: 'The media doesn't dominate the culture, it reflects it. We're a mirror.'**

Well, I think that's madness. For example, the balance of power between the media and politicians is grotesque. I am incredibly junior, I know very little, and yet when one of my colleagues, Steve Richards, and I got invited to lunch by a Cabinet minister, he behaved towards us with a ridiculous degree of sycophancy. It was just surreal. For a start, I assume whenever I meet anyone important that they think, 'Who is this child, and why should I take him seriously?' But whenever I meet MPs they act as if I am the powerful one. You think, 'Hang on! I got chosen by the whim of one person; you got elected by lots of people.' Something has gone wrong.

I think there is a massive problem in journalism. We have created a culture where we assume – and I am not excepting myself from this – that all politicians are stupid shitbags. There is a constant temptation for columnists to present themselves as decent and intelligent people and every week just sneer at government policy.

Of course, sometimes it's right to sneer. I think that at least 55 per cent of what David Blunkett does is hideous. But it's so easy to get into that reflex and there are times when you see other journalists do it and you think, 'Fuck you! These are people who dedicate their lives to trying at least to make things better.' (And this isn't a partisan point. I dislike the Conservative Party strongly but I think that even most Tories believe they are making things better.)

And then there's the problem that the press is overwhelmingly owned by billionaires. Max Hastings, in his brilliant book about being the editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, has a fantastic line about Lord Black: 'Conrad never forgot that he was a member of the trade union of billionaires and he never allowed his newspapers to cross their picket line.' And it is definitely true that the news is skewed in the interests of the people who own the press.

**Was that Cabinet minister under a misapprehension or do you actually wield power or influence?**

It's interesting, I've never really thought about this. Was he making a rational assessment of where power lies? Maybe. I would imagine that my power and influence are tiny, but I think it's the cumulative effect of lots of people like me. But should power lie with unelected, unaccountable people who are ultimately answerable to billionaires? I don't think so.

**Richard Littlejohn might say, 'But we do have a popular mandate. People decide once every four or five years whether to vote Labour, but they decide six days a week whether or not to buy the Sun. And we are accountable, because if ever we stop pleasing our readers they stop buying the paper.'**

I think the answer to that is very clear. The University of York did a really important survey on why people buy newspapers and it's just untrue to suggest that it's for the politics – particularly with the tabloids. The reason people buy the *Sun* overwhelmingly is for the celebrity gossip and the sport.

And anyway it's a misunderstanding of what a newspaper is to think that your job is simply to reflect the readers' prejudices. If the majority of readers think that asylum seekers eat swans or commit rape, the job of the newspaper is to report the truth. I think you've got to take what you do as a journalist very seriously. You have always got to test that what you write is consistent with your principles and consistent with reality. Public opinion has to be formed on the basis of fact, and if the media tell people a pack of lies, as they do about asylum, it's very dangerous.

**You said that you know very little –**

I do. I freely admit that.

**What do you think the role of a columnist is? If it is to offer the reader the benefit of their wisdom and experience, is there something a little contradictory in the title 'Young Columnist of the Year'?**

The way I interpret it (which is not to say the way I think everybody else should interpret it) is to be a sort of paid political campaigner for the causes you believe in. That's probably not a good journalistic answer, but if I'm honest that's how I see it.

But the thing about youth and wisdom, I agree

with you. I think there is something inherently ridiculous in me doing my job at the *Indie* – and when I was offered it there was part of me that thought, 'I can't do this. What would I think if I were reading me? I'd think, "Who is this child? He doesn't know anything."' I don't really have an answer to that beyond saying that Simon Kelner seems to me in all other respects a very good editor, so I just trust his judgement on this one and do the best I can. I do try to do my job diligently, but I'm always amazed when anyone takes what I've said seriously.

**There's rather a gap between the diffidence you're expressing now and the style of your columns. Is it simply part of the job of a columnist to be bold?**

Obviously you have to dramatise the cause you're writing in, so I think you can phrase things provocatively – you certainly express things in as pointed a way as possible; but what you must never do is to go further than you believe. I did it once and afterwards regretted it hugely. I wrote an absolutely ridiculous column about North Korea – I was getting a lot of flak at the time for what I was saying about Iraq and I thought, 'I'll piss these people off.' But I could see it was a very dangerous road to go down and I've really disciplined myself since.

But I don't have any intellectual humility in the sense that I think that as long as I put in the same amount of research, my view is as good as anyone else's – though you've always got to check against your own arrogance.

**With regard to Iraq, you have taken a strongly pro-war line in the same newspaper Robert Fisk writes for. That seems to me to take quite a lot of nerve.**

I don't think my confidence in writing about any issue, actually, comes from thinking, 'Aha! I, Johann Hari, have this insight,' and Iraq is a very good example. I went there for three weeks for the *Guardian* and I went out thinking that war was a terrible idea: thinking that it had nothing to do with September 11 (and it didn't), thinking that the WMD argument was rubbish (and it was), thinking that George Bush was a revolting serial killer because of all the people he had executed in Texas (and I have never changed my mind on that and never will).

But the very strong impression I got out there was that the Iraqi people saw no way to end what was happening to them but a war. I couldn't come back and march with people saying 'Give peace a chance!' There was never going to be any peace for the people of Iraq under Saddam Hussein. What I did was talk to as many Iraqis as I could, I looked at all the surveys of Iraqi opinion I could find, I met lots of young Iraqis in exile in Britain and I thought: 'OK, Robert Fisk knows the region incredibly well but these people know a lot about it too and I think part of my job is to amplify their voices as well.'

**If postmodernity has made us suspicious of anyone who makes any kind of claim to authority, do you think that pontification is all we are left with?**

I'd like to think that I don't pontificate. I'd like to think that I do my research and give a kind of opinion-tinged reaction to fact. Some people have turned mouthing-off into an art – Julie Burchill is brilliant at it – but when it's spinning words in the air I think

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it is ultimately worthless. I'd like to think I don't do that, though I probably do a bit.

But I think it's true that authority is eroding and in some institutions it has to be restored a bit. Partly it's a very healthy thing – it's good that people no longer defer to the ridiculous House of Windsor, or to the Prime Minister either, I think –

**But it's when it degenerates into 'Why is that lying bastard lying to me?'**

Exactly. We've got to find a line between healthy scepticism and a cynicism that cuts away the democratic ground on which we stand, because if at the end of the day you believe they're all evil liars you end up with nihilism. And that plays into the hands of the right, because if the Government can never do anything good you're going to say, 'Oh well, I'll be in it for myself' – and that's a disaster.

**In a column on the 'villainy' of God you talked about acknowledging 'the glorious emptiness of the universe'. How do atheists avoid nihilism?**

I would describe myself as 'anti-theist' rather than 'atheist', by the way. But the answer is: part of me doesn't. You know, I'm aware that some people would classify my pathetically thin and for-what-it's-worth kind of political and religious thought almost as a symptom of depression – I've been taking the anti-depressant Seroxat for a very long time and that is partly because of a sense of nihilism.

Partly you just have to accept that you are making values in a void. There are times when although there are no absolute values you simply have to act as though there are. So, no, I don't believe there is any basis for universal human rights in natural law, even though I think that spreading human rights is the most important political mission in the world today – and obviously I don't think that divine revelation underpins it, or even basic human dignity. I think it's simply a creation of human beings.

You can talk through all the arguments, but if people simply refuse to accept them, I don't have a way to prove my case. That isn't a very comfortable position to be in, but I think it's better to have no illusions than to be deluded.

**Does that make humanism in the end as much an act of faith, of choosing to believe, as any religion?**

But you can build them on some analysis of fact – I don't think liberal values are built purely on decision. So, for example, something I changed my mind on in a very kind of Enlightenment-rationalist way recently was animal rights. I'd always thought that the argument for animal rights was simple-minded rubbish, but then I interviewed Peter Singer and he informed me of a whole range of facts of which I simply wasn't aware, like our amazing genetic similarity to apes and so on, and I became persuaded in quite a rationalist way.

Now, ultimately that was built upon a void because at some point you have to make a pre-rational decision to care about anything; but once you've made that leap, you can have lots of discourse with other people who have made that same arbitrary leap and you can be persuaded of things.

So, I do think that these Enlightenment values matter, but they only matter because we make them

matter. At the end of the day we could just give up in despair and turn to Nazism. You don't have an argument against it other than 'Please don't! I think these values are more attractive.'

**And you have no answer to the Nazi who says, 'I disagree. I think my values are more attractive.'**

Well, you do. If you can't persuade them, in the last resort you kill them is the answer.

**But that's their method.**

Yep. But hopefully a lot of people will find your values more attractive than Nazism or communism or jihadism or any other anti-democratic ideology.

**Don't you have to concede that some of the greatest humanitarian advances have been made by religious people, perhaps because their humanitarianism was built on stronger foundations than yours?**

Well, I don't think fiction is a stronger foundation than an honest acknowledgement of the reality. I don't dispute for a minute that many religious people have done amazingly good things, whether it's Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King or whatever; but did they do them because they were religious? I think that's a harder case to make.

I'm not saying there are not attractive features to some organised superstition. Of course there are. If someone believes there are fairies at the bottom of the garden who are telling them to be nice to homeless people, that's better than if the fairies are telling them to go out and stab them in the face. But it's still not a very good reason to do something – it's better to do it because you've decided to do it yourself. □



**You just have to accept that you are making values in a void**

**B I O G R A P H Y**

**Johann Hari**

was born in Glasgow in 1979. He was educated at a whole series of schools, ending up at Woodhouse College in north London, and studied social and political science at King's College, Cambridge, from which he graduated with a double first.

In 2000, he was named 'Student Journalist of the Year' by the *Times* for work he had done for the student newspaper *Varsity*.

He was employed as a staff writer on *New Statesman* from 2001 until the beginning of last year, when he was engaged by the *Independent* to write two columns a week. He was named 'Young Journalist of the Year' at the 2003 Press Gazette awards.

Today, he writes regularly for the *Times Literary Supplement*, the gay magazine *Attitude* and *New Statesman*. His journalism has also appeared in *Le Monde*, *El Mundo*, the *Guardian*, *Ha'aretz*, the *Melbourne Age*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Irish Times* among many others.

He has also appeared on CNN, NBC's *Today*, BBC2's *Newsnight* and BBC Radio 4's *The Moral Maze*.

In 2002, his first play, *Going Down in History*, was performed at the Garage Theatre, Edinburgh and his first book, *God Save the Queen?*, was published by Icon Books.

*This interview was conducted at The Coffee Cup in Hampstead, north London on September 20, 2004.*