

secularworld

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VICTIMS OF FAITH

In this issue:

Editorial	2	What is Humanism?	11/12
President's Letter	3	Muslim and Gay	13/14
Breaking the Chains	4/5	I deserved to be kicked in the crotch!	15
Fine-Tuning Debunked	6/7	A Vengeful God	16
Where am I?	8	Belief or Knowledge?	17
Poetry Page	9	What do we know about Arabs?	18
Applying Logic to the God Proposition	10	AAI's Freethinking Hero	19

Editorial: *Born an Atheist*



How do believers manage to get their minds into such a mess? After all, we are all born as ignorant as kittens and have a more or less equal chance to develop from there.

We progress from that innocent condition because we are curious animals. We have evolved a tendency to investigate our surroundings, since understanding them means we can find food and avoid dangers. Ignorance is *not* bliss despite the popular saying. The safe and comforting condition is *knowing* - familiarity with the environment.

There are two routes to knowing:

1. finding out for yourself
2. learning from others.

Learning from others is the easier way but it means we have to decide whether we can believe them or not. Sadly, the world is full of charlatans: cheats who rob us by claiming to have special knowledge or abilities that can solve our problems. Some of them are very skillful at making a convincing sounding case for their claimed special powers or personal access to an omnipotent 'god'. An encounter with an unscientific person can poison an infant's thinking. If indoctrinated young enough, they

cannot subsequently perceive the falsity of their belief systems. Then, the journey from a theistic mindset becomes a mountainous climb.

How can we distinguish between a claim and a correct piece of information? We have to go back to route 1: checking the evidence for ourselves. Evidence is the inspector of claims. The trouble is, that's hard work. It's so much easier simply to accept what we are told... Gullibility is a doddle; skepticism is a drudge.

I wish we could trust teachers, but faith schools actually appoint them on the basis of their religious bias! Letting someone else lead us means we are vulnerable to their agenda - no prizes for guessing where their main interests will lie...

Claims can be believed or disbelieved - it's just a matter of choice, but observations we have repeatedly discovered for ourselves are incontrovertible. That is, as long as we understand the process of drawing conclusions that match predictions (or not) and don't confuse the act of making observations with the task of concluding what they mean...

The greatest difficulty is in trying to persuade the faithful to forget everything they have been

told. They don't want to believe that their parents, teachers, imams, rabbis, priests or pastors could either have been so wildly mistaken, or were deliberately lying to them. That's a big ask.

Are we going to simply stand by and watch as our children are inducted into mythical systems that cloud their thinking? No! Here at Atheist Alliance International we are going to fight *against* indoctrination and *for* secular education systems and governments that understand scientific method.

We want laws similar to those that apply in product sales, the laws that protect purchasers from fraud, to be enacted in all fields of life. A person caught selling goods that do not meet their description of them is looking at a conviction. Why should churches get exemption from the requirement to 'Do what it says on the tin'? If you want faiths to be made accountable for their claims, show this to your friends and invite them to join us.

John Richards
AAI Publications
Director



President's Letter



As I write this, the world is in thrall to two very different news items. On the one hand is the tweeting of Donald Trump, President of the USA, and on the other hand is the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the moon landing. We couldn't have two more different stories competing for our attention.

Trump would like to be re-elected next year so he is trying to stir up his base of xenophobic Christian conservatives by labeling four Democratic legislators as foreigners and suggesting that they should 'go home'. Three of them were born in the USA and the other immigrated as a child but that doesn't wash with him! He just wants to scapegoat them as targets of hatred - red meat for his ravenous religious, white-supremacist right-wing supporters.

Two of the legislators are Muslim and they are all 'brown skinned' so that's all he needs: facts don't matter much; it's the narrative that counts. Nobody dares mention that his own father, Fred Trump, was born in Germany and lived there until he was ten years old! This

demagogic nationalism is the disreputable side of the news.

The other news is much more hopeful. When Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin returned from the moon in the Apollo 11 capsule to do a 'lap of honor' around planet Earth, the world was united in congratulating, not just NASA but, *humanity as a species* for the historic and astonishing achievement.

So much good followed that scientific milestone: the Vietnam War ended, the Berlin Wall came down and the USSR disintegrated. Russia, the USA, Europe and other nations co-operate to this day on the International Space Station project. Unfortunately, nothing unites us better than *adversity* in the shape of a common enemy. We all clustered together to fight Adolf Hitler in World War Two.

I wonder if the threat of devastating climate change is likely to do the same? Or do we need our enemy to take the form of a tangible *agent*? Since, the climate change culprit is ourselves, not a Bond villain bogeyman, we may have a problem, Houston...

Sadly, today, *Homo sapiens* seems to have become bored with international friendship. The Hateful Dividers are crawling out of the woodwork all over the place. As usual, religion provides a handy tribal line about which to divide and rule. Opinion in 'the West' is increasingly anti-Muslim...

There's no denying that, taken as a whole, mankind exhibits a stark range of disparities of fortune and there's no doubt that some populations have justifiable grievances, but these differences cannot be equalized by appealing to non-evidential gods. That's why AAI will continue to campaign for rational secularism.

Gail Miller
*President,
Atheist Alliance
International*



(Email me here:
president@atheistalliance.org)

Breaking the Chains

A Journey from Belief to Disbelief



My parents were agnostic atheists so I really had no idea of God as a child. Then, when I turned 13 I was suspended from school for nearly killing another student in a stone fight. I was given a psychiatric evaluation (this was in the late 1960s) and they discovered I had a high IQ, so they advised my parents I was wasting my time at a lowly public school and likely to misbehave because I was bored.

So they sent me to a very highly regarded private Christian boarding school where I learned about God and Christianity. I was inspired by the theologian who appeared to be a man of great worldly knowledge. Who introduced me to Max Ehrmann's "Desiderata" which touched me and had me in tears. I felt that I had found God at that moment, and became a strong believer. I would sit up late at night reading the Bible passages he listed for me.

After graduating I started a university course, but ran out of money so, not wanting to leave the city I fell in love with, I started sleeping and eating where and when I could. A friend from university introduced me to a pastor in a Pentecostal church. I attended regularly and, having no money, I was desperate for a life and recognition by others.

The moment I joined the church

I suddenly had friends, though I realized a couple of years later that they were assigned to spy on me by the head elder. I went through the initiation / water baptism and started speaking in tongues, studying the Bible and, before long, they had me on the streets preaching to passers-by. I thought I was really cool, doing God's work in spreading his word to the people.

One thing that appeared strange to me was that one of the elders supposedly had the gift of interpreting tongues, as we had no idea what we were saying! An elderly lady had one of her sessions translated as "Praise the Lord. Thank you, oh Lord, for protecting my vegetable crop from pests."

At around the same time, a desperate woman, whose daughter I had become friends with, begged me to help her husband leave Herbert W. Armstrong's, "Church of God International", since he was on a basic income and was sending much of it to the church, she barely had enough money for food.

I talked to him and discovered his reading of the same passages in the Bible differed markedly from what I had learned in both Traditional Theology and Pentecostal Theology. This started me wondering, "How could people

read the same passages so differently".

I could see that the Church of God International was definitely a con job, but what about my own church? Then I met the neighbor of the woman who claimed God was protecting her vegetables from pests, and he told me he covered her crop with pesticides while she was out, so her crop was not chemical free as she assured me! It wasn't God at all.

Then I started doing what the head Elder / theologian warned me against: reading the Bible as if it were a novel. I started noticing errors, and illogical things like why did Moses write about himself from a third person / narrator viewpoint as well as write about what occurred after his own death?

So I set up a bit of a sting to see if my church was being honest to me: I told my close church friends (whom I suspected were spies) a pack of lies, like I had just landed a steady job, etc.

It was my turn to have my speaking in tongues translated by the elder with 'the gift'. I even deliberately faked the tongue speak so I knew I was not babbling. Sure enough, my translation was thanking God for the lies I had told the spies!

(continued on page 5)

(continued from page 4)

So I got up from my seat at the front of the church, turned around, glared at the congregation and, after a very blunt, "GoodBye", I walked out the door, never to return.

I was not yet an atheist as I still believed there was a God, it just wasn't the Christian God.

A couple of years later they met up with me again while I was doing work experience as a part time lab assistant at a university, and they tried to get me to introduce their creationism into the science department!

They even harassed me at my home and at my sport, so I went and researched the history of religion and creationism and attacked them back: by then I had become an anti-theist.

(That must have been so courageous, Ed

Graeme Day



We held a T-shirt Slogan Competition
First Prize was \$250
 Dominic Omenai's design (pictured) was a Runner Up

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Fine-Tuning 'proves' God Debunked!

A bad argument unsupported by evidence

Argument	Evidence
Internally fabricated within a brain Conceptual	Externally observed in Nature Not Conceptual
Premises await Falsification	Repetition removes doubt
Involves an Interpretive Step Identifying an Association of Ideas	Repeatedly Observable by Anyone No Interpretation Required
Quality Depends on the Ability of the Arguer	Quality Independent of the Ability of the Observer
Remains Hypothetical until Confirmed by Observations	The Inspector that Distinguishes good arguments from bad
Delivers Inferences: deductions, inductions and abductions	Delivers Conclusions: predictions matched by Observations
Disputable	Indisputable

Apologists like William Lane Craig, Jonathan McClatchie and Zach Arden seek to justify their belief in the existence of their god. They would like there to be evidence. After all, they've seen how powerful evidence is in the field of science. They even use the products of scientific discoveries, such as computers and videos, to express their views!

I recently found a short video by Lane-Craig in which he claims to show 'How an Ordinary Christian Can Silence an Atheist' see here:

<https://youtu.be/QBPYuFhDy7g>

It's fun to watch because he starts out talking about providing evidence then, at 1:10, he drops 'evidence' and switches to 'arguments'. At 1:42 he actually says, "When people ask me, 'There's no **evidence** for god's existence'. I say, 'Well sure there is'. They say, 'Like what?' 'I typically just list about five **arguments**'!" (my bold) He obviously thinks that 'argument' is a synonym for 'evidence'!

One of their favorite tactics is to invoke the fine-tuning argument for the existence of an Intelligent Designer. There's a whole list of constants and values that appear to be just right to permit the emergence of life and that, according to them, must mean their

God (Zeus?) dunnit! For example, if gravity was a tiny bit stronger the universe should still be a singularity and, if it was a tiny bit weaker the universe should have expanded to oblivion and no stars or planets could have formed. Therefore, they make a statistical argument, based on the improbability of the observed strength of gravity (and other things) being uncannily suitable for life, claiming that it means a being must have created everything with the intention of ending up with his pet organisms – us! They then shoehorn in their own god as the Intelligent Designer, without bothering to produce any evidence for either assertion.

There are a number of problems with this. Firstly, it's a mash-up between an argument from ignorance fallacy (we dunno, therefore godunnit) and a non-sequitur fallacy (since godunnit, it must be *my* god).

Statistical improbability is the opposite of evidence, it's a huge lack of evidence. What is needed is *positive* probability such as a 90% likelihood in the Chi squared significance test, and it requires a mechanistic connection between the observations and the claim – not an explanation plucked out of the sky.

Also, inferring that it's the Christian god who is responsible,

rather than Shiva or Mbombo, is just a leap of blind faith.

Secondly, the supposed fine tuning is amazingly poor – out of all of the approximately two hundred billion galaxies in the known universe, each with about two hundred billion stars and probably eight hundred billion planets, not to mention all the very hostile space in between the cosmic bodies, we know of only one place where life has actually emerged: here on Earth. That doesn't sound like the work of an Intelligent Designer. If He intended to facilitate our existence, He barely succeeded. A better description would be Bungling Idiot!

Thirdly, it's a misunderstanding of what statistical probability means: 'very unlikely' does not mean impossible. As an example, the chance of me winning the Euro millions is so remote I don't waste my money entering the lottery, but someone does win it. Nor can you deduce any causal agent from the figures: they are just figures.

Fourthly, there is this notion of historic intention, this 'deliberate design'. "Were you there?" is the challenge that theists bring against the fossil evidence for evolution but, apparently, lack of live observation is not detrimental in this case! It can only be hypocrisy that permits them

(continued on page 7)

(continued from page 6)

to assume retrospection when it suits their presupposition and to deny it when it doesn't. (Fossils are not evidence pointing to evolution, but they are consistent with evolution being the explanation for their existence.) Intention simply cannot be applied retrospectively.

Taking a hypothetical example, let's look at William Lane Craig's arrival on this planet. Early Homo sapiens are thought to have emerged about 300,000 years ago. To make the maths easy let's take 20 years as the generation interval. That means we've had 15,000 generations leading up to the birth of William. Once again, to make the maths easy, let's assume that every ejaculation contains about 100 million sperms (it's usually more than that). Using the fine-tuning statistical style of reasoning, there was a 1 in 100,000,000 chance of William being the specific result of that particular one of his father's sperms fertilizing his mother's egg. Rolling those odds back over his ancestors, there's only a 1 in 1,500,000,000,000 (One trillion, five hundred billion, or 15 times 10 to the 11th power) chance of William existing at all.

But we know he *does* exist! So

we argue that, with those odds, nature could not have produced him therefore God must'a'dunnit? No! So, how do we know he exists? Not by argument, but by *evidence*: we can observe him.

Then, can we deduce that Og and Ug had sex together with the express *intention* of producing William many millennia in the future? No! It is unreasonable to assume historic intentionality.

We do use statistical arguments in science: to justify hypotheses and make a case for carrying out an investigation. We do *not* use improbability as evidence for drawing a conclusion; that would be like saying, "I've thrown this dice one hundred times and it hasn't come up six once so there can't be a six on it". Random rarity indicates nothing: why don't you examine the dice?

Here's an example of how we do use statistics in science: The Drake Equation. Frank Drake (not Sir Francis) calculated that using the numbers from above (approximately two hundred billion galaxies in the known universe, each with about two hundred billion stars and probably eight hundred billion planets) and putting it together with the information that the cosmos

began 13.8 billion years ago, it is extremely likely that some other intelligent life has appeared elsewhere in the universe. Do we take that argument as a closed case? No! It's ok to use improbability to suggest a proposal for testing, but not as a conclusion that has been drawn. So, we take it as a hypothesis worthy of investigating for matching observations in the Natural Realm. That's why we've been listening for signals in the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI) since the 1960s.

Why are we carrying out that investigation? Because the statistical argument supports a hypothesis that can and should be examined for evidence. It's a question we would like to have answered.

Even if the arguments for the Christian God were sound (I'm not addressing that here), His possible existence is uninvestigable and therefore can collect no evidence, so His proposed existence is not even a scientific hypothesis. It's just a wild claim.

An argument is not evidence, it's just an inference. An argument needs evidence to become a conclusion.

John Richards



In October 1938, Orson Wells' fictitious radio play broadcast the message, "We interrupt this program to announce that aliens have landed and are invading Earth". Two years

later, there was a similar interruption announcing that Pearl Harbour had been bombed. This time there was no panic: the audience thought, "We're not falling for that again!"

That illustrates two things:

- the tendency of humanity to initially believe what we are told and only to engage skepticism belatedly, in the pearl Harbour case, inappropriately.
- the messenger carries the credibility, not the message

In the early days of radio, it was regarded as magical. Imagine being able to hear music or someone speaking from a great distance away with no connecting wires! People thought it must be all good and could only be associated with truth...

This is not the first time mankind has been intoxicated by technology - an earlier era was duped by 'scriptures', by writing. It's not the last time either - today we have the internet... To resist being deceived, watch this excellent series of videos: <https://callingbullshit.org/videos.html>

Where am I?



By Blank_map_of_Europe_(polar_stereographic_projection)_cropped.svg: Ssolbergjederivative work: Dbachmann (talk) - Blank_map_of_Europe_(polar_stereographic_projection)_cropped.svg, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=14871393>

I am writing to you from the geographical center of Europe. I'm in a country that, thirty years ago, had twenty-three million inhabitants but now has only eighteen million: five million have gone abroad.

The population is ninety per cent religious. Thousands of churches have been built during the last thirty years and tens of thousand of priests are preaching against scientific truth.

Eighty-five per cent of the people belong to the most conservative Christian Orthodox church. This church has enormous assets, the church rulers have huge salaries, live in palaces and drive luxury cars. They do these things despite having taken the monks' oath of poverty.

Corruption is well known among priests and they have close relations with politicians, despite of their rule of political neutrality. Religion is mandatory in all schools and it is quite difficult to avoid participation in the religion classes. The 'Atheist Struggle' is quite difficult here; we often get called 'satanists'. After World War Two, my land was occupied by the USSR until the Soviet collapse in 1989.

Well, did you guess the name of my country?

This is the situation in Romania today.

Thinking about my predicament caused by the geographical accident of my birth leads me to propose some thoughts about religion:

1. Religion is an example of an institutionalized superstition. The church is an institution that is based on various superstitions, which have built up over time.
2. Religion could be an instinct that suffered a mutation some 40,000 or more years ago. The first signs of religious activity are from the Stone Age. Then appeared the abstract form of thinking but, at that time, they had a pandeterministic way of thinking. They had no understanding of the natural causal relationships between phenomena.

Together with the influence of their social life under a powerful chieftain who often disappeared, they sent the image of the being who had the explanatory power somewhere up high, still watching

over the group from above. This behavior altered the evolved social instinct and the submissive one, transforming it into a religious instinct. The human agents of the sky god were able to exert control over the population for the benefit of their organization and themselves.

That's why all kinds of populations have a religion instinct, but it's manifested in very different ways. Rational and scientific education are wiping this instinct out but, as the new kid on the block, it is also the weakest. Many people don't have it yet.

Religion will disappear, maybe, in the future...

Anonymous correspondent



Poetry Page

God Died Today



*God died today in the heart of another man.
Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,
And in this soil a seed is planted.*

*Love and hate marked this relationship.
I loved this mythical invisible father.
I hated the crotchety old judge.*

*God died today in the mind of another woman.
The black dirt, the moist earth,
From this new garden, wisdom grows.*

*Like the child of an alcoholic,
Or a battered wife, who still loves her husband,
I am glad he's gone, but I still miss him.*

*I was always taught that God died that I
might live.
I never realized how true this was.
His death nourishes the seeds of wisdom,
happiness, and freedom.*

*The new garden I have has wonderful plants,
But I still have to pull weeds of doubt and guilt,
It's my responsibility now.*

*This is a eulogy, a benediction.
I am saddened by my loss,
But know a better life is ahead of me.*

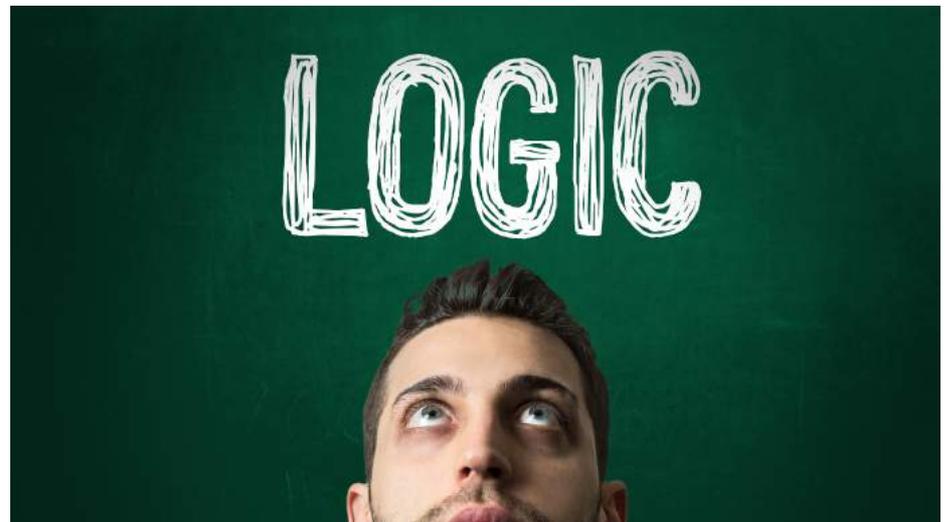
*As a child must grow and leave the safety of
home,
I have grown and left the eternal security of
heaven.
I have outgrown my god, and laid him to rest.*

by Bill Barnes ex-Christian

Applying Logic to the God Proposition

Seventh in the series:

The Moral Argument



If atheism is true, it is still true that: (a) we all want to live in a just and kind and honest world, which desire is sufficient reason for us to try and create one (if you don't want the world to be amoral, then you already have sufficient reason to be moral); and (b) we are social animals, and social animals *need* to be just and kind and honest to work together well, and they need to work together well to optimize survival and realize their goals (indeed, one need only compare moral societies with immoral societies to see the difference, which observation is more than sufficient reason to be moral); and (c) more and deeper joy and satisfaction comes from feeling compassion with others and loving truth (loving falsehood, by contrast, will always result in embracing self-defeating or self-frustrating behaviors; while compassion is *necessary* to vicariously experience the joy and happiness of others).

Thus, atheism predicts three motivating reasons for people to develop a common morality centered around compassion, honesty, justice, and cooperation. But more importantly, atheism predicts that moral rules will only come from human beings, and thus will begin deeply flawed, and will be improved by experiment over a really long time (each improvement

coming after empirically observing the social discomfort and dissatisfaction and waste that comes from flawed moral systems).

Atheism also predicts that will happen only slowly over thousands of years, because humans are imperfect reasoners. And that is exactly what we observe. Just look at the examples of slavery and the subordination of women in the Bible.

By contrast, theism predicts a universe directly governed by justice-laws, or a kind and just stewardship, or the enacting and teaching of divine justice and mercy, everywhere, from the start. But we observe no such laws built into the universe, and no stewards or law-enforcers but us, and no perfect moral code has existed anywhere throughout history. The best moralities have always just slowly evolved from human trial and error

Thus, the evidence of human morality (its starting abysmal and being slowly improved by humans over thousands of years in the direction that would make their societies better for them) is evidence *against* God, not evidence for God.

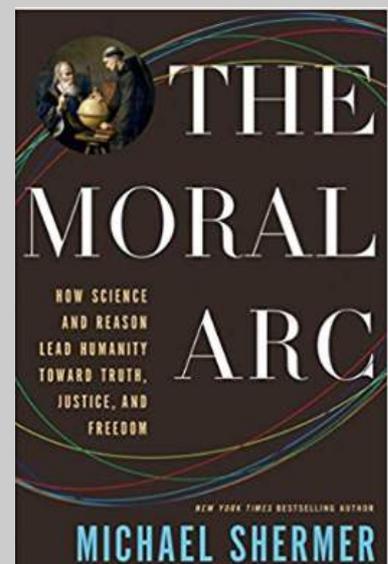


Dr. Richard Carrier
Ancient Historian

For more reading on this topic, Richard recommends Pinker's [Better Angels of Our Nature](#)



and Shermer's [The Moral Arc](#)



What Humanism is not

(from [Stephen Law's blog](#) 07 01 2014)

Number two in a series of three articles explaining the difference between atheism and humanism



The sketch of Humanism in our last edition does not include certain features that are nevertheless often associated with it. These include:

Speciesism. Humanists, as defined above, are not obliged to believe that *only* human beings matter, morally speaking. Nor should Humanism be taken to require the view that it is *by virtue of* being a member of a particular species – the human species – that subjects are deserving of special moral consideration (which is not to say that humans are not, as a rule, deserving of special consideration). Many Humanists would condemn such an attitude as a form of “speciesism” – a form of prejudice against other species. This is not to say that Humanists are necessarily immune to speciesism, as the philosopher Peter Singer notes: “... despite many individual exceptions, Humanists have on the whole been unable to free themselves from one of the most central of these Christian dogmas: the prejudice of speciesism.” (Singer, 2004, p19)

Utilitarianism. Many Humanists are drawn to some form of consequentialism, and some would probably describe themselves as utilitarians. True, almost all Humanists believe that happiness and suffering matter, morally speaking, and should certainly be

taken into account when weighing up ethical questions. However, utilitarianism is not obligatory for Humanists. There is a wide variety of ethical theories open to Humanists, including for example, virtue ethicism and non-theistic versions of Kantianism.

Utopianism. Some Humanists are highly optimistic. Often they are supposed to be naively so, believing that science and reason must ultimately triumph over the forces of superstition and unreason, ushering in a Brave New World of peace and prosperity. However, there is no requirement that Humanists be utopian, and in fact many are rather pessimistic.

Scientism. Some Humanists embrace *scientism* – the view that every meaningful question can in principle be answered by application of the scientific method. However, Humanists are not obliged to accept scientism and many reject it. Certainly, the view that moral questions are ultimately answerable by scientific means is not accepted by all Humanists, many of whom are persuaded that the problem of the is/ought gap raised by Hume (the problem that empirical observation reveals only what is the case, not what ought to be, and one cannot one legitimately infer an “ought” from an “is”) means that while our

moral judgements should be scientifically informed, and while science certainly has a very important role to play in establishing what is morally right or wrong, moral judgement cannot be justified in wholly scientific terms (though note that the Humanist Sam Harris, in his book *The Moral Landscape* (Harris, 2011) argues that science can, in fact, answer moral questions, once morality is understood as those values that lead to human flourishing). Humanists can, and often do, also take the view that metaphysical questions such as why the universe exists, or why there is anything at all, are questions that science cannot answer. Some Humanists reject these particular questions as meaningless (asking “Why is there anything at all?”, they may suggest, is akin to asking “What’s North of the North Pole?”), while others, while not denying the question is legitimate, take the view that, while they may not know what the answer is, they can nevertheless justifiably rule certain answers out, and indeed, can even rule some out on the basis of observation of the world around us (for example, they may suppose that the suggestion that universe is the creation of an all-powerful, all-evil deity can be ruled out on the basis of observation, for doesn’t the universe contains far too

(continued on page 12)

(continued from page 11)

much good for it plausibly to be the creation of such an evil god?). Those Humanists who are positive atheists may suppose that “Why is there anything at all?” is a *bona fide* question to which they do not, and perhaps cannot, know the answer, yet may also quite consistently suppose they can reasonably rule certain answers out – such as that the universe was created by the Judeo-Christian God.

Naturalism. Humanists are not obliged to embrace naturalism, the view that the natural/physical reality is the only reality there is, and/or that the natural/physical facts are the only facts that there are. Many Humanists do accept naturalism. Some Humanists even define Humanism so that, by definition, Humanists sign up to naturalism. However, plenty of those who describe themselves as Humanists would certainly question, and many would reject, naturalism. Some may reject naturalism on the grounds that it is vacuous or confused concept. What is the contrast with? The supernatural? But if the supernatural is then defined as the non-natural, both concepts remain empty. Other Humanists may reject naturalism because, for example, they are mathematical Platonists. Many mathematicians suppose mathematics describes a transcendent, non-natural reality. Such a mathematician could still be an atheist, of course – even a positive atheist. They may reject belief in god, gods and/or supernatural agents. They can also be a Humanist, for they are still free to subscribe to the seven views outlined above. Humanists may also reject naturalism because they suppose there exist moral facts and that moral facts are non-natural facts, or because they suppose there are facts about minds that are non-natural facts. Again, such views do not, or do not obviously, require that one sign up to any sort of theism. A global survey of professional philosophers and graduate students carried out in by

philpapers.org in 2009, found that just under half of them are wedded to naturalism, yet only 14.6% accept some form of theism. So a significant proportion fail to accept either theism or naturalism. Yet they may still be Humanists, as characterized here.

Materialism and physicalism. Materialism is the view that the only reality is material and physicalism the view that the only reality is physical. Neither is a philosophy that Humanists are obliged to accept, for much the same reasons that they are not obliged to accept naturalism. That charge that Humanists are “materialists” is often doubly misleading because “materialist” is also used to denote a shallow person preoccupied with acquiring material possessions. An ambiguous charge of “materialism” against Humanists therefore does them a double disservice.

Given that neither Humanism, nor positive atheism, as I have characterised these terms, requires that adherents accept scientism, naturalism, utilitarianism, utopianism, materialism or physicalism, it is sufficient to refute Humanism or positive atheism that one succeed in refuting one, or even all, of these views. While some Humanists may sign up to some, even all, of these various positions, they are free to abandon all of them without abandoning their Humanism.

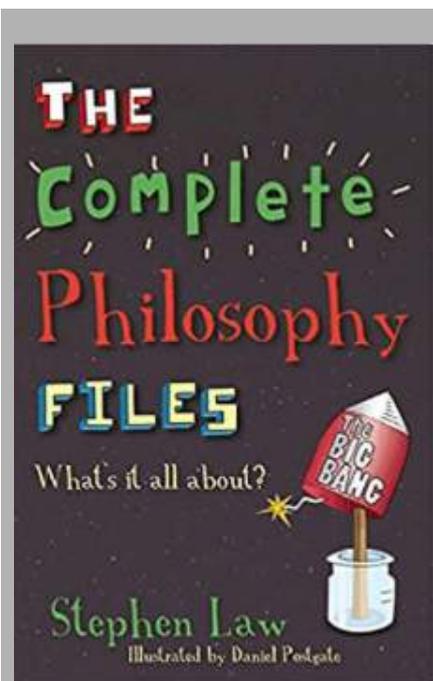
Critics of Humanism often assume Humanists are wedded to at least some of the above views. Popular attempted refutations of Humanism – and also attempted refutations of positive atheism – often involve no more than attempts to refute, say materialism or naturalism. Such arguments leave Humanism unscathed.

Stephen Law

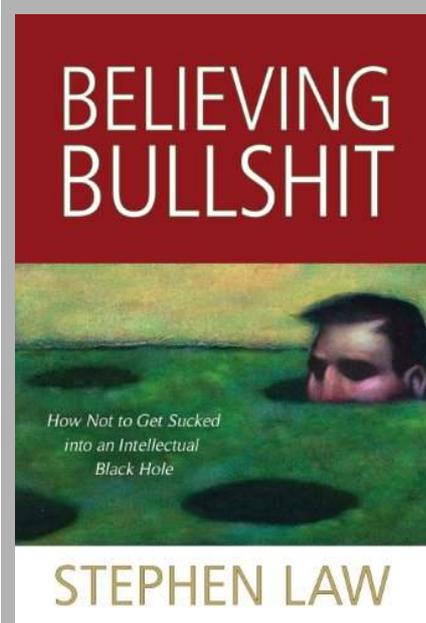
Reader in Philosophy
Heythrop College
London University



(to be continued in
future editions of Secular World)



Being an experienced educator, Stephen writes in a style that makes his subject matter understandable by non-experts. Secular World recommends his books, some of which are aimed at children. One of his recent publications, *Believing Bullshit*, deals with that scourge of the internet age - fake information.



Muslim and Gay...

Homophobia and hatred of atheists in South Africa



I'm an 18 year old gay atheist living in Cape Town, South Africa. I grew up in a large Muslim family. My mother, father, two older brothers, one older sister were not really religious but, like almost all the Muslims I know, would never question Allah or his "perfect" messenger, no matter how much they silently disagreed with them.

Being the youngest, and a rather introverted boy interested in books and nature rather than cars and girls, I was always seen as the odd one out. However, it was never a problem as long as I went to the mosque, prayed occasionally and went to Madrassah (Muslim-school held for an hour every day after "normal" school).

I have always been a creative and inquisitive person and, when I learned at a young age that you cannot question Islam, I took to art to express my concerns. I wrote stories, drew, painted and listened to blasphemous music such as black metal, all in an attempt to step outside of the bubble of Islam. For that is truly what it is: a giant bubble that attempts to make all within it impervious to the reality of nature and life.

I hit puberty early, matured faster than my male peers, and when I realized I was attracted to the

same sex, I knew I was in trouble. I had never felt such fear in my life. I pushed all the questions and doubts I had aside, locked them away in a dungeon, and turned to and pleaded with Allah, beseeching him to help me overcome this "evil" of homosexuality. I became insanely devout, dedicating my time to worship and prayer and reading about the beauty of Islam and Allah and Muhammad.

There was a brief period of time when I was 15 going on 16 when I wanted to drop out of school and pursue a lifelong path of dedication to Allah. In hindsight, what breaks my heart is that my parents were happy for me to do that, they wanted me to drop out!

Then, like all major emotional changes, it happened suddenly and with no warning. One night I was praying to Allah and asking him to forgive me of my sins (as I would do every day, five times a day, which leads me to wonder: how much sin can a teenager possibly have?) and the next I was in bed, crying, bleeding from self-inflicted wounds on my wrists. I had been deceiving my family, my friends, myself, into believing that I was truly happy. The part of me I had locked in a dungeon years ago had grown

and broken free.

But I couldn't let it out! Becoming... that monster... would mean an eternity of hell-fire as determined by the benevolent and just Allah. I pushed it down. It took so much will power to restrict my true identity that I had no energy for anything else: no energy to smile, eat, study, nothing. I had sunk into a black pit and I couldn't see myself escaping. I woke up each morning furious, cursing God and then immediately seeking his forgiveness.

Then, one day, I realized I had been talking to myself all these years. Only me. No god. I cursed god and didn't ask his forgiveness, and I remember feeling my heart race. Had I just become an Atheist?

My parents never had a happy marriage, but it was right about at this time that it all just went downhill. My brothers were recovering drug addicts, my sister was seeing an abusive boyfriend, my parents were on the brink of a divorce - what kind of a shitty son would come to his family at this time with the news that he is gay? I thought, "They can't deal with *this* as well. And neither can I. There's only one thing to do."

So I attempted suicide.

contd. on page 14

contd. from page 13

I remember waking up in hospital and feeling nothing but pure, unadulterated rage. Rage because these people - the doctors and the ones who called themselves my family - had robbed me of the one chance I had of being happy! I was worn out, tired of being alive as a mere shadow of myself just wasting away in an unwashed pool of misery and defeat. I wanted it all to end! "Fuck god!" I screamed. "Fuck god! Fuck you! Fuck all of you! I shouldn't be here!"

I vaguely remember my mom sitting next to my hospital bed praying in Arabic. My eldest brother was there as well. No-one else, except for the doctors and nurses. "I shouldn't be here!" I screamed until I succumbed to sleep.

I came out to my parents a few days later, both that I am gay and an Atheist. I assume they were so shocked about my sexuality that they never registered my Atheism. They still treat me as if I'm Muslim. The word gay isn't mentioned around the house.

I focused on myself this year (my last year at school) and became one of the top students at my school. I got in to study Theoretical Physics at the University of Stellenbosch. I am openly gay but, around my family, a closet Atheist.

After I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and depression, I tried to establish a good support structure of friends. It has helped, but every day my situation at home gets worse. An abusive father, and a whole family who looks at me like the clever son who fucked up and ruined his chance at success ("success" being "Jannah" or "Heaven") - I can't wait until January when I leave to university.

This year has been a battle. A tough one that I fight every morning when I wake up, battling the mental demons and the physical ones. I've come close to suicide again, but I managed to talk myself out of it.

I've never told anyone this story before, and I feel so much better after typing it all out.

Tanner



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Catholic school Head said I deserved to be kicked in the crotch!

The nuns never punished the bullies for teasing me and calling me a 'faggot'. But let's start at the beginning of my story...

Fifty years ago, when I was seven, I told my parents that I was an atheist. My family was not particularly religious so that didn't cause much of a problem. How different it was when, nine years later, I revealed I was gay!

I have been harassed most of my life for being gay and beaten in school by others my age or older. Once they kicked me in the crotch and really injured me. The school principal, a nun, actually told my father I deserved it. I didn't feel safe in my own home and I felt I had no way out but to kill myself.

Then, I was reading the Sunday paper and I came across an article about a small group of men who were going to court to have the city anti-gay laws overturned. Here is the old article:

"Five Cincinnati men asked U.S. District Court on Friday to declare unconstitutional city and state laws prohibiting homosexual behavior. Their petition also sought an injunction barring police officers from enforcing the laws in question. Defendants in the suit are the City of Cincinnati, city safety director Henry J. Sandman and Chief of police Carl V. Goodin.



V. Goodin.

The suit says the plaintiffs are adult male homosexuals who "desire to engage in consensual homo sexual conduct with other adult males of like sexual orientation in the privacy of their homes or in other locations equally private," including acts normally considered unnatural and prohibited by state sodomy laws. The plaintiffs also ask to be permitted to solicit other homosexuals and to wear female clothing, both acts prohibited by sections of the Cincinnati Municipal Code. The suit says the laws which abridge freedom of private sexual activities are in violation of the First, Fourth, Fifth, Ninth and 14th Amendments to the U.S. Constitution,

The Laws also subject the plaintiffs to police harassment, stigmatize them as lawbreakers and burden them in seeking and retaining jobs, the suit states. Plaintiffs also asked that the suit be considered a class action for all Cincinnati homosexuals."

At the end of the article was a man's name, "Powell Grant", and it even had his address! Publishing his address was meant to embarrass him, I later realized.

I looked up his name in the phone book and sure enough it

matched the address. I called him and asked him if he really was gay. Although I never told him how desperate I was, I said I thought I might be gay too and asked if I could call him back. I ended up talking to him about four times over the next two months. Talking with the first gay man that I had ever met was really helpful to me.

Now, I don't believe in karma or weird shit like that but, two months ago an older man started coming to the atheist meetup dinner that I host fortnightly. I caught his last name, Grant, but didn't think anything of it until the most recent dinner when he was talking about that news article! My ears pricked up!

I asked, was your name and address at the end? It was! I asked if he lived on Burnett Ave, and he did at that time! I asked did he remember someone calling him about the article and he said he did!

He is an atheist too and, amazingly, he attended the meetup I hosted! We talked and I cried to meet the really nice guy who helped me deal with coming out at age sixteen..

**AAI Membership Director
Matt Kovach**

A Vengeful God

(Originally published in Live Science
March 20, 2019)

**Is morality based on a desire for
CCTV?**



Ancient societies often used supernatural forces to explain natural phenomena, such as lightning. But in the past several millennia, religions also used supernatural forces to enforce moral codes. For example, the Egyptian sun god, Ra, judged the fate of people in the afterlife according to how well they followed the code of "maat," or "what is right."

Past work suggested that the rise of this idea of cosmic enforcement of morality was associated with social complexity. The concept of supernatural judgment evolved to help strangers in large societies cooperate, researchers hypothesized.

Some work, such as analyses of Austronesian religions or of the Viking age in Scandinavia, suggested that moralizing gods preceded complex societies, while other research, such as a study of Eurasian empires, found that moralizing gods followed the rise of complex societies. But those studies were limited in geographic scope and hampered at times, because historians lacked detailed information on the complexity of societies at given points in history, said Patrick Savage, an

anthropologist at Keio University in Kanagawa, Japan.

In the new study, Savage and his colleagues sought to overcome these limitations using the Seshat: Global History Databank, a database of information about global history from the end of the Paleolithic period up to the Industrial Revolution. The scientists analyzed the relationship between social complexity and moralizing gods in 414 societies spanning the past 10,000 years from 30 regions across the globe. Researchers examined 51 measures of social complexity, such as the size of the largest settlement and the presence of a formal legal code, and four measures of supernatural enforcement of morality, such as the concept of a supernatural force that monitors and punishes selfish actions.

The researchers found that belief in moralizing gods usually followed increases in social complexity, generally appearing after the emergence of civilizations with populations of more than about 1 million people. "It was particularly striking how consistent it was [that] this phenomenon emerged at the million-person level," Savage said. "First, you get big societies, and

these beliefs then come."

All in all, "our research suggests that religion is playing a functional role throughout world history, helping stabilize societies and people cooperate overall," Savage said. "In really small societies, like very small groups of hunter-gatherers, everyone knows everyone else, and everyone's keeping an eye on everyone else to make sure they're behaving well. Bigger societies are more anonymous, so you might not know who to trust."

At those sizes, you see the rise of beliefs in an all-powerful, supernatural person watching and keeping things under control, Savage added. "We are not saying anything about the value of religion," Savage added. "We are not saying it is good or bad, but we are saying it has a deep and consistent relationship with societies throughout world history. Religion is deeply intertwined with what it means to be human, for better and for worse."

Charles Q. Choi, is a contributing writer for and Space.com.

Click here or copy/paste
<https://tinyurl.com/y6nk7d39>

Belief or Knowledge?



Recently, I met a Doctor from Romania and, since I had just edited the article shown on page 8, we had a chat about religion in his native country. He confessed to being a practicing Baptist. In cases like this I wonder what is going on in the minds of obviously intelligent people who understand the value of evidence in their work, but seem to be able to switch off their critical thinking powers on Sundays.

For some reason, possibly due to childhood indoctrination, belief outranks evidence in the field of religion. So I turned to The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (StEPh) for possible enlightenment. Unlike the conventional dictionary definition of 'belief', which is 'a proposition that is taken to be true', the StEPh goes into greater detail; it says (edited):

Contemporary Anglophone philosophers of mind generally use the term "belief" to refer to the attitude we have, roughly, whenever we take something to be the case or regard it as true. To believe something needn't involve actively reflecting on it: of the vast number of things ordinary adults believe, only a few can be at the fore of the mind at any single time.

Most contemporary philosophers characterize belief as a "propositional attitude". Propositions are generally taken to be whatever it is that sentences express. For example, if two sentences mean the same thing (e.g., "snow is white" in English, "Schnee ist weiss" in German), they express the same proposition, and if two sentences differ in meaning, they express different propositions. A propositional attitude, then, is the mental state of having some attitude, stance, take, or opinion about a proposition or about the potential state of affairs in which that proposition is true. Propositions, we shall say, are the shareable objects of the attitudes and the primary bearers of truth and falsity. This stipulation rules out certain candidates for propositions, including concrete events or facts, which presumably cannot be false. These consequences fit well with contemporary usage. (end of StEPh)

Putting this into bullet points:

- Propositions are the bearers of truth AND falsity: they are *necessarily* dubious or unknown.
- Concrete events or facts are not propositions because they *cannot be false*.

- a belief is an attitude towards a proposition.
- A *propositional attitude* is the mental state of having some attitude, stance, take, or *opinion* about a proposition.

Therefore, in a sentence: A BELIEF IS MERELY AN OPINION ABOUT THE UNKNOWN. Maybe we will discover the truth one day but, until then, we only have an opinion.

On the other hand, many items of unfalsified evidential information that we might carelessly say we 'believe in' cannot be false, which means they are not propositions and therefore our belief or disbelief is unnecessary.

This means that the act of believing, being only available for unknowns, actually reveals the dubious nature of a claim. When we hear a person asserting that they believe in something we should raise our eyebrows in suspicion and say, "Oh, yes?"

This is not news: we have all been disbelieving the beliefs of others for centuries. We consider their beliefs to be mistaken and, therefore, unimportant. Why don't we understand that ALL beliefs are of little value compared to knowns?

JR

Links to source:

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/belief/>
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/propositions/>

What do we know about Arabs?



Following the revelation in a recent poll that a majority of Americans think we should not be teaching Arabic numbers in school(!) here are a few bullet points to inform our understanding of the Arab world:

- All Arabs in popular imagination are assumed to be Muslims and therefore potential religious fanatics. The reality is a lot more complex.
- Islam is far from monolithic and has many strands, Sunni, Shia, Wahabi, and many others, including millions of Arab Christians.
- Added to this mix is a growing number of Arabs—mainly young people—who openly declare themselves to be atheists/agnostics/skeptics.
- Non-believers have probably always existed in the Middle East, mostly out of sight, but now they have found a voice. Online social media has given them tools to express themselves and the “Arab Spring emboldened some to speak out.
- Many have been imprisoned for expressing their thoughts, some have been forced into exile, some threatened with execution.
- Many more keep their thoughts

to themselves for fear of reaction from family, friends and employers.

- For an established order that favors orthodoxy and conformity, these dissenting voices present a problem, but one that is not likely to diminish; more likely it will grow.
- A key to the growing numbers of non-believers is access to the internet, satellite television, 3G cell phone signal and foreign travel. As such, Arabs are more aware of the outside world.
- Rejecting religion is part of the growing demands for political and social change.
- Because public discourse has been opened up in recent years, many old taboos have been broken and things can now be said in public that would have been unthinkable only a few years ago.
- Despite this, religion is generally treated as sacrosanct—perhaps the most untouchable of the remaining taboos.
- Some Arab atheists openly question and confront religion. Others simply want a quiet life without advertising their belief but resent being forced to comply with rules imposed by believers.
- Arab non-believers face two

separate but related struggles. One is with religion itself; the other is with governments that refuse to recognize their belief. (Or lack of belief.)

- Non-believers share the broader struggle for human rights with millions of religious Arabs—freedom of expression, of conscience, and so forth. The irony is that while believers and non-believers are on opposite sides where religious ideas are concerned they often find themselves on the same side on the struggle for other human rights.
- Anyone who does not conform to the local religious orthodoxy is liable to fall victim to blasphemy and apostasy laws ... or at the very least sectarian prejudices.
- Minority religious beliefs tend to be more accepted than atheism. There is some recognition of religious diversity even if prejudice and discrimination persist. Outright disbelief in God, however, tends to be greeted with general abhorrence.
- Most atheists believe that when an atheist can be accepted and respected as a normal human being, liberty will truly have arrived in the Arab world.

Howard Burman
AAI Secretary

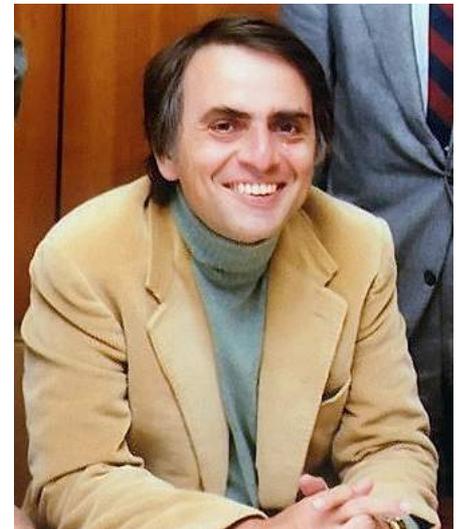


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Carl Sagan

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Famous for the iconic TV series, 'Cosmos' and many well written books, Carl Sagan frequently wrote about religion and the relationship between religion and science, expressing his skepticism about the conventional conceptualization of God as a sapient being.

For example: *"Some people think God is an outsized, light-skinned male with a long white beard, sitting on a throne somewhere up there in the sky, busily tallying the fall of every sparrow. Others, for example Baruch Spinoza and Albert Einstein, considered God to be essentially the sum total of the physical laws which describe the universe. I do not know of any compelling evidence for anthropomorphic patriarchs controlling human destiny from some hidden celestial vantage point, but it would be madness to deny the existence of physical laws."*

On the concept of God, Sagan wrote: *"The idea that God is an oversized white male with a flowing beard who sits in the sky and tallies the fall of every sparrow is ludicrous. But if by God one means the set of physical laws that govern the universe, then clearly there is such a God. This God is emotionally unsatisfying. it does not make much sense to pray to the law of gravity."*

On atheism, Sagan commented: *"An atheist is someone who is certain that God does not exist, someone who has compelling evidence against the existence of God. I know of no such compelling evidence. Because God can be relegated to remote times and places and to ultimate causes, we would have to know a great deal more about the universe than we do now to be sure that no such God exists. To be certain of the existence of God and to be certain of the nonexistence of God seem to me to be the confident extremes in a subject so riddled with doubt and uncertainty as to inspire very little confidence indeed."*

Sagan also commented on Christianity and the Jefferson Bible, stating *"My long-time view about Christianity is that it represents an amalgam of two seemingly immiscible parts, the religion of Jesus and the religion of Paul. Thomas Jefferson attempted to excise the Pauline parts of the New Testament. There wasn't much left when he was done, but it was an inspiring document."*

Regarding spirituality and its relationship with science, Sagan stated: *"'Spirit' comes from the Latin word 'to breathe'. What we breathe is*

air, which is certainly matter, however thin. Despite usage to the contrary, there is no necessary implication in the word 'spiritual' that we are talking of anything other than matter (including the matter of which the brain is made), or anything outside the realm of science. On occasion, I will feel free to use the word. Science is not only compatible with spirituality; it is a profound source of spirituality. When we recognize our place in an immensity of light-years and in the passage of ages, when we grasp the intricacy, beauty, and subtlety of life, then that soaring feeling, that sense of elation and humility combined, is surely spiritual"

In 1990, an environmental appeal, "Preserving and Cherishing the Earth", signed by Sagan and other noted scientists, stated that the historical record makes clear that religious teaching, example, and leadership are powerfully able to influence personal conduct and commitment... Thus, there is a vital role for religion and science.

When asked about his belief system, Carl Sagan described himself as an agnostic.

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