

# PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

February 2005

We turn our attention this month from the foibles and fumbles of humankind to focus, first, on the horrors of God-made, blind cruelty in the world, and on the apologists for His evil. We wring our hands—again—over irrational thinking in America ... recount some instances of really dumb and then some really interesting thinking ... think quite a bit about thinking itself ... and present for your consideration four people who think they should be elected to your Board.

## WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO 220,000 PEOPLE

**John Rafferty**

Count on large-scale disaster to bring out the worst and the craziest in our religious and superstitious brethren—of whatever persuasion, wherever in the world.

Israeli chief rabbi Shlomo Amar pronounced of the Christmas-week tsunami, “This is an expression of God’s great ire with the world, the world is being punished for wrongdoing.” Azizan Abdul Razak, a Muslim cleric and vice president of Malaysia’s Islamic opposition party, said the disaster was a reminder from god that “He created the world and can destroy the world.” Our own Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas, says that the real target of God’s great wave was 8,000 (or 20,000, the numbers keep changing) “fag and dyke” Swedes on vacation, naked, on those Indian Ocean beaches. And Pandit Harikrishna Shastri, a priest of New Delhi’s Birla Hindu temple, said the disaster was caused by a “huge amount of pent-up man-made evil on earth,” and driven by the positions of the planets.

Ah, yes, the planets. Norodom Sihanouk, the retired king of Cambodia, said his country had been spared thanks to the warnings of his astrologer. His ex-Highness neglected to explain exactly how his country acted on the soothsayer’s warnings, other than judiciously locating itself away from the tsunami on the other side of the thousand-mile-long Malay peninsula.

And while a worldwide wave of sympathy almost as great as the tsunami itself brought even George W. Bush (belatedly) out of holiday torpor, and generated hundreds of millions in public and private donations for the 220,000 or more victims, the Ayn Rand Institute, in a December 30 email, argued that we should let ‘em die.

“U.S. Should Not Help Tsunami Victims,” ARI’s David Holcberg headlines, since “every cent” the government spends comes from taxation “extorted” from American taxpayers, and government therefore has no right to spend it on tsunami relief (or any other kind, including the post-WWII Marshall Plan that saved Western civilization and the current \$15 billion pledged to fight AIDS in Africa). Politicians get away with such largesse, Holcberg argues, because “they have the morality of altruism on their side. According to altruism ... those who have more have the moral obligation to help those who have less.” (*For a humanist analysis of altruism see George Rowell’s two-part essay in PIQUE, Jan. and Feb., 2004, at www.shsny.org.*) Holcberg says that “Americans—the

wealthiest people on earth—are expected to sacrifice the wealth they have earned to provide for the needs of those who did not earn it.” It is time to reject, he says, “a vicious morality that demands that we sacrifice our values instead of holding on to them.”

In other words, hold on to our “values”—and our money—and let the third-world poor die.

Could give atheism a bad name.

But crazies aside, in “Countless Souls Cry Out to God,” in Jan. 10 *Newsweek*, Kenneth L. Woodward writes that ordinary “people of all faiths ask, Why us? Why here? Why now?” For Hindus, he reminds us, “all of life is controlled by the play of capricious deities,” Shiva the destroyer far from the least of them, and so propitiating local gods “is more important than thinking about personal or collective guilt for what has happened.” But Buddhists “will look to the idea of karma and ask what they did, individually and collectively, that a tragedy like this happened.” (Why do so many Westerners think Buddhism is rational?) Muslims, like the two other “religions of the Book” more familiar to most of us, “recognizes no natural laws independent of God’s will. All that happens is Allah’s doing ... [and] even the destructive tsunami must have some hidden, positive purpose.” As for Christians, “the death of so many innocent children alone was an excruciating test of the Christian belief that their God is a God of love.”

I suggest that the simple answer to all the questions of Why them? Why there? Why then? is that God is not the answer.

But let someone much smarter than me explain:

## **SCIENCE SAVES**

**Richard Dawkins**

*(From a letter to The Guardian (U.K.) 12/30/04, and forwarded by Colin Rafferty)*

The Bishop of Lincoln asks to be preserved from religious people who try to explain the tsunami disaster. As well he might. Religious explanations for such tragedies range from loopy (it’s payback for original sin) through vicious (disasters are sent to try our faith) to violent (after the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, heretics were hanged for provoking God’s wrath). But I’d rather be preserved from religious people who give up on trying to explain, yet remain religious.

In the same batch of letters, Dan Rickman says, “science provides an explanation of the mechanism of the tsunami but it cannot say why this occurred any more than religion can.” There, in one sentence, we have the religious mind displayed before us in all its absurdity. In what sense of the word “why,” does plate tectonics not provide the answer?

Not only does science know why the tsunami happened, it can give precious hours of warning. If a small fraction of the tax breaks handed out to churches, mosques and synagogues had been diverted into an early warning system, tens of thousands of people, now dead, would have been moved to safety.

Let’s get up off our knees, stop cringing before bogeymen and virtual fathers, face reality, and help science do something constructive about human suffering.

Even if the open windows of science at first make us shiver after the indoor warmth of traditional humanizing myths, in the end the fresh air brings vigor and the great spaces have a splendor of their own. — *Bertrand Russell*

## **A PRIEST, A MINISTER, A RABBI AND A TSUNAMI**

**Art Harris**

On most Sunday mornings, WMCA broadcasts a program called "Religion on the Line." It usually has a priest, a minister, and a rabbi (... who walk into a bar ... no, that's another story). I listen because it's on when I'm doing my morning rituals in the bathroom, and I get to learn what my opposition is up to. (No good, usually.)

The past few weeks have been interesting because the religious leaders have been going through all sorts of gyrations trying to explain the tsunami disaster from a religious viewpoint. One pointed out that God was sorry for the disaster. Which brings me to my question: So, why did He do it? Did He goof?

These fellows ask if God was punishing man and, if so, what had these victims been doing that wasn't going on in other parts of the world? Why had they been selected and others spared? Why did a loving God kill so many innocent children?

The priest, minister and rabbi had no answers.

## **THE NATURE OF HIS GOODNESS**

**Leon Wieseltier**

*(Excerpted from "The Wake," The New Republic, 1/17/05)*

When I began to grasp the magnitude of what the Asian ocean wreaked last week ... I was in no mood to open a Bible. It is indecent to move immediately from catastrophe to theodicy. Evil should shock and disrupt. The humanity of the dead should be honored with the tribute of dissonance, the tribute of doubt. I do not see how a theistic view of the world cannot be embarrassed, or damaged, by such an event. If it is not possible to venerate nature for its goodness, then it is not possible to venerate the alleged author of nature for His goodness.

I understand that religion long ago learned how to argue its way around cosmic cruelty, but it is the absence of protest, the intellectual efficiency, that is so repugnant. Those who smugly intone that they have no explanation, that it is all a mystery, that the ways of the universe and its Creator exceed the capacities of the mind: they are over-ready for tragedy. They should more candidly admit that they choose not to reflect upon the spiritual implications of natural destruction because they wish to protect what they believe. In the aftermath of such a disaster, religious people have more mental work to do than irreligious people, because they are the ones who teach the benevolent government of the world. Sometimes they teach much worse: the punitive explanation of suffering, the idea that this is not evil, it is justice. In the ruins of Lisbon, the "earthquake sermons" came in many varieties, but the most salient theme, to choose but one instance from a prominent Jesuit preacher, was this: "Learn, O Lisbon, that the destroyers of our houses, palaces, churches, and convents, the cause of the death of so many people and of the flames that devoured such vast treasures, are your abominable sins, and not comets, stars, vapors and exhalations, and similar natural phenomena." Such sentiments were heard from Muslim and Hindu clerics this week, and even the Sephardic chief rabbi of Israel instructed, "This is an expression of God's great ire with the world." All this is nothing other than a justification of the murder of children.

**AND LEST WE FORGET ...**

Nearly four million men, women, and children have died as a consequence of the Congo civil war. Seventy thousand have perished in the genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan. In the year just ended, scores of thousands died in wars and massacres elsewhere in Africa, in Asia, in the archipelagoes of the Pacific, and, of course, in Iraq. Less dramatically, but just as lethally, two million people died of malaria around the world, and another million and a half of diarrhea. Five million children died of hunger. Three million people died of AIDS, mostly in Africa. The suffering of these untimely and terrible deaths—whether inflicted by deliberate violence, the result of human agency, or by avoidable or treatable malady; the result of human neglect—is multiplied by heartbroken parents and spouses, numbed and abandoned children, and, often, ruined survivors vulnerable to disease and predation and dependent, if they are lucky, on the spotty kindness of strangers.

— *Excerpted from "Flood Tide," in The Talk of the Town section of The New Yorker, 1/17/05, by Hendrik Hertzberg*

### **BEN FRANKLIN'S PREDICTION**

**Dick Cousineau, Chairman,  
Humanist Society of Santa Barbara**

*(Excerpted from HSSB's The Secular Circular, Jan, 2005)*

I have been reading Walter Isaacson's *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*. The book has further opened my eyes regarding this major force in the building of our country's democratic values in the years just prior to the revolution. Franklin's consistent goal of persuasion through natural discourse and critical thinking, his unbounded enthusiasm for the common man, and his constant inquiry into the nature of things makes him a model of the self-educated, bootstrap-lifting, deeply ethical person of the age of enlightenment. From him came the prediction that the government "is likely to be well administered for a course of years and can only end in despotism as other forms have done before it, when the people shall become so corrupted as to need despotic government, being incapable of any other."

In the midst of this, I came across Perry Treadwell's commentary in the *Santa Barbara News-Press*. As he points out, it took over 200 years for the government to become so corrupt that a despot is needed by the people. Major issues, such as the obscene and endless illegal war, the death of thousands of our young people, the failing economy, the proposals for constitutional amendments to limit the rights of citizens, and the worsening environment, are practically ignored for the issues of security, the redefinition of terrorism, tax cuts for the wealthy, Michael Jackson, and the Wal-Mart mentality. The so-called Bible Belt of our country—with its worst education systems, most primitive religion, highest divorce rate, best football teams, most time-spent-watching-TV, and overall poorest health—is ascendant, the "moral fiber" of this nation. Gad, what a realization!

Mr. Treadwell says, "The life of the Constitution is being smothered by the theocrats and plutocrats," and the founders' fears have come to fruition. ... How can the average critical-thinking humanist like you, and me, have any remaining faith in government?

I am tempted to follow Voltaire's advice about one's own garden, but I get infuriated with our political system, not because one party or the other is in power, but rather because of the drift toward an unenlightened electorate that has been fed bread and

circuses (cheap goods and the NFL) as the good and acceptable life style. I will stand to protest the redefinition of our values, the growing ignorance of our nation, the mounting threat of the know-nothings, and the shouting and fear mongering of the religious bigots. Stand with me to hold back the deluge.

## **THE DAY THE ENLIGHTENMENT WENT OUT**

**Garry Wills**

*(Excerpted from The New York Times, Nov. 4, 2004)*

Can a people that believes more fervently in the Virgin Birth than in evolution still be called an Enlightened nation? America, the first real democracy in history, was a product of Enlightenment values — critical intelligence, tolerance, respect for evidence, a regard for the secular sciences. Though the founders differed on many things, they shared these values of what was then modernity. They addressed “a candid world,” as they wrote in the Declaration of Independence, out of “a decent respect for the opinions of mankind.” Respect for evidence seems not to pertain any more, when a poll taken just before the elections showed that 75 percent of Mr. Bush’s supporters believe Iraq either worked closely with Al Qaeda or was directly involved in the attacks of 9/11.

The secular states of modern Europe do not understand the fundamentalism of the American electorate. It is not what they had experienced from this country in the past. In fact, we now resemble those nations less than we do our putative enemies.

Where else do we find fundamentalist zeal, a rage at secularity, religious intolerance, fear of and hatred for modernity? Not in France or Britain or Germany or Italy or Spain. We find it in the Muslim world, in Al Qaeda, in Saddam Hussein’s Sunni loyalists. Americans wonder that the rest of the world thinks us so dangerous, so single-minded, so impervious to international appeals. They fear jihad, no matter whose zeal is being expressed.

It is often observed that enemies come to resemble each other. We torture the torturers, we call our God better than theirs — as one American general put it, in words that the president has not repudiated. ...

In his victory speech, President Bush indicated that he would “reach out to the whole nation,” including those who voted for John Kerry. But even if he wanted to be more conciliatory now, the constituency to which he owes his victory is not a yielding one. He must give them what they want on things like judicial appointments. His helpers are also his keepers.

The moral zealots will, I predict, give some cause for dismay even to nonfundamentalist Republicans. Jihads are scary things. It is not too early to start yearning back toward the Enlightenment.

Only about a third of Americans believe that Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution is a scientific theory, while just as many say that it is just one of many theories, not supported by the evidence. Forty-five percent also believe that God created human beings pretty much in their present form about 10,000 years ago. A third of Americans are biblical literalists who believe that the Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word. — *The Gallup Poll, 11/19/04*

## **SEX EDUCATION AND GENDER STUDIES IN YEAR 5 OF THE BUSH MINISTRY**

A December 2 report in *The Washington Post* found that a federally funded program to promote abstinence in schools has been teaching students that a 43-day-old fetus is a “thinking person,” abortion can lead to sterility and suicide, touching a person’s genitals can result in pregnancy, and HIV can be spread by sweat and tears. One book preaches the story of a knight who rejects a princess when she becomes too opinionated about how best to slay a dragon. The parable concludes: “Occasional suggestions and assistance may be alright, but too much of it may lessen a man’s confidence or even turn him away from his princess.”  
— *Harper’s Weekly*, 12/14/04

## **TRANSATLANTIC JUNK SCIENCE John Rafferty**

The *Daily News* reports that “British researchers plan to torture hundreds of volunteers to see if faith in God eases pain. Human guinea pigs will be shown religious symbols such as crucifixes and images of the Virgin Mary while their hands are burned with pads of chili gel.” The experiment will be conducted “by a multidisciplinary team of scientists under strict ethical rules,” at the new Oxford University Center for Science of the Mind. Researchers will use brain scans to see if religious imagery distracts the subjects from pain better than placebo pills or thinking “mundane thoughts.”

Whose idea is this? The Pennsylvania-based John Templeton Foundation—which funds research on “spiritual discovery” and is “very interested in the power of belief, the power of prayer, God concepts”—is putting up the necessary \$2 million.

So, anybody want to bet on the results?

But ... how about a second control? Which better takes a subject’s mind off pain, images of the Virgin Mary or images of a skimpily-clad Britney Spears or a bare-chested Brad Pitt (subject’s choice)?

Now I’ll bet.

## **THE VATICAN WINS THE 2004 IG-NOBEL PRIZE IN ECONOMICS**

The Ig-Nobel Prizes are the brainchild of the science humor magazine *Annals of Improbable Research*. The Igs, “meant to spur interest in science,” are awarded at a ceremony at Harvard each September to scientists who have “done something that first makes people laugh, then makes them think.” Real science, but funny.

The 2004 Medicine award went to research on “The Effect of Country Music on Suicide,” published in *Social Forces*. The winning Public Health research “investigated the scientific validity of the Five-Second Rule about whether it’s safe to eat food that’s been dropped on the floor.” The Biology prize went to researchers who showed that “herrings apparently communicate with each other by farting.” Peace went to Daisuke Inoue for “inventing karaoke, thereby providing an entirely new way for people to learn to tolerate each other.”

But someone’s tongue was planted firmly in cheek when the Economics prize was awarded to the Vatican, “for outsourcing prayers to India.” Since the number of Roman Catholic clergy continues to decline, the Church now sanctions the “offshoring” of requested intercessionary prayers—for which U.S. faithful generally pay five dollars—by

email to needy priests in Kerala, India, who do the job for 40 rupees, about ninety-two cents.

And you thought the Church was out of touch with the modern world.

### **SHSNY ELECTION — SECOND NOTICE**

The triennial election for the Board of Directors of SHSNY will take place this spring. Candidate statements and ballots will be mailed to all members on March 15, and returned ballots will be due April 15. The new 3-year Board term will begin May 1.

Who is eligible?

All members are eligible for election. You may nominate yourself or another member(s)—by letter to the P.O. Box or online at [www.shsny.org](http://www.shsny.org)—any time before March 1. Please include a brief statement summarizing the candidate's qualifications and vision for SHSNY, which may be written by the candidate and/or the nominator. If you nominate someone else, please include a statement by the nominee that (s)he is willing to serve.

Who will stand for election?

Four current Board members—Conrad Claborne, Arthur Harris, Donna Marxer, and John Rafferty—will stand for re-election, and their statements follow. Since our By-laws require five directors (there can be more, we hope there will be), the answer to the question, “Who will stand for election?” is, we hope, you.

#### **Conrad Claborne**

Six years ago I joined the Board, then was elected Vice-President three years later. When Hugh Rance resigned, I moved up to the office of President. I run for re-election to the Board, and will seek reelection as President.

I try to be a visible symbol for our organization, and to live my life by its philosophical tenets. We all recognize that we need more members, and at a time when other freethought groups are growing in numbers in response to the dangers of Bush & Company, I hope we can do the same, and it's what I will work to achieve.

I ask all of you: Don't be afraid to start secular humanist conversations, to let people know what you think, how you feel, and to tell them that you are a member of SHSNY, an organization working for their freedoms and rights. Conversations that you start may bring them out of their closets. I ask each of you for your vote.

#### **Art Harris**

I am pleased to run for re-election to the Board for another term. I promise to continue to be a gadfly, biting the rump of both organized and disorganized religion. At a time when faith-based initiatives include the destruction of the Twin Towers, we must continue to gently lead those blinded by faith into enlightenment. Critical thinking must be encouraged. “Faith may be wonderful,” Wilson Mizner said, “but it's doubt that gets you an education.”

#### **Donna Marxer**

As an environmental artist and humanist who grew up in the South, I am deeply concerned about the religious right's threatened dominance in our society today. I've

seen first hand the stranglehold it can have on civil rights, freedom of all kinds, creative thinking.

This is a time when we must all make time to answer back, to make our views known. There are more of us out there than we know. They are just afraid to make themselves heard. Let's help them with our own example. I'm a new board member and I want to stick with it.

### **John Rafferty**

I joined SHSNY in 1997 because I was worried about the rise of the religious right in my country. Newt Gingrich and Jerry Fallwell were screeching that "secular humanists" were the greatest threat to America's "moral fiber," so I figured those were people worth knowing. When, at the first meeting I attended (in a bar, I'm happy to say), I asked the dozen or so people at the table if this was "the Misfits & Malcontents Society," several of them laughed — I knew it was my kind of group.

I've been a Board member for three years, Editor of PIQUE a little more than two, and Secretary of SHSNY for about a year. My goals for the organization over the next three years are: 1) to create and schedule more activities (lectures, dinners, book clubs, movie nights, cocktail parties, pizza-and-beer busts, whatever — *we need volunteers!*); and thereby 2) to increase membership and subscriptions, indeed double them, making SHSNY a more potent force not only in the freethought community, but in the whole metro area.

I ask for your vote.

### **FREE BOOKS**

An SHSNY member is forced to clean out his apartment, and is offering books on secular humanism and freethought— free to any member interested. For a list of titles, please call the SHSNY number, 212-861-6003, and leave your name, address and phone number on the answering machine.

### **DO WE REALLY USE ONLY 10 PERCENT OF OUR BRAINS?**

**Barry L. Beyerstein,  
Brain Behavior Laboratory,**

**Simon Fraser University, Vancouver**

*(Excerpted from ScientificAmerican.com March 8, 2004)*

Whenever I venture out of the Ivory Tower to deliver public lectures about the brain, by far the most likely question I can expect as the talk winds up is, "Do we really only use 10 percent of our brains?" The look of disappointment that usually follows when I say it isn't so strongly suggests that the 10-percent myth is one of those hopeful shibboleths that refuses to die.

I'm sure none of us would turn down a mighty hike in brainpower ... and a seemingly never-ending stream of crackpot schemes and devices continues to be advanced by hucksters who trade on the myth. ...

First of all, it is obvious that the brain, like all our other organs, has been shaped by natural selection. Brain tissue is metabolically expensive both to grow and to run, and it strains credulity to think that evolution would have permitted squandering of resources on



a scale necessary to build and maintain such a massively underutilized organ. Moreover, doubts are fueled by ample evidence from clinical neurology. Losing far less than 90 percent of the brain to accident or disease has catastrophic consequences. What is more, observing the effects of head injury reveals that there does not seem to be any area of the brain that can be destroyed by strokes, head trauma, or other manner, without leaving the patient with some kind of functional deficit. Likewise, electrical stimulation of points in the brain during neurosurgery has failed so far to uncover any dormant areas where no percept, emotion or movement is elicited by applying these tiny currents. ...

The past hundred years has seen the advent of increasingly sophisticated technologies for listening in on the functional traffic of the brain. The goal of behavioral neuroscience has been to record electrical, chemical and magnetic changes in brain activity and to correlate them with specific mental and behavioral phenomena. ... Despite this detailed reconnaissance, no quiet areas awaiting new assignments have emerged.

All told, the foregoing suggests that there is no cerebral spare tire waiting to be mounted in service of one's grade point average, job advancement, or the pursuit of a cure for cancer or the Great American Novel. So, if the 10-percent myth is that implausible, how did it arise?

One stream [of evidence] leads back to the pioneering American psychologist, William James. In addition to his voluminous scholarly work, James was a prodigious author of popular articles offering advice to the general public. In these exhortatory works James was fond of stating that the average person rarely achieves but a small portion of his or her potential. I was never able to find an exact percentage mentioned, and James always talked in terms of one's undeveloped potential, apparently never relating this to a specific amount of gray matter engaged. A generation of "positive thinking" gurus that followed were not so careful, however, and gradually "10 percent of our capacity" morphed into "10 percent of our brain." Undoubtedly, the biggest boost for the self-help entrepreneurs came when the famous adventurer and journalist Lowell Thomas attributed the 10-percent-of-the-brain claim to William James. Thomas did so in the preface he wrote, in 1936, to Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. The myth has never lost its steam since.

I frequently came across the claim that Albert Einstein had once explained his own brilliance by reference to the myth — Einstein's enormous prestige, of course, making it unassailable henceforth. A careful search by the people at the Albert Einstein archives, however, was unable to provide me with any record of such a statement on his part. So it remains probably just another of those instances where promoters with a point or a buck to make have misappropriated the clout of Einstein's name to further their own endeavors.

The 10-percent myth has undoubtedly motivated many people to strive for greater creativity and productivity in their lives — hardly a bad thing. But, like so many uplifting myths that are too good to be true, the truth of the matter seems to be its least important aspect.

Perhaps the best way to combat the 10% myth is to reply to the speaker, "Oh? What part don't you use?" — *The Ten Percent Myth, on snopes.com*

## OR DO WE GIVE ONLY TWO SECONDS TO THOUGHT?

**David Brooks**

*(Excerpted from "Hunch Power," a review of Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking, by Malcolm Gladwell, in The New York Times Book Review, Jan. 16, 2005)*  
There is in all of our brains, Gladwell argues, a mighty backstage process, which works its will subconsciously. Through this process we have the capacity to sift huge amounts of information, blend data, isolate telling details and come to astonishingly rapid conclusions, even in the first two seconds of seeing something. "*Blink* is a book about those first two seconds," Gladwell writes.

*Blink* moves quickly through a series of delightful stories, all about the backstage mental process we call intuition. There is the story of the psychologist John Gottman, who since the 1980's has worked with more than 3,000 married couples. He videotapes them having a conversation. Reviewing just an hour's worth of each tape, Gottman has been able to predict with 95 percent accuracy whether that couple will be married 15 years later. If he watches only 15 minutes of tape, his success rate is about 90 percent. Scientists in his lab have determined they can usually predict whether a marriage will work after watching just three minutes of newlywed conversation. Gottman believes that each relationship has a DNA, or an essential nature. It's possible to take a very thin slice of that relationship, grasp its fundamental pattern and make a decent prediction of its destiny.

Gladwell says we are thin-slicing all the time — when we go on a date, meet a prospective employee, judge any situation. We take a small portion of a person or problem and extrapolate amazingly well about the whole. A psychologist named Nalini Ambady gave students three 10-second soundless videotapes of a teacher lecturing. Then she asked the students to rate the teacher. Their ratings matched the ratings from students who had taken the teacher's course for an entire semester. Then she cut the videotape back to two seconds and showed it to a new group. The ratings still matched those of the students who'd sat through the entire term.

"We are innately suspicious of this kind of rapid cognition," Gladwell observes. We assume that long, methodical investigation yields more reliable conclusions than a snap judgment. But in fact, "decisions made very quickly can be every bit as good as decisions made cautiously and deliberately."

**Editor:** Should the Book Club read *Blink* this fall?

## IS THAT ALL THERE IS?

**David Voron**

*(Excerpted from a review of What is Thought? by Eric Baum, posted on e-Skeptic #42, Nov. 12, 2004)*

What is really going on in our brains when we think? Is the process of thought just the electrochemical activity of a mass of inter-connected preprogrammed neurons? As Peggy Lee asked, "Is that all there is?" Eric Baum's answer in *What is Thought?* is "Yes, Peggy, that is all there is!" We humans are just robotic "meaning in life" overachievers.

What we find meaningful is determined by the mechanistic interaction of the physical world with our physical brains, evolved and optimized over billions of generations of organisms. Our understanding of the structure of the world, which to us

seems so self-evident, is encoded in our DNA. That sounds like a far stretch, even for pure materialists, but Baum, a computer scientist with degrees from Harvard and a Ph.D. in physics from Princeton, is convincing.

Baum explains that his choice of book title was inspired by Erwin Schrödinger's *What is Life?* published in 1944. Schrödinger, a co-inventor of quantum mechanics, felt the answer must lie in physics and chemistry. Baum's thesis is that just as physics and chemistry answer the question "What is life?" they must also answer the question, "What is thought?" ...

The brain, like all other objects in the universe, is a structure operating under physical laws. Our DNA codes its algorithmic computational processes, which have been repeatedly refined since the beginning of life on earth. Whatever computations enhanced survival and reproductive fitness were passed on to future generations. Our brains have evolved reinforcement mechanisms to guide our behavior in the direction of propagation. For example, "Nothing could be more clearly negative reinforcement than physical pain," and "Nothing could be more clearly positive reinforcement than orgasm." Other forms of behavior guided by programmed reinforcement mechanisms are seeking parental approval, caring for children, and jealousy. ...

We may resist Baum's insight that "the things we feel most strongly about we should be suspicious of." This is because "We believe things strongly because we are evolved to, not necessarily because they are true." For example, the conviction that we have free will is so intense that it overcomes the power of rational argument. "The conclusion that we do not really have free will," Baum says, "is after all a very abstract conclusion, of interest only to philosophers and stoned college students late at night." Our genes built our belief in free will into us because it is a very useful theory for predicting the behavior of ourselves and others. ...

But let's not forget that our enjoyment of life is part of the survival repertoire with which evolution has equipped us. If our ancestors hadn't keenly felt life was worth living, we wouldn't be here now. Baum reflects: "Thankfully, the fact that I can intellectually understand that my mind is nothing but an evolved computation does not in any way detract from my enjoyment of life, or from my desire to live a fruitful and moral life."

No doubt Peggy would agree: If all we are, my friends, is an evolved computation, "let's keep on dancing ... and have a ball."

**Neurotheology:** This new and emotionally charged scientific field is trying to find out what effect the workings of the brain have on religious belief. One of the stimuli for such investigations is that some people who suffer from temporal-lobe epilepsy experience religious revelations or hallucinations during seizures, even if they are atheists. Work in the field roughly divides into two types: either stimulating spiritual experience with drugs, or studying brain activity during such experiences using imaging techniques to see which regions of the brain change. Such events seem to exist outside time and space and the evidence suggests they are caused by the brain losing its perception of a boundary between the physical body and the outside world. It may be that what causes these spiritual experiences also leads to other kinds of intangible events, such as reports of alien visitations, near-death episodes, and out-of-body experiences.

— *World Wide Words*, 4/25/03

## **BOOK CLUB SPRING SCHEDULE**

### **“EcoHumanism,” Sunday evening, April 10**

Edited by Robert B. Tapp, Dean of the Humanist Institute—who will attend our meeting—this collection of essays has been called “vital to the agenda for a future of life on planet Earth.”

From the *EcoHumanism* book jacket: “Contributors to this important new work, all humanists in the naturalistic tradition, show that the humanist worldview has much to offer environmentalism. Since humanists are committed to working for a global community in which all humans can flourish, their concern about ecological degradation rivals that of the environmentalists. When asked what should be done about environmental problems, humanists do not hesitate to use the best scientific information and technology to reclaim the natural world and other species while ensuring the welfare of all human beings. “

We’ll meet at 6:00 p.m., Sunday, April 10, at Donna Marxer and John Rafferty’s apartment, 141 East 56 Street (10F) between Lexington and Third. Please call 212-371-8733 or e-mail [john@rafferty.net](mailto:john@rafferty.net) if you plan to come.

### **“The End Of Faith” by Sam Harris**

#### **Thursday evening, May 12 (new date)**

Sam Harris’s new *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, is “an important book, on a topic that should not be shielded from the crucible of human reason” (Natalie Angier, *The New York Times Book Review*) ... “will strike a chord with anyone who has ever pondered the irrationality of religious faith and its cruel, murderous consequences” (*The Economist*). “Harris writes with such verve and frequent insight that even skeptical readers will find it hard to put down” (*San Francisco Chronicle*). “Harris’s tour de force demonstrates how faith threatens our very existence. A must read for all rational people” (Alan Dershowitz).

We’ll meet at 7:00 p.m., Thursday, May 12, at Donna Marxer and John Rafferty’s apartment, 141 East 56 Street (10F), between Lexington and Third. Please call 212-371-8733 or e-mail [john@rafferty.net](mailto:john@rafferty.net) if you plan to come.

**Book Club note:** Our January book club met the same week this issue of PIQUE was put to bed. A full report by moderator Donna Marxer of the discussion of *American Jezebel* and *Fanny: A Fiction* will appear next issue.