

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

January, 2005

First, an important notice, followed by an historical perspective on secularism in one of America's minority communities, and a personal humanist history in another. We wonder what we think of freethinkers, conclude our parsing of anti-evolution illogic, and smile at some of the stupidities of our fellow Americans. And if—considering the war, the election and the futility of the Mets—if Happy is probably not in the cards, we wish at least a Somewhat Better New Year to one and all.

SHSNY ELECTION NOTICE

The triennial election for the Board of Directors of the Secular Humanist Society of New York will take place this spring. Notice is given hereby, as it will be in the February and March issues of PIQUE. 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 dues-paid members of SHSNY are eligible for election to the Board. You may nominate yourself or another member(s)—by letter to the P.O. Box or e-mail to www.shsny.org—at any time before March 1. Please include a brief statement (100-300 words) summarizing the candidate's qualifications and vision for the future of 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?

Rob Takaroff had to resign from the Board last month because of increased demands on his personal time, and long-time Board members John Arents and George Rowell have decided not to stand for re-election. The remaining four Board members—Conrad Claborne, Arthur Harris, Donna Marxer, and John Rafferty—will all stand for re-election. Since our By-laws require a minimum of 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.

SECULARISM AND THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY

**Norm R. Allen, Jr., Executive Director,
African-Americans for Humanism**

Reported by John Arents

(This and the following article are based on lectures delivered to SHSNY on December 4, 2004.)

African-Americans for Humanism, a division of the Center for Inquiry, was founded 15 years ago in the hope of getting more people of color involved in humanism. Today there are 45 humanist groups in Africa. There is a quarterly newsletter, The AAH Examiner. In 1991, Prometheus Books published African-American Humanism: An Anthology, edited by Mr. Allen. It contains many essays by and about distinguished African-

American humanists, of whom there have been more than most people assume. In 2003, *The Black Humanist Experience* was published by Prometheus. Its authors include Americans and Africans, many describing their personal paths to humanism.

The focus of Mr. Allen's talk was on secularism and the African-American community. Two prominent Supreme Court cases were brought by Ishmael Jaffree and Alton Lemon. Mr. Jaffree, a Baha'i, objected to the Christian religious activities to which his daughter was being subjected in her public school. Mr. Lemon's case started with a challenge to practices that discriminated against African-American children, but it led to the famous "Lemon test," a three-pronged test to ascertain whether an action violates the prohibition of a religious establishment. In 1996, there was a celebration in Philadelphia of the 25th anniversary of the Lemon decision, sponsored by AAH, the Council for Secular Humanism, and a local freethought group. The Mayor of Philadelphia issued a proclamation and representatives of the city government participated to show their support of church-state separation.

The civil rights movement has been regarded as a religious movement, reinforced especially by the prominence of Martin Luther King. However, many of its leaders have had a humanist orientation. The concept of civil disobedience, in its modern embodiment, came from an entirely secular source, Henry David Thoreau. He went to jail for a few days over a church-state issue: he refused to pay taxes to support churches. He believed in following one's conscience rather than the supposed will of a God. Activism was a choice, not an obligation. He was not a pacifist: he supported taking up arms for a good cause, including John Brown's raid.

King recognized that many supporters of civil rights did not share his religious orientation. It was more admirable, he said, to be a committed humanist than an uncommitted Christian. He was a strong supporter of church-state separation. He and Gandhi were pacifists, but they learned much from Thoreau.

A. Philip Randolph was regarded as the grandfather of the civil rights movement. He was an atheist, a socialist, and a pacifist — not popular stances in the African-American community. Early in his career, he was co-editor of *The Messenger*, which was harshly anti-religious, but he later moderated his tone, focusing on civil rights. He was a major labor leader, founder of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. He was the first to conceive of a march on Washington, in 1941; it did not come to pass, but he was there to speak at the famous 1963 march.

Another prominent humanist was James Foreman. In 1992, he spoke at a Free Inquiry conference in Florida. He emphasized the importance of secularism. In 1969, he had gotten attention by making the first proposal for reparations for slavery, to come from white churches. His organization, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, was one of the most influential civil rights organizations in the 1960s.

The Kwanzaa holiday was originated by Dr. Maulana Karenga, a member of the American Humanist Association. He wanted to popularize humanist ideals among African-Americans, but his hard-core criticism of religion did not help. Kwanzaa is often seen as a religious celebration, but Karenga emphasized that it was a cultural celebration: African culture and African unity. The last day celebrates "faith," but he does not define it, leaving that to each individual's conception. Kwanzaa has become a major celebration in both America and Africa, even honored by a postage stamp.

Malcolm X (Malcolm Little) was a member of the Nation of Islam after his conversion in prison. He eventually broke with them, which cost him his life. On his pilgrimage to Mecca, he recognized that Islam is a universal religion. He discarded racist ideas cultivated by the Nation of Islam, that, for example, white people are devils. He founded the Organization of African Unity, which was entirely secular. He had become a Sunni Muslim, but his worldview seemed to be secular, and liberal for a Muslim on issues like the status of women.

W. E. B. DuBois was seen as the father of Pan-Africanism. He sought the strands that unite Africans throughout the world. He was not only a civil rights leader but a major scholar in African history and sociology. Late in his life, he emigrated to Ghana. Mr. Allen visited a humanist group there, as well as in Nigeria, and he had an opportunity to deliver a speech at the DuBois Center, which garnered much local publicity.

The contribution of humanists has been obscured by the common image of African-Americans as excessively religious. There is another side that Mr. Allen wants to make known. In the first of his two anthologies is an essay by the great poet Langston Hughes. Some of his poems were strongly anti-religious.

Before any of them was another famous freethinker: Robert Ingersoll. Besides attacking religion, he had a lot to say about civil liberties, women's rights, and African-American rights. His influential speech about his dream, of freedom for women, former slaves, and everyone else, is strikingly similar to the King speech of 1963. Ingersoll was widely admired among African-Americans of his time. Frederick Douglass was his good friend.

The threat from the Religious Right in America pales in comparison to the threats faced by humanists in Africa. Nigeria's constitution declares that it is secular, but a number of states have imposed Sharia—Islamic law—complete with stoning adulteresses. Sudan is another horrible example, with a long-running civil war between the Muslim North and the Christian-animist South. AAH and CFI are offering help to the struggling African humanists, who are making some inroads.

There was a vigorous and lengthy discussion.

IN MEMORIAM: PAUL EDWARDS

Paul Edwards, a founding member of the Secular Humanist Society of New York, died December 9 at the age of 81. Professor Edwards, a longtime instructor at NYU, Brooklyn College and the New School, edited *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* — “an enduring and authoritative reference work covering topics from ‘the absolute’ to Zoroastrianism ... [devoting] eight volumes to nearly 1,500 theories and ideologies of all eras and continents,” according to the *New York Times* obituary.

GAYS AND SECULAR HUMANISM: A PERSONAL JOURNEY

Conrad Claborne, President, SHSNY

First of all I want to thank Rob Takaroff for suggesting that I speak on this topic.

Second, at the time I was putting this together the outing of former Governor James McGreevey of New Jersey was all over the news, so the story I am about to relate is as valid today as it was for me in the 1960's.

Third, after looking over the brief “History of the Secular Humanist Society of New York,” prepared by John Arents, it became apparent to me that Warren Allen Smith—one of the group’s early lights—is, like me, gay.

What is it that people who are gay and lesbian find attractive in secular humanism? There are strong reasons, but in order to answer properly I need to take you on a personal journey. Although I am a member of the Stonewall generation, I grew up and went to college in Southern California. I did not move to Manhattan until July of 1971, two years after the Stonewall riots.

Growing up in Southern California in the 1950’s and early ‘60’s was a challenge to me personally. I knew from a very early age that I was attracted to males, not females. Yet I did not see anybody around me who also seemed to be so inclined, so I remained in the closet. In 1959 we moved from Long Beach to Chula Vista, halfway between San Diego and the U.S./Mexican border. There was almost nothing on gays in visible society except for the occasional notice in our local paper that “X” number of men had been arrested at a local park, or restroom, and charged with “solicitation.” Local cops were sent in to entrap these individuals, whose names, addresses and occupations were then printed in the paper. Obviously society did not think much of them.

For some reason I had to do a paper for school, and I had found some of the work of psychologist Evelyn Hooker, who was one of the first researchers to look at homosexuality scientifically, not from the standpoint of religious or social stigma. Hers was the first published statement I’d come across saying that I was not sick, but a normal human being. This was still a minority view, and it was not until the early 1970’s that Dr. Hooker was able to have homosexuality’s “disease” classification removed by the American Psychiatric Association.

After I graduated from Hilltop High School in Chula Vista I enrolled in the newly opened local junior college, Southwestern College. It was during this period that I went through the process of coming out to myself, viewing myself as a healthy, normal human being. I took a college drama class, and the instructor allowed me the space to look inward and find out who was there.

After graduating from UCLA, I sought to connect with other gays wherever I could find them. The Stonewall riots were raging in Manhattan, and in southern California I became aware of the Metropolitan Community Church, a church for lesbians and gays.

One of my early lessons on religion from my mother and stepfather had been that religion was OK, but be suspicious of people who “got religion” and who were wearing it on their sleeve for everyone to see. I went to our local Methodist Church because my mother wanted me to have an ethical grounding. Later I sampled the Catholic Church, and a local synagogue.

I also had a first cousin on my father’s side who at the time was in the California Assembly as a Democrat from Orange County, and a lifelong conservative from the Lutheran Synod. Later he realized his voting record was too conservative for the Democratic Party, so he switched and was one of the Republicans’ most right-wing members of the U.S. House of Representatives for 12 years. Knowing his opinion on gays, I spoke to him privately to let him know that there was one in the family, and perhaps this would temper his public attitudes. This was a mistake as he was one of the biggest homophobes in Congress. He may have been the inventor of the phrase “It’s Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.” He also wanted all people with AIDS to be placed

together on some offshore island. To this day he still does not understand why religion did not “take” with me.

That needs some explaining. I’ve been fortunate to have an avid curiosity. But in addition to that I have also had little voices of conscience asking me if such and so made sense. In other words I was a natural skeptic. These traits have played well for me in my life.

After a while my mother got used to the idea that I was gay; had PFLAG been in operation then I would have loved to introduce her to that community. That definitely would have helped her over the hump earlier. But I did have a great aunt who had figured what was what, and told my mother that famous men in history such as Alexander the Great were gay, so if it was OK for him it should be OK for Mom! My great aunt was a woman my mother loved and respected.

In the years after 1978, when my parents retired to Sacramento, California, I traveled there often, but refused to attend local church services. I would sit in the back and mentally curse out the ludicrous goings-on. (During one wedding at a much more conservative local church, the minister told the young bride to honor and obey her husband, a jerk. Why would people of religion want to ruin a woman’s life in a bad marriage?)

I realized I had reached a breaking point. First of all I knew what a jackass my father was. In addition I had heard from many a pulpit that people like me were evil, bad people. Since I knew I was a good person, as I had the possibility of looking inside myself, then those preachers had got it all wrong. And if they were wrong on this one important issue, then they must be wrong on a lot of other things, too! It was at that point that I decided to seek out material criticizing religion. My journey led me to Free Inquiry and to secular humanism.

Last year I was very pleased to hear that the Supreme Court finally de-criminalized sodomy. Justice Kennedy pointed out that 15 years ago, when the Court last visited this issue, nobody knew people who had out lesbian daughters and gay sons. Now everyone has had that experience. This is why, despite having lots of trouble coming out, with no role models, I felt it was important to be an honorable and honest person who happens to be an out gay. I discovered a couple of years ago that I had unknowingly been such a role model.

I am so happy to have found secular humanism. I think it is a natural fit for those who are gay and lesbian. It continues to amaze me how blind most religions are. On August 1, *The New York Times* carried an article about a Roman Catholic Bishop in Oregon who had issued an Affirmation stating that Catholic lay leaders must follow church teachings or give up their positions. The Affirmation “singled out issues that many American Catholics have struggled with, like the sinfulness of contraception and ‘the church’s teaching that any extramarital sexual relations are gravely evil and that these include premarital relations, masturbation, fornication, the viewing of pornography, and homosexual relations.’” Compare this to “A Declaration of Sexual Rights and Responsibilities—Evolving Principles for a New Century,” by Vern L. Bullough and others in the August/September 2004 issue of *Free Inquiry*. There one can find the positive statement that “taboos that cause people to feel that viewing the genitals or seeing sexual intercourse is obscene and pornographic should be challenged. Sex must be

treated as part of the natural experience of being human. And masturbation is one of the joys of sex and should be regarded as part of the natural experience of being human.”

But Bullough also emphasizes one’s responsibilities to oneself and to others. “Until now, our bodies have been in bondage to church or state, which have dictated how we could express our sexuality. Most people in the past have not been permitted to experience the pleasures and joys of the human body and their sensory nature to their fullest capacity. To do so, we need to accept the belief that actualizing pleasure is among the highest moral goods — so long as it is experienced with responsibility and mutuality and does not involve unwanted force or exploitation. ... A reciprocal and creative attitude toward sexuality can have a deep meaning both for the individual and for society. Each of us will know its personal meaning, but we also need to experience it with others. In effect, our behavior can say to another, ‘I am enriched for having had this experience and for having contributed to your having had it also.’ The loving feelings of mental and physical well-being, the sense of completion of the self that we can experience from freely expressed sexuality may reach out to all humanity.”

Bullough concludes: “It is impossible to have a meaningful, ecstatic sexual and sensual life and to be indifferent to or uncaring about other human beings. Freeing our sexual selves is vital if we are to reach the heights of our full humanity. But at the same time, we believe that we need to activate and nourish a sense of our responsibilities to others.”

What a tremendous difference in thinking from the poisons of religious dogma to the open air of secular humanism! I feel very much at home here!

I would like to say a few words about same-sex marriage. Had Governor McGreevey taken a different path in his life and won election as an openly gay male he would have been the perfect individual to argue for same-sex marriage with the New Jersey legislature. As it is, the bill he signed was very limited in scope.

I do believe same-sex unions need to be legal, because of civil rights issues. If one’s life partner has a pension, and dies, and because you are of the same sex you cannot inherit benefits, that is wrong. Simply wrong.

The gay community is all over the map as far as our belief in God is concerned. My former life partner is a person who strongly believes in God; in fact this has been one of the most difficult of things for me to ignore in our personal relationship. (After 22 years together he and I are having an amicable split.) There is also Dignity, a large group of Catholic gays and lesbians who try to change the church from within, with absolutely no success, but who continue to go to church regularly.

Others, like me, have no place for religion in their lives. I feel human society has so many problems to face that if we were to dedicate the same energy, time, and money to solving these earthly problems instead of giving it all to religious organizations, we could make significant progress toward our goals. We need to recognize that Earth is our only home, and secular humanism can help to change our thinking, instead of pretending, as Christianity or Islam does, that life is just a way station to an afterlife.

Just think of this turn of events. Most religions position themselves as a lifeline for the poor — access to a god who will ease their pain. But there is nothing in their agendas to deal with the real issues of poverty and to work toward its elimination. Secular humanism does not offer a paradise. It does offer an opportunity to make our lives

significantly better and to treat Mother Nature with respect at the same time, instead of robbing her blind!

ARE ATHEISTS (AND HUMANISTS) NOW IN THE CULTURAL MAINSTREAM? MAYBE ...

(Excerpted from “Goodbye to All That Redux” in Humanist Network News, March 31, 2004, and originally published in American Atheist News.)

Just about everyone in America’s “nonbeliever” community admires Dr. Michael Newdow, the self-proclaimed atheist who took his case for removing the words “under God” from the Pledge of Allegiance all the way to the United States Supreme Court. By accident or intent, however, Newdow may also have succeeded in another remarkable, though unnoticed task, namely galvanizing the country’s disparate, divided, and often disputatious assortment of atheist, freethought, secular humanist and other nonbeliever organizations and individuals in common and cooperative cause. He also advanced intellectual honesty by openly and proudly declaring, “I am an atheist. I don’t believe in God.”

For decades, atheists were excoriated not only by the wider culture, but our would-be comrades as well. The “A-word” was condemned as offensive, frightening, and self-defeating. A political consultant who spoke at an American Atheists convention was blunt. “Change your name,” he said. “Find some other label.”

Nonbelievers, including “closeted” atheists, have tried every ruse to obfuscate the “A-word,” and smuggle their ideas into the intellectual mainstream under every conceivable moniker.

To borrow a phrase from writer Robert Graves, however, “Goodbye to all that.” While Dr. Newdow was inside the Supreme Court building presenting himself as a real, live atheist to the justices, government attorneys and anyone else present, several hundred supporters were by the steps, cheering and gleefully waving banners and placards of encouragement. The “A-word” was everywhere. The next day, *The New York Times* headline read, “Atheist Presents Case for Taking God From Pledge.”

A sideline benefit to all of this seems to be a more respectful and cooperative attitude within our admittedly diverse nonbeliever community. At the rally, a slew of different organizations were represented. Some identify themselves as atheists; others use labels like “freethinkers,” “humanists” or something similar. It all seemed to represent what Ellen Johnson, President of American Atheists, told a dinner the night before:

“We have far more in common than what separates us. We have different organizations, different labels and agendas and different styles. But we’re learning to cooperate and work together on the basis of mutual respect. We’re learning that when we disagree, this is not the same as being disagreeable.”

We hope this healthy and liberating trend continues. Many “freethinkers,” “humanists” and other nonbelievers are also atheists. They are more than atheists, of course, but thanks to the efforts of Dr. Michael Newdow and a pedigree line of other principled nonbelievers, they are perhaps more welcome and able to proclaim their identification with the once-dreaded “A-word.” All of us can also try to cooperate “on the basis of mutual respect,” working together on ad hoc issues without the drudgery of creating layers of bureaucratic gloss, and “agreeing to disagree” in a respectful, appropriate manner. The Rally on the Steps brought many of us together — atheists,

freethinkers, humanists, other nonbelievers. It is now up to us to continue this process, and put the phobias over labels well behind us.

Goodbye, hopefully, to all that.

... BUT WOULD YOU WANT YOUR SISTER TO MARRY ONE?

(Excerpted from "Atheists are most despised group in U.S.," Humanist Network News, April 28, 2004)

A nationwide telephone survey of more than 2,000 Americans has revealed that the non-religious are viewed as the greatest threat to the American way of life. The results come from a survey conducted last summer by the University of Wisconsin Survey Center ... consisting of 120 questions about the respondents' views on race, religion, intolerance and prejudice.

When questioned about what belief group doesn't share their vision of American society, 54 percent of survey participants indicated that atheists provided the greatest threat. Muslims were viewed as the second-highest threat. ...

An April 2001 opinion poll by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life revealed that 66 percent of Americans viewed atheists unfavorably — almost twice the percentage that held a negative view of Muslims. (While the percentage of Americans viewing Muslims unfavorably has increased significantly since September 11, 2001, the new survey shows that Muslims are still a lot less unpopular than the non-religious.) Another 2001 survey — by the Kaiser Foundation, *The Washington Post*, and Harvard University — found that 69 percent of Americans would be bothered by a close family member marrying an atheist.

Commenting on these surveys, Mary Ellen Sikes, Associate Director of the Institute for Humanist Studies, observed that, "Members of humanist, atheist, and freethought organizations — 'the community of reason' — are among the most compassionate, ethical, and patriotic people I have encountered anywhere. We volunteer in our communities, serve in the military, and have lower divorce rates than almost every mainstream religious denomination."

IS EVOLUTION A LOGICAL FALLACY?

Massimo Pigliucci

Reported by John Arents

(From a lecture delivered to SHSNY on October 23, 2004. This report includes many quotations from an article by Dr. Pigliucci and a group of his students, Philosophy Now #46, May/June 2004. Dr. Pigliucci is Professor of Biology at the State University of New York, Stony Brook.)

PART II

[The argument so far: Evolution, Massimo Pigliucci says, has been attacked as illogical ever since publication of The Origin of Species, most notably lately by Peter Williams, who listed eleven logical fallacies allegedly committed by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. Part I of this report by John Arents (PIQUE, December '04) summarized Professor Pigliucci's refutation of the first six "fallacies," i.e.: self-contradiction, begging the question, false dilemma, equivocation, non-sequitur, and special pleading. The argument continues ...]

7. *Wishful Thinking* — a fallacy that posits a belief because it or its consequence is desired to be true.

Dawkins has written that nobody knows how life on earth originated, but it must have been by natural causes. If he is reaching that conclusion because of his philosophical position of naturalism (i.e., atheism), then he is in fact engaging in wishful thinking. However, there is a more moderate interpretation of Dawkins' statement: he is just being a good scientist in accepting as a matter of methodology that the only way to find a scientific explanation for the origin of life is to tentatively assume that there is one that doesn't include supernatural intervention. One may not like the idea that science is limited to natural explanations, but it is hard to see what sort of experiments or testable hypotheses could possibly emerge from introducing a supernatural fiat into these matters.

8. *The Red Herring* — A Red Herring is an irrelevant topic or premise brought into a discussion to divert attention from the topic at hand. Usually, the irrelevancy is subtle, so that it appears relevant to those not paying close attention.

This is really another version of the objection raised under fallacy #6 (Special Pleading), but with a different twist. Williams claims that the real problem of evolutionary theory is to explain the origin of catalytic proteins (enzymes), and accuses Dawkins of distracting his readers from it by introducing natural selection as an explanation of how enzymes became more complex, beginning from a simple molecule.

Once again, evolution by natural selection is not, and was never meant to be, a theory of life's origins. Ironically, it is the creationists who make a red herring out of this issue, since they keep misinterpreting the scope of evolutionary theory. Natural selection is (demonstrably) perfectly capable of changing and improving the catalytic actions of proteins, which is all the theory claims. On the other hand, it is true that we still don't know how the first replicators originated; however, what is needed for a naturalistic theory of origins is that the first replicators were simple enough to originate randomly. This does not seem an inordinately unlikely supposition.

9. *Straw Man Argument* — a type of Red Herring that attacks a misrepresentation of an opponent's position. That is called "burning a straw man." It is a surprisingly common fallacy, because it is easy to misunderstand another person's position.

A criticism of evolutionists is that they misrepresent religion as not paying attention to logic, knowledge, and scholarship, and thus producing nothing of value. It can be asserted in reply that there has been a strong Christian tradition of valuing rationality, in varying degrees among sects and eras, and in other religions as well.

Scientists should respect this tradition, but there is ample justification for criticizing the irrationality of religion. While it is certainly true that there are great traditions of rational inquiry within Christianity, do we need to be reminded that the Church always put very strict limits on such "free inquiry"? Just think of Bruno, Copernicus, and Galileo. The scholarly tradition of the Catholic Church is surely well represented by the Jesuits (for example, they run the Vatican astronomical observatory), and yet it was the Jesuits who opposed Galileo and famously refused to acknowledge the observational evidence he was providing through his telescopes. It is hard to think of a better example of how differently science and religion approach the relationship between rationality and faith. Intellectual activity is not synonymous with independent critical thinking.

10. *Ad Hominem* — the fallacy of attacking the individual instead of the argument.

Dawkins, in his characteristic bluntness, likens people who believe in God to children who believe in Santa Claus. Williams takes this to be an *ad hominem* attack, and hence a logical fallacy.

Dawkins is indeed to be reprimanded for his language, which is sure to inflame and certain not to gain him much sympathy. But this hardly qualifies as a fallacy because Dawkins is not using the “belief in God = childish thinking” equation as an argument against the existence of God. On the contrary, he begins with the premise that God is a fairy tale and then deduces (in a perfectly logical manner, if one accepts the premise) that believing in God is as childish as believing in fairy tales.

11. Poisoning the Well — a form of *ad hominem* attack that occurs before the meat of an argument, biasing the audience against the opponent’s side before he can present his case. Dawkins once again deserves criticism for his language. In some of his writings, he alleges that no qualified scientist doubts the reality of evolution, the implication being that one should not pay attention to arguments advanced from people who do not believe in evolution, because they are not qualified on such matters.

As in other cases, Dawkins’ language is deplorable and clearly hyperbolic. Dawkins can indeed reasonably be taken to be “poisoning the well” here. This *ad hominem* attack on Dawkins, to which he lays himself open, is no argument against evolution.

Science, Philosophy, and the Limits of Logic

This entire discussion is based on the concept of logical fallacies. But reasoning can be logical, and even correct, at the same time that it is strictly speaking fallacious. For example, one of the classical fallacies is the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* (after that, therefore because of that), where one infers that the cause of a certain effect is a particular event on the basis of the fact that the alleged cause preceded the effect by a short time.

It is important to realize in what (very strict) sense *post hoc ergo propter hoc* is a fallacy: if one wishes to say that it necessarily follows that if two events are temporally close to each other, then the first one causes the second one, this is obviously not true. We have plenty of examples of temporal sequences the elements of which are not causally connected. However, it is perfectly rational to begin the investigation into causes based on correlations, which is exactly what science does. If I know that certain kinds of red wine (e.g., high in sulfites) are prone to cause headaches in certain individuals, and if I repeatedly observe that when I drink those kinds of wine I often develop a headache the next morning, then I am logically justified in tentatively concluding (pending further evidence) that my headaches really are caused by high sulfite levels in red wine (and I ought to stop drinking such concoctions).

It follows from all of this that science is inherently an approach that can lead only to tentative conclusions, while if one wishes Truth one is limited to the realm of logic and mathematics. A lot of ink and bad feelings would be avoided if people realized that human beings (with the exception of logicians) cannot attain Truth, but only more or less likely maybes.

There was enthusiastic and interminable discussion by the audience of 30. All were grateful to Dr. Pigliucci for an afternoon both entertaining and enlightening.

Those who cavalierly reject the Theory of Evolution as not adequately supported by facts, seem quite to forget that their own theory is supported by no facts at all.

— Herbert Spencer

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK

Reason #17: 50 years after *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregated the nation's schools, on November 2 the citizens of Alabama defeated an amendment to the state constitution that would have removed existing language that 1) mandates separate schools for "white and colored children," 2) denies there is any right to public education in Alabama, and 3) allows for a poll tax to keep the poor ("colored") from voting.

Reason #33: The 2004 Platform of the Republican Party of Texas (the majority party) calls the separation of church and state a "myth," supports "individual teachers' rights to teach creation science in Texas public schools," believes "the minimum wage law should be repealed," "supports the abolition ... of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the position of Surgeon General, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Departments of Energy, Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, Education, Commerce and Labor," calls for "the abolition of the National Endowment for the Arts," and demands that Congress "immediately rescind our membership in the United Nations" ... and "re-establish United States control over the Panama Canal in order ... to prevent the establishment of Chinese missile bases in Panama."

HE ALSO HAD MORE MONEY FOR CANDY AND COMIC BOOKS

Colin Rafferty

October 4, 2004

During a campaign speech about his "Working Families Tax Relief Act of 2004," in Des Moines, Iowa, President Bush introduced Mike and Sharla Hintz, a couple from Clive who he said benefited from the plan.

"It's a special day for Mike and Sharla," Bush announced, "because it's their 13th wedding anniversary. (Applause.) Here's a family of four, working hard to raise their kids ... I believe they can spend that \$1,200 better than the federal government can." (Applause.)

Mike Hintz, a First Assembly of God youth pastor, said the tax cuts also gave him additional money to use for health care.

October 30, 2004

A Des Moines youth pastor, Rev. Mike Hintz, was charged with the sexual exploitation of a child, and was fired from the First Assembly of God Church.

October 31, 2004

Photos of the President with Mike and Sharla disappear from the White House web site.

Our culture is superior. Our culture is superior because our religion is Christianity and that is the truth that makes men free. — Pat Buchanan

THE SHSNY BOOK CLUB LINEUP:

January 20: *American Jezebel and Fanny*

Our dual selection includes *American Jezebel: The Uncommon Life of Anne Hutchinson, the Woman Who Defied the Puritans*, by Eve LaPlante; and *Fanny: A Fiction*, by Edmund White. Read either and join Donna Marxer and Jerry Wade for a discussion of women in the history of American freedom and secularism.

“Jezebel” Anne Hutchinson was expelled from the Puritans’ Massachusetts Bay Colony for thinking “more bold than a man,” and was the inspiration for Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Fanny is a novel about two extraordinary real-life 19th century women: radical feminist Fanny Wright, who founded the utopian community of Nashoba, and Mrs. Frances Trollope, mother of novelist Anthony and herself best known for *Domestic Manners of the Americans*.

6:30 p.m., Thursday, January 20 at Donna’s loft, 579 Broadway (4th floor walkup, ring “Marxer”), between Houston and Prince Streets. (F or V train to Broadway-Lafayette; #6 to Bleecker St.; N, R or W to Prince St.; or #1, 5, 6 or 21 bus to Broadway and Houston).

March (Date TBA): *The End Of Faith*

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” (*The San Francisco Chronicle*). “Harris’s tour de force demonstrates how faith threatens our very existence. A must read for all rational people” (Alan Dershowitz).

Date and place to be announced in February PIQUE.

Sunday evening, April 10: *EcoHumanism*

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 flyleaf: “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 Donna Marxer’s loft (address as per January 20 meeting) at 6:00 p.m., Sunday, April 10.