

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

November, 2013

This month we celebrate our celebrations of freethought last month, introduce a new Board member, and tell an intellectual joke. We hunt for Hitler in Hollywood, God anywhere, consistency in the Bible, and imaginary beings in your head. We offer advice to the Pope on being too rich and to the Rabid Right on not being poor, test a six-year-old's ethics and testing itself. But first, Science: the how (not why) of it, the choice of it, its use (and non-use), and the dangers of Not-science. — JR

HOW THERE IS NO WHY IN SCIENCE

Lawrence M. Krauss

(Excerpted from the Preface to the Paperback Edition of *A Universe From Nothing, which is a focus of our Humanist 102 discussion November 25 – see page 7.*)

Whenever one asks “Why?” in science, one actually means “How?”. “Why?” is not really a sensible question in science because it usually implies purpose and, as anyone who has been the parent of a small child knows, one can keep on asking “Why?” forever, no matter what the answer to the previous question. Ultimately, the only way to end the conversation seems to be to say “Because!”.

Science *changes* the meaning of questions, especially why-like questions, as it progresses. Here is an early example of this fact, which illustrates a number of features in common with the more recent revelations . . .

The renowned astronomer Johannes Kepler claimed in 1595 to have had an epiphany when he suddenly thought he had answered a profoundly important why question: “Why are there six planets?” The answer, he believed, lay in the view of the five Platonic solids, those sacred objects from geometry whose faces can be composed of regular polygons—triangles, squares, etc.—and that could be circumscribed by spheres whose size would increase as the number of faces of the solid increased. If these spheres then separated the orbits of the six known planets, he conjectured, perhaps their relative distances from the sun and the fact that there were just six of them could be understood as revealing, in a profound and deep sense, the mind of God, the mathematician. (The idea that geometry was sacred goes back as far as Pythagoras.) “Why are there six planets?”—then, in 1595—was considered a meaningful question, one that revealed purpose to the universe.

Now, however, we understand the question is

meaningless. In the first place, we know there are not six planets, there are nine planets. (Pluto will always be a planet for me. Not only do I like to annoy my friend Neil deGrasse Tyson by so insisting, but my daughter did her fourth-grade science project on Pluto, and I don't want that to have been in vain!) More important, however, we know our solar system is *not* unique, which Kepler and his era did not know. More than 2,000 planets orbiting other stars have been discovered (via a satellite named Kepler, coincidentally!).

The important question then becomes not “*Why?*” but “*How* does our solar system have nine planets?” (or, eight planets, depending upon your count). Since clearly lots of different solar systems exist, with very different features, what we really want to know is how typical we are, what specific conditions might have existed allowing our solar system to have four rocky planets closest to the sun, surrounded by a number of far larger gas giants. The answer to this question might shed light on the likelihood of finding life elsewhere in the universe, for example.

Most important, however, we realize that there is nothing profound about six (or eight or nine), nothing that points to purpose or design, no evidence of “purpose” in the distribution of planets in the universe. Not only has “why” become “how” but “why” no longer has any verifiable meaning.

WHY WE SHOULD CHOOSE SCIENCE OVER BELIEFS

Michael Shermer

(Excerpted from *ScientificAmerican.com*, 9/24/2013)

Ever since college I have been a libertarian—socially liberal and fiscally conservative. I believe in individual liberty and personal responsibility. I also

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and a Charter Chapter of the American Humanist Association.

believe in science as the greatest instrument ever devised for understanding the world. So what happens when these two principles are in conflict? My libertarian beliefs have not always served me well. Like most people who hold strong ideological convictions, I find that, too often, my beliefs trump the scientific facts. This is called motivated reasoning, in which our brain reasons our way to supporting what we want to be true. Knowing about the existence of motivated reasoning, however, can help us overcome it when it is at odds with evidence.

Take gun control. I always accepted the libertarian position of minimum regulation in the sale and use of firearms because I placed guns under the beneficial rubric of minimal restrictions on individuals. Then I read the science on guns and homicides, suicides and accidental shootings, and realized that the freedom for me to swing my arms ends at your nose. The libertarian belief in the rule of law and a potent police and military to protect our rights won't work if the citizens of a nation are better armed but have no training and few restraints. Although the data to convince me that we need some gun-control measures were there all along, I had ignored them because they didn't fit my creed. In several recent debates with economist John R. Lott, Jr., author of *More Guns, Less Crime*, I saw a reflection of my former self in the cherry picking and data mining of studies to suit ideological convictions. We all do it, and when the science is complicated, the confirmation bias (a type of motivated reasoning) that directs the mind to seek and find confirming facts and ignore disconfirming evidence kicks in.

My libertarianism also once clouded my analysis of climate change. I was a longtime skeptic, mainly because it seemed to me that liberals were exaggerating the case for global warming as a kind of secular millenarianism—an environmental apocalypse requiring drastic government action to save us from doomsday through countless regulations that would handcuff the economy and restrain capitalism, which I hold to be the greatest enemy of poverty. Then I went to the primary scientific literature on climate and discovered that there is convergent evidence from multiple lines of inquiry that global warming is real and human-caused: temperatures increasing, glaciers melting, Arctic ice vanishing, Antarctic ice cap shrinking, sea-level rise corresponding with the amount of melting ice and thermal expansion, carbon dioxide touching the level of 400 parts per million (the highest in at least 800,000 years and the fastest increase ever), and the confirmed prediction that if anthropogenic global warming is real the stratosphere and upper troposphere should cool while the lower troposphere should warm, which is the case.

The clash between scientific facts and ideologies was on display at the 2013 FreedomFest conference in Las Vegas—the largest gathering of libertarians in the world—where I participated in two debates, one on gun control and the other on climate change. I love FreedomFest because it supercharges my belief engine. But this year I was so discouraged by the rampant denial of science that I wanted to turn in my libertarian membership card. At the

gun-control debate (as in my debates with Lott around the country), proposing even modest measures that would have almost no effect on freedom—such as background checks—brought on opprobrium as if I had burned a copy of the U.S. Constitution on stage. In the climate debate, when I showed that between 90 and 98 percent of climate scientists accept anthropogenic global warming, someone shouted, “LIAR!” and stormed out of the room.

Liberals and conservatives are motivated reasoners, too, of course, and not all libertarians deny science, but all of us are subject to the psychological forces at play when it comes to choosing between facts and beliefs when they do not mesh. In the long run, it is better to understand the way the world really is rather than how we would like it to be.

SCIENCE, EVIDENCE, AND REASON DON'T COUNT FOR MUCH IN DECISION-MAKING

Marty Kaplan

(Excerpted from “The most depressing discovery about the brain ever”, on *Alternet.com*, 9/17/2013)

Yale law school professor Dan Kahan's new research paper is called “Motivated Numeracy and Enlightened Self-Government”, but for me a better title is the headline on science writer Chris Mooney's piece about it in *Grist*: “Science Confirms: Politics Wrecks Your Ability to Do Math.”

Kahan conducted some ingenious experiments about the impact of political passion on people's ability to think clearly. His conclusion, in Mooney's words: partisanship “can even undermine our very basic reasoning skills.... [People] who are otherwise very good at math may totally flunk a problem that they would otherwise probably be able to solve, simply because giving the right answer goes against their political beliefs.”

In other words, say goodnight to the dream that education, journalism, scientific evidence, media literacy or reason can provide the tools and information that people need in order to make good decisions. It turns out that in the public realm, a lack of information isn't the real problem. The hurdle is how our minds work, no matter how smart we think we are. We want to believe we're rational, but reason turns out to be the ex post facto way we rationalize what our emotions already want to believe.

For years my go-to source for downer studies of how our hard-wiring makes democracy hopeless has been Brendan Nyhan, an assistant professor of government at Dartmouth. Nyhan and his collaborators have been running experiments trying to answer this terrifying question about American voters: Do facts matter?

The answer, basically, is no. When people are misinformed, giving them facts to correct those errors only makes them cling to their beliefs more tenaciously.

Here's some of what Nyhan found:

People who thought WMDs were found in Iraq believed that misinformation even more strongly when they were shown a news story correcting it.

People who thought George W. Bush banned all stem cell research kept thinking he did that even after they were shown an article saying that only some federally funded stem cell work was stopped.

People who said the economy was the most important issue to them, and who disapproved of Obama's economic record, were shown a graph of non-farm employment over the prior year – a rising line, adding about a million jobs. They were asked whether the number of people with jobs had gone up, down or stayed about the same. Many, looking straight at the graph, said down.

But if, before they were shown the graph, they were asked to write a few sentences about an experience that made them feel good about themselves, a significant number of them changed their minds about the economy. If you spend a few minutes affirming your self-worth, you're more likely to say that the number of jobs increased.

In Kahan's experiment, some people were asked to interpret a table of numbers about whether a skin cream reduced rashes, and some people were asked to interpret a different table – containing the same numbers – about whether a law banning private citizens from carrying concealed handguns reduced crime. Kahan found that when the numbers in the table conflicted with people's positions on gun control, they couldn't do the math right, though they could when the subject was skin cream. The bleakest finding was that the more advanced that people's math skills were, the more likely it was that their political views, *whether liberal or conservative*, made them less able to solve the math problem. (*Italic emphasis added – JR*)

I hate what this implies – not only about gun control, but also about other contentious issues, like climate change. I'm not completely ready to give up on the idea that disputes over facts can be resolved by evidence, but you have to admit that things aren't looking so good for a reason. I keep hoping that one more photo of an iceberg the size of Manhattan calving off Greenland, one more stretch of record-breaking heat and drought and fires, one more graph of how atmospheric carbon dioxide has risen in the past century, will do the trick. But what these studies of how our minds work suggest is that the political judgments we've made are impervious to facts that contradict us.

Maybe climate change denial isn't the right term; it implies a psychological disorder. Denial is business-as-usual for our brains. More and better facts don't turn low-information voters into well-equipped citizens. It just makes them more committed to their misperceptions.

In the entire history of the universe, no Fox News viewers ever changed their minds because some new data upended their thinking. When there's a conflict between partisan beliefs and evidence, the beliefs win. The power of emotion over reason isn't a bug in our operating systems, it's a feature.

The greatest obstacle to discovering the shape of the earth, the continents, and the oceans was not ignorance but the illusion of knowledge. — *Daniel J. Boorstin*

THE DANGERS OF PSEUDOSCIENCE

Massimo Pigliucci and Maarten Boudry

(Reprinted from *The New York Times Opinionator blog*, October 10, 2013)

Philosophers of science have been preoccupied for a while with what they call the “demarcation problem”, the issue of what separates good science from bad science and pseudoscience (and everything in between). The problem is relevant for at least three reasons.

The first is philosophical: Demarcation is crucial to our pursuit of knowledge; its issues go to the core of debates on epistemology and of the nature of truth and discovery. The second reason is civic: our society spends billions of tax dollars on scientific research, so it is important that we also have a good grasp of what constitutes money well spent in this regard. Should the National Institutes of Health finance research on “alternative medicine”? Should the Department of Defense fund studies on telepathy? Third, as an ethical matter, pseudoscience is not – contrary to popular belief – merely a harmless pastime of the gullible; it often threatens people's welfare, sometimes fatally so. For instance, millions of people worldwide have died of AIDS because they (or, in some cases, their governments) refuse to accept basic scientific findings about the disease, entrusting their fates to folk remedies and “snake oil” therapies.

It is precisely in the area of medical treatments that the science-pseudoscience divide is most critical, and where the role of philosophers in clarifying things may be most relevant. Our colleague Stephen T. Asma raised the issue in a recent *Stone* [*NYTimes* blog] column (“The Enigma of Chinese Medicine”), pointing out that some traditional Chinese remedies (like drinking fresh turtle blood to alleviate cold symptoms) may in fact work, and therefore should not be dismissed as pseudoscience.

This, however, risks confusing the possible effectiveness of folk remedies with the arbitrary theoretical-metaphysical baggage attached to it. There is no question that some folk remedies do work. The active ingredient of aspirin, for example, is derived from willow bark, which had been known to have beneficial effects since the time of Hippocrates. There is also no mystery about how this happens: people have more or less randomly tried solutions to their health problems for millennia, sometimes stumbling upon something useful. What makes the use of aspirin “scientific”, however, is that we have validated its effectiveness through properly controlled trials, isolated the active ingredient, and understood the biochemical pathways through which it has its effects (it suppresses the production of prostaglandins and thromboxanes by way of interference with the enzyme cyclooxygenase, just in case you were curious).

Asma's example of Chinese medicine's claims about the existence of “Qi” energy, channeled through the human body by way of “meridians”, though, is a different matter. This sounds scientific, because it uses arcane jargon that gives the impression of articulating explanatory principles. But there is no way to test the existence of Qi and associated

meridians, or to establish a viable research program based on those concepts, for the simple reason that talk of Qi and meridians only looks substantive, but it isn't even in the ballpark of an empirically verifiable theory.

In terms of empirical results, there are strong indications that acupuncture is effective for reducing chronic pain and nausea, but sham therapy, where needles are applied at random places, or are not even pierced through the skin, turn out to be equally effective ... thus seriously undermining talk of meridians and Qi lines. In other words, the notion of Qi only mimics scientific notions such as enzyme actions on lipid compounds. This is a standard *modus operandi* of pseudoscience: it adopts the external trappings of science, but without the substance.

Asma at one point compares the current inaccessibility of Qi energy to the previous (until this year) inaccessibility of the famous Higgs boson, a sub-atomic particle postulated by physicists to play a crucial role in literally holding the universe together (it provides mass to all other particles). But the analogy does not hold. The existence of the Higgs had been predicted on the basis of a very successful physical theory known as the Standard Model. This theory is not only exceedingly mathematically sophisticated, but it has been verified experimentally over and over again. The notion of Qi, again, is not really a theory in any meaningful sense of the word. It is just an evocative word to label a mysterious force of which we do not know and we are not told how to find out anything at all.

Philosophers of science have long recognized that there is nothing wrong with positing unobservable entities *per se*, it's a question of what work such entities actually do within a given theoretical-empirical framework. Qi and meridians don't seem to do any, and that doesn't seem to bother supporters and practitioners of Chinese medicine. But it ought to.

Still, one may reasonably object, what's the harm in believing in Qi and related notions, if in fact the proposed remedies seem to help? Well, setting aside the obvious objections that the slaughtering of turtles might raise on ethical grounds, there are several issues to consider. To begin with, we can incorporate whatever serendipitous discoveries from folk medicine into modern scientific practice, as in the case of the willow bark turned aspirin. In this sense, there is no such thing as "alternative" medicine, there's only stuff that works and stuff that doesn't.

Second, if we are positing Qi and similar concepts, we are attempting to provide explanations for why some things work and others don't. If these explanations are wrong, or unfounded as in the case of vacuous concepts like Qi, then we ought to correct or abandon them. Most importantly, pseudo-medical treatments often do not work, or are even positively harmful. If you take folk herbal "remedies", for instance, while your body is fighting a serious infection, you may suffer severe, even fatal, consequences.

That is precisely what happens worldwide to people who deny the connection between H.I.V. and AIDS, as superbly documented by the journalist Michael Specter.

Indulging in a bit of pseudoscience in some instances may be relatively innocuous, but the problem is that doing so lowers your defenses against more dangerous delusions that are based on similar confusions and fallacies. For instance, you may expose yourself and your loved ones to harm because your pseudoscientific proclivities lead you to accept notions that have been scientifically disproved, like the increasingly (and worryingly) popular idea that vaccines cause autism.

Philosophers nowadays recognize that there is no sharp line dividing sense from nonsense, and moreover that doctrines starting out in one camp may over time evolve into the other. For example, alchemy was a (somewhat) legitimate science in the times of Newton and Boyle, but it is now firmly pseudoscientific (movements in the opposite direction, from full-blown pseudoscience to genuine science, are notably rare). The verdict by philosopher Larry Laudan, echoed by Asma, that the demarcation problem is dead and buried, is not shared by most contemporary philosophers who have studied the subject.

Even the criterion of falsifiability, for example, is still a useful benchmark for distinguishing science and pseudoscience, as a first approximation. Asma's own counterexample inadvertently shows this: the "cleverness" of astrologers in cherry-picking what counts as a confirmation of their theory, is hardly a problem for the criterion of falsifiability, but rather a nice illustration of Popper's basic insight: the bad habit of creative fudging and finagling with empirical data ultimately makes a theory impervious to refutation. And all pseudoscientists do it, from parapsychologists to creationists and 9/11 Truthers.

Asma's equating of Qi energy with the "sacrosanct scientific method", as if both are on the same par, is especially worrisome. Aside from comparing a doctrine about how the world works (Qi) with an open-ended method for obtaining knowledge, what exactly is "sacrosanct" about a method that readily allows for the integration of willow bark and turtle blood, provided that they hold up to scrutiny? The open-ended nature of science means that there is nothing sacrosanct in either its results or its methods.

The borderlines between genuine science and pseudoscience may be fuzzy, but this should be even more of a call for careful distinctions, based on systematic facts and sound reasoning. To try a modicum of turtle blood here and a little aspirin there is not the hallmark of wisdom and even-mindedness. It is a dangerous gateway to superstition and irrationality.

JOKES FOR INTELLECTUALS

Chrissy Stockton

(Lifted from thoughtcatalog.com by Brian Rafferty)

Werner Heisenberg, Kurt Gödel, and Noam Chomsky walk into a bar. Heisenberg turns to the other two and says, "Clearly this is a joke, but how can we figure out if it's funny or not?" Gödel replies, "We can't know that because we're inside the joke." Chomsky says, "Of course it's funny. You're just telling it wrong."

JONATHAN ENGEL WOWS THE CROWD AT OUR FREETHOUGHT DAY BRUNCH



Pete's Tavern did a complete turnaround after a sloppy Day of Reason performance in May. Service was quick and efficient, drinks came quickly and to the right people, and food was delivered hot and all together - i.e., brunch was fine.

All of which made for a satisfied gathering of SHSNYers and friends (we filled the room again), which quickly became a happy and interested audience when featured speaker Jonathan Engle began his talk on "The

History of Church/State Separation in America".

Witty and knowledgeable, Jonathan (one of our newest members), reviewed the Founders' efforts to promote freedom of and from religion in the early Republic - from Madison's "Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments", to Article VI, Paragraph 3 of the Constitution ("no religious test"), to the First Amendment ("Congress shall make no law ..."), and Washington's famous letter ("all possess alike liberty of conscience ...") to the Touro Synagogue. Said Jonathan, "If I had to choose a 'George' president ..." and the audience erupted in laughter.

Jonathan touched on highlights of church-state relations through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, then brought his talk home to the personal. Jonathan is the younger son of Steve Engel, the name plaintiff in *Engel v. Vitale*, the 1962 case that ended organized prayer in public schools. As per Justice Hugo Black's majority (6-1) opinion:

"It is no part of the business of government to compose official prayers for any group of the American people to recite as a part of a religious program carried on by the government."

And then, in Jonathan's words, "all hell broke loose". His description of the Religious Right fury directed at all the litigants and their families - broken windows, anti-Semitic death threats, even a cross burning, not in Alabama, on Long Island! - held the assembly spellbound.

And half a century later, Jonathan reports, the rabidly religious, the haters, and the delusional continue to try to overturn *Engel v. Vitale*, or to simply flout it with programs - some stealthy, some brazen - to bring organized prayer, their prayers, back into the public schools.

A short and lively Q&A session ended with real applause and several "best ever" remarks - *well done!* - JR

RAFFERTY TO SPEAK ON HUMANISM AT MOLLOY COLLEGE NOVEMBER 10

SHSNY President John Rafferty will participate in the Institute for Interfaith Dialogue's program on Humanism at Molloy College in Rockville Center on Sunday, Nov 10, 3-5 pm. It's free, open to all, and info is at 516-323-3941, or mlowenthal@molloy.edu.

Y'all come. - JR

NORMAN DORSEN REVIEWS THE HISTORY OF CIVIL LIBERTIES IN AMERICA

There was a time, less than a century ago, Norman Dorsen told a spellbound audience in Ceremonial Hall at New York Society for Ethical Culture on October 22, when the term "civil liberties" had not yet been spoken in America, and the concept was brand-new.

Professor Dorsen is Stokes Professor of Law at NYU Law School, and was General Counsel (1969-1976), then President (1976-1991) of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Closer to home, Norman is also a long, long-time member of the Secular Humanist Society of New York.

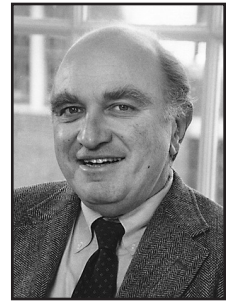
The first of the "Six Crises of the ACLU" (he actually discussed seven) was simply getting started in January, 1920, growing out of the need to protect the rights (against censorship and incarceration) of those who had opposed U.S. involvement in World War I. Founder/first president Roger Baldwin defined the integrity of the new organization:

"The tests of the loyalty of the ACLU to its principles lie in the impartiality with which they are applied and the character of its leadership - no favorites in defense of rights for all, no contradictory loyalties in the minds of the leaders. These are hard tests to impose and apply against natural sympathies and prejudices; harder, perhaps to determine the consistency of anyone's loyalties and beliefs; even harder to defend the thought we hate."

The then-tiny ACLU gained notice defending the rights of immigrants against the "Red Scare" Palmer raids of the 1920s, and - even more famously - joining in the defense of John Scopes in the "Monkey Trial" in Tennessee. But Baldwin's caveat about "contradictory loyalties" was put to the test in the 1930s when the organization split over the expulsion of communists from the ACLU Board, and again the 1950s when it came under attack from the right for protecting victims of anti-communist witch hunts during the McCarthy era, and from the left for, arguably, not doing enough.

In the 1960s, the organization became more activist, eventually taking a leadership role in the anti-Vietnam War movement. But perhaps the greatest test of founder Baldwin's principles was the 1977 Skokie case. For the ACLU it was a no-brainer: defend the free-speech rights of the self-styled "nazis" ("defend the thought we hate") to march through heavily-Jewish Skokie, Illinois, on Hitler's birthday. That stand cost the organization dearly in the short term - loss of membership and financial support - but proved, even to conservatives, the ACLU's "no favorites" commitment.

Today, the ACLU fights the encroachment of the Religious Right on the separation of church and state, and the Bush and Obama administrations upending of civil rights in the "War on Terror" ... and deserves the support of every humanist. - JR, member of the ACLU since 1992.



SHSNY CALENDAR: NOVEMBER 2013 - JANUARY 2014

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, NOV 7, 7-8:30 pm

in the front room of

THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK

28 East 35 St. (Park-Mad)

(3 doors West of the church - red door)

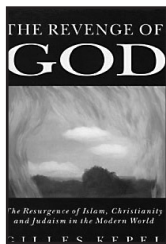
We'll discuss

THE REVENGE OF GOD:

***The Resurgence of Islam,
Christianity and Judaism in the
Modern World***

Gilles Kepel

In this translation of the best-selling French book, *La Revanche de Dieu*, Gilles Kepel, one of Europe's leading authorities on Islamic societies, offers a compelling account of the resurgence of religious belief in the modern world.



Kepel's focus is radical movements within Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. From Protestant televangelists to ultra-Orthodox Jews, from Islamic militants to the "charismatic renewal", he argues that they cannot be dismissed simply as a reaction to modernity.

Each group pursues both a strategy from above, attempting to seize state power and use state legislation to promote its ends, and a strategy from below, evangelizing the masses and seeking to take control of their daily lives.

"They are true children of our time" who seek to recreate society according to a set of symbols and values in accordance with their holy scriptures. We may not agree with them, but they represent a real groundswell for change. - *Paper*

Join us even if you haven't finished reading.

The SHSNY Book Club is open to all ... and free!

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, DEC 5, 7-8:30 pm at

Community Church of NY

28 East 35 Street (Park-Mad)

**FREETHINKERS: A History of
American Secularism**

Susan Jacoby

An authoritative history of the vital role of secularist thinkers and activists in the United States, from a writer of "fierce intelligence and nimble, unfettered imagination" (*New York Times*).

Freethinkers offers a powerful defense of the secularist heritage that gave Americans the first government in the world founded not on the authority of religion but on the bedrock of human reason.

SHSNY BOOK CLUB

THURS, JAN 2, 7-8:30 pm

at Community Church of NY

28 East 35 Street (Park-Mad)

**36 ARGUMENTS FOR THE
EXISTENCE OF GOD:**

A Work of Fiction

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein

36 Arguments for the Existence of God plunges into the great debate of our day: the clash between faith and reason. Through the enchantment of fiction, award-winning novelist and MacArthur Fellow Rebecca Newberger Goldstein shows that the tension between religion and doubt cannot be understood through rational argument alone. It also must be explored from the point of view of individual people caught in the raptures and torments of religious experience in all their variety.

Using her gifts in fiction and philosophy, Goldstein has produced a true crossover novel, complete with a nail-biting climactic debate ("Resolved: God Exists") at Harvard.

NOVEMBER BRUNCH

To be Announced

(Watch Meetup, Facebook, shсны.org)

When 16 of us arrived at Brabant on October 16, we found *Auction* notices on the window and workmen inside dismantling the place. Luckily, The Press Box took us in. *Your suggestions please ...*

... for a new venue for our brunches. We need a moderately-priced place with a private room or separate space in which we can have group conversation without disturbance to or from other customers. Suggestions to: editor@shсны.org.

MONDAY, NOV 11, 7:00 pm

SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT

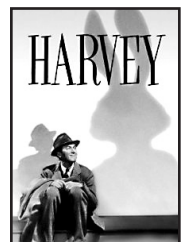
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge

140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)

HARVEY

Inspired by recent nonsense in *The New York Times*

(page 8), this month's selection is the delightful 1950 comedy, "Harvey".



Because his drinking-buddy/companion is an invisible six-foot rabbit, a whimsical middle-aged man (James Stewart in one of his greatest roles) is thought by his family to be insane - but Elwood P. Dowd may be wiser than anyone knows.

After-the-Film Discussion:

Why is talking to an imaginary six-foot rabbit crazier than talking to an invisible man in the sky?

SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.

(But put something on the bar beside your elbow.)

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AND MEET US ON MEETUP

www.meetup.com/shсны-org/

SHSNY CALENDAR: NOVEMBER 2013 - JANUARY 2014

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD

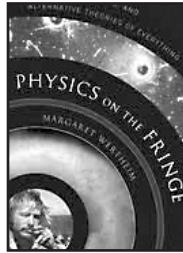
THURS, NOV 21, 7:00 pm

Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)

PHYSICS ON THE FRINGE:

Smoke Rings, Circlons and Alternating Theories of Everything
Margaret Wertheim

For 15 years, award-winning science writer Wertheim has been checking out the work of "outsider physicists", many without formal training, and all



convinced that they have found true alternative theories of the universe.

Through profiles of people like Jim Carter, the "Einstein of outsiders", who demonstrates his complete theory of matter, energy and gravity in back-yard experiments involving garbage cans and a disco fog machine, Wertheim challenges our conception of what science is, how it works, and who it is for.

After-the-DVD discussion:

Considering "alternative" sciences, where do we draw the

"demarcation" line (see page 3)?

Great Lectures Night is FREE

(But put something on the bar beside your elbow.)

PLANNING AHEAD

The usual schedule is ...

Book Club: First Thursday

at the Community Church of NY

Movie Night: Second Monday

at Stone Creek Lounge.

Brunch: Third Sunday

at ... where now?

Great Lectures: 4th Wednesday

at Stone Creek Lounge.

Humanism 101: Last Monday

at the Community Church of NY

More info: www.shsny.org;

at humanism.meetup.com/515;

and 212-308-2165

HUMANISM 102

MONDAY, NOV 25, 6:30-8:30

Community Church of New York
28 East 35 Street (red door)

Meeting/Discussion #2:

Why Is There Anything?

Readings

Online: skeptics@skeptic.com

Robert Lawrence Kuhn: *Levels of Nothing*

Book: Lawrence Krauss: *A Universe from Nothing*

Note: You can do the online reading carefully in an hour or so. If you haven't done the reading, you may still audit the discussion – all are welcome!

TUES, NOV 12, 7:30 pm

SIR DAVID ATTENBOROUGH

Alfred Russel Wallace and the Birds of Paradise

LeFrak Theater, American Museum of Natural History (Central Park West & 79 St.)

Attenborough, like Wallace (co-discoverer with Darwin of natural selection), who spent eight years studying the Birds of Paradise of the Malay Archipelago, is passionate about the birds. After the lecture, he and co-author Errol Fuller will sign copies of their new book, *Drawn from Paradise*. Tickets/info at 212-769-5200 or amnh.org.

Ask, too, about the Nov 12 day-long celebration of Wallace in the Kaufmann Theater at AMNH.

MONDAY, NOV 4, 7-8:00 PM
SUNDAY ASSEMBLY NEW YORK
40 DATES ROADSHOW

NY Society for Ethical Culture

2 West 64 Street - Concert Hall

(Co-sponsors: CFI-NYC & Be Secular)

Out of the "dive bar", Sunday Assembly – with Sanderson and Pippa! – is coming to NYSEC, for non-religious talk, live music, celebration, and socializing. Y'all come.

OTHER REASONABLE NEW YORK EVENTS

CFI-NYC. Mon., Nov 11, 10 pm, Google's Lounge (Upstairs at the Living Room), 154 Ludlow St.: "Skeptics on the Mic Karaoke".

Gotham Atheists Live: Thu, Nov 14, 6-10 pm, Slattery's, 8 East 36 St, "Atheist News Reports" (ala SNY Weekend Update), and panel discussion, interview (David Kasper's new book), drinks, fun.

New York Philosophy. Tue, Nov 19, 6-10 pm, 49 Grove, Cocktails & Conversation: *The Philosophy of "Doctor Who"*. RSVP: nyphilosophy.com

NY Society for Ethical Culture: Fri, Nov 1, Ethics in Film: *Citizen Ruth*. Snacks/Bevs, \$5 suggested.

Mon, Nov 4, 1 pm, Ethics in Literature: *Blasphemy*, by Sherman Alexie. Snacks & Bevs, \$5.

Fri, Nov 8, 6:30 pm, Ethics and the Theater: *The Waverly Gallery*, by Kenneth Lonergan. Reception/Refreshments, \$10 suggested donation.

PLUS

Agnostic A.A.: Nine weekly AA-endorsed meetings. agnosticAAnyc.org/meetings.html

Atheism History Week – With SHSNY's John Rafferty, 5:30 p.m.

Wednesdays, MNN Ch. 57 and RNN Ch. 84 in Manhattan, and live streaming at www.mnn.org.

Drinking With Atheists: Every Friday, fun and conversation. Details: meetup.com/RichiesList/FeministFreethinkersofNewYork

Women (Only) Support Group, Beth's apt, bezu@rcn.com

Manhattan History Buffs: Every 3d Tues, 6:30, dinner/talk at Lili's (Chinese) rest, 83-84th/3rd.

Nov 19: *President Warren Harding, Life & Times*. Info: 212-802-7427

A MORNING'S MUSINGS WHILE READING THE NEW YORK TIMES

Jonathan Engel

The October 15 edition of *The New York Times* contains an Op-Ed piece by T.M. Luhrmann called “Conjuring Up Our Own Gods”. In the piece, Mr. Luhrmann cites research that shows that eight out of ten Americans believe in angels and three out of four Americans believe in something paranormal. He also tells the story of a young man named Jack who, through intense concentration, meditation and visualization exercises has created in his own mind an imaginary fox-like creature that speaks to him. Mr. Luhrmann concludes that, “Jack’s story also makes it clear that experiencing an invisible companion as truly present—especially as an adult—takes work: constant concentration, a state that resembles prayer.”

Can we remember something here? The reason that it takes so much work to experience an invisible companion as truly present, whether it’s a fox, a god, or something in between, is because the object being envisioned is not really there. Perhaps, as Mr. Luhrmann asserts, the invisible talking fox gave Jack comfort, just as many people take comfort in believing in a living, breathing, caring god. Doesn’t make either one any more real.

What Mr. Luhrmann fails to state is whether Jack understands that, even though he heard his fox speak, and she (it seems the fox is female; it’s not stated as to why Jack thinks so, and maybe we don’t want to know) “calms him down”, this “tulpa”, as such figments apparently are called, is a product of his own mind and exists only therein. If Jack understands this, it would seem that his thought experiment is largely harmless; if not, Jack is clearly delusional and in need of psychiatric help.

By the way, in his piece Mr. Luhrmann repeats that hoary old canard, “there are no atheists in foxholes”. I have news for him: Yes there are. If he doesn’t believe me, he should familiarize himself with the story of the great American patriot Pat Tillman, who gave up fame and fortune in the National Football League to join the Army and fight for his country in the wake of 9/11. Mr. Tillman was tragically killed by fellow American soldiers during a chaotic firefight in Afghanistan. Pat Tillman was an atheist.

On a lighter note, there’s a news article in the same issue headlined, “Malaysian Court Restricts Use of ‘Allah’ to Muslims, Citing Concerns of a Threat to Islam”. For me, this headline couldn’t help but conjure up images of the scene from “Monty Python’s *Life of Brian*”, where a man is about to be stoned to death for the crime of uttering aloud the word “Jehovah”. The accused complains, “But all I did was tell my wife that the ham she cooked for dinner was good enough for Jehovah.” This infuriates the chief executioner who berates the condemned man, “You just said it again! You’re only making things worse for yourself,” to which the man replies, “I’m about to be stoned to death; how could it be any worse? Jehovah! Jehovah! Jehovah!”

So I can envision a scene in Malaysia where a non-

Muslim is being dragged out of a restaurant by the police for the crime of having ordered “pie *ala mode*”, and he beseeches them to leave him be, crying out, “But I was only asking for some ice cream on my dessert!”

YOUR FRIENDLY NEIGHBORHOOD EDITOR ALSO REACTED TO THE TIMES

To the Editor: “To experience God as walking by your side, in conversation with you, is hard”, says T.M. Luhrmann (“Conjuring Up Our Own Gods”, Op-Ed, Oct. 15). Mr. Luhrmann, who repeats the nonsense that “there are no atheists in foxholes”, thinks that people who populate alternate universes inside their own heads with imaginary beings, at least one of which is a fox, are sane, even rational. So I assume he’d enjoy a cocktail hour conversation with Elwood P. Dowd (of “Harvey”) and Mr. Dowd’s 6’5” companion rabbit. It’s “hard” to “keep God real”, Mr. Luhrmann, because He isn’t.

John Rafferty, President, Secular Humanist Society of New York

WHERE IS GOD? Giddian Beer

If you Google that question most of what you get are explanations of why God allows so much suffering and proofs of God’s existence. For locations you get only “everywhere”, or “in a different dimension”, or “hidden”, or “inside you”; I have not found anything more specific. This is unfortunate because knowing *where* God is could reveal much about *what* God is. We can learn where he is by examining how he got there, a subject about which we do have some knowledge.

Our species has a powerful need to find reasons, to know how and why. Many conditions and events have no obvious explanation and are attributed by some people to unseen, mysterious powers. In antiquity, before the dawn of science, such happenings were very pervasive. To explain them various spirits with magical abilities were imagined. These spirits were mostly capricious, fearsome and demanding. Often icon surrogates of them were made. Rituals, aided by the placebo effect, were invented to influence, cajole or placate them.

As societies became larger and more complex spirits morphed into gods, rituals morphed into worship, and religions were born. Usually one god was imagined to be more powerful and was more venerated or feared than the others. For the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—the supreme god became God. The remaining gods were eventually abolished, to be replaced, in Christianity and Islam, by angels.

The important takeaway is this: all of these spirits, gods, God, and angels are not existent entities; they live *only* in human minds. They are mere figments of imagination, which, unlike reality, is unconstrained.

In this context it is worth noting that throughout *A History of God**—the excellent seminal book by Karen Armstrong, who is *not* an atheist—gods and God, as well as

spirits, are treated as *concepts*, not as actual beings.

These days, even though almost all of what once bewildered our ancestors is now explained—or is at least explainable—most people still believe there is a God of some kind. However, when they are questioned for details, one finds a plethora of God characteristics and versions—from the creator-supervisor of the universe and everything in it (who is demanding, loving, caring and trustworthy, or demanding, jealous, vengeful and capricious, or both)—to a mere initiator of the universe, or an unknowable supernatural “something”. In short, God is whatever its believers-cum-creators concoct.

So, God, or gods, exist in human minds, nowhere else, especially not in any genes. It, and deeds attributed to it, are imagination supported by (usually willful) ignorance, *nothing more*.

**For a free PDF file, Google “a history of god pdf”*

IN THE BEGINNING(S): QUESTIONS FOR CREATIONISTS AND BIBLICAL LITERALISTS

Timothy Beal

(Excerpted from “In the Beginning(s): Appreciating the Complexity of the Bible” in HuffingtonPost, 2/16/2011)

People love to argue about the Bible. Whether very many of them are actually reading it is less clear. Take the creationism-versus-evolution debates, which have become a central battleground in the larger atheist-versus-believers debates. Despite more than a century of conflict, few in these debates seem aware that there are actually several different accounts of creation scattered throughout the Bible, and they don’t all agree. The opening chapters of Genesis give us two.

In the first, God begins on the macrocosmic level, calling forth light from dark, waters from waters, and land from sea. Then comes vegetation, then the sun, moon and stars, and then animal life. Finally, as the *piece de resistance* of creation, God makes humankind, in the plural, male and female, in God’s image.

In the second story, which immediately follows this one, the order of creation is entirely different. Here God’s first act of creation, before there are any plants or animals, is to form a single human, not yet male or female, by shaping it from the dust of the earth and then bringing it to life by breathing into its nostrils. Thus *ha’adam*, Hebrew for “the human”, is formed from *ha’adamah*, “the earth”, and becomes a living soul by divine breath. A beautiful image of the ecological spirituality of humanity: a God-breathed and breathing lump of clay, human from humus, an incarnation of divine transcendence and earthy immanence, as intimate with the ground as with God. Then come plants and animals. Then, when no animal fits the bill as lifelong companion (sorry, Fido), God essentially divides the human into two, male and female. So, in the first story, humans in the plural, male and female, are created last; and in the second, a single human is created first. These two versions of creation simply do not sync.

That’s just the first few pages of Genesis. There are

several other creation stories in the Bible, and they don’t add up to anything like a coherent biblical account of cosmic or human origins. In Job 38, for example, the first act of creation involves a conflict between God and the sea, that is, the formless, watery deep that was there before the world began. God sinks foundations into it for the earth to rest like some huge primeval offshore drilling station. God then sets boundaries for the waters so that they don’t overwhelm it.

In the brief account of creation in Psalm 74, on the other hand, there are monsters, and the struggle to establish order is much more intense. God must first slay Leviathan and the sea dragons, monstrous forces of primordial chaos, in order to create the cosmos as a safe, orderly place. Then again, in Psalm 104, Leviathan is not a monstrous opponent of creation but a sea creature with whom God plays.

And then there’s the account of creation in Proverbs 8, in which God has a divine cohort, Wisdom (in Hebrew, *Hokmah*), who declares that she was with God “from the beginning, from the origin of the earth ... there was still no deep when I was brought forth, no springs rich with water, before the mountains were sunk”. When God “assigned the sea its limits” and “fixed the foundations of the earth”, she says, “I was at his side as confidant. I was a source of delight every day, playing before him all the time” (my translation). This may remind us of the account of beginnings in the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the *logos*”, usually translated as “Word” but also carrying the meaning of “Wisdom”, now incarnate in Christ.

You get the idea. These and other biblical visions of beginnings don’t add up to a consistent biblical account of creation. Unlike the creationism in circulation today, the Bible’s own creationism is rich in different, mutually incompatible ways of imagining cosmic and human beginnings. There is no single biblical account of creation. The Bible doesn’t seem to have a problem with that.

Why should we?

Creationism: Because it’s a lot easier to read one book than a bunch of hard ones. – *Anon?*

HEY, POPE FRANCIS: IF YOU REALLY MEAN IT ABOUT CHANGE, FIRE THIS GUY!

John Rafferty

(Based on “Church Financing Scandal” on Spiegelonline, 10/14/2013)

Tebartz-van Elst, the Bishop of Limburg, Germany, has furnished his own quarters with a €15,000 bathtub, a €2.3 million atrium, and a €2.67 million private chapel. All told, his luxurious new residence and diocesan headquarters is likely to cost €31 million or more — almost six times the original estimate of €5.5 million.

Hello? This guy — who presumably has taken the priestly vow of poverty — *budgeted* €5.5 million?

Tebartz-van Elst, a Ratzinger appointee (of course), has flown to Rome to explain himself to the new pope.

Update Oct 24: He’s been suspended. Okay, now fire him.

HOLLYWOOD & HITLER: FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION THEN, NOW, AND FOREVER

Brian Lemaire

A recent *The New Yorker* article, "Hitler in Hollywood", told the story of how two men prevented Hollywood movies from telling us what the Nazis were doing to the Jews in the 1930s. Joseph Breen of the Hays office, an avowed anti-Semite, made changes to several scripts. The other man, the Nazi consul in Los Angeles, Georg Gyssling, also was able to exert some control over scripts with regard to the treatment of Jews in Germany. They met little or no push-back from the mainly Jewish businessmen who ran the studios.

To be fair, it should be noted that some movies of the 30s carried messages that spoke truth to power, e.g., "The Grapes of Wrath". But exposing the Nazis was effectively muted, as has just now come to light in two new books — *Hollywood and Hitler, 1933-1939*, by Thomas Doherty, and *The Collaboration: Hollywood's Pact with Hitler*, by Ben Urwand.

The timidity of the businessmen who ran the studios in the face of these censors was echoed later in the 1950s. Television network and movie studios were afraid to hire any writers (Dalton Trumbo) or actors (Marsha Hunt) blacklisted by Joe McCarthy and the House UnAmerican Activities Committee, led by Richard Nixon and others.

A parallel from today? Textbook publishers falling over each other in their race to downplay evolution in biology textbooks for the State of Texas, the second-largest market in America for textbook sales.

These are three examples of media companies bowing to censorship all too easily. But not everyone did, or does.

Maxwell Perkins, Scribners' great fiction editor (he brought us Hemingway and Fitzgerald) believed passionately in freedom of expression. He wrote:

"Any publisher who refrained from publication, even if he did not agree with the author's conclusions, because of fear of some particular sect, would be untrue to his profession, and indeed to the cause of intellectual freedom.

Except in the most extreme cases, people should be allowed to express their opinions, and that the result of this is to stir up thought and controversy, out of which will emerge the Truth. It is only what is false that is killed by discussion, not what is true. ... We as publishers are not partisan. What we publishers think is that our function is to bring everything out into the open, on the theory that we have an adult population that knows values, or can learn them, and let them decide."

Comment: "Hitler & Hollywood" was the subject of our excellent discussion after screening "The Life of Emile Zola" on Movie Night October 14. November's film? See page 6. — JR

We tolerate no one in our ranks who attacks the ideas of Christianity. Our movement is Christian.

— Adolph Hitler, October 27, 1928

WHY WE LIVE IN NEW YORK #54, 55, and 56

Tennessee: Child Support Magistrate Lu Ann Ballew of Newport changed the name of a seven-month-old boy from "Messiah" to "Martin" against the parents' wishes.

Despite the fact that last year more than 700 babies were named Messiah in the US, according to the Social Security Administration, Judge Ballew opined that "the word Messiah is a title, and it's a title that has been earned by only one person, and that one person is Jesus Christ".

Mississippi: After being pulled over for a flat tire, commercial truck driver Jagjeet Singh was called a "terrorist" and harassed by Department of Transportation officers over his appearance and religious beliefs.

Jagjeet carries a kirpan—a small sheathed sword sewn to the waistband—that is designed and worn as an article of Sikh faith, as a cross is worn by Christians. The officers called the kirpan a "terrorist weapon".

An observant Sikh, Jagjeet also wears a turban at all times. But in Mississippi's halls of justice, Judge Aubrey Rimes ordered Jagjeet removed from the courtroom and wouldn't let him return until he removed "that rag".

Nebraska: An abused and pregnant 16-year-old sought to bypass the state's "parental consent" law regarding abortions because her foster parents are extremely religious, and she worried that she would lose her place in their home if she told them she wanted to end her pregnancy.

In early October the highest court in the state — led by a judge who is an anti-abortion and Operation Rescue activist — ruled that she must carry her unwanted fetus to term because she is not "sufficiently mature and well-informed" enough to choose to have an abortion.

But mature enough to have and raise a child.

ON THE OTHER HAND ...

New York: As per the October 11 *NY Daily News*, the NYPD is following up on "leads" called in by "psychics" on the Crime Stoppers tip line regarding the disappearance of an autistic boy from Queens. A police source claimed "all leads are investigated when it comes to missing children, and some of those leads come from speaking to psychics".

Note that the source referred to "psychics", and not people claiming to be psychics. — Dennis Middlebrooks

HOW TO AVOID POVERTY

John Rafferty

Right-wing politicians are always ready—at the drop of an invitation from Fox News—to offer their profundities to America's youth in the form of prescriptions on how to avoid poverty, i.e., stay in school, don't do drugs, don't get pregnant, and vote Republican.

While all of the above (with the possible exception of the last), make sense, I think that in their infinite wisdom the solons have overlooked the three most important. And so, to assist them in their laudable and selfless campaigns, I offer anti-poverty prescriptions Numbers 1, 2, and 3 ...

Be born white, male, and rich.

You're welcome.

MIRTA COTTO JOINS THE SHSNY BOARD

At a September 17 meeting of the SHSNY Board of Directors, Mirta Cotto was nominated to membership and elected unanimously.

Mirta, a native of Puerto Rico, has a BA in Spanish from Charter Oak State College in New Britain, is fully bilingual, and is an English-Spanish translator.

"I have always been curious about religion and religious experience," she says. "I was a born-again Christian during my adolescence, a communist as a young adult, and a New Age enthusiast until last year.

"I quit Christianity at age 19 because among other things I hated the way women were thought of and treated in Church. I quit believing in God/s altogether when I realized it was all a farce aimed at taking what little money I earn. I rather believe in humanity and in myself.

"After all, unlike God/s, we do exist."



THE REAL "BORN-AGAINS"

Julia Sweeney

It took me years, but letting go of religion has been the most profound wake-up of my life. I feel I now look at the world not as a child, but as an adult. I see what's bad and it's really bad. But I also see what is beautiful, what is wonderful. And I feel so deeply appreciative that I am alive.

How dare the religious use the term "born again"? That truly describes freethinkers who've thrown off the shackles of religion so much better!

READERS RESPOND TO OCTOBER PIQUE

To the Editor: The wonderful secularism charter that the French Education Minister will require to be displayed in every school in France ("*Allons Enfants de la [secular] Patrie ...*", PIQUE, October) is a welcome development, but this is only made possible by the fact that France, like most advanced countries, has a centrally-controlled national school system run by qualified educational professionals.

In contrast, the USA has a de-centralized school system under the control of the individual states at the highest level and hundreds of local school boards at the lowest.

It is a system wracked by nepotism, corruption and political strife, with curricula often determined by theocratic creationist lunatics whose primary goal is the ultimate disappearance of free, secular public education in the USA and the transfer of tax dollars to sectarian religious schools and parents who home school their kids.

Compare what has happened in Texas, where American history has been rewritten, not by historians but by bible-thumping troglodytes like David Barton, to the praiseworthy efforts of the French government to protect the Enlightenment-based foundations of the Republic. It is enough to make you sick. — *Dennis Middlebrooks*

To the Editor: I completely agree with the editors of *Scientific*

American that GMO labeling is a bad idea ("Labels for GMO Foods Are a Bad Idea", PIQUE, October). Too many people have been taken in by ignorant if well-meaning activists claiming that GMO foods are harmful. They are not.

Despite extensive testing there is not a shred of valid evidence that they pose threats of any kind. The evidence points sharply to the other direction: GMO foods are extremely beneficial to humanity. They saved some billion lives this past century by eliminating worldwide recurring famines and pandemic nutritional deficiencies.

Labeling GMO foods in an environment encumbered by people misinformed about their safety and benefits is akin to falsely crying "Fire!" in a crowded movie house; essentially it tells a panic-inducing lie. The harm it does is considerable: it turns away the consumer from a nutritious product to more expensive and possibly inferior merchandise; it harms the retailer who must investigate and find another product source; it harms the farmer who must, expensively, redo his farming; it hurts the poor who have to pay more for less. It hurts us all. — *Chic Schissel*

TESTING DONE WELL

Bill Chapman

A review in October PIQUE of *Reign of Error*, a book on education, makes some questionable assumptions. I wish to take particular issue with its criticism of standardized testing in schools.

Here in the US, standardized testing for students has come under attack. In our recent NYC Democratic mayoral primary, the three leading contenders all disparaged "teaching to the test".

I did my last two years of high school in Melbourne, Australia. The government there gave 3-hour exams in each subject at the end of the senior year. Those exams entirely determined which university you got into. The reputation of each school depended very heavily upon their performance in these exams, and much of all four years of high school education was built around preparing us for those tests.

In the US, the No Child Left Behind tests, whose results can cost a teacher their job, are often graded by the teacher whose job is at stake. Not surprisingly, there have been cases of teachers cheating. In Melbourne, the graders were separate people hired by the government, who had no knowledge of which school's, let alone which teacher's, tests they were reading, guaranteeing impartial grading.

The Australian exams were never multiple choice. The answers were always to be in prose or working through the problem in algebra/calculus. Another big difference between the Australian system and the American was that in Australia, 80 percent was an A, 70 percent was a B, and so on. This was instrumental in allowing teachers to make 20 percent of the questions very difficult, requiring imagination and insight and out-of-the-box thinking, and still have a reasonable number of A's, while American teachers, where 90 percent is an A, are constrained to asking only easy questions, which leads to a focus on rote memorization rather than a deep grasp of the concepts.

If it is possible to “teach to the test”, that is, spend time on something other than teaching the material as well as possible, and have that result in a better score, then that means the test is poorly designed and can be gamed. I didn’t feel it was possible to game the Australian tests, I saw my friends try, but it seemed to me that the best approach was to simply pursue mastery of the material. If the NCLB tests can be gamed, the solution is to improve them, not do away with them. It is possible for a government to create great tests – I’ve seen it done.

In the last 15 years or so, American education has widely adopted standardized tests. This allows comparison of performance between teachers, and between schools. This is great progress. Teachers’ unions *hate* it, but you have to remember that what they want is a return to the bad old days, when they had 100 percent job security, regardless of performance, with no accountability or meritocracy at all.

No country in the world is spending more per public school student than the US, and our results for all that money are abysmal. How can we possibly hope to improve the system if we aren’t measuring its quality in some way?

In a completely rational society, the best of us would be teachers and the rest of us would have to settle for something less, because passing civilization along from one generation to the next ought to be the highest honor and the highest responsibility anyone could have. – *Lee Iacocca*

CALVIN ON ETHICS

Bill Watterson

(In this more-than-20-years-old comic strip – but still beloved by Hobbesheads like Your Editor – six-year-old Calvin discusses an ethical conundrum with his stuffed-toy (but real to Calvin) tiger, Hobbes. Yes, they’re named for the historical personages. – JR)

Calvin: Today at school, I tried to decide whether to cheat on my test or not. I wondered, is it better to do the right thing and fail ... or is it better to do the wrong thing and succeed? On the one hand, undeserved success gives no satisfaction ... but on the other hand, well-deserved failure gives no satisfaction either. Of course, most everybody cheats some time or other. People always bend the rules if they think they can get away with it. Then again, that doesn’t justify *my* cheating.

Then I thought, Look, cheating on one little test isn’t such a big deal. It doesn’t hurt anyone. But then I wondered if I was just rationalizing my unwillingness to accept the consequences of not studying. Still, in the real world, people care about success, not principles. Then again, maybe that’s why the world is in such a mess. What a dilemma.

Hobbes: So what did you decide?

Calvin: Nothing. I ran out of time and had to hand in a blank paper.

Hobbes: Anymore, simply acknowledging the issue is a moral victory.

Calvin: Well, it just seemed wrong to cheat on an ethics test.

How to avoid poverty.
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All about Science
(and Not-so-science)
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