

PIQUE

Newsletter of the Secular Humanist Society of New York

April, 2017

Spring ahead! Herein we wonder whether we have a new way of understanding science, consider how much of, well, everything is invisible to us, and how blind we are to reason and even reality.

We promote “community immunity”, easy activism, and phone calls to Congress. We’re positive about public education and Texas (really!), and nominate maybe the dumbest-ever Dumbth. And in this season of hope we conclude with a message about courage from a true American hero. – JR

MARCH FOR SCIENCE

Earth Day – Saturday, April 22 at Noon

Join tens of thousands of other science-minded and freethinking New Yorkers to show your support for science, reason and education, all under attack in Donald Trump’s new American Age of Unreason.

Planning for the day (assembly points, line of march, etc.) is still going on as we send PIQUE to the printer, so keep checking www.marchforscience.nyc/ and/or #marchforsciencenyc for the necessary info.

Be there for science! Be there for reason! Be there!

CONVERGENCE: THE MOST IMPORTANT IDEA ABOUT THE UNIVERSE

Peter Watson

(Reprinted from <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/3/7/2017>)

Archimedes, Pythagoras, Democritus. The history of science famously dates back to the brilliant minds of classical Greece. Another beginning is attributed to the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century, culminating in Isaac Newton’s discovery of order in the heavens, and the founding of the Royal Society in London.

For me, however, there was a much more fascinating reboot in the 1850s, when two near-simultaneous events changed the landscape for all time and transformed our understanding of what science is. These events were: (1) the new understanding of energy and its conservation; (2) Charles Darwin’s idea about evolution by natural selection.

These breakthroughs, arriving in the same decade, were important not just for themselves, but also because each brought together what had hitherto been seen as disparate disciplines. These were the two greatest unifying ideas of all time and this was when the process of convergence—the fact that seemingly disparate areas of science are

fundamentally linked—was first observed.

The conservation of energy, first codified by Hermann von Helmholtz in Berlin, brought together the sciences of heat, optics, magnetism, electricity, food- and blood-chemistry. It identified the concept of “energy”, an entity which cannot be created or destroyed, only converted from one form to another.

With evolution, Darwin collected copious results from zoology, botany, geology and astronomy to show that there was an “order in the rocks”, that living forms varied across the geological ages in systematic ways and that the heavens were themselves evolving, providing ample time for natural selection to have produced its effects.

The importance of these two insights was the way they brought seemingly different activities under the same umbrella. This was doubly important because it showed that the sciences, unlike other forms of knowledge (and this is the crucial point), support one another in a reciprocal framework.

Since then the convergence has gathered pace: Niels Bohr’s discoveries showed how physics and chemistry are intimately linked (through the electrons that orbit the nucleus, which give the different elements their properties; Albert Einstein famously linked space and time, to create spacetime; and Max Planck’s discovery of the quantum, that matter is itself discrete and not continuous, linked up with Mendel’s discovery that genes produce discrete effects—blue eyes or brown, but never blends. During World War II Erwin Schrödinger showed how physics governed the characteristics of the gene. Since the war astronomy and physics have been married. “Early cosmology has become synonymous with particle physics” — this is Abdus Salam, the Indian winner of the Nobel Prize in his Dirac lecture in Cambridge, UK, in 1988.

More recently various aspects of biology — photosynthesis

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and the remarkable ability of birds to navigate huge distances—have been shown to be explicable by quantum physics. And psychology has been amalgamating with economics. Richard Thaler has described how the economic profession has been transformed by the experimental discoveries of behavioral science. In his 2015 book, *Misbehaving: The Making of Behavioral Economics*, he charts its advances over a forty-year period, from the wilderness to the point where he himself became (in 2015) the president of the American Economic Association.

Convergence is not a trivial matter. Steven Weinberg, the Nobel Prize-winning professor of physics at the University of Texas, Austin, says it may be “the most important thing about the universe”. I agree. The way the disciplines have come together, in a reciprocal framework, has produced the greatest story there could ever be—the history of the universe 13.8 billion years ago right up until now, with all discoveries fitting on one coherent line.

This unique success means, I feel sure, that the sciences are set to invade other areas of life not traditionally associated with science: law, the arts, politics, morality, social life. Sam Harris, the American philosopher and neuroscientist, has described morality as “an undeveloped aspect of science” and believes we shall eventually be able to define “human values” satisfactorily. Patricia Churchland, the Canadian-American neuroscientist, argues that our understanding of “human nature” can be refined by neuroscience, to the benefit of all.

The latest developments are aided by the recent accumulation of big data sets and our snowballing abilities in computation. For example, mathematicians, physicists and psychologists have all examined aspects of capitalism. If there is an overriding focus it is what *Science* magazine, in a special issue, called “The Science of Inequality”. This stems from the realization that under capitalism, except for a few decades following the two world wars in the twentieth century, when many industrial states were on their knees financially, the basic economic order has been a growing wealth disparity within populations.

This finding—which applies to many countries—appears solid and has emerged from a wave of big data, tax returns for the past two centuries. This richness means that, as *Science* put it, the “stuff of science” can be applied to it—analysis, extracting causal inferences, formulating hypotheses.

In other words, the methods of science, which have proved so successful—observation, quantification, experimental testing—are being increasingly applied in new areas. By the same token, the personality of jurors is being investigated to see how psychology influences their understanding of evidence and the bringing of verdicts. In political research, psychology—again—is being used to assess which voters vote for a candidate and which vote against, and which aspects of a candidate’s personality appeal to which type of voter. How much do politics and psychology overlap?

These are exciting but challenging times. As Robert

Laughlin, the Nobel Prize-winning professor of physics at Stanford, has pointed out, all areas of life—economics no less than psychology or quantum biology—are getting more accurate and therefore more predictive. The speed of light in a vacuum is now known to an accuracy of better than one part in ten trillion, atomic clocks are accurate to one part in one hundred trillion.

If science can likewise improve accuracy in our legal, educational or financial lives, we shall be making real progress. The very existence of convergence—which lies at the heart of the scientific endeavor when we examine its history—should give us optimism for the future.

CONVERGENCE: AN OPPOSING VIEW

J.L. Heilbron

(Excerpted from “A Science Journalist Foresees One Grand Explanation for the Universe”, Mr. Heilbron’s review of Watson’s book, *Convergence* (see above), in the NYTimes Book Review, 3/10/2017)

(Ed: In the first half of his review/essay, Mr. Heilbron takes Watson to task for errors of fact, and compares his book to Dickens’s “Mudfog Feast”, a “gluttonous banquet” in *The Pickwick Papers*. Let’s skip to his conclusion. – JR)

To historians and other skeptics, Watson’s errors matter very much indeed. They know that science, like all human activities, has been formed by a great many contingencies. No doubt it has developed so as to give us extraordinary control over our environment, in many cases to our advantage and improvement. This control is a product not of convergence, however, but of specialization, of individuals coming to know more and more about less and less. It does not follow that the stories we tell to tie this knowledge together guarantee convergence to a unique Science, or that we would be able to discover such a Science if it exists. To return to our opening metaphor, the primary reason for what appears to Watson as a convergence of the sciences is that they have been cooked in the same kitchen, or, to speak plainly, in their contemporary forms they all try to progress by the application of increasingly precise instruments and strong mathematics to artificially constructed experiments.

The physicist Steven Weinberg, who believes, or has believed, in the imminence of the creation of a Theory of Everything, but more recently has expressed doubts about fundamental aspects of quantum mechanics, devised a metaphor to answer historians who argue from the contingencies of scientific discoveries that theories are to some extent social constructions. Mountain climbers may try many paths, the metaphor goes, run to and fro (the classical method of acquiring knowledge), scramble and slip on their ascent; but if they reach the top, no one doubts they have gotten there. The metaphor can be developed further: A successful ascent does not remove the contingencies in the choice of the mountain. There may be something in Ernst Mach’s remark that the only reason physicists based their science on mechanics and not thermodynamics or acoustics is that human beings have

hunted and made war by throwing things.

At the moment the summit we are climbing is obscured by dark matter, which physicists have postulated to save established theory. Although it must have eight or nine times the mass of all the matter in the universe from which mountains can be made, physicists do not seem to know much more about it than what they have had to assume. Perhaps we are barking up the wrong mountain. Perhaps Watson's story, even if told with all the competence possible, cannot converge. And yet it may. Scientists and taxpayers have invested so much thought, emotion and money in following up the generalizations that Watson thinks put the sciences on the course of convergence that even if our mountain of Science should be no more than a hillock, we might not be able to turn back. In this Pickwickian sense the natural and human sciences might be limping toward convergence. And that would not be a welcome thing.

INVISIBILITY

Kathryn Shulz

(Excerpted from "Sight Unseen: the hows and whys of invisibility", in The New Yorker, 4/13/2015)

Almost everything around us is imperceptible, almost all the rest is maddeningly difficult to perceive, and what remains scarcely amounts to anything. Physicists estimate that less than five per cent of the known universe is visible—where "visible" means only that we could, theoretically, observe it, given the right instruments and sufficient physical proximity. A far smaller amount of the known universe, roughly 0.3 per cent, is dense enough to form stars. Perhaps 0.000001 per cent exists in earthlike planets. As for the part that exists in or near our own planet, the stuff that is visible to us in any literal sense: that is a decimal attenuating out almost to nothing, a speck of dust in the cosmic hinterlands.

Even here on earth, with our senses seemingly full to the brim, we see almost nothing of what matters. Molecules, microbes, cells, germs, genes, viruses, the interior of the planet, the depths of the ocean: none of that is visible to the naked eye. And, as David Hume noted, none of the causes controlling our world are visible under any conditions; we can see a fragment of the what of things, but nothing at all of the why. Gravity, electricity, magnetism, economic forces, the processes that sustain life as well as those that eventually end it—all this is invisible. We cannot even see the most important parts of our own selves: our thoughts, feelings, personalities, psyches, morals, minds, souls.

For the past five hundred years, the great project of science has been to dispel as much as possible of this invisibility. In our determination to access unseen worlds, we have invented microscopes and telescopes, thermometers and radiometers and sonar and seismographs, X-rays and injectable dyes and CAT scans and magnetic resonance imaging. Together with countless other advances, these have helped render visible the otherwise hidden elements of our bodies, our planet, and our universe.

The Humanist Activist

(Ed: in this new feature in PIQUE, we present an essay from a humanist perspective on a topic currently being debated in the political arena (your suggestions are solicited), and will occasionally recommend organizations you might want to support with your money or labor. — JR)

COMMUNITY IMMUNITY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF VACCINATIONS

Sarah Kaiser

As a sociology instructor, it is essential that I convey to my students the importance of the sociological perspective — that is, to consider their individual experiences in light of a wider social and historical context. Many social problems are useful to illustrate the connection between the personal and the political, but perhaps none does this so well as the community immunity that can be achieved through vaccinations.

Vaccines work by teaching the body's immune system to respond to disease, preventing the disease from causing future infections. For vaccines to be fully effective, populations must be vaccinated above a certain rate. Community immunity — also known as herd immunity — is a phenomenon where if a certain proportion of a population is immune, usually through vaccination, the community will resist spread of the disease. Most diseases require 85-95 percent of the population to be vaccinated for community immunity to take effect.

Although most individuals can be vaccinated with little personal risk, a small proportion of individuals are medically exempt. These people—adults and children—may have weakened immune systems or allergies to vaccine components. Individuals who are medically exempt from vaccination depend on the majority of the population to stay up to date on their immunizations and ensure community immunity.

In New York State (where I live and teach), public health policy requires immunizations for students attending K-12 public, private, and charter schools. Today, parents can opt out in one of two ways: by requesting a religious exemption (which must be approved by the principal of the school), or by requesting a medical exemption, which must be approved by a physician.

Anti-vaccination websites¹ claim that New York state makes it too difficult for parents to obtain religious exemptions, and there have been bills introduced in New York that would make religious exemptions easier to obtain.

While K-12 students in NYS are vaccinated at a rate of over 97 percent—the CDC's goal is over 95 percent—an alarming number of schools in the state have rates far below the threshold for community immunity. Health data from 2015-16 shows that 425 schools had immunization rates below 85 percent and 245 schools had immunization rates under 70 percent, well below the CDC's goal.²

A relatively fringe group of anti-vaccination activists that promote the debunked claim that vaccines cause autism are trying to turn this into a religious freedom issue.

It is not that. Rather, this is an issue of public health and personal responsibility. This is a matter of protecting the safety of New York's children.

I am a member of a newly-formed group called Vaccinate New York. We are a grassroots coalition of parents, teachers, health professionals, and other citizens who wish to look out for our kids' health. Together with New Yorkers from Long Island to Buffalo, Vaccinate New York³ is advocating for the passage of S52/A1810, a bill that repeals all non-medical exemptions to vaccination in our schools. It is an organization that deserves your support.

I hope that you will support Vaccinate New York in our fight to protect community immunity, and help make sure our schools stay safe for all New York kids.

1 <http://www.vaclib.org/exempt/newyork.htm>

2 <https://health.data.ny.gov/>

3 <http://vaccinatenuyork.org>

WHAT CALLING CONGRESS ACHIEVES

Kathryn Schulz

(Excerpted from The New Yorker American Chronicles, 3/6/2017)

There are a great many ways to petition the government, including with actual petitions, but, short of showing up in person, the one reputed to be the most effective is picking up the phone and calling your congressional representatives. In the weeks following the Inauguration of Donald J. Trump, so many people started doing so that, in short order, voice mail filled up and landlines began blurring out busy signals. Pretty soon, even e-mails were bouncing back, with the information that the target in-box was full and the suggestion that senders "contact the recipient directly". That being impractical, motivated constituents turned to other means.

The thwarted and outraged took to Facebook or Twitter or the streets. The thwarted and determined dug up direct contact information for specific congressional staffers. The thwarted and clever remembered that it was still possible, several technological generations later, to send faxes; one Republican senator received, from a single Web-based faxing service, seven thousand two hundred and seventy-six of them in twenty-four hours. The thwarted and creative phoned up a local pizza joint, ordered a pie, and had it delivered, with a side of political opinion, to the Senate.

Americans vote, if we vote at all, roughly once every two years. But even in a slow season, when no one is resorting to faxes or protests or pizza-grams, we participate in the political life of our nation vastly more often by reaching out to our members of Congress. When we do so, however, we almost never get to speak to them directly. Instead, we wind up dealing with one of the thousands of people, many of them too young to rent a car, who collectively constitute the customer-service workforce of democracy. ...

Today, thanks to the Internet-as-all-purpose-phone-book, it is easier than ever to call your Congress members, by bypassing the switchboard and phoning their offices directly. ... How seriously those messages are taken by Congress

varies widely, chiefly because, when it comes to interacting with the public, there's really no such thing as Congress per se. There are five hundred and thirty-five small businesses that together form the legislative arm of government, and their way of dealing with constituents can differ as much as their politics. As a logistical matter, however, most congressional offices function in roughly the same way. ...

According to a 2015 C.M.F. survey of almost two hundred senior congressional staffers, when it comes to influencing a lawmaker's opinion, personalized e-mails, personalized letters, and editorials in local newspapers all beat out the telephone.

In normal times, then—which is to say, in the times we don't currently live in—calling your members of Congress is not an intrinsically superior way to get them to listen. But what makes a particular type of message effective depends largely on what you are trying to achieve. For mass protests, such as those that have been happening recently, phone calls are a better way of contacting lawmakers, not because they get taken more seriously but because they take up more time—thereby occupying staff, obstructing business as usual, and attracting media attention. E-mails get the message through but are comparatively swift and easy for staffers to process, while conventional mail is at a disadvantage when speed matters, since, in addition to the time spent in transit, anything sent to Congress is temporarily held for testing and decontamination, to protect employees from mail bombs and toxins. ...

Some forms of correspondence, however, do not carry quite as much weight, starting with anything that comes from outside a legislator's district or state. ... Other messages that staffers tend to disregard include tweets and Facebook posts (less out of dismissiveness than because of the difficulty of determining if they come from constituents), online petitions (because they require so little effort that they aren't seen as meaningful), comments submitted through apps like Countable, and mass e-mails that originate from the Web sites of advocacy groups. ...

Likewise, phone calls that hew to scripts from advocacy organizations usually get downgraded, especially if the caller seems ill-informed about the issue. Such calls also tend to annoy staffers.

[P]olicy change isn't impossible, and it isn't unprecedented, but it is extremely rare. When I asked past and present Congress members and high-level staffers if constituent input mattered, all of them emphasized that it absolutely does. But when I asked them to name a time that a legislator had changed his or her vote on the basis of such input, I got, in every instance, a laugh, and then a very long pause.

ON FUTILITY AND PASSIVE ELECTIONEERING

Joel Galker

I'm not usually given to wearing baseball caps advertising my fandom for any particular team or T-shirts, bumper stickers, badges, insignia, logos of prestigious brands overtly advertising my status or any other bias. It might be

my way of disappearing into the woodwork, keeping a low profile, avoiding being someone's target, an assertion of standing on my own feet, a kind of reverse-psychology pride in avoiding vulgar display. All these and pink pussy hats are just not my style. Buttons as a political act seemed to me futile but I didn't quite know that political buttons are considered "passive electioneering" and, though it might be only rarely enforced, are banned as electioneering at voting sites.

But attending the "Not My President Day" rally and reading a remark online (Michael Moore's?) about political buttons might have encouraged me to pin a half-inch-diameter, discreetly cryptic Flying Spaghetti Monster button (a gift from the Brights) onto my classic crew neck sweater. As it happened, someone at the meeting of a political club asked me about the pin – was it a kinda yin-yang thing? – and we had a discussion about the politics of secular community which she hadn't even imagined as existing. So what's the value of wearing a Dump Trump button in NYC, where almost everybody may welcome dumping Trump but most of are worrying and doing little or nothing about it beyond complaining?

Dumping Trump and his supporters in Congress won't likely happen by patiently waiting for the results of the 2020 election and earnestly hoping everything will turn out well in the end. A little bit of easy "passive electioneering", of wearing a political button, will remind other people on the subway, and others with whom you will never talk, that they are not alone and may help deliver one person to pushing back. Maybe you. If you don't have a button, you can buy one at a demonstration.

Easy Activism: *democracy.io* is the easiest and quickest way to send email to either or both of your elected senators or your congressperson. Just Google *democracy.io*. Enter your own address, which will bring you to a page to select the recipients, one, two or all three of them. Then enter your message. Make it brief, to the point and explicit, just one or two sentences about exactly what you want them to do: introduce a bill or resolution or proclamation; vote for or against a particular bill or nominee; start an inquiry, impeach somebody; get tough or go easy; give your nephew a job, etc. – *Joel Galker*

KEEP THE JOHNSON AMENDMENT

Jonathan Engel

Politicians seem to like prayer breakfasts. Makes them look righteous while they scheme to strip senior citizens of their Medicare and Social Security. I would love to see someone sponsor a Rational Thought Breakfast for politicians, but who would show up? In any event, at a recent prayer breakfast Donald Trump railed against the Johnson Amendment and called for its repeal. There's no talking sense to that miserable excuse for a human being, and so I will direct my comments to the readers of this essay and attempt to explain what the Johnson Amendment is and why its retention is vital to a free, non-theocratic society.

The Johnson Amendment (named for then Senator Lyndon Johnson) is a provision of the Federal Tax Code that prohibits non-profit organizations from endorsing or opposing candidates for public office. The Johnson Amendment applies to all tax-exempt, 501(c)(3) organizations, including religious organizations [*and us - Ed.*]. Those who are calling for its repeal claim that the Johnson Amendment improperly limits free speech on the part of non-profits. This is nonsense, as I will show below. And by the way, I have never heard anyone argue that the Johnson Amendment should be repealed on behalf of secular non-profits. It's always because of religion.

It is important to keep in mind the fact that the Johnson Amendment does not prevent non-profits (including religious non-profits) from speaking out on issues, even if those issues are politically charged. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops have been quite outspoken on issues such as marriage equality and the contraception mandate of the Affordable Care Act (they're against both, in case you had to ask). And yet, nobody has taken away the Catholic Church's tax exemption. But the direct endorsement of, or opposition to, a particular political candidacy is forbidden. But even this prohibition does not deprive a non-profit of its free speech rights. If a clergyman uses his/her weekly sermon to urge their congregants to back or oppose a specific candidate, such clergyman will not be arrested or in any way prevented from speaking. The organization for which that clergyman works will simply lose their tax-exempt status, which is as it should be.

501(c)(3) organizations' exemption from taxation serves two purposes for these groups: it shields them from having to pay most taxes (including corporate income taxes and real estate taxes) and it allows them to receive donations for which their benefactors receive individual tax deductions for themselves. In order to receive this tax exempt status organizations must demonstrate that their work fits into one of the following categories: religious, educational [*again, us - Ed.*], scientific, literary, testing for public safety, fostering amateur sports competition or preventing cruelty to children or animals. (There are other exempt categories under other parts of section 501). And so by granting non-profit status to a corporation, the government is in effect subsidizing non-profits in order to further the (assumed) good works that they do.

The purpose of this government subsidy is manifestly *not* to bolster any particular politician's quest for public office. That's why contributions to individual candidates' campaigns or to purely political entities (whether Freedom Works on the right or Move On on the left) are not tax deductible. If such contributions were deductible, it would put taxpayers in the position of subsidizing non-profits' attempts to influence our electoral process, and really, why should a conservative Republican be expected to have her taxes subsidize a liberal organization's preferred candidate, or vice versa? If a religious organization wants so badly to endorse a particular candidate, it can. It just can't use public tax money to do so. And that's the way it should stay.

SHSNY CALENDAR: APRIL - JUNE

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, APRIL 6, 7-8:30 pm
THE COMMUNITY CHURCH
OF NEW YORK

28 East 35 St. (front lounge)

We'll discuss

MIND & COSMOS:

Why the

Materialist Neo-Darwinian
Conception of Nature is
Almost Certainly False

Thomas Nagel

The modern materialist approach to life has conspicuously failed to explain such central mind-related features of our world as consciousness, intentionality, meaning, and value.



This failure to account for something so integral to nature as mind, argues philosopher Nagel, is a major problem, threatening to unravel the entire naturalistic world picture, extending to biology, evolutionary theory, and cosmology. An adequate conception of nature would have to explain the appearance in the universe of materially irreducible conscious minds, as such.

In spite of the great achievements of the physical sciences, reductive materialism is a world view ripe for displacement. Nagel shows that to recognize its limits is the first step in looking for alternatives, or at least in being open to their possibility.

– *Paperback & Kindle available*

Join us even if you haven't finished reading. The SHSNY Book Club is open to all ... and free!

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, MAY 4, 7-8:30 pm
 Community Church of New York
THREE ESSAYS FROM "THE
STONE", THE NYTIMES'S ON-
LINE PHILOSOPHY FORUM

• *Who Is 'Evil', and Who is the Victim?*

Brad Evans and Simona Forti
 The Stone, Sep 16, 2016

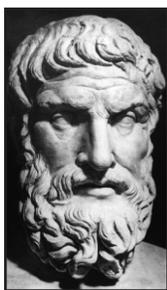
• *Is Humanism Really Humane?*
 Natasha Lennard and Cary Wolfe
 The Stone, Jan 9, 2017

• *The Intellectual Life of Violence*
 Brad Evans and
 Richard J. Bernstein
 The Stone, Jan 26, 2017

To read an essay, go to www.nytimes.com/column/the-stone and simply type its title into the "Search" box.

SHSNY BOOK CLUB
THURS, JUNE 1, 7-8:30 pm
Book selection to be announced

STUDYING HUMANISM
MON, APRIL 24, 6:30-8:30 pm
 Community Church of New York
THE FIRST HUMANIST:
EPICURUS



Back to basics! Let's do half an hour's online reading (required) on the Greek philosopher who inspired the Roman Lucretius, who inspired the Florentine Bruno, then Mill,

Darwin, and us!

Online Required Reading:

1. Google "Epicurus".
2. Click on "Epicurus and Epicurean Philosophy" at Epicurus.net, and read "Letter to Menoeceus".
3. Click on "Epicurus and Happiness - Pursuit-of-Happiness.org".
4. Read.

SHSNY MOVIE NIGHT
MON, APRIL 10, 6:30 pm
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)

WILDE

Humanist/atheist activist Stephen Fry stars as Oscar Wilde – genius, poet, playwright and the "First Modern Man" – in this lush 1997 biopic of a great talent laid low by England's repressive laws against "gross indecency". With Vanessa Redgrave, Jennifer Ehle, Tom Wilkinson, and Jude Law.



"Stephen Fry brings a depth and gentleness to Oscar Wilde [who] was a funny and gifted idealist in a society that valued hypocrisy above honesty".

After-Film Discussion:
What the hell is "indecenty"?
SHSNY Movie Night is FREE.
(But put something on the bar besides your elbow.)

BRUNCH & CONVERSATION
SUN, APRIL 16, 11:30 am
Stone Creek Bar & Lounge
140 East 27 St. (Lex-3rd Aves)



We gather in the saloon's back room, where the pub-grub menu includes a \$12 breakfast special,

the Bloody Marys are hot, the beer is cold, and conversation sparkles. Come join 20 or more free-thinkers for food, fun and great, convivial conversation, including the Dorothy Kahn-led ...

After-Brunch Discussion:
Special for Easter Sunday:
Jesus: Real(ly)?

SHSNY CALENDAR: APRIL -JUNE

GREAT LECTURES ON DVD

WED, APRIL 26, 7 pm

Stone Creek Bar & Lounge

140 East 27 St (Lex-3rd Aves)

A Special Live Lecture:

DR. GERALD MEYER

MARXISM AND HUMANISM

Gerald Meyer is a Professor of Political Science at Hostos Community College whose scholarship has been acclaimed for its close examination of an era in New York history that had been ignored after the onset of McCarthyism and the Cold War.

"Professor Meyer has been a pioneer in unearthing the history of the vibrant New York political left of the 1930s and 1940s, especially the largely unknown Italian-American left. In his work, the streets of East Harlem and the fierce battles over labor and politics come alive."

Great Lectures on DVD is FREE

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

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PLANNING AHEAD

The usual SHSNY schedule (barring holidays and weather calamities) is ...

Book Club: First Thursday

at the Community Church of NY

Movie Night: Second Monday

at Stone Creek Lounge.

Brunch: Third Sunday

at Stone Creek Lounge

Great Lectures on DVD:

4th Wednesday

at Stone Creek Lounge.

Studying Humanism: Last Monday

at the Community Church of NY

More info: www.shsny.org

and/or 646-922-7389

Book now to guarantee your place!

SUNDAY, MAY 7, NOON

SHSNY's 10th Annual DAY OF REASON BRUNCH

at PETE'S TAVERN, 129 East 18 Street

Our speaker will be:

MICHAEL DE DORA

"From D.C. to Geneva: Secular Humanist Advocacy Around the World"

Over the past decade, there has been significant growth in both the scope and impact of political advocacy by secularist, humanist, and atheist organizations in the United States. There has also been a rise in the number of freethought groups working on the international arena. What kind of work are these organizations engaged in? What are their major accomplishments? And what are their major challenges?



As director of both domestic and international advocacy for the Center for Inquiry, Michael De Dora has been directly involved in efforts to advance secular government and humanist values at all levels of public policy, from Washington, D.C. to the UN Headquarters in New York to to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland. He will provide insight into the efforts of atheist, secularist, and humanist organizations to defend the open society.

Michael De Dora is director of the Center for Inquiry's Office of Public Policy and the organization's main representative to the United Nations. In addition, he serves as president of the United Nations NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief in New York.

BRUNCH IS JUST \$25 ...

... for your choice of 11 entrees, tax, tips and a drink included.

Join up to 50 of your fellow and sororal freethinkers for one of SHSNY's best annual get-togethers. Meet old friends, make new ones, schmooze, network and discuss ideas (what we do best).

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SHSNY ELECTION NOTICE

We are in the process of our triannual election to the Board of Directors of the Secular Humanist Society of New York. Our by-laws require a minimum of five members on the Board, which elects the officers of SHSNY. Twelve current Board members and two new candidates are standing for (re)election. We ran the statements of five of the candidates in March PIQUE; here are five more, with the final four to run in May. – JR

The Candidates for the SHSNY Board speak for themselves:

BRIAN LEMAIRE

Ellen Johnson, a former president of American Atheists, once said to me, “Why do we need a separate organization for secular humanists? Don’t we all believe in the same thing?” In a way, yes, we do, but secular humanism also ventures to consider larger issues. Universal morals, an ethical system based on real life, informed by these morals. A meaning of life based on setting positive goals for ourselves. What is the meaning of life? It is whatever we want to define it to be.



I learned secular humanism early on – my father had de-programmed my Protestant mother before I was aware of these things, and from 1980 onward we usually had our monthly copy of *Free Inquiry* on the coffee table.

A few years ago I started a blog on my ValeTales.info website. The blog covers literature and book editing, the scientific method, poetry, an account of Dan Dennett’s views on free will, Dr. Ellis and Rational Emotive Therapy, population and the environment, the reasons to legalize marijuana, and the need for campaign finance reform in America.

Other interests are a history club organized by Barbara Bernstein, one of our SHSNY members, and volunteer work renovating Loews Jersey City Landmark Theatre, which plays classic movies from the 1930s and 40s and hosts community events. I enjoy sailing with a sailing club in Jersey City.

I ask for your vote to continue a role with the Secular Humanist Society of New York. If anyone reading this thinks that our organization might be your cup of tea, come join our very happy family at the monthly brunches, or the monthly movie night and discussion at Stone Creek Bar & Lounge in Manhattan.

MARIA ASTIFIDES



A freethinker since childhood, the secular mindset has been a mainstay in my life. Wishing to be active in the secular movement, I have joined various organizations during the years. The Secular Humanist Society of New York offers a positive balance that I enjoy, therefore my interest

in serving in an official capacity with SHSNY.

Born and raised in NYC, I have witnessed a disturbing shift of intolerance in our city. Religious factions have emerged which have pit factions against each other. Secular humanism provides an option of fairness which I find most accepting. The religious right has been a primary instigator in this process, and working with SHSNY is a way to thwart the process in its tracks. I hope that my actions in the organization will prove fruitful in providing an endpoint to closed-minded thinking.

MATTHEW CALLAHAN

I have had two real passions in my life for as long as I can remember: A complete disbelief in anything god-related, and respect for technology. I remember when I was around 11, I was at my father’s apartment watching the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade. I don’t know what prompted me to say this, but, during a commercial break, I turned to him and said, “Dad, I think I’m an Atheist.” He started to cry, and eventually pulled himself together for long enough to exclaim: “You mean to tell me you’re a Communist?” I didn’t understand what he meant by that at the time, but years later I can look back at it and laugh a little, thankfully.



No, Dad, I’m not a Communist. Far from it. But I never quite understood the idea of believing in something without there being any evidence for it. Now, with everything that’s transpiring in the political arena, I have never been more adamant in my belief that facts, reason, evidence, compassion, and empathy are what really matter – and that’s everything that Secular Humanism espouses.

I am humbled, honored, and excited to be nominated to the board of the Secular Humanist Society of New York, and look forward to combining my expertise in online marketing, web development, social media, and writing with my passion for Secular Humanism and politics to grow our organization and make a real difference in this wonderful city we call home.

CARL MARXER

As a video and communications professional, I will continue to be a resource documenting and communicating the information available to SHSNY as a group, and helping make that information more available to the general population. I have won several awards for my documentary film and motion graphics work. With my background as a communicator and educator, I want to use the skills I have gained to spread the knowledge about SHSNY and what it stands for.



I lived in the Atlanta area for many years, and grew tired of the religious dogma so prevalent in that area. I wanted to

grow my business professionally, and decided to take advantage of the resources that the NYC area has to offer. Lucky for me, I found my cousin, Donna Marxer, and the Secular Humanist Society of New York. I was invited to several of the meetings and found like-minded humanists and rationalists that I agree with in thought and philosophy. And I thought I was the only one who had these feelings.

I believe, though, that there are lots of people who have the same feelings as I do about life, but do not express them because of the pressures of organized religion. I want to help them see that it is OK to express their feelings through and with the support of the SHSNY organization.

DOROTHY KAHN

A few years ago I was a comfortably-off ex-pat Brit newly widowed in New York City with time on my hands and not much to make my life meaningful. Then I went to a Brunch MeetUp hosted by John Rafferty and Donna Marxer, a pair of stellar human beings if ever there were such, and was introduced to the SHSNY and, after a while, offered a place on its Board of Directors.



Flash forward to today. The Trump Era, where everything that secular humanism stands for: free thought, concern for ordinary people's struggles, interest in the arts and culture of all mankind, are being attacked as either irrelevant to or actually hostile to "national security", which is now the *sine qua non* for America.

Now more than ever I prize my association with the SHSNY and especially the monthly Brunch and Discussion meetings that I have the honor of co-hosting at Stone Creek. I look forward to joining my fellow members of the Board of Directors in making a real contribution to the fight for an America that lives up to its Enlightenment aspirations and is not willing to sacrifice them all for an illusory state of "national security".

Please support my re-election to the Board so that I can have the honor of helping in the upcoming fight.

READERS RESPOND, AND ASK QUESTIONS

To the Editor: Re "David Brooks & the Myth of America", I have never taken to David Brooks. His dense, penetrating language feigns to reveal deep truths but in point of fact essentially resolves to a concatenation of obfuscation. (This is how I write after trying to read Brooks).

Brooks says, "Myths don't make a point or propose an argument. They inhabit us deeply and explain to us who we are." But myths are traditional stories, often false, explaining a people's history or some natural or social phenomenon. Myths reflect the opinion of whoever composed that myth, and that surely makes a point and is the start of an argument.

Brooks then complains that the American Myth he holds

dear (whatever it is) "has been battered " by today's "shapeless multiculturalism" (contrasted with yesterday's robust and Brooks-sanctified shape). And I certainly resent his empty and insolent assertion that left wingers (like me) are not patriotic.

But after ploughing through Brooks' language I suspect he might have meant all this as a joke. After all, a Myth is as good as a Smile. – *Chic Schissel*

To the Editor: Regarding David Brooks's *NYTimes* column "The Myth of America" (PIQUE, March), I share his dislike of "shapeless multiculturalism". As a New Yorker, I inherit my social and political DNA from the original Dutch settlement of the 1620s-1650s that was a proving ground for the melting pot and for democracy. When it comes to multiculturalism, I would push for new immigrants to assimilate into this culture, rather than cling to their separate cultural identities. Down with identity politics. Up with citizens invested in the well-being of this country as a whole.

Immigrants from many nations added to this gift from the Dutch, each adding their flavors to the stew. Better it remain a stew, not separate cultures huddling in their own communities. – *Brian Lemaire*

To the Editor: Hi, John. I am glad to see you are back at the helm of PIQUE and making it as interesting as ever.

Recently I have wondered if, among secular humanists, there is a significant spiritual side to them, and if so, how do they describe it. I personally have a non-believer's spiritual side and have been challenged to describe it. I am contemplating how, but find it difficult.

What do you think? Has this come up in PIQUE and I missed it? Cheers for you and Donna,

– *Giles Kelly (Washington, D.C.)*

Giles: For myself, I mistrust the words "spiritual" and "spirituality". Not that I don't believe there is such a thing, but too often it/they has/have been used as New-Age copouts, e.g., "I don't believe in any old-fashioned religion, but I'm spiritual", and what the hell does that mean?

But you are posing a serious question, and I'm going to use it to start a conversation, I hope, in PIQUE. After all, secular humanism is not a religion, with dogma and catechism, but is what secular humanists say it is.

So let's open up the question to the readership – "Is there a spiritual side to your humanism?" – and see what happens. – *John*

To the Editor: Another great issue of PIQUE. Just donated to Secular Coalition for America based on the suggestion in February. – *H. Robert Miller*

Easy Activism: www.flippable.org. "Our mission is to turn America blue by building a movement to flip seats. We focus on state races, and will tell you which races are most important, who's running, and how you can support them." (Thank you, Peter Flom.)

HUMANISTS AND THE FIGHT FOR PEARL (Public Education And Religious Liberty)

Edd Doerr

Fifty years ago, in 1967, a massive effort was made at a constitutional convention in New York to water down the state constitution's Article XI, Section 3, which bars the state from diverting public funds to religion-based private schools. In November 1967 New Yorkers voted 72 percent to 28 percent to defeat the proposed constitution without the private school aid ban. One of the leaders of the campaign was my good friend the eminent New York attorney Leo Pfeffer, who was named the AHA's Humanist of the Year in 1988. The New York battle was the subject of my 1968 book, *The Conspiracy That Failed*.

Between 1966 and 2014 there have been 28 state referenda, from Massachusetts to California and from Florida to Alaska, on that subject. Millions of voters emulated New York by an average of 2 to 1. But the battles have only gotten hotter as "President" Trump, VP Pence and Education Secretary DeVos, all bitter opponents of public education, religious liberty and church-state separation, aided by a complicit GOP-led Congress and state legislatures, are hellbent on imposing on all taxpayers a school voucher plan to divert billions of tax dollars to church-run and other private schools.

Humanists have long been staunch supporters of public schools and church-state separation, as in the 1973 Humanist Manifesto II, Humanist organizations, the Unitarian Universalist 1982 resolution on the matter (which I wrote) and Americans for Religious Liberty, founded in 1981 in New York by Humanist leaders Edward Ericson and Sherwin Wine (headed by me since 1982). But of course we have not been alone. As noted above, vast numbers of Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and others have actually voted 2 to 1 across the country to oppose tax aid to sectarian and other private schools. The 2015 Gallup education poll showed that by 57 percent to 31 percent Americans are with us on this.

What is wrong with vouchers, tax credits and other gimmicks to divert public funds to sectarian and other private schools? Plenty. Here's a quick summary: 1. Such diversions violate our religious freedom and the constitutional principle of church-state separation, enunciated by Jefferson and Madison, and found in the First Amendment and three-quarters of the state constitutions; 2. They take money away from the democratic, religiously neutral public schools that have long served 90 percent of our kids; 3. They fragment the school population along religious, ideological, socioeconomic class, ethnic, and other lines, and thus fragment society; 4. They undermine women's rights of conscience and health, and often undermine teaching about science and climate change; 5. They undermine the teaching profession and teacher unions.

What to do? Humanists must work with people and organizations across the religious and non-religious spectrum to turn back all national and state efforts to

promote vouchers, tax credits and other devices for direct or indirect tax aid to private schools.

(Ed: Edd Doerr is a columnist in *Free Inquiry*, former columnist for 33 years for *The Humanist*, former AHA president, and former editor of *Church & State* magazine. – JR)

WHY WE BELIEVE BALONEY

Philip Fernback and Steven Sloman

(Excerpted from "Why We Believe Obvious Untruths" in the *NYTimes OpEd Gray Matter*, 3/3/2017)

Knowledge isn't in my head or in your head. It's shared. Consider some simple examples. You know that the earth revolves around the sun. But can you rehearse the astronomical observations and calculations that led to that conclusion? You know that smoking causes cancer. But can you articulate what smoke does to our cells, how cancers form and why some kinds of smoke are more dangerous than others? We're guessing no. Most of what you "know" – most of what anyone knows – about any topic is a placeholder for information stored elsewhere, in a long-forgotten textbook or in some expert's head.

One consequence of the fact that knowledge is distributed this way is that being part of a community of knowledge can make people feel as if they understand things they don't. Recently, one of us ran a series of studies in which we told people about some new scientific discoveries that we fabricated, like rocks that glow. When we said that scientists had not yet explained the glowing rocks and then asked our respondents how well they understood how such rocks glow, they reported not understanding at all – a very natural response given that they knew nothing about the rocks. But when we told another group about the same discovery, only this time claiming that scientists had explained how the rocks glowed, our respondents reported a little bit more understanding. It was as if the scientists' knowledge (which we never described) had been directly transmitted to them.

The sense of understanding is contagious. The understanding that others have, or claim to have, makes us feel smarter. This happens only when people believe they have access to the relevant information: When our experimental story indicated that the scientists worked for the Army and were keeping the explanation secret, people no longer felt that they had any understanding of why the rocks glowed. The key point here is not that people are irrational; it's that this irrationality comes from a very rational place. People fail to distinguish what they know from what others know because it is often impossible to draw sharp boundaries between what knowledge resides in our heads and what resides elsewhere.

This is especially true of divisive political issues. Your mind cannot master and retain sufficiently detailed knowledge about many of them. You must rely on your community. But if you are not aware you are piggybacking on the knowledge of others, it can lead to hubris.

Recently, for example, there was a vociferous outcry when President Trump and Congress rolled back regulations

on the dumping of mining waste in waterways. This may be bad policy, but most people don't have sufficient expertise to draw that conclusion because evaluating the policy is complicated. Environmental policy is about balancing costs and benefits. In this case, you need to know something about what mining waste does to waterways and in what quantities these effects occur, how much economic activity depends on being able to dump freely, how a decrease in mining activity would be made up for from other energy sources and how environmentally damaging those are.

We suspect that most of those people expressing outrage lacked the knowledge necessary to assess the policy. We also suspect that many in Congress who voted for the rollback were equally in the dark. But people seemed pretty confident.

Such collective delusions illustrate both the power and the deep flaw of human thinking. It is remarkable that large groups of people can coalesce around a common belief when few of them individually possess the requisite knowledge to support it. This is how we discovered the Higgs boson and increased the human life span by 30 years in the last century. But the same underlying forces explain why we can come to believe outrageous things, which can lead to equally consequential but disastrous outcomes.

That individual ignorance is our natural state is a bitter pill to swallow. But if we take this medicine, it can be empowering. It can help us differentiate the questions that merit real investigation from those that invite a reactive and superficial analysis. It also can prompt us to demand expertise and nuanced analysis from our leaders, which is the only tried and true way to make effective policy. A better understanding of how little is actually inside our own heads would serve us well.

WHERE IS REALITY?

Taylor Link

(Excerpted from *salon.com*, 3/10/2017)

According to the latest poll from the Public Religion Research Institute, a white evangelical in the U.S. is more likely to think that Christians experience a lot of discrimination as compared with Muslims.

The survey found that 57 percent of the white evangelicals polled said they believe that Christians face a lot of discrimination in America, while only 44 percent considered that same level of discrimination exists for the Muslim community. In contrast, roughly 75 percent of the religiously unaffiliated Americans and the nonwhite Protestants surveyed said that Muslims face the most discrimination.

JESUS AND MO EXPLAIN TO THE BARMAID THE NECESSITY OF UNREALITY

(Transcribed from www.jesusandmo.net/comic/best/)

Barmaid: Jesus, do you really think it's necessary to buy into the elaborate and implausible story of sin and salvational sacrifice in order to be a good person?

Jesus: Yes.

Barmaid: And Mo, you have to believe that the Koran – a

mediocre, self-contradictory work of blatant self-promotion – is the perfect and uncreated word of God?

Mohammed: Of course.

Jesus: So, Barmaid, now you understand why humanism must never be taught in schools.

Barmaid: Because it provides an ethical framework for living without the untrue bits required by religion?

Jesus: Exactly.

Mo: Those are the best bits.

RELIGIOUS REALITY: DEPARTMENT OF TRANSUBSTANTIATION CLARIFICATION

John Rafferty

Inter-Christian wars have been fought over the reality (or not) of substances “transmuting” from one substance to another (bread and wine into body and blood most famously), but in a March 15 obituary of Mother Divine, the widow and successor of cult leader Father Divine, *The New York Times* quoted this long-ago explanation by the man whose followers thought he was God, on how people's identities could merge.

“The individual is the personification of that which expresses personification. Therefore he comes to be personally the expression of that which was impersonal, and he is the personal expression of it and the personification of the pre-personification of God Almighty! Peace, it's wonderful!”

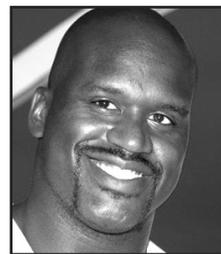
What could be clearer?

WE HAVE OUR FIRST DUMBTH NOMINEE OF 2017. GOOD GRIEF, GUESS WHO?

Who doesn't love Shaquille O'Neal? We all love Shaq, the gentle giant of a basketball star and TV pitchman with a smile that lights up arenas.

Guess what? He's an idiot. In a display of scientific illiteracy, he insisted the Earth is flat! On a recent episode of *The Big Podcast* with Shaq, co-host John Kincaide asked him about recent comments from Kyrie Irving, a Cleveland Cavaliers player who is a flat-Earther. Shaq, who has a Ph.D. in education from Barry Univ. in Miami, FL, replied:

It's true. The Earth is flat. The Earth is flat. Yeah, it is. Yes, it is. ... In school, first thing they teach us is, 'Oh, Columbus discovered America,' but when he got there, there were some fair-skinned people with the long hair smoking on the peace pipes. So, what does that tell you? Columbus didn't discover America. So, listen, I drive from coast to coast, and this shit is flat to me. I'm just saying. I drive from Florida to California all the time, and it's flat to me. I do not go up and down at a 360-degree angle, and all that stuff about gravity, have you looked outside Atlanta lately and seen all these buildings? You mean to tell me that China is under us? China is under us? It's not. The world is flat.



TURNABOUT IS FAIR PLAY IN TEXAS

Michael Stone

(Excerpted from Progressive Secular Humanist, 3/13/2017)

A proposed new law in Texas would require men who want Viagra to be subject to a rectal exam and would punish male masturbation with a \$100 fine. The “Man’s Right to Know Act” was filed late last week by Democratic Texas legislator Rep. Jessica Farrar.

The bill calls “masturbatory emissions” an “act against an unborn child, and failing to preserve the sanctity of life”, contains provisions that would also put restrictions on vasectomies and Viagra prescriptions, allowing doctors to refuse to perform the former or prescribe the latter on the grounds of “religious freedom”. What’s more, “masturbatory emissions” must be stored for the wife for conception.

The proposed legislation is an obvious attempt to satirize and draw attention to the unreasonable and dangerous policy proposals concerning women’s reproductive freedom coming from the Republican Party in Texas and many other states.

Commenting on her bill, Rep. Farrar said:

“A lot of people find the bill funny. What’s not funny are the obstacles that Texas women face every day, that were placed there by legislatures making it very difficult for them to access healthcare.”

DON’T GIVE IN TO DESPAIR

Rep. John Lewis

(Forwarded by Joel Galker – thank you, Joel.)

My message is very, very simple: You cannot give up. You cannot give in. You cannot get lost in a sea of despair. You have to be hopeful and optimistic. Keep pushing, keep pulling, keep organizing, keep believing. This too shall pass. ...

Since the election, I have seen so many people saying, “I don’t know what we’re going to do.” A young woman came up to me and started crying. I told her, “I’ve cried, too.” I cried the night of the election, and for two or three days after that. But I stopped crying. I shed all of the tears that I wanted to shed. We have got to stand up. We have got to fight. Be unafraid. Don’t let anybody or anything get you down. ...

Now is the time for Americans of goodwill—it doesn’t matter whether they’re black or white, Latino, Asian American, or Native American—to get in good trouble, necessary trouble; to push and resist what is happening. We should do it in an orderly, peaceful, nonviolent fashion, but people must stand up and not be silent. To be silent is like going along, saying it’s OK, it’s all right. We cannot do that. But we will get there, I truly believe that. I think that sense of hope is in our DNA. You have to be optimistic.

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Guess who’s our first

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what we can do about it.

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The most important idea
about the universe ... maybe.

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