

Patchworks

A Medley of Uncensored Essays and
Bloggings from the Desk of a Pirate
Philosopher



by Mark F. Sharlow, Ph.D.

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from the Desk of a Pirate Philosopher**

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Parts 1-6 of this book are based on works that previously appeared on the author's website *Brain, Time and Cosmos* (<http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow>). The essays "A Warning about So-Called Rationalists," "Why Secular Humanism Can't Be Scientific," and "Anecdotal Thinking: You'd Better Believe It (Sometimes)" are copyright © 2007 Mark F. Sharlow.

Notice: Nothing in this book is intended to be medical, legal, or other professional advice. Nothing in this book should be construed as, or used as a substitute for, such advice. Because of the changing nature of the web, URLs may become outdated.

Acknowledgment: The two blogs featured in this book were built with Blosxom blogging software (<http://www.blosxom.com>).

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(Please read "Read This First" for information about page numbering in this book.)

Read This First

This book is a collection of some of my writings that do not fit the mold of standard philosophical articles. These writings range over several topics, including religion, free will, human dignity, the nature of persons, and a few others. The longest item in the collection is an archive of my blog, *The Unfinishable Scroll*, as it existed when the book was put together. That blog covers many philosophical topics, including some I haven't discussed elsewhere. Also in the collection are essays (formerly web-based) on topics ranging from progress, to skepticism, to metaphysics — and back again. The book even contains an archive of another, less well-known, blog of mine.

I have edited the items in this collection to make them friendlier to the book format. For example, I removed many web links and replaced some of them with conventional references. The book doesn't have conventional page numbering, but most of the parts have their own numbering. Most parts have distinctive page headers or a distinctive look and feel that make them possible to find within the assorted mix that is this book.

Enjoy.

Part 1

A Philosophical Blog –
The Unfinishable Scroll

The Unfinishable Scroll

Tue, 01 Sep 2009

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Related Reading:

- * [God: the Next Version](#)
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Study Does Not Show that Fat People Are Brain-Damaged

A recent study published in the journal *Human Brain Mapping* [1] suggests that obesity and overweight are statistically linked to brain degeneration in elderly people. The LiveScience news website reported these results in a way that suggests that all obese people have brain damage [2]. The LiveScience article's title, "Obese People Have 'Severe Brain Degeneration'," is enough to create this misunderstanding. Other news outlets, such as FOXNews.com [3], have reported the same story in a similar manner.

DO NOT BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU READ ABOUT THIS STUDY!

The study does NOT prove that fat people are brain damaged.

The study does not even show that being fat causes brain degeneration in the elderly.

The study suggests there is a statistical correlation between a high body mass index (BMI) and certain kinds of brain deterioration in elderly people. This is **not** the same as saying that being fat causes anything. One part of the original journal paper suggests that high BMI is not likely to be the actual cause of the observed brain changes, and that something else might be causing both the high BMI and the brain changes ([1], p. 9).

Misinformation about this study is a serious matter. If the media present this study the wrong way, people might take it to mean that all fat people are brain-damaged. This misunderstanding is sure to increase the widespread hatred of fat people, and to worsen the abuse of fat children, who often suffer vicious bullying, teasing, and social rejection because of their size. Even though the study involved elderly people and not children, the idea that being fat causes brain damage plays right into the "fat kids are stupid" stereotype, which already causes great harm to children who are genetically heavier than average.

There are at least two possible ways to explain the study's results without assuming that fat causes brain damage.

One explanation, which the paper already mentions, is that something could be causing both the high BMI and the brain changes. The paper mentions "reduced exercise" as one such possible cause ([1], p. 9). If this were the real cause, then fat people who get enough exercise should be able to avoid the brain problems. (Despite the widespread belief that fat people don't exercise, in reality many fat people do exercise - and some remain fat even when they are exercising a lot. [4])

Another possible explanation is that social stress and isolation are causing the brain problems. Fat people experience serious discrimination in our society,

and this discrimination can affect health. (See reference [5] for relevant information.) Few thin people can fully imagine how much teasing, bullying, loneliness, and employment discrimination many fat people go through. It's no secret that social stress has bad effects on physical and mental health. Maybe some fat people develop brain problems because of a lifetime of social stress. If this is the explanation, then discrimination, not fat, is the cause of the brain problems. We can address this cause by working to end the discrimination.

In view of these possible explanations of the study's results, **THERE IS NO BASIS FOR THE BELIEF THAT ALL FAT PEOPLE ARE BRAIN-DAMAGED OR THAT BEING FAT IS A CAUSE OF BRAIN DEGENERATION.**

Aside from the misleading media coverage, the study itself contains a feature that can be called into question. This is the study's use of BMI as an indicator of overweight and obesity. Although it is common to use BMI this way, BMI does not appear to be a very good measure of fatness or of poor health. (See references [5], [6] and [7] below for relevant information.)

Any scientific study is subject to future criticism by other scientists; results sometimes fade in the light of further studies. However, even if this study withstands the test of time, it does not show that fat people in general are brain-damaged.

These same warnings apply to any study that suggests that fat people of any age have brain problems. Studies of this sort do not automatically show that fat causes brain damage, or that fat people are stupid. The cautionary remarks given here might well carry over to other studies also.

Notes

[1] Cyrus A. Raji, April J. Ho, Neelroop N. Parikshak, James T. Becker, Oscar L. Lopez, Lewis H. Kuller, Xue Hua, Alex D. Leow, Arthur W. Toga, and Paul M. Thompson. "Brain Structure and Obesity". *Human Brain Mapping* (2009). Published online in Wiley InterScience (www.interscience.wiley.com). DOI: 10.1002/hbm.20870. Accessed 8/25/2009.

[2] "Obese People Have 'Severe Brain Degeneration'". (<http://www.livescience.com/health/090825-obese-brain.html>). Posted 8/25/2009. Accessed 8/29/2009.

[3] "Study: Obese People Have 'Severe Brain Degeneration'". (<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,542480,00.html>) Posted 8/25/2009. Accessed 8/29/2009.

[4] For relevant information, see the following article on a U.S. government website: Marcia Wood, "Health At Every Size: New Hope for Obese Americans?" (<http://www.ars.usda.gov/is/AR/archive/mar06/health0306.htm>) Published in *Agricultural Research* magazine, 3/2006. Accessed 8/29/2009. See also *The Obesity Myth* (reference [5] below).

[5] Paul Campos, *The Obesity Myth* (New York: Gotham Books, 2004).

[6] Raj Jayadev. "Muscle vs. Fitness". *Metroactive*. From *Metro* (newspaper), December 1-7, 2004. (<http://www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/12.01.04/weight-0449.html>) Accessed 8/29/2009.

[7] "Science of HAES". (<http://www.sizediversityandhealth.org/content.asp?id=21>). Accessed 8/29/2009. Includes articles by Dr. Paul Ernsberger.

posted at: 11:30 | path: [/political](#) | [persistent link to this entry](#)

Tue, 14 Jul 2009

Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 11: A Summary of the Papers, and What It All Means

This post is the last in a series that I call "The Anti-Dawkins Papers." Together, these posts form a critique of the main ideas in Richard Dawkins' atheistic book *The God Delusion*. You can find the entire critique [here](#). (Actually, the papers aren't against Dawkins; they are only against some of his ideas.)

Will I add more to the critique after this post? Is this *really* the last of the Papers? Those are open questions.

In the previous ten posts, I refuted the main arguments from *The God Delusion*. Here are summaries of what I did.

- * In [post 1](#) I showed that Dawkins' concept of God is hopelessly inadequate. Dawkins' definition of God describes only one idea of God among many possible ideas. Therefore, *The God Delusion* is not really a line of argument against God at all. Even if the arguments in the book were right, the book would be a refutation of one traditional concept of God - not of the idea of God as such. In post 1 I also showed that Dawkins' attack on Gould's NOMA concept is unjustified, and that Dawkins' grasp on philosophy, at least as deployed in this book, is weak.
- * In [post 2](#) I refuted Dawkins' central argument: the argument from improbability. (Actually I did not do this in the post, but in a [paper](#) to which I linked from the post.) The argument from improbability is Dawkins' best atheistic argument; he even suggested that it might be "unanswerable" (p. 113). Since that argument is the central argument of *The God Delusion* (see pp. 157-158), its downfall effectively guts Dawkins' case for atheism. So much for unanswerability! After disposing of this argument, I also undermined Dawkins' critique of agnosticism.
- * In [post 3](#) I addressed Dawkins' criticisms of personal religious experience. I showed that Dawkins' examples of religious experience were stunningly poor examples. I pointed out that real spiritual experience also exists, and can be a good source of knowledge whether or not there is anything supernatural. Also, I suggested that religions might grow out of legitimate spiritual experiences, and then become

irrational when those experiences are forgotten and misunderstood.

- * In [post 4](#) I showed that Dawkins' argument against design in nature is surprisingly weak. I gave links to some of my writings that describe an alternative view. According to this alternative view, evolution is exactly as science says it is (with no Intelligent Design theory or other aberrations), but there still can be real design in nature.
- * In [post 5](#) I showed that Dawkins' ideas about the origins of religion are irrelevant to the truth of belief in God. Even if religion comes from lowly evolutionary sources, it may still turn out to be partly true. Also, I offered my own suggestion for a source of religious belief.
- * In [post 6](#) I took on Dawkins' claim that religion causes evil. I pointed out that his many examples of religious evil are examples of "bad" religion (as defined in the post). These examples show that "bad" religion causes evil, but they tell us absolutely nothing about "good" religion (also defined in the post). Also, I showed that Dawkins' polemic against faith works only against unreasonable, morally insensitive forms of faith.
- * In [post 7](#) I pointed out two places where Dawkins grossly misrepresents the ideas of opposing thinkers. These examples don't bear directly on arguments about God, but they raise doubts about the credibility of the book.
- * In [post 8](#) I showed that the higher percentage of atheists among scientists and other educated people proves nothing about the truth or rationality of atheism.
- * In [post 9](#) I rebutted Dawkins' claim that science rules out miracles. I did not argue for the reality of miracles, but I showed that some miracles might be compatible with science.
- * In [post 10](#) I exposed Dawkins' harsh anti-religious rhetoric for what it is: a form of discourse which, if used in other circumstances, might be considered hate speech. Also, I pointed out some bad reasons why people might find *The God Delusion* convincing.

From the arguments in these posts, we can conclude that Dawkins has failed to make a convincing case against God. We are back where we started before Dawkins wrote his book: with the question of God's existence wide open. Belief in God remains a reasonable option for thinking people; so do atheism and agnosticism. Dawkins may have succeeded in debunking fundamentalism, religious extremism, and other unreasonable forms of belief - but you do not have to be an atheist to see that these are wrong. (Incidentally, those interested in rational approaches to spiritual issues may want to [peruse my website](#), and especially the documents of mine that I cited in [these posts](#).)

On the dust jacket of my copy of *The God Delusion* (the edition I cited in [post 1](#) and used throughout the posts), a quote from Steven Pinker challenges those who hold some particular beliefs to "see if you can counter Dawkins's arguments." Well, we've done it! We have shown that the most important arguments in *The God Delusion* are wrong. Even if you don't agree with my counterarguments, the fact that it's possible to find substantive rational

objections to Dawkins' arguments shows that he has not conclusively settled the question of God. Dawkins has not delivered any unanswerable final stroke in the debate over God's existence. Instead, he has just added his two cents' worth to that debate. (And a nasty two cents' worth it is!)

Despite the nastily self-assured tone of his book, Dawkins is not a voice of reason (or of Reason). As far as religious thought is concerned, he is only another purveyor of opinion in the age-old debate over the existence of God - and his arguments for his opinion aren't even convincing. It's time for rational thinkers to reject *The God Delusion* and move on to more rewarding pursuits.

posted at: 03:07 | path: [/religion/atheism/god_delusion](#) | [persistent link to this entry](#)

Mon, 13 Jul 2009

Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 10: Hate by Any Other Name?

This post continues my critique of the ideas in Richard Dawkins' book, *The God Delusion*. You can find the whole critique [here](#).

Until now, I have concentrated on factual and logical problems with *The God Delusion*. However, one of the main problems with the book is neither a factual nor a logical problem, but an ethical one. I am referring to the book's extremely mean-spirited tone. (I am not the first to comment on this mean-spiritedness [1].) Early in the book, Dawkins says he wants to remove the respect traditionally accorded to religion (pp. 20-27). This part of the book even bears the title "Undeserved respect" (pp. vii, 20). In the rest of the book, Dawkins does not merely remove the undeserved respect. He spews a stream of hostile and corrosive rhetoric, mercifully interrupted by stretches of more level-headed material. If language as hostile as that in *The God Delusion* were found in a book on race or ethnicity, it might well get condemned in some quarters as hate speech.

I will not try to point out all the instances of vitriolic or insulting language in *The God Delusion*. There are far too many instances for that. Instead, I will just point out a few telling examples.

- * Dawkins quotes from a speech by noted religious physicist Freeman Dyson, made while Dyson was accepting an award (pp. 152-153). In between the lines of Dyson's speech, Dawkins inserts made-up words that Dyson never said, making it look as if Dyson were speaking insincerely. Dawkins admits that the added italicized words are not Dyson's, but still he puts them into Dyson's mouth, making Dyson look insincere. This attack on the brilliant Dyson is not simply a criticism of Dyson's beliefs. Instead, it amounts to a below-the-belt personal attack. Later, Dawkins seems to be trying to cover himself when he characterizes Dyson as "way above being corrupted" (p. 153). However, this quick disclaimer does little to reduce the suggestive power of the fabricated words, or the impressions of Dyson that those words leave in the reader's mind.
- * In his discussion of Stephen Jay Gould's [NOMA concept](#) (which tries

to reconcile science and religion), Dawkins surmises that Gould really did not believe NOMA at all, and was merely "bending over backwards to be nice to an unworthy but powerful opponent" (p. 57). In other words, he is suggesting that Gould lied. Again, a below-the-belt attack - but this time against a deceased man who cannot even answer back.

- * At one point (p. 108), Dawkins suggests that those involved with theology "are often chronically incapable of distinguishing what is true from what they'd like to be true." In other words, if you are on the other side of the debating table from Dawkins, there's a good chance you are living in a fantasy world. Rational argument indeed!

These few examples are enough to expose the ratty tone of the book's rhetoric. Just imagine these examples multiplied many times over. The book leaves the impression that if you think differently from Dawkins, then you are insincere or cowardly at worst, ignorant and confused at best - and perhaps senile to boot (p. 98 n.). It is sad to see such rhetoric in a book whose author is known as a distinguished scientist.

Perhaps the most hateful aspect of *The God Delusion* is its constant carping on the evils of religion. I have dealt with these examples of bad religion collectively in an [earlier post](#). There I showed that these examples prove nothing about the existence of God or about the goodness of religious thought in general. These examples only show that some particular religious beliefs are desperately wrong. (You don't need to be an atheist to figure that out; you just need to watch the evening news.) However, the failure of Dawkins' polemic against religion is not its worst defect. Even though it does not succeed in proving anything, Dawkins' insistent ranting about the evils of religion has the potential to whip up rage against ordinary religious people.

Imagine what would happen if the author of this book were not an atheist criticizing religion, but a member of a particular faith criticizing another faith. Suppose, for example, that a Christian wrote a book against Judaism with the same degree of hostility and ridicule that Dawkins uses to attack religion in general. Suppose further that this Christian author hinted that unconverted Jews constitute a danger to humanity. What would we say about such a book? Many of us would consider it a work of hate. The author of the anti-Jewish book might try to defend himself by saying: "But I wasn't attacking Jews, I was only attacking their *beliefs*!" That argument would not wash well with many of us. Anyone who portrays adherents of a belief as menaces to humanity is attacking the people, not just the belief. That kind of criticism goes beyond mere criticism of ideas.

Dawkins does almost the same thing as our imaginary Christian. The main difference is that he attacks a different group of mostly good people. (The two groups - religious believers and Jews - even overlap.) Dawkins doesn't only attack religious criminals, such as al-Qaeda or child-abusing priests, though he does criticize these (see especially pp. 303-304, 315-318). Instead, he portrays *all* religion as a menace (chap. 8) - and he does so in a way that suggests religious people are vehicles of that menace. (He even likens religion to a contagious virus (pp. 176, 186-188).) In effect, he portrays religious people, not only religious ideas, as a problem for the world. Why should Dawkins get a free pass? Why are we afraid to call *The God Delusion* a hateful book? As I pointed out in my [earlier posts](#), the book is full of faulty arguments. What makes this book significantly better than, say, a fiery Christian polemic against Judaism that uses weak arguments as talking

points?

I suspect that many readers give *The God Delusion* more respect than it is worth because they are afraid to question the opinions of a well-known scientist. However, this fear should not stop them from using their reason. Personally, I am a lifelong supporter of science, but even an ardent admirer of science must admit that scientists are not perfect. Occasionally a scientist messes up just as badly as anyone else could. The Nobel Prize-winning physicist Philipp Lenard became a follower of Adolf Hitler and served as "Chief of Aryan or German Physics" for the Nazi Party. [2] The tragic stories of eugenics and of lobotomies provide other examples of scientific error. These errors eventually got corrected, but not in time to prevent harm. I am not suggesting that Dawkins would embrace errors as gross as these. I am only pointing out that his scientific credentials do not guarantee that his ideas always are right. Critical thinking is necessary in this imperfect world. You need it even when reading a book by a "big" scientist.

Another reason people might take *The God Delusion* seriously is that Dawkins is a good writer. It's true that he's a good writer, but of course this says nothing about the truth of his ideas. It is unfortunate for humanity, but nevertheless true, that people who hold lousy ideas sometimes write well.

Still another possible motive for undue reverence toward *The God Delusion* is the sheer density of information in the book. This book is packed with scientific and historical information and ideas. The reader may get the feeling that the book is full of new insights, perhaps even revelations. However, this does not tell us anything about the book's truth. A good science fiction novel can create the same feeling, and can be just as full of ideas and information. That doesn't mean that the plot of the novel is factually true. (The difference, of course, is that the science fiction novel is not *meant* to be true.)

I suggest that we abandon any undue reverence toward *The God Delusion*, and start telling it like it is. *The God Delusion* is not a book that a rational thinker should believe. For reasons discussed here and in [my earlier posts](#), the book does not succeed in building a credible case for atheism. It's still possible for a thinking person to be an atheist - but if you are going to be one, you need to find better reasons than the faulty arguments and misguided rhetoric in *The God Delusion*.

Notes

[1] See, for example, Alvin Plantinga's comments on the nastiness found in *The God Delusion*. (Plantinga, Alvin. "The Dawkins Confusion." *Books & Culture*, March 1, 2007, [http://www.christianitytoday.com/bc/2007/marapr/1.21.html], accessed 5/10/2009.)

[2] *Nobel Lectures, Physics 1901-1921*, Elsevier Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1967, [http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/physics/laureates/1905/lenard-bio.html], accessed 7/8/2009.

posted at: 23:59 | path: [/religion/atheism/god_delusion](#) | [persistent link to this](#)

[entry](#)

Thu, 09 Jul 2009

Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 9: Of Science and Miracles

This post continues my critique of Richard Dawkins' ideas about religion as found in his book, *The God Delusion*. You can find the entire critique [here](#).

In this post I will take on one of Dawkins' claims about miracles. This post is not an argument for belief in miracles. I am only trying to show that the topic of miracles is not as simple as Dawkins makes it seem.

The line of thought in *The God Delusion* is unfriendly to miracles. Dawkins even claims that "miracles, by definition, violate the principles of science" (p. 59). What "definition" does Dawkins have in mind? Is there a hard-and-fast definition, written down somewhere, that dictates the "principles of science"? No, there is not.

Science is a set of methods that have proven extraordinarily useful in understanding and controlling the natural world. Scientists follow certain working rules because those rules have proven useful. However, science does not bow and kneel before any *a priori* list of inviolable principles. If a miracle ever happened, no so-called principle would bar scientists from studying it! If scientists ever did confirm that there was a miracle (in the sense of an event that violates natural laws), they would not say "Well, we have conclusive evidence for this miracle, but we still can't believe it happened, because believing it would violate The Very Principles of Science Itself." At least scientists who have thought it over would not say that! If scientists ever gained conclusive evidence for a miracle, they would have to accept that some natural laws have occasional exceptions. However, science would not collapse. Science would not even have to change in any fundamental way. A thoughtful scientist might say "Well, there's an exception to one of our known natural laws. Now we know that this particular law isn't invariably true. Instead of holding all the time, it only holds *statistically* - it's usually reliable but can be violated on occasion." Scientists already know of statistically true natural laws. The law of entropy in thermodynamics is not invariably true, but only statistically true. The allowed violations of the law of entropy are not miracles; instead, these stunningly rare violations have a known physical basis. However, the statistical nature of the law of entropy does show that a natural law doesn't have to be 100 percent right to be useful. In layman's terms, stuff happens!

Science does not resort to miracles to explain puzzling facts. This scientific policy has proven itself useful, and is indispensable as a working rule. (If we explain something odd by assuming it's a miracle, then we might be missing some other, non-miraculous explanation that we haven't thought of yet.) But does science really rule out miracles?

Imagine a miracle that only happens once, with no advance warning and with no closely similar miracles before or after. Such a once-off unrepeatable miracle would be no threat to science at all! As far as science is concerned, such a miracle probably would be *undiscoverable*. Here's why. If scientists found apparent evidence for such a miracle, they would favor the simplest, least extravagant possible explanation for the evidence. (The working rule of

scientific method called Occam's Razor says this is the appropriate thing to do.) However, *any* non-miraculous explanation would be less extravagant than the hypothesis that a miracle had occurred. Therefore, scientists would not conclude that there was a miracle, even if there was no other apparent explanation for the evidence.

What does this mean? It means that if a single unrepeatable miracle really happened, scientists would have no intellectual obligation to believe that it happened! Scientists would be justified in acting as if there were no miracle. A once-off, unrepeatable miracle would pose no threat to our scientific knowledge. It would not even touch our scientific knowledge. The miracle would not have to be incorporated into our scientific knowledge, even if it really happened. Science can simply ignore the possibility of such a miracle.

It's all too easy to forget that science deals with *repeatable* phenomena and with hypotheses that are *testable through scientific methods*. Science does not necessarily encompass *all* possible phenomena, and ignores hypotheses that *cannot* be scientifically tested. An unrepeatable event can be of scientific interest, but scientists will try to explain it using laws that have repeatable consequences. Ignoring some phenomena and beliefs may be the correct thing for scientists to do, even if they risk missing something that way.

Science does not trade in miracles. That is as it should be. However, science does not force us to believe dogmatically that there are no miracles. A once-off miracle might not be scientifically confirmable. Note that we *cannot* say this about a *repeatable* miracle (for example, if certain prayers were answered dependably). Such a miracle might well be subject to scientific testing. (Dawkins gives an example of this sort of testing in his section on "the Great Prayer Experiment" (pp. 61-66). In that case, the miracle turned out not to be there.) However, an unrepeatable miracle might be impossible to pin down scientifically.

This is not an argument for belief in miracles. As readers of [my writings](#) may have noticed, my own view of spirituality does not require miracles, if a "miracle" means a violation of natural law. I only want to point out that the relationship between science and miracles is not as hostile as it seems. Science can operate perfectly well without an absolute assumption that there are no miracles. If you believe in miracles, that doesn't automatically make you an enemy of science. Whether miracles really happen is a separate question.

posted at: 17:03 | path: [/religion/atheism/god_delusion](#) | [persistent link to this entry](#)

Wed, 08 Jul 2009

Why Science Cannot Disprove the Afterlife

Part 1. The Afterlife and the Scientific Argument Against It

One of the important beliefs of traditional religions is the existence of an afterlife. Some religions teach that humans have immortal souls that leave the body at death and continue to exist afterwards. Other religions teach that

there is no persisting soul, but that a person's mental life, or some aspect of it, starts up again in a new body. (This second view is typical of Buddhism.)

Science-minded skeptics often reject the idea of an afterlife out of hand. Their standard argument against the afterlife goes like this: The mind is only a process in the brain. Therefore, the mind cannot survive the death of the brain.

Is this argument against the afterlife sound? No, it is not. The reason is simple: a process can continue after its physical medium is destroyed. A process that exists in one medium now can continue in a different medium later. Therefore, the fact that the mind is a process in the brain does not imply that the mind must end with the brain. Instead, the mind might continue later in a new brain or in some other physical medium. [1]

There are many examples of processes that start on one medium and continue in another. Examples of these processes are water waves, computations, and fires.

An ocean wave is a process. A single wave can pass from one part of the ocean to another. In doing so, the wave first occupies one stretch of seawater, then another, then another. The water molecules themselves move around in place; they do not travel with the wave. If the part of the sea where the wave started were removed (say, displaced by a big ship), the wave might continue as if nothing happened - provided that the wave already had traveled to a *new* piece of water.

A computation is a process. It can start on one processor and finish on another. If the computation isn't going to use the first processor anymore, then the first processor normally can be shut off with no harm to the computation.

A fire is a process. It can start on one chunk of fuel and continue on another. Once the fire reaches the second piece of wood, the first piece might already be destroyed. However, the fire can continue to burn. The fire needs fuel, but the fire's existence doesn't depend on *any particular* piece of fuel. A different piece of fuel will do just fine. (The analogy between the spread of a fire and the continuation of the mind occurs in Buddhist thought. Apparently the old-time Buddhists understood the behavior of processes better than do today's skeptics.)

A process can continue even after the demise of its original medium. Therefore, the common "scientific" argument against immortality is neither scientific nor convincing. Even if the mind is only a process in the brain, the mind might still continue after death by continuing in another brain, or in some other physical system capable of supporting mental processes.

This finding isn't an argument for the existence of an afterlife. It is only a rebuttal to the standard "scientific" argument against the afterlife. The skeptics who use this argument are way off track. The mind may be a process in the brain, but this fact alone does not tell us whether the mind can continue to exist after the brain is gone. If the skeptics want to think that the afterlife is impossible, they are going to have to find better reasons than that one!

Part 2. Of Toads and Timing: How Might the Mind Survive Death?

It's possible for a process to outlast its medium. How could this happen for

the human mind?

This question brings us to the many scientific speculations about artificial immortality. Scientists, philosophers, and science fiction writers have asked whether we might be able to become immortal by transferring our minds into new brains or into computers. This kind of artificial mind transfer is one way that the mind might outlive its brain. (I discuss an even wilder variation on this in note [2].)

Artificial immortality is an exciting prospect, but it isn't what I want to write about in this post. I am thinking about *spontaneous* immortality - a mind's survival of death *without* artificial means. Spontaneous immortality is similar to what present-day religions believe in. Is spontaneous immortality logically possible and compatible with modern scientific knowledge?

The simple answer is YES. Nothing in logic or in science rules out the possibility of a mind spontaneously starting up again after the death of its original brain. For this to happen, the mind would have to start up again in some other brain spontaneously, without artificial intervention. We have no proof that this happens, but nothing we currently know rules it out. I'll spend most of the rest of this post justifying this answer.

Could an old mind really start up again spontaneously in a new brain? How could this happen?

If it happens, it might work something like this. The mind stops operating when the brain dies. Then a new mind, starting up naturally in a newly formed infant brain somewhere, happens to have some crucial features of the old process. In fact, it is so much like the old process that the two processes constitute *the same mind*. The new process in the new brain acts as a continuation of the old process in the old brain.

If something like this happened, then a kind of "rebirth" could occur without the need for anything controversial like persisting souls. It wouldn't require any objects besides human bodies and their brains.

Does this scenario even make any sense? Yes! We already know of many physical processes that restart like this. They stop happening for a while, and then start happening again later.

One prime example is a computation. Someone can set up a computer program to do a specific task (for example, calculate pi to 1 million decimal places). If the program saves its in-progress data to the hard disk, then if the program is interrupted (say by a hardware reboot), the program can be started up again later and finish the same task. There is no reason to think of the second part of the computation as a totally new computation. It is part of the same computation as the first part.

Other examples of such processes come from the migration of animals. Many types of animals migrate from one geographical area to another. Perhaps the movement is caused by external stimuli alone, or perhaps internal "clocks" and interactions among animals play roles - but in any case, the result is a process that we call a *migration*. Now imagine a migration in which the animals' movement is triggered by external stimuli alone. Imagine further that these particular animals are not very excitable, so that only one animal is traveling at any given time. If you want a specific example, imagine a bunch of toads moving across the landscape - and imagine that the toads are rather

placid, so it happens that only one toad is hopping at any given time. This process (if it really happened) would be a perfectly good example of an animal migration. However, it would not be a continuous process, but would be a frequently interrupted one. At any given time, a single toad is moving - but in between times, no animals are traveling at all. In spite of the gappy and disconnected nature of the movements, the sum total of these movements is a process of migration. A migration really is happening. It would be an abuse of language to say there is no "migration" just because the migration consists of discrete jumps. [3]

These examples show that a single process can be made up of several consecutive subprocesses or stages ("hops"), each of which spans a different interval in time and space. It's possible for a process to stop and then start up spontaneously later, even if some time elapses between the stages of the process, and even if the restart happens in a different place from the stop.

What does that tell us about the mind? The toad and computer examples show that a process can be made of several stages that happen in sequence, with time gaps (and even space gaps) separating the stages. The stages don't have to be connected directly together to make up a single process. Thus, the process that we call the mind could (for all we know) consist of several separated stages. The fact that the mind is a process in the brain does not rule out the possibility that this process has more stages later, in other brains. When a mind stops, some later process that starts up in some other brain might be *a future stage of the same mind*. We have no proof that this happens, but we can't rule it out by shouting that tired old skeptical battle cry, "the mind is only a process in the brain"!

If minds really could start up again like this, then after you die, your mind might start up again in the brain of some new baby who is just beginning to gain consciousness. (Babies appear to become conscious gradually, not all at once - but still they do become conscious, so we can speak of the experiences that happen as a baby becomes conscious.) In other words, you might die, then wake up as a new baby somewhere in the world. This would be a modern version of the ancient doctrine of reincarnation or rebirth. Of course, there would be nothing that actually "reincarnates," because there is no substantial soul to pass over to the new body. There also would be none of those so-called "past-life memories" that bemuse so many New Agers. Instead, your mind during this life would be only one time-phase of a larger process, which has gaps and also includes the mind of a future brain. This larger process would be your mind as a whole. Your mind as it exists during this life would be only part of your mind - a single stage.

The Buddhist idea of rebirth is much like this: a kind of restart of one's inner life in a new body, without any substantial soul to pass over to the new body. However, the idea I am proposing here is much simpler. Among other differences, my idea can do without the belief in karma, which is important to the Buddhist view.

Part 3. The Perils and Possibilities of Persons

So far I have been talking about an abstract logical possibility: a single mind that exists in two or more different bodies, one after the other. Before we can consider this a real possibility, we need to think about a huge question: Why would the mind of a new body - a body born after you die - be *your* mind? What would make a particular new mind a continuation of *you*, instead of just a new person? Could anything do that?

Offhand, it doesn't seem as if the mind of a later body could be your mind. The very idea seems bizarre. After all, the baby born after you die doesn't have your memories, and probably no information or influence has passed from you to the baby! This kind of "rebirth" isn't exactly like a fire passing from one stick to another, where the first phase of the fire causes the second phase to begin. It's more like our migration of toads, where two independent hops can be stages of the same overarching process. It's just you (hop number 1) and a future infant (hop number 2) - with no important influences passing in between.

Could the baby be the same person as you? I don't have a final answer to this question, but I do know a possible way to an answer. This way is the *theory of personal identity* - a field of philosophy that uses logic to analyze questions about the persistence of persons through time. Let me explain this a bit. I won't go into personal identity theory in depth here (there already are many books on that topic), but I'll try to indicate what the field is about, drawing on general background knowledge about the field. Those interested in a deeper treatment are invited to explore the many books and articles on personal identity.

During your present life, your mind and body continue through time. As they continue, you undergo many different moments and stages of life. All these time-phases of your life are stages of a single history of a unique person. There is a *unity* to your history; the history isn't just a scattered series of random experiences or disconnected moments of existence. There must be some shared feature that the stages have in common, or some relationship among the stages, that unites all the stages into the history of a single person. Philosophers studying personal identity have created various theories, ideas and guesses about the nature of the unifying feature or relationship.

Let's look at a few known ideas about personal identity, and what they say about the possibility that a new baby, born after your death, might be you all over again.

(Note to philosophers: As a philosopher, you might agree or disagree strongly with some of the theories I'm hinting at here. Remember that I am *not* advocating a specific theory of personal identity. I only want to show that different views of personal identity can give very different verdicts on the idea of rebirth. I am well aware that there are arguments for and against each of these views. If an objection is standard, I've probably already heard it.)

Idea 1. Essentialism.

According to so-called "essentialist" views of personal identity, what unites the stages in your life is a set of essential characteristics. These would be the characteristics that make you uniquely you, and that differentiate you from all other persons.

If persons or their minds really have essential characteristics like this, then a baby might be born who is literally a *continuation of you*. People are born with many different sets of characteristics as a result of chance and the genetic lottery. Given any possible set of essential characteristics, some future baby might happen to be born with that same set of characteristics, just by chance. The longer the time after your death, the more likely such an infant will be born somewhere. Thus, you might be "reborn" in the future by virtue of raw chance. In effect, the chance genetic processes that created you in the first place might accidentally create you again!

Idea 2. Continuity of experience.

According to other views of personal identity, what unites your stages into one history is the *continuity of experiences* in your life. At each conscious moment, you have certain experiences (sensations, feelings, etc.). These experiences give way to each other as you go along, creating what's called a "stream of consciousness."

If this apparent continuity is what ties your life together, then a baby might be born who is literally a continuation of you. A baby, once conscious, can have various experiences. Some of these experiences (perhaps most of them at first!) will be dreamy and unreal - so they will include experiences of things that aren't really present. Given the vast complexity of brains, some of these dreamlike experiences might even be rather random. What if the baby's earliest experiences started with impressions that just happened, by chance, to duplicate your last moments - either in detail, or at least in certain crucial respects? That might be enough to make the new baby's consciousness count as a continuation of yours.

Idea 3. Continuity of viewpoint.

Each of us has what philosophers call a "first-person point of view" - a unique standpoint from which one experiences the world. As philosophers often have pointed out, conscious experience has a subjective "feel"; it has an inner, subjective, felt aspect as well as an outer, behavioral one. [4]

This provides a clue to another way that a new baby could be literally a continuation of you. As I pointed out under Idea 2, a baby's earliest experiences may be partly random. What if the baby's earliest conscious moments just happened, by chance, to feel as though *your* last experiences had just happened? Given certain ideas about first-person viewpoint, that might make the baby's first-person viewpoint a continuation of yours. [5]

This idea is especially relevant if a first-person perspective is a kind of abstract object. (Elsewhere I have suggested that the first-person perspective at any given moment of awareness is a kind of *modality*, which can be taken to be an abstract object. See reference [6] and also [here](#).) If a first-person perspective is an abstract object, then it might be possible for a brain not physically connected to yours to realize the same abstract feature.

Idea 4. The abstract self

As I have pointed out [elsewhere](#), it's reasonable to assume that the self is an abstract object - a feature or property of the brain or of the brain's activity. (This idea isn't a theory of personal identity, but it has a similar impact on the rebirth scenario we are discussing.)

If this idea is true, then a new baby might be literally a continuation of you. How? The baby's brain might have the same feature that served as a self when your brain had the feature!

By presenting these four ideas about personal identity or the self, I'm not arguing for any of them. Nor am I arguing for any of the four possibilities for rebirth. Those who think they have fatal objections to one or more of these ideas need not be too upset. I know that much of what I have said is

speculative. (Critics, pay attention to the preceding sentence before writing.) All I am trying to show is that it is not out of the question for a later human organism to be the same person as an earlier human organism. Nothing illogical, supernatural, or antiscientific is required. These four scenarios for survival of death do not violate the scientific principle known as Occam's Razor; they do not assume any extra objects (like ghostly souls) or extra complexity in the physical world. (The only objects required are human bodies and brains, with all their usual properties and features.)

Note that these four proposals do not add up to proof of an afterlife, or even to proof that an afterlife is likely. (I repeat: I am *not* claiming to have a proof of the afterlife.) Besides the four views of personal identity that I've hinted at here, there are other views that make spontaneous survival very unlikely. Examples are views based on the continuity of bodies or on the continuity of most of a person's memories. I am not going to argue for or against any of these theories here. I have presented the above four ideas to make one point: that we can't disprove the afterlife merely by stating that the mind is nothing but a process in the brain.

These examples also teach us another important lesson: if the mind is a process in the brain, then the possibility of an afterlife is a philosophical question, not a scientific one. If the mind is a process in the brain, then the answer to the question "Can a person spontaneously survive death?" depends on the solution to the problem of personal identity. That problem is philosophical, not scientific. Science cannot decide among alternative logically consistent solutions to that problem, for we cannot make that decision using only physical facts about bodies and their behavior. We also need philosophical analysis of concepts, such as the concept of a person. No matter which view of personal identity is right, the physical facts about bodies, brains and behavior will look exactly the same.

Part 4. Some Parting Remarks (pun intended)

What lessons have we learned from this merry romp through philosophy, logic and life? There are two.

1. The standard scientific argument against the afterlife is wrong. It might be possible for persons and their minds to survive death, even if the mind is "only" a process in the brain and the self is "only" a feature of the brain.

2. If the mind is a process in the brain, then the existence of the afterlife is a philosophical question, not a scientific one. If the mind is indeed a process in the brain, then only the philosophical analysis of personal identity can settle the question of the afterlife rationally - if anything ever can settle that question rationally. At very least, science cannot disprove the existence of the afterlife. Science can test particular ideas about the afterlife (such as beliefs about ghosts or past-life memories), but it cannot show that there is no afterlife of any kind.

If the mind is a process in the brain, then the standard "scientific" argument against the afterlife is not scientific. To present this argument as science is to practice pseudoscience! The argument is not scientific, but all too often it gets passed off on the unwary as science.

Before finishing, I should touch on the subject of religion. The ideas I have presented about the afterlife do not support any particular religious view of

the afterlife. (For that matter, they don't support other specific religious beliefs either. An atheist can accept these ideas just as well as a theist can.) The ideas presented here come closer to Buddhist views than to any other religious teaching on the afterlife. However, adherents of other religions might want to speculate on the relevance of this post to their own beliefs. (For example, could "heaven" be interpreted as rebirth in some alternate universe?) Discussing these possibilities would take me too far into the realm of faith, where I do not want to go right now. My aim in this post is not to prove any part of any religion, or any specific picture of the afterlife. I only want to show that the standard "scientific" argument against the afterlife is wrong. And that, I would suggest, I have done.

Notes

[1] As I will mention in a moment, the Buddhists recognized this fact long ago. It is amazing that the proponents of the skeptical argument do not take this old discovery into account.

[2] Combine artificial immortality with time travel - another staple of science fiction - and you raise the possibility of artificially continuing the minds of people who already have died. Some physicists have seriously asked whether time travel might be possible. If it were possible, and if it could take us to any past time, then why not start resurrecting everyone? The result would be every bit as good as the "general resurrection" that some religions believe in. (Liberal Christians often interpret "creation" in a non-supernatural way as the process of evolution. They might also be interested in the idea of a resurrection without supernatural miracles!)

[3] There is little question that an animal migration counts as a single process. The migration as a whole has specific overall effects on regional animal populations and on the natural environment in general. It plays a role in the natural world that goes beyond any of the individual activities of its component hoptoads. To deny that the migration is a real process, while also claiming that *only* the individual hops of the toads are real, would be silly.

[4] To better understand this idea, see the classic article "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" by Thomas Nagel (*The Philosophical Review*, 83 (1974):435-450).

[5] See the treatment of "conscious subject identity" in chapter 5 of my book, [From Brain to Cosmos](#). (Sharlow, Mark F. *From Brain to Cosmos*. Parkland, FL: Universal Publishers, 2001.)

[6] [From Brain to Cosmos](#) (cited above), chapter 3 and especially pp. 65-66.

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Mon, 06 Jul 2009

Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 8: Are Scientists and Other

Smart People Atheists?

This post continues my critique of Richard Dawkins' ideas about religion as found in his book, *The God Delusion*. You can find the whole critique [here](#).

Dawkins' claim that most good scientists are atheists (pp. 97-103) does not provide one shred of support for atheism. The majority of scientists might be atheistic, or appear to be atheistic, for reasons having nothing to do with the truth or falsity of atheism. I can think of four such reasons without even trying very hard.

Reason 1. Academic politics.

This explanation for scientific atheism is crashingly obvious to those of us who have observed the rise of other persistent academic fads, like postmodernism. If the top layers of the scientific profession contain lots of atheists, then it might be hard for religious scientists (even liberal ones) to move up in their fields. Over time, this process of selection would make atheism more and more common among scientists. This mechanism alone could explain the abundance of atheists in science.

Of course, this explanation will work only if there was an initial surplus of atheists to start the process. It isn't hard to see where that surplus could have come from. There could have been a temporary surge of atheism among scientists in the wake of some scientific discovery that seemed to support atheism. Evolution is one candidate for such a discovery. (Evolution doesn't actually support atheism, but it rules out some simplistic beliefs about God, and it *seems* to support atheism. See [here](#) and [here](#) for relevant ideas. Also see my e-books *God and Darwin - Buddies!* and *God, Son of Quark*.) Another possible source for the initial surplus of atheists is pure chance. For example, the top universities might have happened to recruit more atheists than usual for a short time. (This is what mathematicians call a statistical fluctuation.) No matter how the atheistic trend got started, it easily could have become self-perpetuating and stubbornly hard to reverse.

Reason 2. Philosophical ignorance and "philosophobia."

In my personal experience, I have found that many scientists are frighteningly ignorant of philosophy. Some even speak as if they held preposterous beliefs about philosophy - like the belief that philosophers think the physical world is only a dream. A few scientists are downright hostile to philosophy in spite of knowing little about it. Worse yet, most scientists are not skilled in the kind of reasoning used in philosophy - the subtle, nuanced analysis of ideas and shades of meaning, so different from the visual thinking and physical intuition that pervade most scientific reasoning.

This ignorance about philosophy might seem to be a simple case of overspecialization. It might seem to have nothing to do with religion. However, this ignorance easily could trap scientists into becoming atheists or agnostics. Here's how that could happen.

Scientists are highly educated. Because of this, they know that many traditional religious beliefs are wrong. The most obvious example of such a belief is the doctrine that God created each living species through a special supernatural act. When people become educated enough to reject a lot of

beliefs like that, they will lose faith in the old-time religion they grew up with. What outlook will they adopt instead? There are only two real choices. Either they will abandon religion, or they will try to find a more rational type of spiritual belief. How can one find those better forms of belief? Only through philosophical reasoning - the kind of fine-grained qualitative thinking, often about unvisualizable concepts, that is typical of philosophy. You don't have to be a philosopher to figure out rational alternatives to the old-time religion. However, you do need to be able to think like a philosopher. Scientific reasoning, with its emphasis on pictorial thinking about visible things, is not the right tool for this job. When confronted with ideas like [the various personal and impersonal concepts of God](#), scientific reasoning will simply draw a blank. Scientists who no longer believe what they were told to believe, but who can't think philosophically, will not find any rational alternative besides unbelief.

For this reason, a scientist who can't think philosophically is likely to feel that religion is wrong, period. Without the background to think out better answers, what else can a scientist do?

Reason 3. Atheism of convenience.

Maybe the statistics about atheism among scientists aren't as accurate as they seem. Dawkins hints that people of earlier times (including scientists) may have pretended to be religious for political or social reasons (see p. 98). This seems like a very reasonable assumption. However, in today's scientific community, atheism and not religion is the fashion. Thus, the opposite deception might occur. I wonder how many scientists pretend to be atheistic for the sake of their careers, when really they are believers!

This mechanism could not account for all scientific atheism. I think most scientists are more or less honest about their beliefs. However, this mechanism could increase the apparent number of atheists in science.

Reason 4. Mislabeling.

I wonder what scientists and those who observe them really mean when they label scientists as atheistic. If they take "atheism" to mean disbelief in a personal God or in a supernatural God, then a scientist might be labeled an atheist and still believe in a full-fledged supreme being! (See [my earlier post](#) on alternative ideas of God.) Perhaps some scientists are not really atheists, but are just skeptical of traditional ideas about God. Also, I wonder how many "atheistic" scientists really are agnostic instead of atheistic. Do the scientists, with their typically inadequate philosophy backgrounds, fully understand the difference?

These four sociological mechanisms, acting together, easily might explain why scientists tend to be atheists or to be labeled as atheists.

These sociological mechanisms don't affect only scientists. They also could explain Dawkins' observation that educated and intelligent people in general are more likely to be atheistic (pp. 101-103). To explain that fact, we don't have to assume that the idea of God is so irrational that only dumb people fully accept it. (Dawkins doesn't quite make that assumption in *The God Delusion*, but his selective carping on the stupidest examples of religion strongly suggests it.) The fact that scientists and other educated people tend

to be atheistic does not prove anything interesting about the real world.

Incidentally, professional philosophers (like other educated people) could be affected by these sociological mechanisms. Can reason 2 apply to them? Philosophers, by definition, are not ignorant of philosophy. However, they still can suffer from a kind of partial "philosophobia," because present-day philosophy is so deeply fragmented into subdisciplines. One easily can imagine a philosopher of science or a philosopher of mind being ignorant of the philosophy of religion, and thinking there must be something fishy about it because it has to do with religion.

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Thu, 25 Jun 2009

Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 7: Dawkins Misrepresents Some Opposing Ideas and Thinkers

This post continues my critique of the ideas about religion found in Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion*. You can find all posts in this critique, including the present one, [here](#).

There are many things wrong with the line of argument in *The God Delusion*. Besides the [faults I discussed earlier](#), there are two passages that misrepresent opposing thinkers so grossly as to strain belief. I will take up these two passages in turn.

1. Some Silliness about Dualism

One of the ideas that Dawkins criticizes is dualism - the view that the mind is something distinct from the body (pp. 179-180). This criticism is not surprising, since dualism is unpopular in academic circles today. Dualism was more popular among scientists and philosophers in the past. The great philosopher-scientist Descartes was a dualist, as was the Nobel Prize-winning brain scientist John Carew Eccles [1]. Even today, "property dualism" (a mild form of dualism) remains under consideration among philosophers.

In light of these facts about dualism, consider the following two utterly amazing statements by Dawkins (p. 180):

"Dualists readily interpret mental illness as 'possession by devils' [...]"

"Dualists personify inanimate physical objects at the slightest opportunity, seeing spirits and demons even in waterfalls and clouds."

When I first read these incredible statements, I thought, "Which dualists

could Dawkins have in mind?" The answer came quickly: not any philosophical dualist I've heard of! The most prominent dualist philosopher of all time was Descartes. Descartes believed that humans were the only animals with non-bodily minds. To accuse Descartes of "personify[ing] inanimate physical objects at the slightest opportunity" is sheer claptrap. The same can be said about other serious dualistic thinkers besides Descartes.

What Dawkins calls "dualism" in this passage is not dualism, but *animism*. [2] Animism is a feature of some tribal religions. Animism is dualistic, but it is not a reflective or philosophical form of dualism. Scientifically aware dualists are not animists. You can like dualism or hate it, but either way, confusing dualism with animism is simply nonsense.

I don't pretend to know why Dawkins made this mistake. I wish I could give him the benefit of the doubt, and assume that he just goofed and used the wrong word, taking "dualism" to mean what's usually called "animism." Alas, his characterization of dualism on the previous page (p. 179) shows that things are not so simple. He knows the approximate definition of dualism, but he confuses dualism with animism anyhow. The resulting passage in the book makes dualists look far more foolish than any rational criticism could make them appear.

This confusion is rhetorically convenient. If real philosophical dualists believed in waterfall spirits, then dualism would be oh-so-easy to debunk!

2. Nonsense about a Major Psychologist

In another place (p. 50-51), Dawkins makes unsupported statements about the noted psychoanalyst C. G. Jung.

First, Dawkins makes it sound as though Jung were an unshakable believer in a supernatural creator. Dawkins repeats a famous quote, attributed to Jung, about the existence of God: "I do not believe, *I know*." From this quote, Dawkins infers that Jung was a theist and was 100 percent certain that there is a God (p. 50). (Earlier, Dawkins defines a theist as a believer in a supernatural God of a certain sort (p. 18).)

There are two things glaringly wrong with this reading of Jung's statement.

First, Jung almost certainly did not believe in the kind of God that Dawkins is trying to disprove. Jung's idea of God is not the God concept of theism as defined by Dawkins. Anyone who has studied Jung knows that Jung regarded God as having a *psychological* reality, in the sense that belief in God arises from a deep part of the unconscious mind. According to Jung, the God images of myth and religion arise from the conscious mind's contact with unconscious parts of the psyche (what Jung called the "archetypes"). These unconscious parts of the mind are not actually the gods of religion and mythology. Instead, they are elements of our inherited mental capacities. Their presence in us makes us tend to believe in God or gods and to have religious experiences. In Jungian psychology, "God" is "real" in the sense that the part of the mind upon which God-images are based has an objective psychological reality. It's safe to suppose that this psychological reality is what Jung had in mind when he said that he knew God was real. To suppose otherwise is to ignore the entire thrust of Jung's psychological theory.

Whether Jung personally believed in the supernatural is a difficult question. Like many scientists in his time, he was interested in so-called paranormal phenomena, but he tried to understand these as parts of nature. However, this distracting side issue has little bearing on his idea of God. Jungian psychological theory, and even Jung's idea of God, could exist perfectly well without the "supernatural" as Dawkins understands that word. Jung's concept of a psychological God, found in the depths of the human mind, is very far from the supernatural concept of God that Dawkins is trying to refute!

As if this confusion were not enough, Dawkins does something even sillier: he reads Jung's "I *know*" as meaning that Jung was 100 percent sure there is a God (p. 50). Why 100 percent sure? Why not assume instead that Jung was confident to a high level of probability, but less than 100 percent? This is what scientists normally mean when they say they "know" something. They do not usually mean they are 100 percent sure. So, why does Dawkins take Jung's "I *know*" to mean that Jung was absolutely certain? I don't claim to know the answer to this, but once again the confusion is rhetorically convenient. Jung's psychological theory, with its strong strain of spirituality, is a threat to Dawkins' antireligious world view. It's easier to make Jung look foolish if you paint him as a 100 percent confident True Believer.

I'd like to know exactly what Dawkins was thinking when he accused Jung of "holding a belief without adequate reason to do so" (p. 51). Has Dawkins studied Jung's clinical and historical research on the psychological basis for the God concept? I don't know, but based on what I know of Dawkins' ideas, I have serious doubts. If Dawkins is accusing Jung of unreasoned belief without first looking at Jung's reasons, then Dawkins is making an unreasoned claim. Jung, on the other hand, was trying to be scientific. Whether Jung succeeded is a separate question, but he did build up an interesting body of supporting information for his ideas.

Dawkins then attributes another belief to Jung: "that particular books on his shelf spontaneously exploded with a loud bang" (p. 51). Dawkins states this in a context that makes Jung seem silly. The truth about these so-called exploding books is far more complex, and far less helpful to Dawkins.

As far as I can tell, Dawkins' exploding-books claim is based on a well-known story found in one of Jung's books [3]. The story, in summary, is this: Jung and Sigmund Freud were in a room when Jung began to feel an odd physical sensation. Then Jung and Freud heard a loud popping noise in a bookcase. After the first noise, Jung felt strongly that there was going to be a second noise, and said so. Then there was a second bang. Jung's feeling that there was going to be a second bang is the only spooky thing about this incident. The bangs themselves, which seem to worry Dawkins, could have had many possible natural causes, such as accumulations of flammable dust from old books, or overloaded weak bookshelves. (A confirmed skeptic like Dawkins is not likely to be troubled by Jung's odd feeling of things to come, for a skeptic always can dismiss strange events as coincidences.)

If this really is the incident Dawkins had in mind, then he has reduced this incident (with two witnesses!) to a mere *belief* of Jung's. He mentions the affair in an inaccurate way that makes Jung seem foolish. Why? History supports the view that Jung did not merely believe in the noises; he heard them. So did another observer, Sigmund Freud, who is known to have had a skeptical streak. You don't have to be deluded to witness peculiar events. You don't even have to be religious.

Why does Dawkins portray Jung's ideas and experiences in such a bad light? Again, I don't know why (for I am not Dawkins). It's possible that Dawkins' misreading of Jung is just a random mistake. However, we must not forget who C. G. Jung was. Jung was a psychoanalyst who was not only scientifically inclined, but also took the spiritual side of human nature seriously. He thought the findings of psychology lent some credence to human spirituality. Jung saw grains of truth in the world's religions and mythologies, and he collected some facts in support of his position. If Jung was right to any degree at all, then his ideas represent a threat to Dawkins' fire-breathing antireligious crusade. Once again, the mistake is rhetorically convenient!

3. Concluding Personal Opinion

These gross misinterpretations of some of Dawkins' opponents - the dualists and Jung - helped to convince me that *The God Delusion* is off the map intellectually. It is good policy not to believe anything said in *The God Delusion* without first investigating the facts for yourself. Of course, that is good policy when reading any book tagged as "nonfiction." It is especially important for a book as problem-ridden as this one.

Notes

[1] Curtis, D.R., and Anderson, P. "Biographical Memoirs. John Carew Eccles 1903-1997." Australian Academy of Science.
<http://www.science.org.au/academy/memoirs/eccles.htm> (accessed June 25, 2009).

[2] The word "animism," like many philosophical terms, has been used to describe more than one idea. Here I am using the most common meaning: the belief that natural objects are inhabited or controlled by spirits.

[3] Jung, C.G. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. Ed. Aniela Jaffe'; trans. Richard and Clara Winston. Rev. ed. (pbk.) N.Y.: Vintage Books, 1989. The story is on pp. 155-156 of that edition.

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Wed, 24 Jun 2009

Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 6: Does All Religion Cause Evil?

This post continues my critique of Richard Dawkins' book, *The God Delusion*. You can find all posts in this critique, including the present one, [here](#).

One of the main lines of argument in *The God Delusion* is the argument that religion leads to evil. The book is chock-full of descriptions of the evils of religion. However, these examples, dramatic as they are, prove absolutely nothing about the existence of God. The examples do not show that belief in God leads to evil. They only show that certain beliefs *about* God lead to evil. You don't need to hold these particular beliefs to believe in God.

It is silly to jump from the premise that religion has caused evil, to the conclusion that belief in God causes evil. A careful observer of religions should be able to figure out that *belief in God, by itself and without other beliefs, does not force you to do evil*. What causes the evil is not belief in God, but certain beliefs *about* God. Specifically, the evil comes from two kinds of beliefs about God: *beliefs that imply that people should harm others, and beliefs that cause harm to the people who believe them*.

Here are a few examples of beliefs that imply that people should harm others:

- * The belief that God has ordered us to force our religion on others.
- * The belief that God has ordered believers to kill infidels.
- * The belief that God has ordained cruel laws and punishments.
- * The belief that God has ordered women to obey men.
- * The belief that God has told us to beat our children.

Here are two example of beliefs that cause harm to the people who believe them:

- * The belief that sinners or unbelievers go to an eternal hell. (Dawkins is right when he shows this belief can cause horrible unnecessary misery right here on earth (pp. 317-322).)
- * The belief that committing a sin makes God want to punish you, or otherwise puts some kind of spiritual stain on you. (Guilt about sin is one of the *greatest* of all evils inflicted in the name of religion. It lies at the basis of many of the other evils. I'm not talking about the simple moral belief that wrongdoing should be avoided. I'm talking about the theological idea of *sin* with all that it entails.)

Dawkins' book contains references to these beliefs and more. However, you can believe in God without accepting any harmful beliefs of these two kinds. It is these other beliefs that cause problems - not belief in God as such. Belief in God is not the cause of the evils that Dawkins points out. At most, Dawkins has built a case against religion as it exists today, with its many and sometimes strange beliefs. He has not built a case against the simple belief in God as such. That is something different.

Dawkins has failed to build a case that belief in God is evil. Has he built a convincing case that *religion* is evil?

Dawkins' examples of the evils of religion form a strong case against *bad religion* - that is, religious beliefs that deny fact (as creationism does) or that deny sensible, humane moral feelings (as jihad does). His examples do not form a case against *good religion* - that is, personal views of the meaning of existence that do not try to overrule testable fact or decent morality. Dawkins' book is not friendly to distinctions between good and bad religion (see, for example, pp. 301-308), but the difference is real. Some liberal, moderate personal interpretations of religion are examples of good religion. Whether or not these good interpretations are right, they are not causes of evil behavior, provided that they actually respect fact and real morality. A belief system

that respects ordinary human decency (including the rejection of murder and cruelty) cannot approve cruel or murderous behavior, because its moral outlook frowns on such behavior. A belief system that respects scientific facts (including evolution) cannot endorse superstition, because its very essence is to deny superstition.

Do genuinely moral and fact-respecting forms of religion exist? Yes! Many religious believers already are following this kind of religion. They may claim that they belong to some traditional sect or other, but if so, they interpret the teachings of their sect in a humane and realistic way. I have known many Christians and Jews of this kind. I am confident that they have counterparts in all the other major religions. I have known Christians who focused almost exclusively on the Golden Rule and on the universal love that Jesus symbolizes. They believed in a good God, ignored the nasty stuff in the Old Testament and in Paul's writings, and did not really believe in hell. A skeptic might accuse such people of being selective about their scriptures (compare the example of nonviolent Muslims on p. 307). However, this complaint, even if true, pales beside the fact that these believers put kindness and reason ahead of authority and dogma. In any case, selective reading of scriptures can make sense if you do not believe your scriptures are literally true.

Dawkins also claims that faith is bad, even in liberal religions, because if people are encouraged to believe things on faith then they are more likely to become extremists (pp. 301-308). This argument ignores the obvious fact that faith does not have to be unquestioning *blind* faith. There also is such a thing as *informed* faith. Informed faith respects science, reason, and humane moral sentiments. It does not challenge these, but only takes stands on questions that science, reason, and ethics cannot answer. Examples of such questions might include the ultimate meaning and purpose (if any) of existence. Taking an optimistic stand on this question might be a desirable thing to do from the standpoint of human life, even if we don't know the answer. [1]

Faith might not even be necessary for belief in God. I've argued [elsewhere](#) that there are ways to know about God without faith. The God we find this way might not fit Dawkins' [overly narrow idea of God](#), but still it is a supreme being.

Dawkins shows a tendency to carp on bad forms of religion and to downplay more plausible and rational forms. His book is full of examples of crazy or strange religions: cargo cults, militant sects, and the rest. Suggesting that these represent religion is like suggesting that a newspaper horoscope represents the science of astronomy. Just as there is good science and bad science (or pseudoscience), so also there is good religion and bad religion. Dawkins focuses on bad religion and thinks he is building a case against good religion too. You can't prove much about religious beliefs in general by focusing on the bad examples.

Has Dawkins built a convincing case against religion? No. Has he built a convincing case against ignorant and cruel forms of religion? Yes - but thoughtful believers already know these forms are wrong, without being lectured by an atheist.

Notes

[1] The philosopher William James made essentially this same point about faith, and argued it very well. See "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Dover Publications, 1956).

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Mon, 22 Jun 2009

Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 5: The Causes of Religion Cannot Prove Religion False

This post continues my critique of Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion*. You can find the entire critique [here](#).

In this post I will comment on Dawkins' ideas about the causes of belief in God.

In Chapter 5, Dawkins points out several causes that might make people tend to believe irrationally in God or religion. Some of the causes have to do with evolutionary biology, mostly focusing on religion as a "by-product" (p. 172) of evolved tendencies or behaviors. Other causes are cultural; they have to do with the spread and persistence of beliefs and ideas in societies. By proposing these explanations of religion, Dawkins is trying to counter the common view that religion must be right because it is so widespread (see pp. 2 and 159).

It's interesting to watch how Dawkins prejudices the debate by using biased language to describe these phenomena. He uses the term "misfiring" to describe situations in which something in the brain starts to perform a new function that supports religion (p. 188). Regardless of this word's scientific connotations, it clearly suggests there is something wrong. (Why not use "redirection" or some other, more neutral word? Elsewhere Dawkins acknowledges that "misfiring" isn't always a bad word (p. 221). He sure doesn't insist on that point when he discusses religion.) When the alleged cause of religion is cultural, Dawkins often describes it in terms of the spread of "memes" (pp. 191-201). This post isn't the place for a debate on the merits of the meme concept in general. However, it is interesting that Dawkins uses language that paints mental pictures of the automatic spread of a disease germ. He even compares religion to a virus (pp. 186, 188). By using these loaded metaphors, Dawkins marginalizes the fact that the spread of an idea involves conscious, and sometimes even thoughtful, decisions by human thinkers. If you voluntarily decide to change your religious beliefs, that is *your* decision. The fact that you can make this one decision for yourself is more important than any amount of talk about how beliefs spread. The possibility that human behavior is predictable does not make this fact less significant [1].

Dubious language aside, Dawkins' argument about the causes of religion is irrelevant to the question of whether there is a God. His suggestions about evolutionary and cultural causes for religion are interesting, and may even be wholly or partly right. Dawkins' proposed causes of religion may indeed help to explain why religion is so widespread. However, these claims about the

causes of religion have little bearing on the truth of belief in God. Why? Simply put, people sometimes arrive at correct beliefs for the wrong reasons - so the mere fact that a belief has irrational causes doesn't imply that the belief is wrong.

As Dawkins and many others know well, some widely held religious beliefs are grossly wrong. The idea that the world was created in seven literal days is one example. It is easy to imagine that beliefs like these gain their force from irrational causes like the ones Dawkins discusses. However, the vagaries of evolution and culture sometimes cause us to hold *true* beliefs, too. Evolution created the features of our brains that enable us to recognize that one plus one equals two. The fact that evolution prompts us to believe this does not make $1+1=2$ false! Cultural processes, like evolutionary ones, don't just perpetuate false beliefs. They also perpetuate true beliefs. Probably you haven't personally verified every single "fact" that your teachers taught you in school. Perhaps you accepted most of these "facts" when they were taught to you - yet most of these alleged "facts" really *are* facts. (Dawkins recognizes that children absorb truth, as well as error, from authority figures; see pp. 174-176.) The fact that authority or irrational tendencies tilt us toward certain beliefs does not make those beliefs wrong. To think otherwise is to commit the *genetic fallacy* - a logical mistake in which a thing (or a belief) is assumed to have the features of its source or cause.

If we want to find out how much of religion is true, we must examine specific religious beliefs to find out whether they are true or false. Finding out why we tend to favor these beliefs is not the same as finding out whether the beliefs are true. If we find that we are holding a belief for a stupid reason, then the belief still might be true. After all, people sometimes hold true beliefs for the wrong reasons. The important question is not "Where did it come from?", but "Is it right?"

In one especially funny place (pp. 184-186), Dawkins compares religion to falling in love. He suggests (mentioning Dennett as a source for the idea) that religion may be a side effect of the evolved mechanisms that produce romantic love. My first reaction when I read this was: Well, duh! Many [mystics](#) have known of the kinship between religious and romantic experience. This is not a new discovery, nor is it an argument against religion. Mystics of many different traditions know that emotions related to sex and love can be harnessed to produce unusual states of consciousness and spiritual insights. The Tantric tradition, especially its Hindu branch, offers some extreme examples of this. The [romantic poets](#) of all nations and traditions offer other examples. If Dawkins thinks the link between sex, romance and religion is a new discovery, he has some studying to do. Likewise if he thinks this link is evidence against religion.

Dawkins' arguments about the causes of religion cannot help to discredit religion. To think that they can is to commit a logical fallacy, and to ignore a basic fact about evolution and culture: "irrational" forces sometimes shape organisms so that the organisms hold true beliefs.

Dawkins' supposed causes of religion might form part of the reason why people believe. However, I'd like to offer another possible cause for the stubborn persistence of belief in God. (I've already said something about this subject, and the origin of religions, near the end of [an earlier post](#).)

As I've explained [elsewhere](#), certain subjective personal experiences seem to offer deep insights into reality that ordinary experiences do not provide. (I'm

not talking about Dawkins' silly examples of so-called "religious" experiences (pp. 87-92); see [here](#) for the differences.) Often these deeper experiences show the world to be a unity, or "one," in an unexpected way. These experiences can reveal an awesome goodness and beauty in the universe - a goodness and beauty so perfect that one's immediate emotional reaction is one of soaring love. What is more, some of these experiences are accurate in a certain sense: they contain true insights even if they also contain an element of illusion.

A spiritual experience of this sort might prompt a person to believe that there is a single ultimate reality underlying the universe, or a supreme good that encompasses all other goods, or a supreme beauty of which all other beauties are visible manifestations. In other words, these experiences can lead people toward belief in a supreme being of some kind. This being isn't the same as the supernatural God that Dawkins likes to bash (defined on pp. 12-13 and p. 31), but it is a supreme entity nonetheless - and an entity that is not just "dead" matter, but is full of meaning, value, and other "mindlike" qualities.

If people have these experiences and understand them, that is real spirituality. If people have these experiences and *misunderstand* them, the result might well be belief in a dogmatic supernatural idea of God. A person with a limited background of ideas to choose from might confuse a perceived supreme good with a ghostly spirit of some kind, or with a mythical humanoid creator figure. This would be especially likely to happen in the early days of the human race, when mythological and supernatural explanations were the rule.

As I've argued in [God: the Next Version](#) and [elsewhere](#), some real spiritual experiences actually do disclose a being worthy to be called "God." It isn't hard to imagine how people who have heard secondhand of these experiences might invent distorted supernatural beliefs about God. Eventually, when the original experiences are forgotten, confused or malicious people might hijack the resulting belief systems, and invent tragic perversions such as fundamentalism and fanaticism in the name of an imagined superbeing. The best response to these perversions is not atheism, but an effort to reproduce and understand the original experiences.

Many people have had legitimate spiritual experiences. Many have had them without even knowing what they had. (Perhaps they thought they only had a breathtaking moment of romantic love, or of amazement at the vastness of the cosmos, or of "being at one with nature.") If the possibilities of human nature include these spiritual experiences, that might help to explain why belief in God is so persistent.

Dawkins' explanations of religion might form part of the reason why we tend to believe in God. However, there might be another, nobler reason as well. People tend to have real spiritual experiences, and those experiences can show us a supreme being - even if we are not always smart enough to understand what that being is like.

Notes

[1] Note that I am *not* begging the question of the predictability of human action. Whether your decision was predictable or not, it was your voluntary decision. (Many philosophers think predictability is compatible with free

will. This idea is called "compatibilism." See my own compatibilist article [here](#).)

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Sat, 20 Jun 2009

Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 4: Evolution and the So-Called Illusion of Design

This post continues my critique of Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion*. You can find the entire critique [here](#).

One of the main ideas in *The God Delusion* is that the apparent design in the biological world is only an "illusion of design" (p. 2 and chap. 4; see also p. 79). Dawkins is convinced that evolutionary theory shows there is no real design in the biological world. He trots out the old claim that Darwinism refutes the design argument for the existence of God (p. 79). Chapter 4 of *The God Delusion* is partly a rehash of the old argument that evolution shows there is no design in the biological world.

No matter how it is stated or obscured, the central idea of the evolutionary argument against design runs along the following general lines. The evolution of life is simply a resultant of small natural events involving living organisms and their genes. None of these events involves any design; each of them is mechanistic, fully obeys all natural laws, and is caused by other natural events. Therefore, the products of evolution cannot really be products of design.

This argument sounds good at first, but there is something deeply fishy about it (evolutionary pun intended). To see how questionable the argument is, compare it to the following argument about the human brain: Human thought is simply a resultant of small natural events involving neurons and their connections. None of these events involves any design; each of them is mechanistic, fully obeys all natural laws, and is caused by other natural events. Therefore, the products of human thought cannot really be products of design.

If we applied the skeptics' standard for design to the human brain instead of to Earth's biosphere, we would conclude that humans never designed anything! So much for Michelangelo and Edison! According to the scientific view of the mind and brain, human thought processes are neither more nor less than sum totals of small physical events, no single one of which itself involves any design. To avoid the absurd conclusion that humans never designed anything (which is really just an abuse of language, twisting the meaning of the word "design"), we have to admit the possibility that a natural process, composed of small unplanned physical events, *can* add up to a process of design. Once we admit this possibility, the argument that nature's design is an illusion ceases to be convincing. As with human feats of design, the fact that evolution is purely mechanistic and natural does not imply that its products can't be real designs. Nothing supernatural is required.

Another common argument for the illusion of design points to the flawed and conflict-ridden nature of many of the products of evolution. These faults, according to the argument, show that the designer, if there is one, must be far from perfect. It's more reasonable just to assume the products are not designed. Dawkins pulls this gambit (p. 134). However, this argument is even shallower than the above argument about small natural events. By the standard of this second argument, we should conclude once again that human creations are not designed - this time on the grounds that the human brain often (even usually) produces flawed products and preliminary versions instead of perfect final products.

I will not continue this line of rebuttal here, since I already have done that elsewhere. For the rest of my argument, see [this document](#) - and if you like, also read my book *God, Son of Quark*. For now I will just point out that the argument for an "illusion of design" is not as strong as it seems. In fact, it unravels at the slightest touch.

Can those who believe the orthodox scientific version of evolution (as I do) live with this conclusion? Is there any alternative to the "illusion of design" besides supernatural tinkering? Yes! To learn what the alternative is, read the two documents of mine that I just mentioned.

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Fri, 19 Jun 2009

Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 3: Dodging the Issue of Personal Religious Experience

This post continues my [critique](#) of Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion*. In this post I will look at Dawkins' argument against personal religious experience.

Dawkins tries to debunk personal experience as a source of religious knowledge (pp. 87-92). He builds his case in the weakest possible way: by giving flawed examples of so-called "religious" experiences. Some of the examples are experiences of real things wrongly interpreted. For example, someone hears the "diabolical" cackling of a bird (the Manx Shearwater) and thinks it is the voice of the Devil (p. 87). Other examples involve hallucinations, such as supposed ghosts or voices in one's head. Dawkins attributes these phenomena to the "simulation software" of the brain (pp. 88-90).

Despite Dawkins' apparent fascination with them, these experiences are not "religious" in any interesting sense. If Dawkins wants to build a rational case against religion, instead of merely a noisy case, he should know better than to use examples like these. Scholars of religion know of other kinds of experiences radically different from, and much subtler than, these simple mistakes. Some of these other experiences cannot be mere illusions or hallucinations, for reasons I will explain below.

There is one type of experience that, in a sense, cannot be wrong. I am

referring to the experience of a *property* or a *quality*. [1]

Take, for example, Dawkins' example of the Manx Shearwater. The people who heard the noise certainly did not experience the Devil. They did not experience anything that really was devilish; the bird was not devilish, though it sounded that way. However, they did experience a sound which, as they perceived it, *sounded diabolical*. This quality of *diabolicalness* - of seeming devilish or overpoweringly sinister - is a real quality that some sounds have. This quality is not fundamentally mysterious. Presumably we could analyze it in terms of the reactions of the human nervous system, just as scientists do with other perceptible qualities of sound, like pitch, dissonance, or the phonetic qualities of speech. [2] Cultural factors, as well as physiological ones, may figure in this. Certain sounds seem devilish to some people under some circumstances. That much we know.

The people who heard the cry of the Manx Shearwater did not actually experience the Devil. However, *they really did experience the quality of diabolicalness*. They did not experience an evil being. They did experience a bird, but only tangentially (they didn't know it was a bird). But whatever else they experienced, they really did experience a *quality*. The sound really did seem devilish to them.

Experiences of qualities happen all the time in much less dramatic ways than this. When you see a red brick, you have experienced the color red, which is a quality. When you see one side of that brick, you see that it is rectangular; you perceive the quality of rectangularity. The interesting thing about perceptions of qualities is that, in some cases at least, the experience can contain a strong element of illusion and still be right. Suppose that the red brick turned out not to be red. Instead, it was yellow, but odd lighting and bright colors nearby, together with your expectation that bricks are red, made it look red. When the simulation software in your brain created the experience, it registered the brick as red instead of yellow. What happened here? You saw a brick; the brick was not actually red; but still, *you really saw the color red*. The property or quality of redness was, for a moment, an object of your awareness. The same idea works for rectangularity. Even if the brick did not really have rectangular sides (maybe some sides were trapezoidal but the brick was tilted), the property of rectangularity still was present to your mind.

Experiences of a quality may be reliable even if the object that seems to have the quality isn't there. To repurpose Dawkins' pink elephant example (p. 88), I would add that if you get drunk and experience a pink elephant, you have not really seen an elephant - but even though you did not see an elephant, you did experience the color pink.

What do these examples tell us about religious experience? Perhaps a lot - for, as it turns out, the only religious experiences worthy of the name are experiences of *qualities*. Based on what we know about colors, shapes, and the like, it's possible that these experiences really show what they seem to show, even if they also contain a strong element of illusion.

The best examples of these experiences come from a family of special states of mind known by several names: "poetical," "transcendental," "enlightened," "illuminated," or "mystical." (I prefer not to use the word "mystical," because people use that word for all kinds of silly things, including sheer occult folly.) Here I will stick with the more neutral term "spiritual experience." [3] Real spiritual experiences are not the silly experiences that Dawkins calls

"religious." Instead, they are deep, refined states of mind that may happen even to the best scientists and artists. A spiritual experience is a subjective experience that seems to bring a powerful intuitive insight into the ultimate meaning of existence.

Real spiritual experiences do not happen only in connection with religion. Often they happen to poets and artists, to alert observers of nature, or to lovers. They may be called poetic insights, artistic inspirations, or moments of transcendent awareness.

Most spiritual experiences have several features in common. One of these features is the sensation of a *supreme goodness or beauty* that pervades or underlies the universe. Some spiritual observers come away from their experiences with the conviction that the universe is basically good, or that something perfectly and supremely beautiful lies behind the universe we see. Usually the observer also feels that he or she has gained a momentous knowledge of the true nature of reality - a knowledge that cannot be put fully into words. Interestingly, spiritual observers often feel far more awake or alert than normal. These spiritual states are not mere dream states. It feels as if consciousness expands to take in a truth deeper than anything that ordinary awareness can reach.

Can an experience like this be true? Can it give the observer genuine knowledge about reality? Elsewhere I have shown that the answer is "yes." Some experiences of this kind do yield knowledge of reality - and even knowledge that science cannot reach.

My argument for this point is laid out in my e-book [God: the Next Version](#). (Those who want to criticize this post should read that e-book first; my full, unabridged argument is there, not here.) In that book I pointed out a way in which experiences of sublime beauty or love can give rise to experiences of a perfect being. At bottom, this perfect being is an abstract entity (actually a quality!) instead of a physical object or a ghostly "spirit." Just as with other abstract objects like redness and rectangularity, we can experience this abstract entity authentically, regardless of what in our brains is causing the experience.

Because this perfect being isn't supernatural, it doesn't fit Dawkins' definition of God. However, I showed in [an earlier post](#) that Dawkins' definition of God (p. 31) is hopelessly inadequate - it just doesn't capture most actual ideas of God. In [God: the Next Version](#) I showed that the perfect being has mental characteristics of a sort, and also encompasses the physical universe. If we regard this perfect being as God (and I think that is a logical thing to do), then some spiritual or poetic experiences really do yield knowledge of God.

This conclusion may sound mysterious at first. Certainly it will make the professional skeptics angry. However, there is nothing supernatural about all this - it's just a matter of logic! Perceptions like this can happen because the perfect being is partly an abstract entity. This brings us back to the most important part of my argument: the fact that some experiences of an abstract entity can be trustworthy, in the sense that if it seems that you have experienced the abstract entity, then you really have experienced it. I should say a few more words about this potentially upsetting idea.

The reason that even an "illusory" experience of an abstract entity can be right is that you can experience an abstract entity *by means of the internal information processing that happens naturally in your brain*.

Think about it this way. Ordinary sense experiences involve energies from the perceived object that cause events in the observer's brain. For example, when someone sees something, light travels from the object to the observer's eye, causing nerve impulses that in turn influence the observer's brain. For hearing, it is sound that causes events in the brain; for touch, stimuli like pressure do it; for taste and smell, chemicals cause the events. This is the way we perceive concrete physical objects with our five senses: the objects cause events in our brains.

However, not all experiences work this way. When you experience an *abstract* object, like a pattern or a relationship, the abstract object does not need to cause anything. Instead, your brain knows about the object by processing information that already is in your brain. One good example of this is the perception of a Moire' pattern in a print of a digital photograph. When you look at the photo, the colored toner on the print reflects light and causes events in your brain. You see the colored areas on the photo. You also notice the Moire' pattern. You don't have to reason about the pattern to see it. You just *see* the pattern, suddenly and intuitively. The pattern itself doesn't cause anything; only the colored toner on the print is causing events in your brain. However, you still can perceive the pattern. Your brain does this by processing information that's already in your brain from what you saw. In this way, you can verify that the pattern exists and learn much about the pattern - without once receiving a stimulus from the pattern instead of from the colored material.

Another example of knowledge without signals from an object is the understanding of a theorem in mathematics. No new sense experiences are needed. The brain just mulls over the information it already has, and a new insight emerges. In this instance too, you learn about abstract objects and relationships by processing information that's already in your brain. Your brain gains new knowledge by processing and analyzing information that it already has.

Neuroscience strongly suggests that the human self is an abstract object (a feature of the brain) instead of a separate soul. (See [here](#) and [here](#) for my take on this.) In [God: the Next Version](#) I argued that God also is an abstract object, combined with the physical and abstract objects that exemplify or show that object. If spiritual items like God and the self are abstract objects, then we should be able to learn a lot about spiritual realities the same way we learn about other abstract objects - through the brain's processing of existing information. In this way, spiritual intuition and illumination can occur without supernatural intervention. (This conclusion, by the way, is independent of my particular ideas about the nature of God and the self. If God and the self are at least partly abstract objects of any sort, then we might be able to know about spiritual realities through abstract intuition of some kind.)

The lesson from all this is that some "religious" experiences can be for real. Subjective personal experiences can indeed yield knowledge about the existence of God. *I want to emphasize that there is nothing supernatural about this.* It's all a matter of logic, and of the brain's capacity to recognize abstract features in existing information. Once again, the details of this line of argument are in [God: the Next Version](#). Other relevant ideas are in my other blog, with the kindred title [Religion: the Next Version](#).

As if I haven't said it enough, I wish to emphasize it again: Real, qualitative spiritual experience is completely different from Dawkins' silly examples of

"religious" experience, such as cackling birds and voices in the head. Dawkins' attempt to debunk all religious experiences with these examples is simply too shallow and biased to go unlaughed at. Even an experience cooked up by the brain's simulation software can be a source of knowledge, as long as we focus on the qualities it shows and ignore the concrete objects it seems to reveal.

Incidentally, a correct view of spiritual experience also demolishes the argument that Dawkins gives in the section titled "The Argument from Beauty" (pp. 86-87). Dawkins points out that people often feel that the beauty of art shows there is a God. He dismisses this feeling on the grounds that no one has stated a logical argument for this link. Well, we just found the argument! Perceptions of beauty can lead to real spiritual experiences, and according to the argument in [God: the Next Version](#), these experiences can disclose a perfect being. Perhaps the people who put forward ill-formed arguments from beauty are having spiritual experiences caused by beauty, but they just can't put their experiences into words. Dawkins' suggestion that the argument from beauty arises from "jealousy of genius" (p. 87) is as fanciful as it is nasty.

Spiritual experiences frequently give other insights besides the existence of a perfect being. For example, poets and mystics often feel that reality is unified in some deep way ("all is one"). Some mystics, mostly Buddhist meditators, get the impression that the physical universe is empty and impermanent. I won't say much about these other insights here, except to point out that they have a basis in fact. The natural world really is one, in the sense that everything is interconnected. A careful observer of nature can begin to realize this fact; no supernatural knowledge is required. A poet who focused intensely on this unity might have a sudden flash of insight that nature is One. The Buddhist who sees the universe as Void might seem to be in contradiction with the nature mystic who sees the universe as One. However, the Buddhist also is right: all physical things are impermanent, and since all physical things depend on other things for their existence, they are empty of any permanent and stable existence. The viewpoint of science and everyday consciousness, which tells us that the world is a collection of objects, also is right. Each of these three perspectives reflects a one-sided and biased view of reality, but each of them is correct in its own way. (Aren't all human experiences biased and one-sided?) Interestingly, the experiences of unity and of emptiness both involve a kind of abstract intuition: the discovery of new features in a universe that we already know.

Ironically, Dawkins comes close to recognizing the true nature of spiritual experiences. Judging by his book, he has had at least one such experience himself. Dawkins admits to having had a "quasi-mystical" experience of the natural world (p. 11). He describes his poetical attitude toward the physical universe (pp. 11-12), which could just as well be called mystical or near-mystical. The first chapter of his book is significantly titled "A Deeply Religious Non-Believer."

Dawkins obscures the link between religion and spirituality when he claims that his own deeply poetic attitude toward nature should not be called "religion" (p. 12). Dawkins is wrong about this. The poetic attitude, and the experiences that it fosters, can reveal deep aspects of reality and even can disclose the divine. What could be more religious than that? The professor whom Dawkins mentions on p. 12 was right: such experiences are indeed religious. Dawkins might have been able to figure this out if he didn't insist on a narrow definition of God that makes God supernatural (pp. 12-13, 31).

Apparently, Dawkins thinks we are confused if we connect transcendent experiences to belief in God (pp. 12-13). In reality, the connection between spiritual experiences and God is real and perfectly logical. Experiences of the sublime and transcendent in nature actually are experiences of God, whether we know it or not. The God that they show us is a perfect being - not just a poetical name for the scientists' universe, as Dawkins finds some pantheists using the word "God" (p. 18). However, there is no reason to think that the God of spiritual experience is a *supernatural* being. Therefore, He, She or It is not quite the "God" that Dawkins is against. (Incidentally, a poet can use any of these three pronouns.)

In this post I have only begun to touch on the subject of religious experience. It took many words to do even that much. The important point is this: if Dawkins wants to address the subject of religious experience, he should concentrate on real religious or spiritual experiences, not on obviously flawed experiences. He should take into account the remarkable experiences discussed in the writings of contemplatives of East and West. He should take special account of the experiences that do not involve simulated visual or auditory images. Those experiences are the most likely to disclose something real. Dawkins also should study the insights of romantic poets from all over the world. Their poetic experiences often are spiritual to the core.

Whatever one thinks of real spiritual experiences, they are not the same as the simplistic mistakes, illusions, and mental simulations that Dawkins deploys as examples. These bogus experiences are nothing but straw men - easy to knock down if one wants to hide from the real intellectual challenge that religious experience poses. The problem of the validity of religious experience is a complex topic with many nontrivial philosophical angles. One cannot simply handwave away the whole subject, as Dawkins tries to do in *The God Delusion*.

Before wrapping up this post, I should mention my own view of the relation between spiritual experience and religion [4]. In my opinion, personal spiritual experience is the most important aspect of religion. It is the human mind's main method for exploring spiritual realities. I suspect that it also is the original source of most of the world's major religions. Here is how a religion might start. Some brilliant teacher, a spiritual genius, has personal experiences of the divine. This teacher, or his/her followers, write down what the teacher learned from these experiences. Since it is almost impossible to put these experiences into words, the writings are easily misunderstood. Thus we have the beginnings of an organized religion - a body of people who, though possibly well-intentioned, don't really know how to keep the original teacher's insights alive. If the original writings contain poetical words of inspiration or exhortation, these words are misunderstood and turned into dogmas and rules. Fear replaces love, and irrational faith replaces the spark of intuitive insight. In this way dogmatic religions are born - irrational systems of thought which are corrupted versions of great teachings, but which nevertheless contain grains of truth that a perceptive believer may be able to pick out from amidst the errors.

Such might be the origin of today's major world religions. Since you and I weren't there, who knows?

Notes

[1] Note to philosophers: I am bypassing the philosophical debates about infallibility and incorrigibility. If you read on, you will find out what I mean when I say that experiences of qualities "cannot be wrong." Feel free to interpret this according to your own ideas about infallibility and the like.

[2] Dawkins mentions the brain's handling of sounds and speech (p. 90).

[3] The general information on spiritual experience that I am using in this post has been distilled from the literature of religious mysticism and related topics, and also from the insights of poets. Most of the ideas are not attributable to any single source, but are part of general knowledge on these topics.

[4] My guess about the origin of religions is not original. It owes much to ideas widely held among experience-friendly thinkers on the subject.

posted at: 22:51 | path: [/religion/atheism/god_delusion](#) | [persistent link to this entry](#)

Tue, 26 May 2009

Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 2: Why Dawkins' Main Argument Against God Is Wrong

In [my earlier anti-Dawkins post](#), I explained why Richard Dawkins' conception of God, as presented in his book *The God Delusion*, is too narrow to be of much use. In this post I will confront Dawkins' most important argument against God: what he calls the "argument from improbability."

The "argument from improbability" is the main argument in *The God Delusion*. The gist of the argument is that God, if there is one, would have to be extremely complex. According to the argument, only a very complex being could create the universe or do the other tasks that God is thought to do (such as answering prayers). However, a highly complex being is very statistically improbable. Therefore (the argument goes) it is very probable that there is no God. What is more, using God to explain the complexity in nature is useless, because the assumption that God exists just adds to the complexity that it supposedly explains. (This is only a brief summary of the argument; the original is in *The God Delusion*, especially in chapter 4.)

Unfortunately for Dawkins, the argument from improbability is wrong. The argument might appear convincing at first glance, but it turns out to be hopelessly weak once you see the illogical spots. It is like a magic trick: the believability goes away once you notice how the trick is done.

I started to write a post explaining the flaws in the argument, but the post got rather long, so I turned it into a paper. [Here is the link to that paper](#). (The paper is in PDF format.)

Of course, this paper is not a disproof of atheism or a proof of the existence of God. However, it debunks one seemingly "good" reason for being an atheist. If you are going to be an atheist, you will have to find a better reason than the argument from improbability.

posted at: 15:15 | path: /religion/atheism/god_delusion | [persistent link to this entry](#)

Mon, 18 May 2009

Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 1: Overlooking the Idea of God

Richard Dawkins' book *The God Delusion* is one of the cornerstones of the so-called New Atheism. After reading this book, I found that it utterly fails to build a convincing case for atheism. I'd like to offer my opinions on this book in a series of posts to this blog.

The most serious flaw in *The God Delusion* is that it misses the idea of God almost completely. Dawkins focuses on one particular idea of God: that of a supernatural creator of the universe, as presented in traditional theism and deism (pp. 11-15, 18-19, 31). He admits that he is trying to debunk only the supernatural idea of God (pp. 15, 31). The only other idea of God that Dawkins even considers is pantheism, which he equates to the poetic use of the word "God" to describe the physical universe or its laws (p. 18). By leaving the reader with only these choices, Dawkins bypasses the many well-considered philosophical conceptions of God that do not fit either of these categories. Thus, he cannot debunk these other ideas.

Dawkins begins this mistake by ignoring all forms of pantheism that do not fit his narrow definition of "pantheism." Dawkins' description of pantheism fits some versions of pantheism, but is grossly inaccurate for other forms. Among these other forms are the pantheistic viewpoints of Schelling, Heraclitus, and Bruno, and Eastern philosophies such as Advaita Vedanta. In various ways, these philosophies identify God or the divine with the whole of reality or with the underlying principle of the universe. However, they do not equate God to a universe regarded as a mere collection of material particles. Some forms of pantheism depict the mental and spiritual features of reality as real and significant — at least as significant as the physical features of the cosmos. Thus, they do not reduce God to a mere poetic name for the physical universe known to science.

Dawkins' handling of Spinoza is especially revealing. Spinoza probably is the best known of Western pantheists. His philosophy, born in the early days of modern science, stressed the unity of nature and the immutability of natural law. Dawkins mentions Spinoza and notes that Einstein approved of Spinoza's idea of God (p. 18). However, this mention of Spinoza seems ironic, because Spinoza's pantheistic philosophy simply does not fit Dawkins' narrow definition of "pantheism." Spinoza identified God with nature, but he also held that nature has mental as well as physical properties [1]. According to Spinoza, the natural universe itself is not merely a physical system, but also is intrinsically spiritual. Spinoza's God is impersonal, but has mental and spiritual features, making it a bit more like a "someone" than a mere "something." After reading Spinoza's *Ethics*, it would be silly to equate Spinoza's pantheism to "sexed-up atheism" — which is Dawkins' characterization of pantheism (p. 18). Indeed, Spinoza himself denied that he would equate God to nature if nature were thought of as strictly material [2]. Spinoza's God is impersonal and natural, but is a real supreme being, not merely a sexed-up collection of lumps of matter. Despite the sharp

differences between Spinoza's view of God and the standard Christian views, the Christian writer Novalis had good reason to label Spinoza "the god-intoxicated man" [3].

Besides neglecting most forms of pantheism, the book also ignores many other philosophical conceptions of God. There are ideas of God that portray God as something besides the physical universe, but that do not involve (or could exist without) belief in miraculous supernatural action. Some philosophers have proposed theories of God like this; offhand, the names of G. H. Howison, Charles Hartshorne and Aristotle come to mind [4]. Dawkins' polemic bypasses these ideas almost as if they did not exist. He simply sorts ideas of God into two bags — the supernatural, miracle-working creator from traditional religion (together with its simpler variant, the God of deism), and the poetically described material world with no real God. Any form of belief in God that doesn't fit into one of these two bags simply fades from view.

By ignoring all these philosophical conceptions of God, Dawkins forfeits any claim to have built a case against God. At most, he has shown that traditional Western religious conceptions of God are inadequate. This does not imply atheism. At most, it implies that those who believe in the traditional version of God should either become atheists *or* adopt improved ideas about God. (Whether Dawkins has accomplished even this much is a separate topic.)

This slighting of non-supernatural ideas of God contributes to Dawkins' high-handed treatment of Stephen Jay Gould's NOMA concept (pp. 54-61). According to NOMA, science and religion each have their own areas in which they are authoritative. If NOMA is right, then religion should not dictate about matters in the area of science, such as evolution and cosmology, and science should not dogmatize about matters of the meaning of existence, which belong to religion. The NOMA idea is quite reasonable. It is close to what many liberal, modernist believers in God already believe. (If you think the Genesis story can't be literally true because it contradicts science, then you already are practicing NOMA to some degree.) Of course, most religions today do not obey NOMA. Instead, they postulate literal miraculous happenings that science might, in principle, be able to evaluate. Dawkins correctly recognizes this, and observes that a religion that follows NOMA would be quite different from most religions practiced today (p. 60). Dawkins could have taken this observation to some reasonable conclusion. For example, he could have claimed that today's religions need to be reformed and modernized, leading to liberal forms of religion that take miracle stories to be spiritual lessons instead of physical facts. Instead, he uses the occasion to rake NOMA over the coals. He even makes the nasty suggestion that Gould was insincere in his embrace of NOMA (pp. 57-58). To support this putdown of the brilliant Gould, Dawkins trots out the claim that Gould personally was skeptical of the existence of God (p. 58). Needless to say, Gould's personal belief or disbelief in God is totally irrelevant to Gould's sincerity in embracing NOMA. One can believe that religion is a legitimate field of study and still come to a personal decision to be an agnostic or an atheist in the field of religion. (It's much like studying a particular field of physics and finally embracing a theory that denies some commonly accepted concepts in that field. No insincerity required!) None of Dawkins' overheated criticisms of NOMA cast any doubt on the rational acceptability of NOMA. Of course, making NOMA look bad is useful for Dawkins, because if NOMA were right his science-centered polemic against God might lose its grip.

The main line of argument in *The God Delusion* is an attempt to debunk supernatural concepts of God, especially those that involve supernatural creation or intervention. Because not all concepts of God require supernatural happenings or even a supernatural God, the book does not succeed in debunking God. It fails as a polemic for atheism. The most this book can do is undermine traditional religious conceptions of God, then leave us on our own to decide about the conceptions of God put forth by philosophers and reason-friendly religionists. Whether the book can do even that much is a separate question.

Why does Dawkins ignore almost all philosophical conceptions of God? It might be a symptom of a more general problem: a striking failure to handle philosophical ideas correctly [5]. One can catch a whiff of this failure at various points in the book. I'll give a few examples here.

In a discussion of traditional Christian ideas about the Trinity (p. 33), Dawkins refers to a teaching of Arius that makes use of the philosophical concepts of "substance" and "essence." Philosophers (including atheistic ones) are likely to have some idea of what these terms mean, for philosophers have thought about puzzles involving substance and essence since the time of the ancient Greeks. However, when Dawkins asks rhetorically what these terms mean, his answer is " 'Very little' seems the only reasonable reply" (p. 33). This is simply wrong. One can love or hate theology, but either way, the terms "substance" and "essence" do mean something. They are standard philosophical terms with real meanings.

Another example of bad philosophy (and also of substituting ridicule for thought) is Dawkins' discussion of the ontological argument for the existence of God (pp. 80-85). This is a famous argument put forth by Anselm of Canterbury in the Middle Ages. Dawkins' treatment of this argument is both emotional and coarse. He calls the argument "infantile," and then gives a silly scenario in which children on the playground argue about God using some of the same words used in the real argument (p. 80). Despite the tone of snide self-assurance in that passage, Dawkins gets the ontological argument wrong! Scholars have known for decades that Anselm wrote down at least two distinct versions of the ontological argument [6]. The first version was more or less preliminary; apparently Anselm himself was dissatisfied with it, for he presented a second version in the next chapter of his book. The second version is more sophisticated and is not nearly as vulnerable to attack. The full analysis of this second version requires modern techniques of logic. However, the version that Dawkins quotes is the *first* version (p. 81). It is pretty clear that his ridiculous playground scene also is based on this first version. As Hartshorne pointed out in 1965, many past philosophers made the mistake of critiquing the first version of the argument and ignoring the second [7]. However, there is no excuse for this mistake today; we simply know better. Dawkins either does not know or does not bother about the second version of the argument. He just goes ahead and quotes and ridicules the weak first draft of the argument, as if that were an effective attack on the ontological argument.

Toward the end of his attack on the ontological argument, Dawkins mentions the time he presented a bogus argument, resembling the ontological argument, to a meeting of philosophers and theologians. Dawkins says: "They felt the need to resort to Modal Logic to prove that I was wrong." (p. 84; capitalization in original). Read in context, this remark seems snide, as though forcing the philosophers and theologians to use modal logic were a gloating victory. Does Dawkins even know that modal logic is a respectable

mathematical discipline, and that modal logic is necessary for the rational analysis of almost *any* argument about possible entities that might not be real? To me at least, the book gave no answer to this question.

Still another example of a crude approach to philosophy comes from Dawkins' discussion of mind-transfer scenarios (p. 180). Dawkins mentions two fictional stories in which people find that they have swapped minds, with the mind of one now existing in the body of the other. Dawkins claims, without much argument, that "the plot makes sense only to a dualist" and that such stories could happen in real life only if the personality is somehow distinct from the body (p. 180). A little philosophical reading shows that the truth is not so simple. In real life, philosophers have studied mind-transfer scenarios in great detail — and some *materialist* philosophers have seriously considered that they might be logically possible [8]. One can be a materialist, with no belief in a nonphysical mind, and still find it possible for the mind of person A to enter the body of person B. All one has to do is suppose that the two persons' brains are reorganized in a way that makes one of the brains continue the memories and conscious life of the other. Needless to say, this experiment would be an enormous feat in real life. Today's science is nowhere near being able to do it. However, this feat would be possible in principle even if dualism is false. If Dawkins offered any real argument for his opposite opinion on this topic, I might take his opinion seriously — but he offers no real argument.

These examples are far from my original topic of the idea of God. I mention them only to show that Dawkins' book contains some strikingly crude treatments of philosophical ideas. Perhaps this helps to explain why the most interesting ideas of God — the philosophically well-considered ones — are almost entirely absent from this book.

Notes

Page numbers for *The God Delusion* refer to the edition listed under "Works Cited," below.

[1] Spinoza, *Ethics*. See especially Part 2 Proposition 7, including the following "scholium" or note, and Part 2 Proposition 13, especially the following note. Also see Durant, pp. 134-143.

[2] See the excerpt from Spinoza's letter, in Durant, p. 132.

[3] Quoted in Durant, p. 149.

[4] The works of Aristotle are well-known. Hartshorne's ideas are well-known too, within the rubric of "process theology." His idea of God is discussed in his several books. Howison also is important in the history of philosophy, but appears to be less well-known than Aristotle and Hartshorne. His main work is *The Limits of Evolution and Other Essays*.

[5] I am not the first to comment on Dawkins' inadequate treatment of philosophical ideas. Plantinga has mentioned Dawkins' "jejune" and

"sophomoric" handling of some philosophical matters (see Plantinga, "The Dawkins Confusion").

[6] See Hartshorne. The first version of Anselm's ontological argument is in Anselm's *Proslogium*, Chapter 2. The second version is in Chapter 3.

[7] Hartshorne, especially pp. 12-18.

[8] See Shoemaker, pp. 108 ff.

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N.B.: Spinoza's *Ethics* comes in several versions. Durant's chapter on Spinoza is a valuable introductory discussion of this philosopher. See especially Section 2, "Matter and Mind."

(Post slightly updated on 22 May 2009.)

posted at: 23:21 | path: /religion/atheism/god_delusion | [persistent link to this entry](#)

Sun, 03 May 2009

The Unfinishable Book Is Now Free

One of my main e-books, *The Unfinishable Book*, is now [available for free download](#). (The usual Internet connection charges still apply, but the price of the book is a great big zero.) The book is in PDF format.

posted at: 01:06 | path: [/general](#) | [persistent link to this entry](#)

Thu, 19 Mar 2009

Drawing a Blank: In Search of Empty Consciousness

Think about your conscious experience as it is right now - everything that's going on in your inner mental world.

Now imagine the items in that world (sights, sounds, thoughts, the feeling of time passing, and so forth) disappearing one by one, until there's nothing left.

The result is a totally blank inner world - a mental world with no impressions or other contents at all.

What is left over? Just your consciousness - a "pure" consciousness, with no contents.

Now ask yourself a question: Is this any different from no consciousness at all?

What is the difference between a completely empty consciousness and no consciousness? Is there a difference?

This mind-bending question might seem purely theoretical. After all, how often does anyone have a pure, empty consciousness? Perhaps this happens sometimes during states near to unconsciousness, or during deep meditation - or perhaps not. In either case, empty consciousness seems to have little to do with our ordinary mental lives.

If you think about it further, the question of empty consciousness turns out to be important. This question might bear on the puzzle of the mind-brain relationship. Here's why.

If an empty consciousness is not possible, then the absence of conscious experience - the lack of a "stream" of impressions and other mental contents - is the absence of consciousness itself. If (as we usually suppose) the brain is responsible for creating these contents, then consciousness is entirely dependent on the brain.

On the other hand, if an empty consciousness is possible, then the absence of conscious experience might *not* spell the complete absence of consciousness.

All the contents caused by brain activity could stop for a while, and some residue of consciousness - an empty consciousness - would remain. This empty consciousness would exist without any of the contents that correspond to brain activity. This raises the possibility that consciousness itself, in the form of an empty consciousness, might exist even in the absence of brain activity. In other words, maybe the mind is not simply reducible to the brain.

It is hard to see how scientific evidence could rule out this possibility. We can use scientific observations to study behavior, mental activity, and the processing of information in the brain. However, it is hard to imagine how science could test for the existence of a hypothetical "pure" consciousness in which no mental events happen. Suppose that a comatose person or a really good meditator were truly devoid of mental contents for a while. What observations would you do to tell whether this person was truly nonconscious or was in a state of empty, contentless consciousness? No set of scientific observations could tell the difference. Science studies consciousness by collecting and interpreting data about behavior (including verbal reports) and the functioning of the nervous system. The absence of behavior, and of the kind of brain activity associated with experiences, would point to the absence of any impressions, thoughts, feelings, or the like - any contents. However, if there were an empty consciousness, it would not be associated with any impressions or experiences. There is no compelling reason to expect that such a consciousness would be evidenced by any behaviors, or by any happenings at all. To use a colloquial English phrase, such a consciousness would be "nothing doing." Even if there were some type of observable brain activity associated with empty consciousness, how could a scientist decide whether this activity is associated with *empty* consciousness or with *nonconsciousness*? The subject would behave the same way in either case. From a first-person standpoint, neither empty consciousness nor nonconsciousness would involve any distinguishable experiences, so the subject would not have any grounds for making different reports. Thus, the question of the existence of an empty consciousness does not seem to be an empirical question at all.

Why should we even worry about empty consciousness? It seems like an outlandish possibility - the stuff of thought experiments at best. So why worry about this possibility? One potential answer comes from the strange world of mathematical logic. If we apply a little formal logic to the question of empty consciousness, we find that empty consciousness might have to exist, even if science cannot decide its existence one way or the other!

The most striking feature of consciousness is the existence of a way things seem - an "inner world" of facts that seem, to the conscious subject, to be true. If you are conscious right now, things seem a certain way to you. This "way things seem" is different from the objective, external world in many ways. Things can seem to be the case that are not the case (as when illusions occur), and many things really are the case that do not seem to anyone to be the case. The important fact is that *there is a way things seem*. For any conscious subject, a fact may seem to be the case or may not seem to be the case. These "subjective facts" of an observer's consciousness can be quite different from the facts of the objective world.

If you are conscious, you have a world of subjective facts. A "conscious" system that does not have such a world is not really conscious at all.

In my book [*From Brain to Cosmos*](#), I used ideas from modern logic to explore the idea of subjective fact. I stressed the fact that consciousness

defines what logicians call a *modality*.

The idea of a modality is somewhat involved. To show what a modality is like, I'll present two examples of modalities. (For more information, see a book or encyclopedia article on modal logic.)

Example 1: Possibility. Given any statement, you can create a new statement by adding the words "It is possible that" to the beginning of the statement. The new statement then describes what is *possible* instead of what is *actual*. For example, you could begin with the statement "There is a zebra in Moscow." From this you can form a new statement: "It is possible that there is a zebra in Moscow." This statement describes what is *possible* - what might possibly be true. This statement can be true even if there actually is no zebra in Moscow. After all, the mere fact that there is no zebra in Moscow doesn't rule out the possibility that a zebra might end up there!

The phrase "It is possible that" stands for an important modality - the modality of *possibility*. (Philosophers recognize several different kinds of possibility, but I won't explore those details here.)

Example 2. Pastness. For any statement, you can make a new statement by adding the words "It was the case that" to the statement. The new statement then describes what was true in the past, instead of what is true now. For example, you could begin with the statement "There is a zebra in Moscow." From this you can form a new statement: "It was the case that there is a zebra in Moscow." A less awkward and more grammatical way of saying this is: "There was a zebra in Moscow." This statement describes what was true in the past. This statement might be true even if today there is no zebra in Moscow. If today there is no zebra in Moscow, this doesn't rule out there having been a zebra in Moscow in the past!

The phrase "It was the case that" stands for an important modality - the modality of *pastness*. (Philosophers also recognize several other modalities having to do with time. The mathematical subject of "tense logic" makes use of these modalities.)

These two examples illustrate what a modality is. It's like a function that changes a statement into a statement of a different kind. Phrases like "It is possible that" and "It was the case that" change ordinary statements about the actual, present world into statement of other kinds - statements about possibilities and about the past, respectively. You can think of a modality as *a way in which propositions can be true*. A proposition (like the proposition that there is a zebra in Moscow) might be *actually true* - but it also might be *possibly true*, or *true in the past*. Even a proposition that isn't actually true can be "true" in one of these other ways.

Students of logic know of many different modalities. For our purposes here, the important thing is that *seeming* is a modality. The phrase "It seems to me now that" changes a statement about how things are into a statement about how things seem. If I say "It seems to me now that there is a blue door," I am making a statement about how things seem to me now - in other words, about

my experience. This statement does not imply that there really is a blue door. Maybe I'm looking at a window and misinterpreting it as a door, or maybe I'm only dreaming about a blue door. Or maybe I really am seeing a blue door. In any of these cases, *it seems to me* that there is a blue door.

Now, what does all this talk of modalities have to do with the problem of empty consciousness?

Suppose that you really did attain a period of empty consciousness, like I described earlier. Would there be anything of your consciousness left over during that period?

Yes, there would. Even if you were having no experiences, there still would be a modality of seeming. There would be the modality of how things seem to you now - and this modality is an important element of your consciousness!

At any given moment during your period of empty consciousness, there still would be the modality of *seeming to be the case for you now*. This modality, like all modalities, is a way that propositions can be true. Even if there currently are no propositions that are true in this way (that is, nothing seems to be the case for you now), there still is this modality of seeming to be the case for you now. We still can make meaningful statements using this modality, even if nothing seems like anything to you. At very least, we can make the statement "It is not the case that it seems to you now that P," where P is any proposition at all. (Translation of this statement into plain English: "Nothing seems like anything to you now.") If you are conscious of nothing at all, then the statement "It is not the case that it seems to you now that P" is true, and describes an actual state of affairs. The statement could not be true in this way if the phrase "It seems to you now that" were meaningless. We know what this phrase means; it means the same as it meant before you went blank! Since that phrase still has its meaning, it follows that there still is a modality of *seeming to be the case for you*.

The bottom line is that there is something left of your consciousness even if your consciousness is absolutely empty! This "something" is a modality of seeming - a modality that is essential to being conscious. Even if you are not conscious of anything, there still is such a modality.

Of course, the modality is not an extra thing that exists besides your brain activity. The modality isn't a "thing" at all. It's an abstract logical item, just as are the other modalities like possibility and pastness. The important fact is that the modality of seeming does not go away just because your consciousness is empty. It continues being what it was before: just a modality.

Now we can answer the question that started this post. Is there any difference between an empty consciousness and no consciousness at all? Yes, there is! With an empty consciousness, there still is a modality of seeming, similar to the one that the conscious subject used to have when his/her/its consciousness was not empty. This applies to a subject whose consciousness didn't used to be empty, but is empty now. This situation is very different from the existence of no consciousness at all. If a physical system (like a rock) has no consciousness at all, then there is no modality of seeming associated with that system. There simply is no way that things seem for that object - not even an empty, blank, void way.

The fact that seeming is a modality suggests that there can, in principle, be an empty consciousness. There is no fundamental logical reason why an empty consciousness of some kind cannot exist. This is true because there is more to consciousness than just the contents of experience. There also is the modality of seeming - which is equally real whether or not consciousness has any contents.

Earlier I pointed out that if empty consciousness is possible, then consciousness has a feature that science cannot detect. Since empty consciousness is possible in principle, we are stuck with an interesting conclusion: that there is at least one fact about consciousness that science cannot know. This conclusion may seem dangerous to the scientific approach to nature, but actually it is not dangerous at all. Mathematics constantly deals with facts beyond the reach of scientific methods - for example, the fact that the Pythagorean theorem follows from the axioms and postulates of plane geometry. No one thinks that such formal mathematical facts are threats to science. The existence of an untestable feature of consciousness is a fact of much the same sort. It is a formal fact that becomes apparent when we apply modal logic (a type of mathematics) to the idea of consciousness. The facts of mathematics and logic are not threats to science - so the fact that empty consciousness is possible cannot be much of a threat either!

posted at: 21:48 | path: [/mind](#) | [persistent link to this entry](#)

Fri, 13 Feb 2009

Merry Darwinmas - Now Let's Get Evolution Right!

Yesterday was the two hundredth anniversary of the birthdays of two important historic figures: Abraham Lincoln and Charles Darwin. Lincoln's legacy is stronger than ever today, especially since the election of America's remarkable new president, Barack Obama. While Lincoln's well-deserved fame continues to grow, Darwin's reputation has been tarnished somewhat by the world's failure to understand his theory of evolution.

Two main problems plague the theory of evolution today. One is the persistence of antievolutionist beliefs, with seven-day creationism as the extreme example. The other problem is the stubborn misunderstanding of the meaning of evolution by so-called skeptics and rationalists. Scientists have done a good job trying to address the first problem by explaining the massive evidence for evolution to the public.

In honor of this anniversary of Darwin's birth, I'd like to say a few words about the second problem - the misinterpretation of evolution by those who claim to think rationally. Some of what I will say here has been said before, but it bears repeating because many seem to have ignored it.

The theory of evolution is not a philosophy or a religion. It is a scientific theory that explains how types of living organisms come into being. It is a theory supported by massive and convincing evidence. The theory of evolution shows how new species can develop without the help of supernatural acts of creation. However, the theory of evolution does not contradict the basic religious ideas that there is a supreme being and that the

universe is meaningful.

The theory of evolution does NOT say there is no God. It says that natural events, not supernatural miracles, created living things - but that is not the same as saying there is no God.

As I explained in my ebook [God and Darwin: Buddies!](#), there are at least two ways that God could have created the universe even if evolution is true. (I'm talking about the real, scientific, Darwinistic version of evolution - not so-called "intelligent design," which is watered-down creationism.) God could be the creator of the universe even if there are no violations of natural law (not even at the Big Bang!) and no interruptions of the flow of natural causation by divine doodling. Religious believers are free to adopt this alternative view of creation if they wish. Evolution does not rule out the possibility of a creator of the universe. It only rules out certain ancient, literalistic beliefs about that creator.

What is more, there can be a God even if there is no supernatural creator at all! In my online article "[God: The Next Version](#)" I presented an idea of God that does without the supernatural. The God I portrayed there is a real God - not just a fancy name for the physical universe (as in some forms of pantheism), but an ideal being who embodies the supreme good. You don't have to believe in any supernatural beings or forces to believe in such a God.

When skeptics claim that evolution rules out God or makes God obsolete, they are talking baloney. The concept of God is a philosophical idea that can take many forms. Not everyone's idea of God is incompatible with evolution!

Evolution also does not imply that humans are "only" animals. Yes, we are animals - but the difference between humans and other animals is so obvious that we don't need God or Darwin to help us see it. Humans are animals, but humans are special. We are special, not because of where we came from, but because of what we are right now - and specifically, because of what our brains are. No discovery about our origins can make us less special. The discovery that our "specialness" resulted from evolution makes us all the more remarkable.

Finally, evolution does not imply that the universe is meaningless. Our experiences of meaning and value may be truthful experiences that reveal real, objective meaning and value in the world. The fact that evolution gave us the ability to have these experiences does not make them any less important. The questions of whether existence has real meaning, and of whether values are objectively real, are philosophical questions that cannot be answered through scientific methods alone.

I hope these remarks will clarify some of the common confusions about the meaning of evolution. Let's celebrate Darwin's two hundredth birthday by finally getting the implications of his theory right!

posted at: 22:45 | path: [/religion/science_and_religion](#) | [persistent link to this entry](#)

Wed, 31 Dec 2008

The Worst Atheist Argument in the World?

One of the standard arguments for atheism goes like this:

"Religion is responsible for many of the world's evils (the 9/11 attacks, the Inquisition, the Crusades, oppression of women, abuse of children, and so forth). Therefore, the world would be better off if people did not believe in God."

This argument comes up again and again in discussions of atheism. Atheists state the argument in various ways - some short, some long - but all the forms of the argument amount to the same thing.

No matter what the atheists tell you, this is one of the most preposterous arguments in the world.

The main problem with this argument is obvious: not every form of belief in God promotes the evils blamed on religion. The atheist argument only hits the forms of religion that do promote evils like these. The argument might work if aimed at fanaticism, extremism, or cruelly strict and prudish forms of religion. However, it can say nothing about more reasonable forms of belief that do not promote these evils. This fault in the atheist argument has long been known, but some atheists just don't seem to get it.

It is possible to believe in God and also deny most of the dogmas of conventional religion.

You can believe in God and also be against all forms of war. (Pacifist Quakers do this today.)

You can believe in God and also reject the use of force to spread your religion. You might even think God wants people to believe only through a free, uncoerced decision to believe, and not through any kind of force. Some believers think that way.

You can believe in God and also believe in human equality, kindness, and mercy. You can believe in God and support the quest for an end of oppression in the world. Martin Luther King did that.

You can believe in God without believing in religious doctrines that are likely to promote cruelty. You don't have to believe in hell. You don't have to believe that only members of your religion go to heaven. You don't have to believe that God wants us to be afraid. You can believe in God without believing in a cruel God-image derived from the earlier books of the Bible.

It's possible to believe in God, and yet reject all the evils done in the name of religion. It's possible to believe that God disapproves of these evils.

It's possible to believe in a God of love, goodness, beauty and freedom, instead of a God who promotes suicide bombings, sexual repression, and bigotry.

So what happened to the atheist argument? When you think carefully about it, the argument just goes away! It stops being convincing - like a magic trick once you see how it's done.

It is vitally important that we oppose the evils done in the name of religion. However, belief in God is not the real source of those evils - and atheism is not the solution to them.

posted at: 15:31 | path: [/religion/atheism](#) | [persistent link to this entry](#)

Wed, 29 Oct 2008

What's New on My Site in October 2008

I've added a lot of new material to my main site, [Brain, Time and Cosmos](#). Things to look for (all in PDF format):

- * In "[God: the Next Version](#)" I propose an alternative idea of God — an idea friendly to real rationalists and religious poets alike. (Watch out, atheists!)
- * "[Progress: the Boundless Quest](#)" is an essay on progress.
- * "[The Meadow, the Sky and the Vision](#)" is a semi-poetic meditation on the prospects of progress.
- * "[Forward to Freedom](#)" is a longish political document that digs into the faults of existing legal systems, among other topics.
- * "[Anti-Postmodernist Paper #1](#)", also known as "[Seemsthat](#)", is just what its first title sounds like. Hold on to your hat! (Watch out, deconstructors!)
- * In "[Religion and Beyond](#)" I explore some ideas of the world's religions, and argue that there's no real cause for conflict.

As of the date of this post, these writings all are listed in the ["What's New?" section of my home page](#).

Stay tuned...

posted at: 00:23 | path: [/general](#) | [persistent link to this entry](#)

Wed, 24 Sep 2008

Why Libertarians Should Tolerate the Big Bailout

As readers of [my political website](#) know, I lean toward libertarianism. Libertarians usually oppose government intervention in markets. However, I think the U.S. government's impending Wall Street bailout is OK if it's done the right way.

Why would I think this?

Because the bailout would *reduce*, not increase, the effects of government interference in markets.

Corporations, as we know them today, are creations of governments. They are extremely powerful creations. Corporations are legal "persons" with powers and privileges that no real person can possibly have. For example, corporations can own other "persons" of their own kind, and potentially can exist forever. The special legal status of corporations is the main force that lets some companies become tremendously large and powerful.[1]

Some so-called libertarians seem to think a "free market" is a market in which corporations are allowed to run wild. This is *not* what real libertarianism is about! A truly free market, with only a minimum of government intervention, would not contain state-created corporations at all. A market dominated by state-created corporations is not even close to being free.

In today's world of state-created corporations, corporations have a big advantage over individuals. Workers need corporations much more desperately than corporations need workers. The corporations' extra power originally comes from the state. This extra power lets corporations grow much larger and more powerful than a truly free market would likely allow.

Today, some corporations are so large and powerful that their collapse would be a humanitarian disaster. Their failure would affect the markets in ways that could damage the lives of countless hardworking people.

Is the government justified in trying to prevent this collapse? Yes. True, a government bailout is a violation of the free market. However, the bailout is a way of correcting the effects of an earlier, and much worse, violation of the free market: the government's own creation of corporations.

The government entity that bails out the corporations need not be the same one that granted the corporate charters. There are Federal and state governments, and different departments within each of these. The point is that government power created corporations, and now government power is being used to mitigate some of the effects of that creation.

Like all modern corporations, the corporations being bailed out were not part of a free market to begin with. They were created with the help of government power. By preventing the bad effects of their collapse, the bailout would reduce the effects of government power more than it would increase those effects. Paradoxically, the bailout could make the market more like a free market.

So, should libertarians tolerate the big bailout? Yes. The bailout is a government intrusion into markets, but it will reduce the damage from a worse government intrusion that is built into our present economic system. The bailout is the lesser evil.

This toleration of the bailout comes with one warning: the bailout must be done right. It must be done in a way that prevents damage to working people, not in a way that simply lets the ultra-rich get richer.

Aside from the bailout, this same logic holds for many of the laws designed

to regulate corporations. Such laws are designed to restrain corporate power that originally comes partly from the state. Viewed in this light, regulation of corporations can be a way for the state to help undo some of its own excesses.

Ideally, our society would be able to do without state-created corporations and their excess powers. [This is not an impossible dream](#). The libertarian economist Murray Rothbard described a business structure, not backed by state power, that is like a corporation in some respects.[2] Perhaps this structure, or other arrangements, will replace the modern corporation. But unless and until this sweeping reform happens, careful government regulation of corporations will prevent a bad situation from becoming even worse.

Notes

[1] On the expansion and dangers of corporate power, see especially: Ted Nace, *Gangs of America* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2003), and Walter Lippmann, *An Inquiry into the Principles of the Good Society* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1937), pp. 13-19, 308-310.

[2] Murray N. Rothbard, *Power and Market* (2nd ed.; Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1977), pp. 79-80.

posted at: 23:59 | path: [/political](#) | [persistent link to this entry](#)

Sat, 06 Sep 2008

New Political Manifesto Goes Online

The left wing and the right wing are not the world's only political choices. Go beyond left and right - to the future!

For further details, read my new political statement, [Manifesto of the Good Society](#). The document is in PDF format.

Be sure to visit [the rest of my political site](#) too.

posted at: 02:27 | path: [/political](#) | [persistent link to this entry](#)

Thu, 07 Aug 2008

Spirit without the Supernatural

Is matter the only reality?

Is there anything in the cosmos beyond physical substances and forces?

Religious teachings usually answer "no" to the first question and "yes" to the second. Most religions claim that the universe contains spiritual things, or spirits, as well as physical things.

Most Western religions teach that God is a spirit. Most of these religions also teach that the human soul (the innermost self of a person) is a spirit.

Different religious teachings have different ideas about spirit. Many believers seem to think of spirit as a substance or stuff that is invisible but real. This substance supposedly can act on matter, producing the connection between body and soul.

This idea of spirit is interesting, but it has a serious drawback: it depends almost completely on faith.

Science hasn't found any need for the idea of spiritual items or substances that affect the material world. Instead, scientific findings suggest that the human brain "runs itself," in the sense that it doesn't need a separate soul to make it work properly.

Some people claim that parapsychology provides evidence of a soul, but this claim is extremely controversial.

Philosophy has more to say about the soul, but still not enough. Some rationalistic philosophers, such as the brilliant Descartes, have believed in a separate soul that influences the body. However, there is no widely agreed-upon rational line of argument for such a soul.

This leaves religious believers in a pickle. If they believe in spirit, they must rely on faith to support their belief. This makes their position unconvincing to those who don't happen to believe the same way. It also makes them vulnerable to atheists, who can simply laugh at the whole idea. Many modern atheists believe that science is the only important form of knowledge, and that faith should play no role in human thought. According to today's science-based antireligion, the mind is only a property of the brain, and therefore there is no soul and there is nothing spiritual in human nature.

This disagreement between believers and atheists rests partly on a mistake. Neither side seems to realize that the universe, as known to science, *already* contains items that are not physical objects. We don't have to believe in these items through faith; they are right there in the scientists' universe. What is more, if the mind is a property of the brain, then the human self is one of those remarkable items!

What are these remarkable items?

To find out, let's start with some basic observations.

The universe contains physical objects, like sticks, stones, stars and atoms. However, those objects never exist alone. Each physical object has properties: its shape, color, weight, and so forth. In other words, there are not just physical objects. There also are *properties* of physical objects.

A round stone has the property of roundness. A yellow star, which gives off mostly yellow light, has the property yellow. (Colors, after all, are

properties.) A hexagonal snow crystal has the property of hexagonality. (It might not be a perfect hexagon, but still it has that property.) A diamond has the properties of solidity and transparency.

Roundness, yellowness, hexagonality, solidity, and transparency. These are not physical objects. They are *properties* of physical objects. They are not physical objects - yet we find them in the real world.

We don't live in a world of physical objects alone. We live in a world of physical objects plus their properties.

There are at least two kinds of items in the universe - (1) physical objects, and (2) properties.

Someone might object to this statement by arguing that properties really don't "exist" at all. Maybe there are only physical objects, and although we can talk as if the properties existed, it's only the physical objects that really exist.

Philosophers have been debating this question for thousands of years. The debate goes back at least to Plato and Socrates in ancient Greece. Philosophers have a name for this question (I'll mention it at the end of this post), but the name doesn't matter. The question is: *Do properties really exist?*

I think this question depends on confusion about the meaning of the word "exist." If someone asks whether properties exist, I'll answer the question with another question: What do you mean by "exist"?

If you think "exist" means "be a physical object," then the answer is no - properties don't exist, because they are not physical objects.

But if you think "exist" means "be something" (be any kind of item at all), then properties do exist.

I've written a [philosophical paper on this subject](#), where I went into more detail and covered some points that I've skipped over here. The main lesson of that paper: We can safely assume that properties exist.

Properties exist for all practical purposes. The people who have to work with properties act as if properties are real. Colors are properties. No painter would dare to claim seriously that there are no colors in the world! No weather scientist would claim that ice crystals are not really hexagonal, just because some philosopher said the property of being hexagonal doesn't exist.

To insist that properties don't exist is to cut off the idea of existence arbitrarily - to limit existence artificially to concrete, individual objects like physical objects. If existence includes everything found in the universe, instead of just concrete physical objects, then properties exist. They exist *as properties* instead of *as physical objects* - but that's just another way to be real.

So properties are real for all practical purposes.

The world in which we live is not a world of physical objects alone. It is a world of physical objects *plus* the properties of physical objects. The properties are real items too - just as real as the physical objects, but existing in a very different way. The properties are not simply globs of matter and

energy, like physical objects. Instead, they are qualities, features, or patterns in the physical world. They are real items that are found in physical objects, but that are different from physical objects. (For example, the property of roundness can be found in the sun, the moon, or a coin - but roundness is not the sun, the moon, or a coin. It's a property that all these objects have.)

What does all this have to do with spirit?

If properties are real, then spirit doesn't have to be a substance or stuff. Instead, it can be a property!

Instead of being an invisible substance, spirit might be a property of physical objects. As a property, it would be every bit as real as the redness of a sunset, or the hexagonal shape of a snowflake, or the brilliance and transparency of a diamond.

If spirit is a property, then the human brain could indeed have a soul. Science suggests that your personality or self is a property of your brain. If so, then that property might be your soul.

The nice thing about this idea of the soul is that it's hard for skeptics and atheists to attack. If you believe the soul is a property, then the skeptical argument that "the self is just a property of the brain" doesn't disprove the soul.

Skeptics try to debunk the soul by claiming that the self is "only" a property of the brain. The skeptics had better watch out! They are making a serious mistake!

The skeptics begin with the idea (suggested by science) that the self or personality is a property of the brain. From this, they argue that the soul is nothing - that there is no soul.

But wait a minute!

The skeptics say the self is a property of the brain. However, we have found that a property is not just nothing. In its own way, a property is quite real!

If the self is a property, then the self has a real existence of its own - just as real as if it had been a real ghostly substance. By saying that the self is only a property of the brain, the skeptics are admitting that the self is real. Worse yet for them, they are admitting that the self has a type of existence that goes beyond the existence of physical objects!

The skeptics might not realize they are admitting all this. However, if properties are real in any way at all, then this is where their "skepticism" leads.

Without realizing it, the skeptics have painted themselves into a corner, and admitted that people have souls of a sort!

Granted, these souls are a little different from what most religions teach. They are properties, not ghostly supernatural objects. But the important point is that *they are real*.

Once we admit that properties are real, then the skeptical view that the self is

a property of the brain becomes almost the same as the religious belief that people have souls distinct from their bodies. The property of the brain that we call the self is an entity different from the matter of the brain - just as the yellowness of the sun is different from the sun itself.

So it appears that the skeptics and the believers are not as far apart as they seem.

Religious believers might have a big problem with this idea of soul-as-property. They might think that if the soul is a property of the brain, then the soul cannot be immortal. Skeptics often use this argument to debunk the idea of an afterlife: if the self is a property of the brain, then it must cease with the brain.

But things are not so simple!

I'm not going to make an argument for (or against) the afterlife here. I just want to point out that if the soul is a property of the brain, then the soul still might be immortal.

How?

After the end of the brain, another brain could have the same property!

Most religions believe either in a nonmaterial afterlife, like Heaven, or in reincarnation. If you believe in reincarnation, the idea of your self ending up in another brain is nothing new. If you believe in Heaven, then you still can believe that the soul is a property - if you are willing to believe that there are bodies of some kind in Heaven, with brains of some kind!

I'm not suggesting that any of these beliefs are true. I'm not going to take a stand for or against belief in the afterlife. My point is just this: that the property version of the soul does not rule out belief in an afterlife. It also doesn't force you to believe in an afterlife. It just leaves the question of the afterlife open, for you to decide for yourself.

So we don't live in a world of things alone. We live in a world of things and properties. Once we realize that, and take the reality of properties fully to heart, we begin to see what spirit might be. The world of spirit might not be supernatural at all. Instead, it might be a part of the world of properties - the part that contains a mysterious and complex property of each of us, the property that we call the self.

Notes

I'm including these notes to thank the sources of some of the ideas in this post, and to fill in some technical details that students of philosophy might find interesting.

This post uses ideas from two of my philosophical papers. These papers are available [here](#) and [here](#). Another relevant paper of mine is [here](#).

The name of the question of the existence of properties and such is "the problem of universals." (Technically, the question "Do properties exist?" is only part of the problem of universals, but it's the most important part.)

My position that properties are real is a milder version of what Plato thought about properties (the so-called "Platonic realist" view). However, you don't have to believe everything Plato said to accept my view of properties! (See [this paper](#) for details.)

The idea that the soul is a property of the body, but still is an item distinct from the body, is a version of what philosophers of mind call "property dualism." (Property dualists usually don't use the idea of "soul" - often their position is that conscious experiences are nonphysical properties of the brain.) Property dualism is different from "substance dualism" - the idea that the soul or self is a kind of mental substance associated with the body. Descartes was a "dualistic interactionist" - a substance dualist who thought the soul could act on, and be acted on by, the body.

The idea that the soul could be immortal even if it is "only" a property of the brain is not new. Plato thought of the soul as something sort of like a property (an "abstract object" as philosophers would call it today). Plato thought of the soul as immortal. See [this paper of mine](#) for my take on Plato's view of the soul. The idea that the self, as an abstract object, might be potentially immortal comes up in modern thought, for example in Daniel C. Dennett's book *Consciousness Explained*. (I disagree with Dennett on some important points - see [this paper](#) - but this idea is interesting.)

(This post was slightly reformatted after posting.)

posted at: 01:50 | path: [/mind](#) | [persistent link to this entry](#)

Sat, 26 Jul 2008

Announcing New and Republished Books in Philosophy

Two of my full-length books, *The Unfinishable Book* and *God, Son of Quark*, are now available for sale as PDF ebooks. [Visit this link](#) to find out where to get them.

Also, my short ebook *Poetry's Secret Truth* has been re-released. [Visit the same link](#) to find out more.

posted at: 22:01 | path: [/general](#) | [persistent link to this entry](#)

Wed, 23 Jul 2008

New Ebooks on Science and Religion

Interested in science and religion? I've written two short ebooks on this subject. To buy them, or to buy my longer book *From Brain to Cosmos*, [follow this link](#).

posted at: 01:00 | path: [/general](#) | [persistent link to this entry](#)

Confused about Science, Religion, or Morality? Let's TOK!

Have you read all the news stories about the physicists' search for a Theory of Everything - also known as a TOE? This theory, if found, would describe the tiniest parts of matter and the natural laws that govern them. The discovery of a correct TOE would be a huge achievement for science.

There's another theory that might be as important, in the long run, as the TOE. This is the *theory of knowledge* - which we might as well call "TOK" to keep it short.

Let's talk about TOK for a few minutes.

TOK is not a single theory. It's a whole branch of knowledge that studies how people know things, and that tries to find the limits of what we can know. TOK is like a science, but it isn't exactly a science, because it deals with problems and questions too basic and slippery to solve through scientific methods alone. Instead, TOK is considered a branch of philosophy. Like other branches of philosophy, TOK uses logic and reason, more than experimental facts, to try to answer questions about human knowledge.

TOK is not new. People have been studying the theory of knowledge for a long time. In fact, philosophers have given TOK a second name that comes from ancient Greek - because the ancient Greeks studied some of the questions of TOK. (I'll mention the other name at the end of this post. For now I'll just say it starts with an *e*.)

Here are some of the questions that people who study TOK have wondered about:

- * Does all human knowledge come from the senses? Or is there some other way to find knowledge, without information from the senses?
- * Can reasoning alone give us any knowledge, without help from the senses?
- * Besides sense experience, are there any other kinds of experience that can give us knowledge? (For example, how about the emotional insights of artists and poets? Are these really knowledge?)
- * There are many things that people believe, but that they don't really know. So, what's the difference between knowledge and belief?

These few questions should give you some idea of what TOK is about. TOK is the study of knowledge - where knowledge comes from, how we can find knowledge, and what we can and cannot know.

Does all of this stuff matter? What does the study of knowledge have to do with you, right now, today?

TOK matters because you probably already have opinions about it - even if you have never heard of TOK before. What is more, those opinions help to decide what you can think and believe about many other things!

TOK is not just a game for philosophers. Nearly everyone has opinions on some of the questions that TOK asks.

For example, some people don't believe anything that isn't scientifically proven. (You've probably known people like that. I sure have.) That's an opinion about what we know - the opinion that if it's not scientifically proven, we don't truly know it.

Other people like to rely on their intuition, and feel that intuition is more dependable than rational thought. That's also an opinion about knowledge - the opinion that intuition is a more dependable source of knowledge than reason.

Some people believe that the teachings of religious faith are a form of knowledge. Others strongly disagree.

All of these opinions are about the sources and limits of knowledge - so all of these opinions are part of TOK.

So why does TOK matter to you?

TOK matters to you because it affects what you believe about other things *besides* knowledge. Your opinions about knowledge affect how you think and feel about other things. Here are some examples:

- * If you think that faith can be a legitimate source of knowledge, then you also can believe there is a God.
- * On the other hand, if you don't think there's any knowledge besides science, then it will be hard for you to believe there is a God - because scientists don't use the concept of God in their theories.
- * If you think that feelings and emotions sometimes give us knowledge, then you might also believe that art is more than just something pretty. Instead, art may be a major source of knowledge, side by side with science.
- * If you think feelings and emotions sometimes give knowledge, then you also might believe that the *conscience*, or moral feelings, can teach you something. This makes it much easier to believe there are real moral standards - that morality is not just arbitrary.

Your opinions about knowledge can have a huge impact on your opinions about some very important issues. Many of the ongoing disagreements in today's world are partly fights over TOK, though they seem to be about something else. The prime example is the debate between science and religion. This might not seem like a disagreement about TOK - but that's mostly what it is!

Atheists who deny all religion, but who believe in science, actually hold a strong opinion about the nature of knowledge - whether they realize it or not. They believe that conclusions of science are real knowledge, but the doctrines of religious faith are not. Thus, science-based atheism actually is a thinly veiled opinion about TOK.

Those who believe in religion, but who deny parts of science (like the seven-day creationists), also hold an opinion about the nature of knowledge. They believe that faith, or religious revelation, is a more dependable source of knowledge than is science. That's an opinion about knowledge, so it's a position on TOK.

Some religious people don't emphasize faith, but instead rely on personal spiritual experiences to answer their spiritual questions. This is especially true of adherents of Eastern teachings that emphasize meditation. If you think that you can know something important through meditation, that is an opinion about the sources of knowledge - so it's an opinion about TOK.

It's beginning to look like the "war" between science and religion is mostly a scuffle between different ideas about TOK!

The study of TOK might even help us understand religious fanaticism - a problem which, of course, is sadly relevant to today's world. Religious fanatics often think the traditions of some religious sect are so important that it's OK to harm people for those traditions. On the other hand, a normal, nonfanatical religious believer usually has some sympathy or compassion for others. Such believers tend to ignore or soften any cruel traditional beliefs, instead of following those beliefs strictly. Thus, the normal believer often trusts moral emotions, like compassion, as sources of knowledge about how to behave. The fanatic does not take these emotions nearly as seriously as he takes the literal words of his religion. The difference between the normal believer and the fanatic is a difference of character and heart - but it also involves a hidden difference in TOK.

Yes, TOK can be that important!

This brief foray into TOK teaches us some lessons. Perhaps the main one is this: *We cannot get our ideas about morality and religion straightened out until we get our assumptions about knowledge straightened out.* The endless debates about religion, atheism, and science will never cool down as long as we fail to think clearly about what knowledge is and where knowledge comes from.

If we want less confusion in our world, let's start by having more TOK!

P.S.: The other name for theory of knowledge, or TOK, is "epistemology" (e-PIS-ta-MAHL-uh-jee). Philosophers use "epistemology" and "theory of knowledge" to mean the same thing - and I've even seen some of them call it "TOK."

posted at: 00:49 | path: [/knowledge](#) | [persistent link to this entry](#)

Fri, 11 Jul 2008

Still No Disproof of Free Will

Has science debunked free will? A recent article *Nature Neuroscience* [1] tells of some research that suggests the answer is "yes." An article in *The Wall Street Journal Online* [2] explores this research - and its implications for free will - in less technical terms.

According to the research, our brains can show specific kinds of activity about 10 seconds before we make conscious decisions. The findings suggest that when you make a conscious decision, your brain already has "decided" as much as 10 seconds earlier. So what is the role of your conscious decision? Does your act of deciding do anything? It seems as if your feeling of conscious decision is just a side effect of brain activity that already has happened. As one of the researchers pointed out (in [2]), this makes things look bad for free will.

It seems as if science might have debunked free will.

But wait a minute! Things just aren't that simple.

There is a way of understanding these findings that does NOT rule out free will. Maybe your brain starts a decision a while before you consciously decide. However, you can believe this and still believe in free will. All you have to do is admit that your actual consciousness includes more than your so-called conscious mind.

Psychologists (especially psychoanalysts) have long claimed that people have unconscious minds as well as their ordinary conscious minds. Philosopher Ned Block [3] has suggested that contents of the so-called unconscious might actually be conscious in a sense. This raises the possibility that your so-called unconscious mind might not truly be empty of consciousness, but might have a consciousness of its own. This would be a consciousness that you normally can't think or talk about - but that is a real part of you anyhow. (I've explored this idea further in my book, [From Brain to Cosmos](#) [4].)

Now what if you made a decision, but the decision happened in your unconscious mind? Since your unconscious mind is part of you, the decision truly would be your own - just as if you had made it with your ordinary conscious mind. For all we know, it could even be a free choice. (Some of the people who commented on the Wall Street Journal article made these two points about the unconscious. [5]) But what is really interesting is that your so-called unconscious choice might really be a *conscious* choice. This would happen if the so-called "unconscious mind" has some consciousness. Even if this were the case, you might not be able to think or say that you had decided, or act on the decision.

This might be what is happening in the study in *Nature Neuroscience*. The brain events that happen 10 seconds before the "conscious" decision might really be, or contain, the person's own free decision, involving conscious processing of a sort. However, it is a decision that he or she cannot yet think or talk about, or act upon.

In other words, free will and conscious choice might exist even if the neuroscientists' findings are right. The findings might show that we don't understand ourselves as well as we think. Specifically, they might show that the unconscious parts of ourselves are much more important than we usually suppose them to be. But the findings cannot debunk free will.

Just think about that!

(The argument I used in this post is not new. It's based on the one in my paper, "[Yes, We Have Conscious Will](#)." [6] That paper is a response to another line of argument against free will - not the same as the one discussed here, but in the same vein. If you're interested in the details of my argument, in further references on these topics, and in some other rebuttals to arguments against free will, read that paper.)

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[1] Chun Siong Soon, Marcel Brass, Hans-Jochen Heinze and John-Dylan Haynes, "Unconscious determinants of free decisions in the human brain," *Nature Neuroscience*, 11, 543-545, April 2008.

[2] Robert Lee Hotz, "Get out of your own way," *The Wall Street Journal Online*, June 27, 2008, p. A9.

[3] Ned Block, "How can we find the neural correlate of consciousness?", *Trends in Neurosciences* (Reference Edition) 19, 456-459.

[4] Mark F. Sharlow, *From Brain to Cosmos*. Parkland, FL: Universal Publishers, 2001.

[5] WSJ.com Forums, linked from reference [2].

[6] Mark F. Sharlow, "Yes, We Have Conscious Will," 2007. Available at <http://philsci-archive.pitt.edu/archive/00003778> .

posted at: 01:30 | path: [/mind](#) | [persistent link to this entry](#)

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The Unfinishable Scroll

Thu, 03 Jul 2008

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Welcome to my Blog!

The Unfinishable Scroll is open for browsing, controversy and fun. Politics? Religion? Science? Snails? I plan to talk about all of 'em and more. Stay tuned...

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Note on Links in *The Unfinishable Scroll*

When I converted *The Unfinishable Scroll* to PDF format, the links in the original pages did not survive. In the PDF version, the links are visible (colored and underlined), but they don't link to anything. You can find out what these links pointed to by consulting the original blog (located at <http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/cgi-bin/blosxom.cgi> at the time this book was composed).

In case the blog should ever disappear, here is a key to deciphering the links.

- 1. Some of the links mention a book, article, or website by name.** You can try to find these items by searching the web. If it's a book or article of mine, you could also try my website (if it still exists), or the PhilSci Archive or the PhilPapers archive (available via the web). (Note: The "privacy and legal notices" link at the end of the blog was a link to a page on my website.)
- 2. Some of the links point to parts of the same blog.** If you read or skim the rest of the blog, these links should make sense.
- 3. There are a few links that can't be figured out this way.** For example, some links say "this paper" without saying *which* paper. Here is a key (hopefully fairly accurate) to these links:

In "Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 11: A Summary of the Papers, and What It All Means":

The link to "paper" pointed to a paper of mine titled "Playing Fast and Loose with Complexity: A Critique of Dawkins' Atheistic Argument from Improbability."

In "Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 9: Of Science and Miracles":

The link to "my writings" pointed to my e-book "God: the Next Version."

In "Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 4: Evolution and the So-Called Illusion of Design":

The link to "this document" pointed to an article of mine titled "What's Really Wrong with the Argument from Design?"

In "Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 3: Dodging the Issue of Personal Religious Experience":

The two links labeled "here" pointed to the post "Spirit without the Supernatural" in this blog, and to the post "The New Face of Spirit: Part One" in my other blog "Religion: the Next Version."

In "Anti-Dawkins Paper No. 2: Why Dawkins' Main Argument Against God Is Wrong":

The link labeled "Here is the link to that paper" pointed to a paper of mine titled "Playing Fast and Loose with Complexity: A Critique of Dawkins' Atheistic Argument from Improbability."

In "Spirit without the Supernatural":

The link labeled "philosophical paper on this subject" pointed to my paper titled "Getting Realistic about Nominalism."

In the Notes, the three links labeled "here" pointed to the following papers of mine: "I Am an Abstraction, Therefore I Am," "Platonizing the Abstract Self," and "Qualia and the Problem of Universals"

The link to "this paper" pointed to "Getting Realistic about Nominalism."

The link to "this paper of mine" pointed to "Platonizing the Abstract Self."

The final link to "this paper" pointed to "Platonizing the Abstract Self."

Part 2

Another Philosophical Blog –
Religion: The Next Version

Religion: the Next Version

Real God. Real souls. No dogmas. No kidding.

[Blog Home](#)
[Page](#)

Mon, 27 Apr 2009

[Mark F. Sharlow](#)

Introducing a New Version of God

Links

* [Blosxom](#)

One of the most basic teachings of religion is the idea that there is a supreme spiritual reality of some sort. Some religions depict this supreme reality as a person and call it God. Others think of it in impersonal ways, using concepts like Tao, Brahman or the Void. Either way, religions usually portray the supreme reality as spiritual instead of as merely physical. This can mean that the supreme reality is purely spiritual, or that it is physical but also spiritual, or that it is the common ground of matter and spirit.

These religious ideas of the supreme reality are different from the nonreligious view of matter as the ultimate reality. Even a committed atheist can believe there is an ultimate reality if this reality is just matter itself. The supreme being or reality known to religious thought is not like this. It is not merely matter, but has mental or spiritual aspects. Some religions depict it as impersonal, but even if it is not a person it is more like a "someone" than a mere "something." What is more, the supreme being is thought to play an important role in our spiritual and moral lives. In most religions with a personal God, the supreme being creates the laws that govern human morality. In most religions without a personal God, the quest to understand the supreme reality brings enlightenment and wisdom. According to some religious teachings, the effort to create a better world brings us closer, in some sense, to the supreme being.

Is there a supreme being? The question is not simple. Despite what some atheists have claimed, the existence of a supreme being is not a question that science alone can settle. Some ideas of the supreme being may be scientifically testable, but others are not. Two random examples that come to mind are the God concepts of the philosophers G. H. Howison and Charles Hartshorne. Both views of God are scientifically untestable, but both depict a real God who is not just matter. Philosophy, and not science, is the right subject for studying these other ideas of God.

Do you have to abandon reason to think there is a supreme being? No. Philosophers have developed several alternative ideas of God based on reason instead of faith. (Again, Howison and Hartshorne come to mind as examples, but there are many others: Hegel, Aristotle, Leibniz, and so forth.) These ideas of God may be right or wrong, but at least they are attempts to think rationally about God. You *can* think rationally about God - and if you do, you don't have to stop believing in God, though your ideas about what God is like may change.

As a starting point for studying God rationally, I'm going to introduce you to an idea of God that is both rational and poetic. According to this idea, God is more than just matter, and God lies at the root of all goodness and beauty in the universe. However, this idea of God contains absolutely nothing that disagrees with science! This idea can be true even if everything in the universe came about through purely natural causes. This idea of the supreme being cannot disagree with evolution, with scientific theories of the origin of the universe, or with anything else that science may discover.

To find out about this alternative idea of God, [click here](#) to read a PDF ebook titled [God: the Next Version](#).

posted at: 20:43 | path: [/God](#) | [persistent link to this entry](#)

Thu, 19 Mar 2009

The New Face of Spirit: Part Two

In [Part One](#) of this post I explored a basic idea of religion: that we are more than just our bodies. This idea is true because we have abstract selves that are not the same as our material brains. However, we also differ from the matter of our bodies in another way. We differ from the matter of our bodies because all physical objects differ from their parts.

To explain what I mean by this mysterious statement, I'll explore some facts about diamonds. (What do diamonds have to do with the human spirit? Read on.)

Think about a diamond. According to science, a diamond is composed of carbon atoms arranged in a certain orderly way. A diamond is made of carbon atoms; it has no substance besides the substance of its carbon atoms.

Now ask yourself: Is a diamond really just carbon atoms?

The obvious answer to this question is "yes." After all, a diamond is made of carbon atoms. Take away the carbon atoms and - poof! - there's no diamond left. It seems as if there's nothing to the diamond but carbon atoms.

It *seems* that way - but is it true?

It isn't easy to find a good answer to this question. To find the answer, we have to think carefully about the relationship between the diamond and the atoms that make it up.

Is the diamond the same thing as any one of its atoms? Obviously not - because the diamond isn't just a single atom.

Is the diamond the same thing as all of its atoms together? This option seems much more reasonable, but still it isn't quite right. If the diamond were somehow identical to all of its atoms, then *one* thing would be the same thing as *many* things. If you take this idea literally, it doesn't make much sense: how can one single diamond really be the same as many different atoms? (This is one aspect of the traditional philosophical problem of "the one and the many.") Of course, the diamond will be the same as all of its atoms together if we take this to mean that the diamond is the same as the whole composed of all the atoms. But that isn't an answer. It's just a different way of saying what we already know: that the diamond is made of the atoms.

So can the diamond really be its carbon atoms? The best answer is: Not exactly. The diamond is not identical to the atoms that make it up. The diamond is an object that comes into being when the atoms are placed in the proper arrangement. It's perfectly true that the diamond is composed of these atoms and of nothing else. It's also true that the diamond is the whole made up of the atoms, and that the diamond has no substance besides that of the atoms. However, if we want to say that the diamond *is* the atoms, we must stop ourselves - for we are saying something that isn't quite true. The diamond is made up of its atoms, but it is not just its atoms. It is a whole of which the atoms are parts - but still, it is something a bit different from the atoms.

If you start with a zillion carbon atoms and then build a diamond, you are starting with a zillion things and ending up with a zillion and one things.[1] You are creating a new thing, even though no new matter is created!

There is nothing mysterious about what I just said. I'm not claiming that the diamond has some mysterious, ghostly thing in it besides its atoms. The diamond is just a whole composed of atoms, with no added parts - natural or supernatural! But in spite of this, the diamond is not just its atoms. There are the atoms. There is the diamond. There is the relationship between diamond and atoms (the diamond is a whole composed of the atoms). But the diamond is not *identically the same* as the atoms. If you took some loose carbon atoms and built a diamond, you would be creating a new thing - an extra thing that wasn't one of the things you started with. The extra thing is just the diamond itself. The amount of matter would remain exactly the same - but a new object would come to exist.

So what's the point of all this talk about diamonds? What do diamonds have to do with the human spirit?

The point is not just about diamonds. The point is that *all material objects work the same way as the diamond*. Material objects are not identical to the matter that makes them up. They are made of matter, but it would be a mistake to say that they *are* just matter. There is something to them besides the matter that makes them up. This "something" is not ghostly or mysterious. The "extra something" is just the fact of the existence of the complete material object - an existence that is *not* the same as the mere existence of the matter that makes up the object!

Like the diamond, your body is more than the matter that makes it up. Your body - including your brain - has an existence that goes beyond the mere existence of atoms and subatomic particles. This difference of existence is not magic, but is a subtle difference rooted in the logic of whole and part. It is not a property of humans alone, or even of living things alone. All physical objects have this difference. However, for humans the differences between the atoms and the whole system are much more dramatic than for diamonds. The human body has properties that would be unthinkable in the atoms - properties such as self-movement and thinking. Philosophers call these features "emergent properties." Their presence is a sign that your brain is more than the chemical elements that make it up.

There is a school of thought called "holism" that says the whole is more than the sum of the parts. The idea I am presenting here may sound like holism, but it isn't the same. You can believe what I am saying here whether or not you are a holist. Holism, in its common forms, says that the properties of the whole can't be explained in terms of the parts. I'm only claiming that the whole is *not the same as* the parts. Holists and non-holists alike are welcome to consider this view.

You are not just matter. Even your body - a material object - is not just matter. We live in a world in which wholes are a bit different from their parts. Your brain is no exception!

In [Part One](#) of this post I said that you have an abstract self that is not the same as your brain or your body. Now it turns out that your brain and body are not just the matter that make them up. This is a second way in which you are not just matter. Not only are you more than matter, but even your body is more than matter. Once again, there is nothing supernatural about this.

The human mind is more than just matter. Even the human body is more than just matter. You are more than just matter - and you don't have to believe in the supernatural to be that way!

If you want to read more about the ideas in this post, read my ebook [God, Son of Quark](#). There I present detailed arguments about the differences between objects and their parts. (I've presented the ideas informally in this post; the book gives the rigorous arguments and the philosophical details.) The book also contains references to the work of many philosophers who did things related to this idea. If you're curious about all this, [read the book](#). It has an interesting cover too.

Notes

[1] The view of whole and part that I suggested here is essentially the same as what Donald L. M. Baxter called "the Non-Identity view" of whole and part. See Baxter's article "Identity in the Loose and Popular Sense" (*Mind*, vol. 97 (1988), pp. 575-582).

posted at: 22:27 | path: [/soul](#) | [persistent link to this entry](#)

Thu, 05 Mar 2009

The New Face of Spirit: Part One

One of the most basic ideas of religion is that we are not just our bodies. According to most religious teachings, a human being is not just a physical body, but also has a soul or spirit. The soul or spirit is supposed to be an intangible part of us - a nonphysical "something or other" that makes us more than just hunks of matter or bags of chemicals.

Religions have many different ideas about the soul. Many religions teach that the soul is immortal. According to most Western denominations, the soul is a spiritual entity that inhabits the body. Buddhism offers a different view: that there is no permanent soul, but a person's mental processes (or some aspects of them) can start up again in a new body. Some liberal forms of religious thought hold that the soul is not immortal, but that we still are more than our bodies during this life.

All of these beliefs have a common denominator: we are more than our bodies. The soul, whether immortal or not, is what makes us different from the complex chemical and physical system that is the human body.

Are we really more than our bodies? Science would seem to say no. Scientific findings suggest that the mind and personality depend completely on the brain. Scientists have not found any need for a supernatural soul in their picture of the mind. Science seems to say that we are only hunks of matter.

But has science *really* debunked the soul? A little thought will show that the answer is no! Science has **not** proven that we are just our bodies. Instead, science has rejected one particular idea about the soul: that the soul is a supernatural, ghostlike entity that controls the brain and the body. This is not the same as disproving the soul. There are other ideas of the soul that are even better than the ghostly idea. Science cannot disprove these other ideas!

We are more than our bodies in at least two ways. I will discuss one of these ways in this post. I'll leave the other way for a future post.

Here is the first way in which we differ from the matter of our bodies: **Human beings contain abstract objects as well as matter.**

What are abstract objects? Are they supernatural or ghostly? No! Abstract objects are perfectly natural - but they can be spiritual also.

The following quote from my article "[God: the Next Version](#)" explains what abstract objects are.

[From "God: the Next Version"]

Our daily experience shows that there are other kinds of "items" besides concrete material objects. We live in a material world, yet not everything around us is a material thing. Material things are not just vague, featureless things. Instead, all material things have *properties*, or (as I will call them here) *qualities*.

What are some examples of qualities? All red objects have the quality of redness. All triangular objects have the quality of being triangular (which we also could call the quality of triangularity). All hard things have the quality of hardness. All liquids have the quality of liquidity.

Redness, triangularity, hardness, and liquidity are examples of qualities. They are not things - they are the qualities of things. There are red things in the world - but there also is a quality, redness, that these things have in common.

Qualities are examples of *abstract objects*. They are not things, but are found in things. Usually they are features of things. The mind can pick them out by examining many similar things and recognizing something in common. [...]

Other examples of abstract objects are *relations*. These are features that connect together more than one thing. For example, one mountain may be taller than another. The relation of *being taller than* connects together two physical things. *Being taller than* is not just a quality that one thing can have. It is a relation that can connect two things. A more familiar example of a relation is friendship. This is a relation that holds between any two people who are friends of each other.

For still other examples of abstract objects, we can look at *patterns*. The posts in a wooden fence form a definite, repeating pattern. Once your mind has recognized this pattern, you can notice it in fences anywhere. If you do digital photography, you probably know about the "Moiré patterns" that appear in some photos. These are patterns made of straight or curved bars of dark and light. A computer program also is a pattern - a pattern of bits of information, which can be found in any processor that is running the program.

Patterns, qualities, and relations are important to our reasoning and our experience. We find patterns, qualities, and relationships in the world around us. We did not invent them; they really are there. Yet these items do not "exist" in the same way that a physical object exists. They are not things at all. They are *abstract objects*.

At this point, you may be asking an important question: Do abstract objects really exist? Philosophers have been asking this question for thousands of years. They have developed several possible answers: that abstract objects really exist, that they don't really exist, that only some kinds of them exist, and so forth. Despite its popularity, I think this question is a fooler! The answer depends on whether "exist" means "exist in the same way that material things exist." Abstract objects are not things - they do not exist the same way that things exist. However, they are true components of reality. Things really do have properties. People really do form relationships. Patterns really do show up - sometimes in the most surprising places. The problem isn't that these items don't exist, but that they don't exist *as things*. A property, relation or pattern is not a thing. It's just a property, a relation, or a pattern - nothing more. But that can be a lot!

Here are two quotes, from my earlier work, about the reality of abstract objects. (One of these is from a blog post named "[Spirit without the Supernatural](#)" that first appeared on my other blog, [The Unfinishable Scroll](#).)

[From "*God: the Next Version*"]

Philosophers have long debated whether abstract objects are truly real. I think this question is somewhat confused. Instead of worrying about this question, we should just accept that our world contains physical objects, patterns, qualities, and relations, and stop fretting about which of these objects "really" exists. Patterns, qualities and relations do not "exist" in the same way in which sticks and stones "exist" - yet clearly a Moiré pattern in a photograph *really is there*. We should not try to deny that this pattern is real, even though it is "only" a pattern and not a physical object. The photographer who denies that a conspicuous Moiré pattern is there may end up losing a customer! And it seems rather silly to claim that a computer program is unreal.

[From "*Spirit without the Supernatural*"]

I think this question depends on confusion about the meaning of the word "exist." If someone asks whether properties exist, I'll answer the question with another question: What do you mean by "exist"?

If you think "exist" means "be a physical object," then the answer is no - properties don't exist, because they are not physical objects.

But if you think "exist" means "be something" (be any kind of item at all), then properties do exist.

I've written a [philosophical paper on this subject](#), where I went into more detail and covered some points that I've skipped over here. The main lesson of that paper: We can safely assume that properties exist. [...]

To insist that properties don't exist is to cut off the idea of existence arbitrarily - to limit existence artificially to concrete, individual objects like physical objects. If existence includes everything found in the universe, instead of just concrete physical objects, then properties exist. They exist *as properties* instead of *as physical objects* - but that's just another way to be real.

So we find that there are abstract objects in the world - properties, relations, patterns, and more. So much for the belief that only material objects are real! Even if every *thing* is made of matter, the universe still contains abstract objects as well as *things*. We live in a natural universe - but not in a universe made only of lumps of matter. There is nothing supernatural about all this. (A Moiré pattern is not supernatural, and neither is the hardness of a diamond!)

Now, where does spirit come in? Here is a further quote from "[Spirit without the Supernatural](#)":

[From "*Spirit without the Supernatural*"]

What does all this have to do with spirit?

If properties are real, then spirit doesn't have to be a substance or stuff. Instead, it can be a property!

Instead of being an invisible substance, spirit might be a property of physical objects. As a property, it would be every bit as real as the redness of a sunset, or the hexagonal shape of a snowflake, or the brilliance and transparency of a diamond.

If spirit is a property, then the human brain could indeed have a soul. Science suggests that your personality or self is a property of your brain. If so, then that property might be your soul. [...]

Skeptics try to debunk the soul by claiming that the self is "only" a property of the brain. The skeptics had better watch out! They are making a serious mistake!

The skeptics begin with the idea (suggested by science) that the self or personality is a property of the brain. From this, they argue that the soul is nothing - that there is no soul.

But wait a minute!

The skeptics say the self is a property of the brain. However, we have found that a property is not just nothing. In its own way, a property is quite real!

If the self is a property, then the self has a real existence of its own - just as real as if it had been a real ghostly substance. By saying that the self is only a property of the brain, the skeptics are admitting that the self is real. Worse yet for them, they are admitting that the self has a type of existence that goes beyond the existence of physical objects!

The skeptics might not realize they are admitting all this. However, if properties are real in any way at all, then this is where their "skepticism" leads.

Without realizing it, the skeptics have painted themselves into a corner, and admitted that people have souls of a sort!

Granted, these souls are a little different from what most religions teach. They are properties, not ghostly supernatural objects. But the important point is that *they are real*.

Once we admit that properties are real, then the skeptical view that the self is a property of the brain becomes almost the same as the religious belief that people have souls distinct from their bodies. The property of the brain that we call the self is an entity different from the matter of the brain - just as the yellowness of the sun is different from the sun itself.

So it appears that the skeptics and the believers are not as far apart as they seem.

This is the first way in which we differ from the matter of our bodies. (I'll deal with the second way in a future post.) We differ from the matter of our bodies because we contain abstract selves - properties of our brains - as well as matter.

This idea that the soul or spirit is an abstract object is not new. It's been around for quite a while. (For references to some previous versions of this idea, see the references in "[Spirit without the Supernatural](#)" and also [this paper](#).) The idea that the self or soul is nothing but a property of the brain, or perhaps a pattern of information (or both), will be nothing new for those who have done some reading about the brain. The important point, which most so-called skeptics overlook, is that these features of the brain *have an existence of their own*. They are real in their own way. To claim that they do not exist is to confuse different kinds of existence. If the soul or spirit is a feature of the brain, then people really do have souls or spirits - because the feature is an abstract object, and is not to be confused with the brain that has it.

The soul is not just the brain. We are not just our bodies. And you don't have to believe in anything supernatural to recognize this fact.

Can an abstract soul of this kind be immortal? I'll deal with that question in a later post, if I dare...

posted at: 20:55 | path: [/soul](#) | [persistent link to this entry](#)

Mon, 02 Mar 2009

The Guts of Religion

There has been a lot of discussion over the years about whether science and religion are compatible. Atheists often claim that science and religion are incompatible, and that everyone should give up religion. Fundamentalist religious believers typically are much like the atheists - they think science and religion don't mix. However, they want to give up part or all of science (especially evolution) instead of religion. Liberal religious thinkers often think science and religion are compatible - that you can hold some religious beliefs and still believe everything that science has discovered.

I am going to argue that the most important ideas of religion are fully compatible with science. You can believe in the most important ideas of religion, and also believe in science. There is no conflict at all between the basic ideas of religion and our scientific knowledge of the world. What is more, it's possible to build a system of spiritual belief based on reason instead of dogmatic faith.

Before getting started, I should clarify what I mean by "religion." I won't try to define "religion" precisely. I'll just say that religion is not the same as dogmatic belief or as membership in a religious sect. These are not religion, but are only particular forms of religion. There can be other forms.

Three ideas are basic to a truly religious attitude.

The first idea is that the universe is meaningful. There are things that really matter and that really have value. By "value" I don't just mean moral values, like goodness. I also mean the value of beauty in all its forms - like the beauty of nature. These values are real. They are not just illusions of the mind. They are not just reactions and preferences of ours. At least some values are objectively real. Some happenings really are good. Some things really are beautiful. Some things really matter. It's not just that we *think* they matter - it's that they *really do* matter.

The second basic idea of religion is that there is a supreme being or supreme reality of some sort. There are many different ideas about this supreme reality. The idea of God taught in Christian churches is not the only possible idea of a supreme being or reality. Different religions and philosophies teach different ideas about this topic. Some Eastern religions have ideas of an ultimate root of things quite different from the usual Western ideas of God. But the important point is that there is a supreme being or reality of some kind. This is not just the source of all things (as matter might be for an atheist), but a being, entity, or reality that is of supreme significance for our spiritual and ethical lives.

The third basic idea of religion is that we are not just our bodies. A human being is not just matter, but is something more than that. A human being is something capable of having rights, dignity and worth. This implies that a human being must be the *kind* of thing that can have rights, dignity and worth - which means not just a simple blob of matter, but something more. Different religions and philosophies have different ideas about what this "something more" is. Many religions teach that there is a soul inhabiting the body. The soul is supposed to be sort of an invisible, ghostly thing that lives in the body. Other religions have a more subtle idea of the soul. Buddhism, for example, traditionally teaches that there is no permanent soul, but that personal identity or consciousness can pass from an earlier body to a later one. According to this belief, the "something more" is not a supernatural soul, but an ongoing process that extends beyond our present bodies. No matter how

we think of the "something more," the important point is that there is something more to us than the matter of our bodies. A human being is more than just a lump of matter - and because of that, a human being can have spiritual qualities that no mere heap of chemicals can possess. (By mentioning human beings here, I am not ruling out similar beliefs about other organisms.)

These are the three most important ideas of religion: that existence is meaningful, that there is a supreme reality, and that we are more than our bodies.

posted at: 16:57 | path: [/general](#) | [persistent link to this entry](#)

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Note on Links in *Religion: the Next Version*

When I converted *Religion: the Next Version* to PDF format, the links in the original pages did not survive. In the PDF version, the links are visible (colored and underlined), but they don't link to anything. You can find out what these links pointed to by consulting the original blog, which was located at <http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/cgi-bin/rel/blosxom.cgi> at the time this book was composed.

In case the blog should ever disappear, here is a key to deciphering the links.

1. Some of the links mention a book, article, or website by name. You can try to find these items by searching the web. If it's a book or article of mine, you could also try my website (if it still exists), or the PhilSci Archive or the PhilPapers archive (available via the web). (Note: The "privacy and legal notices" link at the end of the blog was a link to a page on my website.)

2. Some of the links point to parts of the same blog. If you read or skim the rest of the blog, these links should make sense.

3. There are two links that can't be figured out this way. In "The New Face of Spirit: Part One," the link "philosophical paper on this subject" pointed to a paper of mine titled "Getting Realistic about Nominalism," and the link to "this paper" pointed to a paper of mine titled "Platonizing the Abstract Self."

Part 3

Restoring the Foundations of Human Dignity

Restoring the Foundations of Human Dignity

Upholding the reality and significance of persons in an era of cynicism

The importance of the person is an endangered idea in today's philosophical thought. Many traditional philosophical views emphasized the freedom, autonomy, and dignity of persons. Today, philosophical doctrines that marginalize personality seem to have gained the upper hand. Among these doctrines are:

- **Scientism**, which teaches that science is the only legitimate form of knowledge. (If taken seriously, this leads to the view that a person is only a mass of chemicals.)
- **Behaviorism** and **eliminative materialism**, which teach, in different ways, that the human mind is unimportant and perhaps even unreal.
- **Determinism** in its **incompatibilist** form, which teaches that persons do not have free will.
- **Postmodernism**, which sometimes teaches that persons are mere fictions of language, and that personal qualities like reason are social constructs invented by "oppressors" (ethnicities or genders that the postmodernists do not favor).

Most of these lines of thought seem scientific at first glance. Postmodernism is the exception; it does not pretend to be scientific, and it tends to be antiscientific. Despite their differences, all these doctrines deny or undermine the reality and dignity of the person.

Forget what you have heard from the overconfident followers of these beliefs. **Science has not confirmed any of these doctrines — and philosophy has not confirmed them either.**

Indeed, some of the more scientific-sounding of these ideas are scientifically untestable, so there is no chance science will confirm them.

The literature of philosophy contains many arguments against doctrines like these. This literature is too extensive to list here, though I would like to do so. Anyone who searches the literature deeply enough will find that **all** of these doctrines are

controversial. None of them has found general acceptance by all serious philosophers. There are arguments for and against all of these ideas. Sometimes scientists who are not philosophers come out in favor of these views — but the philosophical literature already contains arguments that refute their pronouncements.

There is no scientific or philosophical "proof" for any of these antipersonal viewpoints. The truth of each of them remains an open question at best. There still is plenty of room for confidence in the opposite views — and for confidence in the importance and dignity of persons.

On this page, I will summarize some of the main points of my own view of persons. In some places I will provide references to relevant points (or at least related points) in my writings.

- **Skepticism about the reality of consciousness is untenable.** To claim that you only seem to be conscious is, in effect, to claim that things don't really seem a certain way — they only *seem to seem* that way. This latter claim leads to inconsistency. The claim that consciousness has no phenomenal or subjective character is untenable for the same reason. ([1]; see also [2])

- **Skepticism about the reality of mental states is untenable.** So-called "folk psychology" — the commonplace set of beliefs that people generally hold about the human mind — has a solid core that is not in danger from science-driven skepticism. Science can cast doubt on some beliefs about the mind, but it cannot show that humans do not have thoughts, feelings, desires, and the like. [3]

- **The conscious subject is a single, unified entity.** Disunifying phenomena, such as self-division and unconscious influences on the will, cannot compromise the basic unity of the subject, though they can seem to do so. [1]

- **Science has not refuted free will.** Many philosophers today are *compatibilists*; they hold that free will could exist even in the presence of *determinism* (the causal determination or predictability of all physical events). I concur with the compatibilist view. Even if determinism were true, there could be free will. (Since I have not yet written a piece about compatibilism, I will not give a link here, but there are plenty of compatibilist arguments already in the literature.) The possibility that our actions are controlled entirely by unconscious neural events is perhaps a greater threat to free will than is simple physical determinism. But even this circumstance would not rule out free will — because even a so-called "unconscious" brain event may actually lie within the scope of personal consciousness, and therefore be one's own doing. [4, 1]

- **Reality does not consist of concrete physical objects alone.** It also contains *abstract objects*, such as properties, relations, and sets. These are not concrete objects made of matter or energy. Hence materialism is not a complete view of the universe. (Note that the incompleteness of materialism does not imply supernaturalism. There is nothing "supernatural" about properties, relations and sets.) The idea that abstract objects are fully real is called *ontological realism*. This is a very old idea in philosophy. I argue that ontological realism is not the extravagant doctrine that some say it is. Indeed, ontological realism requires us to believe very little beyond what we already know from everyday experience. [5]

- **The self is real — and no scientific discovery about the mind can prove otherwise.** It is plausible to identify the self with a fully real abstract object of the kind discussed in the point about abstract objects, above. [6, 7] Since abstract objects are genuinely real, a self of this kind would be genuinely real too. Even if neuroscience found no evidence of a self, this abstract object could be the self, and its existence would not be falsifiable by science. Some authors seem to think that if the self were "only" an abstract object, then the self would not be real. This argument fails if we accept that abstract objects are fully and genuinely real. (It is unwise to say that anything is "only" an abstract object.)

- **The qualia, or subjective qualities of conscious experience, are real.** Qualia are the subjectively felt features of personal experience — for example, the "feel" of the color red, of a particular pain, or of the musical note middle C. Qualia are abstract objects. As I said earlier, abstract objects are real entities. If we identify qualia with suitable abstract objects, we find that the existence of qualia is not falsifiable by science. The possibility that neuroscience has no need for qualia cannot weigh against the reality of qualia. [8]

- **Language really can refer to reality; this reference is not merely a social construct or a political fiction.** Once one understands how language is related to the way things seem, one finds that language can refer to an objective reality. Hence, postmodern critiques of the referentiality of language must fall apart at some point. ([1]; see also [2] and [9])

- **The existence of different cultural perspectives does not rule out the reality of objective truth.** Although there are many different cultural perspectives, there still is such a thing as objective truth — a truth which, in a sense, encompasses all the perspectives. Hence, postmodern dismissals of objective reality and truth are extravagant and pointless. [1] If one wants to respect all cultures, one should assert that there is objective truth, instead of denying this as so many postmodernists do. (If there were no objective truth, the claim that different cultures deserve respect could not be true.)

- **Conscious subjects play important roles in physical reality.** The physical universe is objectively real, is not a mental construct, and is vast compared to humanity. Nevertheless, the physical universe is deeply intertwined with consciousness. All physical facts have logical ties to the actual and possible experiences of observers. Physical facts are dependent — not causally, but in a certain logical manner — upon facts about experience. Thus, conscious observers are not mere trifles. Consciousness plays a key part in the physical universe. [1]

- **Science is a valuable source of knowledge, but it is not the only legitimate knowledge.** The view that science is the only legitimate form of knowledge is called *scientism*. Scientism, if taken seriously, would imply that philosophical knowledge is impossible. A follower of scientism cannot consistently adopt any philosophical positions — including scientism itself. There are other forms of legitimate knowledge besides science; philosophy is one of these forms. Also, the notion of truth is too rich to be exhausted by any single methodology, including that of science. [1] The statement that scientism is false is not a criticism of science itself, and does not alter the facts that science "works" and that truth is objective. (I should mention in passing that the fashionable postmodern critiques of science are hopelessly off track. Among its other faults, postmodern antiscience demeans people whose lives have been saved by modern scientific medicine.)

These philosophical points, taken as a whole, point to a new view of the person — a view that leaves abundant room for freedom, dignity and autonomy. This new view is based on reason and is fully compatible with science. It is not a finished philosophical system, but is open-ended and exploratory in character. Nevertheless, this view clearly overlaps with two enduring philosophical traditions: **humanism** and **personalism**. (By "humanism" I mean humanism in its original sense, not the scientism-based movement called "secular humanism.") Personalism and humanism both recognize the importance of persons. I suggest that the philosophical ideas presented here could serve as the seeds for a restoration of a truly humanistic and personalistic outlook in the twenty-first century.

— Mark F. Sharlow

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[4] Mark F. Sharlow, "Yes, We Have Conscious Will."
<http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/papers/conscious_will.pdf>, accessed 7/16/2009.

[5] Mark F. Sharlow, "Getting Realistic about Nominalism."
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[6] Mark F. Sharlow, "I Am an Abstraction, Therefore I Am."
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[9] Mark F. Sharlow, "How Subjective Fact Ties Language to Reality."
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Note: The copies of preprints cited here are on the author's website (<http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow>). However, most of these papers also can be found in the PhilSci Archive (<http://philsci-archive.pitt.edu>) or in the PhilPapers archive (<http://philpapers.org>).

Part 4

About Idealism

About Idealism:

An Exploration of Some Philosophical Viewpoints that Put Mind Before Matter

What Is Idealism?

People have both minds and bodies. Everyone knows this. Yet over the centuries, there has been much disagreement about the exact relationship between the human mind and the human body.

Many people regard the mind as something separate from the body. This includes many religious believers, who regard personality and self as attributes of an immortal soul. Some philosophers, relying on logic instead of faith, also have taken the position that the mind is distinct from the body and is not explainable in terms of bodily processes alone. The belief that a person is composed of a mind and a body, with neither one reducible to the other, has traditionally been called **dualism**.

Other thinkers, especially those influenced by scientific thought, have held that the mind is not distinct from the body, but is in some way a product of the body. Typically, such thinkers hold that the mental functions of a person are simply functions of that person's brain. The belief that the mind is reducible to material things and processes is known as **materialism**.

Still other thinkers, influenced by logical arguments and reflective thought, have maintained that the mind is not really separate from the body, but that the physical world is in some sense a product of minds. This viewpoint is known as **idealism**.

Idealism, then, is the philosophical view that material things owe their existence to minds.

Actually, there are other philosophical positions called "idealism" which are different from the position I just described. The view that material things owe their existence to minds is sometimes called **metaphysical idealism** to distinguish it from other viewpoints called "idealism." I won't go into these other ideas here, but I will name a few of them: epistemological idealism (a hypothesis about what we can know); ethical idealism (the belief that moral ideals are worth striving for); and political idealism (the belief that one should strive for an ideal form of government). The words "dualism" and "materialism" also have other meanings, but I won't go into these here, either.

What Idealism Is Not

First, let me dispel one of the greatest myths about idealism: **Idealism does not deny the reality of the observable world.**

No idealist (at least no sensible idealist) has believed that there is no observable world - that the world we see, hear, touch, smell and taste is not there at all.

Idealists typically believe in the existence of the observable world, just like everyone else. They do not regard the observable world as a figment of anyone's imagination. What makes idealists different is their understanding of the **nature** of the observable world. Most people think of the observable world as something independent of minds - something that could continue to exist even if all minds were to

disappear from the universe. Idealists go beyond this view; they think of the observable world as depending, in some way or other, on minds and the activities of minds. According to the idealist view of reality, if there had never been any minds of any sort in the universe, then there would not have been a universe at all. But the observable world is not merely something that people dream up. Some idealists (especially Berkeley, whom I discuss below) even have claimed that there is no matter - but by "matter" these idealists generally mean a non-mental, mind-independent substance. Claiming that the world is dependent on minds isn't the same as claiming that the world isn't really there!

Another common belief about idealism is that it is contrary to reason - or, as some people put it, "crazy." This too is a myth that needs to be put to rest. Most idealistic thought, particularly in the West, is based on logical arguments of various sorts. In itself, idealism isn't contrary to reason or logic. The worst that might be said is that it's contrary to common sense. But this same charge can be leveled at many of our beliefs about the world - such as the true belief that the Sun is a star, which contradicts the common-sense observation that the Sun is just too big to be a star!

Still another myth about idealism is that idealism is contrary to science. Actually, the idealistic concept of the material world is logically compatible with the scientific view of matter. Idealism does not say that the natural world is unreal; it does not say that the laws of nature are mere inventions of the human mind; it does not say we can change the world magically by thinking differently. Nor does idealism place humanity at the center of the universe; it merely assigns conscious minds (of any kind, human or nonhuman) to a rather important role in the universe. Most of the best-known idealists of the western world have been either scientists or scientifically oriented philosophers. And as anyone knows who follows the popular scientific literature, some scientists start sounding like idealists when they discuss the picture of reality provided by quantum physics.

Also, idealism does not have any direct relation to the idea of "mind over matter." Although idealism affirms that matter depends on mind, idealism does NOT require you to believe that your own mental processes (or even everyone's mental processes together) can affect the actual course of material events. Some individuals who regard themselves as skeptics have associated idealism with belief in paranormal phenomena, and have tried to tar both beliefs with the same brush. Actually this is silly, since idealism neither supports nor contradicts belief in the paranormal.

Idealism Comes in Several Flavors

All idealists agree that matter somehow depends on mind. However, different idealists have held different views on exactly **how** matter depends on mind. Thus, there are several different kinds of idealism. A few of these are discussed below.

(Warning: To keep these summaries brief, I may gloss over some of the fine points of the theories I am describing. The summaries given here are meant only to provide a thumbnail summary of idealistic thought. **Do not rely on any information in this document for school papers or for any other purpose;** consult appropriate research sources instead.)

Idealistic Theory No. 1: Subjective Idealism

The most straightforward kind of idealism - and possibly the most famous kind as well - is known as **subjective idealism**. This is the view that matter is a construct built up from the mental contents of the mind which observes it. In other words, the sensations that observers have when they experience a brick are all there really is to the brick. A brick is simply an aggregate or system of sensations. When you experience a brick (by seeing it, feeling it, etc.), the sum total of these sensations, and other sensations

like them, are all that you really can find there. The brick exists, but there is nothing else to the brick besides these sensations.

Of course, this doesn't mean that the brick isn't made of atoms, electrons, etc., as science says it is. A subjective idealist might argue that the atoms and electrons also are systems of sensations - perhaps including the sights and sounds that scientists experience when they read instruments that detect atoms and electrons. These systems of sensations could be parts of a greater system of sensations, namely the brick.

Subjective idealism may seem weird, but it has a certain logic behind it. After all, what do you really know of the brick besides the sensations you get when you experience it? When you think about it, it seems as though the sensations are all you really find there. Normally, people assume that along with the sensations of a brick, there also is a non-mental brick which causes the sensations. But if the non-mental brick vanished - and only the sensations were there - **how would you know the difference?**

Could you know the difference, if all the sensations remained exactly the same?

So how do you know that there's anything behind the sensations, even as things are now?

Even if you don't believe subjective idealism, these three questions are worth thinking about!

The philosopher usually regarded as the founder of subjective idealism is George Berkeley, who lived in the 17th and 18th centuries. Using arguments rather like the one I just used (but much more complete and precise), Berkeley argued that physical objects, though quite real, actually are collections of sensations. He expounded his views in two books, *The Principles of Human Knowledge* and *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*. Berkeley tried to show that the concept of "matter" as a non-mental substance is a mistaken idea.

One of the big problems facing subjective idealism is the problem of why the same objects should exist for everyone even though everyone has different mental contents. If you and I both see a brick, then you and I will have slightly different experiences, depending on our positions, the lighting, etc. The brick as I see it is constructed from my mental contents, and the brick as you see it is constructed from your mental contents. So how can we say we're seeing the same brick? How can I even know that you are seeing a brick at all? Berkeley recognized a problem much like this, and thought he could solve it without abandoning subjective idealism. Other idealists abandoned subjective idealism and devised idealistic theories which seemed to avoid such problems. I will mention some of these theories below.

Idealistic Theory No. 2: Absolute Idealism

Absolute idealism is the view that the existence of material things depends upon one underlying mental reality rather than upon the mental contents of individual observers. It differs from subjective idealism mainly in its picture of the "mind" that underlies matter. According to subjective idealism, matter is a construct based on the mental contents of individual observers, like you and me. According to absolute idealism, there is a single underlying mental or spiritual thing, or principle, whose mental activity and content underpins the existence of the entire material world.

In Western philosophy, the best-known absolute idealist is the 18th/19th-century philosopher G. W. F. Hegel. Hegel regarded the universe as a manifestation of what he called "the Absolute." The Absolute, as Hegel conceived of it, is a spiritual principle which encompasses minds and material objects alike and is the ground of all existence. Hegel thought of the evolution of the universe, from atoms to galaxies, as

an image of the process of unfoldment or development of the Absolute. He wrote a number of books, including one known in English as *Science of Logic*.

The idea that there is one mental or spiritual reality behind everything may sound religious or mystical. One can interpret it that way if one likes; certainly, some idealists with religious or mystical inclinations have equated the Absolute with God. But absolute idealism, in and of itself, does not require one to believe in any particular religion or to be a mystic.

Idealistic Theory No. 3: Pluralistic Idealism

Pluralistic idealism is the view that there are many individual minds which together underlie the existence of the observed world. Unlike absolute idealism, pluralistic idealism does not assume the existence of a single ultimate mental reality or Absolute. According to pluralistic idealism, it is individual minds which make possible the existence of the physical universe.

Pluralistic idealism differs from absolute idealism by denying that all minds are encompassed by one absolute mind. According to the pluralistic idealist view, individual minds are the sources of reality; it is the individual minds, not the Absolute, that do all the work. Pluralistic idealism also should be distinguished from subjective idealism. Although it is possible to be a subjective idealist and also a pluralistic idealist, most pluralistic idealists have regarded matter as the resultant of the activity of interrelated minds acting together, rather than as constructs built up from the contents of single minds.

Pluralistic Idealism, Version 1: Monadism

One form of pluralistic idealism is **monadism**. According to monadism, the minds that underlie the material world are not limited to human and animal minds. They also include rudimentary minds that exist within all material things. In modern terms, one might state this form of idealism as follows: The ultimate particles which make up matter are not merely material; they have some slight degree of consciousness. It is these primitive consciousnesses, together with more complex minds such as human minds, that underpin the existence of the world.

According to monadism, matter is not a construct of mind, but is made of minds - very simple minds, which perhaps don't have thoughts and feelings as we do, but which nevertheless have some degree of consciousness.

Monadism is the creation of the 17th/18th-century philosopher G. W. Leibniz, who also co-invented calculus. Leibniz used the term "monad" to refer to any of the different minds in his theory - human and animal minds, the primitive minds within matter, and some other minds as well. Leibniz also held other views about monads that I won't discuss here because they aren't directly relevant to my discussion of idealism.

Leibniz's idealism is presented in a straightforward way in his short book, *Monadology*.

Pluralistic Idealism, Version 2: Personal Idealism

Another form of pluralistic idealism is **personal idealism**. This is the view that the minds which underlie reality are the minds of persons. According to personal idealism, the world is at heart a world of conscious, personal beings, including ourselves. The interactions or relationships among these beings give rise to the system of experiences that we call experiences of the observable world.

Like other types of idealism, personal idealism acknowledges the existence of the observable world, and regards that world as dependent upon the activity of minds. Personal idealism denies that there is a single absolute mind behind the world. It also denies that things are merely constructs of the mental contents of single minds. Instead, personal idealism regards things as resultants of the interrelated mental activities of persons. For example, if you and I both see a brick, the existence of the brick depends upon your experiences and upon my experiences, and perhaps upon the experiences of other observers as well. If you hand me a brick, your experience of handing it and my experience of receiving it both contribute to the existence of the brick.

One of the leading personal idealists (and the one who used the term "Personal Idealism" most specifically for his ideas) was the 19th/20th century philosopher George H. Howison. Howison put particular emphasis on the role of purpose and values in idealism. He argued that the flow of time is a result of the activity of personal minds, and that for this reason, persons must be regarded as beings who transcend the flow of time. Howison's ideas are expounded in his book *The Limits of Evolution and Other Essays*.

My Own Suggestions: Physioidealism and Recursive Idealism

Earlier I said that idealism is compatible with the scientific view of nature. One possible sticking point in this compatibility is the fact that scientists are attempting to understand the human mind in terms of the activity of the brain. Scientists have made considerable progress in explaining mental functions in terms of brain functions. Although no complete explanation is yet available, many people believe that such an explanation (known as a materialistic explanation of mind) is possible.

In my opinion, the possibility of a materialistic explanation of mind is not as blatantly obvious as many scientifically inclined philosophers might believe. There still are major open philosophical problems about the nature of the mind. Even if every single mental function were found to be associated with a specific physical process, we still would have trouble establishing that each mental function really IS the corresponding physical process. Before such an identification could be made, there would be philosophical questions to answer as well as scientific ones. Science alone cannot do this job; both science and philosophy are necessary.

But suppose that a materialistic explanation of mind is found one day. Idealism claims that matter depends on minds for its existence. If minds ever are shown to be reducible to matter, will metaphysical idealism still be a tenable philosophical position?

In my opinion, the answer to this last question is a resounding YES. **Even if the mind were shown to be nothing but a set of functions of the brain, the material universe still could owe its existence entirely to minds.**

My argument for this opinion is found in my book, *From Brain to Cosmos* (Parkland, FL: Universal Publishers, 2001). There I describe a version of metaphysical idealism that I call **physioidealism**, and a specific type of physioidealism that I call **recursive idealism**. These viewpoints are not entirely new; both of them have precedents in recent philosophy, and especially in the current thinking of some scientists. I discuss these precedents in the book.

Recursive idealism is an idealistic view of reality which will work just as well if the mind is a mere function of the brain as it will if the mind is something independent of the brain. Despite its compatibility with materialism, recursive idealism is a genuine metaphysical idealist theory; it does not back down from the claim that material things literally owe their existence to minds. I will not attempt to

argue for recursive idealism here, since I already have published the relevant arguments elsewhere. Those interested are referred to my book, *From Brain to Cosmos*.

Note on Sources

Much of the information presented in this document is common knowledge in the field of philosophy and can be found in general philosophy textbooks. Information about the ideas of particular philosophers is based on my understanding of the works mentioned in the text. As the reader will have noticed, this document also contains some of my own opinions and interpretations.

- *Mark F. Sharlow*

Copyright © 2002 Mark F. Sharlow. This essay appeared earlier on two of the author's websites, most recently at <<http://www.eskimo.com/~msharlow/idealism.htm>>. Minor edits made in 2009.

Part 5

Debunking the Skeptics

Debunking the Skeptics

A Logical Look at the Claims of the Skeptics, So-Called Rationalists,
and Other People Who Insist on Disproving Things



"Truth Can Be Elusive!"

What Is This Document About?

This document is about the mistakes skeptics make. The document contains a set of essays that show why some of the ideas of the skeptics are illogical.

Who Are the Skeptics?

In this document, "skeptic" means **a person who systematically tries to disprove things that seem spiritual, paranormal, or too imaginative.** There are different kinds of skeptics. Some skeptics insist that science has disproved religion — not just fundamentalist religion, but *all* religion. Other skeptics feel that all claims on the fringes of science (such as claims of paranormal happenings) have been debunked once and for all. Many skeptics hold both of these beliefs.

(The word "skeptic" also has other meanings. Philosophers know of "Cartesian skeptics," "Humean skeptics," and skeptics of still other kinds — but this document is not about these skeptics.)

What Is This Document *Not* About?

This document is **not** meant to encourage belief in any of the things the skeptics don't like. This isn't a paranormal page, a New Age page, or even a religious page. It's more of a **philosophy of science** page. I'm not trying here to defend the beliefs that the skeptics don't like. (For that matter, I'm not trying to disprove those beliefs either.) I am just trying to show

that the skeptics have used some bad arguments against these beliefs. Whether religious or paranormal beliefs are true is a separate question that I don't plan to take up here.

Why Was This Document Created?

Because I got tired of watching the skeptics use the same irrational thinking that they accuse true believers of using! I am interested in logic, reason, and science. I noticed that skeptics sometimes use bad arguments and call it rationality or critical thinking.

How Is This Material Organized?

The criticisms of skepticism are organized into essays. The essays are listed below.

Do the Essays Cover Every Skeptical Argument?

No. They only cover a few of the most important points.

List of Essays:

- * A Warning about So-Called Rationalists
- * Why Secular Humanism Can't Be Scientific
- * Anecdotal Thinking: You'd Better Believe It (Sometimes)

A Warning about So-Called Rationalists

Mark F. Sharlow

Have you ever heard of rationalism and rationalists? If so, have you wondered what these words mean?

A rationalist is someone who believes that reason is the most reliable way to arrive at knowledge. Nowadays you sometimes hear about scientists or other people who call themselves rationalists. Most of these “rationalists” actually are not rationalists at all. They, or their followers, are using the word “rationalist” wrongly.

Most so-called “rationalists” today fall into one of these three categories (and many of them fall into all three categories at once):

- (1) Religious skeptics, who don't believe in God and don't like religion.
- (2) Skeptics about unusual happenings (such as alleged paranormal phenomena).
- (3) People who refuse to believe anything that isn't backed up by scientific evidence.

People who fall into these three categories usually are not rationalists at all! In fact, people who fall into the third category *never* are rationalists. I will now explain why this is the case. For convenience, I am dividing this explanation into three parts, to match the three categories of so-called “rationalists” in the list I just gave.

Point 1. Rationalism Isn't Disbelief in God or Religion

Some atheists and agnostics attribute their lack of religious belief to their “rationalism.” This is wrong. Rationalism, by itself, does *not* say there is no God. It is

possible to be a rationalist and believe in God. Some of the leading rationalist philosophers of the past, such as René Descartes and George Howison, believed in a supreme being of some sort. There is nothing logically inconsistent in believing that reason is the main source of knowledge, and simultaneously believing that reason supports the existence of God.

Today, most so-called rationalists claim there is no rational evidence for the existence of God. However, these “rationalists” usually have a rather fuzzy idea about what counts as rational evidence. Often, what they mean is that there is no *scientific* evidence for the existence of God. Actually, it is possible to have good *rational* evidence for a belief without having any scientific evidence at all! (If this idea is new to you, see Point 3 below.)

Since rationalism doesn’t imply disbelief in God, skeptics of category (1) (the atheists and agnostics) can’t pass off their skepticism as a part of rationalism.

Point 2. Rationalism Isn’t Disbelief in Controversial Phenomena

Many skeptics who disbelieve in psychic and paranormal phenomena seem to think that disbelief in these is part of “rationalism.” When you read about these skeptics, you sometimes get the feeling that “rationalism” is just another name for disbelief in ESP.

In this short essay, I am not going to take up the controversial question of the reality of the paranormal. I only wish to say this, to believers and skeptics alike: Disbelief in the paranormal is *not* the same as rationalism! Rationalism is compatible with complete disbelief in the paranormal, but rationalism also is consistent with some forms of belief in the paranormal. Here’s why:

It is logically consistent to believe that reason is the main source of knowledge, but also to admit other, subsidiary sources of knowledge, like personal experience. Rationalists normally take this position in real life. (No reasonable rationalist would say that when I look at my clock, I can’t possibly know that it’s about 8:30—even though the knowledge that it’s about 8:30 comes from experience and not from reason.) If a rationalist can admit personal experience as a source of knowledge, then it is possible, in

principle, for a rationalist to admit things like ESP experiences as sources of knowledge. A rationalist who does this will not automatically be guilty of logical inconsistency.

Please note that I am *not* telling anyone to believe in ESP. (Skeptics, reread the last sentence before you break out your typewriters! It would be silly at best, and dishonest at worst, to read this essay and then claim I am arguing for ESP.) For that matter, I am not telling anyone to disbelieve in ESP, either. I am only using this possible combination of beliefs—rationalism and ESP—as an example to show that rationalism, by itself, doesn't automatically force you to disbelieve in all paranormal phenomena.

Also, it's possible to disbelieve in the paranormal for reasons having nothing to do with rationalism. For example, some religious believers argue that telepathy doesn't exist, on the grounds that their religion (which they believe in for nonrational reasons) teaches that only God can read one's thoughts.

It is possible to believe in rationalism either with or without belief in the paranormal. Also, it is possible to believe in the paranormal either with or without belief in rationalism. None of these combinations of beliefs will force you automatically into logical inconsistency. Yet most "rationalist" skeptics seem to think their disbelief in the paranormal is a consequence of rationalism! Actually, their disbelief is a consequence of their faith in scientific methods. These "rationalists" believe that science has debunked the paranormal; they also believe that rationalism requires us to believe what science tells us. Therefore, they believe that rationalism rules out belief in the paranormal. But this conclusion rests on a bad argument. Even if you believe that science has debunked the paranormal, the argument still is bad—because rationalism does *not* automatically require us to believe what science tells us. (To find out why, read point 3 below.)

Since rationalism, by itself, does not rule out belief in the paranormal, the skeptics of category 2 can't pass off their skepticism as a necessary consequence of rationalism.

As I said earlier, this is *not* an argument for paranormal belief. It is only an argument about the relationship of rationalism to paranormal belief.

Point 3. Rationalism Isn't Belief in "Nothing but Science"

Rationalists believe that reason is the primary means for arriving at reliable knowledge. Skeptics in category (3) believe that science is the main, or the only, way of arriving at reliable knowledge. These two beliefs are not the same! There are two reasons why they are not the same:

Reason #1: Scientific methods are not entirely rational.

Science is not entirely a rational process. The act of getting scientific ideas can involve intuitive leaps; scientists make use of intuition in finding hypotheses to test. This much is well known. However, the nonrational character of science goes much deeper than this. Although science is a great way to gain knowledge, scientific confirmation lacks a rigorous logical basis!

Philosophers of science have long known that scientific confirmation involves the use of assumptions and methods that have no clear logical justification. For example, many people believe that scientific confirmation makes use of inductive reasoning. However, experts in logic have been unable to find a rigorous basis for inductive reasoning! Mathematical logicians have been studying the problem of justifying induction for a long time without finding any decisive reason to believe in induction. Rational, critical-minded philosophers (especially David Hume) began casting doubt on inductive reasoning hundreds of years ago. So far, no one has found a truly convincing way out of this doubt. These facts may be shocking to science-lovers who think of science as a logical and rational process. Apparently, scientific confirmation is not a form of logical inference, as many people once believed.

Some philosophers of science, such as Karl Popper, have argued that science does not need inductive reasoning, and that scientific confirmation is based on other kinds of reasoning. But despite the best efforts of logicians and other philosophers, no one has yet come up with a satisfactory purely logical foundation for scientific inference. The assumption that scientific methods yield reliable knowledge may be useful, worth

believing in, and even true. However, this assumption is not logically justifiable. Anyone who has confidence in science must somehow deal with the fact that scientific methods cannot be justified in a purely logical way.

Another place where nonrational thinking enters scientific confirmation is in the principle of parsimony—otherwise known as “Occam’s Razor.” This is the principle that an explanation which does not assume the existence of extra, unproven items is preferable (all else being equal) to an explanation that assumes such items. This principle has been exceedingly useful as a guide to thinking up new explanations for natural phenomena. However, it is not a principle that one can justify through logic alone. Many skeptics seem to feel that Occam’s Razor is the very essence of rationality. Actually, Occam’s Razor is not a principle that we can justify by purely logical means.

None of the criticisms that I have made here are criticisms of science! They are only criticisms of certain false views of science. Personally, I have faith in science. I have great confidence in science’s ability to solve humanity’s material problems. It makes me angry when people claim that science is worthless or bad (as certain ignorant humanities professors and political extremists have done). But despite my confidence in science, I do not think that one can justify scientific methods through purely rational means.

Probably the skeptics will call me an antiscientist, and even nastier names, for daring to say that science is not 100 percent rational. But I am not being antiscientific. All I am saying is that science, despite its usefulness, plausibility, and past successes (and despite my love of it!), cannot sensibly be regarded as a rational process. Science is not a branch office of reason. Science makes extensive use of reason, but it is not exclusively rational.

Thus, the skeptics who believe that science is the only trustworthy form of knowledge have no business calling themselves rationalists.

Reason #2: Reason is not restricted to science.

Today’s “rationalists” often seem to think that if science can’t confirm a belief, then that belief is irrational or otherwise bad. These skeptics ignore the simple fact that reason is much larger and wider than the special kinds of reasoning used in science. To prove

this, I need only point to the entire subject of philosophy. Philosophers have used rational arguments to support important conclusions that science can neither prove nor disprove. In fact, one can think of philosophy as the study of questions that reason can approach, but that scientific methods cannot settle. Readers familiar with philosophy may know of D.M. Armstrong's work on abstract objects, Eli Hirsch's work on identity, and Charles Hartshorne's work on religious ideas. One need only think about these three outstanding examples to realize that there is more to reason—and I mean the good, competent, careful, scholarly use of reason—than science ever can encompass.

Skeptics who hold a “nothing but science” view of human knowledge will likely respond to this argument by repeating old myths about how philosophy isn't as good as science. Some skeptics like to say that philosophers can't agree on anything, that philosophy is impractical, and so forth. But anyone familiar with the real literature of philosophy, and especially that of modern analytic philosophy, will realize that these old myths are false. It is true that there are many problems that philosophy has yet to solve. Philosophers do disagree over solutions to these problems. However, for most of these problems, philosophers have managed to narrow down the range of potential solutions and to gain much clarity and understanding about the ideas involved in the problems. If philosophy has progressed more slowly than science, perhaps this is because science deals with subject matter that is much easier to study. Science studies the physical world, which is observable, dissectable, and subject to experimentation. Philosophy studies a set of excruciatingly subtle fundamental ideas, on which experiments are impossible.

Since science is not the only rational form of knowledge, skeptics of category 3 (those who approve only scientifically confirmed beliefs) can't pass off their skepticism as a necessary consequence of rationalism. The traditional name for the belief that science is the only form of knowledge is “scientism.” Scientism is not the same as rationalism. Indeed, scientism has no rational justification.

We now see that skeptics of kinds 1, 2 and 3 cannot blame their skeptical ideas on rationalism. These skeptics are simply abusing the name of an old and honorable philosophical tradition. If you meet a rationalist today, watch out. It's possible that you

have met a disciple of reason. But nowadays, it's more likely that you've met someone who has stolen a once-respectable word, and who may (in a purely philosophical sense) be trying to pick your pocket!

Why Secular Humanism Can't Be Scientific

Mark F. Sharlow

Secular humanism is not a single set of beliefs. It comes in several flavors. Nevertheless, secular humanism does have some pervasive themes. Many secular humanists seem inclined to reject all beliefs that can't be demonstrated scientifically. This variety of secular humanism has a serious flaw: it is *logically inconsistent*. In this short essay I will lay bare the inconsistency for all to see.

Most secular humanists seem to agree that secular humanism is an outlook that embraces the value of humans while rejecting the existence of anything supernatural (and especially the existence of God). In practice, most secular humanists appear to reject anything that science can't demonstrate. Secular humanists often say that their beliefs are based on "critical thinking," "rationalism" or "skepticism." What this usually amounts to is a refusal to believe anything that isn't scientifically confirmed. (This refusal is not the same as rationalism or critical thinking, but some secular humanists talk as though it were the same.)

Secular humanists of this sort believe in the worth of humans, but they also refuse to believe anything that lacks scientific confirmation. The problem with this combination of beliefs is simple: the belief that humans have worth cannot be scientifically demonstrated! This belief is about values, not about facts. Therefore, one cannot confirm or disconfirm it through scientific methods. If you believe that humans have worth, or that human actions have worth, or that anything at all has worth, then you are embracing a belief that is outside the scope of science. Therefore, if you believe that humans have worth, and refuse to believe anything that isn't scientifically provable, you have fallen into logical inconsistency. To be a real humanist, you must admit at least one belief that is beyond science.

Secular humanists might try to rebut this argument by claiming that value judgments really are not beliefs at all, but are just reflections of personal decisions, or perhaps expressions of feeling. (The philosophers known as “ethical emotivists” might like this rebuttal.) But a little critical thinking reveals that this rebuttal is just a sleight of hand. If your value judgment that humans have worth is not really a belief, then you don’t really believe that humans have worth, so you are not a humanist—and that’s that. If, on the other hand, you hold the belief that humans have worth, then you believe something that isn’t within the power of science to prove or disprove. And if you don’t believe anything that isn’t scientifically testable, then you *cannot* consistently believe that humans have worth.

Secular humanists often claim that they believe in values and in the meaning of life, but they don’t believe that values and meaning have a supernatural source (such as God). This does not change what I just said about logical inconsistency. No matter where you think values come from, if you believe that something has value, then you believe something beyond the scope of science. The possibility that values and meaning have a purely natural origin does not free you from the hard choice. Either you reject the reality of values and meaning, or you bite the bullet and admit that you have a scientifically untestable belief.

A humanist can’t reject all beliefs that lie beyond the reach of science and still credibly claim to be a humanist. To reject scientifically untestable beliefs is to reject the possibility of believing that anything, including human life, has any real value or meaning. And that is the last thing an *honest* humanist would want to do.

Anecdotal Thinking: You'd Better Believe It (Sometimes)

Mark F. Sharlow

One of the pet peeves of many so-called skeptics is something called “anecdotal thinking.” In anecdotal thinking, one draws conclusions from personal experiences instead of from controlled scientific studies. Skeptics often claim that anecdotal thinking shouldn't be taken seriously.

Here is an example of anecdotal thinking. Suppose that Jack has an illness that does not normally cause nausea. Jack takes a particular medicine for his illness. A few minutes later, he feels queasy in the stomach. Jack persists in taking the medicine, and keeps feeling a nauseated. After a few doses, he stops taking the medicine. Shortly after that, he stops feeling nauseated. Jack draws the conclusion that the medicine made him feel nauseated.

If scientists carry out a clinical trial of the medicine, and find that no one becomes nauseated as Jack did, then Jack's experiences will be labeled “anecdotal.” Skeptics who believe strongly in scientific methods are likely to discount the connection between the medicine and the nausea, and to feel confident that Jack is only imagining the connection between the medicine and the feeling in the stomach.

The problem with the skeptics' confidence is simple: it overlooks the real possibility that the medicine caused Jack's nausea. The human body is an excruciatingly complex chemical system. Weird things go on in the body all the time—and usually we are not conscious of these weird things. What is more, every body is different from every other body; people are not made with a cookie cutter. Perhaps Jack's body chemistry was changing in some subtle way when he took the medicine. Perhaps this change made the medicine hit him the wrong way. If anyone in the clinical study had happened to be in a biochemical state similar enough to Jack's, then that person might have had the same side

effects. Then the nausea might have been recorded as a documented side effect of the medicine. But there did not happen to be such a person in the study, so the side effect was not recorded.

If this scenario of Jack and the drug really happened, then Jack's belief about the effects of the medicine might be more accurate than the skeptics' belief. Of course, there also would be a possibility that the skeptics were right, and Jack's nausea after taking the medicine was coincidental. But Jack could well be right instead.

Skeptics who read this story will argue that the coincidence explanation is "more probable" than Jack's belief that the medicine caused the nausea. But we must examine this skeptical argument critically. It may be true that coincidence is the more probable explanation, based on the statistical probabilities calculated from the scientific study. But when the study was made, the investigators did not have Jack's experience among their data. If Jack had been a subject in the study, maybe his odd reaction would have been documented as part of the study, instead of being dismissed as "anecdotal evidence." Maybe the study just didn't happen to include anyone with an individual body chemistry similar to Jack's.

The skeptics' argument does not rule out the possibility that Jack experienced a real side effect. At best, their argument only shows there is no scientifically confirmed reason (yet) for us to believe that Jack experienced a real side effect. It could be that Jack experienced a real side effect that scientists have not yet detected and confirmed. And even if scientists have not confirmed the effect, Jack still might have a rational reason to believe in it, as the following gruesome example shows. Suppose Jack took a certain medicine and started vomiting blood immediately. Suppose Jack took the medicine again a week later, and again two weeks later, and vomited blood immediately each time. Suppose there were no other known reason Jack might have vomited blood (no severe stomach virus going around, no ulcers, and the like). I can't give anyone medical advice, but if I were Jack, I would be mighty suspicious of that medicine—even if there were no scientific studies supporting my suspicion! In this fictional example, reliance on "anecdotal thinking" might be quite reasonable.

This example suggests that is possible, under some circumstances, for a person to

have a reason to believe something (at least in a tentative way) even if scientists do not have such a reason. “No scientifically confirmed reason to believe X” is not the same as “no reason for Jack to believe X.”

The examples of anecdotal thinking that attract the most attention from skeptics are examples involving paranormal belief. I’m not going to argue for or against paranormal belief here; I just want to make a single point about anecdotal thinking. Occasionally, someone reports a strikingly odd sequence of events that seems too weird to be a coincidence. For example, someone dreams about being in a building they have never seen before. The next day they happen to go into a new building for the first time; the interior of the building matches the dream in all details, even down to the details of what’s in the room. Sometimes these odd sequences of events get labeled as “paranormal phenomena.” (I won’t try to give examples of these alleged phenomena here; there are plenty of other places to read stories about them.) According to standard skeptical doctrine, all happenings of this kind are simply coincidences. The skeptical argument runs, more or less, like this: “There are many people in the world. People are undergoing all sorts of different events and experiences all the time. Therefore, it’s likely that some extremely odd things will sometimes happen to people just by coincidence. Therefore, we can safely dismiss all odd events as coincidences.”

Make no mistake about it—I’m not going to argue that odd events are more than coincidences. I just want to point out that skeptical explanations in terms of “coincidence” sometimes fail to mesh with rational thinking and good sense. The following story shows what I mean by this.

John takes a trip to visit his relatives. First he visits his uncle Joe. While John is approaching Uncle Joe’s house, two birds land in John’s hair. Then John visits his aunt Mabel in another town. While John is in that town, a bird (different from the first two birds) lands in John’s hair. Then John visits his cousin George, who lives far from the first two relatives. A bird lands in John’s hair. Finally, John visits his cousin Melbert out on the farm. Three birds land in John’s hair, one at a time.

In all the places that John visits, there are no unusual crowds of birds. In each case, the birds land only on John, and not on his relatives or on any passersby near John.

If you were John, would you think this is all just coincidental? Or would you start to suspect there is something about your hair (or in your hair) that's attracting birds? Which thought would be more reasonable? Of course, it's logically possible that it's all a coincidence. There's nothing truly irrational about assuming that it's all coincidental. But wouldn't you begin losing confidence in that explanation after the fourth or fifth bird?

Personally, if this happened to me, I'd wash my hair. To undergo this series of events, and still not have doubts about the contents of one's hair, seems to me to be a breach of critical thinking. I think John has justification for thinking this set of experiences might *not* be coincidental—and, in fact, that coincidence is not the most reasonable explanation of the events. John can't rule out the possibility that the events are coincidental. However, the hypothesis that they are not merely coincidental is plausible and perhaps even probable. It becomes more plausible each time more birds land on John's head.

To finish the story: John washes his hair, and some seeds come out. He doesn't know how the seeds got there, but he speculates that maybe they blew in on the wind during a storm he encountered on the road. So much for the mystery.

What does all this have to do with the paranormal? There's nothing paranormal about having seeds in your hair. The point of the story is that it was reasonable for John to believe, tentatively, that something about his hair was attracting birds. This tentative belief was reasonable because of John's own experiences. John did not have to have scientists in white coats tell him, "Yes, John, there really is a causal link between seeds in the hair and repeated bird landings for some people. We have studies that prove it. It might not be a coincidence." John already knows that it might not be a coincidence. He knows that the belief that it is not a coincidence is plausible. He knows this precisely because of his personal experiences—or, as the skeptics call them, "anecdotal evidence."

This last remark brings us to the core of the notion of "anecdotal thinking." Ultimately, what skeptics call "anecdotal thinking" is just belief based on personal experience. If I have a series of experiences and draw the conclusion (tentatively) that they are not coincidental, then I will be found guilty of "anecdotal thinking." We have

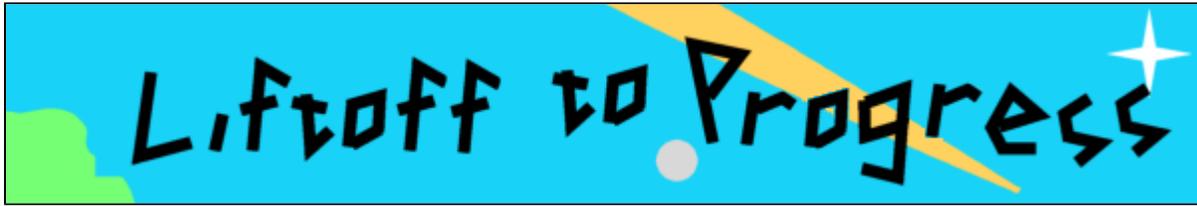
seen that this thinking may sometimes be rational, and can even be extremely useful at times (recall the example of the vomit-inducing medicine).

This is not to say that we should trust anecdotal thinking uncritically. (Uncritical thinking of any kind can be dangerous.) I am claiming only that anecdotal thinking *sometimes* is rational. But there is a deeper difficulty with the blanket condemnation of anecdotal thinking. The difficulty comes from the fact that all scientific studies make use of personal experience. In the end, all scientific knowledge rests on the personal experiences of scientific observers. When scientists read meters, question test subjects, and so forth, those scientists are having personal experiences. Scientific data—the data that scientists collect—are just the records of personal experiences. If the same personal experiences occurred outside the context of a scientific study and without careful preparation and recording, they would be regarded as anecdotal. Even the statistical analysis that scientists do with their data involves an element of personal judgment. Scientists strive to make this analysis impersonal and objective—but in the end, someone has to examine the statistical analysis and judge that it is correct. That involves a human being’s good judgment, influenced by personal background, reflection, and experience, as much as it involves mathematical theorems.

Human judgment based on personal experience—that is what John used when he decided he needed to wash his hair. That is what Jack relied on when he began to wonder about the wonder drug. And that is all that scientists have to go on when they collect their data. All scientific studies have deep roots in a kind of knowledge which, if found in another context, would be called “anecdotal.” And that should give the skeptics—who often hold idealized views of science—a moment of pause.

Part 6

Liftoff to Progress

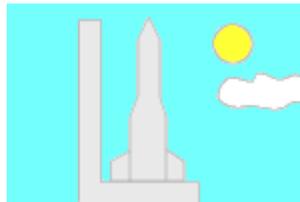


Tomorrow Is Within Reach!

Once upon a time, everything was possible. Even the Moon was within reach — and the stars were next.

Those days of hope and progress are not gone.

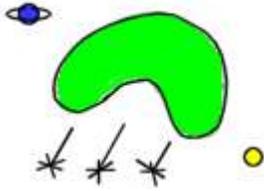
We still can have the glorious future that we once foresaw — if we are willing to make it happen!



Progress! The word stirs up mental pictures of a better tomorrow — of a future world in which human ingenuity, through technological innovation and social betterment, has overcome the limits of the human condition.

The twentieth century was a century of progress. During those hundred years, humanity progressed from a world without airplanes, computers, or modern medicine to a new era in which these technological miracles were commonplace. These technical achievements were not the only accomplishments of that fateful century. There also were vast changes in social thought, with great steps forward toward human equality and freedom — the struggle for racial equality, the recognition of women's rights, and the defeat of the new, unprecedented menaces of Nazism and Communism.

The story of the twentieth century showed, beyond a doubt, that real progress is possible. We knew this from the previous history of the world — but the achievements of the twentieth century confirmed it once again.



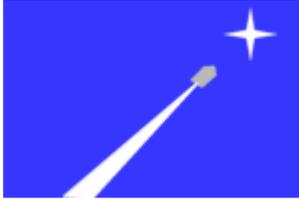
In the 1950s, much of the world was filled with a spirit of optimism. This attitude was neither excessive nor unreasonable. The facts of progress in the first half of the twentieth century justified this optimism. So did the steady march of progress throughout the previous history of the world.

During the 1960s, faith in progress began to fade. Historians and social scientists have debated the causes of this decline, but one fact is clear: **the loss of the spirit of optimism was entirely unnecessary.**

It is true that some terrible things happened during the sixties. That decade was the time of the Vietnam War, of the peak of the Cold War, and of the growth of the drug culture. But positive changes also happened during the sixties. There were medical breakthroughs and civil rights advances. In 1969 came the first human landing on the Moon. Progress did not stop! The foes of progress may have slowed down progress, but they could not stop it. The spirit of progress was alive and well during the sixties, even though that spirit was partly hidden behind the gloomy pronouncements of the pessimists.

Near the end of the twentieth century, progress had gone far, but much work remained to be done. Humanity's technological conquest of illness, hunger, and other natural and artificial threats was far from complete. In the social and political realm, many serious injustices and unnecessary limits on freedom still existed. Menaces to the environment posed new challenges, as did new threats of war. Yet hope always was in sight, because it was obvious that progress could go much farther. We knew that progress was possible, and that progress was good.

Today we are at a point of decision. Arrayed on one side are the antiprogress forces. There are the postmodernists, who ignore the facts and preach that progress is an illusion. There are the left-wing extremists, who use the discrimination that still existed in the fifties to argue that the good aspects of the fifties were not real. There are the right-wing extremists of all lands, who long for an imagined era of religious oppression and who want to revive only the worst parts of the past. Finally, there are the doomsayers, who believe that human resolve and ingenuity cannot overcome today's real threats and challenges. All of these factions oppose or doubt progress. On the other side are the friends of progress, who know that the forward movement of the world has not stopped, and that the best of the past is worth preserving as the planet Earth moves into its potentially brilliant future.



The optimistic age of the fifties was not the high noon of progress, but only its morning. The friends of progress, united in a vision of the future, know that the optimism of the mid-twentieth century was not an idle dream. The wonders yet to come are even greater than those we once imagined.

We must go forward! Our future demands it. We who look toward tomorrow, and who have the courage to dream cosmic dreams, will settle for nothing less.

- Mark F. Sharlow