

Australian

Rationalist

Journal of the Rationalist Society of Australia

TALKING PAST EACH OTHER

The non-arguments between religion and science

Malcolm Fraser on a Declaration of Human Responsibilities

Power stalemates in Syria

How cyber war can destroy worlds

Does Australia have a global warming get out?

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Contents

Rationalism and economics

A former editor examines the morality of the dismal science 5
by Kenneth Davidson

Going beyond the rational

A politician's view of how to influence 6
by Lyn Allison

Being fair to your opponents

The advantages of being generous about others' views 7
by Peter Ellerton

Letters

America's tyranny, science matters, the hubris of legislators, funding suggestions 8

From the president

Thoughts on political upheaval 9
by Meredith Doig

News

Of mice, war, science failure and free will 10

Getting responsibilities right

The need for a declaration of human responsibilities 11-12
by Malcolm Fraser

Middle Eastern chess

The intractable problems emerging in Syria 13-14
by Adam Tarock

Poem

he's not much but he's all he thinks about 15
by Allan Browne

Cover story – When giants shadow box

The curious non-battles between religion and science. Jonathan Meddings on non-competing magisterium 16-20

Perspectives – What direction should the Australian Rationalists take?

Michael Ellis and Ian Robinson discuss the options 21-23

Cyber dangers

An interview with cyber security expert Scott Borg 24-25

The cross currents of free speech-What is the right balance to be struck with what we say?

by Rosemary Scea 26-28

A South American mystery

A local perspective on the new pontiff 29
by Hector D Allesandro

Contents cont.

Evolution and politics - Can evolution be used to justify anything? <i>by Cori Wong</i>	30-32
Love and rationality - The three kinds of love examined <i>by Massimo Pigliucci</i>	33
Australia's global warming excuse - Does being Down Under make us lucky? <i>by Stanley S Schaezel</i>	34
9/11 and science - Has scientific integrity collapsed along with the Twin Towers?	35-36
The wisdom of polls - How crowd thinking seems to outdo the insights of individuals <i>by Tim van Gelder</i>	37-38
Book reviews Kevin Childs on Colleen Ryan's Fairfax book, Ken Wright on "Beloved Father, Beloved Son", Rod Bower on "Atheism for Dummies" and Warren Bonett on "Animal Wise"	39-43
From the archive A plea for rationality during the Second World War <i>by C.E.M. Joad</i>	44-47

The Rationalist Society of Australia has published a journal almost continuously since the 1920s, interrupted only by war, internecine strife and lack of funds.

The ideas and opinions published in these pages do not necessarily represent the views of the RSA, its Committee or the Editor. Rather, we aim to publish material that furthers the RSA's mission to inform, to educate and generally to promote thoughtful and dispassionate analysis of issues of public contention.

We publish regular articles on Philosophy, Ethics & Religion, Science & Technology, and Law & Politics. We will also consider humour, poetry, short fiction and cartoons; excerpts from forthcoming or just released books; and previously published material if it has appeared recently in non-competing, low circulation periodicals.

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Economics – A moral science

The philosophical challenges of the dismal science.

by Kenneth Davidson

Consciously or not, most people who are required to make judgements about the worth of economic alternatives apply their values to deciding their preferences. Markets may be the most efficacious mechanism for meeting individual ‘wants’ but what ultimately provides the direction for the economy is the value system in which the economy is embedded.

Do we give precedence to the individual? Or do we take the view there is such a thing as community, which is entitled to impose its values on the operations of markets in order to ensure their outcomes are according to some community standard?

These are moral issues that cannot be avoided, least of all by economists. The way a physicist might answer these questions may determine how he or she votes. But for the economist, the answers will largely determine the sort of economic models he/she will develop in his/her head to explain the economic world.

According to Keynes, economics is “a moral science...it deals with introspection and values...it deals with motives, expectations, psychological uncertainties. One has to be constantly on guard against treating the material as constant or homogeneous”. There is no ‘scientific’ route to choosing the best ‘model’ of how the economy works. According to Keynes “good economists are scarce because the gift for using ‘vigilant observation’ to choose models ... appears to be a very rare one”.

Worse, the model that gains ascendancy isn’t necessarily the one that provides the best explanation of how the economy works but the one that supports a particular social or economic agenda. Economists might develop the economic models but the models that become influential in policy making are those with the most appeal to the main actors in the economy (politicians, capitalists, workers).

Marx pointed out that unless an economic model serves the dominant class interest it is unlikely to gain their support, while a model that has been discredited by history is unlikely to be abandoned by the dominant class interest as long as it can be used to legitimate those interests.

In the modern era when religious influence is declining in the face of the expansion of the authority of scientific ideas, economics has displaced religion as a major legitimating factor for those wishing to achieve power in a democracy. In the age of feudalism and the divine right of kings it was the bishops who were expected to validate the power of the king. In an age of unbelief, economists and economic ideas or models have displaced theologians and their religious ideas as the validating tool of those contending for power, wealth or justice.

Martin Luther wasn’t the first medieval priest who came to the conclusion that the Catholic Church was corrupt, or that God could reveal him or herself directly to adherents without the intermediation of the Catholic Church. But he was the first priest to get the powerful backing of German princes capable of challenging the Vatican. Their political aim was legitimated by Luther’s theology, sparking off the Reformation.

As a moral science, economics has more in common with history (and theology) than the natural sciences, which deduce “natural laws” that can be proved or disproved by repeating the experiments. The laws do not change over time.

Economic studies about the causes of economic growth are based on observations from the past about how changes in government spending affected national output, employment and inflation. These observations may provide a good indication of how government spending may affect employment in the future, but causality can be affected by changes in human behaviour. Economic relationships are not immutable and history is constantly being re-interpreted in the light of the present.

Globally, there is growing concern that the major economies are heading towards a “double dip” recession rather than full recovery from the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. Economists are split between the current ‘austerians’ and the Keynesians. The austerians argue that the recession can be largely avoided by cutting government spending, taxation and the budget deficit, resulting in a boost to consumer and business confidence, higher growth and reduced unemployment. It is no accident this model has been adopted by neoliberals who want to see the welfare state and its regulatory supports wound back.

The Keynesian diagnosis is that private spending is insufficient to support a strong economic recovery necessary to boost growth and reduce unemployment; that governments should increase spending to fill the gap left by deficient private spending and that this spending, by boosting profits and wages, will generate tax revenue and reduce welfare payments. It is considered the only way to sustainably reduce the budget deficit. The Keynesian approach is consistent with social democracy and an expansion, rather than a contraction, of the welfare state.

Political support for the austerians is provided by what Marxists would still call the dominant class interest. They are comfortable with a redistribution of income from wages to profits and with wages being held down by high unemployment. But the economic model that supports the austrian agenda is no longer supported by research from the conservative International Monetary Fund.

Is the rational enough?

Not everything about human beings is logical.

by Lyn Allison

I don't suggest that the Rationalist Society ought to have the answers to all the problems of the world, but adherence to the principle that all significant beliefs and actions should be based on reason and evidence, is arguably inadequate.

The science tells me I would be healthier and longer lived (which I want to be) if I ate a bit less and exercised more (which I want to do but don't). Smokers, drug users, gamblers and people who drive too fast know the risks, but they do it anyway

Reason and evidence suggest that giving citizens the right to bear arms results in more guns in society and an increased risk of being killed by one. There are 88.8 firearms for every 100 Americans and the great majority of Americans apparently would sooner live with the greatly increased risk of death than lose this right.

More seriously, the citizens of the world are speeding headlong into disastrous climate change, locked into growth economies – growth in population, wealth, consumption and the generation of greenhouse gases. Science has clearly articulated the problem and the solution lies mostly in giving up fossil fuels in favour of wind and sun power, something we have known for at least two decades. What science doesn't tell us is what will prevent us from turning this particular ship around.

An old-fashioned campaigner, I preach at every opportunity the need to clearly identify the problem, to have to hand well-considered solutions, and to understand and deal with the barriers to change.

These barriers have not a lot to do with science and reason. Rather, I've decided, it comes down to a few factors. Firstly, human minds and the forces that shape them are altogether too diverse. Sure, our superior brains have used multiple branches of science to come up with solutions to most human survival problems but they have also freed us up to be individuals, to experience the world in very diverse ways and to shape our lives and our environment to suit us. We indulge in self-interest. We like to be different, to cultivate our own opinions, to be creative. Expecting book clubbers, skydivers, go cart enthusiasts and golfers to live the same lifestyle, let alone agree pay a little extra to have their power use sourced from renewable energy, is fanciful.

The second important factor in not doing what's reasonable in the face of disaster is the power of organisational success and vested interests. The first countries to adopt well-reasoned corporate laws and practices, encouraging good risk management,

profit growth and accountability to shareholders became wealthy. Many exhausted their own natural resources and moved to global trade, often at the expense of less well organised countries. Now, the top four global corporate giants earn over \$US400 billion a year, all but one from oil and gas. This is more than the GDP of 87% of the world's sovereign countries (169). Little wonder there is great resistance about shifting to renewables.

Over time, science, technology and reason have been exploited for good and evil and, often, for profit. Pharmaceutical companies produce life saving drugs for which they rely heavily on the work of scientists but they are mostly huge global businesses building growth and profits like any other. The medical research spending is heavily skewed towards drugs and away from medical procedures and practices because of the profit motive. This explains to some extent the unscientific loss of confidence that a small group of parents have in immunising their babies.

Cars, buildings and appliances could easily be made more energy efficient and longer lasting, but close ties between energy companies and the auto industry, and built in obsolescence designed to keep consumption and turnover growing, means profits are often put before the greater good. This is entirely consistent with the accepted rules of business that means the interests of the corporation must be paramount in the decisions of its board. Only through corporate law reform or the generosity of company owners, can it be otherwise.

Actually, a lot of what we humans do has little to do with science and reason. Having cleverly subsumed nature to feed, shelter and clothe ourselves, well beyond what's necessary for survival, plenty of time and energy can be put to cultural pursuits. Even in dirt poor societies, time and creativity exercised on cooking goes well beyond the purpose of food for nutrition. Taste is one, but we have many senses to satisfy. Art, literature, architecture, fashion, dance and music are valued in every known civilisation. Perhaps culture keeps us happy and is now so entrenched in our economies that it has some rationale. But engaging in the arts is by no means universal and art lovers cannot all be said to be non-rational or non-scientific.

When pushing our campaigns about elevating reason and evidence as prerequisites for determining significant beliefs and actions, we need to grapple with the many barriers and complexities created by us humans. But I think we're up for it.

Charity and understanding

The principles of fairness in rational discourse.

by Peter Ellerton

One of the main tenets of effective argumentation is the principle of charity, which states that we should present the views of our opponents in the most rational, cohesive and charitable light possible. It should be done in such a manner, as they themselves would wish that they had said it so well. There are several extremely good reasons for doing this.

The first is to dissolve any urge to project excessive emotional content onto the issue, particularly when we are simply succumbing to petulance. This makes the issue one of argumentation rather than just a statement of contempt.

The second reason is that you make yourself seem reasonable to both your opponent and to any prospective audience. Not only that, but you project a generosity of spirit and a respect for the other view that can only be advantageous.

Finally, and most importantly, if you are able to argue well against a position presented in its best possible form, then any arguments against your case will have less traction, and your potential to persuade others to your position will be maximised.

Unfortunately, this is directly opposed to how argumentation is generally conducted in the public sphere (I leave the reader to note examples of this through a casual inspection of the media on any given day).

Let's look at an example using the case against gay marriage. No single group or ideological basis represents the opposition to gay marriage, but for the purposes of this exercise I will focus on those that (claim to) oppose it from a non-religious stance.

What arguments might be made from this perspective? In its most charitable interpretation, those who hold such views value the role of family in both the upbringing of the individual and as a societal unit that lends stability and security to the community. Families are the wellsprings of values in a way difficult for schools to achieve, and can act as a buffer against emotional and psychological turbulence. They can give meaning and purpose in life and are a source of unconditional love and support. They also act as a model for children, in that they can fashion their own relationships in such a way as to mirror the success of previous generations, and so perpetuate this success through to a new generation.

Families are best able to achieve all the above when they are based on a loving relationship focused on the well being of children. The best type of family is that which provides for the children a male and female role model, through the father and mother, as

these roles can show children different strengths and weaknesses and can therefore give children the best possible support at all times. This model is tried and tested, having survived for many generations.

Allowing people of the same gender to marry diminishes how families are valued. It is not that such people should not be permitted to have a relationship, but rather that marriage should be preserved as the special bond between a man and a woman so that the prominence of that role in society is upheld and that we, as a society, make clear to children that we value what it can give. This is aspirational for us both individually and collectively.

The above description is one attempt to present, as charitably (and briefly) as possible, a position in which gay marriage should not be permitted. But this position has tensions that make the case weak.

The major tension is that between the loving inclusivity of the family, as portrayed above, and the excluding action of denying same sex couples the recognition that the love they have for each other is of the same character and potency as found in any heterosexual relationship. Worse, children of such families are logically exempt from all supposed benefits as what is innate to them is incompatible with the values and purpose of the family. To speak of nurturing, support and unconditional love on the one hand, and then of rejection and exclusion on the other is untenable.

Another tension is the assumption that all the supposed rewards of family can only emerge from a relationship between a male and female. Hence, in this view, to oppose heterosexual-only marriage is to oppose or deny the value of the family. In a similar way, the recognition of gay marriage would be seen as a public rejection of this value. This is the error inherent in the phrase 'family values', so often associated with those who oppose gay marriage.

One of the important imperatives of the principle of charity is that you treat your audience as rational. This means they are willing and able to follow your arguments, and are amenable to change as a result. By presenting the most favorable face to a position and then demonstrating its weaknesses, your audience is limited in arguing the alternative position. More than this, the onus of proof can shift to them to show how they would oppose this, rather than it being on you to justify your position further.

Give it a go in your next encounter.

The new totalitarianism

Dear Editor,

The article in the Sydney Morning Herald, July 17, "Snowden applies for asylum in Russia" was food for thought. During my whole lifetime it has always been Soviet Russia that persecuted those who told the truth while America gave them asylum and tried to protect them. Today, however, it is Washington that spies on its people, persecutes those who speak the truth, and seemingly, it is Russia that protects them. The criminals are in Washington now, suppressing truth and redefining it as treason.

The new USA

Rex Williams, Ainslie ACT

Science matters

Dear Editor,

I found your June journal in a news agency when I was looking for something to read. Well I adored every single article, it was like it was written just for me, and I am not just saying this to be polite. I am a 34 year old father of four, I have a science degree and I am currently studying to be a teacher. I have always been one to think rationally, and so it is no wonder the content in the journal held my interest so well.

I will be looking forward to your next journal. Keep up the good work.

Brett Davis

The hubris of our law makers

Dear Editor,

The article on Sri Lanka by Bruce Haigh was extremely depressing reading. It seems we continue to make the same mistakes over and over again. Now our two major parties are looking at relocating

asylum seekers in Papua New Guinea or proposing putting the military in charge of repelling them, which senior military figures are rightly saying undermines some of our basic separation between civilian and defence functions.

It seems to me that the problem is that asylum seekers are, until their legal status is determined, outside our law. They may be legitimate refugees, they may not. So when setting laws or policies that are designed to deter them, we are extending beyond what is the normal range of national law. Meanwhile, we are pretty much prepared to ignore international laws or protocols.

That is pretty dangerous territory. Legislation has inevitable limitations. It cannot prevent people wanting to commit crimes. It cannot stop asylum seekers wanting to find a different place to live, it can only be used to determine later whether or not they have broken Australian laws.

As our politicians descend into ever lower depths in their desperate attempts to outdo each other in cruelty towards asylum seekers – a race that must reflect the opinions of the electorate otherwise they would not be expending so much political capital on it, or making such fools of themselves – one is left wondering what they think is the reach of the legislation they enact?

One is also left wondering what they think are the limits of their efforts to create an effective deterrence? Do they think that mining our coast is a step too far, for instance? Or using our submarines to attack the boats? It would certainly be a deterrence. Assuming that they think this too extreme, why exactly? What should be the ethical principles that define the actions of our law makers? It is clear that there has been an agreement that the ends justify the means. So is there any moral principle left that we feel we should protect?

Robert Stevens

Management speak and science

Dear Editor,

The article by Keith Ashman about scientific research funding was as restrained as it was hard hitting. Success in science seems to have less and less to do with the practice of science and more and more to do with the practice of manipulating bureaucratic processes. The result is truly ridiculous, like this Australian Council research grant announcement:

"This Research Hub aims to transform the Australian food industry by demonstrating how new knowledge on food production and consumption generated through novel sensing technologies and advanced modelling techniques can be implemented in smart applications to power competitiveness, sustainability and innovation in food value chains."

This is the kind of management speak that is killing our science. Of course it is important to make spending on science accountable. But there is a price to be paid for imposing such bureaucratic nonsense. That price is the loss of trust in scientists. It is sending a signal: "We don't trust you with the money, so we will make sure you have to justify every cent, even when we won't really be able to tell whether it is well spent or not." In fact it is never possible to know whether it is money well spent because, by definition, you do not know what will be the scientific outcome in advance. If you did know that, there would be no need for the research. Plus the full impact of research may not be known for years, or even decades.

So here's a novel suggestion. How about making academic bureaucrats accountable for their ability to trust the scientists looking for funds? We could have a "trust metric", measured on an annual basis. It might counter some of the absurdity, or at least counter one absurdity with another.

John Keevers

From the President

And so we present the next edition of our new format Australian Rationalist. We've had nothing but positive reaction to the relaunch of our flagship journal and I want to place on record our thanks to the AR's new Editor, David James.

By the time this edition is distributed, Australia will have a new Federal Government. One way or the other, the next few years are likely to bring upheaval. According to a Nielsen survey conducted in 2009, 84 per cent of Australians agree that 'religion and politics should be separate'. And yet both sides of politics continue to genuflect to the power of the church (and the temple and the mosque).

Earlier this year, spurred on by Sean Faircloth urging us to get active, the RSA collaborated with a range of other freethought groups (atheists, humanists, skeptics, secularists) to develop a "10 Point Plan for Reclaiming a Secular Australia" – see sidebar.

Some in the freethought movement think all would be well if only Australia had the same strict legal separation between church and state that America has. Our two constitutions have almost exactly the same clause regarding the role of religion and the State. The US Supreme Court has interpreted this clause strictly, with the result that government funded schools and hospitals are prevented by law from doing anything that privileges or promotes religion. Our High Court on the other hand has interpreted the same (or largely similar) clause much more narrowly, leaving the way open for our governments to fund a whole separate system of education (the Catholic system) and provide up to 85 per cent of the funding required for new private religious schools.

But I dare say most Australians would not wish to swap our system for the American one. At least here we can tolerate a Prime Minister who 'comes out' as atheist. In the US, atheists are rated the least desirable group for a potential son or daughter-in-law and only 45 per cent of voters say they would vote for an atheist.

Still, the sort of aggressive evangelism that seems common in the US is exporting its wares and in Australia we need to be vigilant. There are schools in Australia, charging small fees and getting most of their funding from governments, that teach creationism in science classrooms. There are balance-of-power politicians who have said they would trade their support for a government policy in return for institutionalising personhood status for a foetus, potentially undermining legal access to abortion.

Australia has a mixed economy (public and private) and a mixed society (pluralist and democratic), but only if we fight to keep it that way.

Meredith Doig

- 1 **RSA and its allies support a secular, pluralistic and democratic Australia.**
Government policies should be based on evidence, reason and compassion, and protect the human rights of all Australians.
Everyone should be free to choose and hold their own religious or non-religious worldviews, provided they do not impose such views on others, and provided practices associated with such worldviews do no harm.
- 2 **There must be clear separation between religion and the State.**
All Australian constitutions should be reformed to ensure clear separation between religion and the State, and all references to God removed.
Parliamentary prayers and religious references in statutory oaths should be removed.
No laws made by parliaments nor decisions of executive government should privilege or promote religion.
- 3 **There must be 'one law for all', with no recognition of parallel legal systems.**
Religious institutions should not be permitted to exempt themselves from the law of the land. Canon law must not take precedence over Australian law.
Sharia courts should not be officially recognised.
There should be mandatory reporting by religious functionaries of actual or suspected child abuse.
- 4 **Religious organisations must be subject to the same laws as other organisations.**
The 'advancement of religion' should be removed from the statutory definition of charity, and religious organisations should not enjoy automatic tax exempt status.
Religious organisations should be subject to anti-discrimination laws in employment and service provision.
Government funding to religious organisations such as schools and hospitals should be subject to rigorous accountability to ensure compliance with anti-discrimination laws and the absence of proselytising.
- 5 **Children must not suffer because of the religious views of their parents.**
Decisions about children's healthcare should be based on evidence-based medicine, not the religious worldviews of their parents.
No organisation, whether religious or not, should be allowed to restrict children's education or to isolate them within closed communities.
- 6 **Education must be strictly secular, not promoting any particular religion.**
National and state curricula should include the study of a range of religious and non-religious worldviews, taught by professionally trained teachers.
Government resources should not be used to support particular religious views, programs of religious instruction, or the employment of religious functionaries in educational settings.
- 7 **There must be no discrimination on the basis of a person's sex, sexuality or gender identity.**
Australian governments should not impose a religious bias on the definition of marriage, or on the right to adopt.
- 8 **There must be freedom of reproductive choice, with no religious interference.**
Termination of pregnancy should be decriminalised in all States and Territories.
Governments should make access to evidence-based sexual and reproductive health information and healthcare services universally available.
Age-appropriate sex and relationships education should be included in national and state curricula.
- 9 **Healthcare must be available to all regardless of the religious views of the provider.**
Public hospitals must not be allowed to restrict treatment on the basis of religious worldviews.
Private hospitals must not refuse emergency treatment on the basis of religious worldviews.
- 10 **When facing the end of life, everyone must be guaranteed control over their own bodies, free from religious interference.**
'Advance directives' should be given legal force.
Physician-assisted suicide, with appropriate safeguards, should be decriminalised.
Governments should fund non-religious palliative care services.

Mice remember badly

False memories are a major problem with witness statements in courts of law. The introduction of DNA testing has resulted in many convictions being overturned when the defendants had been convicted on the basis of eye witness testimony. This phenomena of “false memory” has now been given some scientific legitimacy. Scientists have successfully implanted a false memory in the brains of mice. They hope it sheds light on the phenomenon of people “remembering” events or experiences that have never happened. Susumu Tonagawa, a neuroscientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and his team encoded memories in the brains of mice by manipulating individual neurons.

War not inevitable

Humans may have a tendency to violence, but they are not coded to wage wars, according to researchers Douglas Fry and Patrik Soderberg of Abo Akademi University, in Finland. Writing in “Science”, they found, based on their review of what is known about modern hunter-gatherers, that people are not peaceful, but they are also far from warlike. Most violent deaths occurred at the hands of fellow tribesmen, not outsiders. This suggests that murders are common, but that they were not the aggressive warriors often depicted in history or anthropology.

Fry and Soderberg came to this conclusion by scrutinising 21 hunter – gatherer societies from all over the world. They looked at ethnographic studies of these groups, published over the last century.

Change your genes

The emerging field of epi-genetics, a branch of biology that focuses not on the genes themselves but rather on how particular genes behave in specific cells, is leading to some surprising conclusions. A paper published in the “Public Library of Science”, reported the effects of six months of moderate exercise on 23 male couch-potatoes who were in their 30s and 40s. The researchers observed changes in the men’s adipose tissue, the place where fat is stored. The way fat cells in this tissue expressed their genes had altered.

One conclusion is that the genes active in a cell could be changed by making chemical alterations (known as epigenetic markers) to their DNA. Such alterations let the body fine-tune its response to the environment.

It was there a minute ago...

The essence of scientific discovery is that an experiment be reproducible. But in a commentary in “Nature”, researchers from the biotechnology company Amgen reported that the findings in 90 per cent of landmark cancer papers from academic laboratories could not be reproduced, even with the help of the original study authors.

Some of this lack of reproducibility is thought to be due to incompetent or sloppy research, and some due to research misconduct, such as deliberate misrepresentation, fabrication or falsification of data.

David Vaux, medical researcher at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute comments that a review from October 2012 in Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS) showed most of the rapidly growing number of retractions of papers were due to research misconduct, rather than inadvertent mistakes.

“In the US, the Office for Research Integrity (ORI) handles more than 200 allegations of research misconduct each year,” writes Vaux. “It ensures that every allegation of misconduct in National Institutes of Health-funded grants is investigated, but rather than carrying out the investigations itself, it provides advice to institutions and checks to see they do the investigations properly.”

Free to think about free will

Peter Tse, an American neuroscientist at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire is claiming to have solved the problem of free will. In an article published in “New Scientist” Tse argues that the secret is in how neurons rewire each other. But not everyone is convinced. Neil Levy Honorary (Principal Fellow) at the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies and Neuro-ethicist at The Florey Institute of Neuroscience and Mental Health, writing in “The Conversation”, contends that the problem of free will is a conceptual problem, not a scientific one.

“(Tse’s) research suggests that how we respond to information is dynamic: the same input may cause us to respond in different ways at different times, depending on how our circuits have come to rewire themselves in the interim,” writes Levy. “If it is enough to be an intelligent information processor to be free, then the details don’t matter much: so long as our brain implements information processing somehow or other, it doesn’t matter how it does it. We already know, by observing our own behaviour, that we are sophisticated information processors. It is philosophical argument (and not neuroscience) that will answer the question whether that’s enough for free will. Neuroscience can tell us about when and how brains don’t work as they should, or about local failures of free will. It can’t answer the philosophical question itself.”

The interplay of rights and responsibilities

On the need for new international standards.

by Malcolm Fraser

In 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was endorsed by the United Nations. In a globalised, inter-related world, it is evident that we also need a Universal Declaration of Responsibilities. Those working toward this purpose believe that a world in which everyone demands rights, but do not accept responsibilities, will be an unequal and even dangerous and discordant world. Sadly, the Declaration of Human Rights is too often used as a political tool to advance national self-interest. The demand for rights alone will not achieve the purpose of the original authors.

Most accept that rights come with responsibilities, that some reciprocity between the individual and the state is essential. Yet the two are not equal. Whereas rights are typically thought to be self evident, that which people should inevitably possess, responsibilities are more problematic. Responsibility to whom, for instance? Or to what? Do we have a responsibility to the environment, for instance?

Rights imply responsibilities for their effective implementation but the converse is not true: there are responsibilities that do not follow from rights. For example, the freedom of the press, or of a journalist, is guaranteed in a modern constitutional state. There is the right to report freely. The state must support this right and, if necessary, act to enforce it. The state and the citizen have the responsibility to respect that right but the right to report freely does not impinge on the responsibility of the journalist, or of the media. There are ethical responsibilities, grounded in the dignity of the human person and that person's conscience, which do not flow from specific rights.

So while responsibilities and rights are very much intertwined, they are not simple mirror images of each other. To get some sense of how responsibility should be understood, let us consider the history of thinking about rights. Human rights are broadly understood, and, in theory at least, accepted. On one level, 'human rights' are the inalienable possession of each individual. On another level, they are the 'rights' the government must accord to their citizens.

The most basic of "rights" go back to Magna Carta itself: to Habeas Corpus, to the rule of law, to due process under the Law, to equal access to the Law, the right to liberty and security, the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, the right to freedom of opinion and expression without distinction of any kind as to race, gender, faith, language or political belief. The Universal

Declaration of Human Rights is not a legal document, however. It is a moral standard that has come over time to be a statement of international law.

What is proposed for a similar Declaration on Human Responsibilities? It would outlaw inhumane behaviour, make it clear that no person, group or organisation stands above good or evil. Everyone endowed with reason and conscience must accept responsibility. What you do not wish to be done to yourself, do not do to others.

There is a responsibility to respect life; to resolve disputes between states without violence; to protect each person unconditionally; to behave with integrity, honesty and fairness and to make serious efforts to overcome poverty, ignorance and inequality. No person is exempt from general ethical standards. There is a responsibility to speak truthfully, to show respect for all other people.

Many countries in the East and in the developing world liked the idea of a Universal Declaration of Responsibilities. But in the West there has been considerable difficulty. Some argued that it was hard enough to get nations to accept their obligations under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and that a further declaration would confuse the issue. Others argued that some states would use a draft Statement on Responsibilities in a repressive or even a reactionary fashion.

There was a third argument, that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights really represented a statement about the way government should behave in protecting the rights of individuals, while the draft Statement on Responsibilities was much more a matter for individual action. It was reasoned that it would be wrong for governments to be prescriptive about what individuals should or should not do.

I believe this latter argument was mistaken. The Draft Declaration on Responsibilities not only refers to the responsibility of citizens, as general members of society. It refers in particular to the responsibility of people in positions of power and authority, whether that power comes from wealth, from institutions, from corporations or from government.

When the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations it was an article of hope, a light on the hill, an aspiration. The world needed such a document because civilisation as we knew it had nearly been destroyed.

We are at a similar point when we must examine our own

responsibilities more rigorously. It is now over a decade since the September 11 terrorist attacks but concern, even paranoia, has developed in many places about Islamic fundamentalism and indeed, in some quarters, about Islam itself.

If we want to avoid Samuel Huntington's vision of a Clash of Civilisations, we need to work to bring reason and common sense to the debate. Whatever was said about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the United States knew that Saddam Hussein had no missiles that could go any way towards harming cities in Europe, much less London. That was not in doubt.

We need governments who can speak of the reality so that there can be a considered and effective response. Leaders who frighten their people, who expand the truth, who unadvisedly support extreme action, will not be effective.

The former British prime minister Tony Blair described terrorism "as a wholly new phenomenon ... (whose fundamental advocates) ... preach hatred of the West and our way of life." He spoke of the terrorists saying "they are not provoked by our actions; but by our existence". That view is still widely held. Yet Blair also said he would make the revival of the peace process between Israel and Palestine a "personal priority". His first statement is saying terrorists have no cause but hatred. His second statement is saying they have a cause which is their perception that a fundamental injustice is being suffered by the Palestinians.

Both statements cannot be true. I accept the second; his first is definitely wrong. Terrorism is far from new: witness Ireland, the Basque region, Chechnya, the Philippines. There is no justification for the sanctioning of violence against civilians, but governments must take the responsibility to ask themselves: "Why do people become terrorists?"

We must also consider our responsibilities towards our own legal traditions. We have stepped back into a darker age. It is now common to argue that because of the nature of global terrorism, we must also alter the principles, including the legal principles, by which we have lived.

There is a passage from a cable Winston Churchill sent to Herbert Morrison, when the Home Secretary at the time, Sir Oswald Moseley, leader of the Nazi Party in Britain and his wife Lady Diana Moseley, were about to be released from custody. The war was going a good deal better for the Allies; the Mosleys had become ill; and the Home Secretary was preparing to release them, but with restrictions.

Churchill's memorandum to Morrison asked the Home Secretary to emphasise that the release of the Mosleys was a matter of high principle. He cited the great privilege "of Habeas

Corpus, and of trial by jury, which are the supreme protection invented by the English people for ordinary individuals against the State", saying removing those protections is what totalitarian governments do. Extraordinary powers may be assumed by the Executive, with the consent of Parliament, during emergencies. But when the emergency goes, they should be reinstated. "This is really the test of civilization," he concluded.

Yet today, in the name of security, the most curious and frightening provisions are justified. Since September 11, some people in positions of great authority have been prepared to throw those principles overboard, accepting that we cannot defend liberty by the principles of liberty. It shows how fragile is our grasp of the real necessities of a democratic, liberal society.

The United States sought to put people in Guantanamo Bay, where they would be beyond the law. To that country's credit, there is debate about these issues. In Australia, there is very little. The "Australian Security Intelligence Organisation Legislation Amendment (Terrorism) of 2002" has been described as the most draconian bill any Australian Government has ever conceived. It is believed to surpass anything the former Australian Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies, tried to do when he sought a ban on the Communist Party in 1950. One person summed it up in this way: "Only Australia has sought to legislate to authorise the detention in secret of non-suspects".

It allows our government to detain a person whom authorities believe may help in counter-terrorism enquiries. The authorities do not have to believe the person is guilty of any offence. They only have to believe that the person may know something of relevance to anti-terrorism enquiries, even if the person does not know he or she knows it. The authorities have stopped normal reporting of these events. Anyone disclosing somebody's detention under a warrant, commits an offence.

We are also seeing asylum seekers, who have qualified for refugee status, being indefinitely detained. They are not able to find out the reasons why. ASIO is simply saying they are a threat to national security, and that is enough. It is for good reason that under British law and under our law, the onus of proof has been on the Crown and the presumption of innocence until proven guilty is accorded to all people.

How is it that both major parties in Australia agreed to these provisions? The legislation is contrary to the Rule of Law. It is contrary to Due Process, to Habeas Corpus, to the basic rights that we have come to understand are central to a free and open society. A Declaration of Human Responsibility should be made to apply to Australian governments and Australia's major political parties.

"How is it that both major parties in Australia agreed to these provisions?"

The Syrian maze

A deadly mix of foreign intervention and sectarianism.

by Adam Tarock

The U.S. decision in Mid-June 2013 to provide direct military assistance to the Syrian rebel forces would hence considerably, if not decisively, change the dynamics of the civil war in favour of the rebels. A year ago the conventional wisdom in the mainstream media and diplomatic circles was that the Syrian rebel forces, with the support of the West and its Arab allies, would soon overthrow the Assad government. It was also predicted that Russia would in the end acquiesce with the West, as it did in Libya. Neither prediction materialised; if anything, the civil war, which started in March 2011, has intensified. No reliable figure is available about casualties of the war, but it runs into thousand of lives lost and two million refugees living in neighbouring countries. The difficulty is that the conflict involves an entanglement of sectarianism, great power and regional power rivalries. All indications point to a drawn out civil war because the outside powers have conflicting views as to what the outcome should be.

The major powers involved are Russia and China (on the side of Assad); and the United States, and Europe (on the side of the opposition). The regional powers are: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey (on the side of the opposition); the Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraq, and Iran (on Assad's side). Each is pursuing its own national interests and looking for different outcomes. A particularly destructive feature of the Syrian crisis is the sectarianism between the Shias (the ruling Alawites of Syria are a branch of Shia Islam) and the Sunni (the majority of the Arabs). Saudi Arabia and most other sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf are fanning this religious divide.

This sectarianism did not feature in the uprisings of other Arab countries. The Alawites are Shia and constitute 12 percent, 2.6 million, of the 22 million population. They are a prominent religious mystical group, known to be tough fighters. They are also believed to be closer to the Christian tradition than to the mainstream Shias. Other religious minorities in Syria who support the Assad government are Christians and Druze. The Sunnis command the majority.

Countries that are supporting the Alawite-dominated Syria are Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon's Hezbollah. King Abdullah of Jordan in 2004 described them, incorrectly, as the 'Shia crescent'. The alliance between Syria and its backers is more geopolitical than religious. Ironically, Arab governments which, under the pretext of democracy and the rule of the majority, support the opposition are archconservative monarchies with zero-tolerance for democracy at home. It is worth recalling that Saudi Arabia sent its troops to Bahrain in 2011 to crush dissidents from the Shia majority when

they demanded a voice in running the country.

In Syria, Iran's geostrategic interests take precedence over its religious affiliation with the Alawites. The strategic alliance goes back to September 1980 when Saddam Hussein invaded Iran and Syria supported Teheran. Since then Iran and Syria have further consolidated their alliance. One reason is that both have been under political and economic pressure from the West and Israel, so they feel isolated. Should Israel decide to attack Iran's nuclear facilities, as it has often threatened to do, and Syria be broken up, it would make Iran more vulnerable to such attacks. The economic dimension of this alliance is also important. According to Professor Mohammed Ayoob of Michigan State University, their economic ties have included a \$10 billion agreement signed, just before the Syrian uprising began, for the construction of a gas pipeline running through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, and reaching Europe via the Mediterranean. This agreement is of paramount importance, particularly for Iran because the U.S. and its European allies have banned, among other things, Iranian oil imports.

From Saudi Arabia's perspective, regime change in Syria has two advantages: religious and geostrategic. Religiously, the fall of Assad would end the rule of the Alawites, which the fundamentalist Wahhabis regard as 'un-Islamic'. The Guardian's Middle East correspondent, Ian Black, has argued that Saudi Arabia's puritanical and intolerant Wahhabi doctrine has always vilified Shias and Alawites as 'worse' than Christians and Jews. Sheikh Adnan Arour, a Saudi Salafi cleric, notoriously warned in a satellite TV broadcast that Alawites 'who helped defend the Assad regime would be put into a meat grinder and their flesh fed to dogs.'

If the rebels were to topple the Assad government, that would not only end Iran's influence in Syria and Lebanon but also reduce Teheran's standing in the Persian Gulf. Iran's influence has increased considerably since the fall of Saddam Hussein. The coming to power of a Shia government in Iraq has heightened tensions between Iran and the monarchies of the Persian Gulf, and has rekindled the old rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The two countries have been political rivals since the 1960s. To the Gulf monarchies Iraq, ruled by the Shias, is like a thorn in their sides because there are sizable Shia populations in the sheikhdoms. It is one reason why the Saudis and Qataris support the Syrian opposition (according to press reports, Qatar has spent \$3 billion on assisting the rebels). To the sheikhdoms, regime change in Syria, which would demolish Iran's only pillar in the Arab world, is the end game. The interests of the monarchies, the West and Israel have thus converged in Syria. As Robert Fisk, the veteran

Middle East correspondent of The Independent, has said, 'In the end, all Israel and its Western supporters want is to break Iran – via Syria.' Fisk's assertion is not farfetched. Assad's fall could serve as a prelude to Israel and/or the United States attacking resource rich, and geo-strategically well-placed, Iran.

For a century after the Ottoman Empire, Turkey withdrew itself, culturally and politically, from the Middle East. It looked westward. However, with the coming to power in the first decade of this century of an Islamic-oriented government, Turkey began looking toward the Arab world as well. Its new foreign policy, dubbed 'zero problem,' called for noninvolvement in the controversial issues besetting the Middle East. It emphasized the expansion of economic and trade relations between Ankara and the Arab world. A new law was passed to make it easier for Arab investors to participate in Turkey's development projects.

Turkey's very active intervention on the side of the Syrian armed rebel groups, stands in sharp contrast to Ankara's 'zero problem' foreign policy. Ankara has not clearly explained its policy change, and it is not known what economic, political and geostrategic benefit Turkey can benefit from regime change in Damascus. It is suggested in the media, however, that the prospect of the Arabs' capital investment in Turkey outweighs any resolve to remain neutral in the conflict between the Assad government and the Arab monarchies.

Syria and the great powers

International actors like Russia and the United States are more important than regional actors in the Syrian crisis. To Washington, the Assad government is unacceptable. Obama has often put it bluntly: "Assad must go." Syria is seen as a 'recalcitrant' state; in the Middle East it follows an independent foreign policy from that of Washington. An imperial power, by its very definition, cannot tolerate a small, recalcitrant state that is outside its orbit. One of the ironies and paradoxes of the present situation is that although the Assad Government is secular, perhaps one of the few left in the region, Washington, which is known for its advocacy of such governments, is bent on getting rid of Assad. It is an uncontested assertion that the Assads (Hafez and Bashar, the son) have been brutal and have ruled with iron fists and that their rule must be ended by force, if necessary. But there have been other brutal rulers who have had the blessing of the United States.

For strategic and political reasons, Russia is opposing the U.S. and European policy in the Syrian civil war. The end of the Cold War in 1991 has proved a minus. For at least one and a half decades,

a hegemonic America has for the most part dominated the Arab world -- except in Syria where Russia has maintained its presence and influence. Should the Assad government fall, it would strike a blow to Moscow's influence in the Middle East, and enhance further America's geopolitical and strategic positioning in the region. Russia still remembers that when the U.S. occupied Iraq in 2003, Moscow lost much of its political capital and economic interests there.

Russia's support for Assad goes beyond commercial interests. If Assad goes, Russia will also lose its naval facilities at Tartus, on Syria's southern Mediterranean coast. If the coast is controlled by Washington, it would sit perfectly well with the latter's commitment to Bahrain, which hosts the Pentagon's fifth fleet. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in Amman, Jordan, on 6 November 2012, that: "we have no plan to change [regime in Syria]." And David Ignatius of The Washington Post, has observed, "there's no good way out of the Syrian crisis without Russian help."

If Russia and the U.S. fail to reach an agreement then the U.S. and NATO could take some form of direct military action against Assad. The Obama administration has so far shown reluctance to involve America directly in the Syrian conflict but pressure from within is forcing his hand. Senator John McCain has been pushing hard for war and has visited rebel leaders on the Syrian-Turkish border. He and other war party political heavies, and the mainstream media in the U.S., are beating the drums of war in Syria as loud and as fast as they did for the war in Iraq.

Predictions about the outcome of political developments are often naïve, indeed foolish. But drawing on historical evidence, it is possible to provide some clue as to what the present crisis in Syria might produce. Although the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and the Iranians can affect the outcome in the Syrian civil war, the actual determining factors would most likely come from rivalry between U.S./Europe and Russia.

As things stand now, neither the government nor the opposition can win decisively, notwithstanding Washington's decision to provide direct military assistance to the rebels. Too many outside powers and too many diverse rebel groups are involved to allow either the government to regain full authority, or to allow smooth transition of power to a new government. This will create a political climate of chaos and bloodshed for years, not unlike that in Iraq. The most effective anti-Assad rebel military faction in Syria, the Nusra Front, is a branch of al Qaeda in Iraq, the same radical Islamist group that the U.S. fought and the Iraqi government is now battling with.

"Iran is of high value to both Tel Aviv and Washington."

he's not much but he's all he thinks about

by Allan Browne

maybe there are carols
among the cackle
turtles
emulating chubby
a monkey, that's not with it and a cliché
for friends of bill
maybe there's a thrill
in my solitude
and echo, in my cardiograph
and a girlfriend, plural
for the wild man
while here i stand
patiently waiting
will he return?

When giants shadow box

Disputes between science and religion may have more to do with power than reason.

At first glance it appears to be a storm in a petri dish. The much publicised “conflict” between science and religion does not stand up to scrutiny. Science, which is concentrated on hypothesis, the collection of evidence and measurement, is almost entirely focused on what already exists and how it can be explained. Sometimes, most notably in areas like cosmology and quantum mechanics, this involves using sophisticated mathematics and models that almost acquire a metaphysical character. But for the most part, science does not trespass into philosophy, let alone religion.

Religion, by contrast, attempts to address questions like “Why does the universe exist?” and “Does life have a purpose?” -- questions that, by definition, cannot be resolved from available evidence, and, to many scientists and rationalists, are either meaningless, irresolvable or to be decided in the negative. In the case of some Eastern religions the universe itself is regarded as an illusion, hardly a claim that can be entertained by science.

Consider the differences in the subject matter. Religion and philosophy seek to provide answers to questions about good and evil, usually with accompanying supernatural claims. Science remains necessarily silent on these issues. On the margin, some

science and religion is the exceptional success of modern science, which has given it a status similar to that enjoyed by religion in the past. One magisterium has, in a sense, replaced another.

The rise of science has greatly increased confidence in rational inquiry, and for many it has removed the need for further speculation. But the rational conclusion should be that religion rarely intersects with science. The English humanist A.C. Grayling was recently asked while in Australia to criticise the irrationality of religion. His response was telling. “Religion is non-rational,” he said. “Some of it is irrational,” he added, careful to maintain a distinction between religion and the rational.

Another way to demonstrate the incompatibility between science and religion is to consider the extent to which each can change. As the philosopher Thomas Kuhn famously argued, science goes through periods of paradigm shifts when its fundamental tenets have to be rethought.

Religions do not. Imagine, for example, Buddhism having a “paradigm shift” about the teachings of Buddha? It would no longer be Buddhism. Or Islam deciding that the teachings of Mohammed have to be fundamentally reworked? It would no longer be Islam.

“Religion is non-rational; some of it is irrational” – A C Grayling

neuroscience is looking to examine which part of the brain might produce a sense of morality in human beings, but for the most part science is not concerned with ideas of good and evil, it is concerned with how nature works (which is not to say scientists are not personally concerned with morality, only that it is something that science is not equipped to examine).

So how has the supposed “battle” between religion and science developed? One reason is that it is the kind of controversy that appeals to the mainstream media. The technique is to select aggressive proponents from both sides of the “divide” who then appear to argue about what is ultimate truth, when in fact they are not really debating at all.

There can be significant marketing advantages in claiming that science has superseded religion. For example, in his recent book “The Grand Design” the physicist Stephen Hawking claims that: “God no longer has any place in theories on the creation of the universe due to a series of developments in physics.” This must have come as startling news to most physicists, few of whom would have imagined that divine beings could ever have occupied a place in their discipline.

Another reason for the persistence of arguments between

Religion typically starts with belief, which does not change, or at least changes little. Those beliefs can be developed rationally, but as Grayling observes, belief itself is not rational. Science, by contrast, goes where the evidence leads it. True, science has to make assumptions, such as that causes have effects or that the laws of the universe remain the same and these assumptions could be said to resemble beliefs. But any assumption has to be tested and if it fails then it is discarded.

It is this intersection of science’s constant evolution and the relatively unchanging character of authority that is the cause of the recurring tension, according to Keith S Thomson, professor emeritus of Natural History at the University of Oxford and the executive officer of the American Philosophical Society. Speaking in his fourth Terry Lecture, Thomson said the battles between religion and science have, over the centuries, been part of a much bigger trend concerned with who possesses authority.

“It has not been about philosophy, science or religion alone, but about a contest for authority,” he said. “It happens whenever new information bumps up against the thinking of institutional authority. These things change at different rates and when they change at different rates there is bound to be conflict.” Thomson

adds that most academics, when faced with claims that battles are inevitable between religion and science, respond by saying it is the wrong question. There are too many different types of science and too many different types of religion.

Thomson believes the persistent political friction between members of religious communities and proponents of science is unfortunate. He comments that many issues being opened up by the march of science are proving challenging to religions because there are no clear cut theological positions on which to rely.

“These are issues that do not concern theological abstractions, and do not involve the supernatural but involve the conduct of daily life where science has had an immediate as well as a principal impact. These are areas where the supposedly non-overlapping magisteria can overlap. But (I am pessimistic) because of the conflict between religion and science on these quasi-philosophical points that have nothing to do with the conduct of our lives are coming back into the fore again.

are confirmed in their view that evolution is more than a scientific theory but is in fact a disguised ideology. On the other side the ultra-Darwinists often use Darwinian theory as a medium for a set of secularist values that they hold dear.”

Neither side seems to have taken great account of growing uncertainties about Darwinism. The world’s most famous geneticist, Craig Venter, who was credited with being the first person to map the human genome (in the end he accepted the award with his former government colleagues) said in Washington in 2001 that, based on what was then known, “we now know that Darwin was wrong.”

Venter at that time questioned the idea that randomness is the only means by which evolution occurs. He suggested that species change is already embedded in the genes, and is triggered by the environment rather than something that occurs by chance mutation.

It was randomness, and the suggestion that it implied a lack

*“It has not been about philosophy, science or religion alone,
but about a contest for authority” – Keith S Thomson*

The Ghost of Darwin

The most contentious scientific subject has been the theory of evolution posited by Charles Darwin. It has been, and is, a lightning rod for disputes. Yet as Bertrand Russell pointed out in 1938 (writing in “The Rationalist Annual”), Darwin’s ideas did not initially create widespread concern amongst mainstream religious groups in England.

Neither has it been a conspicuous bone of contention in European Catholic traditions. Stephen Jay Gould, in his seminal article “Non Overlapping Magisteria” quotes a Catholic priest saying: “I have always been taught that no doctrinal conflict exists between evolution and Catholic faith, and the evidence for evolution seems both entirely satisfactory and utterly overwhelming. Have I missed something?”

Gould says the opposition to Darwin came from more narrow sources in America. “Creationism is a local and parochial movement, powerful only in the United States among Western nations, and prevalent only among the few sectors of American Protestantism that choose to read the Bible as an inerrant document, literally true in every jot and tittle.”

Professor Peter Harrison, director of the Centre for the History of European Discourses, University of Queensland, said in a radio interview that what fundamentalist critics of evolution are against is a package of secularist values being presented as scientific theory.

“When people like Richard Dawkins make claims that evolution naturally points towards atheism, they (religious critics)

of purpose in the physical world, that most troubled religious critics of Darwin (an objection that was always dubious given that it assumes the universe to be like a piece of clockwork run by a divine being, rather like the poet William Blake’s satirical figure of Nobodaddy, an old man with a white beard who grumpily manages a cosmic machine). A glimpse of how evolution will develop in the future was provided by Venter’s team when they succeeded in creating synthetic life, inventing DNA on a computer then making cells. This is species creation that is definitely not random.

Venter’s objections do not stop there. He also claims that Darwin’s thesis that there is a Tree of Life is not supported by the evidence. He discovered, after travelling around the world on a yacht mapping the genetic diversity of life in the oceans, that there was much greater complexity than biologists had expected. He concluded that the Tree of Life is an “artifact of some early scientific studies” that cannot be derived from the evidence. In genetic terms, the tree is effectively upside down.

Darwin’s idea of survival of the fittest (which on the face of it is an unfalsifiable circular argument; if you survive you must be, by definition, fit) is questioned by Venter. “If this is survival of the fittest, then there are an awful lot of species that are fit,” he commented at a 2009 lecture in Melbourne.

That some of Darwin’s ideas are being revised as more evidence becomes available is scarcely surprising. It is a standard process that occurs continually in science. It is hard to see how there would be any implications at all for religion if Darwin’s theories are superseded. But this raises the question: ‘Why were Darwin’s

theories ever thought to have implications for religion in the first place?’

It may have an effect on the ideologies attached to Darwinism (as opposed to what Darwin actually wrote). The philosopher Jerry Fodor, writing in the “London Review of Books”, points out that Darwinism has strayed into many areas unrelated to biology.

“(Examples) are to be found in more or less all of the behavioural sciences, to say nothing of epistemology, semantics, theology, the philosophy of history, ethics, sociology, political theory, eugenics and even aesthetics.”

“What they have in common is that they attempt to explain why we are so-and-so by reference to what being so-and-so buys for us, or what it would have bought for our ancestors. ‘We like telling stories because telling stories exercises the imagination and an imagination would have been a good thing for a hunter-gatherer to have.’ ‘We don’t approve of eating grandmother because having her around to baby-sit was useful in the hunter-gatherer ecology.’ ‘We talk by making noises and not by waving our hands; that’s because hunter-gatherers lived in the savannah and would have had trouble seeing one another in the tall grass.’”

The implication is that science can be vulnerable to ideologies just as much as politics and religion. Harrison considers ideologies to be the greatest danger. “We should stop talking about disembodied ‘isms’ and start talking about historical events in their complexity and their contingency. It is not just a case of there being these monolithic entities science and religion that are somehow locked in this perennial battle.”

If, at an intellectual level, religion and science are self

causation. The ancient Greeks, for example, could not develop causation as an over riding principle because they conceived time to be circular, in some cases arguing about who came first: a father or a son.

Jaki also documents how ideas of motion were developed in the fourteenth century by a French priest Jean Buridan that were crucial to the formation of modern physics. These ideas of momentum anticipated Isaac Newton’s first law of motion by more than three centuries.

Another assumption being explored in medieval Europe was that the universe was subject to rational laws and that understanding how those laws worked was a religious imperative. The historian Allan Chapman argues that the development of science started long before the Enlightenment, it stretches back into the Middle Ages. From the fourteenth century onwards, a tradition of scientific cartography was developed. Medieval undergraduates could not get degrees without a knowledge of astronomy, mathematics and geometry. The science of optics was first developed in the thirteenth century by Roger Bacon. In the sixteenth century, there was a full scale, state-of-the-art astronomical observatory in the Vatican City.

“The Enlightenment Age is generally thought to run from around 1650 to 1800,” writes Chapman. “Yet when one analyses this ... categories dissolve away as grand theory is corroded by the potent acid of plain historical fact.”

The implication is that it is most probably the closeness of religion and science in the West, rather than what sets them apart, that has led to the persistent tension.

“We should stop talking about disembodied ‘isms’ and start talking about historical events in their complexity and their contingency” – Peter Harrison

evidently separate, their historical links are much closer, especially in the West. This link does not occur automatically. The French philosopher, Jacques Maritain, writing in “Introduction to Philosophy” observes that in most ancient civilisations – Persian, Jewish, Indian, Chinese and Egyptian – religion, science and philosophy were undifferentiated. Only in ancient Greece did philosophy become a separate discipline, and that did not result in stable science.

The picture was quite different in medieval Europe. Metaphysical and cosmological assumptions were being developed at this time that proved crucial to the development of science. One of these, documented by the historian Stanley Jaki in his 1974 Gifford Lectures, was the notion that time travels in a line, with a beginning and an end (teleology).

This view of time was crucial for developing notions of

It might be countered that there is nothing unique about Western Europe’s scientific insights into how the natural world works. Scientific inventions have been developed by many civilisations, for thousands of years (many of the great inventions credited to Europe came initially from China). But it was only in medieval Western Europe that science developed into the stable and continually improving body of knowledge that it has now become. And as science gained a life of its own, away from religion, questions of authority and power have inevitably arisen.

The Final Divide

Science has now become entirely autonomous; the separation is complete. In its practice at least, it has two emphases that create a permanent divide with religion. It is materialist, designed only to analyse the material world. And it is positivist (that is, something only exists if it can be measured, there is positive evidence of

its existence). Scientific method, with some exceptions such as theoretical physics, is principally focused on measuring natural phenomena.

Both these emphases pose problems for religion. Most religions, in one form or another, argue that there is more than just the material world (in some cases they may even posit that the material world is an illusion). That does not leave much in the way of useful common ground with science.

Likewise, measurement is rarely, if ever, of interest to religions. It makes little sense to talk about measuring areas of human experience like faith, wonder, beauty, awe, compassion,

guilt, love. Neither is it possible to come up with measurements that would show whether or not there is a purpose in the universe, or whether it was created by a divine being.

The conclusion is that a healthy scepticism should be applied whenever there are “arguments” between advocates of science and religion. Too often, there will be no debate at all. Stephen Jay Gould, considering the question of whether humans have souls, described it this way: “My world cannot prove or disprove such a notion, and the concept of souls cannot threaten or impact my domain.”

Nonoverlapping magisteria: why Gould got it wrong

By Jonathan Meddings

Reconciliation between science and religion is as likely as between Israel and Palestine, but that hasn’t stopped the scientific and religious alike from trying. In his 1997 essay Stephen Jay Gould proposed that religion and science are nonoverlapping magisteria, stating that:

The lack of conflict between science and religion arises from a lack of overlap between their respective domains of professional expertise—science in the empirical constitution of the universe, and religion in the search for proper ethical values and the spiritual meaning of our lives.

It says a lot about how the religious have dominated the moral discourse that even scientists defer ethical matters to them without objection. But what is wrong with Gould’s proposition? First, even if one ignores the instances that religion is expressly in conflict with science – such as when it lobbies to prevent stem cell research and have creationism taught in schools – the two nonetheless remain fundamentally irreconcilable. Second, religion does not restrict itself to moral teachings, and the role of science in developing an intelligent ethical framework is unavoidable.

On conflict

On the face of it the argument that there exists no conflict between science and religion seems patently absurd. Numerous conflicts spring to mind, and one doesn’t have to read a history book to find them, only a newspaper. The philosopher Russell Blackford argues that the reason it is even possible to imagine no conflict between science and religion is a result of just how much the religious have had to concede:

Historically, religions have been encyclopedic systems of belief, offering explanations of a vast range of phenomena ... As encyclopedic systems, they inevitably come into conflict with

science as the latter provides more and more facts about how the world actually works. Religion can avoid direct conflicts only by retreating into highly abstract and more-or-less unfalsifiable positions. Some modern-day versions of religion may well have retreated so far from falsifiability that they are no longer in direct conflict with science, but that’s a fascinating historical development, not an indication that religion and science exercise inherently different and non-overlapping magisteria.

Over and over again history has proven religion to not just be wrong, but embarrassingly, fatuously wrong; so much so that it would appear the only thing all religions got right is that all other religions are wrong. And now the religious stand before us clinging to the one thing science is yet to take from them – morality.

If conflict exists between science and religion it is either because religion suppresses science or makes claims that science deems false. Although the former is not as prevalent as it once was, the latter remains as rampant as ever. Indeed, the religious can only retreat so far into unfalsifiability, because at the core of every religion is theism, which is falsifiable. This is why science and religion are irreconcilable.

On reconcilability

Due to the fact the metaphysical claims of religion are neither falsifiable nor verifiable, science has little to say about them, save them being claims to truths that no primate can possibly know. However, a defining characteristic of religion is theism. And this is why although conflict might only arise when religion trespasses on science funding, education and research, that they are nonetheless inherently irreconcilable.

Theists believe that God or gods intervene in the universe, performing miracles and paying particular attention to human

affairs; especially concerning matters of diet, conduct and what we do whilst naked. It is theism that makes religion irreconcilable with science. Once God is said to intervene in the natural universe the role of science in determining if this is so becomes inescapable, because science deals with the natural universe. Were the God of religion simply a deistic one – a noninterventionist deity who created the universe and left it to its own devices – then science might be left out of the equation (barring advances in physics).

If religious apologists are content to dodge scientific criticism by invoking the argument for non-overlapping magisteria, they forfeit any claim that their beliefs are supported by science. Conscious of this, many religious apologists are critical of Gould's non-overlapping magisteria. If to be rational is to employ the use of logic, reason and evidence to arrive at one's conclusions – and I maintain that this is as good a definition as any – then clearly religious people are rational if they employ the use of logic, reason and evidence. The trouble is that religious arguments are riddled with logical fallacies, anecdotal evidence and fallacious reasoning – rational they might be, scientific they are not. And if ever there was a case that exemplified religious beliefs being unscientific it is the curious case of Francis Collins.

In *The Language of God*, Collins seems to echo Gould when he says:

In my view, there is no conflict in being a rigorous scientist and a person who believes in a God who takes a personal interest in each one of us. Science's domain is to explore nature. God's domain is in the spiritual world, a realm not possible to explore with the tools and language of science. It must be examined with the heart, the mind, and the soul—and the mind must find a way to embrace both realms.

It so happens that the mind has found a way to embrace both science and religion – it is called cognitive dissonance.

Collins is a scientist best known for his work leading the Human Genome Project, but he is also a believing Christian. As such he believes in a “God who takes a personal interest in each of us.” He believes in miracles including, among others, the virgin birth and literal (not merely metaphorical) resurrection of Jesus Christ. Were any scientist, even one as esteemed as Collins, to give a presentation detailing how the literal resurrection of Christ occurred based entirely on questionable historical texts they would be laughed out the room, and rightly so. Collins knows the claims of religion are extraordinary. He also knows there is no extraordinary evidence to support these claims. In his mind there is dissonance. He reduces it by changing his opinion about the evidence, to the point that even a frozen waterfall is taken as definitive proof of God's existence.

The foundational, structural and integral differences of science and religion.

In order to fully understand why religion and science are

irreconcilable we need first consider their fundamental differences. We can view these differences in terms of their foundation, structure and integrality.

The foundational difference between religion and science is that the former is grounded in mysticism and the latter in philosophy. The former foundation is one of ignorance and superstition propped up by faith, the latter the systematic endeavour to eliminate such things through a process of logic and reasoning. As far as foundations go, this is the difference between sand and cement.

Due to their different foundations religion and science have marked structural differences. Supporting religion and reinforcing the conviction of religious adherents is scripture, ritual and tradition; the ossifying nature of which is – if not immutable – at the very least enduring, which necessitates absolutism. Supporting science and reinforcing the doubt of scientists is the scientific method and scepticism therein. The conviction of scientists comes only from mountains of mutually supporting evidence that withstand repeated attempts at falsification and verification, and even then it is never absolute.

Religion deals in absolute, revealed truth that is promulgated by dogma. Science contends that although truth might be absolute that it can never be known with absolute certainty, and that any certainty whatever can only be viewed in terms of probability having examined all available evidence.

Integral to religion is theology, which has the impossible task of justifying religious texts and arguments based on countless presuppositions. This is why religious reasoning is always circular. Integral to science is humanism – though this is perhaps less obvious. It is often argued by religious apologists that science has nothing to offer by way of determining human values, or so much as even contributing to a conversation about morality. As a result of science exposing religious claims about the natural universe to be false, the religious now cling to their moral high horse, but they do not have the moral high ground.

I am of the school of thought of Sam Harris, who in his groundbreaking book *The Moral Landscape* argued that once we accept that moral questions are really questions about the wellbeing of conscious creatures, a science of morality is not merely possible, but ineluctable. Science can answer moral questions. And it can answer them better than any holy book. The religious can cling to their moral high horse all they like, because sooner or late they will realise they are flogging a dead horse. Morality is biological and psychological, not divine.

Humanism is integral to science because the understanding that our morality has no supernatural basis forms the foundation of a science of morality, and it is this fledgling field of scientific inquiry that gives science heart. Science has given rise to unprecedented advances in knowledge and technology. The great revelation is it can also inform how we use them.

Question: What is the best way forward for the Rationalists?

T Michael Ellis was a former member of the Rationalist Society of Australia.

I did not renew my membership of the RSA in February 2012 because it seemed to me that the Society was quite out of touch with most rational Australians. It seemed fixated on one thing only to the point of indicating that many members must be suffering from some sort of emotional problem. Ironically, they are making a religion out of the issue.

First of all, it should be made clear where I stand: I am a rationalist myself, 100 per cent. I do not adhere to any ideology whatsoever, be it political, religious or philosophical. All ideas must, in my opinion, be carefully scrutinized in the light of pure reason. Any set of ideas must be at least internally consistent in the first instance, and externally consistent (eg, with what is observed) on the other. Consider a scale of 1 to 6, where 1 means a person who is completely credulous in religious matters and 6 means a hardened atheist. Richard Dawkins places himself at 5 since, according to his own explanation, no scientific idea is ever considered absolute, and may be disproved at a later time. Because he is a trained scientist, he ought to abide by this principle. However, I place myself at number 6, which means that I am even more of a hardened atheist than Richard Dawkins. Nature herself is the only arbiter; if something cannot be perceived through the senses (or through extensions of those senses such as telescopes, microscopes and other instruments), then as far as mankind is, or should be, concerned, it simply does not exist.

This is despite my having attended Catholic schools, first with nuns and later with Brothers teaching us. There were never any cases of sexual abuse at our schools. Every single one of the nuns and Brothers at the schools I attended were unimpeachable: they were excellent teachers and were absolutely devoted to their jobs. I, and literally hundreds of thousands of other children, perhaps millions in Australia and New Zealand, owe them a huge debt of gratitude. Evidently, a comparatively microscopic percentage sexually abused some children. Of course that is regrettable, but the Society, like the tabloid press forgets, about the millions of successes, and concentrates only on the relatively miniscule number of failures. As Shakespeare wrote (in Julius Caesar, Act 3, Scene II) "The evil that men do lives after them, the good is oft interred with their bones." The result was that millions like me received a fine moral upbringing and a first class education.

Now what does the Rationalist Society endlessly go on about? Catholic bashing, and practically nothing else. So, a huge percentage of members were brought up as Catholics (or Christians in general). So what, so was I. So they went through a religious crisis. So what, so did I. For heaven's sake, get over it and

move on. Every single issue of the newsletter or magazine would go on and on about Catholics or school chaplains, in an unbroken outpouring of irrational hatred, as if they had to somehow get even with those who, even though they devoted their lives to those under their care, had nevertheless themselves been duped in their childhood but never quite managed to escape the mental trap. Is that all the Society thinks Rationalism is about? Because it ought not to be.

Before going on with what the main issue should be, let me mention a side issue which is completely ignored. It may interest the Society to know that approximately 700 Muslim women are treated per year in Melbourne's Royal Women's Hospital for genital mutilation. And this is just in Melbourne's RWH! It does not cover the dozens of other major and regional hospitals in Australia. If The Rationalist Society wants to blast away at a particular religion, then they should be speaking out publicly against this, and against the tacit acquiescence to it by state and federal governments. This practice is a crime in this country. There are the thousands of court cases per year, with what must amount to tens of thousands of defendants, including all the accessories before and after the fact, of which there must surely be twenty or thirty per case.

Ignoring the atrocities of Muslims everywhere, but especially in our own country, is the height of cowardice. The Society constantly bombards the Catholics, with infantile cartoons of the Pope; at the same time they turn a blind eye to a vastly more serious problem which is happening to thousands of young women in Australia, right now, every year. Catholics are an easy target – they don't bite back; but Muslims do. To use the biblical phrase, the Society strains out a gnat and swallows a camel. Should I join a society which unconscionably and cowardly mimics the silence of Australian governments on this matter?

But now to the real issues on which the Society should be concentrating. At its core, it is not religion per se – it is the teaching of science (or rather, lack of teaching of science). Education used to be centred around the three R's, but today we live in the scientific age. We should be concentrating on RRRS. The Society should be pressuring governments to make General Science compulsory for all students to Year 10. For those not specializing in one of the sciences (such as biology, geology, chemistry or physics), General Science should still be compulsory until Year 11 (and must be passed). In today's world, we should not have a situation in which a child leaves and is totally and utterly scientifically illiterate. And yet this is the case today. Many children leave school not knowing a single thing about science. From my own experience, I would

hazard a guess that only one person in about 10,000 in this country would know precisely why there are seasons. And yet this is 450 years after Galileo, and 2,200 years after Eratosthenes! This is simply not acceptable in what is supposed to be a first world country. Some time ago, the US decided to “shoot down” one of its (supposedly) aging satellites. Not one of the news media in the country picked up on the fact that one cannot “shoot down” a satellite – it is not supported aerodynamically in the Earth’s upper atmosphere by the use of aerofoils. It is in orbit in space, and therefore destroying it scatters debris in space, most of which remains in orbit for very many years and is a serious hazard to other craft, manned and unmanned.

Incidentally, China had deliberately destroyed one of its own satellites only months earlier to demonstrate to the world that they had this capability. The US wanted to remind China that they also had the same capability, and so the real reason was revealed as being political. Rather humorously, the US actually accused China of space vandalism when they destroyed their satellite (for the reasons explained above); but in their case, the satellite had been “shot down”.

The point of all this is that a child in Year 10 should have been able to expose all this in a flash; in fact, it should have been a big joke throughout the whole of the country, as everyone should have understood the basics. Instead (as far as I could see), the truth of the matter was reported in just one US newspaper and was based on an interview with a NASA scientist.

This scientific illiteracy leads to a much wider problem than religion, namely widespread superstition. The amount of superstition in Australia today is truly staggering. I have made a list of over 100 of them, from astrology to auras to feng shui. Excluding religion, I cannot think of a time in this country when superstition has been so widespread. In fact, many people hold superstitious beliefs but profess no religion! To quote the (Catholic) author GK Chesterton: “When people stop believing in God, they don’t believe in nothing, they believe in everything.” If all religion were to vanish from Australia tomorrow, it would not make a scrap of difference; if anything, it would probably make the situation worse.

This emphasizes the importance of scientific education. In my job, I have met thousands of people and got to know hundreds. Of those who have had a scientific education, not one subscribes to any religious belief, and not one has any superstitious beliefs. Of those who are scientifically illiterate, a number are either deeply religious or are superstitious; some are both.

The Society must then put all of its efforts into pulling the weed out by its roots, which is scientific ignorance. When society is scientifically literate, religion and superstition will simply wither away.

I have not time to talk about logical fallacies, but I believe

that these should be taught in schools, that the subject should be compulsory, and that a pass should be required in order to obtain a VCE (or equivalent).

There is just one other area that I would like to mention about the Society before finishing: If one thinks carefully about every matter, and is not driven by any ideology, one ends up with an extremely well balanced political perspective. Like a pendulum that slows down and oscillates gently about its point of equilibrium, the politically mature thinker ultimately finds himself sitting on the fence. This is more-or-less what I would have expected of a society whose swan song is rationality.

But what I have found is a presumptuous belief that to be a rationalist, one’s politics must automatically be left-wing or even ultra-left-wing, especially on moral issues. As a result, I am left with the feeling that I do not belong. I do not believe that a society such as the RSA should be promoting any ideology: it certainly does not promote a religious one; but it should not be promoting a political one either. This reminds one of the phrase “a left-wing intellectual”; one never hears the term “a right-wing intellectual”; indeed, the latter term would be practically considered an oxymoron. The truth of the matter is that they both are. Pushing an ideology is anti-intellectual and should have no place in a society the essence of whose teaching is supposed to be the opposite. The Society gets a tick for rightly not pushing any religious ideology, but fails miserably by often pushing a political one.

In summary, the Society should be getting back to the basics. If it must criticize religion, then it should have the courage to speak out against the atrocities committed by Muslims every day in this country, atrocities which are barely comparable to the sins committed decades ago by a tiny minority whose victims have not lost any body parts! And it should publicly denounce Government inaction on this matter as well.

The essence of the problem, though, is neglect of education in science and logic. The Society fusses over the symptoms and not the cause. People with a good grounding in both tend on the whole to be neither religious nor superstitious, and are better able to make sensible decisions on truly important issues. If the sapling is well nourished, it will become less prone to parasites. We may never completely succeed, but we shall have achieved a great deal if we could get both religion and superstition to the point where they have about as much influence on people’s lives as the Flat Earth Society has today. Denounce barbaric and illegal practices by all means; but true change will not come about through fatuous criticism of people’s beliefs. One needs to fix the basic cause, and it is this which should be the Society’s main focus.

The Society should not allow itself to be driven by ideologies, whether political, philosophical or religious. In matters of great import, Nature and facts drive me, ideologies and emotions do not.

Ian Robinson is President Emeritus of the Rationalist Society of Australia

I agree with the general outline of Mike Ellis' plan that we should not just be bashing Catholics. If we are to attack religion we should devote a significant amount of that energy to critiquing Islam as well as Christianity and we should have a strong emphasis on promoting science and reason, especially in schools. This seems like an excellent program to guide the Society into the future.

Where I take issue with Mr Ellis is his allegation that the RSA in the past has not followed exactly these precepts. Having been a member of the RSA for 40 odd years I have to say that Mr Ellis' description of what he thinks we do bears little resemblance to the Society I have spent many years supporting and working for.

The similarity between Mr Ellis' Rationalist Society and mine is so slight that I began to wonder if our more inventive theoretical astrophysicists were correct and there are indeed parallel universes, including one in which Mr Ellis' Rationalist Society flourishes and this one in which mine resides.

But as a rational person I was not content to rely solely on my impressions, however well-informed they may be. I took the liberty of accumulating some evidence. I conducted a content analysis of the Australian Rationalist journal for the ten years between 2000 and 2010, the years with which I am most familiar. The results may surprise Mr Ellis. What I discovered was that only about 16 per cent of the articles in this time were about religion of any kind, and the majority were about various other issues such as women's rights, morality and ethics, education, politics, economics, the environment, philosophy and so on. And, believe it or not, about 10 per cent of the articles were about science! Perhaps that is not enough to satisfy Mr Ellis but it is certainly a respectable contribution.

The other interesting result that emerged was that while most of the articles on religion were criticising religion in general, about one third of them were aimed specifically at Islam. And do you know what proportion were "bashing" Catholics? Just over 1 per cent! Indeed, of all religions, the Catholics -- with, as Mr Ellis points out, their strong intellectual tradition -- have been the branch of Christianity most amenable to civilised dialogue with Rationalists.

They have not infrequently been contributors to our conferences. I remember one in the 70s or 80s about competing world views with two leading atheist speakers debating with two leading Catholic intellectuals who were, I believe, Dr Greg Denning and Prof Tony Coady. At our conference on Euthanasia, Catholic moral theorist Nick Tonti-Filippini was one of the speakers and at the conference on Separating Church and State, although he is not a Catholic, we had The Age's Religion Correspondent Barney

Zwartz on the platform. So I don't think the charge of crass religion bashing sticks and I plead not guilty.

I think Mr Ellis' false impression of the Society may stem from a too narrow focus on comparatively recent times when the huge upsurge of information about the systemic failure of the Catholic Church to protect its children has demanded a principled and muscular response. This is merely a warranted reaction to current community concerns, not an indicator of long-term obsessions.

There is no doubt that there are many good Catholics and many good Christians in general. However there may not be as many as is popularly believed and they may not be as good as we think. I would like to draw attention to two articles in the latest issue of the US magazine "Free Inquiry" which argue that much of the frequently quoted research that gives a positive score to religious people is flawed.

Studies are often quoted as saying that religious people have a greater sense of well-being than the rest of us, but this research too often conflates all except committed believers in one group and compares them to the rest. But when you break the non-believers into committed atheists and people who are unsure and uncommitted, as did the recent World Values Survey, you get a quite different picture. It turns out that those that claimed religion was important and those who claimed religion was not important at all were both among the happiest. It was the people in the middle who couldn't make up their minds who were not content.

The "Free Inquiry" study also exposes in-built biases in much of the frequently quote pro-religion research, due to many factors including: its excessive reliance on self-reporting and/or reports by fellow religion members, its not taking into account religious people's restriction of "helping" and "charity" to religious charities, and its ignoring of the limitation of generous and trusting behaviours to fellow religionists only.

In short, a sceptical review of the research shows that religious people may be nice, but only to each other; religious people may give generously, but only to their own charities; and religion may promote honesty, sharing and cooperation, but so does belief in secular civic concepts.

But Mr Ellis has a very good point to make. It seems to me that the important difference between science and religion is not so much their opposing world views but how they each arrive at their conclusions. The epistemological methods invoked by religion do not pass intellectual scrutiny. If science accepted religion's standards of evidence it would be in total chaos. Only the methods of evidence and reason, which are at the heart of civilization, and of science, can bring enlightenment. Religion resists this, because if it accepted them it would collapse entirely. So science and science literacy and science education are critical to the development of a flourishing secular society.

The unseen war

A cyber security expert draws back the curtain on some hidden threats.

The revelations of Edward Snowden, the former contractor to the National Security Agency, have exposed the extent of the United States and British surveillance of its own people and foreign governments. Snowden has been declared a traitor and forced to seek asylum outside America. It is likely that, if extradited, he would spend most of the rest of his life in jail.

The international repercussions have been extensive. European governments are furious about being so extensively monitored. Snowden has been called by the European parliament to testify about international surveillance, along with National Security Agency chief General Keith Alexander and two other NSA whistle-blowers, Tom Drake and William Binney. Hearings are being held to develop new data privacy rules and data-sharing agreements between Europe and the United States.

One question worth asking is why is so much effort put into surveillance? One reason is probably that governments tend to exploit any opportunity and increased monitoring has become easier because of digital technology. Another reason may be that the digital world has profoundly changed military and security thinking.

A glimpse into this was provided by Scott Borg, director and chief economist of the Cyber Consequences Unit in the United States. In a recent visit to Australia, during which he gave a talk at the Cranlana Programme, he depicted perils that may help explain why the monitoring has become so intense.

Borg argued that it is possible to write a computer program that will run diagnostics on any generator that it finds. The programme will figure out how to destroy the infrastructure and then proceed to carry it out. Such malware can be migrated from device to device.

“Every computer has to be plugged into other electronic devices periodically for maintenance for uploading of data and so on,” says Borg. “You can run a piece of malicious data called malware that will migrate up the devices and find its way into any number of places and then physically destroy it.”

Such attacks could turn off generators for months at a time, destroying the economy of a country. It can be used to interfere with water and sanitation. “If you run that kind of attack the death toll becomes enormous, there is a total destruction of civil society,” says Borg. “The amount of destruction from that kind of attack is exceeded only by nuclear warfare. We are talking about something that is totally devastating and it is rooted in such fundamental properties of our economy and our technology and the way we conduct any kind of business. We can’t eliminate it through disarmament. And we can’t get engineered systems to make it no longer work in order to protect an industrial situation.”

There are some responses available. One is similar to mutually

assured destruction, akin to how nuclear deterrence works. Borg believes that the major powers can all use these cyber techniques against each other already. But none has any incentive to pull the trigger, which creates some stability.

“I am confident that Russia and China and America can do the kind of damage that I have just described to each other’s critical infrastructures. If they chose to, they could do it with an anonymous launch so the country that was destroyed wouldn’t know who was responsible unless they had an embedded agent already there monitoring the attack.

“I am also confident, however, that each of those countries would sacrifice lives to prevent that from happening. Those countries would go to extraordinary lengths to protect each other’s critical infrastructures because the last thing they need is the other countries in economic meltdown, especially with demagoguery on the rise. So I am not at all concerned that Russia and China have that capability. The worry is that down the line this information becomes more diffuse and the expertise more widely available.”

What is not possible is to think of enemies in the usual way. The cyber threat cannot be combated using conventional military thinking based on the application of force. This is potentially a very different type of war, according to Borg.

“The basis of military policy is deterrence and specifically deterrence by retribution. ‘We can smite anyone who harms us.’ In the world of cyber security you won’t know who harms us. If an attacker doesn’t want you to know who you are they can prevent you from finding them.

“I can go out and buy a laptop for cash, or I can steal one. I can write into that computer my malicious program, I can travel to a different city, sit down in a hotel lobby, be on line, launch my malware to some suitable target. I will put it into computers that people will be using who are walking into that facility, or into the computers of the maintenance people, or even the cyber security people. Using that method I could destroy all the critical infrastructures of my continent.

“Then, I take out the hard drive, drag a magnet across it and junk the whole thing. That is utterly untraceable. It is hard to imagine a world where we impose such burdens on people where that would no longer be possible.”

Another response is increasing surveillance, which may be one reason why it has become so intense. Borg says people are trying to attack the major critical infrastructure industries in America and Europe all the time. He says Australia is also probably under threat. Rather vaguely, he says “any number” of different organizations are hostile and discontent and wanting to engage in terrorist activity. That they haven’t been successful is largely due to cyber

security people having stayed ahead of them.

“Our electrical companies are blocking all kinds of attacks that would be really bad if they succeeded. We are stopping them all the time. We aren’t losing the war. We are actually staying ahead of the attackers, we are winning. Whether we will be able to keep that up is a question a lot of us worries about.

“Most cyber attacks are traceable because the people who are carrying them out don’t bother to conceal their identity. Or they are so incompetent that we can track them anyway. So the great bulk of the time we can figure out where the attacks come from. Not with complete certainty, but with a high degree of probability. They are mostly foreign; they are coming from the groups that you’d guess. It’s hard to find people in the West who really want to destroy the United States. Even on a bad day the French wish us well. To a point.”

Another partial defence is decentralization. “In general things are more resilient if you can modularise them. The key thing here is being able to modularise not have them not be centralised. In fact if we centralise things then we tend to take out the ability to modularise them. So we increase vulnerability. Also centralising thing tends to make them more of a target. It is one of arguments for employing the smart grid.”

Encryption is overrated, according to Borg. He says it tends to get far more attention than it deserves partly because it is how high school teachers get students to pay attention. “It does not really work because you hardly ever steal information when it is

“The metaphor I like to use is understudy systems. In the theatre every job and acting role has an understudy. If the star of the show is not able to go on stage, then there is an actor in a supporting role ready to go on and then there is another actor ready to take that person’s place and so on. They are not idle just waiting to be back up system. They are doing something else the rest of the time, they are not identical they are different people with different capabilities. If we are no longer in a world of deterrence we are moving into a world of resilience.”

Not everything in Scott Borg’s world is imminent danger and threat. There are also opportunities. In particular, there is economic advantage in developing systems that provide adequate defence. Nevertheless, the vulnerability will remain.

“Computers run simply on ‘yes’ or ‘no’,” he says. “There is no way to tell where those yes-nos came from. A biometric identifier, for example, is just a collection of numbers. Once you have turned it into a collection of numbers it’s susceptible to being spooked or stolen.”

Borg urges throwing away the traditional conceptions and categories used to understand security. Computers, he notes, are “a general purpose machine for executing instructions”. They do not think for themselves, they simply respond. “They are ‘if this, then do that.’ The condition is met, or it is not. A lack of understanding of those things is causing governments to waste a huge amount of money on research projects that have no more chance of succeeding than discovering perpetual motion.

“The amount of destruction from that kind of attack is exceeded only by nuclear warfare.”

in transit. If I can get malware at either end of the channel I don’t need encryption; your encryption is only as good as your garbage collection.

“The main tool right now for getting malware into systems, whether it is government, corporate, or whatever, is to send people an email with an attachment and make it irresistible to open that attachment. (The attackers) are putting Trojanised (Trojan horse) programs that people load into their smart phone voluntarily. That enables tools that allow them to be spied on. These emails are so well crafted you can show them to the person who was supposed to have sent it, and that person will not know whether he or she wrote it.”

Another possible defence is what Borg calls an “understudy” technique. The usual approach in conventional infrastructure systems is to have excess capacity, redundancy. But in the cyber area this does not work because, “there is no advantage in having a second system if it is just the same.” But there is an advantage in having something that will substitute.

“We tend to anthropomorphise everything. We curse at, or coax, our car engine if we are having trouble starting. We see human faces in stains on walls. You have (just) got a device that is executing instructions. The instructions are extraordinarily ingenious written by brilliant people and it is easy to start imagining that that machine is thinking, not the people who wrote the instructions.”

He especially rejects the idea of the “singularity”: a predicted time when computers have become so sophisticated they are able, in effect, to dictate to humans. “The idea of the singularity is actually a religious concept. A lot of people are afraid of dying and they think that they will be able to upload their consciousness and their brains into computers and achieve immortality. This is actually a kind of religious cult. They believe that computers will exceed human intelligence and exceed all intelligence. It’s a religion. It is about not dying, and I don’t have a very high opinion of it. It has no foundation in anything in cybernetics or computer engineering or anything at all.”



Words and prejudice

How far should freedom of speech extend?

by Rosemary Sceats

There was much media coverage of Geert Wilders' speaking tour of three Australian capital cities, Melbourne, Perth and Sydney. Dozens of venues refused to host his talks, some even after they had paid and signed contracts. The Perth talk was cancelled because the venue pulled out at the last minute, leaving insufficient time to find another one.

Most commentary concentrated on his statements that the Prophet Muhammad was a warlord, terrorist and paedophile, and that Muslims should renounce Islam for Christianity or atheism, or another religion of their choice. It also repeatedly says that Wilders is "using hate speech and spreading hatred". I attended the Melbourne talk, and there was nothing I heard that could be construed as either, nor as racism. Wilders did say, however, that he hates not Muslims themselves, but rather their religion and "holy book"; that the Koran contains more anti-Semitism than "Mein Kampf"; and that the former should be banned in the Netherlands, where publication and sale of "Mein Kampf" is illegal. (It's interesting to note that "Kampf" and "Jihad" both mean "struggle" or "battle".)

He also believes that immigrants convicted of crimes should be deported back to their country of origin. This may seem extreme, but I'd hazard a guess that many Australians would like this to be the fate of Melbourne Muslim cleric Abdul Nacer Benbrika, currently serving a fifteen-year sentence for "intentionally being the leader and a member of a terrorist organisation" who is believed to have plotted to bomb the MCG and Crown Casino, "... to cause maximum damage. To cause the death of a thousand ... by use of a bomb." Prosecutors (based on recorded telephone conversations) also alleged that the group led by Benbrika was "bent on violent jihad"; "planned terrorist attacks on football games or train stations to maximise deaths"; and that Benbrika said that in some cases it was theologically permissible to "kill women, children and the elderly".

The media coverage has made little or no mention of the main thrust of Wilders's message: that mass immigration from Muslim countries has resulted in major cities in Europe becoming increasingly Islamised, with no-go areas of Muslim concentration, effectively cities within cities, states within states, parallel societies where Sharia law and Islamic custom reign supreme. He said that Britain already has Sharia courts where, for example, a will was dealt with such that an estate was settled giving sons twice as much as daughters, in line with Islamic doctrine that a woman's worth is half that of a man.

He believes that European culture itself is under threat of

extinction. He wants to warn Australia about the dangers of untrammelled Muslim immigration, in the hope that we will learn from Europe's experience, and prevent the worst of it from happening here. He also stated his belief that Islam is more than a religion: that is it also a totalitarian, all-encompassing, socio-political ideology and system, and that the greater the concentration of the Muslim population in any country, the less freedom there is. He cited Saudi Arabia as a good example.

On Friday 22 February I was quite angered by the conduct and content of a panel discussion on Radio National's "The World Today" program. The topic was "When does free speech become hate speech?", or "Free speech questioned when it comes to race." The panelists were Gillian Triggs, the Australian Human Rights Commissioner, David Oldfield, the former politician, political advisor, now a commentator and free speech advocate, and Keysar Trad, the founder of the Islamic Friendship Association and right-hand man/spokesperson for Sheik al-Hilaly (he of the infamous "uncovered meat left out for cat" statement). The transcript can be found at:

<http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2013/s3696020.htm>

To quote Keysar Trad:

"But what Geert Wilders has done is base his whole ideology on things that are not true. He's made statements that are utterly false and statements that are offensive but in a sense he's done us a great service because what he's done is I think he has miscalculated the level of intelligence of Australian society and his comments are leading people to come to us and ask us first hand so we can tell them whether his comments are true or not and people are realising that what Wilders is doing is nothing other than cheap political opportunism and I think they are now more enlightened as a result of what he's done."

Later in the discussion he said:

"There are a lot of comments out there that are not only deeply, deeply hurtful and offensive but they are also untrue and they are informing a large section of Australian society and until members of that large section who have been misinformed actually come in contact with a Muslim or take the time to speak to a Muslim organisation, they will remain misinformed..."

David Oldfield's argument in defence of free speech was that:

"... freedom of speech is one of the most important things we have in our society and it's all very well for those who threaten the freedom of speech in my view often simply to protect what is their own deceit. We have to be very concerned about people who want to disrupt or limit freedom of speech because by simply doing so in

many respects they simply want to keep the truth covered.”

The following is lifted directly from the transcript:

DAVID OLDFIELD: ...there are many things within Islam that people like yourself would rather was not or were not openly discussed and some of the things that you talk about as being untrue and I've had people ring my radio programs at times and tell us that what we were saying is not accurate when in fact it is accurate.

What is it for example that you are so upset and I'm not saying I'm here to defend Geert Wilders but what is it that he's been saying in brief that you say is untrue?

KEYSAR TRAD: Look, his statement has been widely reported that, accusing the Prophet Muhammed, peace and blessings upon him, of a number of horrific things there.

DAVID OLDFIELD: Such as?

KEYSAR TRAD: I'm not going to name them, I'm not going to name those three things that he said but they've been widely published and you know what they are.

Keysar Trad is either ignorant or in denial.

The discussion made no mention of Muhammad's large number of wives, nor of the concubines and slave girls to whom he had access (despite the fact that he restricted other men to a maximum of four wives each), nor of the convenient and self-serving “special revelation” he received, granting dispensation from the rule that prohibited men from having sex with a son's wife. He married Zainab, the ex-wife of his adopted son Zaid, after Zaid divorced her in deference to Muhammad, who he knew had designs on her, having seen her unveiled when visiting Zaid's house. At the time, adopted sons had equal legal status to biological sons.

Why is the media shielding the public from knowledge about the origins of Islam and the life and doings of Muhammad? As David Oldfield said, “... they simply want to keep the truth covered.” This applies to the media, as well as to Muslims themselves, and I fear that the process of losing the right to free speech in Australia is well underway when it comes to known and documented historical facts about Muhammad and Islam. Are people afraid of having a

“The media coverage has made little or no mention of the main thrust of Geert Wilders' message”

DAVID OLDFIELD: Well, I know this one in particular and I don't consider that we should make judgements of people.

Keysar, I don't consider we should make judgements of people who lived in the 7th century based on 21st century values but let's face this for simple fact, the Prophet Muhammed was in his last betrothal, betrothed to Aisha who was six at the time when they were betrothed, nine at the time when he consummated the marriage. These are matters of fact.”

(Note here that Muslims believe that Muhammad was the most perfect man who ever lived, and they should do their best to emulate him. When the Ayatollah Khomeini took control of Iran and transformed it into an Islamic republic, the minimum age for girls to marry, and the legal age for girls to assume legal responsibility, was set at nine years.)

At that point, he was abruptly cut off by the program hostess, and the subject changed. I got the impression that Oldfield was about to elaborate on other accusations against Muhammad. The hostess was obviously intent on preventing the discussion going there.

The facts of Muhammad's life are well known to serious historians and scholars of Islam and the Koran: he was primarily a military leader who led his followers in violent raids on caravans, murdering and beheading people who opposed him. In AD 627, he participated in the annihilation of the last Jewish tribe in Medina, the Qurayza. He beheaded the men and the pubescent boys and enslaved the women and children. These are known facts of which

Salman Rushdie-style fatwa slapped on them? So much for “The truth will set you free.”

This is not unique to Islam: I was raised a Roman Catholic, and during my entire education in the Catholic school system, I never once heard about the Inquisition, the “bad popes”, the Great Schism and rival papal courts, or the trial, forced recantation and house arrest of Galileo, the only mention of whom was in the context of his physics experiment on gravity at the Leaning Tower of Pisa. It was believed that “Ignorance is bliss”. Remember the infamous “Index of Forbidden Books” that the Catholic Church maintained for over 400 years (from 1557 to 1966). These days, if a book was placed on the Index, it would be a godsend (no pun intended) to the author, and the book would become an instant bestseller.

We were taught that Jesus' last words to his disciples before ascending into heaven, “... and behold I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world.” (Matthew 28:20), meant that the church and its clergy could do no wrong, in perpetuity! There is a double irony for me here: the clerical child sex abuse revelations and the subsequent cover-ups have put paid to that notion. Also, I well remember from my Catholic childhood the “holy pictures” of a benign and gentle Jesus with the biblical caption: “Suffer the little children to come unto me” (Luke 18:16). In hindsight it seems almost prophetic, as if Jesus was speaking of Catholic priests in the church of the future.

The (alleged) facts concerning the origins and founders of

other major world religions are well known, and no attempt has been made to conceal them, so why should this not be the case for Islam also? Judaism, Christianity and Islam are known as “the three Abrahamic religions”, and their followers as “people of the book”. The story of Abraham and Isaac was taught even to very young children in Catholic primary schools. I remember being thoroughly spooked and terrified by this story, that an omniscient and loving father God would test Abraham’s devotion and obedience by ordering him to slaughter his own son. If God was omniscient, why couldn’t he read Abraham’s heart and mind and know whether he was loyal and obedient? After all, Catholic dogma says that God knows every single “impure thought” and registers it for the appropriate future punishment in purgatory or hell!

It’s obvious that Muslims do not want the facts of Muhammad’s life, character and doings known and/or discussed. I suspect that even the majority of “lay Muslims” are ignorant of them, although you’d expect that Muslim clergy should be fully apprised thereof.

It’s not as if there’s a prohibition on publication of material, whether fact, opinion or speculation, embarrassing to other religions: just look at the extensive media coverage of the Catholic Church’s child sexual abuse scandals.

To take another example, when “The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail” was published in 1982, it was not suppressed or banned, but was even serialised in many major newspapers, including the Sydney Morning Herald. It was a blockbuster bestseller. The main thesis of this book was that rather than living his entire life as a bachelor, Jesus was married to Mary Magdalen, they had children, and their distant descendants are alive and among us today, but that knowledge of this was suppressed by the early church, out of fear that its authenticity and authority would be challenged by

Jesus’s own blood descendants. The authors speculate that the term “Holy Grail” was a simple but clever cryptographical way of saying “Holy Blood”, ie a bloodline descending from Jesus and Mary Magdalene, members of which, through the centuries, have occupied some of the royal houses of Europe. The term originally used was “San Grael”, and to disguise the nature of the forbidden knowledge of the hidden bloodline, the words “Sang réal”, ie “blood royal” were split after the “n”, to give “San Grael”, or “San Grail”, ie “Holy Grail”. Another term used in esoteric writings on this subject was “The Red Serpent”, a cryptic reference to the presumptive bloodline. This blasphemous and heretical idea was deeply disturbing and even offensive to many Christians, but the authors did extensive background research and provided a vast bibliography, and the book and its sequels were scholarly works.

If, as Keysar Trad suggests, seekers after knowledge about Islam and the Koran go to a Muslim source for information, they are likely not to remain misinformed, but to become misinformed, by being given a highly sanitised, censored, and even possibly altered version of Muhammad’s life and the contents of the Koran and Hadith. As an example, several years ago Irshad Manji, a Canadian Arabic-literate Muslim woman, and author of the book “The Trouble With Islam”, was a guest on Radio National’s Breakfast program. She related a story about the version of the Koran provided for prayer in a mosque. It had the text in both Arabic and English, on facing pages. One passage said in Arabic something to the effect that: “People must obey Allah and his Messenger in all things.” The English “translation” said: “Women must obey their husbands in all things.” When she challenged the imam over this, he said dismissively: “Allah, husband, same difference.”

There I rest my case.

Islam’s secular spirit

Not many Muslims attended Geert Wilders’ talks, but some who did expressed shock at his depiction of Islam as inherently violent. They counter that the Koran needs to be seen in its historical context, 1400 years ago. Few verses in the Koran specifically sanction violence, and this was in response to attacks from pagan Arabs. The laws on multiple marriages were formed at a time when Islam was replacing Arab pagan practices that allowed men to have dozens of wives. It was in part initially conceived as a way that women who did not have financial support could receive assistance. Neither is the religion characterised by excessive rules; of the 6,280 verses in the Koran only 80 are legal verses.

There are many Western misconceptions about Islam, they say. There is no specific mandate for women to wear headgear. Jihad is principally conceived as a battle with one’s own appetites and inclination to evil. Many cultural practices associated with Islam are actually at odds with the religion, such as female circumcision.

The evidence that Islam necessarily poses a domestic threat in non-Islamic countries is weak. One of the principles of sharia law is that Muslims in countries where they are minorities are required to follow the law of that country.

The links made between Islam and terrorist acts, a favourite topic of Wilders, are dubious. A study by the American political scientist Robert Pape of suicide bombers from 1980 to 2003 found that one third were from secular groups, and more than 90 per cent were acting for nationalistic reasons.

Neither is Islam opposed to the secular state; indeed secularism has mostly been the norm in Muslim countries. Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im, in his book “Islam and the Secular State” comments that enforcing sharia is a betrayal of the Koran’s insistence on voluntary acceptance of Islam. Just as the state should be secure from the misuse of religious authority, he argues, sharia should be freed from the control of the state.



A South American mystery

A local view of the first Argentinean Pope.

by Hector D Allesandro

When the white smoke, or fumata bianca, came out of the Vatican, indicating that the 44th pope had been elected, the shock was that it was the Argentinean Jorge Bergoglio. The papal miter had stunned the world. For the first time in history, the pope was neither Italian, nor European, although, as his name indicates, his ancestry was Italian. Instead, Bergoglio was representing Latin America, which along with Africa, has long been marginalized in the Vatican.

When Pope Benedict, formerly Cardinal Ratzinger, was elected, Bergoglio was his opponent. Benedict's election was only possible because Bergoglio stepped aside.

The first decision of the new Pope who belongs to a Jesuit order (and this is another novelty) was to choose as his name Francisco, after the Italian saint St Francis of Assisi. The name had been

behavior with the military junta. Esquivel has since recanted, saying that Bergoglio had nothing to do with the military. But the documents are available and they prove that Bergoglio at least spoke with Massera, who was one of the constituents of the military Board.

So who is Bergoglio? Well everyone knows that he was an Iron Guard member (Guardia de Hierro), the youth members of a right wing, Catholic nationalist Peronist group. He had clashes with the Kirchner government over gay marriage, abortion, euthanasia, pedophilia. But the visit of the president, Cristina Kirchner to Bergoglio seems to have given him governmental blessing.

It is curious that president Cristina Kirchner told him: "Celestial battles await you, like those of Megafon." The Pope replied: "It is my favourite book. I love Marechal." (Leopold Marechal is an

"Francisco's style has nothing to do with the elitist Benedict, and the choice of him as Pope will bring Latin America to centre stage."

suggested to Bergoglio by a Brazilian colleague. When he took it, he stated that by taking St Francis of Assisi he wanted a poor name for a poor church. It was a statement that bought acclaim from journalists and indicated that his papacy would represent a major departure from Ratzinger.

His subsequent actions ranged from joking with reporters to suggesting a position, without reference to protocol, for the Uruguayan priest Gonzalo Aemilius. Aemilius was responsible, until recently, for the Lyceum Jubilee, a Catholic high school located in an area of poverty and high risk. He has a history of working with young fellows in the area.

This highlights that Bergoglio's mode of operation will be completely different to Ratzinger. As an aside, Bergoglio is said to be a supporter of the Argentine club San Lorenzo while Gonzalo Aemilius is the member number 60,000 of the Uruguayan club Peñarol.

When Bergoglio was named my first reaction was: "Oh, my God! We went from having a member of the Hitler Youth (Ratzinger) to a collaborator with the dictatorship in Argentina."

This latter contention has been run in the newspaper Pagina 12, by the journalist Horacio Verbitsky. He has written on Bergoglio's behavior during the dictatorship, claiming he was responsible for the arrest of two seminarian Jesuits.

Another controversy occurred when the Nobel Prize winning writer Pérez Esquivel described the ambiguity of Bergoglio's

Argentinean writer who is a notorious Peronist. His book is titled "Megafon or the War"). She also mentioned the topic of the Malvinas (Falkland Islands) and the uniting of South American nations.

What to expect from Francisco? The Brazilian writer and political activist Frei Betto says a deep restructuring is needed in the church, which Bergoglio should undertake. These include the topics of chastity, the necessary inclusion of women, the democratizing of decisions, ecclesiastical authority, and the relationship with the other religions. He has to correct some damaging gaffes made by Ratzinger. The Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff also expects an attempt to renew the church to regain lost time.

But the truth is that it is a mystery. It is true that the new Pope has a folksy and friendly attitude. Francisco's style has nothing to do with the elitist Benedict, and the choice of him as Pope will bring Latin America to centre stage. He surely will dedicate much of his action to the continent.

Everyone expects Francisco to do the obvious task, adapt the Catholic church to the twenty-first century, a job that has been pending since the 1960s, when John I tried it with the XXIII Vatican II Council.

But as they say in Latin: RES NON VERBA. "Deeds, not words." That is what we should adjust to, because maybe our desires go well beyond what will be the final realities.

Improving the politics of evolution

Darwin's famous theory can be used to justify anything.

by Cori Wong

A few years ago while teaching a philosophy course on love and sex to a group of young college students, I began to develop a deep suspicion of evolution. Not evolution as a scientific theory but “evolution” as a concept for explaining how we live, or ought to live.

At first I wasn't surprised by statements such as, “I just think that homosexuality is wrong because it's not natural. You can't make babies unless you engage in heterosexual sex, so homosexuality just doesn't make sense ... from an evolutionary standpoint.” I wasn't surprised to hear such things because, after all, comments like this are rather predictable and familiar when it comes to discussions about human sexuality.

However, I eventually became increasingly frustrated with this type of response as the weeks went on. No matter the topic, whether we were talking about gender roles, monogamy, or types of sexual pleasures, students were quick to cite evolution and the inherent naturalness of human sexuality to explain anything and everything. But rather than carefully thinking about these topics, they were effectively choosing to explain them away. By doing so, they failed to recognize how deeply embedded their assumptions were about human nature, biological instincts, and the idea that sexual intercourse serves one primary function—reproduction.

To be clear, my increasing frustration was not directly related to the political judgments that students expressed about the moral rightness or wrongness of things like homosexuality. Instead, I took issue with the unquestioning invocations of evolution that were used to back up those judgments in a way that actually inhibited their ability to critically think, which is a pattern that I have since continued to notice in conversation, on television, and in political debates. I quickly realized that my biggest challenge that semester was not to get my students to think about sexuality. Our level of reflection had to go much deeper and address an even more basic foundation—we needed to start thinking about their dependence on evolution to inform their moral, political, and intellectual perspectives.

One need not throw out evolution as a sound scientific explanation for how life came to be in order to acknowledge that it is quite unhelpful for determining how life should be. At the moment, when the discussion moves from how life came to be to how life should be, evolution meets ethics and politics -- two areas of life with which science typically tries to avoid having intimate relations. Science, we want to believe, is objective, not political. It explores facts about the natural world to explain certain phenomena without being contaminated by messy things

like shifting cultural norms, personal biases, or value-laden social issues. Indeed, it is perhaps precisely because the objectivity of science is assumed to be apolitical that scientific evidence is readily called upon to inform political positions that carry heavy moral weight. This is especially true of evolution, an indisputable scientific fact for many that frequently occupies a very persuasive space in political discourse on a wide range of topics.

What is especially peculiar about the majority of people who use evolution to explain human behavior and justify their moral and political perspectives is that they do not really know much about evolutionary theory in a scientific sense. In this way, “evolution” has become more of a political concept—something that we say, that we think, to which we refer, but that we don't really know. Furthermore, the concept of evolution as we tend to use it can easily be used to support diametrically opposed positions.

For instance, one could say that because heterosexual intercourse is necessary for reproduction we have naturally evolved to have heterosexual relationships. However, one could say also that homosexuality is a naturally occurring phenomena in our population that has not been “bred out” but rather perpetuated by heterosexual couples who have gay and lesbian children, which could be evidence that homosexuality is a form of sociality that benefits the cohesion of the species.

There's always a chance that the scientific truth behind the status of homosexuality remains intact and that one person just has their evolution story completely wrong. More likely than not, however, the fickle yet equally apt evolutionary justification of contradictory perspectives indicates that the evolution story can be spun in a number of directions to support a number of conflicting positions. Because of this, we should be more suspicious of the role that “evolution” plays in our thinking about politics and moral behavior. Ultimately I suspect that we have been thinking wrongly about evolution all along. In fact, when it comes to ethics and politics, we haven't been taking evolution seriously enough.

The Story of Evolution

Most people are familiar with the story of evolution and can rattle off a few keywords, like ‘genetic fitness,’ ‘natural selection,’ and ‘survival of the fittest.’ As an academically trained philosopher I admit that I lack extensive education in the natural sciences. This means that I may be one of those highly-evolved apes but I am also shamefully ignorant about how I actually evolved in relation to the apes or the amoebas or the dodo birds. Fortunately for me, that also means I am as qualified as nearly everyone else who talks about evolution for the sake of politics. Not only do I find this common

dearth of scientific knowledge philosophically interesting, but I also think it is politically significant since it is not necessary to know the biological ins and outs of evolutionary science in order to appreciate how “evolution” functions as a politicized concept in everyday discourse.

Although not a full account of evolution as a scientific theory, the story that most people can tell about “evolution” goes something like this: Life begins with small, rudimentary, simple organisms that contain the basic building blocks of life in their genes. Through a series of many mutations, organisms develop different characteristics and behaviors that enable them to adapt to the external forces that they encounter (such as predators, diseases, bad weather), which increase their ability to survive against these conditions. This is survival of the fittest. Organisms that are too weak, sickly, or poorly adapted to the elements will be killed off or die off on their own.

In other words, nature will run its course and clean out the gene pool of weakness. But it’s not enough to simply live since life ultimately seeks to reproduce itself. For those that survive, then, we can assume that nature has selected them as fit enough to reproduce and pass on their good, strong genes. Evolution, as the

The Values of “Evolution” and the Value of Evolution

In the realm of politics and morality, if we uncritically buy into this narrative about how human nature has evolved and accept it at face value, one only has to take it a half-step further to see how the evolution story can be used to support discriminatory practices, unjust institutions, hateful attitudes and behaviors, and even multiple forms of violence on individual and state levels.

For instance, let’s return to the example of human sexuality. Rather than accounting for the complexity of human sexual experiences—emotions, relationships, insecurities, creativity, playfulness, the cultural significance of certain actions, words, touches, and feelings—an evolutionary mindset skips over these phenomena and focuses on things like biological reproduction to illustrate how heterosexuality assumes and maintains its status as the natural sexual orientation for humans.

Anything else (homosexuality, bisexuality, asexuality) is therefore deemed unnatural, a deviation from normal behavior, which then can (or even should) be regulated, corrected, or extinguished for the sake of the species. Since this type of evolutionary-centric thinking associates what is natural with what is morally good, right, and justifiable, whereas unnatural things

“One need not throw out evolution as a sound scientific explanation for how life came to be in order to acknowledge that it is quite unhelpful for determining how life should be”

story goes, is a wholly natural phenomenon. It may not be pretty and we may not like the idea that some have to suffer and die along the way, but these are the facts of life in the most fundamental sense.

Implicit in this evolutionary story, although seldom fully appreciated by the general public, is the idea that life develops toward a higher goal, toward greater perfection, or at least toward something better. “Evolution” represents a teleological development on a mostly-one-directional path, which allows for recognition of the fact that development can be stunted, thereby leaving some at more “primitive” stages of life. For instance, thanks to the common story of evolution, lower-order animals, organisms with less complex nervous systems, or even certain types of humans can now be deemed “less developed” than others. With this developmental march toward the highest realization of the species, or of life, or whatever else we think we’re talking about, whenever someone or something steps off of the path of higher development, it can also be presumed that they or it will eventually be “corrected” and brought back on track. If they do not adapt, nature will once again run its course and they will eventually be eliminated. “You shouldn’t have stepped off the path in the first place!”

are to be shunned, heterosexism is not considered a matter of political bigotry but rather a plain, “straight-forward” defense of the natural order of things. No pun intended.

Ultimately, the tendency to adopt a moral position based on the idea that what is natural is morally and politically good safeguards an individual from being held accountable for their judgments, actions, and beliefs. In other words, as long as one can claim that their beliefs and actions accord with what is natural, it becomes all too easy to do and say morally and politically problematic things. Although it has become increasingly unpopular to openly ascribe to a political ideology of Social Darwinism, the belief that the strong will outcompete the weak and that this is a natural process, even a sign of progress, can still be implicitly used to legitimate colonization, genocide, cultural imperialism, and vast disparities in economic privilege or access to healthcare.

With respect to individuals and their behaviors, an insistence on evolutionary progress, naturalness, and the will toward biological reproduction can also be used to justify the denigration of people with disabilities who might be viewed as weak or maladaptive, to deny access to contraception for girls and women who allegedly ought to be fulfilling their primary role of reproducing the species, and, of course, to undermine the legitimacy of same-

sex relationships. Still worse is how presumptions about an uncontrollable biological impulse to reproduce and maximize one's gene pool can be used to justify a range of actions from infidelity to rape, all in the interest of "spreading one's seed."

If one spins the evolution story in just the right way, one can deflect moral accountability for just about any atrocity and say, "Hey, if you don't like what I'm saying or doing, I'm not really your problem. These words and actions are backed up by evolutionary science. Don't blame me. Blame nature! Blame evolution!" These examples of moral deflection reveal a disturbingly simple explanation for how some humans can treat their fellows in astoundingly horrible ways. If people believe that their actions accord with what is natural and are in the interest of the evolution of the species as a whole, then they don't actually see what they are doing as horrible at all. It may not be pretty, but it doesn't make sense to say that it is wrong.

In addition to justifying morally and politically problematic

who suffers, who thrives, and the injustices we might inadvertently support that make this the case. In many ways, then, to explain oppressive systems and behaviors in light of "evolution" is to be complicit in the maintenance of this ignorance, upon which the continuation of oppressive systems depends. With this in mind, if the politicized use of "evolution" as an explanatory concept for human nature continues to protect us against assuming moral accountability for our beliefs and actions, then, in the interest of greater intellectual and political freedom, "evolution" is a concept that we would be wise to abandon.

That need not be where the evolution story ends. Although I have highlighted some problems associated with the role that evolution plays in our deliberations about morality and politics, the dramatic irony is that very few people actually take evolution seriously enough. Here's what people do not often say: 'The great thing about our evolution as a species is that we have developed beyond brute instinct'. We often tout that our

"If one spins the evolution story in just the right way, one can deflect moral accountability for just about any atrocity"

practices and beliefs, using evolution as the default justification for human behavior means that "evolution" functions more like an intellectual place holder that, while itself a pretty empty concept, fills an epistemological space making it appear as though there is no reason to question what people assume to already know about so-called "human nature." It detracts attention away from political issues and thwarts our ability to seriously consider the mechanisms of ongoing systems of oppression.

Social forces and historical institutions like ethnocentric racism, capitalistic exploitation, compulsory heterosexuality, and gender policing are less readily recognizable in terms of their actual operation and more quickly explained away with reference to "evolution." And because evolution is a fact of the natural world, whatever forms of oppression might be accounted for in terms of "evolution" are also naturalized in a way that suggests that this is just how things are and will continue to be. In other words, the status quo is presumed to have come about "naturally," all on its own—our current norms and state of affairs have not been produced through historically and systemically maintained economic inequality, social limitations, violence and terrorism, or even scientific discovery itself.

Understood in this way, defaulting to evolutionary explanations means that we remain ignorant of the social, cultural, historical, and political aspects of our experience that shape how we behave,

rationality, creativity, imagination, and curiosity are powerful characteristics that set us apart from other animals. And as things like vaccinations, rocket ships, and atomic bombs evidence, our cultures, arts, inventions, technologies, and our intricate brains present us with opportunities to believe, act, and behave in highly sophisticated ways. Rather than being fatalistically compelled by thoughtless impulses, we can live deliberately, consciously, and with intention, according to our own set of created values. We can actively choose our present. We can purposefully construct our future. In fact, although we might prefer to not own up to it, we already do.

The scientific truth behind evolution is, in reality, a game-changer. Thanks to our long history of evolving, adapting, and developing into the beings that we are today, we are responsible for the state of affairs within which we currently live. The task before us, then, could be one of living in ways that don't undermine our capacities as a species, of choosing norms and constructing cultures that don't underestimate the extent to which we really can do better, and of adhering to moral and political values that don't thwart the actualization of greater justice and flourishing. Rather than being used to justify our shameful moral failings, the evolution story can be told to raise the expectations we set for ourselves.

Love knots

Some brain teasers about relationships.

by Massimo Pigliucci

Recently I attended a talk by Ronnie de Sousa, a philosopher at The University of Toronto, that had the somewhat unusual, almost oxymoronic, title of “Love and Reason” (as opposed to, say, Love or Reason). It turned out to be a fascinating tour de force, ranging from the Countess of Champagne and her 1176 verdict on the nature of love, to cognitive scientist’s Helen Fisher studies of the chemical underpinning of different aspects of love.

Apparently, back in 1176, a “Court of Love” was established — presided by the Countess herself — to address the question of “Whether love can have a place between spouses?”; whether the very concept of love is compatible with matrimony. Here is the verdict:

“We state and affirm that love cannot extend its power to a married couple, for lovers give one another everything freely, without obligation or any necessity; conjugal partners, by contrast, are committed to doing one another’s will and not to deny anything to one another.”

So there you have it, apparently duty and inclination are not compatible, a very stern, Kantian view of things. Indeed, Kantian interpretations of love were a major target of de Sousa, who clearly distinguished reasons of love from reasons to love. For instance, most people would not accept “I love her because she is rich” as a good reason for love, just like we would find it weird, within the context of a work of art, if someone were to say “it’s beautiful because it’s expensive.”

De Sousa presented his version of the famous Euthyphro dilemma, which, in its original Platonic context, represents the most powerful argument for the irrelevance of gods to morality. The love-related version of the dilemma goes something like this. Is what we love of value to us because we love it, or do we love it because it has value? Be careful how you answer it, because either horn of the dilemma carries pretty logical consequences.

The first possibility is tautologically self-referential, and would lead us to admit, among other unsavory things, that it is perfectly sensible to love a monstrously evil individual (or to love anyone, really). The second option raises the question of fungibility: let’s say that I think I love someone because she is smart, beautiful, and of good character. Well, there is always the possibility of eventually meeting someone else who is even more so in any (or all) of said dimensions. That being the case, wouldn’t it make sense to “trade up,” so to speak? Switch to the newer, better model? While a distressing number of people do in fact do so without a thought, it seems a bit callous (not to mention extremely un-Kantian) to treat someone who we allegedly love as if s/he were a car or a television set, no?

De Sousa deals with the problem of fungibility by introducing Helen Fisher’s famous studies on the cognitive science of three distinguishable kinds of love: lust, romantic love (“limerence”), and attachment. The first type, lust, is characterized by being fairly object-generic, meaning that we can lust after a (great) variety of people, though of course even lust is somewhat discriminating in its targets. Lust drives sexual intercourse, and at the hormonal level is underpinned by androgens (especially testosterone) and estrogens. It typically has a time span measured in hours or minutes.

Limerence is unlike lust; the object of romantic love is unique, indeed obsessively so. Its function is to focus one’s energy and time on a particularly good candidate for long-term attachment, and it is chemically underpinned by catecholamins, hormones such as norepinephrine and dopamine. This phase can continue for weeks or months, and up to 2–3 years, depending on the people and the circumstances.

Finally -- if a couple gets that far -- we have long-term attachment. This is not focused on sex, though it can in fact arouse intense emotional distress. It is what allows people to raise families, which means it is evolutionarily crucial, in a species such as ours, where long-term parental investment is vital for the survival and well being of the offspring. The chemistry here is dominated by oxytocin and vasopressin, and the duration is indefinite, ranging from several years to a lifetime.

De Sousa argues that only lust is really fungible, that only limerence seems to be exclusive, and that only attachment has a significant historical component (meaning the unique, shared history of the people involved). If he is right, what makes long-term love (the sort that leads to attachment) non-fungible is not the exclusivity of the love object, people are capable of feelings of attachment toward more than one person, but rather the uniquely historical, unrepeatable, series of events that characterize the relationship. The longer one’s history of love with another person, the less fungible that person becomes — even though there may be another individual around the corner who is smarter, more attractive.

He concludes that the contingency of the circumstances that give rise to relationships makes them deeply a-rational (so long, Kant!). They derive from chance priority of acquaintance, pheromone compatibility, genetic fatality, transference, and habit (i.e. they have many causes). None of the above mentioned factors count as reasons. It pretty much kills any rationalist, Kantian approach to the philosophy of love. And that, my friends, is no small accomplishment.

Is global warming our problem?

We may be beating ourselves up for nothing.

by Stanley S Schaetzel

Global warming is real. The phenomenon is largely anthropogenic and its progress, plotted against time, follows the shapes of curves showing the rising population of the globe and the development of industry which started in Europe in the mid-1700s, became world-wide in the mid-1800s and exploded after World War II.

The mean temperature of the atmosphere is driven by solar output, variations in the Earth's orbit and its inclination to the ecliptic, the albedo of its surface, particulates in the atmosphere (clouds, volcanic ash, wind-carried and industrial dust), presence of 'greenhouse' gases (water –as vapour, methane, carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide and various organo-chlorides), presence of methane-belching ruminants. There are secondary effects of rising atmospheric temperature such as changes of Earth's albedo (melting of snow and ice cover), reduction of absorption of CO₂ by oceans due to their increase in temperature, release of methane from permafrost and clathrates; changes in absorption of CO₂ by vegetation due to deforestation and desertification, weather extremes and so on.

The atmospheric CO₂ concentration has risen from a stable pre-industrial level of 280 parts per million (ppm) to the current figure of almost 400 ppm in the Northern Hemisphere (May 2013).

of the world's industry are situated in the Northern Hemisphere. It follows that over 95% of sources of anthropocentric global warming are sited in the Northern Hemisphere. Due to reduced equatorial mixing (Hadley Cells along the equator) there is a reduced transfer of air masses between the two hemispheres. The Southern Hemisphere's CO₂ concentration is always several ppm less than that of the Northern one.

This leads to another fact also rarely mentioned. Australians live in a net absorbing CO₂ hemisphere. As a hemisphere we produce only some 6% of the world's greenhouse gases, but we absorb more CO₂ than we produce. Not only is the production of CO₂ greater in the Northern Hemisphere, its absorption is significantly smaller. This appears obvious when we look at the distribution of continents on our globe. Some 77% of land lies in the Northern Hemisphere. The remaining 23% in the Southern Hemisphere is located mostly between the Equator and latitude of 400, where vegetation is evergreen and absorbs carbon dioxide all the year round. In the North, with the exception of equatorial Africa, most of the land is sited above the tropic of Cancer, where the vegetation is dormant for at least five months of the year, during which time it does not absorb carbon dioxide. This greatly contributes to the difference between the Hemispheres.

“we must avoid extreme measures, like closing coal-fired power stations”

It is generally accepted that, if human activity does not change and carbon dioxide concentration reaches 450 ppm (expected before 2050), global temperature will rise by 2°C, sea levels will rise by over 60 cm, climatic zones will move and thousands of species will become extinct. Several tipping activities will begin, releasing methane from permafrost and from clathrates in the oceans.

Thus far we have been talking in global terms. The obvious conclusion is that humanity must reduce the generation of greenhouse gases in order to avoid a potentially irreversible situation by reducing our dependence on sequestered carbon in coal, oil, gas, shale, wood and straw, stopping destruction of old-growth forests and reducing the number of ruminants.

It is often mentioned that Australia is, after the United States, the second largest CO₂ producer per head of population. In global terms this statistic is almost meaningless due to our position in the Southern Hemisphere.

What is rarely, if ever, mentioned in discussions about global warming is the differences between the two hemispheres. They are significant: some 93% of the world's population and about 95%

The effect of vegetation is visibly demonstrated by the oscillating monthly levels of CO₂, on records from the NOAA observatory at Mauna Loa

This does not mean that Australia should ignore or remain inactive concerning global warming. But we must avoid extreme measures, like closing coal-fired power stations or applying carbon taxes. We must concentrate on using wisely our abundant assets (sunshine, wind, geothermal, hydro and nuclear sources) and research methods of carbon sequestration. We should avoid Mickey Mouse solutions that do not provide a sustained base load. We should have our mind open in relation to the safe use of nuclear power by using lithium as a fuel. And we should not allow the coal and gas we export to be counted (as they often are) as pollution created in, or by, Australia.

It is also obvious, although seldom mentioned, that global warming is directly related to the world's population of the world. World population growth is on a much steeper curve than the CO₂ curves from the Northern Hemisphere. It might be time to start thinking seriously about geo-engineering.

9/11's Threat to science

Persistent doubts about the official explanation of September 11 are creating a scientific controversy.

The cataclysmic events of September 11, 2001 have profoundly shaped the West's approach to foreign policy and internal security. But there may be other collateral damage – to the practice of science. There is certainly some troubling physical evidence. Most problematic is the collapse of Building 7, a 47 storey skyscraper that was part of the World Trade centre complex. This building was not hit by planes, and was only damaged by a small amount of debris. There was a fire on the top floors, but it appeared to have gone out when the skyscraper came down.

Dr Paul Craig Roberts, former Assistant Secretary of the US Treasury and Associate Editor of the Wall Street Journal, writes that the 47 storey building fell in about seven seconds, indicating it was in free fall. “Buildings cannot enter free fall unless controlled demolition has removed all resistance to the collapsing floors.” (Amusingly, the BBC appears to have reported the collapse of Building 7 before it happened, suggesting that a news feed was mistimed; the footage is on Youtube).

The response from many scientists and engineers has been concerted and sustained. Architect Richard Gage formed Architects and Engineers for 9/11 Truth, which has 1,700 members. They have consistently argued that there is, at the very least, a strong reason to re-examine the physical evidence, which they claim indicates the buildings were demolished.

According to John McMurtry, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Guelph, Canada, writing in the “Journal of 9/11 studies”, the practice of science has been dangerously compromised. “What about the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) verifying the official account of the building collapses?” he writes. “Certainly a public scientific institution accountable to scientific method and open inspection of data and conclusions would better get to the truth of the matter than a 9-11 Commission. Here, above all, one would have hoped for publicly reliable science that once distinguished U.S. civilization.”

He comments that the approach of the official inquiry was to frame out any other result than the desired one while describing the process in exalted terms as adhering to ‘rigorous scientific standards’.

McMurtry is one of many critics of the quality of the scientific investigation. Another effort to apply scrutiny has been provided by the so-called Consensus Panel, 22 expert panelists who looked for the “best evidence” about what happened. They used a technique known as the Delphi method, which is based on selecting the best available evidence. The method is not infallible, but it is one way of getting a multi-disciplinary picture of what occurred. The Panel included professors of chemistry, physics, aeronautics, and

engineering; air force and commercial pilots; journalists; authors and film makers; an aircraft accident investigator; a public health officer; a lawyer; and a politician. It arrived at consensus on 13 points of evidence.

The Panel questions the claim that fires destroyed the Twin Towers. “Experience, based on physical observation and scientific knowledge, shows that office fires, even with the aid of jet fuel, could not have reached temperatures greater than 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit (1,000 degrees Celsius). But multiple scientific reports show that metals in the Twin Towers melted. These metals included steel, iron, and molybdenum – which normally do not melt until they reach 2,700°F (1482°C), 2,800°F (1538° C), and 4,753°F (2,623°C), respectively.

“Huge sections of the perimeter steel columns, weighing many tons, were ejected horizontally as far as 500 to 600 feet, as seen in multiple photographs and maps. These high-speed ejections of heavy structural members cannot be explained by the fires, the pull of gravity, or the airplane impacts (which had occurred about an hour earlier).”

The Consensus Panel also found that the best evidence indicates an explosive, nano-thermite, was discovered in the wreckage of the Twin Towers. “Unreacted nano-thermitic material, ‘which can be tailored to behave as an incendiary (like ordinary thermite), or as an explosive,’ was found in four independently collected samples of the World Trade Centre dust.”

The Panel argued that mathematician David Chandler produced the best evidence about the collapse of Building 7. His analysis indicated that it came down in absolute free fall for a period of about 2.25 seconds. The Panel is critical of NIST's claim that Building 7 was destroyed by fire, noting that this had never occurred before with a steel frame building.

“If fire were to cause such a building to collapse, the onset would be gradual, whereas the videos show that Building 7, after being completely stable, suddenly came down in virtual free fall. This building's straight-down, symmetrical collapse, with the roofline remaining essentially horizontal, shows that all 82 of Building 7's support columns had been eliminated by the time the top started down.”

The Consensus Panel also looked at the political and military command on the day, concluding that the 9/11 Commission gave “false accounts of the behavior of six officials occupying positions from which they could have affected the outcomes of the 9/11 attacks.” The officials examined were: the president, George W Bush, Dick Cheney, vice president, Donald Rumsfeld, the secretary of Defense, General Richard Myers, acting chairman of the joint

chiefs of staff, General Hugh Shelton, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff and Brigadier General Montague Winfield, deputy director of operations. The Panel claims that the official account of their activities should be re-examined.

Much has been made, and is continuing to be made, of the political implications of doubts about what happened with the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. Less noticed has been the effect on the practice of science. Roberts writes that the first scientist to make an effective and compelling argument questioning the official account was physics professor Steven Jones at Brigham Young University.

“Jones said that explosives brought down the twin towers. He made a good case. For his efforts, he was pressured to resign his tenured position. I wondered whether the federal government had threatened (the university’s) research grants or whether patriotic trustees and alumni were the driving force behind Jones’ expulsion.

“Regardless, the message was clear to other university based experts: ‘Shut up or we’ll get you.’

“Jones was vindicated when chemist Niels Harrit of the University of Copenhagen in Denmark reported unequivocally that the scientific team in which he participated found nano-thermite in the residue of the twin towers. This sensational finding was not mentioned in the US print and TV media to my knowledge.”

then fully collapse at freefall acceleration. Instead, NIST attends solely and exclusively to the prior time of the planes hitting the buildings and of “collapse initiation”. If it does this, it appears to be “scientific” while in fact it is the opposite by exclusion of the most relevant data.”

McMurtry describes the process as one of repressive elimination. “All that can conflict with the official story is erased – not merely by mass removal, seizure or destruction of evidence, but by blocking out the very time frame within which the explosions, outward projectiles, and total collapse occurred. The conclusion (the planes did it) is thus already built into the first premise of the investigation (investigate the impact of the planes and the initiation of destruction, but not the full period of destruction).

“Logically speaking, it is the ancient fallacy of *petitio principii* – assuming what is required to be proved in the pseudo proof of it. Here the vicious circle is dressed in technological-scientific uniform.”

The Australian chemist Frank Legge, formerly co-editor of the “Journal of 9/11 Studies” questions the official explanation that Building 7 collapsed because of fire. He measured the downward acceleration of the roof, and found it was “very close to free fall”, concluding that only the complete severing of the support columns could account for such motion. This could only be done with explosives, he asserts.

“The message was clear to other university based experts: ‘Shut up or we’ll get you’”

McMurtry believes that the “official story” has been used to erase any scientific objections. “Nothing gets through which conflicts with the assumptions of the reigning story of reality. Indeed, there is a rule against recognising this rule as well as against recognising the rule itself. This syntax of thought repression and control is always at work in 9-11 thinking.”

McMurtry explains how he believes both philosophy and science are being undermined. “Materials science and technology in service to the system must perform at a different professional level. They must appear to be upholding the obligations of scientific method and not cooking conclusions in accordance with a predetermined story or value program.

“How can NIST specifically explain the collapse of the fireproofed World Trade Centre towers to get the results that support the official story and still remain scientific? This seems an impossible task until one recognises the ruling meta assumption across domains which frames out all inconsistent data a priori.

“The NIST follows in line by eliminating the time period within which all the physical phenomena conflicting with the ruling myth occur – namely, the period of time during which the buildings explode into dust and iron-rich microspheres and so on, and

“The evidence for explosives in controlled demolition of all three buildings is convincing, and the failure of NIST to consider this possibility is prima facie evidence of corruption,” claims Legge.

“The north face had little fire while the south face, according to the proponents of the official explanation, had severe fire. It is inescapable that if one side of a tall steel structure is heated to the point of failure, while the other side is not, the structure must lean toward the heated side. World Trade Centre 7 did not lean however, it just came straight down.”

McMurtry concludes that both NIST and the 9-11 Commission have undermined the practice of science. “The explanation that is alone consistent with the evidence – controlled demolition – is eliminated in the NIST study. Predictably, no media has reported one step of the structure of delusion, the supreme interests in sustaining it, or the real science of explaining the suppressed facts.

“We may witness here the collapse of logic and scientific method along with the collapse of the buildings. When logic and scientific method are themselves suspended by the U.S. National Institute of Technology and Standards, we may observe a derangement deeper than 9-11 itself – the collapse of U.S. scientific civilization at its official core.”



The wisdom of polls

How collective thought has a life of its own.

by Tim van Gelder

Some years back I began an academic career obsessed with a long-standing metaphysical challenge, that of proving once and for all that there are no minds separate from the rest of the material world. Or, put another way, that minds were “nothing but” brains and bodies doing what they do. I was, in other words, a bog-standard Australian materialist. The angle I was exploring was that the then relatively new discipline of artificial intelligence could help us understand what minds are in a purely material world.

These days I think of that kind of materialism as not wrong, but as, in the Austrian physicist Wolfgang Pauli’s phrase, “not even wrong”. That is, as only arising within such a simplistic and muddled metaphysical and linguistic framework that it is not even a serious candidate for truth or falsity – a bit like claiming to have discovered a fifth element alongside earth, air, fire and water. (That doesn’t stop it being boldly embraced by retiring neuroscientists, who seem to think that MRI machines can detect the absence of Cartesian ghosts.)

These days I take seriously a doctrine my younger philosophical self would have treated with utter contempt. It is that over and above individual minds there are group or collective minds, which can have beliefs that can be true, or false, or even wise.

I can understand you might be somewhat skeptical of this, so let me try to win you over with a few examples.

James Surowiecki opens his well-known, and excellent, book “The Wisdom of Crowds” by describing a paper by the great scientist Francis Galton, concerning a competition at an English show sometime around 1906. An ox had been put on display, and observers were invited to try to win prizes by guessing how much the ox would weigh once slaughtered and dressed. About 800 guesses were submitted, some by experts such as butchers and others by ordinary show-goers. Galton collected the guesses and found that while most individual guesses were a fair way off, the median guess – the only guess not “being condemned as too high or too low by a majority” – was out by less than 1 per cent.

It seems natural to say that the “crowd” had a collective view of the weight that happened to be remarkably accurate, as both Galton and Surowiecki remarked. It illustrates some important features of collective views.

They need not be “consensus”, or even majority, views. Most punters disagreed with each other, and their individual opinions differed from what turned out to be the collective view. Indeed, as the case illustrates, sometimes few or even none of the individual opinions agree exactly with the collective view.

In order to be formed or known, collective views always require

some suitable process. Unlike ordinary human minds, collectives are unable to directly introspect. In the Galton ox case, the process consisted of the punters making their individual guesses, writing them on cards, the cards were collected and ordered, and the median chosen. It was a relatively simple process, but without that process or something similar, there wouldn’t have been any collective view.

Metaphysically, the collective mind is all the individual minds as temporarily bound into some level of coherence by the process in which they participate (perhaps unwittingly). A useful analogy here is the notion of a “super-organism.” A colony of bees, for example, is an organism or living thing in its own right, made up of (in a healthy colony) tens of thousands of bees. The colony senses its environment, regulates its own temperature, maintains a food supply and shelter, protects itself from invaders, and reproduces itself, sometimes multiple times in a season. A collective mind is a coordinated swarm of individual minds, just as a bee colony is a coordinated bevy of individual bees.

Collective minds can be wise. Indeed, under the right circumstances they can be wiser than most, or even all, of their members, experts included. Consider another example, that of reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. It is reasonable for the world to ask climate science to inform us of the realities of climate change. This is not done by asking one or two renowned climate scientists what they think, let alone one or two “skeptical” scientists. Nor is it done by a survey or poll. Rather, there is an extraordinarily elaborate drafting and review process with a dozen major steps with input of various kinds from hundreds of climate scientists, resulting in a report that represents their collective wisdom even though any individual scientist might disagree with certain parts of it. The lengthy and complex process is used to ensure, as far as humanly possible, that the final report embodies the wisdom of the profession as a whole. This is how climate science makes up – and speaks – its mind.

The collective wisdom of climate science, of course, is that the planet is heating rapidly, that humans are causing this heating, and that it has dire implications for humans and other species.

How should we respond? This is not a question for climate science, though individual climate scientists may have an opinion. It is a matter of policy, and such matters are generally decided by governments. A fundamental principle of democracy is that important government decisions should reflect the will of the people. This presupposes that the people’s will can be somehow formulated and brought to bear on government decision making.

What then is the will of the Australian people on how we should

respond to climate change? How can this be determined? By what process can 22 million Australians, collectively, introspect?

A common idea is that an opinion poll or survey can reveal what Australians think. In some sense, this is true. However, as political scientists have been pointing out for decades, standard polls have severe drawbacks if we really want to understand what people think – or rather, if we want to understand what the people really think. Polls suffer from a range of technical difficulties such as selection biases and framing effects. And they have some more profound limitations.

A typical Australian poll gathers the views of around 1000 individuals and reports results in percentage terms, e.g. 61 per cent have Candidate X as their preferred Prime Minister. It thus presents a mere numerical tabulation of individual viewpoints. Compare this with the IPCC process, or even Galton’s study, in which diverse individual views are synthesized into single, collective views. By this standard, polls don’t peer into the collective mind at all.

Worse, what polls ask for, and get, is whatever the respondents happen to think at the moment of polling, regardless of how much they happen to know about the issue, or the extent to which they may have reflected on it. In a poll, every individual view is treated equally, regardless of merit.

In short, polls are almost useless if our interest is in identifying the collective wisdom of Australians on critical issues. An alternative to standard polling is deliberative polling of the kind described by James Fishkin in his important book “When the People Speak”. Deliberative polls typically bring a representative sample of the population together for a few days of deliberation, informed by input from relevant experts. The participants are polled before and after, and usually show a substantial shift towards more reasonable views.

Deliberative polling comes considerably closer to generating genuine collective wisdom than standard polling, but suffers severe drawbacks of a different kind. Running a deliberative poll takes much time, effort and money – major reasons why it very rarely happens.

The fact is, in Australia, we almost never know what the collective wisdom of the Australian people actually is. Our democracy is perennially flying blind.

What we ideally would have is a process which:

- Generates authentic collective wisdom
- Does so for all major issues all the time
- Involves large-scale, representative participation
- Is open to any concerned citizen
- Is wholly independent of any government, corporate, political or religious control.

No such process exists now or has ever existed. However, a

project initiated in 2011, YourView Australia (www.yourview.org.au), has adopted this ideal process as its destination and is already up and running.

YourView is a virtual (online) forum open to any Australian. YourView raises major public issues such as legalisation of same-sex marriage. It aims to provide for each such issue a short “clarifier” purporting to provide the bare minimum one would need to know in order to have a reasonable opinion on the topic: what the issue is, some basic facts, and the key arguments for and against. It enables users to vote on issues and engage in group deliberation through activities such as commenting, replying, and rating.

Based on this activity, YourView calculates, in real time, the collective wisdom on each issue (or a version thereof). At the top level, the calculation is simple: it takes the votes of the users on an issue, and weights those votes by the credibility of each user. The more credible the participant, the more influence they have on the collective wisdom.

A user’s credibility is a measure of how thoughtful and constructive they are as a participant on the YourView forum. It is calculated on-site. YourView captures as much data as possible about a participant’s interaction with the site, including how others rate that participant’s contributions. It then crunches the data using algorithms designed to identify the extent to which the participant is exhibiting what philosophers call epistemic virtues. For example, a classic epistemic virtue is open-mindedness – a willingness to pay attention to, and acknowledge merit in, opinions different from your own. YourView has various ways of tracking open-mindedness. Other epistemic virtues include: independence, cogency, and flexibility. Through their activities on the site, users accumulate (or lose) credibility points over time. This tends to encourage constructive engagement.

YourView synthesises individual views into a collective viewpoint, and, by privileging epistemic virtues, generates something more deserving of the name “wisdom” than the results of a standard poll.

At the moment, YourView can’t claim to be computing the collective wisdom of Australians generally. Its user community is too small and unrepresentative, and its algorithms are only in early stages of development. However, with sufficient resources, dedication, and luck, these problems should be surmountable. Our lofty ambition is that by 2020, YourView, or some similar platform, be accepted as constituting an ideal process of the kind outlined above, and further, that it occupy a place in the Australian political landscape alongside and comparable to (though not displacing) standard opinion polling. YourView would, in short, give our view of a real role in government.

“A collective mind is a coordinated swarm of individual minds”

Keating, Murdoch v Fairfax

by Kevin Childs

Quick trivia quiz. Which distinguished newspaper editor was sacked for publishing a rational editorial at Easter? John Pringle, a veteran of the (then) Manchester Guardian, The Observer and the (pre Murdoch) London Times was brought back to again edit the Sydney Morning Herald in 1965, having been editor for five years in the 50s. He was soon in trouble with his boss, the patrician Warwick Fairfax, however, for running pieces on the monarchy and film censorship. He even printed two reviews of Hair, then a controversial musical.

But his Easter editorial which, took a humanist rather than a religious approach, was the final straw. ‘...from time immemorial...’ moaned chairman Warwick, the Easter editorial had been on Easter’s significance. He should have been consulted if the tradition were to be broken. To adopt a humanist or rationalist approach can only suggest that the Herald is less concerned with religion as a moral force and less convinced that it is an essential part of the basis of the values on which civilisation depends’.

Pringle objected to the chairman’s interference and was gone within three weeks. As Warwick would say, he could tell his editors anything and they would do it. He removed another editor after a devastating expose of the Vietnam war, saying that without strong action a communist line might suddenly appear.

These are among many entertaining yarns in Colleen Ryan’s racy little account of the implosion of a once great and powerful newspaper dynasty. What remains is a shell. Warwick’s third wife, Lady Mary, is now living, Miss Havisham-like, alone in her nineties in the family’s harbourside mansion, Fairwater, between Double Bay and Point Piper. Mary tried to have her son, ‘young’ Warwick, seize the family business, but instead he all but destroyed it, blowing \$2 billion.

For an on-the-ground reporter such as Ryan, this had many consequences, not the least being at one stage unable to hire a car for an urgent news story because the company was in receivership. Cash, not credit, was needed.

Colleen Ryan put in more than 35 years at Fairfax. She is a triple Walkley Award winner and former editor of the Australian Financial Review. She peels off the masks that have been used to hide the shonks, fraudsters, rogues and mere fools who helped make the families of Packer and Murdoch even more wealthy and powerful while bringing down the newspapers that had a noble role in shaping Australia.

Those much talked of ‘rivers of gold’, the classified ads that paid for quality journalism, could have been saved if the digital start-ups that put jobs, homes and cars online had been seized when

they were available. ‘Incompetent management and lacklustre boards let them go,’ writes Ryan. The site Seek is alone worth two and half times all of Fairfax and has 70 per cent of job ads.

Now one journalist in five is gone, the emaciated papers struggle, the cant and hypocrisy from board members continues and Gina Rinehart, the unlovely face of capitalism has her mate, ‘Hungry Jack’ Cowin, the billionaire purveyor of burgers, KFC ‘food’ and Domino’s pizzas, on the board. At least Cowin maintains some traditions: Warwick Fairfax would ship his Rolls-Royce over to show off in England, foul-mouthed Kerry Packer sent furniture from Sydney to his London hotel suite so he felt comfortable and Cowin’s 70th birthday bash in Saint-Tropez saw his \$50 million super yacht moored near his rented villa, with Gina suitably ensconced nearby.

Roger Corbett, the former Woolworths chief executive, now chairs Fairfax. He is also on the Reserve Bank board. Ryan says he prays before making decisions that confront his Anglican faith. One would wonder whether his prayers are answered, since he is also on the board of Walmart, the notorious cut-price US chain. As Bloomberg notes:

“2005

A California jury orders Walmart to pay \$172 million in damages to 116,000 workers for failing to provide meal breaks. Walmart appeals and later agrees to pay between \$77 million and \$152 million.

2006

A Pennsylvania jury orders Walmart to pay \$78 million in damages to 187,000 workers for failing to pay for off-the-clock work. On appeal, a judge raises the award to \$188 million, which is upheld.

2008

Walmart agrees to pay \$54 million to settle a Minnesota class action over off-the-clock work. Two weeks after the Minnesota settlement, Walmart agrees to pay as much as \$640 million to settle 63 class actions over unpaid work.

2009

Walmart agrees to pay \$40 million to settle a Massachusetts class action by 87,000 employees for off-the-clock work and shortened breaks.

2010

Walmart agrees to pay as much as \$86 million to settle a California class action over failing to pay vacation and overtime wages to 232,000 workers. Walmart did not concede that the wages remained unpaid, according to Reuters.

As chairman, Corbett talked more about Woolies than about Fairfax. As a board member he had been rude, bombastic and cutting. But, like the old Warwick Fairfax, a good Christian.

The book has details that should chill anyone interested in the free flow of news and opinion. One example: Kerry Packer and Rupert Murdoch agreeing in London in 1995 that Rupert would take over Fairfax, sell his papers to his Australian chief who would be 'independent', while Packer would get a clean run in free-to-air TV, with Murdoch selling out of Seven and buying 15 per cent of Nine. Prime Minister Paul Keating stopped that, however.

Yet like John Howard and many other politicians who meddle with the media, Keating was a malign and incompetent force. Enraged about Times on Sunday pieces on his friendship with the dubious Warren Anderson, Keating acted like a wounded tiger. As the moribund Herald and Weekly Times group and Fairfax slumbered, Packer and Murdoch were briefed by Keating. Murdoch was able to seize two-thirds of the nation's metropolitan newspaper circulation, grabbing about 40 papers while flogging off his Channel Ten interests. Packer picked up \$1 billion by offloading his network to Alan Bond. And Fairfax? It was preoccupied with the debt incurred in buying the Syme family out of The Age. And it had bought, of all publications, the venerable house organ of the British Right The Spectator, as well as setting up new magazines, such as BRW.

Spooked by Murdoch's coup, Fairfax stupidly tried to buy Channel Seven in Melbourne. It won, but Keating's new laws meant that it would have to sell the channel or The Age. Keating's revenge was complete. He is quoted as saying he wanted the HWT broken up and Fairfax hurt. '...his conversation is littered with threats, references to getting even, doing deals and assisting "our crowd" in business, the press and within the ALP,' said a report to the Fairfax board by the formidable journalist Max Suich. Keating saw old money or establishment money as dead money stultifying the economy and preferred the new money of Murdoch and Packer to have opportunities to knock off old money. It was a sort of use of capitalism to maintain class warfare.

Then came the move of that 'silly little bastard', 'young' Warwick to buy out Fairfax and take it private – just two months before the huge stockmarket crash in late 1987. WA 'businessman' Laurie Connell was to be rewarded with \$100 million if the buyout worked. In the background, as Ryan explains, was resentment by Mary Fairfax at her late husband's humiliation at the hands of Fairfax family members.

Ryan's book is marred by some cliches, lawns are 'manicured', harbourside restaurants are 'opulent', change sweeps through the industry 'like a tsunami' -- or is 'a tsunami of technological change'. And how is a pantomime 'book ended'? There are mistakes: 'flack' instead of 'flak', she talks of two spies in the Petrov defection, Fairfax's ill-fated free paper Melbourne Express was a late-morning paper not an evening sheet and Packer's furniture shipping anecdote is repeated. There is awkward writing: buy up instead of just buying, the hideous word 'authored' is employed, people do 'jailtime' instead of going to jail and there is the occasional proofreading failure, such as 'nime o'clock'.

That aside, it is interesting to reflect that the \$2 billion lost by Fairfax is only double that lost in just one deal by the now much lauded James Packer and his sidekick Lachlan Murdoch, on a business called One.Tel. But of course it wasn't their own money and hasn't restricted their spending, or their hubris.

In writing of one Fairfax operative, Ryan sums up her story: 'It is tempting to turn a great newspaper man into a true hero. But none of them really are. It can be a grubby business. Like politics, there are a lot of compromises and deals involved. And, inevitably, betrayals'.

Perhaps the greatest betrayal is that of Keating in allowing Murdoch such control. But those who ran Fairfax also betrayed a trust when they blindly held that the world began and ended in newsprint.

"Fairfax, The Rise and Fall" by Colleen Ryan. The Miegunyah Press, 2013.

Belief meets unbelief

by Ken Wright

A conversation about faith between a Bishop and his atheist son: this is how the subtitle accurately describes "Beloved Father, Beloved Son", by Graeme and Jonathan Rutherford. It was with some reluctance that I undertook the task of reviewing this book. Against expectation, however, I found reading it an enjoyable experience.

Between them, the authors are very well read in Christian apologetics, biblical criticism and philosophy. What gives their book its distinctive appeal is their mutual love and respect. Theirs is the kind of dialogue that can only spring from a determination to

understand and appreciate the position of the other.

The book is divided into chapters with such headings as "The Bible – God's truth or human construct?", "Why bad stuff happens – random suffering" and "Does morality make sense without God?" Within each chapter, Graeme and Jonathan present their respective views and responses at length. Readers of this journal will not be surprised that I find the arguments of the atheist son more convincing than those of his Christian father.

Graeme is no fundamentalist. He is well aware of the errors and contradictions to be found in the sixty-six books that comprise the

Bible. It is difficult not to be moved by his struggle to reconcile the findings of biblical scholarship with his conviction that God reveals himself through that collection of writings.

He describes his approach to Bible reading as one of “prayerful rumination”. He claims to follow the practice of some Benedictine monks in employing “a pre-critical, allegorical approach to the text rather than taking it too literally,” (p.64) and he tries to explain that approach by an analogy:

“As the speech of God however, the Bible should be studied like no other book, allowing its words to lodge in our minds and hearts. . . . It’s a bit like sucking a lozenge when you have a sore throat! You don’t chew it up quickly but savour it and allow its healing properties to remain in your mouth and do their healing work for as long as possible. So it is with our ruminating on God’s word.” (p.59)

The resurrection of Jesus is an essential foundation stone of Graeme’s belief system, yet he concedes that it defies historical investigation:

“... the Resurrection was an event utterly unlike anything else in history, an event utterly uncaused by any human or historical process, and therefore beyond the historian’s capability of finally nailing it down.” (p.75)

Why bad things happen in a world created by a good God is a question that has troubled Christian thinkers over the centuries. Many apologists have argued that, when innocent beings suffer, this is the result of the actions of humans to whom God has granted

free will to choose between good and evil. That answer does not wash for Graeme, since:

“Human choice is not involved in the patterns of evolution by predation, death and extinction. Nor is it involved when the movement of tectonic plates gives rise to deadly tsunamis.” (p.50)

In the end, he abandons the quest for a solution:

“What faith offers is not a logical answer to the problem of the massive and often bizarre suffering in our world but ‘a resolve never to abandon the struggle to follow the path of love’.” (p.51)

On morality without God, Graeme muses:

“Granted, it is not impossible to be good without God, but my own struggles for moral energy lead me to think it must surely be harder!” (p.91)

Jonathan’s arguments are straightforward and clearly stated. I have not quoted from them because they will be familiar to readers of this journal. Instead, I will let him have the last word:

“We both see a need for Christians and non-Christians to work together for a better world. For progressive atheists, humanists and agnostics reading this book, I want to say that Christians, though at times an odd bunch, are often some of the best alliance partners you will find! Work with them to expose the ‘powers and principalities’ of this world and usher in a more just, sustainable, peaceful and friendly world.” (pp.128-9)

“Beloved Father, Beloved Son: a conversation about faith between a bishop and his atheist son.”

By Graeme and Jonathan Rutherford. Mosaic Press, 2013.

Julia has company

by Rod Bower

If I had wanted to write a book about atheism, it would have been “Atheism for Dummies”. I’ve always been happy to answer questions about atheism face to face, and put the answers into the context surrounding the questions. In fact I quite enjoy that process, in moderation. But I’ve started to get tired of repeating myself, and sometimes feel that those discussions have become a distraction from working on the bigger picture. My big picture does not require de-converting adult religious believers, but it does include toning down their concerns and misconceptions about atheists, in the hope they won’t throw a hissy-fit if their children or friends decide to renounce gods at some point. If I can provide a book to answer a religious believer’s questions about atheism and the atheist view of life in a way that’s clear, positive and easy to read, it will help. This book will do that job very nicely, and with that in mind I intend to loan it around – a lot.

The author, Dale McGowan, earned his Ph.D. in music composition and was a college professor before taking up writing as a career. Prior to this book he co-wrote “Parenting Beyond Belief” and “Raising Freethinkers”, and edited “Voices of Unbelief: Documents by Atheists and Agnostics”. He also blogs

about parenting for the non-religious and has written a satirical novel, “Calling Bernadette’s Bluff”. In recognition of his work on parenting, McGowan was named 2008 Harvard Humanist of the Year.

The book has over three hundred pages, but it’s not too densely packed, and is well set up for dabbling in or for referring my friends to particular sections. Like most “Dummies” books, the reader is expected to use the extensive Contents list and Index to pick and choose parts that sound interesting to them, or to answer the question on their mind at the time. However it can also be read cover-to-cover without too much repetition (some is necessary, to ensure the dabblers don’t get lost). Of course “Atheism for Dummies” is not actually written for “dummies”, but it’s not a difficult read and can confidently be given to your religious or non-religious friends and family without worry of upsetting anyone (except maybe that raging fundamentalist uncle from up in the hills, who will think from the title that it’s the work of the devil). If they are open-minded enough to read it at all, and can follow a logical explanation, they should be fine.

The 21 chapters are organised into five parts, covering:

- What atheism is (and isn't) including a look at the bewildering array of -ist groups out there. This part also gives a helicopter view of the material covered in later parts, and entices the reader to look around a bit more. In the process it looks at some of the arguments for atheism, clearly, but in a non-dogmatic way.
- A potted history of atheism and related philosophy and politics. Starting with the Axial Age and continuing right through to 2012, this is a thorough little lesson in the often hidden (until recently) place of atheism down the years. If you can convince your believer friends to read this part I think they'll be surprised at how rich atheistic history is. And many atheists like me, who don't have a degree in history, will learn a lot from it too!
- A chronological glimpse at some of the major atheist writings across history, from ancient Greeks and Indians through Meslier to Bertrand Russell and "The Great Agnostic" all the way on to well known bloggers and of course the "Four Horsemen". I enjoyed the references to some of the better known poets and their part in promoting a rational approach to life.
- Life without gods – How atheists manage to live full and satisfying lives, and how they think about the big (and not so big) questions of life. This includes an interesting look at what it's like being an atheist in a still fairly religious world (this is where McGowan's American background shows up most strongly). Here is where the author covers most of the questions I get from non-atheist friends, so it's the part I'll often recommend they read first, but I hope they'll be enticed to read the earlier sections too.
- And finally a section with a few fun and interesting lists of facts about atheists and atheism. It was interesting to see an American author include our own Julia Gillard as one of his "Famous Atheists"!

The fourth part, the one addressing those questions about

how atheists think and live, is where the book had the most risk of becoming subjective. As we all know (and insist on) there is no atheist dogma to provide answers to questions about atheistic morality, how atheists relate to religion, or what the future of the atheist "movement" is or should be. McGowan does provide general explanations about how atheists derive morals, but he is careful to allow for varying viewpoints between atheists. I think he does well at explaining atheist thinking to religious folks, and I also felt this section could be useful as a teaching aid for atheist parents – perhaps that's not surprising given McGowan's previous books on parenting. He also discusses openly the differing opinions within the atheist "movement" about how to conduct (or not conduct) relations with religious groups, and the future of atheism in a changing world.

He quietly makes plain (as I read it anyway) his own leanings as a Humanist and an "accommodationist". While obviously committed to seeing atheism accepted as a mainstream position whose time has come, one senses he wants more than that from his community. I was very comfortable with this part of the book, and I felt it would suit the sort of liberal, relatively rational, religious believer I will be loaning my copy to. If you are the sort of atheist or agnostic who loans books to believers you should have no worries with McGowan's position.

In summary, I found "Atheism for Dummies" a great resource for explaining and "fleshing out" atheism to my family, friends and acquaintances. The bonus for me (and McGowan foresees this in his Introduction) was to learn more about the history, and the big names and titles, of atheism for myself. I recommend buying a couple of copies (from Embiggen or your other favourite bookshop), and keeping at least one of them circulating around those friends who've been asking the usual questions. Maybe it will change someone's understanding and opinion of the atheist world view.

"Atheism for Dummies" By Dale McGowan, John Wiley and Sons, 2013.

Cats are people, too

by Warren Bonett

Are you a dog person or a cat person? Perhaps you own fish or love horses. Maybe you're a twitcher or keep hamsters? I'm none of these. Whilst I once harbored a desire to study zoology and briefly worked for a vet, research with or ownership of animals isn't my cup of tea. On the other hand, experienced science writer, Virginia Morell and the researchers she describes in "Animal Wise" feel an almost visceral enjoyment from working or playing with animals. This may be one of the reasons that animal cognition research often has an image problem within the scientific community: do we see what we want to see with the animals? Do we anthropomorphise their characteristics? Can we accurately venture into the mind of

an animal without viewing them through the lens of the human experience?

Even though I would never have said that various animals didn't have a life of the mind, I did fear that I was going to be reading about people dressing up the behaviours of animals in human likeness. Then, within 15 pages I was pushed into asking myself quite unanticipated questions. Given that our brains and cognitive functions are products of evolution, why should those descriptions we house in the category of anthropomorphism, such as: thinking, reasoning, self-awareness, or even friendship, be seen as 'belonging' to humans alone? We share common DNA,

physiologies and anatomical components; doesn't it therefore stand to reason that we'd have features of the mind in common? *Animal Wise* makes a strong argument for the evolutionary basis for a wide variety of animal cognition, from insects to marine mammals.

Morell takes the reader through the daily routines and experiments of researchers studying ants, fish, parrots, elephants, chimps, dolphins, rats, gorillas, dogs, and wolves. It is immediately apparent how ingenious the experimenters need to be in order to devise tests that are capable of revealing something statistically useful about the brain processes of their subjects. For example, the chapter on ants describes the work of Nigel Franks who is attempting to learn how the individuals of an ant colony create complex nests and societies without either blueprints, plans or leaders. He does this by painstakingly painting a unique pattern of dots on every single member of each of his colonies so that they may be individually monitored.

"If they didn't have the little paint spots, we wouldn't be able to see them as individual," said Franks. The colors and patterns change our whole outlook on them – which is very intriguing. We humans respond so differently when we see animals as individuals... You stop looking at them as a colony ... and start thinking: 'Well what are these individuals doing? We know that each one is making her own decisions, that there isn't centralized leadership.'

The next researcher Morell focuses on is Stefan Schuster, whose work involves cognition in Archerfish. Schuster states, "Intelligent circuitry can be assembled in any brain; that's my big belief... It is not limited to those animals with large brains and many neurons. If evolution requires it [this kind of intelligent circuitry], it will be assembled – even with a small number of neurons."

In attempting to answer specific questions about the fish they found one particularly interesting behaviour: some archerfish appeared to imitate the behaviour of more successful shooters, thereby learning to become better shooters themselves. This alone was a profound finding in a field where the dominant theories suggested that only primates and other higher order mammals were capable of such learning.

The following chapters add further weight to the overall argument that a wide variety of animals experience categories of mind-life that were previously considered the domain of humans alone. Both the historic connections to the work of Charles Darwin and how the field as a whole suffers from deep scepticism by other scientists are repeated in almost every chapter.

"The brain of an ant is one of the most marvelous atoms of matter in the world, perhaps more so than the brain of man. Charles Darwin."

Whilst it is nice to hear from the great man, it reads like an appeal to authority which is its own logical fallacy. Fortunately for her overall thesis, however, she makes a strong enough case elsewhere.

Some of the doubt about the research is historically connected to ideas of human 'specialness.' Other uncertainty stems from the

huge number of variables that animal cognition researchers must deal with. The powerful emotional responses by scientists to their research subjects too are cause for some wariness about claims. The descriptions of the rigorous experimental protocols are the book's most effective weapon against all three of these sources of doubt. Strangely Morell's affable and even sentimental style partially undermines her efforts to describe scientific impartiality. So we learn that the scientist Karl Berg is "Tall Lanky, and freckled, and with a wide brimmed, battered straw hat shading his red hair and blue eyes, ...[he] looked like a grown-up Tom Sawyer. He had a wry sense of humor, too, and liked to poke fun at himself." (p.x) Or describing ethologist Elizabeth Lonsdorf: "Her dark hair spiraled in curls to her shoulders, and she had the kind of direct gaze and patient manner of an ethologist who spends months in the field, focused on her study animals."

The most powerful argument made in "*Animal Wise*" was that the charge of attributing human cognitive characteristics to animals is at least partially useless or even fallacious due to these qualities being common features of many species. And it is this aspect of the book that I found the most consequential for science and philosophy and even society.

The motivation for Morell's style fully unfolds in the epilogue when the tale of mass extinctions is told. Of how our treatment of other creatures is even more unethical due to their far higher levels of awareness and ability to suffer than they are given credit for. She is clearly very passionate about this geological period of destruction we are living through, and has sought to help engender more powerful connections to the animals around us. Yet for me her most important argument was in the dismemberment of anthropomorphism as it pertains to this type of research.

"...animal bodies are not empty forms; they are equipped with sensory cells and brains. In his later works, Darwin argued that these internal structures—and their accompanying thoughts and emotions—evolved as well. With the 'endless forms' have come endlessly beautiful and wonderful minds."

"*Animal Wise*" is written with an almost childlike sense of wonder and accessibility that will appeal to all animal lovers. The emotional descriptions of the researchers and of the internal world of animals may rub the wrong way those with a leaning towards the physical sciences, but this style is perhaps fitting given the nature of the messy and complex subject matter Morell is dealing with.

"Animal Wise: The Thoughts and Emotions of Our Fellow Creatures" By Virginia Morell. Black Inc Books, 2013.

Rationalists in war time

published in *"The Rationalist Annual"*, 1941, pp 83-86.

by C.E.M. Joad

There are three things which it seems worth while for a Rationalist, writing in the summer of 1940, to say to other Rationalists – things which fall into the respective categories of hopes, memories and duties.

First, hopes. Let them make a point of seeing "Thunder Rock". If they cannot see it, let them read it. The play is a tonic for those who still continue to believe in the possibility of progress through reason. Despairing of the modern world, with which as a war correspondent he has achieved an unsavoury familiarity, Charleston goes into retirement as the keeper of a lighthouse on Lake Michigan. The lighthouse was erected following the shipwreck of a steamer full of emigrants nearly a hundred years ago.

Charleston's imagination, quickened by solitude, calls a number of these drowned emigrants to life, and six of them, taking the stage, discuss with their creator their world and his. All of them, it turns out, had emigrated because they had been defeated by life and despaired of the world which had defeated them. For instance, an Austrian doctor experimenting with anaesthetics has seen his house burned down by a prejudiced mob. Speaking out of his knowledge of what came afterwards, Charleston is thrust, to his embarrassment, into the role of an optimist commenting on history, who tells the story of subsequent achievement and assures the dispirited doctor that the use of anaesthetics is now universally accepted.

How do other causes which were deemed lost by the discouraged emigrants appear in retrospect a hundred years afterwards? At the very moment (1850) when they were despairing of progress, the human mind was preparing to take one of its greatest leaps. Darwin was about to publish "The Origin of the Species" and evolution to become the doctrine of all reasonable men; Pasteur was about to proclaim the germ theory of the origin of disease; Lincoln to launch his successful campaign for the freeing of slaves.

"But suppose," says the doctor, "that Pasteur, Darwin and Lincoln had never been born. Would their discoveries have remained unknown, their advances unachieved?" "Not at all," says Charleston in effect; "if they had not lived and thought and struggled, somebody else would have done these things in their stead."

And the inference? First, that however dark the immediate surface prospect, the seeds of growth are nevertheless germinating underground. Secondly, that individuals are instruments of a process which they do not initiate. If there had not been a Darwin, Pasteur and Lincoln, there would have been others. All that the pioneer does is anticipate discoveries, and to accelerate

improvements which sooner or later are seen to have been inevitable. Let me put it in the form of a quotation from Meredith, the moral of which is too obvious to require to be drawn at length for readers of the RATIONALIST ANNUAL:

... The Times are overcast;
But still may they who sowed behind the plough
True seed fix in the mind an unborn Now
To make the plagues afflicting us things past.

Secondly, memories. In these days of the twilight of reason it seems to me worth remembering that the record of progress, with the recital of which Charleston was able to reassure his nineteenth century pessimists, was in almost every case written by the champions of human reason freely and boldly operating upon an appropriate subject matter. The architects of progress were, in fact, Rationalists, whose virtue consisted in their determination to follow reason wherever it might lead them.

Both Darwin and Pasteur were Rationalists in this sense. Moreover, the very principles for which we are fighting today – principles which form the common heritage of our civilization – are such as Rationalists were the first to proclaim: respect for the individual, tolerance for unpopular opinions, freedom of thought and expression, the repudiation of the all embracing claims of the State – in a word, the doctrines of democratic individualism were announced by the agnostic Thomas Paine, and developed by men like Mill and Spencer, whose names stand high among the patron saints of Rationalism. Again, in our own day, it is to men who are primarily distinguished by their Rationalism, such as H.G. Wells and Bertrand Russell, that we owe the guardianship and defence of this tradition.

Thirdly, remembering the stand for liberty which Rationalists have made in the past, remembering the ideals of liberty for which we are bidden to fight in the present, it is incumbent on us, their descendants, to see that the liberties which they proclaimed and we are defending are not filched from us in the process of their defence. This, indeed, is incumbent upon all citizens; when terms of imprisonment, even in certain circumstances the death penalty itself, can be inflicted without the intervention of a jury; when by Ministerial decree Habeas Corpus and Magna Carta, the guarantors of the time honoured privileges of the subject, can be suspended; when the right of the elected representatives of the people to voice grievances is being imperilled by the suppression of public debate in parliament; when a system of spying by irresponsible persons, not only upon actions, but upon the very words men utter, is encouraged and bids fair to become an established institution;

-- continued page 47

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To propound and advance Rationalism, that is adherence to the principle that all significant beliefs and actions should be based on reason and evidence, that the natural world is the only world there is and that answers to the key questions of human existence are to be found only in the natural world.

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To promote a secular and ethical system of education.

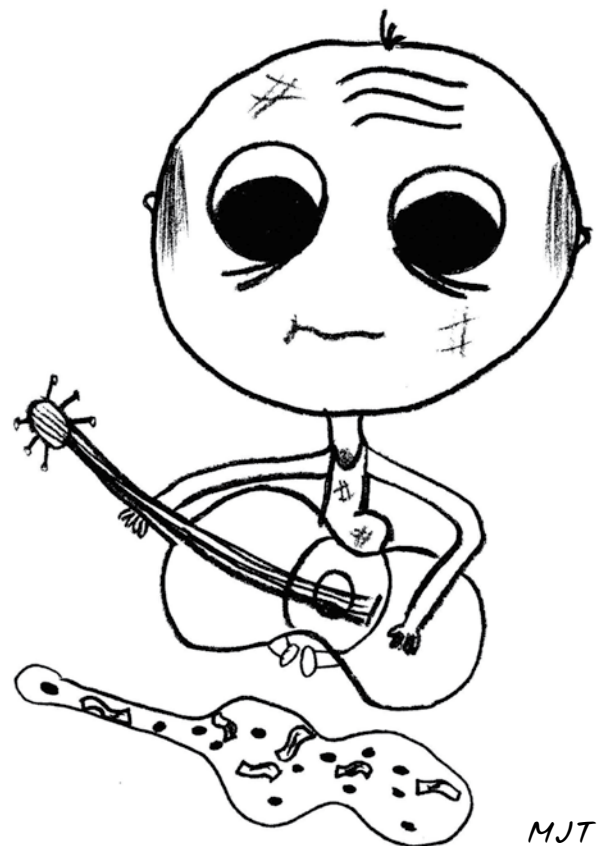
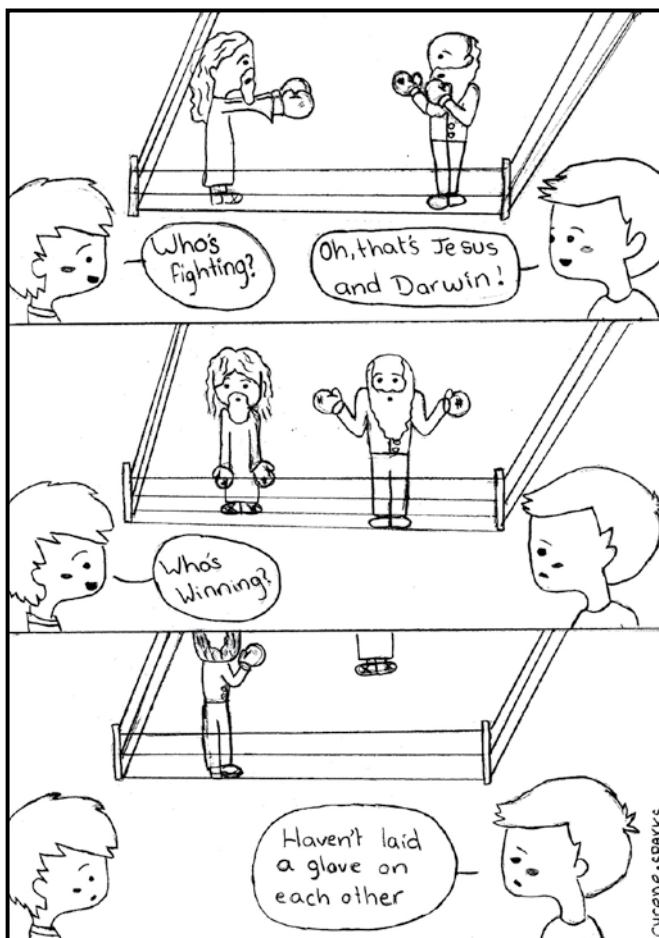
when projects are mooted for interfering with legitimate criticism by the Press ... Whatever may be the attitude of ordinary citizens to these encroachments, the duty of Rationalists is clearly imposed upon them by the traditions which they have inherited in the past – the duty of preserving our liberties, not only against the Nazis who would openly suppress them, but also against the more insidious process of their erosion in the cause of their alleged defence.

The danger to liberty which I have discerned and against which I have endeavoured to arouse the vigilance of readers of the RATIONALIST ANNUAL is the danger constituted by the encroachments of our own Executive. Some infringement of the liberty of the individual has always occurred in war-time; it may be that it is necessary. It is the duty of the individual to see that

such infringement does not exceed the minimum which the emergency requires.

But I am anxious that nothing that I have said should mislead readers into thinking that I am not aware that the victory of the Nazis would constitute an eclipse of liberty so complete that Western civilization – if civilization it could still be called – would enter upon a new Dark Age.

It is, then, the duty of all Rationalists to unite to prevent such a victory. Money, leisure, security, even life itself, may have to be sacrificed in the struggle; yet we must at all costs retain that liberty of thought and of the expression of thought the preservation of which constitutes at once the end and the justification of the struggle.



All that endures is change – Heraclitus

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