

Reality Check



May-June 2002



From the President's desk

By Dave Buck

Perhaps the most common story I'm told by visitors who show up at RET's activities is how wonderful it is to finally be able to express their non-religious beliefs without being judged. Folks tell me that they've been treated differently by neighbors, co-workers, and family members after finding out that they are freethinkers.

Now, I must be careful here. The open-minded theist who reads Realty Check might decry, "Hey, aren't you creating a straw man and a stereotype to boot?" Fair enough. It's been my experience that most religious folks are level-headed about interacting with non-believers. As with most prejudice and bigotry, the negative reaction some of us experience is based on inaccurate stereotypes. It takes contact and communication to overcome them. Recently, one of our members took the opportunity to do just that.

In April, the Christian Academy of Knoxville invited Massimo Pigliucci, a published atheist, to lead an open forum on Secular Humanism. Many high school juniors and seniors attended as well as several adults. Among the questions asked of Massimo was, 'How can you

have a moral base without a god?'

Massimo took this chance to dispel the myth that atheists, freethinkers and secular humanists have no moral framework or have 'anything goes' ethics. To paraphrase, Massimo stated that his ethics and moral decisions are based on the principle that it is immoral to impede on another human's ability to flourish and seek happiness. This is similar to the utilitarian position that 'an action is deemed good if it maximizes human happiness and minimizes suffering, and evil if the contrary'. While not all non-believers use this same principle to guide their conduct, they tend to use science and reason as a base.

Let's continue our efforts to meet with our community. My hope is that once they see that we indeed have moral principles, are good people and care about the welfare of others, we can remove some of the prejudice we've experienced. We should try to coordinate more public forums, invite more people to our activities, write more letters to the editor, and when you volunteer in our community, don't be afraid to let people know who you are. —R C

Back to the basics: Why bother?

By Massimo Pigliucci

Question: suppose there is no God, what's the harm in letting people believe there is one? Why do skeptics "preach" their lack of faith?

The shorter answer to the second part of the question is that skeptics, usually, don't preach at all. What we are interested in is that people exercise and refine their natural abilities of critical thinking, for the simple reason that we think that more critical thinking would help the human predicament much more than superstition. Preaching is antithetical to critical thinking.

The answer to the first part of the question is that the degree of harm done when one believes in a god depends on what kind of god and what sort of belief. If the religious people of the world were like most mainstream Christians (both Catholics and Protestant), i.e., they believe in a supernatural being with whom they feel they have a relationship of some sort, but they are

not compelled to impose their religion on others, there would really be little point in "militant" skepticism. Secular humanists are very much supporters of the "live and let live" philosophy inherent in a pluralist society.

The problem, of course, is that the god of the Bible is a jealous god, and some of his followers don't wish to share the world with the heathens. The latter need to be converted, excluded from public office, shut off from public discourse, and—for some extremists—sent to Hell a little bit ahead of schedule.

It is this sort of intransigent religionism that is the main target of the activism of skeptics, freethinkers and secular humanists. Take my own case. Before moving to Tennessee and feeling my philosophical positions under assault I never wrote a single word about atheism and never participated to a debate. Stop trying to impose your supernatural nonsense and we'll all go back to do better things with out time, including worshipping somebody, if we are so inclined. —R C





Rationally Speaking: Ecology vs. ecophily

By Massimo Pigliucci

The situation of the environment is getting worse by any reasonable estimate, and we are simply not doing enough. The problem impacts everybody, including Knoxville, which has just been declared the 8th most polluted city in the US – not exactly a record to be proud of. Among the many environmental problems we face, few have such a high emotional impact as species extinction. More and more people realize that extinction is, literally, final, which raises not only practical questions (what if we just lost a species of plants producing chemicals useful to fight cancer?), but ethical (what gives us the ethical ground to condemn entire kinds of other organisms to death because we wish to augment our own standard of living a bit more?).

However, should we go as far as lying in order to save the environment? Some people apparently think so, and seem to follow the same suggestion that Martin Luther gave to his followers: "What harm would it do, if a man told a good strong lie for the sake of the good and for the Christian church [...] a lie out of necessity, a useful lie, a helpful lie, such lies would not be against God, he would accept them." Well, I don't know about God, but I'm not too sympathetic toward people who lie, even for a good cause.

In the case of the environment, I draw a distinction between ecologists and ecophiles. An ecologist, strictly speaking, is a professional who studies the interactions of living organisms with the environment. I do research on ecological matters, so I am an ecologist in that sense of the word. An ecophile is somebody who loves the environment and the living world and wishes to do something to protect them. Accordingly, I am an ecophile as well.

The problem comes when people mix the two perspectives and misuse science in order to advance the cause of environmental protection. When that happens, we are lying for the greater good, just like Martin Luther suggested we should do. In both cases, I think we are wasting ethical currency, because neither God (presumably) nor the environment need that sort of help.

Let's consider a recent example of questionable ecophilia. Biologist and Pulitzer Prize winner E.O. Wilson has given an interview to the Christian Science Monitor (25 April 2002) in which he has made an impassioned appeal for scientists to be activists. I couldn't agree more. Scientists have an ethical duty as human beings to become involved in issues of public education, especially when they can bring their expertise to direct bearing over fundamental questions such as the preservation of biodiversity. And Wilson has done an admirable job in just such role. However, Wilson also abandoned himself to statements that he will come to regret, as soon as the perennially vigilant anti-environment move-

ment will hear about it. And the damage will be all the greater for the environmental community because of the high status of the scientist who made those claims.

Wilson said that "Before humanity came along, species were dying at a rate of about 1 per million per year, and they were being born 1 per million per year. So, through time immemorial, things have been pretty much in balance. Now we're speeding up the death of the species 1,000 times and we're lowering the birthrate. The cradles are being destroyed."

There are various problems with this statement, which take a significant amount of power out of it and put a dent into Wilson's, and the entire environmental movement's, credibility. First off, Wilson knows very well that extinction and speciation rates have fluctuated wildly throughout the history of the planet, with several documented mass extinctions and a constantly fluctuating rate of "background" extinction: no such nice balance between death and birth has ever been maintained on this planet. Indeed, biologists would be at a loss to explain how such balance could possibly happen by natural forces (which are not in the business of long-term environmental planning). Second, Wilson – later on in the same interview – states that the current estimate of the total number of species living today on earth varies from 1.8 to 10 to 100 million. Hmm,

"Should we go as far as lying in order to save the environment?"

given that we are talking about at least two orders of magnitude of difference, how do we know that we have sped up things by 1,000 times? It could be only 10 times, or maybe 100,000 times. The data are simply not there for us to make an educated (as opposed to a wild) guess.

Now, I am sure that Wilson did not mean to consciously mislead the Christian Science Monitor readers, and it is not certain to what extent what was printed was what he meant to say. However, similar exaggerations are presented by ecophiles commonly enough to have fueled a copious literature by a backlash anti-environmental movement (see the excellent book by Paul and Anne Ehrlich, *Betrayal of Science and Reason*). We don't need to exaggerate the sorry state of the environment; it's bad enough as it is. There is good science to give plenty of ammunition to those who wish to advance the environmental cause. However, if we are not careful with the accuracy of our statements (not to mention if we lie about the facts as some environmental groups have repeatedly done) we lose the moral high ground and we do irreparable damage to the cause of scientific education and to the very problem we are so concerned about. Let's be scientists and activists by all means, ecologists and ecophiles, but always keep the facts as separate as possible from the feelings. That *really* helps the environment.

—R C

Wither religion?

By Fred Venditti

In 1952 my wife and I found the Unitarian Church. Prior to 1952, although we had come to be secular humanists (out of a Presbyterian background), we had not lived anywhere that harbored such a congregation.

Upon finding the Unitarian Church in Wichita, Kansas, we became enthusiastic, committed members. It was a wonderful time for us. We became part of a group of like-minded individuals who rejected conventional supernatural religion and regularly engaged in stimulating social and intellectual activity, which we found richly rewarding. Moreover, we had a "church school" for our children.

Looking about the religious landscape in the early 1960s, less than a decade after our affiliation with the Unitarian Church, it seemed to me that there was only one potential obstacle to the burgeoning of Unitarianism: the incredible liberalization of theological thought taking place in certain of the largest, old-line Protestant denominations. Why, some Methodists, for example, were saying openly that God was dead.

Given such a broad, liberal trend within Protestantism in general, who would bother to join the Unitarian Church? Most of the Protestant church was surely destined to become one huge Unitarian congregation, even if remaining nominally attached to old historical divisions. Boy! How wrong can you be?

Essentially, I'd espoused without ever having heard of it, the "secularization of religion" theory propounded by such sociologists as Peter Berger, among other social scientists. Their idea was that religion was just naturally going to wither away as people became better and better educated. Belief in the scientific method and the efficacy of reason was about to dispel interest and faith in the supernatural. In fact, Berger told the *New York Times* in 1968 that "by the 21st century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture." I wasn't the only one who was wrong.

Among scholars studying the phenomenon of religious proliferation globally today, there is general agreement that it is the more fundamentalist groups on the edges of formerly mainstream religions that are growing most rapidly—especially evangelical and pentecostal Christian movements. Shockingly, therefore, it is the most irrational species of the religious animal that is reproducing most successfully.

There is no question that institutionalized religion is and has been responsible for much good in the world. It is equally true that it has been the cause of untold suffering, violence, and death. And today it is especially the hardy, fundamentalist varieties of religions (fundamentalist Islam comes immediately to mind) that are most actively inflicting misery upon

people. Is this not depressing?

And what's to be done? Obviously there is no easy answer. It would seem that contrary to what Berger predicted, today it is religious non-believers who are to be found in small groups, huddled together to resist a worldwide religious culture.

But what is the alternative? To go with the flow? To bow helplessly to the destructive forces inherent in supernaturally-grounded religions?

I think not. However bleak the prospect, those must act who recognize the perils to the human species of clinging stubbornly to outmoded, supernatural, religious belief systems. They should raise their voices as never before on behalf of reason and reliance upon scientific methodology as the most likely means of improving the lot of humanity.

Fortunately, it seems to me, they may be heartened by two key contentions of sociologist Robert Stark of the University of Washington. (These are central to his "rational choice theory of religion.")

First, contrary to the conventional wisdom, people choose particular religions because they are seeking gratifying social relationships, not initially because of attraction to supernatural religious faith—faith comes later.

Second, active involvement in community projects and mutually supportive in-group activities that go along with religious affiliation, e.g., cleaning up highways, sitting with the ill, comforting the bereaved, gives people a powerful sense of security and strengthens the ties binding them together.

Not all those who study religion endorse Stark's theory, by any means. In fact, some find it highly controversial. But many are persuaded that it is essentially sound, and I

think they are right.

To the extent they are correct, those (such as members of RET) endeavoring to work in an organized way outside the boundaries of

conventional, supernatural religion toward human betterment have a paradigm to guide them. It suggests three, rather common sensible, things.

First, reach out to people in the community by any and all positive means possible.

Second, when contacts are made—as, for example, in meetings and social gatherings—be every bit as hospitable, warm, and open as your nature permits.

Third, find imaginative ways of involving those showing interest in the organization in meaningful activities designed to promote the group and, more important, benefit its members and people in the community at large.

An old proverb states, "It is better to light one candle than curse the dark." In this discouraging time of proliferating, primitive religions, RET members are heeding this admonition. Who knows how much light they may ultimately generate in their community.

"It is better to light one candle than curse the dark."



Forum: In favor of free enterprise, again

By Al Westerfield

Massimo Pigliucci is fond of quoting Umberto Eco on making subtle distinctions. He does so in his opinion piece on the Middle East where he himself fails to distinguish between the war on drugs and the war on terrorism. Such lack of distinction is apparent in his comment on my article on free enterprise. When discussing economics it should not be necessary to place the adjective "economic" in front of every statement. Pigliucci confuses what is with what he feels should be to deny that free enterprise does the greatest good for the greatest number. So let's be more specific.

By any economic standard free enterprise does the greatest economic good for the greatest number. This is so obvious it should not even be worthy of debate. And it is this in Adam Smith's treatise where he creates the (soft) science of economics. Like any good scientist, he describes what is. He describes the way large masses of persons act on average and the inevitable results. Supply and demand. Investment. Economic controls.

Now, we can try to "fool Mother Nature" but we have to be willing to pay the price. We all at one time or another have wished we could fly. Few have actually stepped off a tall building in the expectation that gravity would be repealed if we only wished hard enough. So it is with economics. We can wish for a kinder, gentler world but we must be willing to pay the economic price. No amount of wishing that some other system will do better will make it so. Free enterprise may not be the best system for achieving economic goals but it is the best system yet invented.

Pigliucci and I differ on how to achieve social goals. Heck, we differ almost completely on what those goals should be. Pigliucci believes economics as taught in our universities is a myth meant to control the masses.

In part, I agree. Where Keynes teaches that supply and demand must be ameliorated by government spending I liken this to the war on drugs. Such action will never achieve its goal. Where von Hayek teaches what actually happens rather than what should be, we have science rather than myth and I liken it to the war on terrorism. If the problem is defined clearly enough, the winning strategy becomes apparent. Distinctions, distinctions.

-R C

Forum: Against free enterprise, again

By Massimo Pigliucci

I do not see what my fondness for Umberto Eco has to do with anything, but I gladly admit to such sin. As for my piece on the Middle East, perhaps I will defend it another time, since the main thrust of Westerfield's argument addresses the desirability of free enterprise (defined here as the complete lack of external control on the economy, left to its own devices or internal "laws").

I think it *is* necessary to place the adjective "economic" in front of the proper statements when discussing these issues, because Westerfield seems to keep missing that my main point is that economics needs to be integrated with other aspects of societal life. What makes sense economically might not make sense socially (e.g., it makes perfect sense for a company to deal in crack cocaine, since it's cheap to produce and yields a high return on investment; it also happens to be considered immoral by society).

It is also highly debatable that free enterprise does the greatest economic good for the greatest number, and the very fact that the divide between rich and poor in the United States has been widening should make us pause when we hear such unsubstantiated generalizations (dare I say articles of faith?).

Westerfield likens economic laws to physical laws (though he does admit that economics is a "soft" science), and yet there is a lot of genuine discussion about the usefulness of econometric models. Despite the fact that people are given the Nobel in economics, several authors (including some economists) have pointed out that the ability of economic theories to actually predict what will happen in the real world is abysmal (see, for example, Mark Buchanan's *Ubiquity*, Crown, 2001).

Westerfield also says that we can't fool mother nature: most of us wouldn't jump out of a window because we wish we could fly. True, we would take a helicopter instead. Analogously, even *if* there truly are economic laws, we can bypass them and reign them in if we think that the cost is worth in terms of human flourishing.

The fact that Westerfield and I disagree on what goals society should try to achieve is very much a good reason not to let economics be the only arbiter: obviously there are plenty of people who would rather trade a bit of financial wealth for, say, psychological well being, reduced stress, avoidance of depression, and many other worthy goals which cannot possibly be on the radar screen of cold "free" enterprise.

-R C

If you would like to contribute to this discussion, or bring up any other topic for discussion in the Forum section of *Rationally Speaking*, please email the editor at pigliucci@utk.edu



Philosopher's Corner: Am I an empiricist or what?

By David Buck

Up until last philosophy Sunday, I proudly claimed that all we know is based solely upon our experiences. Our knowledge comes directly from what we can see, hear, taste, touch, or smell. Anything else is a hypothetical construct and subject to skepticism... (or so I thought).

Like David Hume (1711-1776) I'm satisfied with 'knowing' only what can be sensed. So, if someone asked, 'Is your bike blue?', I would answer 'yes' because I can look at it and see that it is blue. I'm also comfortable with many statements that I can't personally sense directly but someone can, at least in principle. For example, 'Coils on the Goldstar Dehumidifier froze when Consumer Reports testers dropped temperatures to 60 degrees', or 'in an experiment testing two diet types, two participants in the Atkins diet dropped out while 7 of the low-fat dieters quit,' or 'Keith Jones saw the latest Star Wars movie last weekend.' I didn't directly observe any of these, but, because they are observable and testable, I raise them to the status of knowable.

However, I don't give the same status to statements about things that cannot, by definition, be sensed in the natural world. For example, the following statements are not knowable through our senses; 'Shiva is a God that destroys so new can be created,' or 'Jesus is the truth, the light, and the way,' or 'Mithra was born of a virgin, the son of god, and those who believe in him are rewarded with eternal life.' Because the claims cannot be sensed, I do not elevate them to 'the knowable' and move on. But, what about the statement, 'There is no number so large that 1 cannot be added to it'? I believe this statement is true, but I don't know it from experience. Nor can it be experienced by anyone. Oh oh.

I don't want my test of truth to be an arbitrary one (e.g., eanie meanie minie moe). Perhaps pragmatism can rescue me. Infinity is a useful concept and without it I can't solve many math problems. The statements about the different gods don't add anything to my life and so I can ignore them. I'm not sure this is a sound method in this case.

Another approach would be to deny infinity. I can't sense it so perhaps there is no reality behind it. If you accept the premise that anything real must exist within boundaries, then infinity cannot exist because by definition, it can have no bounds. This doesn't work for me because there are an infinite number of points that can appear on a line and the line can still have a distinct beginning and end. Yet, this begs the question: are there

really an infinite number of points on a line? I haven't counted them.

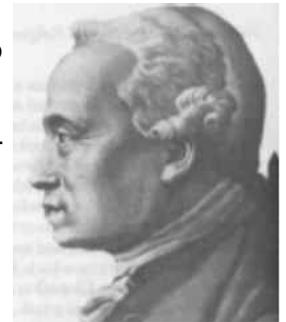
Perhaps rationalism, logic, and reasoning can help me. Hmm, Premise 1: Any number you mention, I can think of a larger number. Premise 2: Each larger number I can think of, I can still think of a larger one. Therefore, there is no end to numbers. Is this enough to logically conclude that numbers can go on forever?

Well, Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) approach presents us with a possible solution. Traditionally, philosophers distinguish between synthetic and analytic statements. Synthetic or *a posteriori* statements are ones where the truth is based on experience (Hume called these 'matter of fact'). Analytic or *a priori* statements in which the truth is based on lack of contradiction, are knowledge independent of our sense-experience (Hume called these 'opinion').

Kant combines these two and says that synthetic statements (statements about reality) are simply self evident. Otherwise, pure mathematics and physics would be impossible. For example, we have knowledge of events ordered in time. Event A and then event B occur. We experience the events but there is no stimulus that we sense as 'time' per se. We hear the clock tick or watch the pendulum swing but *time* is simply understood. It, like space or infinity or the perfect circle are reasoned, not real. So the statement, 'there is no number so large for which 1 cannot be added to it' is said to be 'self evident' by Kant. It's not something proven by logic, it is simply known. It's a statement about real things but it's not based on our experience. This makes Kant a mixture of a philosophical rationalist and empiricist.

But, as I finish this essay, I've decided I'll consider the statement about infinity as *probably* true, based on inductive reasoning. Until someone can come up with a number that we can't add one to, so I'll assume they're all like that. This way, I'm grounded in empirical evidence and not overstepping my truth criteria. As for other analytic statements like 'there is life after death', I'll stick with my empiricist view and hold them to the level of 'opinions' and not 'matters of fact.'

-R C



Immanuel Kant

"Up until last Philosophy Sunday, I proudly claimed that all we know is based solely upon our experiences."



Roundtable: Intuition vs. rationality?

By Massimo Pigliucci

Is intuition the opposite of rationality? Are people either intuitive or rational, creative or logical, artistic or scientific? For a long time the popular and academic conceptions of these two abilities of the human brain agreed on the existence of a fundamental dichotomy: if you are intuitive you go for the fine arts; if you are logical you become a scientist.

Yet, recent research in the behavioral sciences which we discussed at the latest roundtable shows that this simplistic view of the relationship between intuition and rational thought is deeply flawed and needs to be rethought.

For one thing, people are not "intuitionists" or not, it isn't a yes or no choice. It turns out that we tend to have good intuitions in areas in which we are knowledgeable. And the more knowledgeable we are, the more likely our intuitions are to be correct.

For example, chess masters "see" potential solutions to a chess problem much faster than novices, so fast in fact that the answer could not possibly have come from conscious data processing. On the other hand, when the same masters are presented with pieces randomly distributed on the board, their intuitions are no better or faster than the novice's because they don't have a subconscious database to draw from.

The evidence comes from a variety of sources, including studies of patients with brain damage that lack intui-

tion and are therefore affected in their decision-making capacity (see *Science* vol. 275, pp. 1269-1271, 1997). There is also research on the sources of mathematical thinking (*Science* vol. 284, p. 970, 1999), showing that while the ability to perform exact calculations depends on language (i.e., it is mediated by conscious, logical thought), getting approximate answers to mathematical problems is an entirely different ability that is not dependent on language and relies instead on nonverbal visuo-spatial processing.

Perhaps the best way of thinking about intuition and rational thought is that the two interact in a synergistic manner. The more we think and read (consciously) about a topic, the more we develop an ability for subconscious, fast processing of information, and therefore the more accurate our intuitions are. On the other hand, intuitions can be misleading, and the best we can do is to filter them out by applying rigorous logical thinking to what our subconscious is proposing. Think of intuitions as rough drafts of a paper and of rational thought as the editor who corrects, improves, or even rejects the draft.

It is also possible to speculate that fast but rough data processing evolved in an environment in which our ancestors had to often make split-second decisions, which means that intuition may be the result of natural selection and evolutionary change. —RC

Christians and interior decoration

By Daryl Houston

My county recently ruled in favor of posting the Ten Commandments in county buildings, so long as the displays were not purchased with tax money. Surprisingly, there was a fair amount of resistance to the ruling. Any time a silly topic like this takes up time on the commission's docket, I'm paying for it with my taxes. And the time that my esteemed commissioners spend posting and publicizing their displays is probably on my dime.

The money involved is marginal, of course, but it's the big shiny principle of the thing, futile though it often seems for folk of my a-spiritual persuasion to stand up for principles.

I have two friends with opposing viewpoints regarding what historical documents should be engraved on the walls of our public buildings.

One friend would post the Hippocratic Oath, and she points out that though doctors are not required to take the oath and though the oath is outdated, it would be a fitting adornment for our courthouse walls. It is after all a document that purveys the appropriate spirit our medical professionals should adopt. The oath is an important

part of the history of medicine and should be venerated even in the face of its shortcomings.

My other friend would have the Virginia Slave Codes of 1705 celebrated in our fine halls of justice nationwide. These too are an important part of our cultural history, having contributed to a war that divided our country. Let us not forget, my friend adds, that many savages and infidels were brought to Christianity through slavery, which could not have been enforced for so long without adequate slave codes.

For my part, I would post neither. The Hippocratic Oath simply isn't relevant to the venue, however admirable it may be. Let us reserve it for our doctors' offices and hospitals, surely more fitting locations. And though the slave codes could more appropriately be placed in the law courts, I think many would agree with me that they are not only outdated, narrow-minded, discriminatory, and generally offensive, but that they have no place in our public buildings regardless of the bearing they may have had on our heritage.

—RC

In memory of S.J. Gould, by Michael Shermer

By now almost everyone has heard about the death of Stephen Jay Gould. My phone has been ringing all day so tonight is the first moment I've had to sit and think about the meaning of Gould's life and death.

Steve told me about this latest bout with cancer back in March, and I was amazed at his stamina and strength when, after having brain surgery on Monday, May 1, I spoke with him at his home in Cambridge four days later. He had just finished giving a lecture at Harvard! This cancer was a totally different type than the one he had back in the early 1980s. He was symptom-free and went in for a routine check-up in February when they discovered a couple of masses in his lungs. Further investigation revealed that he also had tumors in his brain, and "something going on with the liver," he said. As he characteristically told me back then, "we're still in the data-collection stage, no conclusions yet." Spoken like a true scientist. Steve seemed hopeful the past couple of months, but I could hear in his mother's voice the past few weeks that the end was coming soon. We can only rejoice in the fact that he lived long enough to see his magnum opus, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory*, published and widely reviewed. Still, his death was something of a shocker because I just spoke with his family on Saturday morning, and they were bringing him home that afternoon to spend the rest of his days there. I got the impression that there were weeks to go. As

Gould himself might have said, life is so very fragile and contingent.

Gould was so famous that when asked to do something that he could not, he would send out the following form letter, which I myself received in 1988:

"I can only beg your indulgence and ask you to understand an asymmetry that operates cruelly (since it produces tension and incomprehension) but that leads to an ineluctable (however regrettable) result. The asymmetry: you want an hour or two, perhaps a day, of my time--not much compared to what you think I might provide (exaggerated, I suspect, but I won't struggle to disillusion you). From that point of view, I should comply--not to do so could only be callousness or unkindness on my part. But now try to understand my side of the asymmetry: I receive on average (I promise that I am not exaggerating) two invitations to travel and lecture per day, about 25 unsolicited manuscripts per month asking for comments, 20 or so requests for letters of recommendation per month, about 15 books with requests for jacket blurbs. I am one frail human being with heavy family responsibilities, in uncertain health and with a burning desire (never diminished) to write and research my own material. Thus, I simply cannot do what you ask. I can only beg your understanding and extend to you my sincere thanks for thinking of me."

And adieu Steve. We'll miss you.

-R C

Book Club: Ten Theories of Human Nature

By Massimo Pigliucci



The May book club discussed *Ten Theories of Human Nature*, by L.F. Stevenson and D.L. Haberman. This is a handy little booklet summarizing literally thousands of years of inquiry into the human condition as seen from religious, philosophical and scientific perspectives.

The authors start out by examining what religion has to say about human nature, focusing in particular on Confucianism, the Upanishadic tradition of Hinduism, and of course Christianity. They then consider five philosophical attempts, from Plato and the idea of the rule of reason to Kant's analysis of the relationship between reason and freedom, from Marx's theory of the role of economic forces in shaping human history to Freud's theory of the unconscious, ending with Sartre's existentialist call for radical freedom. (It is a bit strange that Freud is listed under philosophy rather than science, though arguments can be advanced on both counts.) The two scientific approaches considered are Skinner's behaviorism and Lorenz's evolutionary psychology.

Each chapter follows the same format in that it starts out with a brief introduction and an illustration of the basic aspects of the particular theory under scrutiny. Every theory is then assessed in terms of its understanding of human nature, its diagnosis of human prob-

lems, and its prescriptions for improving the human condition. A critical assessment of every theory is either interspersed throughout the corresponding chapter or left for the final section devoted to that theory.

There are some obvious limitations to this sort of approach. Major religious traditions, such as Buddhism, are left out, and so are major philosophical ideas, such as Aristotle's conceptions of human nature and of virtue ethics. Perhaps the least satisfying section of the book deals with science, where both Skinner and Lorenz have little current currency within the scientific community, their ideas having been replaced by more sophisticated (albeit no less controversial) theories such as sociobiology, game theoretic models of human behavior, and evolutionary psychology. Such is the nature of science, where movement (if not necessarily progress) is much more rapid than with religions and philosophies.

However, the book offers plenty of food for thought and can easily stimulate not only discussions on the material covered, but the curiosity necessary to get to the nearest library and find out more. What else can one ask from a good book?

-R C



Announcements and Upcoming Events



Upcoming Events

Roundtable: June 2, 10:30 AM Roundtable discussion on "Reaching Young People about Humanism." Location: The Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont. For more information call 982-8687, or email Aleta Ledendecker at AletaL@aol.com.

Skeptic Book Club: June 9, 5 PM at Borders' Books (West Town) on *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos*, by R.D. Kaplan. For information, contact Massimo Pigliucci at pigliucci@utk.edu.

Philosophy Discussions: "Survival of the fittest: Darwin and the Purposes of Nature," 10:30 AM at the Candy Factory. Socializing begins at 10:00 AM. For more information call 692-6669 or contact Dave Buck at dbuck@visumllc.com.

Special event: June 22, Solstice Party at Colleen and Greg Landaiche's in Kingston. RSVP 3760670 or land@paintrockestates.com for directions and more information.

Announcements

Rotating Dinners. New diners are welcome, since the greater the numbers of participants, the more interesting the mix will be.

Please contact Mellrose Flockhart at 681-0377 or EFlockhart@AOL.Com, if you would like to join.

Call now if you are not already a registered diner and want to get in on the action for the next round.

Highway cleanups.

If you are interested in helping out with RET's regular highway cleanups to show that secular humanists care about the environment, contact Phil King at philip.king@comcast.net

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