

The Reality Check

July-September 2005 Issue

A publication of the Rationalists of East Tennessee

www.rationalists.org

Soundbite Nation

by Jeff Kincaid

Massimo Pigliucci, in his March "Rationally Speaking" column, "And they say liberals are whiny!" reprinted in the last issue of "Reality Check," asserts three salient facts: (1) that the conservatives are on the verge of controlling all branches of the U.S. government, (2) that academia alone remains "on the left," and (3) that "a large chunk of the American public" has such limited intellectual capacity that communication with that chunk must be restricted to the use of "simple, bite-size, messages."

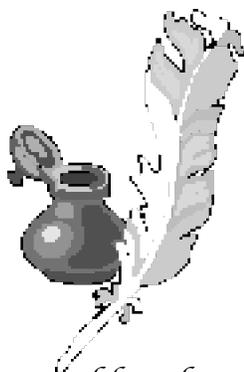
As to these facts, I agree with Massimo. What he fails to see, or at least fails to address in his column, is the answer to the question: "Why?" And in particular, to ask himself to what extent #2 might be the direct cause of #3, and the ultimate cause of #1.

I'll start with #3 by interjecting a fourth fact: that a greater percentage of U.S. citizens today hold college degrees than ever before. Who then, if not our "on the left" academic establishment, is responsible for the American public's obtuseness? Who, if not our leftist professors, has given us the Jaywalk All-stars?

The professors would answer, I suspect, that they are not to blame, that today's high school graduates are barely literate, and that they, the professors, are doing the best that they can with the material they have been given. Maybe so. But why are so many incoming students so poorly prepared for college? Who educated their teachers? Who educated the administrators, the board of education members, the politicians and the bureaucrats, the writers of textbooks, even the CEO's of the textbook companies? Whose ideas constitute the philosophic base upholding the totality of today's

educational enterprise?

Pragmatism, the distinctly American version of Neo-Kantianism, dominated American academic philosophy the first half of the 20th century. Today's Analysts are Pragmatism's direct descendants and intellectual heirs. America's leading Pragmatist, Columbia professor of philosophy John Dewey was, and remains posthumously today, our leading philosopher of education.



"Reason and freedom are the only defenses against faith and force."

Dewey explicitly opposed the teaching of theoretical (i.e., conceptual) knowledge. The purpose of education, he lectured and wrote, was socialization, not learning. Dewey's program has been implemented in full, to wit: the abandonment of phonics for "Look-Say," of didactic lectures for bull sessions, class projects, and community service, of essays for

multiple choice. Once socialization is made the primary goal, the scaling back of intellectual content and rigor follows necessarily; egalitarianism requires that everything be kept within the grasp of the least capable (and/or least motivated) in the class. Why, then, should we be surprised to find college bound high school graduates who are unable to compose a coherent sentence? What more should we expect of the American public, but that large chunks of it are incapable of comprehending anything more abstract than a bite-size message?

Political discourse by soundbites, rather than by ideas, results from a general preference for perceptual association (the mode of learning we share with the higher animals) over reason (the distinctly human mode

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My mother sent me the following joke:

A college professor, an avowed Atheist, was teaching his class. He shocked several of his students when he flatly stated he was going to prove that there was no God.

Addressing the ceiling he shouted:

"God, if you are real, then I want you to knock me off this platform. I'll give you 15 minutes!"

The lecture room fell silent.

You could have heard a pin fall. Ten minutes went by.

Again he taunted God, saying, "Here I am, God. I'm still waiting."

*"Allah was busy.
He sent me."*

His count-down got down to the last couple of minutes when a Marine, just released from active duty and newly registered in the class - walked up to the professor, hit him full force in the face, and sent him tumbling from his lofty platform.

The professor was out cold!

At first, the students were shocked and babbled in confusion. The young Marine took his seat in the front row and sat silently. The class fell silent too ...waiting.

Eventually, the professor came to, still shaken. He looked at the young Marine in the front row. When the professor regained his senses and could speak he asked: "What's the matter with you? Why did you do that?"

"God was busy. He sent me."

One Nation Under God

I am sure she thought it was funny. I, a lifelong atheist, found it somewhat less funny, as was no doubt intended by the author. What puzzled me

more was the fact this was the same woman who declared her children were forbidden to use the "N" word; the same woman who explained to us that Pollock jokes were demeaning and insulting to people of Polish decent; that you never said "he jewed me;" that slapped my brother across the face for saying the word, "whore," when talking about a classmate. You get the idea. Of American Indian ancestry, she knew first hand what prejudice was and taught her children to recognize it and to speak out against it. Now, late in life, mom was surprised when I pointed out the obvious.

Let's have some fun. I'll make a minor change or two:

A college professor, an avowed Christian, was teaching his class. He shocked several of his students when he flatly stated he was going to prove that there was no Allah.

Addressing the ceiling he shouted:

"Allah, if you are real, then I want you to knock me off this platform. I'll give you 15 minutes!"

The lecture room fell silent.

You could have heard a pin fall. Ten minutes went by.

Again he taunted Allah, saying, "Here I am, Allah. I'm still waiting."

His count-down got down to the last couple of minutes when a Marine, just released from active duty and newly registered in the class - walked up to the professor, hit him full force in the face, and sent him tumbling from his lofty platform.

The professor was out cold!

A Joke!
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At first, the students were shocked and babbled in confusion. The young Marine took his seat in the front row and sat silently. The class fell silent too ...waiting.

When the professor regained his senses and could speak he asked: "What's the matter with you? Why did you do that?"

"Allah was busy. He sent me."

One Nation Under Allah

Still funny?

humor shared - by Chuck Janack



Upcoming events:

Visit www.rationalists.org or call 982-8687 for more information.

Sunday, July 3, 2-5PM: Memorial Celebration for the life of Fred Venditti. TVUUC, 2931 Kingston Pike.

Sunday, July 10, 5:00PM, Skeptic Book Club: Animals in Transition: Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behavior, by Temple Garndin, at Barnes & Noble.

Sunday, July 17, 10:30 AM, Philosophy Sunday, topic Leo Straus

Sunday, August 7, 10:30 AM, Roundtable: presentation by Carl Ledendecker TBA.

Sunday, August 14, 5:00PM, Skeptic Book Club: Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe, by Erik Wielenberg, at Barnes & Noble.

Sunday, August 21, 10:30 AM, Philosophy Sunday, topic: "Can We Re-create the Big Bang in the Laboratory?", Soren Sorensen, Head of the UT Department of Physics.

Sunday, September 4, 10:30AM Roundtable TBA

Sunday, September 11, 5:00PM, Skeptic Book Club: Collapse: How Societies Choose To Fail or Succeed, by Jared Diamond, at Barnes & Noble.

Sunday, September 18, 10:30AM, Philosophy Sunday, TBA

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of learning); that is, for an emotional response elicited automatically by a brief conjunction of sounds, over a difficult and laborious process of grasping and judging abstract concepts by means of logic. Modern philosophy, of course, recognizes no such distinction: reason is an illusion, or a class prejudice, and humans learn, if they learn at all, like rats in a maze, only by perceptual association. Modern educators (with some heroic exceptions) have endeavored, most of them unknowingly but effectively nonetheless, to justify this premise: by stifling reason, and reducing their charges to the intellectual level of parrots and apes.

Which brings us to #1. Massimo thinks his side can beat back the conservatives by out-soundbiting them. This won't work. The opposition has had 2000 years of practice. Reason and freedom are the only defenses against faith and force. But reason has been gravely wounded: by Kant and Dewey. Their disciples, today's leftist academics, righteously pour dirt into the festering wound. It is they who have cleared the way for a resurgence of religion and, quite possibly, a new Dark Ages.



"Life can be beautiful, profound, and awe-inspiring, even without an irate god threatening us with eternal torment." Judith Hayes

The United States Constitution is, of course, literally a "godless" document: the word "God" (like the words "Jesus," "Christ," "Christianity," or "Bible") simply doesn't appear anywhere in our country's fundamental legal document. If the Founders of the United States meant to establish this as a "Christian Nation" in any constitutional, legal, or political sense, they neglected to mention it in the document from which our federal government derives its authority. From: *The Unchristian Roots of the Fourth of July* (1999) by Michael E. Buckner.

Camp Quest of the Smoky Mountains 2005 --- another successful year!

by Aleta Ledendecker

From June 5 - 12 campers aged nine through fourteen gathered at Tremont to participate in a week of humanist camping. Each day the campers enjoyed a variety of normal camp activities such as crafts, horseback riding, hiking, roasting marshmallows for S'mores, and swimming. In addition to those traditional pastimes, though, the youngsters also spent time engaged in philosophical discourse during the nightly Socrates Café and learned about science. They participated in many "cool science" sessions and several short activities to learn more about air pressure in preparation for flying with the Young Eagles program (grounded due to weather conditions on flight day). One science activity ranked as a favorite of the campers was learning how to set up double blind experiments.



Campers gave the camp high marks. The one drawback to it being the perfect experience was that more campers were needed. With a greater number of campers, there could

be more activities from which to choose so every camper could do his or her own thing. Some wanted more hiking, some wanted more crafts and one said that more time was needed to study freethinkers from history! One camper went so far as to say that Camp Quest fell short of being the best week of his life because it was a few hours short of a full week.

Campers and families mark your calendars for next year. The dates for the next Camp Quest of the Smoky Mountains will be June 4 - 11, 2006. Let's double the number of campers so we can double the fun and learning. Campers aged 8-17 are encouraged to inquire early.

Camp Quest Smoky Mountains 2005 is supported by a grant from the Institute of Humanist Studies. Camperships are available for interested campers.

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Material published in The Reality Check represents the views of the individual authors. Publication does not constitute an endorsement by the Rationalist of East Tennessee or its members. Articles, letters, review or other material intended for publication should be submitted to Chuck Janack or John McCaffrey via e-mail c_janack@yahoo.com or jkmccaffreytn@yahoo.com, in text or RTF format. Final decision on publication will be made by the editors. Authors will be notified of acceptance for publication before publication. Phone contact: evenings, 531-8577 (Chuck).

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