

FIG Leaves

Volume 10 Issue 9

September 2001

September Meeting

FIG's Tenth Anniversary Dinner
Sunday, September 23, at 6 PM

Please help us celebrate FIG's Tenth Anniversary by joining us for dinner in the Vernon Manor's Regency Room on Sunday, September 23. This is their most attractive room, with large windows and a chandelier.

PROGRAM

* Speaker: Timothy Madigan, Ph.D in Philosophy, our very first speaker 10 years ago and one of FIG's most popular.

* Topic: The views of Peter Singer, Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University and one of the country's most controversial humanists.

* Tim will highlight Singer's views on fetal tissue research. Tim says:

Singer's writings on such topics as animal rights, euthanasia, economics, and infanticide have caused uproar. He has been attacked frequently in the Wall Street Journal's editorial pages. An outspoken atheist, as well as an exponent of the philosophy of utilitarianism, Singer is arguably the most important contemporary public intellectual, on a par with such figures as John Dewey and Bertrand Russell.

* Time and dining details: 6 PM, cash bar, buffet dinner: four entrees, salad, dessert, and coffee or tea.

* Cost: \$20 advanced payment (\$25 at the door).

We hope that many of you will join us for this celebration. If you pay in advance, you will be helping us greatly to plan for the number of diners. To encourage you to do this, your cost will be \$20. Please send your check in the enclosed envelope by Monday, September 17.

If you decide to pay \$25 at the door, please help us by letting us know at Joelevee@aol.com. If you have questions, please use these same ways to contact us.

PETER SINGER: PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

Peter Singer, Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University's Center for Human Values, is one of today's most controversial philosophers. His writings on such topics as animal rights, euthanasia, economics, and infanticide have caused an uproar. An outspoken atheist, as well as an exponent of

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Events

September Meeting
Sunday, September 23, 6:00 p.m.
Vernon Manor Inn, Regency Room

October Potluck
Tuesday, October 9, 6:30

Risky Business: Breaking Out and Speaking Out

It's getting lonely here in the closet; my fellow outcasts keep breaking out of here all the time. I suppose that must be a good sign, a sign of increased tolerance for human variety and lifestyle choices, what we've all been waiting for. But I miss the company, the impassioned discussions and the never-ending debate about who will be next to get a ticket out of here into the light of day and who might be destined to be the last one remaining.

The feminists are long gone. First they got the vote, doors open to higher education, clothes that aren't so tight and confining and lately, almost equal pay in the workplace. Of course they don't come by much to visit anymore; working first shift on a job and second shift at home doesn't leave much time for seeing old friends, not to mention making homemade treats. Then the out-of-wedlock mothers, divorced women, war protesters who fled to Canada, and people with AIDS stopped hiding and pretending to be what they were not; more recently the followers of exotic religions like Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism began to build mosques and temples not far from churches and synagogues without much fear of being shunned.

Even homosexuals, the charter members of the closet inhabitants, except for those in the military and those who teach kids, are out there now with public parades and demands for equal treatment under the law. And they've mostly relinquished the habit of making up stories about previous marriages and relationships in order to soothe the mildly anxious looks on their neighbor's faces when they notice the preponderance of same-sex visitors over the garden fence. Race? Tiger Woods has taken care of that, with the assistance of Colin Powell, Michael Jordan and that woman with the funny first name who's trying to warn George W. about getting too friendly with Putin.

So who's left here in the shadows, dissimulating, smiling, appearing to not mind one bit when Christmas trees are declared secular symbols or public funds are allocated for "faith-based services"? Who can be found nodding sympathetically when a friend attributes good fortune to God's generosity or to fervent prayers that have been answered? The New York Times had a front page photo of The President and his cabinet, each head solemnly bowed in unison in prayer as the first item of business on their meeting agenda. What would I have done if I were a member of that group? Would I have the presence of mind to drop something on the floor and be occupied searching for it to escape

being noticed for having a straight neck? Would I cowardly go with the flow for fear of standing out? Being noticed is to be avoided when you are pretty sure that your lack of "faith" sets you apart and marks you as someone at risk for questionable behavior because you are defined largely by what you are not.

Hey! (I want to shout). I have principles! I have ethics! And I think they're solid, well-grounded and carefully considered. So why am I still here in the closet fidgeting, and waiting for permission to come out? I crack the door open now and then, testing the air. I can see some dark clouds outlined by a star-filled sky. There's work to do, risks to take and freedom to savor.

Idelle Datlof

(Continued from page 1)

the philosophy of utilitarianism, Singer is arguably the most important contemporary public intellectual, on a par with such figures as John Dewey and Bertrand Russell. He is certainly a figure that all humanists should be aware of.

In particular, Singer's ethical writings have much to say about the debate over fetal tissue research, and we will discuss his views on this issue.

Our speaker will be Timothy Madigan, Ph.D. Tim is an old friend of FIG's -- in fact he spoke at our first meeting ten years ago. He is editorial director of the University of Rochester Press and former editor of *Free Inquiry*. As many FIG members know, Tim is an informative speaker who knows how to use humor to leaven any subject.

"Fanaticism is a camouflage for cruelty. Fanatics are seldom humane, and those who sincerely dread cruelty will be slow to adapt to a fanatical creed." — Bertrand Russell, *Theory and Practice of Bolshevism*, 1920, from *2000 Years of Disbelief*, James A. Haught

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Rationally Speaking

A monthly e-column by
Massimo Pigliucci
Department of Botany,
University of Tennessee

N. 15, 15 September 2001: "Of terror and insanity" (This is a special edition of this column)

This column can be posted for free on any appropriate web site. If you are interested in receiving the html code, please send an email (pigliucci@utk.edu).

"In the City of God there will be a great thunder, Two brothers torn apart by Chaos, while the fortress endures, the great leader will succumb, The third big war will begin when the big city is burning" - Nostradamus 1654

I can only hope that this horrible hoax, because that is what this alleged quatrain from the "prophet" Nostradamus is, was perpetrated accidentally and not by somebody taking advantage of or poking fun at the human tragedy that hit the United States on September 11, 2001. Several other similar verses were released over the Internet, and self-styled Nostradamus "expert" John Hogue immediately took to the media for a special appearance on the Art Bell show commenting on what Nostradamus "really" predicted. To decrease my faith in humankind even further, my wife came home the other day from her job at the public library telling me that all the books on Nostradamus are gone and the public still calls for more.

It shouldn't take a course in critical thinking to realize that the suspicious thing about prophecies (even those that are not actually written after the fact) is that we realize what they were predicting only after the events. Hindsight is 20/20, as they say, but one could reasonably ask what is the point of a prophecy that can only be understood when it's too late. The interpretation of a single prophecy always depends upon what time the interpretation is taking place, as the vague poetic lines are stretched and cut to fit whatever has just happened or what seems likely to happen. So, rather than coming to the true understanding of a prophecy, what we're really doing is making it up out of thin air, just as the prophet did originally.

What good are psychics if they can't warn of specific, imminent danger? For example, multimillionaire mind-and future-reader Sylvia Browne was on CNN's Larry King Live just a few days before the terrorist attack. She wasted her talent warning skeptic James Randi that he had

something wrong in his left ventricle (Randi is in good health, but it is also a good bet that an elderly white American male will eventually have something wrong with his heart) instead of warning everybody on live national TV of what was about to happen. It was her chance to prove herself, and she blew it.

Of course, the true believer always has a ready answer: the point of the prophecy is to make you realize the power of mystical and religious inspiration, annihilate your pride in reason and open your heart to God, not merely to save human lives.

And speaking of God, rabid Christian fundamentalist Jerry Falwell was also out for publicity immediately after the tragedy. Was he praying for the victims and offering spiritual guidance to the rest of the nation? No, he was busy explaining why this all happened. According to this monster the reason all those people died was twofold: First, evil exists (an observation about which one can hardly disagree, although definitions of evil differ) and, second, God has lifted his umbrella of protection and allowed the tragedy to occur. Apparently, God lifted his protection because of too much secularism, not allowing kids to pray or read the Bible in school (which is not true), and allowing porn on the Web.

These statements are so outrageously stupid and offensive to the memory of the people who died that you would expect them to be immediately chastised by any reasonable Christian who was listening to Falwell's show. Alas, millions of people are hooked on the words of a man whose worldview is similar to that of the fringe religionists who rejoiced at the attack. It is frighteningly easy to imagine someone prone to Falwell's thinking style becoming someone like bin Laden under different historical circumstances. Falwell, after all, does want to turn the United States into the Christian equivalent of Taliban Afghanistan.

This morning I was riding the bus to work and they were broadcasting a local radio talk show where people were understandably upset at the events of the previous days and were trying to come to grips with the surreal situation. I imagine most of the callers had spent the previous Tuesday in a state of mind similar to my own, shocked by the news, unable to fully comprehend the scope of the tragedy or the sickness of the minds that planned it and carried it out in cold blood. But of course most of the callers to the show went immediately beyond the specific event to further-consciously or not-their religious agenda. A typical comment was "we need to turn this nation to God."

Well, wake up people, this nation is turned to God. Constantly. God is all over this nation, from the now ubiquitous signs on our highways to the highest number and density of churches that ever occurred not only in the US but probably in any other time or place in the world.

(Continued on page 4)

(Continued from page 3)

Over 95% of the citizens of the US profess belief in a personal God, and about half of them hold onto at least some of the most fundamentalist views espoused by the innumerable sects that have developed at an incredible pace over the last century. Why would God "lift his umbrella" from one of the most adoring places on the whole planet?

More importantly, what kind of a horrible God allows thousands of innocent people to be wiped out in an instant just because somebody posts pornographic pictures on the Internet? Ah, but I forgot that this is the same sort of God that told the Jews to exterminate entire races because they didn't please Him enough, and added that they should slaughter their enemies' children and-for good measure-rape their wives (see Genesis 34:13-29, Exodus 17:13, 32:27-29, Numbers 16:27-33, 21:35, 31:17-28, Deuteronomy 2:33-34, 3:6, 7:2, 20:13-14, and the list can go on and on). Is this the sort of God that our nation should turn toward? I suggest instead that we try to nuke Him if we can find where in the Hell He hides!

As the reader can see, this is an angry column. I rarely allow myself this sort of unbridled frankness, but too much is too much even for somebody attempting to style his life after the moderate advise of Epicurus. These people must be stopped, and I'm not talking only about the Islamic fundamentalists, but about any sort of fundamentalist-religious or not-who thinks he's got the answer to all the world's problems, if only the world would submit to his iron-fisted rule. It is time for all people of good will and

good sense to say: Enough!

Further reading:

James Randi's *The Mask of Nostradamus*, the only book on the "prophet" you really need to read.

Another great book that puts things in a bit of perspective: Helen Ellerbe's *The Dark Side of Christian History*.

Web Links:

Donald Morgan's site on Biblical atrocities, vulgarities and absurdities. A must for an alternative understanding of the "good book." (http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/donald_morgan/)

The James Randi Educational Foundation, if you'd like to contribute to stop the insanity. (<http://www.randi.org/>)

The Young Skeptics Program, let's help our children think critically (<http://www.csicop.org/youngskeptics/>)

Next Month: "Heart disease and the myth of individual responsibility"

© by Massimo Pigliucci, 2001

Quotes from John Emerich Edward Dalberg (Lord Acton)

There are two things which cannot be attacked in front: ignorance and narrow-mindedness. They can only be shaken by the simple development of the contrary qualities. They will not bear discussion.
-- **Lord Acton**, letter, 23 Jan. 1861 (published in *Lord Acton and his Circle*, Letter 74, ed. by Abbot Gasquet, 1906).

Every thing secret degenerates, even the administration of justice; nothing is safe that does not show how it can bear discussion and publicity.
-- **Lord Acton**, letter, 23 Jan. 1861 (published in *Lord Acton and his Circle*, Letter 74, ed. by Abbot Gasquet, 1906).

By liberty I mean the assurance that every man shall be protected in doing what he believes to be his duty against the influences of authority and majorities, custom and opinion.
-- **Lord Acton**, *History of Freedom* (London, 1907, p. 3); quoted in Maurice Cranston, *Freedom* (1953, r. 1967)

Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.
-- **Lord Acton**, letter, 3 April 1887, to Bishop Mandell Creighton (published in *The Life and Letters of Mandell Creighton*, 1904).

The possession of unlimited power corrodes the conscience, hardens the heart, and confounds the understanding.
-- **Lord Acton**, quoted by Richard Robinson in *An Atheist's Values* (p. 238).

Those who have more power are liable to sin more; no theorem in geometry is more certain than this.
-- **Lord Acton**, quoting Baron Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibnitz (G. E. Fasnacht, *Acton's Political Philosophy*, p. 134), quoted by Richard Robinson in *An Atheist's Values* (p. 238-9)

The most certain test by which we judge whether a country is really free is the amount of security enjoyed by minorities.

-- **Lord Acton**, *The History of Freedom and Other Essays*, 1907

FIG Leaflets

Effects of Christianity

But both the idea that nature somehow played a role in the development of each organism's attributes and a generally healthy scientific attitude toward gathering data from the real world just for the sake of learning about it were squelched by the rise of Christianity in the first and second centuries A.D. Inquiry within the confines of a monolithic church could only proceed through the acts of prayer and revelation. Personal experience and direct observation no longer counted in the assessment of what should have been a scientific problem. In fact, inquirers were often burned at the stake or drawn and quartered as heretics and infidels.

Ian Tattersall and Jeffrey H. Schwartz,
Extinct Humans (2000) p. 19

A view from opinion survey.

The data indicate that a significant minority of people who attend Christian churches maintain that abortion and homosexuality should be legal activities. "Increasingly we find that the positions on moral issues that are taught from the pulpit are not necessarily views embraced by regular attenders of those churches," according to George Barna. "Most congregations exhibit a diversity of opinion on doctrinal and moral matters that would shock the average pastor."

The Barna Research Group (23 July 2001)

The crocodile also surfaces in *The Book of the Dead* as Sobek:

"I am the owner of seed who takes women from their husbands whenever he wishes, according to his desire. I am Sobek, within whom terror of him dwells; I am Sobek, who carries off by violence."

(Source: *Saudi Aramco World*, July/August 2001, p. 16)

A lone individual consulting only his strong conscience and deep faith?

Though aides tried to portray his decision as akin to a religious meditation, he ran the meetings like a CEO probing for weak spots in a marketing plan. Bush's handlers decided to try something bold: to illuminate his predicament. Realizing they would have to sanction some kind of research and risk

outraging the right they chose to turn the president's decision-making pilgrimage into a kind of political outdoor Passion play. The theme: a man of conscience wrestles with the Big Questions high above the plane of mere politics. Bush would not only show that he took religious concerns seriously, but show media doubting Thomases that he could master a complex topic.

-- Quotes from: "Bush draws a stem cell line" in the National Affairs section of *Newsweek* (20 August, 2001) pp. 16-20.

Whence the Gods?

(From: *Satire of the Trades* Second Millenium BCE)

I'll speak of the fisherman also,
His is the worst of all the jobs;
He labors on the river,
Mingling with crocodiles.
When his time of reckoning comes,
He is full of lamentations;
He does not say, "There's a crocodile,"
Fear has made him blind.
Coming from the flowing water
He says, "Mighty god!"

It's against Religion.

As an old man, from his Russian periphery, von Baer made the famous and rueful remark that all new and truly important ideas must pass through three stages: first dismissed as nonsense, then rejected as against religion, and finally acknowledged as true, with the proviso from initial opponents that they knew it all along. Genetic technology has brought us through the first stage. Our current debate on stem cells resides in von Baer's second stage, with the religious views of a clear, if powerful, minority setting an unfortunate opposition to one of the most vital avenues of beneficial research in our time.

Stephen J. Gould, *New York Times*, "Op Ed"
(27 August 2001)

The Queen is most anxious to enlist everyone who can speak or write or join in checking this mad, wicked folly of "Woman's Rights" with all its attendant horrors, on which her poor feeble sex is bent, forgetting every sense of womanly feeling and propriety. Lady Amberley ought to get a good whipping.

--Queen Victoria, in a letter to Theodore Martin

Thanks to Wolf Roder for the quotes.

BOOK REVIEWS

The Darwin Wars: The Scientific Battle for the Soul of Man

by Andrew Brown

(London: Simon & Schuster, 1999)

This conflict is not between Biblical creationists and scientists. The war is rather among biologists over the process of genetic selection. Clearly, only genes can be selected, since only genes are transmitted between generations as they are passed on to offspring. Yet selection, that is survival of the fittest to reproduction, works on the whole individual. So with any offspring half of an individual's genes are transmitted. The good genes which enhance survival and the bad genes that promote illness or handicaps are transmitted as a bundle. This makes the transmittal of "selfish" genes as isolates rather difficult.

At issue is the inheritance of social behaviors, particularly altruism, but also conservatism, idealism, and similar attributes. On one side are the followers of Dawkins and sociobiology, who use mathematical models to show the likelihood of the inheritance of social characteristics and behaviors. On the other we find the adherents to the Gould paradigm emphasizing the highly random process of punctuated equilibrium. Among them the Marxist ideas of continuous historical change and the perfectibility of society preclude inheritance of complex social characteristics. Gould himself, in *The Mismeasure of Man*, has specifically singled out intelligence as not controlled by genes.

Brown emphasizes that this quarrel is among competent biological scientists. In the absence of data, much of the argument turns on social consequences of genetic endowments. All sides agree that any existing human trait must be enabled by an individual's genetic inheritance. So must any inherited trait be enabled by unfolding within an environment. As universal a human trait as walking, will not be enabled if the person loses his legs in infancy. A person born with a great talent for playing bridge will not develop this trait if born into a society which has neither paper nor cardboard, or if raised in a church which prohibits card playing. At issue are the extent and limits of this inheritance, and what does it mean for society and politics.

The inheritance of altruistic behavior among

animals, particularly self-sacrifice among social insects, can be predicted by mathematical models. Similar genetic modeling can explain kin-selection behavior among mammals. Since humans are mammals and by the same reasoning, virtue and idealism are genetic in man. Which leads to the suspicion, if you inherit good behavior, there is not much merit in being a god-fearing, virtuous person. Nor can evil action be faulted if it is in your genes. Genetic determinism, of course, has in the past led to eugenics and racism, to sterilization laws and the gas chambers. No wonder the "sociobiologists" have had mud thrown at them, both literally and figuratively.

To Gould and the *Not in Our Genes* crowd (1) the human genome is almost infinitely flexible, and the role of chance in evolution very prominent. Gould himself is famous for asserting that if earth history were re-run there is no necessity that human beings, or any self-conscious, intelligent animal would evolve. To write about a gene, or genetic predisposition, for divorce, for instance (2), makes no sense. On the contrary society, religion, and politics develop independently and determine whether divorce is an option, is easy, or will be prohibited.

The issue between sides here is to what extent is culture and cultural evolution independent of biology and genetics. How much free will do we as human beings have, is culture infinitely malleable, and can we fashion any history to our will and specification? The quarrel is so virulent, as Brown comments repeatedly, because conclusive data are lacking. Until more research is forthcoming the layperson is best advised not to take sides. Meanwhile, *The Darwin Wars* is a clear and insightful book, which explains the state of the battle at this time.

Wolf Roder

(1) Richard C. Lewontin, Steven Rose, and Leon J. Kamin. *Not in our genes : biology, ideology, and human nature*. (New York : Pantheon Books, 1984)

(2) Matt McGue and David T. Lykken, "Genetic Influence

"Devout deity-inspired religionists tend to sacrifice human love for godly love....They foment religious fights, feuds, wars, and terrorism, in the course of which orthodox believers literally batter and kill rather than cooperatively help each other." —Albert Ellis, American psychotherapist, *Free Inquiry*, spring 1988, p 28, from *2000 Years of Disbelief*, James A. Haught

BOOK REVIEWS

A Necessary Evil: A History of American Distrust of Government

by Garry Wills

(New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999)

In this volume Garry Wills examines the widespread organized and individual distrust of our own freely elected government. He looks at our long history of resistance and obstruction of constituted powers, from the rebellion of the thirteen colonies to Timothy McVeigh and insistence on every American's right to carry a concealed handgun. In the process he refutes, questions, and debunks many of our most cherished fantasies about the role of government.

We and some of us even more so have firm ideas about "the best government is that which governs least" and leaves the people free to pursue their private interest. Thoreau said it, that government is at best "a necessary evil." While we cherish freedom, individualism, and the right of every man, woman, and child to defend themselves, we are equally quick to demand that "government do something" when events we don't like occur. In order to support the myths of limited government we have fashioned an interpretation of history which is just plain aslant.

Let me start with the myth that the minute men, armed citizens electing their officers, won the revolutionary wars. They played a role, but it was a regular army under General Washington which did most of the fighting. And it was an army trained, officered, ruled, and disciplined in the spirit of the Prussian military by the Baron Fredrick von Steuben. In contrast to the regular army the citizen volunteers had a tendency to go home when the corn was ripening.

The fathers of the American constitution indeed were wary of powerful government, and endeavored to fashion a regime limited to specific powers and with balance among the three branches of government. But they also deliberately fashioned a strong government, one which could command and pursue the interests of the nation. Something that the Confederation had not shown itself capable of doing. Nor did they disdain professional politicians who would be limited in their terms. Clearly, a man who serves only a year in the legislature has scarcely learned the beginnings of what the job is about.

Wills devotes some of his most telling arguments to debunking the mythology of urban gun toting cowboys who "believe that government cannot protect

an individual's freedom. That must be done by each person, keeping law and order in private ways, with private guns." (P. 223) It wasn't six gun shooting desperadoes who tamed the frontier, but the United States cavalry. The second amendment to the Constitution does not permit every person to bear arms, but the state to maintain police forces and the national guard. What is private justice enforced by private guns but vigilantism and blood revenge, a primitive form of violence I thought we had left behind.

I have heard gun nuts claim, that if the Germans had had guns, Hitler would never have come to power. Actually, the Germans had plenty of guns, hunting and shooting sports being a long tradition. Hitler in fact was elected by a democratic plurality, and became a much beloved leader before the war. What are people really suggesting when they claim guns for resistance to powerful government. Are they advocating a civil war, a guerilla force. Do we advocate private gun ownership so we can have a private military force like the Irish Republican Army?

A government to be effective has to impose duties on its citizens, the very existence of government means that we give up some freedoms. Government must regulate, restrict, and tax, else it is not government but some kind of private association. Wills does his best to explain these issues clearly and historically. Many conservative, gun nuts will disdain or hate this book.

Wolf Roder

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