

FIG LEAVES

Volume 20 Issue 2

February 2011

February FIG Meeting: Tuesday, Feb. 22 at 7:00 pm

Atheist Coming Out Stories

Presented by Shawn Jeffers and FIG Members

Atheist Blogger, Greta Christina, recently created a presentation which she titles, "What Can the Atheist Movement Learn from the Gay Movement?" In her presentation, she analyzes how the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Movement is 35 years ahead of the Atheist movement, but that the two movements share many similarities and can learn much from each other.

While we would not be able to do justice to Greta's entire presentation, we are able to focus on one particular area - *Coming Out Stories*. Both the LGBT Movement and Atheist/Freethought Movement are invisible minorities; meaning that unless an individual publicly declares he or she is Gay or Atheist, many times their co-workers, friends or family remain unaware. With the recent atheist and humanist sponsored billboards and bus ads, freethought groups have made headlines and garnered publicity throughout the United States more than ever before. These advertisements have enabled us to raise our profile as organizations, but have not placed the same focus on individuals to share their stories.

At the February meeting, FIG Member, Shawn Jeffers, will highlight the components of a *Coming Out Story* and the role they have played in ending such invisibility. Then a few FIG Members will share their story - highlighting the reality of leaving religion, coming to terms with atheism or humanism, and the potential rejection of families. After a few examples in front of the whole room, we will break into small groups and provide an opportunity for members to share their stories.

Information on Greta Christina - Greta lives in San Francisco and we hope to have her speak in October at our FIG 20th Anniversary Celebration. Her blog is located at <http://gretachristina.typepad.com/> and we thank her for inspiring this month's presentation.

Directions to The Hannaford Suites Hotel, 5900 East Galbraith Rd.

- 1) Take Exit 12 onto Montgomery Rd.
- 2) From the off Ramp at Exit 12:
From the North - Turn Left OR From the South - Turn Right
- 3) Continue on Montgomery Rd. to East Galbraith Rd. Turn Left.
- 4) After you go under I-71, turn right into the driveway of the Hotel.

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Events

Note Location/Date/Time Changes!

February Meeting

Tuesday, February 22, 2011, 7:00 PM
Hannaford Suites Hotel

March Meeting

Tuesday, March ??, 2011, 7:00 PM
TBD

If you are interested in setting up and coordinating future FIG Community Dinners, please contact Donna Loughry at dloughry@fuse.net.



January Meeting

The Role of the Church in the African-American Community

Dr. Tonya Matthews, Vice President of Museums at the Cincinnati Museum Center, spoke to the Free Inquiry Group at our January meeting. Dr. Matthews, an African-American Catholic with a PHD in biomedical engineering, brought her unique perspective into the exploration of this topic. We advertised the talk as a response to the question, "Why would people adopt the religion of their oppressors?" Tonya admittedly took this topic in a direction that none of us expected. This resulted in an excellent presentation and a lively Q and A session.

Dr. Matthews approached this topic as, "What's up with black folks and God? Are we even asking the right question?" She began by showing statistics that reveal that the more atheistic societies such as those in Europe, tend to be the ones that have the greatest degree of societal health, implying that, "White, westernized countries where folks have health care tend to have more non-believers than places where people have no food." From that, we can surmise that people in places such as Africa are leaning on God and religion in times of stress.

Dr. Matthews gave these top four reasons why black folks should not be Christian.

- 1 - Christianity was used to justify slavery.
- 2 - Christianity used to pacify people into their particular positions of suffering and oppression as the "master plan."
- 3 - Christianity used to brainwash black people into a false sense of belonging, equality and salve to oppression.
- 4 - Noteworthy, leading Christians defy their own doctrine to espouse racism and bigotry.

At this point, she turned the presentation to a direction that was unexpected. She revealed that she had been questioned about her faith in a religion that was used to oppress her ancestors. She wondered why she had not received the same amount of skepticism about her education in science. "No one really ever approached me and said, 'How can you, as a well-read black person, possibly follow any of these strains of thought that have come through modern biology?' Here she explained the history of phrenology, eugenics and the Bell Curve and how they were used to justify slavery and pacify people as the "natural order" (In Numbers 1 and 2 above consider "Christianity" changed to "biology").

An education in science and math is regarded by the black community as a way to prove that African-Americans are equal and belong to an unbiased first class citizenry that values intelligence and objectivity. She gave some examples of famous and influential black scientists and doctors such as Dr. Hale Williams and Charles Drew who were discriminated against because of their race, and used these examples ⇒



Dr. Tonya Matthews



FIG Leaves - Thoughtful articles, letters, reviews, reports, anecdotes, and cartoons are very welcome. Submit in Electronic format via the internet to figmessage at gofigger dot org; or on disk or typewritten via mail to Editor, FIG Leaves, P.O. Box 53174, Cincinnati, OH 45253. Contributions received before the first Friday of the month will be considered for publication that month.

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to replace “Christianity” with “biology” in her Number 3 reason above.

At Number 4 on her reasons chart Dr. Matthews replaced Christianity with biology again and justified that with two examples. One was Alexander Graham Bell who mistakenly thought that mating among deaf people would result in deaf offspring, leading him to the eugenics view that artificial breeding programs should be introduced to eliminate deafness. His theory would later be disproved through genetic research. The other



example was Dr. James Watson, a Nobel Prize winner for his part in the discovery of DNA. He was quoted in 2007 as saying that while there is a natural desire to regard all races as having equality in their levels of intelligence, employers who have to deal with black employees have found this not to be true.

These scientists, Matthews said, were going against their own findings and the teachings of their peers.

Her conclusion: There is no more reason to question why a black person would be Christian than there is reason to question why a black person would follow the sciences that justify racism. A variety of tools are used to justify and promote racism, including science and religion. Dr. Matthews stated that too often scientists are regarded as gods with all the right answers. That sort of privilege is dangerous for any one. She admitted that too often scientists do not speak the language of lay people and are not used to being questioned by non-scientists. She stressed the need for ethical training for scientists and training in the scientific method for all fields. She also stressed that whatever tool is being used to determine procedure involving ethics and morality, it should be subject to honest and impartial questioning. Knowing what you bring to the discussion and how you frame the question is imperative to generating an honest and fruitful dialogue.

Following the formal program, the discussion touched on a variety of subjects and opinions. Actually, the discussion period was about twice as long as the

formal presentation. In my opinion, this program is a great jumping-off point for further conversation. It has already generated some emails and personal conversations among our membership. I would like to continue talking about this subject and related themes in future FIG meetings. If we want to diversify our group, it is important to clarify and describe the positions we hold coming into the discussion and what we hope to accomplish.

I encourage anyone who is interested in commenting on this meeting and furthering this discussion to submit a thoughtful, reasonable article or letter for possible publication in FIG Leaves. Instructions on how to submit a piece for the newsletter can be found on page 2 of the newsletter or on line at gofigger.org.

– reported by John Welte ☘



Fact or Fiction: Arsenic-Based Life

On Thursday January 27 Dr. Hazel Barton spoke to about fifty people at Slatt’s Pub in Blue Ash for the monthly Science Café. Dr. Barton, a microbiologist at Northern Kentucky University, is a microbe hunter who has been featured on CBS’s *The Early Show*, *Animal Planet* and National Geographic’s children’s book *Extreme Scientists*. Her cave explorations were featured in the IMAX movie *Journey Into Amazing Caves*.

Dr. Barton’s presentation explained that there is controversy regarding the findings of scientists who recently announced the discovery of an arsenic-based life form. She began her talk by explaining that science is empirical and that she would present the evidence so that we could decide for ourselves what to believe.

Astrobiology is the scientific study of the origin, distribution and future of life in the universe. The discipline is composed of experts in several different fields so that there are many viewpoints to draw from when examining evidence and forming new hypotheses. Many techno-



Dr. Hazel Barton



logical advances in medicine, computing and more have come as a result of astrobiology missions into space. The most profound discovery in human history, the discovery of alien life, will probably come, if it comes, as a result of explorations conducted by astrobiologists.

Since there is only one place where life is known



to exist, astrobiologists must be prepared to think about what life might be like that is not of the earth. The paper that was released about arsenic-based life is called, "A Bacterium That Can Grow Using Arsenic Instead of Phosphorous."

Phosphorous is used by life to build DNA, membranes and proteins and to carry energy around inside cells. It is essential for cell growth. Arsenic is toxic. It can replace phosphorous in chemical reactions but it is unstable. Scientists wanted to know if life could use arsenic instead of phosphorous if phosphorous is not available. Mono Lake in California is alkaline and is high in arsenic. Scientists isolated bacteria from this lake and grew them with high arsenic and no phosphorous (extreme) and with high phosphates and no arsenic (normal). They found bacteria grew both ways but the extreme cells were much larger than the normal cells. Actually, it has been known for some time that extreme cells can use arsenic instead of phosphorous.

Dr. Barton showed graphs that illustrated the growth of bacteria being fed arsenic, other bacteria being fed phosphorous and a third group that was fed nothing. Even the group that was fed nothing grew! It turns out that they had not bought chemicals that were phosphate-free so all of the experiments were contaminated with phosphorous. There was enough phosphate present for the organism to use. Other contaminants were found in cleaning materials used for the experiments that also affected the results. In the Sargasso Sea bacteria have been found that utilize less phosphorous than was present in the contaminants in these experiments. The nail in the coffin of this paper was the fact that there are also very high levels of phosphates in Mono Lake. Dr. Barton

asked, "Why would an organism change its structure to use arsenic when there is plenty of phosphorous available?"

Dr. Barton also talked about her exploration of caves and the work she does with NASA to insure that no Earth organisms hitch a ride to other worlds. She speculated about the possibility that moons in our solar system could harbor life and shared the reasons why scientists suspect that there might be life on these alien worlds. She finished her talk by showing a hilarious you tube video of the song called "Astrobiology." After a break, there were trivia questions and door prizes before the Q and A session.

So, the Science Café is educational. The talk was a great illustration of the scientific method in action. Scientists made a claim using evidence that they had gathered. Other scientists were able to test their methods for accuracy, test their



results and found problems with their conclusions. Science is provincial. There is no dogma or doctrine. Dr. Barton quoted Carl Sagan, "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence." If you make a scientific claim, you had better have the evidence to back it up.

The Science Café is also fun. The video, the jokes that Dr. Barton told throughout her talk, and the trivia contest with prizes added a friendly feeling to the event. It's a great chance to meet one on one with working scientists. Don't miss the next one! Wednesday, 23 February, 6 pm, Slatts Pub. See announcement this FIGLeaves issue. For more info go to <http://www.meetup.com/CinCitySkeptics/>. ☿





THINGS TO DO....

THINGS TO SEE...



Cincy Science Café

Date: Wednesday, February 23, 2011 at 6:00 pm

Where: Slatt's Pub; 4858 Cooper Road, Blue Ash, OH

Speaker: Thane Maynard - Director of the Cincinnati Zoo

Thane Maynard is the Director of the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden. The mission of his work teaching and writing mirrors that of the zoo: to tell the story of biological diversity, natural history, and wildlife conservation to the general public.

Thane is best known as writer and host of numerous wildlife programs, including the daily public radio series *The 90-Second Naturalist*, which airs on stations across North America. He has also been featured on *Good Morning America*, *The Today Show*, *CBS This Morning*, and *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*.

Science Cafes are free monthly events that bring together the general public and working scientists in an informal setting. Cincinnati is home to many working scientists who are performing breakthrough studies in our own backyard, but these scientists rarely have a chance to speak about their amazing research to members of the community. Everyone is invited to attend, enjoy a dinner of fish and chips, drink a frosty lager, and learn about the wonders of scientific progress. How cool is that?

The "Cincy Science Cafe" will always encourage our speakers to allow plenty of time for questions and answers. The organizers want these events to be a conversation, and not a lecture. Everyone is encouraged to let their curiosity get the best of them and ask as many questions as they wish.

"Cincy Science Cafe" is put on by The Cin City Skeptics and is a member of the NOVA ScienceNOW network. We also are partnering with University of Cincinnati's Sigma Xi fraternity, the Free Inquiry Group, and the Association of Rational Thought.

Slatts is located at 4858 Cooper Rd. in Blue Ash.

<http://www.slattspub.com>

More information here:

http://www.sciencecafes.org/event_pages/Cincy.html

Cin City Skeptics:

<http://www.meetup.com/CinCitySkeptics/>

Science Book Club

All meetings on 3rd Sunday of each month at 2:30 in room 3A of downtown Main Public Library unless otherwise noted.

Preliminary Schedule for 2011:

February - Peter - two of his articles

"Is It Inevitable That Evolution Self Destruct?" 4,400 words

"To Achieve Sustainability" 9,000 words, for both of which he will send out copies by email

March - Randy - *The Rational Optimist: How prosperity evolves* by Matt Ridley, 2010, 438pp

April - Rick Davis - *You Are Not a Gadget* by Jaron Lanier, 2010, 209pp

May - Carolyn - *On The Take : How America's Complicity With Big Business Can Endanger Your Health* by Jerome Kassirer, 2005, 251 pp

June 5 or 26 - Eric Otto - *Wrong: Why Experts Keep Failing Us - and How to Know When Not to Trust Them* by David Freedman, 2010, 295pp

June 5 or 26 - Bryan - *A Life Decoded: My Genome, My Life* by J. Craig Venter, 2007, 390pp

July - Bob Streifthau - *13 Things That Don't Make Sense* by Michael Brooks, 2008, 240pp

August - open

Sept or Oct - Frank - *Sacred Geometry* by Stephen Skinner, 2006, 160pp

October, Nov - Gary - *What Have You Changed Your Mind About? Today's Leading Minds Rethink Everything* by John Brockman, ed, 2009, 387pp

Oct or Nov - Richard Bozian - *The Dependent Gene: Fallacy of Nature vs. Nurture* by David S. Moore, 2002, 312pp,

November - Pauline - *The Denial of Death* by Ernest Becker, Pulitzer Prize, 1973, 314pp

December - open

no date - Bernie - *The Dominant Animal: Human Evolution & The Environment* by Paul R. Ehrlich 2008, 420pp





Contradiction Corner

by Dennis Davis



For this edition of Contradiction Corner I will focus on some of the most blatant contradictions that are literal cases of a verse making a statement while another says the opposite.

A most direct example of such a contradiction would be the answer to the question, “Do children pay for the sins of their fathers?” Deuteronomy 24:16 tells us that they absolutely do not: “The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin.” Yet Exodus 20:5 says the opposite: “for I the *Lord thy God* am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me.”

Another such error would be Genesis 7:1 where we have God specifically telling Noah that he is being saved because he is righteous; then we are told that Lot (Abraham’s nephew) was also righteous in 2 Peter 2:7-8. Yet the entire message delivered by the author of Romans 3 is that only Jesus was a fitting sacrifice for our sins because he was and is the only righteous human who ever lived or would ever live. If Romans 3 is correct than God himself is a liar in Genesis; however if Romans 3 is wrong then Jesus was not unique and the most fundamental foundation of modern church doctrine is untrue.

Many of the errors encountered in the Bible exist because it is a collection of writings by various authors of documents separated by centuries; but occasionally a set of contradictions can be found in the same book just verses apart. Let us look at what the Bible tells us about the Amalekites, a people who lived in Canaan during Old Testament times that happened to be in the way of Israelite expansionism. 1 Samuel 15:7-9 tells us that King Saul fought the Amalekites and “destroyed them utterly,” so how is it possible that his successor, King David, in 1 Samuel 27:8 fought them again and this time David left “neither man nor woman alive.” Yet somehow, three chapters later in the same book, 1 Samuel 30:1, the Amalekites somehow attacked the Kingdom of Israel from the South. Maybe it was an army of zombies?

Examples of two conflicting verses in the same book can be found in the New Testament as well. In John 5:31 Jesus is quoted as saying, “If I bear witness of myself,

my witness is not true”, yet in John 8:18, Jesus is quoted again saying, “I am the one who bears witness about myself.” So according to his own words Jesus tells us not to trust anyone who says the things he said elsewhere.

In James 1:13 where we are told “God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man”, yet in Genesis 22:1 we are told “God did tempt Abraham”. Here is one of those fun passages where many Christians will attempt to avoid the contradiction by pointing out that modern translations of scripture use the word “test” instead of “tempt” as in the KJV. They say that God was only testing Abraham not tempting him with evil; however, this test of Abraham involved taking a knife and murdering his son as a sacrifice. I don’t see how such an act could be described as anything other than evil.

The last contradiction I will point out in this article is a simple test provided by the Bible that tells Christians how to recognize true spirits from false ones. 1 John 4:2 states, “This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.” Yet by this test what Mark 3:11 calls unclean spirits would be true because they confess to Jesus that “Thou art the Son of God.” If demons are considered true spirits one wonders what untrue spirits must be like.

As anyone can see, Biblical contradictions are often straightforward in plain sight. The only reason that most fundamentalists who claim Biblical inerrancy don’t find them seems because they never actually read scripture critically. Perhaps many choose to read merely a few pet scriptures that make them feel good. However through this collection of contradictions you can correct his or her oversight.



Food For Thought

1. A clear conscience is usually the sign of a bad memory.
2. Change is inevitable, except from vending machines.
3. If you think nobody cares, try missing a couple of payments.
4. Eagles may soar, but weasels don’t get sucked into jet engines.
5. When everything is coming your way, you’re in the wrong lane.



New Alabama Governor: Only Christians Are My Brothers And Sisters

by Eric Lach; 18 January 2011; TPM

Speaking on Martin Luther King Jr. Day in the very church where Dr. King once pastored, new Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley gave a speech

in which he said that those who have not accepted Jesus Christ as their savior are not his "brothers."

Bentley spoke at the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church in Montgomery just minutes after taking the oath of office on Monday. The new governor, who has been a deacon at First Baptist Church in Tuscaloosa, first said that though he ran as a Republican, once he took office he "became the governor of all the people."

"I am color blind," Bentley said, according to *The Birmingham News*. But Bentley then said that only those who are Christians and "saved" like he is are his brothers and sisters.

"There may be some people here today who do not have living within them the Holy Spirit," Bentley said. "But if you have been adopted in God's family like I have, and like you have if you're a Christian and if you're saved, and the Holy Spirit lives within you just like the Holy Spirit lives within me, then you know what that makes? It makes you and me brothers. And it makes you and me brother and sister."

Bentley stopped just short of calling for non-Christians to accept Jesus Christ.

ARIS 2008

(American Religious Identification Survey)

Table no. 4

Beliefs about God among U.S. Adult Population

Regarding the existence of God, do you think . . . ?

	percent
There is not such thing	2.3
There is no way to know	4.3
I'm not sure	5.7
There is a higher power but no personal God	12.1
There is definitely a personal God	69.5
Refused	<u>6.1</u>
n = 1000	100



Separation of Church and Health

by Herb Silverman, 24 January 2011

Silverman is Founder and President of the Secular Coalition for America, and Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the College of Charleston

In Texas, a Catholic bishop made two hospitals cease doing tube-tying operations for women who are not going to have more babies. In Arizona, a nun was excommunicated and the hospital where she works was expelled from the church after 116 years for allowing doctors to terminate a pregnancy to save a woman's life. At the same time, some doctors and other health professionals have faced disciplinary action for refusing to perform procedures or provide medications that go against their religious beliefs.

Should Catholic hospitals be able to restrict doctors from performing common and legal medical practices? Do such restrictions unfairly impinge on the rights of non-Catholic patients and doctors, particularly those in rural or underserved areas where alternative hospitals are not readily available?

I feel the same about separation of church and health care as I do about separation of church and state. People have the right to follow the god of their choice, and denominations have the right to make rules for their flocks. A religion need not accept government funds, but any money a religion receives from our secular government may only be used for secular purposes.

A church-related hospital that receives no public funds can choose to make medical decisions (for previously informed adults) based more on the advice of church leaders than medical practitioners. My problem is with church-affiliated hospitals that impose their medical restrictions →



One of our members is blogging unbelief:

Ben Doublett has: FoolofPsalms.blogspot.com

It opens with the Motto:

The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good - Psalms 14.1





on uninformed patients.

For financial reasons, some church hospitals are merging with secular hospitals. If they don't publicize what they offer (or, more likely, what they don't offer), patients probably won't know. I'd like to see some truth in advertising, where all hospitals are required to prominently display what religious restrictions they place on health care. Perhaps we will see signs like:

"We are more likely to pray over you than give you a blood transfusion." or "Exorcism is among our psychiatric services." or "Our sexual advice to couples comes from celibate priests."

Signs or brochures of this type would be fine, though I might exercise my First Amendment right to proselytize for secular health care. Unfortunately, there are many communities with just one hospital, sometimes one with religious restrictions that prevent the quality health care a patient needs and deserves. Our government tries to assure that nobody is denied emergency health care for financial reasons, and it should also try to assure that nobody be denied standardized secular health care because of the hospital owner's religious beliefs. ❧



Take the Nation Back...Where?

by Herb Silverman, 31 January 2011

Silverman is Founder and President of the Secular Coalition for America, and Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the College of Charleston

Mike Huckabee, the conservative former Arkansas governor, this weekend said that he is concerned about Islam's role in Egypt's future. As On Faith panelist Reza Aslan this week noted, Huckabee has also called for Americans to "take this nation back for Christ" and, while running for president in 2008, declared that "what we need to do is to amend the Constitution so it's in God's standards."

In America and in Egypt, should a majority religion inspire political life? How will Islam play a role in the struggles for democracy happening now in Egypt and other parts of the Muslim world?

All Middle East countries have constitutions, as do we, but I'm more worried that their leaders will establish Sharia law than that our leaders will "take this nation back for Christ." Why? Because our religious radicals have not yet found a way to get around the Bill of Rights, despite their attempts to chip away at an increasingly brittle wall that separates church from state.

Former (and perhaps future) presidential candidate Mike Huckabee is ignorant and wrong in so many ways. He can't take back this nation to a place it has never been. Perhaps Huckabee meant back to the first Pilgrims and Puritans who settled here and established Christian colonies. Those of the "wrong" religion were excluded from government participation and persecuted. Such church-state unions led to the Salem witch trials.

The framers of our U. S. Constitution and Bill of Rights wanted no part of the religious intolerance and bloodshed they saw in Europe, and in our own early theocratic colonies. They wisely established the first government in history to separate church and state. There have been numerous amendments proposed to turn our secular country into a bible-based Christian nation. Thankfully, all such attempts at official establishment have failed.

It's interesting that some politicians can see dangers in a theocracy or in a government that favors one religion over others only when it's their religion that isn't favored. I mostly support democratic rule, but I'm not an absolutist. I worry when the majority of voters in any country want to establish a government religion. Whatever the outcome in Egypt or anywhere else, I hope for a government that respects women and minorities, and allows freedom of conscience for all its citizens.

There are many reasons strife continues in the Middle East. One is that fundamentalist Christians, Jews, and Muslims all want to take back the so-called "holy land" for Yahweh, Jesus, or Allah. Pandering American politicians who try to be holier than thou should recognize they have a long way to go to be holier than Middle East theocrats. Holiness isn't all it's cracked up to be. ❧



More Food For Thought

1. Everyone has a photographic memory. Some just don't have film or the right digital media.
2. OK, so what's the speed of dark?
3. What happens if you get scared half to death twice?
4. Life isn't like a box of chocolates... it's more like a jar of jalapenos. What you do today, might burn your butt tomorrow.



Morals Without God?

By Frans de Waal, October 2010

(De Waal is the foremost research scientist on the subject of ethics and empathy among animals. What he has to say about the evolution of morals in the human animal is worth reading.)

I was born in Den Bosch, the city after which Hieronymus Bosch named himself. This obviously does not make me an expert on the Dutch painter, but having grown up with his statue on the market square, I have always been fond of his imagery, his symbolism, and how it relates to humanity's place in the universe. This remains relevant today since Bosch depicts a society under a waning influence of God.

His famous triptych with naked figures frolicking around — “The Garden of Earthly Delights” — seems a tribute to paradisiacal innocence. The tableau is far too happy and relaxed to fit the interpretation of depravity and sin advanced by puritan experts. It represents humanity free from guilt and shame either before the Fall or without any Fall at all. For a primatologist, like myself, the nudity, references to sex and fertility, the plentiful birds and fruits and the moving about in groups are thoroughly familiar and hardly require a religious or moral interpretation. Bosch seems to have depicted humanity in its natural state, while reserving his moralistic outlook for the right-hand panel of the triptych in which he punishes — *not* the frolickers from the middle panel — but monks, nuns, gluttons, gamblers, warriors, and drunkards.

Hieronymus Bosch's “Garden of Earthly Delights” depicts hundreds of erotic naked figures carrying or eating fruits, but is also full of references to alchemy, the forerunner of chemistry. The figures on the right are embedded in glass tubes typical of a *bain-marie*, while the two birds supposedly symbolize vapors.

Five centuries later, we remain embroiled in debates about the role of religion in society. As in Bosch's days, the central theme is morality. Can we envision a world without God? Would this world be good? Don't think for one moment that the current battle lines between biology and fundamentalist Christianity turn around evidence. One has to be pretty immune to data to doubt evolution, which is why books and documentaries aimed at convincing the skeptics are a waste of effort. They are helpful for those prepared to listen, but fail to reach their target audience. The debate is less about the truth than about how to handle it. For those who believe that morality comes straight from God the creator, acceptance of evolution would open a moral abyss.

Our Vaunted Frontal Lobe

Echoing this view, Reverend Al Sharp-ton opined in a recent videotaped debate: “If there is no order to the universe, and therefore some being, some force that ordered it, then who determines what is right or wrong? There is nothing immoral if there's nothing in charge.” Similarly, I have heard people echo Dostoevsky's Ivan Karamazov, exclaiming that “If there is no God, I am free to rape my neighbor!”

Perhaps it is just me, but I am wary of anyone whose belief system is the only thing standing between them and repulsive behavior. Why not assume that our humanity, including the self-control needed for livable societies, is built into us? Does anyone truly believe that our ancestors lacked social norms before they had religion? Did they never assist others in need, or complain about an unfair deal? Humans must have worried about the functioning of their communities well before the current religions arose, which is only a few thousand years ago. Not that religion is irrelevant — I will get to this — but it is an add-on rather than the wellspring of morality.

Deep down, creationists realize they will never win factual arguments with science. This is why they have construed their own science-like universe, known as Intelligent Design, and eagerly jump on every tidbit of information that seems to go their way. The most recent opportunity arose with “the Hauser” affair. A Harvard colleague, Marc Hauser, has been accused of eight counts of scientific misconduct, including making up his own data. Since Hauser studied primate behavior and wrote about morality, Christian Web sites were eager to claim that “all that people like Hauser are left with are unsubstantiated propositions that are contradicted by millennia of human experience” (Chuck Colson, Sept. 8, 2010). A major newspaper asked “Would it be such a bad thing if Hauser-

gate resulted in some intellectual humility among the new scientists of morality?” (Eric Felten, Aug. 27, 2010). Even a linguist could not resist this occasion to reaffirm the gap between human and animal by warning against “naive evolutionary presuppositions.”

These are rearguard battles, however. Whether creationists jump on this scientific scandal or linguists and psychologists keep selling human exceptionalism does not really matter. Fraud has occurred in many fields of science, from epidemiology to physics, all of which are still around. In the field of cognition, the march towards continuity between human and animal has been inexorable — one misconduct case won't make a difference. True, humanity never runs out of claims of what sets it apart, but it is a rare uniqueness claim that holds up for over a decade. This is why we don't hear anymore that only humans make tools, imitate, think ahead, have culture, are self-aware, or adopt another's point of view.

If we consider our species without letting ourselves be blinded by the technical advances of the last few millennia, we see a creature of flesh and blood with a brain that, albeit three times larger than a chimpanzee's, doesn't contain any new parts. Even our vaunted prefrontal cortex turns out to be of typical size: recent neuron-counting techniques classify the human brain as a linearly scaled-up monkey brain. No one doubts the superiority of our intellect, but we have no basic wants or needs that are not also present in our close relatives. I interact on a daily basis with monkeys and apes, which just like us strive for power, enjoy sex, want security and affection, kill over territory, and value trust and cooperation. Yes, we use cell phones and fly airplanes, but our psychological make-up remains that of a social primate. Even the posturing and deal-making among the alpha males in Washington is nothing out of the ordinary.





The Pleasure of Giving

Charles Darwin was interested in how morality fits the human-animal continuum, proposing in *The Descent of Man*: “Any animal whatever, endowed with well-marked social instincts ... would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience, as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well developed ... as in man.”

Unfortunately, modern popularizers have strayed from these insights. Like Robert Wright in *The Moral Animal*, they argue that true moral tendencies cannot exist — not in humans and even less in other animals — since nature is one hundred percent selfish. Morality is just a thin veneer over a cauldron of nasty tendencies. Dubbing this position “Veneer Theory” (similar to Peter Railton’s “moral camouflage”), I have fought it ever since my 1996 book *Good Natured*. Instead of blaming atrocious behavior on our biology (“we’re acting like animals!”), while claiming our noble traits for ourselves, why not view the entire package as a product of evolution? Fortunately, there has been a resurgence of the Darwinian view that morality grew out of the social instincts. Psychologists stress the intuitive way we arrive at moral judgments while activating emotional brain areas, and economists and anthropologists have shown humanity to be far more cooperative, altruistic, and fair than predicted by self-interest models. Similarly, the latest experiments in primatology reveal that our close relatives will do each other favors even if there’s nothing in it for themselves.

Maintaining a peaceful society is one of the tendencies underlying human morality that we share with other primates, such as chimpanzees. After a fight between two adult males, one offers an open hand to his adversary. When the other accepts the invitation, both kiss and embrace.

Chimpanzees and bonobos will voluntarily open a door to offer a companion access to food, even if they lose part of it in the process. And capuchin monkeys are prepared to seek rewards for others, such as when we place two of them side by side, while one of them barter with us with differently colored tokens. One token is “selfish,” and the other “prosocial.” If the bartering monkey selects

the selfish token, it receives a small piece of apple for returning it, but its partner gets nothing. The prosocial token, on the other hand, rewards both monkeys. Most monkeys develop an overwhelming preference for the prosocial token, which preference is not due to fear of repercussions, because dominant monkeys (who have least to fear) are the most generous.

Even though altruistic behavior evolved for the advantages it confers, this does not make it selfishly motivated. Future benefits rarely figure in the minds of animals. For example, animals engage in sex without knowing its reproductive consequences, and even humans had to develop the morning-

In brief his overarching argument is summarized by his title for Part III of his book: “**Revolution: The Christian Invention of the Human.**” [sic] If you imagine that he is merely being metaphorical or hyperbolic, he is more specific in his opening chapter where he declares that “compassion, pity, and charity” are inventions of Christianity. (p.16)

C. J. Wright quoting David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (2010)

after pill. This is because sexual motivation is unconcerned with the reason why sex exists. The same is true for the altruistic impulse, which is unconcerned with evolutionary consequences. It is this disconnect between evolution and motivation that befuddled the Veneer Theorists, and made them reduce everything to selfishness. The most quoted line of their bleak literature says it all: “Scratch an ‘altruist,’ and watch a ‘hypocrite’ bleed.”

It is not only humans who are capable of genuine altruism; other animals are, too. I see it every day. An old female, Peony, spends her days outdoors with other chimpanzees at the Yerkes Primate Center’s Field Station. On bad days, when her arthritis is flaring up, she has trouble walking and climbing, but other females help her out. For example, Peony is huffing and puffing to get up into the climbing frame in which several apes have gathered for a grooming session.

An unrelated younger female moves behind her, placing both hands on her ample behind and pushes her up with quite a bit of effort, until Peony has joined the rest.

We have also seen Peony getting up and slowly move towards the water spigot, which is at quite a distance. Younger females sometimes run ahead of her, take in some water, then return to Peony and give it to her. At first, we had no idea what was going on, since all we saw was one female placing her mouth close to Peony’s, but after a while the pattern became clear: Peony would open her mouth wide, and the younger female would spit a jet of water into it.

Such observations fit the emerging field of animal empathy, which deals not only with primates, but also with canines, elephants, even rodents. A typical example is how chimpanzees console distressed parties, hugging and kissing them, which behavior is so predictable that scientists have analyzed thousands of cases. Mammals are sensitive to each other’s emotions, and react to others in need. The whole reason people fill their homes with furry carnivores and not with, say, iguanas and turtles, is because mammals offer something no reptile ever will. They give affection, they want affection, and respond to our emotions the way we do to theirs.

Mammals may derive pleasure from helping others in the same way that humans feel good doing good. Nature often equips life’s essentials — sex, eating, nursing — with built-in gratification. One study found that pleasure centers in the human brain light up when we give to charity. This is of course no reason to call such behavior “selfish” as it would make the word totally meaningless. A selfish individual has no trouble walking away from another in need. Someone is drowning: let him drown. Someone cries: let her cry. These are truly selfish reactions, which are quite different from empathic ones. Yes, we experience a “warm glow,” and perhaps some other animals do as well, but since this glow reaches us *via* the other, and *only* via the other, the helping is genuinely other-oriented.

Bottom-Up Morality

A few years ago Sarah Brosnan and I demonstrated that primates will happily →



perform a task for cucumber slices until they see others getting grapes, which taste so much better. The cucumber-eaters become agitated, throw down their measly veggies and go on strike. A perfectly fine food has become unpalatable as a result of seeing a companion with something better.

We called it *inequity aversion*, a topic since investigated in other animals, including dogs. A dog will repeatedly perform a trick without rewards, but refuse as soon as another dog gets pieces of sausage for the same trick. Recently, Sarah reported an unexpected twist to the inequity issue, however. While testing pairs of chimps, she found that also the one who gets the *better* deal occasionally refuses. It is as if they are satisfied only if both get the same. We seem to be getting close to a sense of fairness.

Such findings have implications for human morality. According to most philosophers, we reason ourselves towards a moral position. Even if we do not invoke God, it is still a top-down process of us formulating the principles and then imposing those on human conduct. But would it be realistic to ask people to be considerate of others if we had not already a natural inclination to be so? Would it make sense to appeal to fairness and justice in the absence of powerful reactions to their absence? Imagine the cognitive

burden if every decision we took needed to be vetted against handed-down principles. Instead, I am a firm believer in the Humean position that reason is the slave of the passions. We started out with moral sentiments and intuitions, which is also where we find the greatest continuity with other primates. Rather than having developed morality from scratch, we received a huge helping hand from our background as social animals.

At the same time, however, I am reluctant to call a chimpanzee a "moral being." This is because sentiments do not suffice. We strive for a logically coherent system, and have debates about how the death penalty fits arguments for the sanctity of life, or whether an unchosen sexual orientation can be wrong. These debates are uniquely human. We have no evidence that other animals judge the appropriateness of actions that do not affect themselves. The great pioneer of morality research, the Finn Edward Westermarck, explained what makes the moral emotions special: "Moral emotions are disconnected from one's immediate situation: they deal with good and bad at a more abstract, disinterested level." This is what sets human morality apart: a move towards universal standards combined with an elaborate system of justification, monitoring and punishment. ☞

Atheists Don't Have No Songs
as performed by Steve Martin.

Christians have their hymns and pages,
Hava Nagila's for the Jews,
Baptists have the *Rock of Ages*,
Atheists just sing the blues.

Romantics play *Claire de Lune*,
Born Agains sing *He is Risen*,
But no one ever wrote a tune,
For godless existentialism.

For Atheists, there's no good news,
They'll never sing a song of faith.
In their songs they have a rule:
The "he" is always lower case.
The "he" is always lower case.

Some folks sing a Bach cantata,
Lutherans get Christmas trees,
Atheist songs add up to *nada*,
But they do have Sundays free.

Pentecostals sing to heaven,
Coptics have the *Books of Scrolls*,
Numerologists can count to seven,
Atheists have rock and roll.

For Atheists, there's no good news,
They'll never sing a song of faith.
In their songs they have a rule:
The "he" is always lower case.
The "he" is always lower case.

Catholics dress up for Mass,
And listen to, Gregorian chants.
Atheists just take a pass,
Watch football in their underpants.
Watch football in their underpants.

Atheists, Atheists, Atheists,
Don't have no songs!

To see this Video, Google
"Steve Martin Atheist Song"
Enjoy! - It's hilarious!



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March Meeting
Tuesday, March??, 2010, 7:00 PM



February Meeting
Tuesday, February 22, 2010, 7:00 PM



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Cincinnati, OH 45253

FIG

Our Purpose

The Free Inquiry Group, Inc. (FIG) is a non-profit organization founded in 1991. FIG is allied with the Council for Secular Humanism as well as an affiliate of the American Humanist Association and of the American Atheists.

Though most of our members are secular humanists, we welcome to our meetings anyone interested in learning about or furthering our purpose.



To foster a community of secular humanists dedicated to improving the human condition through rational inquiry and creative thinking unfettered by superstition, religion, or any form of dogma.

In accordance with our purpose, we have established the following goals:

- To provide a forum for intelligent exchange of ideas for those seeking fulfillment in an ethical secular life.
- To develop through open discussion the moral basis of a secular society and encourage ethical practices within our own membership and the community at large.
- To inform the public regarding secular alternatives to supernatural interpretations of the human condition.
- To support and defend the principles of democracy, free speech, and separation of church and state as expressed in the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights.

For more information, write the Free Inquiry Group at the address above, e-mail - [figmessage at gofigger dot org](mailto:figmessage@gofigger.org), or visit our web site at gofigger.org or freeinquirygroup.org.