

FIG LEAVES

Volume 20 Issue 12

December 2011

December FIG Meeting:

Tuesday, December 20, 7pm,
Hannaford Suites in Kenwood

Solstice Celebration and Discussion

For our December meeting, we will have a Solstice potluck and discussion. FIG members are asked to bring food or desserts to share or drinks (beer, wine, soft drinks, etc) to celebrate Solstice Eve. After noshing, we will break into small groups to engage in conversations with other FIG members around recent billboards and advertisements within the atheist and humanist communities. American Atheists, American Humanist Association, Freedom from Religion Foundation have become much more visible in recent years, so we will review different billboards and advertisements they have made. Additionally, atheists have become targets by several religious individuals around the "War on Christmas" and through political campaigns. Plan on joining us for a fun and thoughtful evening.

FIG Election

We are having an election in December.

Our President, John Welte has been appointed Ohio State Director of American Atheists. With this appointment, John is stepping down from the position of President, but he will remain a Board Member of FIG. Shawn Jeffers has announced that he is running for President. If Shawn is elected, there will be an opening as Program Chair for FIG. Also open is the position of Vice-President. This can be someone already on the board, or someone newly elected.

Further, there will be openings for a couple Board member positions. If you are interested in serving on the Board or as Program Chair, please contact John Welte at welte@fuse.net. Please volunteer.

FIG Accepting Credit Card/PayPal Donations

FIG now can accept donations online through PayPal - pay with your credit card or PayPal account. A link for a PayPal donation is available on www.gofigger.org. OR You can also donate online by using this web address - <http://tinyurl.com/3dtvpp4> OR You can also find the information on our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/gofigger.

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Events

December Meeting/ Celebration/Potluck

Tues. Dec. 20, at 7:00 PM
The Hannaford Suites Hotel
*(There are no other meetings in December -
Spend time with family and friends.)*

January 2012 Meeting/

Tues. Jan. 24, at 7:00 PM
The Hannaford Suites Hotel
Program - TBD



Please Let Us Have Your E-Mail Address!

Whenever we send out an e-mail, several rejections are returned. If you want to stay in touch with FIG, please make sure we have your correct and up-to-date e-mail address. We also need your current snail mail address.

To confirm your e-mail and Snail address if it has changed, please send an e-mail to Brian Sellers at bsellers@fuse.net.





Message from the President

by John Welte

As some of you already know, I will be stepping down from the presidency of FIG to become the Ohio State Director of American Atheists. Serving as the president of the Free Inquiry Group for the last few years has been an honor and a privilege. I have had the pleasure of meeting a lot of intelligent and humanitarian free thinkers. I think that has been the highlight of my term as president; interacting and learning from a great group of individuals.

The projects and programs that we have shared have meant a lot to me. Thought provoking and challenging events are a great way to bring a sense of community to our group. Even when we disagree with each other it is an enlightening and broadening experience. One of my favorite meetings was the "coming out" event where several members shared their journeys from being believers to being non-believers. Sharing these experiences promoted a feeling of camaraderie within FIG as our members were able to empathize and relate in a personal way to these experiences. A few more favorites of mine were: trips to Sunrock Farms, the Bodies Exhibit, and the FIG@20 celebration. I don't think I am able to pick a favorite speaker from the last few years. There were just too many great ones from which to choose!

It is my personal thought that groups such as FIG benefit from having a change in leadership every few years. This refreshes the group and prevents one individual from being too much of a presence as far as determining the mission and future of the group. I plan to be involved with FIG as a member and possibly as a member of the board of directors if the membership agrees. We have a few open spots on the board now and that is a great way for members to be a vital part of the organization. Please consider volunteering.

Finally I would like to thank those of you who have helped me but I don't have the space to mention everyone. Ideas and suggestions from members have been invaluable. The board of directors assisted and guided me when I was unsure about a course of action or policy. One member of the board that I will mention by name is Joe Levee. Besides being the originator of the group he has been the backbone of FIG for its entire twenty years. Joe was always my go-to guy when I needed advice to make an important decision. Joe is stepping down from the board but it is my sincere hope that he will remain involved with FIG in the future. If you heard Joe's talk at the FIG@20 event you know from its content and Joe's tone of voice and expressions that FIG is very important to him. I'm sure he will continue to be involved.

I'm anxious to see what the next twenty years will bring to FIG. Where do we go from here? It's up to all of you. Here's to you!

In Reason,
John Welte



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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Dennis Davis
Terry Kassnel
FIG Leaves Editor: Wolf Roder.



Memberships run from:

1 January to 31 December.
One year: \$30
Family: \$40

If you join during the year, you receive a \$2 discount for each month that has passed.

We request contributions above membership dues. Contributions are tax deductible.



November Science Cafe

Prince of Evolution

The November Science Café featured a very interesting talk by Dr. Lee Alan Dugatkin. Dr. Dugatkin is an evolutionary biologist and historian of science and a professor and Distinguished University Scholar in the Department of Biology at the University of Louisville. The author of several books, Dugatkin's presentation on this evening highlighted his latest book,



The Prince of Evolution: Peter Kropotkin's Adventures in Science and Politics. Not only did he come all the way from Louisville to speak but he also wore an authentic Russian shirt made by his wife especially for his presentation.

Russian Prince Peter Kropotkin was one of the world's first international celebrities. He was known as a brilliant scientist, famous for his work on animal and human cooperation, and for his role as a founder of anarchism. Born in 1842 to a noble family, he caught the attention of the Czar when he was only eight years old as the kind of person the Czar wished to train for future leadership. As a member of the privileged class he received an excellent education. One of his teachers presented him with material from an underground anarchist movement. Peter took to this idea and declared that he never again wanted to be called "prince." When he joined the court of pages he became interested in evolutionary biology. He achieved the highest ranking among students. As a result he got his choice of assignments from the Czar and decided to explore Siberia.

Kropotkin was interested in the natural history of this great area of Russia and also, as an anarchist, wanted to be far from the seat of power in his country. His official assignment was to study prisons. He did that but his main interest was in the flora and fauna of the area. He spent five years and traveled 50,000 miles by dog sled, experiencing many hardships and struggles along the way. Expecting to find a dog-eat-dog world from his study of Darwin, he was surprised to find instead a world

of, as he called it, "mutual aid." He observed animals of all kinds including humans, cooperating and supporting each other in their struggle to survive as a species. The first book he wrote was entitled, "Mutual Aid." One of the interesting things that he discovered was that villages that were farther away and less influenced by the governmental authority were the villages that were the most cooperative among their population and were more prone to aiding each other as individuals. This supported his ideas of anarchy. He was the first to speak about naturally evolving mutual aid as a benefit to the welfare of species and the welfare of human political societies.

After his travels he went to St. Petersburg University and studies mathematics. Here he developed his theory that anarchism is the next evolutionary phase of human evolution. He was arrested and imprisoned for his distribution of these radical ideas. Here he wrote and exercised for a couple of years until he and a few others escaped and he fled to England. The stories of his escape attempts are worth the price of the book.

Kropotkin started working for the new magazine, *Nature*. He wrote a series of articles opposing the brutal struggle for existence propagated by the works of Thomas Huxley while making a case for his own theory of mutual aid. He listed many examples from his travels in Siberia. His favorite example of mutual aid among humans was the French Revolution before it went bad. He thought that the act of the people taking over the reins of government for their own good was a quintessential aspect of mutual aid. His essays gained him fame and notoriety equal to that of Thomas Huxley.

Tens of thousands of people listened to Prince Peter during two speaking tours that took him around



the world, including America in 1897 and again in 1901. He spoke on an incredibly wide variety of topics. He was also banished from most respectable Western countries of the day. Somehow Kropotkin found the energy to write books on a dazzling array of topics: evolution and cooperation, ethics,





anarchism, socialism and communism, penal systems, and the coming industrial revolution in the East, to name a few. Though seemingly disparate topics, a common thread --Kropotkin's scientific law of mutual aid, which guided the evolution of all life on earth --tied these works together. Just like in the animals he watched for five years in Siberia, Kropotkin saw human cooperation as ultimately being driven not by government, but by groups of individuals spontaneously uniting to do good, even when they have to pay a cost to help. He thought that the driving force behind this mutual aid was empathy felt by animals as well as humans.

After the February revolution in Russia in 1917, Kropotkin returned to his native land, thinking that this revolution was the answer to his hopes as an anarchist. He was crushed when the Bolsheviks took over the government and instituted their policies of propaganda and totalitarianism. He died in 1921, possibly of starvation. His funeral was financed by anarchist groups and attended by thousands of people. As Dr. Dugatkin said, this is a man we should all know more about. His theories are generating thousands of papers by scientists of today who are still researching various aspects of his philosophies and research.

– John Welte

For more on Dr. Dugatkin go to <http://louisville.edu/faculty/laduga01>. The Science Café is featured at <http://www.meetup.com/skeptic/>. ☞



THINGS TO DO...

THINGS TO SEE...



Meetups

Monday, December 19, 2011, 6:30 PM

Washington Platform Saloon

1000 Elm St, Cincinnati, OH (map)

Selected By: Drew Hanners

Atheists, Agnostics, Humanists and Freethinkers meet here. Regular monthly gatherings are held on the 3rd Mondays. New people join every month, and we all wear name tags (no quizzes). Check the Message Board for current hot topics. This is a purely social gathering. No agenda, no speaker, no rules of order. If you'd prefer a bit more structure, please check the calendar for lectures, FIG meetings, and other events.

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Thursday, January 5, 2012, 7:00 PM

Hofbrauhaus Newport

200 East 3rd Street, Newport, KY (map)

Selected By: Drew Hanners

Atheists, Agnostics, Humanists and Freethinkers meet here. Regular monthly gatherings are held on the 1st Thursday. New people join every month, and we all wear name tags (no quizzes). Check the Message Board for current hot topics.

This is a purely social gathering. No agenda, no speaker, no rules of order. If you'd prefer a bit more structure, please check the calendar for lectures, FIG meetings, and other events.

If the weather is nice we will try to snag an area outside, if not we will sit inside. But either way the Hofbrauhaus is always fun.

New meetup scheduling due to my new work schedule. This allows me to attend every meetup easily. I have heard several members asking to meet again here.

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Monday, January 16, 2012, 6:30 PM

Washington Platform Saloon

1000 Elm St, Cincinnati, OH (map)

Selected By: Drew Hanners

Atheists, Agnostics, Humanists and Freethinkers meet here. Regular monthly gatherings are held on the 3rd Mondays. New people join every month, and we all wear name tags (no quizzes). Check the Message Board for current hot topics. This is a purely social gathering. No agenda, no speaker, no rules of order. If you'd prefer a bit more structure, please check the calendar for lectures, FIG meetings, and other events

Science Book Club

All the meetings are held at the downtown Cincinnati Library in Meeting Room 3A at 2:30 on the third Sunday of each month with the following exceptions:

Schedule for 2011:

December 18 - *The Dependent Gene: Fallacy of Nature vs. Nurture*, David S. Moore, 2002.

Schedule for 2012

This is tentative, the book and date could change, check with Brian or others:

January 15 - Ken Little will lead the discussion of: *Placebo Effects: Understanding the Mechanisms in Health and Disease* by Fabrizio Benedetti, 2008. The book is available as a free download from the Internet.





“Completely” Prohibited - unless . . .!

Epling was incessantly bullied at MacDonal Middle School in East Lansing, Mich. His last day of eighth grade was the final straw: he was given a “Welcome to High School” beating. School officials did little, so his parents decided to go to the police. But fearing retribution from his bullies, Epling killed himself rather than tell the police what happened. In the nine years since, the state’s Republican lawmakers would not let an anti-bullying law through, saying it would create a “protected class” of citizens: gays. Michigan is one of only three states without an anti-bullying law; meanwhile, “at least 10” more bullied students have committed suicide in the state. So this year, “Matt's Safe School Law” was finally put to vote in the Michigan Senate. According to the proposed law put forth by Republicans, torment is not bullying if “a sincerely held religious belief or moral conviction” is behind the bully’s actions. The law specifically addresses “cyber bullying” -- but only if the bully uses “a device owned or under the control of a school district” -- not a student's own cell phone. Also, Republicans would only support the bill if it didn’t require schools to report bullying, didn’t have provisions for enforcement or teacher training, and did not hold school officials accountable for failing to act. With that, the bill passed -- 26 Republican votes in favor vs. 11 Democrats opposed.

(RC/Detroit Free Press, Time)

Is Birth Control Now Part Of Our National Health Policy?

Earth’s population reached seven billion this month. As *WN* pointed out two years ago, that's double what it was in 1968, the year Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich warned of desperate shortages in *The Population Bomb*. Julian Simon, a libertarian economist at the University of Maryland, challenged Ehrlich to a public wager on a list of commodity prices. Ehrlich lost on every point, but the real loser was the environment: anthropogenic climate change, vast floating garbage patches in ocean gyres, starvation in parts of the world, the Hubbert peak in oil production, perpetual warfare etc. But there was also good news in 1968; “the Pill,” a combined-hormone oral contraceptive, was approved by the FDA. The Pill

is arguably the most important technological invention in history, and last week the Obama administration made it clear that health insurance plans are required to cover birth-control expenses without co-pays. The policy follows the recommendation of the Institute of Medicine, but prompted protests from Catholic bishops who will have fewer souls to save. An editorial in the *New York Times* called the policy a “proud achievement” of the administration.

- *What's New* by Robert Park, 30 November 2011

Journalism At The Edge

Simon Erero, a reporter for the *Post-Courier* newspaper in Papua New Guinea, really wanted to get the story to expose how Free West Papua militants from Indonesia were getting across the border into PNG. "The impact of Simon's scoop was enormous," said the judges of an in-house journalism prize for News Limited reporters; the company which employs Erero. “The police commissioner launched a major operation to tighten the borders and close down the [Free West Papua] refugee camps.” But to get that scoop -- to interview a group of “jungle rebels” who rarely let journalists in -- Erero had to agree to first allow himself to be circumcised with bamboo sticks. He did, they did, and he got the scoop and the company award.

(RC/London Telegraph)



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.





Contradiction Corner

By Dennis Davis



In this article I will continue my discussion of logical fallacies. As a skeptic, free-thinker, agnostic or atheist you are almost certain to be challenged by religious believers determined to convert you. Sometimes these evangelists are our family, friends, missionaries walking door-to-door or just someone you meet on the street. You should be aware that the faithful are persuaded by appeals to emotion so a good understanding of these fallacies will probably not convert them; however, it can allow you to hold your ground or more importantly prevent you from being taken in by their faulty arguments. You may also start the wheels turning in the minds of any third parties listening in on the conversation and promoting logical rational thought is always a good thing.

The first fallacy I will discuss today is the ad hominem attack. You see this type of attack being used in propaganda all over the Internet, not just in religious discussions. An ad hominem attack is essentially attacking the messenger instead of the message. For example, a creationist may oppose natural selection because someone told him that several early scientists faked fossils. The dishonesty of some scientists does nothing to address the validity of the overall theory. This strategy is very useful to anyone seeking to hide the fact they have weak arguments. You will typically encounter this fallacy from believers claiming that Christianity is true because they think all nonbelievers are miserable. As George Bernard Shaw once said, "The fact that a believer is happier than a sceptic is no more to the point than the fact that a drunken man is happier than a sober one."

There is a related inverse fallacy to the ad hominem attack known as an "argument from authority". While an ad hominem fallacy attacks an opposing position holder, the argument from authority posits that a supported position is true because some respected figure agrees with it. A very common example of such a fallacy might be claims that we should believe in a god because brilliant people such as Isaac Newton believed in one. Although no one can doubt Newton was a genius, we also know that emotional investment in an idea can cause a person to turn a blind eye to cherished beliefs so this proves nothing. Furthermore, we can find just as many brilliant people, like Albert Einstein, who did not believe in a personal

god. Truth is not determined on the intelligence, social status or number of people who believe it.

Another very common fallacy is what I call an "argument from ignorance" although I have also heard it called an "argument from personal incredulity". This fallacy is committed when someone jumps to a conclusion because they cannot think of any other explanation. We have all encountered this fallacy in god-of-the-gaps reasoning. For example, the believer looks at a beautiful tree and can't imagine how it could have come into existence via natural causes, so god did it. They ignore the fact that they may have evolved in such a way that they would perceive trees as beautiful and that the tree might not have a property called beauty. They might also be surprised that scientists can explain in extreme detail how trees reproduce, grow and evolved over millions of years.

Perhaps the most common fallacy we encounter today is the false dichotomy. This is a method of reasoning that limits argument to two possibilities when there may be a whole range of possibilities. This type of thinking is often exhibited by Christian fundamentalists and often called "black and white" thinking. A good example of a false dichotomy is the ever popular Pascal's Wager thought by many believers to be the ultimate argument for god.

Pascal's Wager compares the ultimate fate of the believer with the nonbeliever and is usually presented this way: If the believer in the Christian god is wrong then when he dies, he will simply stop existing and lose nothing; however, if the nonbeliever is incorrect he will be tormented forever as a result of his miscalculation.

Pascal's Wager falsely posits that there are only two positions, either be a believer in the Christian God or not. In fact there are many differing religions that present potential eternal threats after death so that belief in the Christian afterlife is only one of many; therefore the Christian believer is just as much at risk to these other fates as the nonbeliever. In fact Pascal's Wager is a whole collection of fallacies; it assumes that belief can be decided by considering odds. It also assumes that the Christian god would accept such a calculated worship in place of sincere repentance. Finally I would highly disagree that the Christian life costs nothing, my experience was one of deep guilt and observation of senseless religious rules.

I will finish this article by challenging the reader to further examine Pascal's Wager for even more logical fallacies.





BOOK REVIEW

The Wit and Blasphemy of Atheists
compiled by Jonathan C. Criswell
(Berkeley, Ca: Ulysses Press, 2011)

This little book, five by seven inches, 200 pages, gives us 500 of the greatest quips and quotes from freethinkers, non-believers, and the happily damned. Each quote is provided with the name of the author, who are also listed in the index. Authors range from A to Z, from our Adams presidents and the creator of *Dilbert* to Gary Zukav, author of *The Dancing Wu Li Masters, An Overview of the New Physics*, who tells us, "Acceptance without proof is the fundamental characteristic of Western religion. Rejection without proof is the fundamental characteristic of Western science." (p.138)

The most ancient writers quoted are either the Greek philosopher and satirist Xenophanes of Colophon, or the original Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, both of whom flourished around 500 BCE. The most recent contributors are still living, including the comic strip *Peanuts*, and *Homer Simpson* from TV, who complains about the Bible, "And talk about a preachy book! Everybody's a sinner except this guy."(p.107) Indeed there is much comment on the Bible, and we learn it is not only full of nonsense, but also replete with just about every variety of evil. Much also is said about churches, preachers, and sermons, amounting on the whole to the judgement they are boring, tedious, and tacky.

Some quotes are the result of a lifetime of thought and study. Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890) was an explorer, writer, ethnologist, poet and diplomat, who studied religions and people on five continents. He concluded: "The more I study religions the more I am convinced that man never worshipped anything but himself."(p. 135)

Another thinker, Charles Proteus Steinmetz (1865-1923) devoted his life to mathematics and science. His research on alternating current made the modern power industry possible. He commented:

In the realm of science, all attempts to find any evidence of supernatural beings, of metaphysical

conceptions, as God, immortality, infinity, etc., thus have failed, and if we are honest, we must confess that in science there exists no God, no immortality, no soul or mind as distinct from the body, but scientifically God and immortality are illogical conceptions. (p. 134)

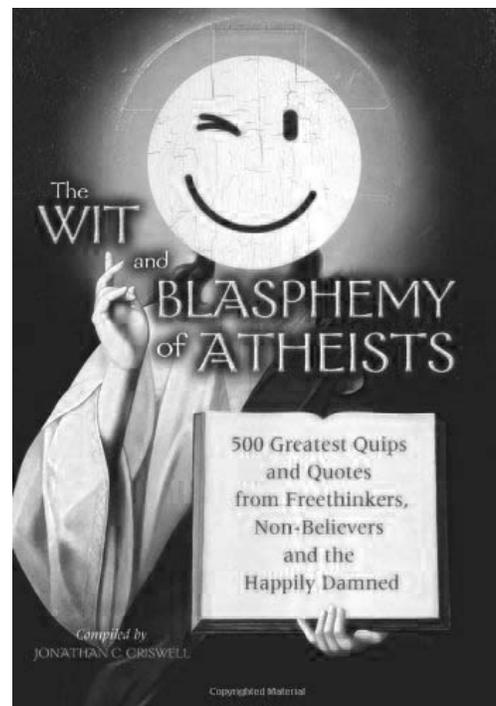
In a collection of 500 quotes only a few authors get more than one or at most two appearances. But who gets the most? It is a close race, Robert Ingersoll (1833-1899), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) and Mark Twain (1835-1910) have seven citations each, Henry Mencken (1880-1956), goes them a little better with eight. But in the end nobody beats that old satirist of *The Devil's Dictionary*, Ambrose Bierce (1842-1913) with nine contributions.

Not much is new under the Sun; we are familiar with most of the ideas here briefly expressed. Emily Dickinson has an unusual thought: "They say God is everywhere, and yet we always think of Him as somewhat of a recluse."(p. 168)

Emo Phillips has a different take on god, "When I was a kid, I used to pray every night for a bicycle. Then I realized that the Lord doesn't work that way so I stole one and asked Him to forgive me."(p. 122)

This book of atheist thought would make a good gift for the right person, perhaps a stocking stuffer for the holidays.

- Wolf Roder ☚





January FIG Meeting
 January 24, 2012 at 7 PM
 Hannaford Suites Hotel



December FIG Meeting
 Tuesday Dec. 20 at 7 PM
 Hannaford Suites Hotel



FIG Is On Facebook
 If you have a Facebook account, become a Fan of FIG. To join you can type in this long weblink: <http://www.facebook.com/#!/pages/Cincinnati-OH/FIG-Free-Inquiry-Group-of-Cincinnati-and-Northern-Kentucky/306015475868> or it is much easier to search for "Free Inquiry Group" and find it the first option on the search page.
 By being a Fan you can receive FIG updates and meeting notices and RSVP for events such as the monthly FIG Community Dinners.

FIG Leaves
 P.O. Box 53174
 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.