

Red River Rationalist

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redriverfreethinkers.org

Old Books; New Books

Davis Cope

[Reviews books or anything else interesting to Cope.]

Does God Exist? The Design Argument.

Red River Freethinkers invited Mr. W, a local religious activist, to give a talk. He told us (a) that whether God exists is the most important question there is; (b) that we can prove God exists without referring to the Bible; and (c) that we should then turn to the Bible to learn about God.

Philosophy studies such questions as the existence of God, and philosophers have identified several main arguments on that question. In philosophy, an "argument" means a reasoned examination leading to a conclusion. For (b) above, Mr. W gave what philosophers call the "Design Argument".

The Design Argument. When we examine a house, we see that it is an orderly structure with at least one use (providing protection). This combination of order and use does not just "happen". It was designed. A Designer must exist. When we examine the natural world, we see that it also is an orderly structure with uses (providing us food and materials for clothes and houses). Thus, it was also designed. A Designer must exist. That is God. (The analogy with a house is commonly used and was used by Mr. W.) The point. Mr. W did not merely claim that God exists. If he had, he would simply be stating an opinion. He claimed there is a valid argument demonstrating God's existence, a much more significant statement.

But the issue is whether his argument, the Design Argument, is valid or not. Some people will ignore this issue and only consider whether they agree with the conclusion or not. Of course, this reduces the discussion to merely stating opinions. Some people will understand the issue but assume the argument must be valid because Christians are trustworthy and Mr. W is a Christian. I will return to this notion below. Some people will consider the argument as obviously valid because it appears clear and simple. Others may discourage themselves by assuming that it takes special knowledge or a degree in philosophy to analyze such arguments. It is certainly true that special knowledge may be necessary to determine the validity of an argument. But not always. Constructing valid arguments is much harder than one might think, and a little thoughtful examination may turn up problems. Even when special knowledge is necessary, some initial analysis has to be done to establish the need for it.

I will try examining the Design Argument, and you judge for yourself whether I am doing anything fancy or unfair. The Argument examined. First, our experience with houses tells us there is indeed a Designer (the architect), so the Argument is correct that far. But experience also tells us the Designer is different from the Maker (manifested in the persona of the carpenter, the electrician, and the plumber). There will be further designers and makers for the furniture, kitchen utensils, clocks and TVs, car and boat, the family's arms and ammunition, even its Bible. We would have to conclude that the Argument, if valid, actually leads to the existence of multiple gods, not one God.

Second, houses start with piles of raw material being transformed into a house by obvious human activity. Once formed, the house is static. It does not transform itself into other houses. It simply sits

there and is used by the owner. Natural processes are different. They are cyclic and dynamic. Seeds produce plants, which produce flowers, which produce seeds, which produce etc. They keep going independently of us or any other agent. While both houses and the natural world may have an orderly structure, there are significant ways in which the two are totally different and not comparable. For example, the natural world may have been cycling forever without a beginning as the consequence of its own inherent laws. The analogy between a house (requiring a designer) and "creation" (requiring a Designer) therefore breaks down, as an infinite cycling is at least as feasible. The Argument fails again.

A conclusion. Mr. W claims the existence of God to be the most important question we can examine, and he presented the Design Argument to settle the question. He did not tell us that the Design Argument and the fact that it is invalid is a standard topic in introductory philosophy courses. I have briefly indicated here some of the reasons it is not valid.

Another conclusion. After completing his "proof", Mr. W went on to read to us at some length from the Bible (in accord with (c)). Apparently he thought that he had demonstrated the existence of the Biblical God. Unfortunately, this skips over another important point. When Mr. W asked "the most important question one can ask", he neglected to define its key term, "God", but he did not neglect to proceed as if he had proven the existence of his particular God. In other words, if Mr. W had been doing archery instead of philosophy, he would have shot his arrows and then drawn circles around their impacts, apparently thinking this is how dead center hits are produced.

Summary. I believe Mr. W's treatment of the "most important question one can ask" is inadequate and even misleading, and this suggests his treatment of lesser questions may be unreliable as well.

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*"If the liberties of the
American people are ever
destroyed, they
will fall by the hands of the
clergy."
(Marquis de Lafayette)*

JK Rowling Adds Fuel to the Fire – Dumbledore ‘Outed’

I am a very big Harry Potter fan. I have read all 7 of the books and thoroughly enjoyed them. I've also been interested in the ridiculous controversy surrounding them. Christian groups have been objecting to the series for years. They often cite Deuteronomy 18:10-14 calling one who practices witchcraft an abomination. They are extremely concerned about Harry Potter because try as they might, most of them are unable to keep their kids away from the excitement that surrounds the series. They feel that their children are being seduced by evil forces. Many Christians have attempted to censor their children from reading/watching Harry Potter. Many children have gone behind their

parent's backs and watched/read the series anyway.

Now as if the Christians didn't have enough to complain about, Rowling revealed a startling detail about one of the key characters in her books.

In front of a full house of hard-core Potter fans at Carnegie Hall in New York, Rowling, sitting on the stage on a red velvet and carved wood throne, read from her seventh and final book, "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows," then took questions. One fan asked whether Albus Dumbledore, the head of the famed Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Witchcraft, had ever loved anyone. Rowling smiled. "Dumbledore is gay, actually," replied Rowling as the audience erupted in surprise. She added that, in her mind, Dumbledore had an unrequited love affair with Gellert Grindelwald, Voldemort's predecessor who appears in the seventh book. After several minutes of prolonged shouting and clapping from astonished fans, Rowling added. "I would have told you earlier if I knew it would make you so happy." [From <http://www.newsweek.com/id/50787>]

Albus Dumbledore has become one of the most beloved characters in literature. So many people who have read these books have formed a very strong attachment to the wise, caring, loving Dumbledore. Dumbledore always knew what to do, he had all the answers. Even as an adult I found myself admiring this fictional character. I found myself aspiring to be like him. Now that so many people have grown so fond of him and presumably the series has been completed, we find out something about him that is such a controversial issue to fundamentalist Christians.

I was so pleased to hear about this revelation. I personally have no change in my attachment to Dumbledore. I still think he is one of the most fascinating and attractive characters ever to be developed. If nothing else, it allows even a little more insight into who he was. I was quite interested to hear the following quote from Rowling. I think this is a great promotion for freethinking. Hopefully some will listen to her message.

[<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,303760,00.html>] *"Rowling said that she regarded her Potter books as a "prolonged argument for tolerance" and urged her fans to "question authority." Not everyone likes her work, Rowling said, likely referring to Christian groups that have alleged the books promote witchcraft. Her news about Dumbledore, she said, will give them one more reason."*

- Lilie Schoenack

The Corporatocracy

Many people do not realize that American is no longer a democracy. It is a corporatocracy. The USA has been the target of a successful, covert, hostile take-over by the corporatocracy and the nation now exists of, by, and for the entities that comprise the corporatocracy.

The corporatocracy consist of Big Military, Big Energy, Big Finance, Big Media, Big Politics (both republican and democratic parties), Big Religion, Big Government (all the bureaucracies at local, county, state, and federal levels), Big Ag, Big Pharm, and Big Government (all three branches of government). Citizens elected Al Gore in 2000, but the corporatocracy voided the election and installed its own CEO (Bush) and COO (Cheney).

Business enterprise has become the state religion of America. Everything is commodified, most egregiously the trading in pollution credits. All decisions at all levels of society are rendered in economic terms. How will global warming affect the economy? Democrats and Republicans and liberals all worship the state religion. This is why none of the candidates can be trusted. They make speeches praising the values of democracy then vote the state religion, as evidenced by a Democrat-controlled Congress giving Bush almost \$500 billion for defense. The war in Iraq is a religious war between Islam and Business Enterprise, not between Islam and Christianity.

I favor a return to the language of the Declaration of Independence. The purpose of the nation is "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." The goals of the Declaration are antithetical to the goals of the corporatocracy and of Business Enterprise. Commerce should serve Life, it should serve Liberty, and it should promote the Pursuit of Happiness. In fact it is the other way around, and Americans have given their lives and their liberties and surrendered all possibility of true happiness to commerce. These are the messages our nation needs to hear. If we frame our argument in these terms, we address the true problems, not the false issues the corporatocracy uses to distract us.

John Omaha, PhD.

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[This letter was originally posted on the internet at bsnorrell.blogspot.com. It was reprinted in the American Rationalist (September/October 2007) and is reprinted here with the permission of Dr. Omaha.]

"I do not pretend to be able to prove that there is no God. I equally cannot prove that Satan is a fiction. The Christian God may exist; so may the Gods of Olympus, or of ancient Egypt, or of Babylon. But no one of these hypotheses is more probable than any other; they lie outside the region of even probable knowledge, and therefore there is no reason to consider any of them."

- Bertrand Russell

What is a Rationalist?

We call our group the Red River Freethinkers and our newsletter The Rationalist, but our main focus seems to be that we are skeptical of religion. I am certainly in agreement with that. However, speaking for myself, I think a rationalist should be skeptical of mysticism and superstition in all their guises.

Nowhere is mysticism more rife than in the field of medicine. There are several reasons for this. For one thing, the mind seems to be a great healer. I once had a very good doctor tell me that seventy-five percent of human illness could be cured with a good bedside manner and sugar pills. Many studies have been done on the "placebo effect," where a substantial number of patients who only thought they had received a certain pill or surgical procedure, benefitted as much as those who actually did.

Another factor is the desperate wish for a miracle cure of some sort. Several years ago, when I worked in hospitals, I had heard relatives of cancer patients scream and swear at a doctor for not getting laetrile for the patient (a few years before that it was krebiozin - another worthless concoction that was touted as a cancer cure).

So, I would urge fellow rationalists to be very skeptical of pseudoscientific therapies and remedies. An incomplete list of these would include acupuncture, acupressure, acu-yoga, aromatherapy, chiropractic, Christian science, chromotherapy, crystal power, cupping, dianetics (scientology), exorcism, faith healing, goat glands, homeopathy, magnetic therapy, past life regression, phlebotomy, psychic surgery, pyramid power, rolfing, shiatsu, sight without glasses (Dr. Bates), voodoo, and water cures (Willard water or other magically treated water).

I'm pretty sure I will have stepped on some toes with this list. I'll just mention one. Chiropractic has, in recent years, lobbied its way into semi-respectability. I'm aware that some of the recent graduates do some massage and physical therapy procedures that help many people. However, the basic underlying principle, that all illness is caused by "subluxations" of the spine, is not valid science. The above is not just an opinion of mine, but was brought home quite vividly for me. By the time you read this I will have had surgery on three vertebrae in my neck that had "crimped" the spinal cord quite seriously. Once this was diagnosed, the neurologist warned me repeatedly, "do not go to a chiropractor!" He said that any attempt to "adjust" my neck could cause me to become a quadriplegic.

This is not a ringing endorsement of the American health care system. It is far from perfect and I'm very leery of many of the popular drugs that are so widely dispensed. But I urge you to have the same skeptical attitude toward miraculous-sounding medical treatments that you do toward other mystical claims.

- **Chuck Crane**

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More Students "Pass" on Religion

Allen B. Downey, in an article entitled "The Godless Freshman" (*Free Inquiry* Aug./Sept. 2007), cites a survey by the Higher Education Research Institute which shows that students entering college are rejecting religion in record numbers. The survey showed that 19 percent of these students have no religious preference and more than 23 percent have not attended a religious service within the last year (the spread between these numbers is the so-called hypocrisy gap).

The number of students with no religious preference has increased at a steady rate since the low of 8.3 percent in 1978, with an upturn since 1997 with the rate increasing by 0.6 - 0.7 percent each year. As the author rather gleefully points out, if those rates continue, the class of 2056 will have an atheist majority.

Interestingly, the survey shows a consistent gender gap: men with no religious preference were 21.2

percent, women 17.4 percent. The gap for non-attendance at church was similar (25.7 vs. 21.2 percent). The author speculates that women may be as likely as men to disbelieve, but reluctant to profess atheism because that "involves a tradeoff between the satisfaction of Philosophic consistency and the discomfort of social stigma."

Another interesting result showed significant numbers even for students at religious colleges (9 percent non-belief and 15 percent non-attendance for students at Catholic colleges). The author does point out that college students are not a random sample of the population since "people with more education are less likely to believe in heaven, the devil, miracles, and the literal truth of the Christian Bible. He feels, however, that these data make a strong case that secularization in the United States has accelerated in the last decade.

- **Chuck Crane**

Footnotes

Sometime I might try to formulate footnotes for the Ten Commandments, perhaps in legalese, if I could manage that.

For Example: The prohibition against graven images shall now be construed to prohibit carved representations of our Lord Jesus Christ impaled on a cross.

Reference to other gods shall not be construed to imply the existence of other gods.

Exceptions shall be made regarding parents who kill or sexually abuse their children.

Exceptions on killing shall be made for self-defense or judicially approved executions, or acts of war.

If your neighbor has an extremely attractive slave, one is permitted to entertain lascivious thoughts provided no attempt is made to implement them.

.....And so on.

- **Will Treumann**

* * * * *

"... in effect, religion, which should most distinguish us from the beasts, and ought most particularly to elevate us, as rational creatures, above the brutes, is that wherein men often appear most irrational, and more senseless than beasts themselves. *Credo, quia impossibile est* (I believe, because it is impossible) might, in a good man, pass as a sally of zeal; but would prove a very ill rule for men to choose their opinions and religions by."

- **John Locke**

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The Red River Freethinkers is organized by freethinkers to be a nonprofit educational organization. We are a group of nonreligious people skeptical of religious dogma. We advocate Intellectual Freedom and the use of Reason. Articles and letters in this newsletter present ideas and opinions of individual writers and do not necessarily reflect those of the Red River Freethinkers organization.

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Red River Freethinkers Calendar

Regularly scheduled meetings are held at 2:30 p.m. on the third Sunday of each month at the Fargo Unitarian Universalist Church at 121 9th Street South in Fargo.

This month's meeting will be on November 18, 2007, at the usual time and place. Our guest, Dr. Ganapathy Mahlingham, Prof. of Architecture at NDSU for the past 14 years, will speak on Hinduism.

Thanks to all members who voted to approve the proposed bylaws lastmonth. Also thanks to Carol Sawicki for all the work she put into the updates.

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