

THE UNSAVED PAPER

In earlier days, when an electronic component inside your computer failed so catastrophically that it emitted visible, burnt-smelling fumes, we in the computer support department would jokingly say "yep, your computer is complete toast, the magic smoke escaped, and the computer needs the magic smoke to do it's magic."

Similarly, in earlier days, when using a word processing program like WordPerfect, if you started typing a new paper and hadn't yet saved it to a floppy disk, and then your computer lost power and suddenly shut off, the letters and words that you had typed up to that point would be lost forever, a sad reality. The paper you were writing would be lost forever because the words that you had typed, which **did** exist the moment before power was lost, existed only in the computer's "volatile" memory, and didn't exist permanently on a floppy disk or on paper.

In general, programs running on a computer are temporarily contained in fast-but-volatile "RAM" memory for quick access and manipulation by the computer. But the contents of this RAM memory stay intact only as long as the computer's power supply isn't interrupted, and this brings us to the loose analogy between a person's body/mind/soul, and a computer's hardware/word processing software/unsaved paper.

Everyone has a body (the computer), everyone has a mind (the word processing program), and everyone is continuously writing a paper about their own individual, ongoing life story (the soul). But the catch for us humans is, our life stories can't be saved to any floppy disk or hard drive, and they cannot go on existing after our computers die and our word processing programs stop working. Once we die, our stories end. But for the short time that we are living, we temporarily exist as a unique electro-chemical pattern contained within our own volatile grey matter.

Eventually for all of us, while we are writing our life stories, our hardware will suddenly stop, the magic smoke will escape, and our unique electro-chemical patterns will be gone forever, as Bertrand Russell described, "over the rim of the world into the cold unfathomable lifeless abyss." Although the reality of our existence being only temporary is too much for some to bear, it is the most honest evaluation of the true extent of our existence that scientific inquiry has given us, and that evaluation should be enough to convince us all to make the most out of this life, for ourselves, and for all of the other living things whose short existence coincidentally overlaps with ours. ■

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The mission of the Red River Freethinkers is to advocate for a skeptical view of the role of religion in society and to promote critical examination of religious authority and dogma

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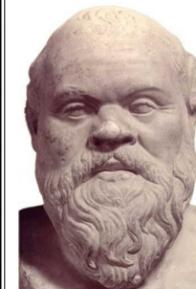
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THE RED RIVER RATIONALIST

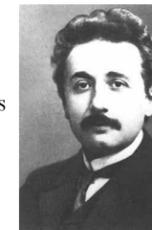
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BREAKING FREE

There is a surprising benefit available to those who eventually break free from a cult: Realizing the absurdity of all beliefs.



This benefit is obtained through the application of critical thinking skills, a method of learning far back into history, with Socrates being one of its most famous advocates. Albert Einstein was also a



proponent of mind experiments that tapped into deep critical thinking skills.

One example involves testing within an expanded condition set the underlying 'logic' of a position taken under a narrow set of conditions. (i.e., when looking at *all* of the evidence we can't help but conclude that species do evolve; a pyramid scheme's nature is exposed when following its structure to its inevitable collapse.)

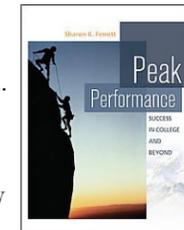
People given critical thinking-based tests in school or business readily realize the benefit, but *easily* exempt religious belief from critical evaluation.

The extreme environment of a cult, however, requires a more powerful effort to maintain that exemption. If true critical thinking ever does get applied, the result is more illuminating than when less extreme beliefs are critically examined. Instead of maybe switching religions, those in an extreme religious environment can't help but conclude that *all of it* is absurd because the effort needed to break apart that high-energy belief system is so powerful that it collaterally tears open all beliefs as a human failing.



At least this was true in my case, having grown up in The Worldwide Church of God, the cult created by Herbert W. Armstrong. It's the only thing for which he can be thanked.

Below is a decent list of critical thinking skills from *Peak Performance*, by Sharon Ferrett.



- Ask pertinent questions
- Assess statements and arguments
- Admit a lack of understanding or information
- Have a sense of curiosity
- Be interested in finding new solutions
- Clearly define a set of criteria for analyzing ideas
- Be willing to examine beliefs, assumptions, and opinions and weigh them against facts
- Listen carefully to others and give feedback
- See that critical thinking is a lifelong process of self-assessment
- Suspend judgment until all facts have been gathered and considered
- Look for evidence to support assumption and beliefs
- Adjust opinions when new facts are found
- Look for proof
- Examine problems closely
- Reject information that is incorrect or irrelevant

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POINTS OF INTEREST

- The February RRF meeting will be in the Presentation Center at the Plains Art Museum at 704 1st Ave N in Fargo on Sunday Feb 21 from 1 to 3 pm. Everyone is welcome!
- Every Saturday morning from 11-12pm on KNDS 96.3 FM, be sure to catch Kent and Brian on "The Amplified Atheist".
- The 36th National Convention of America Atheists will be April 2-4, 2010 in Newark, NJ.
- The 2010 American Humanist Association Convention will be June 3-6 at the Doubletree Hotel, San Jose, CA

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THE BURDEN OF PROOF (PART 1 OF 2)

I'm a cosmic teapot, orbiting about,
here is my handle, here is my spout.
At ambient space temperatures, I don't steam.
Ice won't pour and you can't hear me scream.

Prove me wrong! This is equivalent to the common canard that the burden of proof lies on non-theists to disprove the existence of 'God,' and, this is the fourth essay in a series inspired by an article by Jason Schoenack (RRR- Oct. 2009). I have borrowed the cosmic teapot from Bertrand Russell.



The teapot was Russell's answer to the assertion of an *a priori* god. He insisted on proof that there is not a teapot circling the sun between the orbits of Venus and Mercury. A more recent rendition is: prove that we were not created out of the minds of invisible pink lesbian unicorns frolicking at the planetary core of Venus (remember that they are gods and can do anything- including sowing and providing evidence for that Christian

myth thingy).

The absurdity of the position that it is up to non-theists to disprove the existence of God should be clear. The form of argument I employed is known as *reductio ad absurdum* and was invented by Gottfried Leibniz- who also invented calculus (the Greeks used a more limited form known as argument by contradiction). The method of the argument is to assume a claim is true (such as the existence of god) and then see what follows from that assumption. Acceptance



of a god without proof gives us no bases for discerning a fact and no way to evaluate evidence. Whether searching for a disease cure, investigating sun spots or a crime scene, at what point would you throw up your hands and say, 'I cannot understand' or 'and then a miracle occurred' and assert 'God did it?' What if there is a disagreement? An *a priori* god delusion leaves us no way to progress beyond "I'm right and you're wrong" because

there can be no evidence. Or, as Ludwig Wittgenstein said: 'every space is an argument place' (and everyone knows that there cannot be an essay dealing with logic but one that contains at least one Wittgenstein quote).



In human history one could claim that there have been five inventions to get us beyond the 'I am right and you are wrong' impasse: social organization, weaponry, religion, rhetoric (including logic) and science. Before science and exclusive of weaponry, yet within the context of social organizations, the burden of proof assertion was left to rhetoric- as theology never gave human beings a chance. Consequently, early in Western civilization the Greeks thoughtfully searched for ways that might indicate the truth or falsehood of statements without reference to the facts- as these could be uncertain. From this search we have inherited the forms of rhetoric including early tools of logic.



Aristotle, the great classifier and organizer of knowledge, noticed that a simple declarative sentence could be divided into two parts: the subject of the statement, and a predicate that said something about that subject. Further, he noticed that if a set of three such sentences were presented in a format

which he called a syllogism, the third statement would be true in and of itself *if* the first two were true. His discovery was that within language itself there was a tool for discerning truth. For example:

Deists believe in a god.
Carl Sagan was a deist.
Carl Sagan believed in a god.

Unfortunately, the modern garbage in- garbage out rule applies. Since the second statement is known to be false, the conclusion (third statement) of the syllogism is false. Syllogisms can be abused.

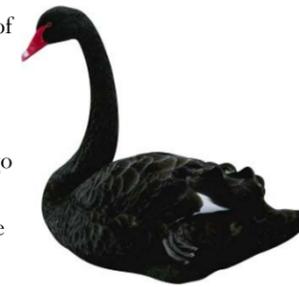
When a series of simple statements going from general to more particular relations are put together, a specific conclusion can often be reached. This extended syllogism is known as deductive reasoning. For example:

1. Jerry attends Red River Freethinker meetings.
2. The third Sunday of November was November 15th.
3. Atomic Coffee is located in downtown Fargo.
4. Red River Freethinker meetings are held the third Sunday of every month.
5. Atomic Coffee was open on November 15th.
6. The November Red River Freethinker meeting was hosted by Atomic Coffee.

Conclusion: Jerry was in downtown Fargo on November 15, at Atomic Coffee, attending a Red River Freethinker meeting. This is a deduction from the extended syllogism. There is another type of reasoning known as inductive reasoning or just induction. Induction could metaphorically be labeled the 'unstable bastard stepchild' of deduction. Here we are going from specific statements to a broader generalization. For example:

1. The Mute swan is a white bird.
2. The Whistling swan is a white bird.
3. The Whooper swan is a white bird.
4. The Trumpeter swan is a white bird.

Conclusion: (most swans are noisy- kidding)- all swans are white birds. This typical inductive argument was still partially true after 1782 (Black-necked swan) but was falsified in 1790 (Black swan). The difficulty with an inductive argument is that it is only as good as the latest observations. Fortunately the definition of 'swan' did not rest on their being white birds and all seven kinds of swans did not mysteriously vanish in 1790. Old evidence does not go away. Theories are evidence based inductive arguments and the above illustrates why one cannot prove a theory.



Deductive and inductive reasoning are just two of the logic tools of rhetoric (the *reductio ad absurdum* is a third), but there are other tools of rhetoric besides logic. Returning to the extended syllogism above- that set of statements, while true in every detail, may on occasion still yield a false conclusion because the first sentence, in this case, contains a subtly hidden logical fallacy known as equivocation- I (Jerry) do not attend *all* meetings. Although this syllogism is true most of the time, the only way to know if the conclusion is true for any given meeting would be to have an independent observer see if I was in attendance. Why would the observer have to be independent? Because in any argument there is also the assumption that each protagonist is being honest in making all statements, i.e. a fair broker of the facts. But what if in the above extended syllogism, I was not a fair broker? We all know forms of logic fallacy where this is the case, statements such as 'When did you stop beating your wife/ voting republican/ torturing kittens. Assumptions here are that you have done such evil things and so I am not being a fair broker of the facts in questioning when you stopped. And, I have not been a fair broker while discussing this fallacy, as an item was included which would deny you one of your rights in a democracy- voting for a candidate of your choice. Embedded in the list was yet another form of fallacy called guilt by association. At this point I'll try to rescue my credibility as an essayist by providing reference to a logical

fallacies page (independent fact source): <http://www.infidels.org/news/atheism/logic.html> which lists 46 logical fallacies. The one employed by insisting on claim acceptance without proof and #42 on the list is (read with stentorian voice):

Shifting the burden of proof.

Shifting burdens leads us to the Sorites Paradox. Take a pile of sand- we agree that it is a pile of sand. Remove one grain. Is it still a pile? Remove another, and then another, is it still a pile of sand? At some point although we have followed definitions at least tacitly agreed to and have followed a logical rule from start to finish we no longer have a pile of sand. Logic, the tool of language, that very thing the Greeks were employing to discern facts, is not only easily corrupted by other types of rhetoric, but, by strictly following rules, logic itself may fall short.



This brings us back to Wittgenstein, who, in the 20th century, perceived the 'metaproblem' and observed that language, in order to describe or discuss anything at all must share a correspondence with what is being described or discussed and, when language does not, we must remain silent [or misunderstood]- herein lies the problem with theism. The linguistic correspondence of description and discussion in theism is such that within the context of reality, Yahweh is no more valid than the lesbian unicorns.

The Hellenistic world with simple logic and ingenuity produced geometry, measured the Earth's circumference, measured distances to moon and sun and created the first steam engine- aeolipile. All this invention occurred prior to 70 c. e. What happened? For the next 1450+ years western Civilization stagnated (algebra was invented in the Islamic world) because social organization, religion and rhetoric were not enough. There was no way beyond the 'I'm right and you're wrong impasse' until the invention of science and the scientific method in the 16th century. How does science deal with the problem of correspondence with reality? How does science get beyond the 'I am right and you're wrong impasse? Next month, in part II of *The Burden of Proof*, we will examine what science is, how science works and the necessary assumptions in scientific research.

Reference material for much of this essay can be found in Cryan, Statil and Mablin (2001), *Introducing Logic* -a book far more useful than its appearance and Okasha (2002) *Philosophy of Science, a very short introduction*, as well as Ben Ari (2005) *Just a Theory*- see first essay. ■

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