

Minutes 1

Lakeside Freethinkers

Those present Chad Olsen, Ron Napier, Henry Laxen, Hank Shriver, Stephen Seagall,
John Stokdijk, Philip Rylett, John De Waal, Judy Parker, Bill Douglas

Date Sep 16, 2015 4:05pm–6:00pm

1.1 President's Remarks

Today is an open discussion on science and religion. In order to frame the discussion, I will include Ron Barry's exposition on Objective and Subjective reality here:

1.1.1 Article by Ron Barry

Fellow Freethinkers,

I have composed the following essay in the light of some of the recent discussions following the free will debate of the September 16, 2015 meeting. I don't know if it will be relevant to the group's science vs religion discussion scheduled for October 21, 2015 (which I will not attend), but I felt impelled to clarify my position on the matters discussed therein.

I will preface this document with some autobiographical information, so that readers will have an idea of my worldview:

I have a B.S. degree in mathematics, with a minor in physics, from Texas Tech, class of 1960. In addition to those subjects, I have studied psychology, philosophy, Buddhism, sociobiology, sexuality, artificial intelligence, and a variety of other topics.

I am widely read in English literature, both fiction and non-fiction, and I have a greater than average appreciation of classical European, Indian, and Japanese music, along with jazz, and for that matter, rock n roll.

I became a computer programmer in 1961, and retired from that profession in 1998.

I tend politically to be fiscally conservative and socially liberal; if there is a conflict between the two, I usually choose the socially liberal alternative.

I am a white male heterosexual atheist, materialist, reductionist, incompatibilist freethinker, and a judge of good whiskey.

It is my intention in this document to provide an apologia for both objective and subjective ways of knowing about reality. I define objective knowledge as that which can be gained from a scientific viewpoint, as scientific knowledge exists at the present time, and subjective knowledge as that which cannot, at least at the present time, be gained from scientific knowledge. I consider both ways of knowing to be valuable in the living of ones life. To paraphrase Einsteins famous (and unfortunate) statement regarding the relationship between science and religion, objectivity without subjectivity is impoverished; subjectivity without objectivity is ignorant.

Here are examples of each: I understand, from reading and from my acquaintance with a retired Stanford physics professor, both the concept and the mathematical derivation of Einsteins Special Theory of Relativity. I know, without understanding why I know, that Bachs Goldberg Variations is such a magnificent work of music that it will, more often than not, move me to tears at the listening. Perhaps in the future, scientific research will explain why it has that effect upon me; perhaps not. It doesn'tt matter to me whether science will ever accomplish that or not; the music has that effect upon me here and now.

Lets consider science as a way of knowing: first off, there is no philosophically acceptable definition of science, a difficulty known as the Demarcation Problem. This is more of a problem for philosophers than scientists, who rarely concern themselves with philosophy, preferring simply to practice science as they view it, and who are wholly satisfied as to its validity if theory agrees with empirical evidence.

However, whether scientists know it or not, science rests upon three philosophical pillars which cannot logically be proven by science itself, but which are taken as axioms by most scientists; (1) that there is an objective reality shared by all rational observers, (2) that this objective reality is governed by natural laws, and (3) that these laws can be discovered by means of systematic observation and experimentation. To one who is devoted to a scientific viewpoint, these three axioms seem to be self-evident, but even among established scientists there is not universal agreement as to their truth.

The distinguished particle physicist Victor J. Stenger held the viewpoint that there were no natural laws, but that what appeared to be laws of physics emerged from principles of symmetry, and from the spontaneous breaking of symmetries on a fundamental level. He even went so far as to surmise that the unexplained phenomena of the Standard Model of particle physics arose by pure chance at the time of the Big Bang, and that rather than the universe being deterministic at all scales, apparent determinism was itself an emergent phenomenon of the random activity of large ensembles of elementary particles.

Whether that be the case or not, let me be clear on one subject; science and super naturalism cannot logically coexist. If there are supernatural phenomena in the universe, science is futile, for any phenomenon whatsoever could be due to supernatural causes, and there would be no way of knowing otherwise. Diseases could be caused by evil wizards, and their attendant germs could be the result of the diseases, rather than the other way around. I choose science.

Enough of the objective way of knowledge for now: I trust that most of the Freethinkers share with me the viewpoint that scientific methodology is by far the best way of gaining objective knowledge. As Victor J. Stenger says, You might think of science as a 100 megapixel digital camera taking pictures of whatever reality is out there, compared to drawing a picture in the dirt with a stick.

When Descartes, in his 1637 Discourse on the Method, enunciated the phrase I think, therefore I am, he provided the most fundamental element of Western philosophy. Sam Harris expands upon it, saying that Subjectively speaking, the only thing that actually exists is consciousness and its contents.

Humans, and quite possibly other animals, like to alter their consciousness. One of the oldest methods of doing so is the drinking of fermented (and distilled) fruits and grains, but a strong competitor has

always been the ingestion of marijuana. A Scientific American article from 1969 describes the use of marijuana in a Chinese herbal compendium dated 2737 BCE, and even then it was a source of controversy.

Nonetheless, its use as an intoxicant spread from China to India, then to North Africa, and from there, about 1800 CE, to Europe. It has been known for centuries in South and Central America, spreading to the USA around 1920, and by now it is grown and consumed in almost every country in the world.

The reason for the popularity of mind-altering drugs is not hard to understand; all higher animals need predictability, but too much predictability leads to monotony, and a balance needs to be preserved. Even rats in a maze will eventually seek different paths to the food source after identifying its location.

Here is an excerpt from another Scientific American article, this time from 1964, on the subject of hallucinogenic drugs: Research on the personality traits of highly creative individuals has shown that they are particularly alert to the challenge of the contradictory and the unpredictable, and that they may even court the irrational in their own make-up as a source of new and unexpected insight.

In addition to these reasons for using hallucinogenic drugs, however, in the 60s and 70s, inspired by charismatic figures like Timothy Leary, and influential writers like Aldous Huxley and Alan Watts, there emerged the belief that shortcuts could be found through use of hallucinogenic drugs to achieve the reputed Eastern experiences of self-transcendence. Many over-blown claims were made at the time, but the overall conclusion of most of us who experimented with them was that there was no substitute for patient mindfulness training.

I myself attempted meditation off and on for years, with scant result. I lack the patience, and the faith that my patience will be rewarded, to be able to maintain the concentration that is required to produce results from this exercise. It is universally agreed among those who are beginners in the practice of meditation that when ones concentration fails and it will, over and over again the only thing to do is to resume the meditation as though nothing had gone awry, and I never got beyond the beginner stage.

I should elaborate somewhat at this point on what is meant by self-transcendence. The experiments of Benjamin Libet and later researchers have shown, at least to my satisfaction, that free will is an illusion. What was known even before that, however, is that the self is also an illusion, comprising a sort of story that the brain constructs, which makes it seem as though one has a center of being.

Now, it has been known to neuroscientists for several years that meditation produces an identifiably unique state of brain wave activity, primarily in terms of the heightening of alpha waves, leading into theta waves in the case of experienced meditators. The object of meditation, then, is to be able to reach a state of consciousness in which the meditator no longer identifies with his or her thoughts, but simply experiences them as an aspect of the ongoing stream of existence. That is self-transcendence, or awakening. It is simple, but it is not easy.

Those who have been fortunate enough to have achieved that state report feelings of clarity, and serenity, and general well-being. Among some practitioners, it is said to lead to compassion toward other living things. I must accept these statements on faith, as I have only reached that point once in my life, and then only for a few brief moments.

This is what Sam Harris is writing about in his lamentably titled *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion*. Its title is lamentable because the very word spirituality is anathema to hard-core atheists, who will pursue its message no further, and all too attractive to New Age mystics, who will read just enough to discover that it abandons any vestiges of the kind of solace they are seeking.

It is of value, however, to those of us who are looking for a clear exposition of Harris's own search for self-transcendence as I have described it above, replete with his descriptions of the blind alleys that he wandered into along the way, and his eventual success in finding a teacher who had just the right prescription for the final step of his awakening.

I may be fooling myself, but in reading it I have the feeling that Harris has deliberately left hints for how to avoid those blind alleys, as a favor to the reader. Although he is a practicing Buddhist, he makes it clear that it is not necessary to be a Buddhist, secular or otherwise, in order to achieve self-transcendence.

Perhaps the most important of his conclusions, at least for me, is his discovery that the awakened state of mind is not something deep and mysterious, but rather a surface phenomenon; right before our eyes, as it were. That alone is enough for me to resume my meditations.

One final note: I rather enjoy vulgarity, as long as its in good taste.
Ron Barry

1.1.2 Definition of Spirituality, per Wikipedia

Historically, the words religious and spiritual have been used synonymously to describe all the various aspects of the concept of religion. Gradually, the word spiritual came to be associated with the private realm of thought and experience while the word religious came to be connected with the public realm of membership in a religious institution with official denominational doctrines

In the field of psychology, spirituality has emerged as a distinct social construct and a focus of research since the 1980s. With the emergence of spirituality as a distinct concept from religion in both academic circles and common language, a tension has arisen between the two constructs. One possible differentiation among the three constructs religion, religiosity, and spirituality, is to view religion as primarily a social phenomenon while understanding spirituality on an individual level. Religiosity is generally viewed as being rooted in religion, whereas this is not necessarily the case for spirituality.

Among other factors, declining membership of organized religions and the growth of secularism in the western world have given rise to this broader view of spirituality. The term "spiritual" is now frequently used in contexts in which the term "religious" was formerly employed. Both theistic and atheistic camps have criticized this development.

1.1.3 Opening remarks by Chad Olsen

Science vs Religion Bullets
Chad's Bullet points

Against Religion

Religion is a disease. Its disappearance would make us all healthier.

The net affect of religion is to harm rather than help people.

- Science education is under siege in the US. A threat to everybody's health since it undermines the credibility of climate scientists.
- Secularists continually have to fight the church to obtain justice (same sex marriage) and protect freedoms (church/state separation, reproductive rights).
- Gays and atheists have been demeaned for centuries, are considered morally unfit, and as a result, have suffered a loss of dignity, and had their lives made difficult and more dangerous.

- Religion that has to rely on deceit (religious apologists) and access to minds not old enough to employ critical thinking probably should not survive.

Religious intolerance - the threat or use of force to resist it - is a mistake on multiple levels. The goal should be to diminish the influence of the church by diminishing its numbers.

- Diminish its influence over laws, public policies, and education curricula.
- Reduce its influence over cultural norms and values.
- Make clear what is true, and who is to be respected - using democratic principles.
- Let religion self-destruct and we will see a reduction in the harm religion does at no cost to anybody apart from the clergy and political structures that benefit from it.

Tenets of Christianity are harmful

- It teaches a distrust of science and scientists
- It teaches that man is a failed creature deserving of punishment.
- It teaches that earth is destined for a fiery destruction - why cherish or protect it?
- It teaches that faith is a virtue. How is that possible?
- It promotes magical thinking.
- It teaches that love involves torture and blood sacrifice.
- It teaches that gays and atheists are immoral.
- It teaches atonement and easy forgiveness just by demanding it.

Against Anti-religion

- Its not a choice between science and religion pluralism is the best path.
- Not all Christians are Christian Fundamentalists. There are many liberal (progressive) Christians.
- Religion as practiced by liberal Christians does not harm society.
- The Catholic Church has been a supporter of evolution and has opposed Intelligent Design.
- It is better to be clear about which Christians and which atheists we are talking about rather than generalizing.
- It is better to oppose ideas rather than groups of people with broad generalizations.
- Religion is a crutch but better to walk with a crutch than fall flat on your face.

It's important not to confuse Christians and Christianity or Muslims and Islam. One can be critical of the ideology without being critical of its victims.

1.1.4 Comments made during discussion

John Stokdijk: by defining context of issues differences narrow.

John de Waal: religion started up to 50K years ago. Also perhaps because of farming, 10K years ago. Now man is subject to nature, so pray for good crops. "Priests/Oppportunists" take advantage of this situation.

Bill Douglas: Dawkins meant "religion is a disease" as a metaphor. Bible was written 300 years after Christ.

John Stokdijk: Yes: Religion can be like a disease. No: Religion is always like a disease in all cases.

Philip Rylett: does believing in fairies do any harm?

Hank Shriver: I don't care as long as it doesn't hurt me or get into government

Chad Olsen: most of bible was written 60 years after death of Jesus Bill: compiled 325 years later

Chad Olsen: Many historians wrote daily during this period, and there is no mention of Jesus.

John Stokdijk: need to be careful when rejecting anecdotal evidence

Phil Rylett: complementary medicine in England a regular doctor can't in good conscience prescribe bullshit

Henry Laxen: in the book "bad science" he revealed that even knowing that a placebo is inert, it still works

John de Waal: 90% of diseases were psychosomatic - challenged by Stephen and reduced to 30%

Chad Olsen: religion is harmful in general. Specifically in some cases can be beneficial to some individuals.

Henry Laxen: harm of religion is like entropy. Globally the harm increases but locally there can be pockets of diminishing harm.

Stephen Seagall: 613 orders in the bible. Obey or die.