

"Religious bondage shackles and debilitates the mind and unfits it for every noble enterprise."
— President James Madison

Critical Thinker

The Bimonthly Newsletter of United States Atheists | September / October 2003

Atheism and Human Nature

by James E. Archer *President, United States Atheists*

Recently an issue (one that never seems to be resolved) surfaced at one of our meetings at the Atheist Community Center: can one speak meaningfully of human nature? The topic arose in the context of a claim that human beings are religious by nature with the unstated assumption that atheists are wasting their time trying to resist religious illusions.

Part of the problem lies in the phrase "human nature." A better term is "species character." Note that atheists differ from many theists by insisting that humans are a species like dogs and elephants and have no special status in the universe. Theists often claim that "man" was created in God's image, etc.

I find it interesting that most people have no problem noticing that dogs act like dogs and cats like cats and that these behaviors are qualitatively and quantitatively different. But when it comes to humans, they reject the claim that humans act like humans.

Let's begin with the obvious. Humans have anatomical and physiological characteristics that are obvious: two arms, two legs, large brain, erect stance, patterns of eating, sleeping, etc., that form the basis of much of human behavior. This alone is enough to form a basis for species character.

But, to be fair, the real issues arise over more abstract questions, like how people think and what they believe. Can one find species character in these areas? Modern cognitive science — the study of how the human brain functions — points to a yes answer to this question.

Human language is instructive, both as evidence for human nature and as an

example of how subtle these issues can be. There are hundreds of known languages and they appear to be very different. This would seem to argue against human nature. Why isn't there just one human language?

The answer is that there is only one "deep" human language but it results in multiple derived "surface" languages. This "deep" language results in a core vocabulary of meanings and in a limited set of grammar that underlie the seeming disparate spoken languages.

Human nature can best be understood in this way: in almost every domain of human behavior we find extreme surface differences but upon more careful study, common underlying patterns emerge.

Although the evidence is harder to find, a similar claim can be made for human ethics: it appears to vary wildly, but upon examining it more carefully, in the light of history, one can see a rough pattern of progress.

So what does this have to do with atheism? A great deal! A common criticism of atheism is that it provides no foundation for human behavior. But if human nature is real, it provides just such a foundation.

Principles of democracy, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of thought, the rights of labor, etc., have all risen, albeit fitfully, out of history as an expression of human nature and species character.

As atheists we should welcome the reality of human nature and make it the foundation of our world view. A view that requires no recourse to spiritual illusions and is rooted in our common humanity. ■

Upcoming Events

Adopt-A-Highway Cleanup

Saturday, Sept. 13, 9:30am Meet at the Atheist Community Center at 9:30am. Join us for about two hours of cleaning-up the stretch of highway "adopted" by USA. Dress for the weather, wear comfortable shoes and bring a pair of work gloves.

Weekly Meetings

Every Tuesday, 7:30pm Join us at the Atheist Community Center, 6514 SE Foster Rd., Portland. Guests and the public are always welcome.

Sept. 02	Speaker
Sept. 09	Social/discussion
Sept. 16	Work/discussion
Sept. 23	Open forum
Sept. 30	A Surprise
Oct. 07	Speaker
Oct. 14	Social/discussion
Oct. 21	Work/discussion
Oct. 28	Open forum

Please note that meeting topics are subject to change.

"Bunk Busters"

"Bunk Busters" is the cable TV show produced by USA and co-hosted by Jerry Billings and Kendall Auel. It is cablecast through Portland Cable Access. For more information, contact Alfredo Torrejon at bunkbusters@unitedstatesatheists.com.

Schedule (subject to change):

Tuesdays	7:30pm	Ch. 22
Saturdays	1:30pm	Ch. 23
Sundays	2:30pm	Ch. 11

Web Site

Be sure to check out our ever-improving Web site for the latest information.

www.unitedstatesatheists.com

Dial-An-Atheist

For a weekly message of common sense, dial 503-ATHEIST (284-3478).

Critical Thinker

For complete submission guidelines, go to www.unitedstatesatheists.com/critical-thinker/. Deadline for next issue: October 15, 2003. Send to the editor at critical-thinker@unitedstatesatheists.com. Contact the editor if you are interested in placing advertising in the newsletter.

Join USA's E-Mail List

Would you like to get the latest information on United States Atheist news, events and activities? If so, send an e-mail to Nan at contacts@unitedstatesatheists.com and ask to be added to our e-mail list. Be sure to also include your name, telephone number and mailing address so that we may keep our records up-to-date. Please let us know whenever your e-mail address changes. We respect your privacy, so your personal information will be used for USA purposes only and will not be sold or shared. ■

Help Us Keep Our Mailing and Membership List Current

Is a change of address in your future? Is the *Critical Thinker* or other mail from USA being sent to the wrong address? Has your e-mail address or phone number changed? Please let us know so that we may update our records. Contact Nan at contacts@unitedstatesatheists.com, or write to us at United States Atheists, 6514 SE Foster Rd., Portland, OR 97206-4659. If you prefer, you may leave a voice mail at 503-ATHEIST (503-284-3478). Please be sure to clearly state all information and spell everything out. ■

Join us for lively discussions and good times at our weekly meetings. We meet every Tuesday night, 7:30pm at the Atheist Community Center, 6514 SE Foster Rd., Portland. Bring a friend!

USA Ice Cream Social

Words and photos by **James A. Smith** *Critical Thinker Editor, United States Atheists*

On August 12th, USA hosted an Ice Cream Social at the Atheist Community Center in Portland. Approximately 30 people came and enjoyed ice cream and good conversation. The party brought out a number of USA members who often don't

come to meetings, as well as several first-time attendees.

The USA board wishes to thank Nan Steinebach for all her hard work in organizing the event and serving ice cream. We hope to hold similar events in the future! ■



What Would Jerry Do?

by **Jerry Billings** Treasurer & Co-host of "Bunk Busters," United States Atheists

Dear Jerry,

Would you continue to try to deny God's creation if I proved to you that Darwin was wrong?

*Too Clever for You
in Dayton, Oregon*

Dear TC4Y,

There is a time-tested approach for your proposition. What you have written is well-known as the "God of the Gaps Argument." It is a common fundamentalist error which assumes if any modern scientific explanation or discovery is disproved or found to be mistaken then the only other possibility is that one of the gods did it. So, let us pretend that you proved to the world that Darwin was completely wrong in his discovery of the elements of Evolution.

But, just because a naturalistic explanation might be found lacking, that does not leave only the supernatural one. Yet, that is the common argument of Creationist and Intelligent Design theorists. In fact, it is the most prominent feature of the majority of religious hucksters who spend their time being clever rather than being right. It is a sorry but true observation that in order to be a believer, one must abandon all power of reasoning.

So when you claim that Darwin was in error, what you are really doing is just throwing out as many criticisms of Darwinism as you can, hoping that one of them will stick. If it were proved that Darwin was wrong, then there is no other explanation and you would leave the world with the lone answer that "God did it." But that does not answer the problem that even if Darwinism were unable to account for biological com-

plexity, no other scientific finding could be correct. But so far, anti-Darwinists have offered not the least evidence that God's creation is the only plausible alternative or even a fair explanation. Like all the Creationists' arguments, it assumes that what cannot be explained by Darwinism must be God's work. And that is the old, phony "God of the Gaps Argument."

Now that you understand that you have been sold a bill of goods, let me urge you to consider if the whole religious nonsense that has been claimed to be true might also be false.

— Jerry Billings

Dear Jerry,

It is clear that both my church and my God have declared same-sex marriages illegal and sinful. What makes you so bright that you can disagree with that?

*On the Straight and Narrow,
Clackamas, Oregon*

Dear S&N,

Many are confused by the involvement of both state and church in marriages. If the church is correct in its claim to whether those wishing to enter upon a marriage are qualified, then most definitely, marriage would be a religious activity.

BUT WAIT! If religious leaders are correct in claiming marriage as a religious ceremony and subject to religious requirements, then how does the state get involved? It does by selling permits to get married, setting age requirements, limiting the number of concurrent marriages to one, requiring blood tests, prohibiting marriage between certain relatives, disallowing marriage prior to an interval follow-

ing divorce — have I missed anything? On the other hand, the state claims and exercises its right to criminalize marriages that violate its regulations and to imprison those who violate laws against bigamy, incest & polygamy and even sometimes to imprison cohabiting unmarried couples who do nothing more than some married people do.

Only the state has the right to dissolve marriages to free the parties to form subsequent unions. Only the state can provide for child custody, visitation, support & alimony. Only the state can divide property, limit either party's choice of residence or limit the behavior of a party during visitation or custody (alcohol, drugs, partners, medical treatment or education, as examples).

Clearly the state has preempted church law in marriage. The only legal right of the church in marriage is to perform a ceremony but even that is not limited to churches alone.

So what right does the church have in allowing or disallowing a marriage? What right does a church have in commanding how parents may raise a child? Religion, especially Mormon, have shown that they cannot be trusted in requiring a free consent to becoming married. What right does a church have in declaring that two people who love each other are not entitled to have the same governmentally-granted rights (and there are over 1,000 of them, according to Ashcroft's Justice Department), which are allowed to married people? The answer is clear, it is, "No right."

I suspect that the church's position in this debate is less about morality and more about mind control.

— Jerry Billings

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503-ATHEIST (284-3478)
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I am an Atheist and would like to join United States Atheists.

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If you provide your e-mail address we will add you to our e-mail list to keep you updated on USA news and events. If you do **not** wish to be added to the list, please check this box:
Your personal information will be used only for United States Atheists purposes and will not be sold or shared with other organizations.

I would like to help out financially. Enclosed is a charitable donation:

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6514 SE Foster Rd.
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You may also join at any of our regular meetings, held every Tuesday evening at 7:30 at the above address. Contributions are also gratefully accepted at our meetings.

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Welcome to the *Critical Thinker*!

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