

WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?

By JOHN D. BOENKE

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Vinton, VA 24179

This book is
Dedicated to my Grandchildren
Sylvie, Jimmy, and Eli Bowden
And
Henry, and Timothy Haller

John D. Boenke was born in 1926 in Rossford, Ohio and grew up during the Great Depression. He served in the U. S. Army in 1946 - 47 in the Medical Corps. In 1951 he received a degree of Bachelor of Science in Physics from the University of Michigan. After college, Mr. Boenke worked in research and engineering for the General Electric Company. Later he was the Manager of an engineering test laboratory for Lau Blower Company, then Chief Engineer for Halsey Taylor Water Cooler Corp. and Senior Design Engineer for The Werner Ladder Company. Before retiring in 1989, Mr. Boenke also owned and operated a small motel in Ashtabula, Ohio.

Since retiring, Mr. Boenke has been interested in reading and studying in the areas of Cosmology, Theoretical Physics and Philosophy. In addition, he has an interest in the origins of religions. He has privately published several short stories and some poetry.

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A HUMANIST

I want to be a humanist,
And let the god things die,
Allow my mind to be more free,
Immune from watching eye,
Of phantasm or deity,
Or spirit in the sky,

I want to be a humanist,
And grow to be myself,
Take all the ancient tabulae,
And shatter them as Delft,
Sweep clean the dusty texts away,
And leave an empty shelf,

I want to be a humanist,
And make my own beliefs,
I'll pose my cause celebre,
In clear poetic briefs,
And rationally I'll share,
A life of joys and griefs,

I want to be a humanist,
And face existence square,
No need to fear the dark beyond,

Which isn't really there,
Or look for force unknown,
To make me love and share,

I want to be a humanist,
And prove a course of life,
That parts the fact from fiction,
When muddling is rife,
Which deals with actuality,
And spurns depressing strife,

Yes, I will be a humanist,
And show a wondering world,
A splendid way to cope with life,
My mind not tightly curled,
But opened up and resonant,
My psyche free; unfurled.

By John D. Boenke

April 15, 1996

INTRODUCTION

I am not a Theologian, nor an expert in any way in Philosophy, History, or whatever is required to be a scholar in the Humanities. Why then am I writing about Religion and Philosophy? I am an expert in being myself, an ordinary person, and I feel that my reactions, interpretations, and understandings of all the religious gobbledygook which has been forced on me all my life, and which is even more rampant in the modern society, are just as valid as any other ordinary persons responses to the same mass of common misinformation. At least, religion has interested me enough that I have spent a lot of time reading about it, thinking about it, and I have listened to many different view points.

Even so, this does not make me an expert, but I do feel qualified to talk about my own experience and thought. I challenge the reader to follow my reasoning and accept that which is tolerable, and reject anything which does not appeal. All I ask is that you do so on a rational basis, for rationality is the one thing human beings have which other animals do not. Unfortunately, reasoning is an imperfect art, and it is easily distorted by those who wish to do so. Because of its imperfection, the reasoning process must be examined and re-examined continually to be sure it is consistent, and is based on the best possible information. This means a person's understanding is not fixed, but is a fluid thing. It must be amenable to change when better facts or more nearly true insights and deductions become available.

I am motivated to write this book for two reasons. The first is my natural desire to have some influence on the thinking of my children and my children's children. I want the best life for all of them, and if what I write here in some way helps them to better cope with the vicissitudes of existence, I will have achieved my main purpose.

My second reason for writing on this subject is the concern caused me by my observations of the troubles in the world. I believe the two most crucial problems are intellectual irresponsibility of individuals, and the unchecked overpopulation of all world areas. It seems that most people are rational only to a degree. When it comes to ideas which are difficult, challenging or emotional charged, they prefer to revert to myths and fairy tales to sustain themselves. They willingly place their destiny in the hands of those who claim to know it all, but who actually have no better facts than anyone else.

Also, it often seems that many groups which are the least bit different from one another feel compelled to be at odds on a continuing basis, and each group takes irrational offense at any and all actions of the other party which they do not, or perhaps refuse to understand.

My feeling is that, if we could all once agree on the facts of the situation in which we find ourselves, we might stand a chance of really correcting the ills of society and live happier and fuller lives. We might learn not to fight each other, but turn our talents to organized synergetic actions with the intended result being the attainment of a better symbiosis with the life of the earth and ultimately with the universe. Eventually, this should result in a stabilization and a better balance in the ratio of the

number of human animals to the rest of the life in our world. If this could happen, I believe it follows then that the human race would perhaps stand the best chance of continuing in a comfortable state of life for the longest period of time.

Further, it seems to me, that all the scholarly thought and guidance through the ages has not resulted in a very satisfactory world in which to live during the present epoch. Conceivably it is time we ordinary people chuck the scholars and their nonsense aside, and solve these problems ourselves with our own elemental, rational, and consistent approaches. When organized, the power of rational people is formidable.

We, as individuals, have the responsibility to ourselves to make our way through the maze of conflicting ideas alone with our own good sense, and to choose among the many “facts” presented to us by wise men and fools, scholars and simpletons, and virtuous persons and charlatans.

We must consider all sources, whether churls, scholars, devious imposters, or straightforward thinkers; as well as the irrefutable realities which our own experiences, senses, and rationality present to us. In doing so, we may arrive at the most nearly true of all possible insights. After all, it is our own lives we are living, and we have the right to live them in whatever manner we deem to be the best possible way for ourselves.

Whether you agree or disagree with me, I hope you enjoy my presentation. Perhaps you can tear it apart, on a rational basis mind you, or, as I would prefer, you may enhance my considerations and enlarge upon my conclusions. If the reader still considers me extremely audacious for presuming to write this tract on religion, so be it. I will do it anyway.

One other thought. If anything you read here causes you to change your ideas or beliefs, please do so only after a thorough personal examination and reasoning process, and not just because what I may write sounds “nice”. I do not wish to convince you. I prefer that you convince yourself. Or, if after a careful thoughtful all inclusive consideration of facts and rational ideas, you still feel the need or convenience of mystical belief, perhaps that is best for you. I am not one to argue to the extreme. Happy reading and clear thinking!

I have now read through my writings many times. On each occasion, I have changed, re-worded, and massaged my text. Although at this point in time, the wording is the best I can do, it obviously is a work in progress which may never be done. For that reason, I choose to stop here and publish it. Perhaps I will have to redo it in the future, but that remains to be seen. From my standpoint, it is better to present what I have now, than never to voice my ideas at all. Also, I have been moved to write a poem, which is at the very end of the work. If you have the stamina to read all the way through the rest, you can then enjoy the poem, I hope.

John D. Boenke

INTRODUCTION TO THE REVISED EDITION

The book has been revised mostly in the way it is organized. The poem is no longer at the end, but it is to be hoped, you have enjoyed it already at the beginning. Various typographic errors have been corrected and Addendum Two has been incorporated into the body of the main text. There have been a few modifications of wording or further comments in some areas. It is felt this does not change the main thrust of the ideas in any material manner. The final result is a bit more satisfying to me, and I hope is even more appealing to my valued reader.

John D. Boenke

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

To begin with, let's establish some basic realities which we can use to organize, rationally, the world we experience.

It seems to me there is overwhelming evidence that the scientists are correct. Everything we know and with which we have familiarity, is composed of definable and discrete, but fantastically minute "particles" of matter. I believe these "particles" are not solid in the sense we understand "solid" in everyday life. They are instead, perhaps, "condensed" energy or energy which is moving in a set or particular fashion and remains together because it is somehow balanced and meshes in a unique way.

Because of the nature or characteristics of the motion, there are several varieties of basic particles which can combine according to certain rules into larger and larger fragments. The names of these particles are interesting., but not important. The fact that they are able to combine in greater complexity into all the visible material of the universe is important. There may be nothing in the universe that is solid, but all the matter that we can perceive is only energy which, for the moment, is satisfied to remain in a stable state.

Normally we consider a rock to be solid, and we cannot put our finger through it. However, the rock and our finger are both mostly empty space, and the fact that we cannot put our finger through the rock is because the forces which exist on the microcosmic levels prevent it, not because either the rock or our finger is completely "solid". If these basic forces did not exist, then perhaps our finger would easily slip through the rock. However, if the forces did not exist, the rock and the finger would probably not hold together as the entities we know either.

Concomitantly, I believe the idea that the universe arose from a cataclysmic event some billions of years ago from a quantity of energy suddenly beginning to expand and to convert into matter, is exactly what happened. This event is usually referred to as the Big Bang. There has been much theorizing, testing, and experimenting with this concept, and the technical literature is full of demonstrations that the basic view is reasonable and true. More popular explanations of the process of the Big Bang can be found in works by Stephen Hawking, "A Brief History of Time"; Steven Weinberg, "The First Three Minutes"; and James S. Trefil, "The moment of Creation"; along with many other comparable books.

Currently there is much theoretical and experimentation work by the physicists which seems to indicate a much more complex universe than we have previously realized. There is even the idea that the underlying continuum for our universe is a multiverse, which is much more intricate structure than previously considered.. The interesting ideas of String theory may eventually shown to be sound by the higher energy testing which is now possible. In any case, the world in which we find ourselves is not mystical. It works in fundamentally rational ways which are becoming more known as the boundaries of physical theory are expanded. These then are our beginning points of our physical surroundings

Similarly, I believe the theory of evolution of all complex life from simpler life forms is true. The "hypothesis" of evolution has been adequately demonstrated as true by many studies, discoveries, and archeological facts uncovered in the last few hundred years. The hypothesis has truly attained the status of theory. We are here in our present human form simply because it was possible to occur. Given the extremely long times available for the unfolding of higher forms of life, it happened. Even though it

is not clear where the original life came from, once it existed the rest followed naturally.

Whether the simplest life formed here on earth from a rich mixture of the elemental building blocks, or whether it drifted in from outer space as spores from some other life supporting area where it was initiated, is not important to the present result. The overall idea of evolution is basically simple and understandable. To me it is reasonable that complex organic structures arise from less complex structures slowly over many subsequent replications rather than suddenly appearing by an act of a god or other unknown force. It reflects the process of all growth whether it be simple cells splitting, the intricacies of vines growing among and around other plants or the formation of flowers; or the structure of words from letters, sentences from words, and treatises from sentences.

I believe that these ideas of scientific discovery and the evolutionary process which can be tested and demonstrated to be accurate, and which carry a great degree of rational consistency, are the fundamental truths from which rational beliefs will flow naturally. These beliefs, based on the best knowledge we have, may then relate the closest to the actual situation in which humankind finds itself. If our status and position in the universe can be explained reasonably to the satisfaction of most people, perhaps we would have a starting point for greater cooperation in solving the problems of our over-exploited earth. We may then begin to live in a more sane fashion in relation to other peoples, other life forms, and the eco-system. These rational viewpoints may also temper our own expectations of life.

My starting perspective then, is that science is rational, consistent, believable and true. Keeping that in mind, I will explore a variety of topics.

RELIGION

PAGAN, *NOUN* (Latin, *pdganus*, a peasant) One who worships false gods or subscribes to a polytheistic religion; one who is neither a Christian, a Jew, nor a Mohammedan; a heathen; an idolator; a person with no religion.

HEATHEN, *NOUN* (O.E. *haethen* commonly explained as meaning originally ‘heath dweller’.) A member of a people which does not acknowledge the Jewish, Christian, or Islamic God; a pagan or idolater; an irreligious or unenlightened person.

RELIGION, *NOUN* Recognition on the part of man (humankind) of a controlling superhuman power entitled to obedience, reverence, and worship; the feeling or the spiritual attitude of those recognizing such a controlling power, with the manifestation of such feelings in conduct or life; the practice of sacred rites or observances; a particular system of faith in, and worship of, a Supreme Being or a god or gods; the state of life of the members of a religious order; a practice of devotion or conscientiousness.

The above definitions were taken from “The Living Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary” Copyright 1972 by The English-Language Institute of America, Inc. Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 76-146839.

Not being very knowledgeable in the field of religion, I can only follow my own unprofessional understanding of the subject and build on that. Starting with the above definitions, I understand that the word, pagan, describes “One who is a peasant” or similarly, a heathen is “One who was born and lives on the heath”.

Presumably in early times, such people had no other religion than believing in the things around them which seemed to have power; most notably, the sun, which gave heat and light and was necessary to grow food; the moon, which seemed to control the tides; the earth, from which growing plants emerged and supplied life sustaining foods; large and dangerous animals which could take life from one, etc. For such practical beliefs, they are called Pagans or Heathens, usually in a disparaging manner.

In other words, they believed there was basically a “spirit” of some sort in these natural entities which deserved respect and recognition, and was regarded with awe because actions of the spirit were unpredictable. The spirit was worshipped to keep it appeased, therefore assuring that it was willing to continue to supply its bounty and largesse to the believers.

I believe pagan religions celebrated natural events such as the reversal of the disappearance of the sun (winter solstice), the renewal of spring (vernal equinox), harvest time (autumnal equinox), phases of the moon, and so on. Many myths and superstitions arose because people seemed to notice a cause and effect relationship which produced successful events; when to plant the corn or grain; when to expect to collect certain wild foods; what plants and herbs cured which sicknesses; etc. These and many other actions grew out of humankind’s collective experience. To attempt to explain them, they were ascribed to the appropriate “spirits” because scientific understanding was not available at that time.

Further, the individuals own emotional feelings related to the “spirits” in these natural things, and in that way they identified with the world around them which may have made them feel special, or at least feel included in the world they experienced surrounding themselves. This might have allowed them to feel they had spirit, and therefore were powerful also. This, very briefly and generally, is Paganism as I understand it.

How do the major religions compare to these basic ideas? It is my understanding that their gods are described as the controlling force or creator of the universe. This is an awesome concept when it is seriously contemplated. To believe there is something or someone which we do not see, feel, or hear, and which is in charge of everything, requires a gigantic leap of faith, as there is no direct proof. The only guidance offered is the preaching or the writing of “religious” persons, who have had “revelations” or “mystical experiences”. Also, we may be guided or persuaded by great thinkers who have mulled over these questions for a lifetime, and who then have “decided” what the truth is. The best “proofs” of any religion in my estimation, are those people who actually live by the laws and precepts they espouse. They, at least, demonstrate the usefulness of their religion, and in that way somewhat establish its validity. However, it seems to me that the vast majority of “religious” persons do not in fact live by the religious laws they claim to hold. If they did, I believe we would have a kinder, gentler, more accepting and peaceful world than we do. The major religions also celebrate the same natural events the Pagans celebrated, but they give them a new mantel of acceptability which is described in terms of their own beliefs.

My impression of the major religions, primarily Christianity because I have the most direct experience with it, is that they require absolute, unquestioned faith and obedience, but offer no tangible proof whatsoever that all their claims are factual.

Moreover, there are so many disagreements of “fact” within and between the various branches and sects, that to a complete outsider, (as perhaps someone from an alien, more rational world), the whole religious institution would appear ridiculous. Briefly, in my estimation, religion is what most people need as a basis in trying to make sense out of their situation in life and keep themselves from losing their sanity in the face of a mindless, hostile, capricious, indifferent and incomprehensible world. Religion is that which humans have developed to attempt to systematize and excuse the unexplainable aspects of their status and their relationship to the universe in which they find themselves.

The major purpose of a religion then, is to help human beings cope with the problems and situations which life imposes on them. For some, Christianity works; for others it is Judaism or Islam. For still others, it is Paganism or Heathenism or any number of other ‘isms which provide the rules and guidance for living in the physical world and for interacting effectively with the rest of the human race. In that sense, all of the above, including Heathenism and Paganism, are religions.

I believe a further purpose of religion is to help the average person accept and adjust to the knowledge that they do not live a physical life forever. A variety of rewards are promised for leading a “good life” by the various religions. These rewards become the prime inducement to some of the “believers” to continue their faith and commitment to the religion. By offering these great compensations, the followers are persuaded to support the religion in the manners recommended by the initiators or leaders, or their anointed deputies who espouse the religion. Peace of mind is promised to those who will follow the rules and principles of the religion, and the concern for eventual death by the individual is assuaged.

Another characteristic of most religions seems to be that they consider themselves the only “true” religion and the unfortunate persons who do not believe in that religion will find themselves in some uncomfortable situation sometime in the future. This results in further conflict between various religions. The fanatical, irrational behavior of the members of some religions leads to the result of attempting mutual extermination with other religions in many cases.

Unfortunately, this destructive, short-sighted behavior blinds the individuals to the next, and even more important point which is: Religion should not only help a person to live in the world, but should make that person be responsible for preserving the world for future persons. I believe this should be the ultimate aim of a wise and

perceptive religion, credo or ideology. The ideal belief should be a rational system which fosters a realistic relationship with nature, and which provides room for planning the continuance of the human race in the most satisfactory fashion through the foreseeable future.

Regrettably this last objective is largely ignored by most religions in their zeal to “save” their own members and promote the growth of their own group and point of view. Some even discount it entirely.

With all these good religions having operated for hundreds or even thousands of years, why do we now find ourselves in the current critical situation relative to the environment? Why is the ultimate viability of the earth now in jeopardy because of overpopulation? It is obvious to me the existing religions, which involve the majority of the earth’s peoples, have failed to prepare for the future in this respect. They evidently are missing the point somehow, or they may be operating with incorrect or insufficient information, or perhaps they just do not consider planning important.

Because of this failure, it is my contention that it is appropriate to reconsider and re-evaluate religion in general and look for a better solution to the needs religions seek to fulfill. We need a better approach to our relationships with the earth; with the universe; with each other. Perhaps this is also time for using a different name for these relationships. To avoid the stereotypes or preconceptions which the word religion may invoke, perhaps we should just call this revitalized attention, Rationality.

To begin, let us look at some of the details of physical reality. Let us examine and try to understand better what our senses, emotions and awareness really are. The next sections deal with these topics.

SENSES

We are told there are five senses, vision, audition, olfaction, taste, and tactility. Why do we have them, and what do they do for us? I believe it is apparent our senses let our interior “world”, the world of our brain and neural actions, communicate with the “real” world outside our bodies. The senses are the bridge between reality and the internal functions of our brain. Without them we would experience being in a void, and would be aware of nothing except the inner workings of our brain.

However, I think even that residual sort of activity would be minuscule or non—existent, if the brain never had any stimulation or experiences from the senses.

The primary sense organs act like transducers converting light, sound, smells, tastes, pressure or heat into electrical signals in the nervous system. These signals flow to the brain by an intricate combination of electrical-chemical-mechanical functions through a series of specialized cells which then activate their own particular brain area or areas. The brain then processes this information and lets us be aware of the sensory stimulus. How it does this is beyond my understanding, but much investigation is being pursued in these areas.

One book which I found most interesting is “The Astonishing Hypothesis” by Francis Crick. This is a fascinating explanation of how a brain may work, but it also contains extensive references to other work done and being pursued on the workings of the brain.

Neither will I attempt to define awareness or consciousness. That is beyond the scope of this humble work, and volumes have been written about them by experts in the field. I will beg the question and say only, “As sentient beings, we all know what awareness and thinking are, or we would not now be in a state of communication.”

All the information the brain receives is from the senses. By whatever wonderful means, the sensory perceptions end up in the brain and are held and used for greater and lesser periods of time according to the rules followed by the brain for processing such information.

From this we know facts, we have experiences, we develop skills, we remember events, we think, we create and generally express our personality; that which is “us

Further, I maintain that the information the brain receives is only from the senses. There is no mystical, mysterious “spirit” or “vapor” or “presence” which imposes itself on the brain to give our Being impressions or ideas beyond that which the real world provides. I do not believe there is any reliable demonstration of such spiritual existence.

It wonders me that most people accept the idea of mystical existences with no physical proof. A person believes the spirits are there only because he or she “feels” like they are, by what happens within the persons body. Our senses are notoriously inept in being exact, and are easily fooled by confusing stimulations. Yet persons will believe almost anything, if they can generate a “gut feeling” about it. Intuition may be useful in divining or exploring factual situations, but must be discarded when describing factual conclusions. A “gut feeling” is exactly that when it comes to defining something nebulous and unknown to the experience of our senses. Feelings relate only to physical actions in our bodies, not to external influences. Phantasms are created only in the workings of our mind and the reactions of our bodies. “Gut feelings” are a result of what goes on in our brain, not responses caused by wraiths from outside or inside the body. Feelings are completely internal and are, or ultimately will be, explainable by body functions in physical terms.

I believe the senses developed because they aid our survival, specifically the survival of our genes. Each sense in some way makes it easier for us to live and prosper. If it did not, I believe it would die out because of its uselessness. Also, we can live without one or more of the senses, but it becomes increasingly difficult, and a person lacking a sense is at a great disadvantage.

I consider the senses to be survival mechanisms which evolved over many millennia. Because we have them, other wonders have developed. We (our predecessors) became able to react to the stimuli provided by the senses and allow the body to operate on the messages being supplied, we became able to think, that is, to process the stimuli, then we became aware of the process, perceived the feelings in our bodies, and lastly, we recognized our conscious selves.

The senses provided the stimulation to our bodies. The reaction of our bodies to the stimulation then gave rise to the emotions. I believe the emotions are simply an extension of the senses. They are a result of being aware of the messages from the senses which causes us to think and to take actions again to promote our survival. As the next higher level of organization, let us consider the emotions in the following section and explore how they help us.

EMOTIONS

What are emotions? How do they help us? It seems to me that emotions are the body's total reaction to sensory input. They are an end result of the brain's complete mental activity. All the stimuli in a given situation first go to the brain. The brain next processes and evaluates the information, then lastly it causes various reactions in the body by sending the appropriate signals to diverse parts of the body. We hear of an unfortunate happening; we understand it; we cry. We see a sunset; we recognize the beauty in it; we feel happy. Another car cuts in front of us while we are driving; we think it is dangerous and unfair to us; we get angry.

I believe the emotions all happen in the brain. We can "feel" things in other parts of our body, but it is the brain which has told that body part to react. Subsequently, we feel something in that part. Such as, we may be walking in the forest and meet a bear. The brain registers fear and causes various changes in the body which may include modifications in the blood distribution to prepare to fight, or to run, or to climb a tree. But the strange feeling in our stomach is not the emotion, it is a result of the emotion which is in the brain.

Emotions have developed in us (our ancestors) through evolution, because in some way the emotions help us to survive better. Love aids in the continuation of the species. Fear causes us to react to danger to save ourselves, and therefore save our genes and the potential to pass them on to the next generation. Grief helps us to close out old sadness and to move on with our present life more effectively. Sympathy causes us to care for and help preserve our group, and again to preserve our heritage. Emotions, like the senses, are another, but more advanced and sophisticated mechanism the body has of surviving in a hostile environment.

Unfortunately, it is generally simple to ascribe to the emotions a reality of their own which I do not feel is justified. Because of physical changes in our bodies (blood pressure, distribution of blood, rate of breathing, heightened attention to sound and sight), most persons seem to say they feel something beyond these responses, which is the emotion. They say, "I feel it in my heart." I maintain, the emotion is just the brain causing physical reactions. There is nothing mystical beyond the physical which is required for the emotion to have the desired positive effect on our reactions or to influence our ability to cope with life. To say there is something more than the physical

reactions, is to allow our minds to play tricks on us needlessly.

Let me add however, just because I feel the emotions can be explained only by what goes on in the brain, does not mean I consider them any the less authentic. My love is just as genuine, my fear just as distressful, my sadness just as honest, my anger just as unreasonable as the same emotion in anyone else. I tend to cry in happy and sad situations before many others do, but I do not consider they lack emotion. They only seem to be able to control it better than I. My emotions help me to survive just as well as the rest of the world, even though I consider they have no mystical component.

As I indicated above, allowing our emotions to convince our intellect there is some power “behind” the emotions or to imply the existence of a “spiritual” component to them is neither necessary nor constructive. It is not necessary since the emotions themselves perform the required functions of relieving or adjusting our thoughts to allow us to continue in a constructive manner. Nothing beyond that adds to the healthy reactions needed to deal with or to overcome the event causing the emotion.

Implying a spirituality behind the emotions is counter-productive because it acts as a crutch which denies us the power of developing our own internal strength to deal with the surrounding world in an intellectually honest fashion. Ascribing the capacities of protection and guidance to a mythic being or some sort of phantasm robs us of our own strengths and disavows our right to have our own experience of responsibility and control over our existence. We are stronger than that. We deserve to experience the joy of being in charge of ourselves. Our psyche, our mental life, deserves the opportunity to expand and develop as we meet and deal with life situations.

I believe there is nothing about emotions or so called spiritual feelings which cannot be explained now on a rational basis, or which will become explainable in the future with added investigations into the physical reactions of our bodies relating to the emotions. In other words, we do not need gods, spirits, or fairy tales to exist in this life or in this world, in the most wholesome manner. To believe in them does not add any utilitarian component to dealing with our current situation. In addition, I believe for others to exploit our emotions is unfair to us. Some use the very time we are in an emotional state to take advantage of us and to try and impose their values and ideas on us. In the larger context of all that it means to be human in the highest sense, this exploitation is inhuman.

In spite of all of the above reasoning, there are persons who, even though they feel themselves free of coercion by other persons or by the various doctrines, may decide for themselves that there is spirituality. I would not argue too much with them. Although I consider spirituality unnecessary and doing nothing for me, perhaps for them it is the only way to cope with this admittedly challenging world. After all, even crutches serve a useful purpose for a while. I contend though, that eventually it is better to be without them.

AWARENESS AND THOUGHT

Awareness and the thinking process are also topics which I feel are too complex for me to tackle in technical terms or detail. There has been a lot of work done in this area, and more investigations are currently in process. The book I mentioned previously “The Astonishing Hypothesis” by Francis Crick also considers certain aspects of awareness and thinking. It is a resource which lists many references to the associated work of others in the field.

Based on my own experience, allow me to comment just a little about thought and awareness in a general fashion. I feel that awareness and thought are the end product or end result of all the stimulation of the various senses. Thinking is what the brain does with all the information it receives. We all know we are aware and can think, but what exactly is going on in the brain is beyond my ability or qualification to say.

The main point I would assert is that it is all going on in our head. I believe my brain is the seat of where “I” am. My thought, consciousness, knowledge, experience, rationality, memory, personality, and all that I am, is situated in my brain. It is the sum total of all my experience “burned” into pathways in the brain which make my brain unique to me, and causes my own particular responses to the current events I encounter. I believe this is the reality which current investigations are showing.

Further, I believe our total being eventually will be explainable in physical, chemical and mechanical terms which are basically easily described and defined. That is the full extent of who we are, and there is no spirit or soul or mystical being hiding somewhere inside of us. I do not think there is a force lurking inside (or outside) which plays games with our gullibility or emotional responses.

Those persons who trifle with our emotions to make us feel guilty or in other ways induce us to be sympathetic with them so they may impose their ideas, ethics, and morals and on us, are the worst of all charlatans. They attempt to manipulate us in our most vulnerable emotional states to attain their goals. Rather than to assist our understanding of our own circumstances in time of need, they promote their agenda ultimately at our expense. We should be on guard at all times to be sure that what we are reading, observing or being told, is interpreted by us according to standards of rationality, consistency and truth.

Awareness, is probably the most distinguishing feature which separates human beings from other animals. We are aware of and can think about the world around us. We can understand much of what is going on and turn it to our advantage by our thinking processes. I will admit some of the “lower” animals do exhibit a certain amount of awareness and apparent thinking processes. Our separation from them is not exact or complete, and our abilities certainly developed by evolution from them. Perhaps, it is better to consider the difference as a matter of degree. Although I think there is not much disagreement that we have the greater and more developed awareness and thinking ability of all animals, this does not translate into the right to disregard, exploit or misuse the “lower” animals. We must recognize they have important roles in the world also, and they are entitled to fulfill them.

This awareness is what we mean in a greater sense when we speak of “life”. This “life” is more than the life represented by the growing ability and the reproducing ability we share with the rest of the organic universe. Life is also experiences which may be shared and understood by others. Life is the highest stimulation of our senses and emotions by the world around us. Life is the enjoyment of living.

We may truly believe we have more “life” than the lower animal forms have. That does not necessarily result in a more permanent form of life however. We are

alive because our brains are functioning. We hear, see, feel, think and are aware, therefore we are alive. That is what life is. If our brains do not function that way, we are dead.

The fact we are aware, does not necessarily mean that our aware life has an existence separate from our physical processes. If the physical processes do not take place, we do not have life; we are not aware. To my way of thinking, this is the clearest indication that there is no “life” after death. If the total of life is brain activity, then when the brain ceases, there is no longer any mechanism for life. This idea is for me a great mitigation of anxiety. What could be more oppressive than having to be aware for interminable time, and have no way to occupy oneself? Eternity, after all is not just a thousand billion years (1,000,000,000,000), it is forever. Death, I believe, is a welcome release from awareness. There is nothing more to be concerned with after that.

Similarly, when we are dead, we no longer have sensations, emotions, thought processes, or awareness. These qualities are the foundations on which so-called spirituality is built. If these qualities no longer exist, I believe it is rational to infer that any spirituality which might have existed because of them can no longer be.

THE SOUL

What about the soul? No discussion of one’s philosophy would be complete without some comments on the soul. Does the soul exist? Do I have a soul? What is a soul? Returning to the previously consulted Webster’s Dictionary, we find the definition:

soul *n*, ----, The principle of life, feeling, thought and action in man (humans), regarded as a distinct entity separate from the body, and commonly held to be separable in existence from the body; the spiritual part of man (humans) regarded in its moral aspect, or as believed to survive death and to be subject to happiness or misery in a life to come; ----etc.

My approach to the existence of the soul is a reasonable one. Is there evidence that the soul exists? Is the soul necessary? Does it serve a purpose?

I have never seen a proof that souls exist. I believe any such attempt at a proof would involve a discussion of our senses, emotions and awareness. It may claim that since these qualities exist, there must be an actuality of some sort behind them, and that actuality is the soul. This does not seem sensible to me. I believe our senses, emotions and awareness can exist without having any other explanation than the physical ones available. Why should we invent another aspect to further complicate the situation?

If there is such a thing as a soul, why should it have senses or remember our unique emotions and awareness after our death, when the senses, emotions and awareness no longer exist? Is not this saying that our senses, emotions and awareness continue to exist beyond death, which is obviously untrue? Why should a soul be influenced by these things which are ephemeral in nature.

If a soul exists, what qualities does it have? Does it feel things in a tactile sense? Does it feel things emotionally? Does it have awareness? If it does, the soul is carrying along those things which are unique to the living human brain. But after death the human brain ceases its activity, and these qualities no longer exist. How then can the soul exhibit them? To be concise, if the soul depends on the presence of the senses, emotions and awareness to perform whatever it does, it cannot continue when those factors no longer function, that is, when we are dead.

On another point, the senses, emotions, and awareness in a normal well adjusted human being function very well. They do their jobs and promote the life and well being of that individual. Nothing additional is needed to make them work. Adding a soul is superfluous. Since the soul adds nothing to the functioning of the rest of the components, there is no need for it to assist in our living.

I prefer to consider that the sum total of what I am, my emotions, awareness, senses, judgment, and ideas of right and wrong, can be described as my Psyche, which has life while I have life, but dies with me. Again from Webster:

Psyche, *n*, --- (1.c.), *psychoanal.* a person's mental components, both conscious and unconscious.

As I indicated above, I believe the Psyche is the sum total of what we are. It is "us" in the sense it represents everything we know or have experienced. It is what other persons see and experience in us. I believe it incorporates that which others prefer to call the soul or the spirit. The major differences are that, to me, the Psyche is not a mystical entity, but is rationally explainable, and it does not have a life of its own after our physical death.

This does not mean that I cannot be a moral person or have ethical values. I am still, I think, a valuable member of society, law abiding and well behaved. I respect the interests of others, but I work to have the things I want as long as my actions do not infringe their rights. I cannot act inappropriately because society at large is still my conscience. I uphold laws in so far as they are reasonable, and my behavior is open to criticism and judgment by my peers.

I do not believe there is anything lacking in my view of life. There is no void to which a soul would contribute substance, if I were to claim one. There is nothing in my behavior which would be modified or enhanced were I to say I had a spirit. I consider a soul to be a superfluous creation which adds nothing to that which is "me", and in that sense it is unnecessary baggage.

My main point is that we can all be real human beings, and live good, useful, enjoyable lives, and even face the unknowns of death without resorting to mysticism and fabulous stories. Moreover, we will be better off, stronger and healthier, if we do rely on ourselves and other caring human beings, rather than on fabricated inventions of imprudent ancestors who lacked present day information and relied on speculative ideas.

To sum up, I do not believe the concept of a nebulous, indefinable entity called a soul, adds anything towards understanding the real situation. Making up a vague hypothesis to explain the unknowable adds nothing to the available body of knowledge.

WHERE ARE WE?

So! Where are we? What does it all mean? Let us review what has been discussed and try to put the relevant ideas in perspective. A religious person supposedly lives a pure, pious, ethical, moral life because their god wants them to. If they live a good life they will be rewarded in the end. However, I believe it is possible to live the same way and behave in the same manner as the ideally perfect religious person, simply because it is a satisfying method of living and results in a peaceful and contented life. It does not require oneself to put faith in some nebulous underlying illusion which has no rational justification. Simply accepting that a cooperative, tolerant, and fair way of dealing with others is best in the long run for each individual, is “religion” enough for everyday actions. Others experience us by our actions and interactions. If our relationships with others are mutually beneficial and fair, the motivation for the behavior is not important. Whether it is inspired by god or by good common sense, is of no practical consequence.

I am convinced there is no credible physical evidence to account for the various claims of “seeing god” or “hearing his voice” or other such mystical events. I believe such happenings, if they actually occurred, are explainable by natural laws, even though we may not have understood those laws at that point of our development, or whether we understand them yet. Further, I believe any events shrouded in mystery, whether religious or not, are all of the same sort. That is, they are not “mysterious” in that they are ultimately unexplainable by natural laws. It is rather that at this time, with the information we have, and the understanding we have, they cannot be explained.

For no other reason that “it seems so” the pagan attributes power to the “spirits” of the natural world. In the identical manner, it seems to me, the major religions do the same thing, but relate to the whole universe and in a more sophisticated fashion. It does not appear to me that there is any reliable proof that a god exists other than the interpretations by “scholars” of unusual events, or the claims of people, who are generally of good character, that they believe such is the case. However, just claiming it is so, is insufficient to prove it or to convince me. I submit that GOD or gods or spirits do not exist.

Some would argue “Obviously there is a god. Look around you. Contemplate the beauties of nature, trees, flowers, the immensity of the universe, the amazing ways in which natural laws mesh and allow worlds to grow and flourish.” They imply this observation is surely a proof that it was planned and is being controlled by an omni-being, whether or not we can see, hear or feel that being. Does not the end result justify interposing an explanation of it in spiritual terms? They may add, “Can this all have happened merely by accident? We, after all, are supposedly the greatest creations in the universe. Do not our opinions and our ideas carry some weight?”

And I would answer, “Yes, look around you. See the raw violence in nature and the physical universe. See the lowest to the most highly evolved organisms competing viciously for a portion of nature and their own survival. See plant and animal life destroying and eating other life, and consuming its environment in any manner possible for its own aggrandizement. See this as the system which has evolved as the necessary path; the required way; to exist and to survive in the world and universe.

This cannot be the creation of a kind, loving god!!

The crux of the matter is this. What is the difference in saying there is a spirit in the soil which gives us food, to saying there is a spirit in the universe which is concerned for our well being? The spirit in the universe is conceived on a grander scale, but actually is less directly and immediately involved than the spirit in the soil. What is the difference between these spirits?

Neither can be seen, heard or felt. They both exist only because someone has said they exist. They offer no proof of existence of their own. They exist only to try to explain a phenomenon or make sense out of our experience as human beings. Their main purpose, it seems to me, is to make people more comfortable with the situation in which they find themselves. Thus in fact, there is no difference in the two concepts.

Claiming that there are spirits controlling the soil to make food, is basically the same as maintaining there is a god-spirit controlling the universe for our benefit. In both cases, irrational leaps of faith insist the spirit exists, but no credible method of proof is possible for the rational mind.

Actually, I believe neither of the spirits exist. They have been conjured up to satisfy the answer to the question “Why are things the way they are?” It seems to me that things are the way they are, because that is the way a physical world works. No one had to plan it, or start it, or tell it what to do. It is a physical world, and the physical particles behave in certain ways which result in what we are experiencing.

To assert the spirits do not exist is opposite from both the Pagan ideas and the main-line religion viewpoint. Certainly, it is a position which is more reasonable in the face of the evidence. Why is it necessary to invent a non-provable explanation for an action (such as growing food or for the conduct of the universe) when plenty of physical evidence exists to describe the reasons for what is happening? Why should the situation be clouded by the introduction of an unnecessary god or spirit, except that it suits the purposes of those who would try to control others.

Perhaps, promoting a belief helps to assuage the concern and bolster the strength of those who need the belief themselves. Without it, and without the support of like minded persons, they would otherwise feel inadequate or insecure in facing the vagaries of life. Or, perhaps, they are merely using the inherent timorousness of the general populace to promote their own agenda. I am afraid this last point is most often the case.

As to the question of planned versus an accidental mechanism by which this world came about, I would not describe it as either. It is now just the current outcome of plausible, physically possible interactions. It continues in the same manner. The fact that it is possible to happen does not make it an either/or situation. It is accidental only in that it happened here and to us, but it could have happened anywhere in the universe (and probably is being duplicated now in similar form elsewhere). Simply given the physical world, this development process is the result. That is, it would happen again in any other similar universe which began the same way ours did. One could argue that, in fact, it probably has happened over and over again throughout unimaginable eternities of space-times, which recur endlessly. How is that for mind boggling?

There is the further challenge that “one must be concerned for one’s eternal soul, and the after life”. This is one of the main reasons believers are called to believe and thus guard their one chance at some sort of immortality. I am confident this worry drives many persons to “believe” just to cover themselves in case it happens to be

true. What they refuse to recognize is that we have all been here in one form or another during the eternity from the beginning of the universe; and we will continue to be here in some form or other during the eternity to the end of the universe. The form we have now, which has consciousness and some limited reasoning power, did not exist prior to our birth, and will not exist after our death. Nevertheless, the part of the universe which makes up our bodies today will still be around. It simply will not be recognizable as us, nor will we have a consciousness of our surroundings.

In the final analysis, the god or spirit concept is unnecessary, and in my estimation it is counter productive. The similar genesis, the same unsubstantial belief, and the same unnecessary function, causes me to see gods and spirits in the same light, whether their domain is claimed to be the soil or the universe. I am non-religious in the sense that I do not believe the unsubstantiated “facts” and theology of the wide variety of religions. Unless I discover more reasonable ideas, I shall be happy to continue as non-spiritual, non-mystical, and non-pagan. I consider myself to be pro-Humanist, and I am my own unique, moral and well behaved person. The opposite of being religious is not in being heathen or pagan. Religiosity and Paganism are of the same ilk. The opposite is not believing in any phantasms, but in trusting our own innate intelligence. This, to me, is Humanism, or as I choose to call it, Rationalism.

Finally, in spite of all of the above, suppose there is a god who created me and made this world for me. Why then did he-she-it not announce to me in clear and unambiguous terms in a physical setting which I could understand exactly, what he-she-it was doing for me? Why would he-she-it torture (yes, that is not too strong a word) me with pain, sorrow, misinformation, confusion, a hostile environment, subjugation to others, deprivation of understanding, and capricious destiny, while expecting me to enjoy the life and to consider him-her-it good, kind, and loving? That irrational treatment is the most convincing, and for me the most legitimate reason to conclude the non-existence of any form of god.

WHITHER AWAY?

Where do we go from here? We are alone in an alien universe which is unthinkingly benign one moment and hostile the next. How do we cope with that? How do we live our lives while we are seemingly continuously on the edge of a precipice? How can we find satisfaction and contentment in an unpredictable world?

It is my observation that it is still worthwhile and most productive to live by some of the guidelines which have come from the world's religions. Not because we are commanded to do so, but because it makes good sense for useful, constructive interpersonal relationships, and for effectively dealing with life situations. As the saying goes “Don't throw out the baby with the bath water”. Being intelligent animals, we should allow ourselves to benefit from morally excellent ideas wherever they come from, even though no god sent them, but only because they developed out of the experiences of other human beings.

Most religions have some sort of statement of the “Golden Rule” The Christian statement, which is phrased positively is perhaps the best. It is “Do unto others as

you would have them do unto you”. I believe this makes good sense in most circumstances. Persons respond well generally to being treated well themselves. Putting someone in a pleasant mood usually disposes them favorably towards you. It is good basic psychology.

There is a statement by The Council For Secular Humanism which lists what I believe to be useful guidelines, and to which I subscribe. It is reproduced below, and I strongly recommend it

The Affirmations of Humanism:

A Statement of Principles*

We are committed to the application of reason and science to the understanding of the universe and to the solving of human problems.
We deplore efforts to denigrate human intelligence, to seek to explain the world in supernatural terms, and to look outside nature for salvation.
We believe that scientific discovery and technology can contribute to the betterment of human life.
We believe in an open and pluralistic society and that democracy is the best guarantee of protecting human rights from authoritarian elites and repressive majorities.
We are committed to the principle of the separation of church and state.
We cultivate the arts of negotiation and compromise as a means of resolving differences and achieving mutual understanding.
We are concerned with securing justice and fairness in society and with eliminating discrimination and intolerance.
We believe in supporting the disadvantaged and the handicapped so that they will be able to help themselves.
We attempt to transcend divisive parochial loyalties based on race, religion, gender, nationality, creed, class, sexual orientation, or ethnicity, and strive to work together for the common good of humanity.
We want to protect and enhance the earth, to preserve it for future generations, and to avoid inflicting needless suffering on other species.
We believe in enjoying life here and now and in developing our creative talents to their fullest.
We believe in the cultivation of moral excellence.
We respect the right to privacy. Mature adults should be allowed to fulfill their aspirations, to express their sexual preferences, to exercise reproductive freedom, to have access to comprehensive and informed health-care, and to die with dignity.
We believe in the common moral decencies: altruism, integrity, honesty, truthfulness, responsibility. Humanist ethics is amenable to critical, rational guidance.
There are normative standards that we discover together. Moral principles are tested by their consequences.
We are deeply concerned with the moral education of our children. We want to nourish reason and compassion.
We are engaged by the arts no less than by the sciences.
We are citizens of the universe and are excited by discoveries still to be made in the cosmos.
We are skeptical of untested claims to knowledge, and we are open to novel ideas and seek new departures in our thinking.
We affirm humanism as a realistic alternative to theologies of despair and ideologies of violence and as a source of rich personal significance and genuine satisfaction in the service to others.
We believe in optimism rather than pessimism, hope rather than despair, learning in the place of dogma, truth instead of ignorance, joy rather than guilt or sin, tolerance in the place of fear, love instead of hatred, compassion over selfishness, beauty instead of ugliness, and reason rather than blind faith or irrationality.
We believe in the fullest realization of the best and noblest that we are capable of as human beings.

*This is copied from the Website of the Council for Secular
Humanism, Amherst, NY

Whether or not one can agree with all of the positions expressed above, they are a good beginning point for evolving one's own ideas. That is what this whole effort is about. We, each of us, at all ages, accept and reject ideas which are continually presented to us. It is the way the human brain works. If there is anything lacking above, it is in not including in the acceptance of differences, the freedom of individuals to change their sexual identity both emotionally and physically, however they feel themselves to be. Indeed, recognizing that the transgender phenomenon exists normally in nature and accepting those who are dealing with the issue as normal and equal human beings, is only being fair. This sort of sexual expression should also be considered a right and freedom.

My consistent plea is that ideas should be based on fact and challenged reasonably, and accepted or rejected solely on the basis of their demonstrable validity. Think about it!!

RECONSTRUCTION

If there is no god, where does that leave us; what do we do now? Good question!! What do you want to do?

Basically, we do not do much differently than we have been doing. We will still be good, moral, caring persons living useful lives among friends. We can still enjoy sunsets and the beauties of the world. Music, the Arts, social activities and friends are still there. We are still free to follow our interests and enjoyments as long as they do not abridge the rights of others. We will still support good causes and conscientiously vote our mind. The things we do should not greatly change.

However, we may **feel** considerably different. If we have no one looking over our shoulder and judging us every second, perhaps we can be more relaxed and actually enjoy life more. Maybe we can take a new look at our life and make rational decisions about what things are in our best interest. Conceivably, we can take a new look at society and our friends and acquaintances to examine our relationships in an un-god-encumbered way. Possibly we can take a calmer, more thoughtful view of our life and our station in the universe. Perhaps we may even attain a serenity in our view of life and the life process.

Our only "religion" should be the belief in, and the trust in, the goodness of other rational, caring human beings. We are still impelled to be "good", since our society will turn on us and make us outcasts if we are not fair and honest in dealing with others.

Whatever we do, it should be in a rational and accepting manner. It does not make much difference whether we all think alike or not, only that we are interested in each other's ideas in the same way explorers are interested in what is over the next hill or around the next bend. Whether we agree with others or not, at least we can acknowledge their right to their ideas and they can be willing to tolerate ours. On a rational basis, we should always be looking for new truths, new ideas, and new discoveries. If we look at each other as meritorious human animals immersed in a fantastic world and dealing with common situations and problems, perchance we will have a new appreciation for each other.

Held by those common bonds, we should be able to live a good life and to enjoy our universe as much as possible. Also together, we may oppose and help to expose those meretricious, narrow minded individuals who would desire to deny our rights to live our lives in rational ways and in the manner we have determined to be best for ourselves. We might assist in denying the actions of those who would try to entrap our unsuspecting friends in closed-minded, mean schemes. In the best scenario, we may see the dawning of a new age of reason, wherein all persons can achieve their greatest potential, unencumbered by restrictive cultural ideas and predatory societies.

Is this too much to which we should aspire? Perhaps, but then high expectations at least do not get in the way of unexpected fortuitous advances. It reminds me of the fellow who applied for the position of librarian at a school. He had poor appearance, negligible language skills, and no training as a librarian. When asked why he was applying for the job he replied, "Rully I want ta be the janitor. I'm jest aimin' high ta hit low.~~

Let us aim as high as possible.

ADDENDUM - BON MOTS

These are my own original one-liners and other observations. They are included here for fun or intellectual stimulation, whichever comes first.

JDB

- * Meditation is a time of doing nothing, when it probably would be more useful to be doing something.
- * From time to time, from Sun to Sun, the World and you and I are one.
- * Life is a game we have to play, but we aren't given the rules till it's over.
- * The reason we are sometimes frustrated in an action, is to give ourselves a second chance at a decision.

- * By brute force and awkwardness, science triumphs again.
 - * If you find yourself in first class, act like you belong there.
 - * This life is punishment enough. There is no reward, only release.
 - * There are many questions which will never be answered; there are many more which will never even be asked.
 - * Don't blame god, it's doing all that is humanly possible.
 - * Life is easier to take if you just don't pay attention.
 - * We may be described by metaphors, but we do not become the metaphor.
 - * Nothing gets done until you stop making decisions and start acting.
 - * Ultimately, there is no defense against the truth.
 - * The trouble with reaching out to others is that you may get your hand slapped.
 - * Before you dig a hole, you have to know which end of the shovel to hold.
 - * The essential difference of Secular Humanism is that it based on fact, religions are based on faith and fancy.
 - * Religions are afflictions of the mind. Facts and Reason are the cures.
 - * Rely on science, people, serendipity and your own good sense. They are all there are to rely on.
 - * It is sad that most of the human race will never rise above its comforting mythologies and mentally debilitating religious beliefs to experience true freedom of the mind.
 - * Sometimes it is necessary to work inefficiently just to get anything done at all.
-
- * Modern Music has allowed people without good voices the opportunity to sing.
 - * Either lead, follow, or get the hell out of the way.
 - * The Human Race is so absorbed with doing things which do not matter, it cannot deal with the things which do matter.
 - * Triviality has become the norm for human activity.
 - * The most intelligent animal in the universe is intent upon destroying each other, its environment and itself.
 - * If you act like you know what you are doing, sometimes you can get away with it.

- * It is difficult to be objective because we are subjective oriented beings.
- * We should get Religion out of politics and reinstall Ethics and Morality.
- * Philosophy is the art of talking about unanswerable questions extensively and coming up with no answers.