



# HOUSTON FREETHOUGHT ALLIANCE

## Newsletter

### For the Humanist and Freethought Community

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#### Calendar of Events:

**Wednesday, August 1** | 7:00 pm - 10:00 pm | *North Houston Atheist Meetup* | Bennigan's Grill & Tavern at 4505 Fm 1960 Rd W | Social dinner with humanists and atheists on Houston's north side, first Wednesday monthly | Contact: [Nigel Bedrock](#)

**Sunday, August 5** | 10:30 am - 12:00 noon | *Coffee Social* | at Borders Books & Music in Meyerland Plaza (I-610 W Loop S at Beechnut) | Spontaneous informal discussions are held on first & third Sundays monthly | Contact: [Art Fay\\*](#)

**Sunday August 5** | 12:30 pm - 2:00 pm | *Humanists of Houston (HOH) Brunch* | Randall's 11041 Westheimer Road at Wilcrest (S.E. corner) | Topics chosen by the group are discussed on first Sunday monthly | Contact: [Daniel Strain\\*](#)

**Monday, Weekly** | 7:00 pm - 10:00 pm | *Freethought Forum* | Starbucks at Louetta and Kuykendahl | Freethinkers gathering socially to discuss current events and anything else on our minds | Contact: [Curt Loose\\*](#).

**Alternate Thursdays** | 11:45 am - 1:00 pm | *Hungry Heathens* | Lunch and informal discussions at various restaurants for those who have time on a weekday | Contact: [Art Fay\\*](#)

**Saturday, August 11** | 1:00 pm | *HAMCIAC Regular Meeting* | Montgomery Co. Library in the Woodlands (2nd floor) [From I-45 go west on Woodland Pkwy to 2nd traffic light; turn north (right) on Six Pines Dr; cross bridge & watch for wavy sculptures in the median; turn west (left) to Lake Robbins Rd; pass Woodlands Pavilion; turn left into Library parking lot] | Regular meetings are held on second Saturdays monthly | Contact: [Ross Henry\\*](#)

**Sunday, August 12** | 10:30 am -11:30 am with coffee available at 10:00 AM. | *Houston Church Of Freethought (HCOF) Service* | at the Holiday Inn which is located at 3131 West Loop (northbound just north of Richmond) | Services (including song, humor, lectures & discussion with children's classes & baby sitting available) are held on second Sundays monthly | Contact: [Art Fay\\*](#)

**Saturday, August 18** | 2:30 pm - 4:30 pm | *Humanists of Houston (HOH) Regular meeting* | in the Unitarian Fellowship hall at 1504 Wirt Rd Meetings are held on the third Saturday of each month | Contact: [Daniel Strain\\*](#)

**Sunday, August 19** | 10:30 am - 12:00 noon | *Coffee Social* | at Borders Books & Music in Meyerland Plaza (I-610 W Loop S at Beechnut) | Spontaneous informal discussions are held on first & third Sundays monthly | Contact: [Art Fay\\*](#)

**Thursday, August 22** | 6:00 pm | *Humanist Contemplatives Club* | Location varies. Please see the WEB site for information on our next session's location | Meet the fourth Thursday of the month | WEB site: <http://www.humanistsofhouston.org/contemplatives>

**Friday, August 24** | 5:00 pm | *Newsletter Deadline* | all articles, letters, and submissions of interest are welcome if on editor's desk, postmarks not withstanding (e-mail format required), | Contact: [Jim Knierien\\*](#)

**Saturday, August 25** 10:30 am - 12:00 noon | *Religion, Ethics, and Society Club* | At Dr Louis Daily's family house at 1506 North Boulevard. See HOH WEB site for directions | A moderated group discussion of Religion, Ethics, and Society. Meetings are held on the fourth Saturday monthly, Contact: [Marian Hillar\\*](#)

**Sunday, August 26** 10:30 am - 12:00 noon | *Ideas Club* | At Dr Louis Daily's family house at 1506 North Boulevard. See HOH WEB site for directions | Book reviews by members are held on fourth Sundays monthly, Contact: [Bob Finch\\*](#)

**Sunday, September 2** | 10:00 am - 12:00 noon | *Coffee Social* | at Borders Books & Music in Meyerland Plaza (I-610 W Loop S at Beechnut) | Spontaneous informal discussions are held on first & third Sundays monthly | Contact: [Art Fay\\*](#)

**Sunday, September 2** | 12:30 pm - 2:00 pm | *Humanists of Houston (HOH) Brunch* | Randall's employee training room 11041 Westheimer Road at Wilcrest (S.E. corner) | Topics chosen by the group are discussed on first Sundays monthly | Contact: [Daniel Strain\\*](#)

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Alliance member's reports:

## Houston Church of Freethought

The July service was held Sunday, July 8 at the Holiday Inn located at 3131 West Loop. The program was:

Opening

Presenter: Jim Ashmore

"The End of Days"

Presenter: CJ Renzi

Announcements

Presenter: Art Fay

Steven Pinker on "The Evolutionary Psychology of Religion"

Presenter: Art Fay

FTOTM: Ayaad Hirsi Ali & video

Presenter: Art Fay

Closing

Presenter: Anthony Stott

Our own C.J. Renzi made a most interesting presentation based on the book "The End of Days: Fundamentalism and the Struggle for the Temple Mount."

Also featured was a short video of Ayaad Hirsi Ali, the Islamic woman who wrote the script for the movie "Submission." Theo Van Gogh made the movie and was later murdered by Islamic extremists. The video is Hirsi Ali speaking to the national Press Club. She now is an atheist and explains why Islam and the West are not compatible, while making a firm distinction between Muslims and Islam.

Steven Pinker's complete essay on "The Evolutionary Psychology of Religion" may be found at:

[http://pinker.wjh.harvard.edu/articles/media/2004\\_10\\_29\\_religion.htm](http://pinker.wjh.harvard.edu/articles/media/2004_10_29_religion.htm)

## Humanists of Houston HOH REPORT

Here are **FOUR** major headlines everyone should know about HOH right now...

### 1) WHEN YOU GO SHOPPING

Those who are going grocery shopping this weekend, please don't forget to pick up just **one** extra can for the needy! We're asking everyone to make that a regular practice and bring them to the HOH Main Monthly Gatherings (3rd Saturday of each month, 1504 Wirt Road, Houston 77055, 2:30pm). We then donate these cans to the End Hunger Network.

### 2) GOOD WITH CHILDREN?

If you or someone you know of loves children and might be interested in being our Child Care Director, please let us know. Someone to watch children during our monthly gathering would make it easier for people with children to attend, so a baby sitter would do for now - but if they'd like to read to them and develop a program that's even better.

### 3) MEMBERS AND NON-MEMBERS: DO YOU KNOW YOUR OPTIONS?

We currently have a great number of people on our various contact lists and sites, but only 15% of them have actually become HOH members (this was 30% until a recent doubling of the size of our contacts). Your membership (very modest annual dues) would help us build a better community for Humanists in the Houston area and further Humanistic values locally. Please check out [www.humanistsofhouston.org/join.htm](http://www.humanistsofhouston.org/join.htm) to learn the ease and benefits of membership. **And for those who are already members:** becoming an *HOH Patron* is a manageable way to *greatly* increase our growth and projects. If you are already a member, please see [www.humanistsofhouston.org/patron.htm](http://www.humanistsofhouston.org/patron.htm) to learn how to become an *HOH Patron*. If you lack internet access, please call 832-778-7382 for more information.

### 4) SOCIAL CLUB TO EXPAND

The social aspect of HOH is crucial to building a fun and great freethought community in the Houston area, but it is an area in which HOH could use some expansion. We would like to expand the Social Club activities to include more things, more fun things, and things which are appealing to young adults - whether that be going out for drinks, dancing, live music, fun places and sites, or more. But to do this, we need some additional volunteers to help plan and organize these things! Please contact us at [www.humanistsofhouston.org](http://www.humanistsofhouston.org) or 832-778-7382 if you'd be interested in this!

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## The Religion, Ethics, and Society Club

Marion Hillar Reporting

At the August meeting which will be held Saturday August, 25 Tom Brucia will talk about William James' book "The Varieties of Religious Experience" It is a classic in psychological studies.

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## Ideas Club

Robert Finch Reporting

The meeting of the Ideas Club which was held on July 22<sup>nd</sup> was a meeting at which members had 5 – 10 minutes each to report on their own current reading.

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Eric Simon

We are sad to report that Eric Simon, a long time member of the Houston Freethought alliance community has died.

A Memorial service for Eric was held Sunday, June 24, at the Jewish Community Center 5601 S. Braeswood where several members of the alliance spoke.

Essays:

## Friedrich Nietzsche: *The Genealogy of Morals*.

### The Second Essay entitled “‘Guilt,’ ‘Bad Conscience’ and Related Matters.”

By Marian Hillar

In the second Essay of the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche attempts to describe the origin in the human psyche of “guilt” or “bad conscience” as an expression of moral rule, the evolution of punishment and its purpose and draws a far reaching conclusion about the consequences of these feelings.

The feeling of guilt derives, according to Nietzsche, from the faculty in humans which is to make promises but at the same time we have a defense mechanism, oblivion which operates by keeping clean our mental functions and clear and quiet our consciousness. Without it happiness or serenity may not be possible. This power, however, can be superseded by another which is remembering. The operation of remembering requires, however, learning to “calculate” by which Nietzsche understands making moral judgments.

And this is the generation of the faculty of responsibility. That is, the final step in the moral analysis or moral development of man. These two things are not clearly differentiated, nevertheless by achieving this man becomes an autonomous agent leaving behind the “straight jacket” of moral customs. Man then, according to Nietzsche, acquires freedom, a sense of power, and is burdened with a sense of responsibility. At the same time he inspires trust, fear, and reverence among his peers. The awareness of his responsibility man will call his conscience. Such a conclusion reminds us of the autonomous categorical imperative of Kant (1724-1804) by virtue of which humans become moral lawgivers and subject to their own law.

Now Nietzsche speculates on the mechanism of the development of this conscience. It has a long history of transformation. He links it with memory in the early stages of human development, with that that is painful: “A thing is branded on the memory to make it stay there; only what goes on hurting will stick.” Thus it was developed because of the experience of torture, sacrifice, and bloodshed, cruel religious rituals (which have their origin in the instinct that pain is the strongest factor to produce memory). Their purpose was moral teaching. Germany was not an exception in this past; nevertheless he places Germany as “one European nation among whom is still to be found a maximum of trust, seriousness, insipidity, and matter-of-factness, which should entitle us to breed a mandarin caste for all of Europe.”

In search for the origin of guilt or bad conscience, Nietzsche advises us to discard the approach done by other philosophers as useless, because they did not have a historical perspective. Just as previously he derived the concept of good and evil from the linguistic analysis, so now he refers to the moral term *Schuld* (=guilt) as derived from commercial term *Schulden* (=to be indebted). The feeling of guilt is thus a product of the oldest relationship between humans, that of “buyer and seller, creditor and debtor.” With this origin is linked the concept of punishment as compensation for the contractual relation between debtor and creditor. Damage produced by not keeping a contract results in a rage and for every damage some equivalent for compensation may be found, even in inflicting pain.

In older civilizations drastic pledges were made by the debtor in order to guarantee fulfillment of the promise. These

compensations were in the form of inflicting bodily harm through which the creditor, in place of material compensation such as land or money, was receiving pleasure. Later this punitive authority was passed on to the legal authority and the creditor then enjoyed seeing the debtor despised and mistreated.

Thus through such a process of contracts and legal obligations these moral concepts were developed: guilt, conscience, duty. And Nietzsche ponders that even not long ago the pain was brought to a level of apotheosis characterizing the whole history of higher culture, for example public celebrations associated with executions, tortures, *autos da fé*.

Now Nietzsche draws awkward conclusions that during the old times when inflicting pain was considered a pleasure, life was more enjoyable than today since people were not ashamed of their cruelty; today life is pessimistic. Moreover he suggests that then pain was not so hurtful as is today. He makes an assumption that even today pleasure exists in suffering in a sublimated form in imaginative or psychological terms. In the old days it was a spectacle which was not a senseless neither is it today. It is interesting that Nietzsche links with this ancient spectacle an invention of the gods – they would witness any unseen suffering, a spectacle edifying to the gods (e.g., the Trojan War and similar atrocities; or the heroism of Heracles and other Greek heroes). Here Nietzsche is quite on target anticipating modern psychological studies where the invention of gods is necessary for natural moral instincts (e.g., the study of Pascal Boyer). However, he stops short of taking this step and that constitutes a limitation of his take on the origin of morals.

He insists on the origin of morals as deriving from this “oldest and most primitive relationship between human beings, that of buyer and seller, creditor and debtor.” This is the basis of the social context of humans which is the essence of moral behavior. “Here, for the first time, the individual stood and measured himself against individual.” And Nietzsche summarizes his conclusions: “Here we find the oldest variety of human acuteness, as well as the first indication of human pride, of superiority over other animals ... man saw himself as the being that measures values, the ‘assaying’ animal. Purchase and sale, together with their psychological trappings, antedate even the rudiments of social organization and covenants. From its rudimentary manifestation of interpersonal law, the incipient sense of barter, contract, guilt, right, obligation, and compensation was projected onto the crudest communal complexes (and their relations to such complexes) together with the habit of measuring power against power.” The other direction led humans through grand generalizations to postulation of “the oldest and naïvest moral canons of justice, of all ‘fair play,’ ‘good will,’ and ‘objectivity.’”

In the next parts of his essay Nietzsche now approaches the problem of how punishment evolved in society. In the early society, a debtor who lived in a group enjoyed the privileges associated with this membership. When he broke the contract, he at the same time broke his pledge to the group and forfeited all the benefits and amenities of the community. His infraction produced the rage of the creditor, rejection from the community and thus every kind of hostility could be applied to him. The punishment

mimicked the attitude toward a conquered and hated enemy. When the societies grew in wealth and power, the situation changed – the offender no longer represented a danger and his treatment became more lenient, rules were introduced which led to the development of the penal code, justice, and its self-canceling mechanism called *mercy*.

Other philosophers attempted to trace the source of justice to other sources. Nietzsche strongly opposes the view of E. K. Dühring (1883-1921) who proposed as the source of justice reactive emotions. “The doctrine of vengeance is the red thread that runs through my entire investigation of justice.” On the contrary, says Nietzsche, the just man remains just even under the stress of harm done to him and will not seek vengeance. And he supports his point by a historical argument. Laws were developed just in order to regulate the senseless rage of rancor. Only with the establishment of laws can one talk of “right” and “wrong.” He maintains that from the biological point of view a legal system is an exceptional condition, since it limits the natural life-will acting in the direction of power, but which must serve, in the final analysis, the collective purpose. Thus it is only an instrument which regulates the struggle for power complexes in the society of individuals. In this statement, Nietzsche also rejects the notion of Dühring which he considers a communist cliché that “every will must regard every other will as its equal” as demoralization.

Another problem associated with punishment is the origin of the purpose of punishment. Nietzsche takes quite a Darwinian perspective denying any purpose or goal in the cultural or biological evolution of “a thing, custom, an organ.” He postulates instead that “it is a sequence of more or less profound, more or less independent processes of appropriation, including the resistances used in each instance, the attempted translocations for purposes of defense or reaction, as well as the results of successful counterattacks.” In the final analysis Nietzsche clings to his concept of progression in the form of the will tending toward “greater power” and at the expense of “lesser powers.” It does not seem, however, that he advocates the Spencerian view of society rather, he expresses the role of a psychic trait, *activity* in contrast to mere reactivity which is a passive trait which he labels as *adaptation*.

The meaning and purpose of punishment underwent various changes in history and in various societies. Nietzsche gives a long list of such meanings emphasizing their utilitarian purpose: punishment as “rendering the offender harmless and preventing his doing further damage;” as “the payment of damages to the injured party;” as “isolating of a desequilibrating agent;” as “a means of inspiring fear;” as “the elimination of a degenerate element;” as “a means of creating memory;” as “a ‘triumph,’ that is, the violating and deriding of an enemy finally subdued;” as “a compromise with a traditional vendetta;” as “a declaration of war.” In popular minds punishment is supposed to create “remorse” or “pangs of conscience.” He strongly opposes this use of punishment. On the contrary, All conscientious observers agree that “punishment hardens and freezes; it concentrates; it sharpens the sense of alienation; it strengthens resistance.” Moreover, as Nietzsche brilliantly observed, those who are victims of the punitive authority are prevented from regarding their own deeds as intrinsically evil when they see that “the very same actions performed in the service of justice with a perfectly clear conscience and general approbation: spying, setting traps, outsmarting, bribing, the whole tricky, cunning system which chiefs of police, prosecutors, and informers have developed among themselves; not to mention the cold-blooded legal practices of despoiling, insulting, torturing, and murdering the

victims.” In the final analysis Nietzsche postulates that man can be *tamed* by punishment, but not *improved*.

As to the origin of “bad conscience” Nietzsche suggests the transformation in human psyche when he developed a “polity.” With time and due to this transformation man became a sociable and pacific creature. Nietzsche emphasizes that this transformation was so profound and pregnant with possibility that it required “a divine audience”- whether it be called Zeus or Chance – to justify it. Man, therefore, invented divinity. Here Nietzsche brilliantly anticipates modern psychological and anthropological studies which demonstrate that one source of religion is the natural moral faculty of man. This transformation was not a gradual or voluntary process; it was an act of violence by which a race of conquerors organized for war organized others and fiercely dominated them. Then old instincts adapted to wilderness, war, and free roaming were not allowed free play and turned inward, becoming internalized. With it also punishment was developed as a means of protection of the “polity” against ancient instincts of freedom. Man turned against himself those tendencies to “hostility, cruelty, the delight in persecution, raids, excitement, and destruction.” This led to the invention of “bad conscience” which Nietzsche describes as “a disastrous malady,” “man’s sickness of himself,” and “the declaration of war against old instincts.” And he says “In its earliest phase a bad conscience is nothing other than the instinct of freedom forced to become latent, driven underground, and forced to vent its energy upon itself.” This phenomenon of formation of the “bad conscience,” though ugly and painful, created “beauty,” “selflessness, self-denial, self-sacrifice.” “A bad conscience, the desire for self-motivation, is the wellspring of all altruistic values.”

The relationship between debtor and creditor was projected into another context, namely into the relationship between living and the forebears. This obligation felt toward the forebears seems to be a juridical one instead of an emotional one which is rather a new acquisition. Early societies felt that they could survive only because of the sacrifices of the earlier generations, so they had to repay the debt by burnt offerings, rituals, shrines, and obedience to them. But the doubt about the repayment grew with the success of the tribe leading eventually to the necessity of a grand act of repayment (redemption) in the sacrifice of the first-born or other form of human blood. Ancestors slowly became so powerful that they were turned into divinities – “all gods have arisen out of fear.” And this is the second source of religion anticipated by Nietzsche. This sense of indebtedness to gods and desire to make final restitution grew through the centuries with an evolution of the concepts about the deity. And when combined with despotism it led to a form of monotheism. It ended up in Christianity with a paradoxical and ghastly sacrifice – “god’s sacrifice of himself for humanity;” “the creditor offers himself as a sacrifice for his debtor out of sheer love (can you believe it?), out of love for his debtor ...” The invention of religion serves to exacerbate man’s self-torment, the projection of his denials of self as embodiment, as true reality, as god, as transcendence, endless guilt and punishment. And Nietzsche calls it “sickness, the most terrible sickness that has wasted man thus far.” And he contrasts this image of deity with the image of Greek divinities. Homeric Zeus spoke thus of humans: “How strange that the mortals complain so loudly of us gods! They claim that we are responsible for all their evils. But they are the ones who create their own misery, by their folly, even in the teeth of fate.” To explain the foolishness of one of their members, Greeks would explain: “Well, he must have been deluded by a god.” It resonates like Dawkins’s “Religion is the source of all evil.” Nowadays there is a steady decline in the belief in a Christian god in the western world – does it mean that

the growth of atheism will lead to a decline in man's guilt consciousness? - asks Nietzsche. Perhaps breaking of an altar requires raising another one.

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Eugen Karl Dühring, *The Value of Existence, A course in Philosophy, (Der Werth des Lebens; eine Denkerbetrachtung im sinne heroischer Lebensauffassung)*, O.R. Reiland, Leipzig, 1922.

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# Research Project: Search for the Good

## Part 5; Subjectivity and Objectivity in Ethics

By Robert D. Finch

In the last installment of this series we discussed the topic of values. Hume and his followers, including Bentham, the Mills (father and son) Sidgwick and many others through to our contemporary Peter Singer have continued to explore the plethora of value systems which have been created. John Stuart Mill for instance wrote a celebrated essay on liberty. Karl Popper stated that rationality is the first requirement for ethics. Other philosophers have advocated systems based on laws or on equality. We pointed out that with these many different values which might be adopted, problems arise when different courses of action are indicated by different systems. One person might stress the importance of truth while another might emphasize compassion. Somebody might value freedom greatly but also feel an obligation to show benevolence to the poor. How are conflicts of this sort to be resolved? We pointed out that Kidder suggested that we must re-examine the applicability of the principles in these circumstances. For example one might substitute a new ethic of responsibility that includes caring for both the indigent as well as ourselves. Sidgwick advocated a two-value system which was a combination of benevolence and excellence. In that case we might convince ourselves that we cannot be truly happy while others are suffering. Hume himself used the term "utility" as a generic expression for the overall measure of a person's needs and then extended the idea to cover the desires of a group of people. In architecture the call of aesthetics has to be counterbalanced by the demands of science. In these cases we have adopted multi-valued or pluralist systems. Engineering design is a discipline in which different values are sometimes translated to a level of mathematical precision through a process referred to as optimization. Design engineers talk about "maximizing a utility function" in this exercise. In politics we often refer to "democracy" as the over-riding requirement but if this concept is examined we discover that it actually embodies a number of values.

But there is a more fundamental problem with the theory than even these difficulties with multiple values. In its modern guise the problem started with the writings of Immanuel Kant, but as Dewey and others have pointed out it really goes all the way back to Plato. The problem is that according to this school of philosophers from Plato to Kant at least some values are objective. The claim of objectivity in ethics is still being made by authors such as Pojman (1990) in "Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong". But Mackie (1977) in his book "Ethics: Inventing Right

and Wrong" claims that there are no objective ethics and has written an extensive explanation of why this is to be believed. Plato maintained that every word we use has an essential meaning which has an objective existence. This applies to tangible things such as "chair" and "table" as well as intangibles such as "good". It was Kant who introduced the term "imperative" into ethics. Kant explained that some imperatives were "hypothetical", meaning that they were conditional (if...then...), whereas others were "categorical", meaning that they were unconditional, the same for everyone at all times and in all places. Like Rumpole's wife categorical imperatives must be obeyed. Mackie points out that what he terms first order ethical judgments assert that actions are right or wrong, or distinguish between good and bad characters or propound broad principles from which detailed judgments can be inferred. Second order statements tell us what is going on when first order statements are made (e.g. is the first order statement a discovery or a decision or does it tell us how we think or reason or does it express a view on the meaning of the statement). The first part of Mackie's book is devoted to a second order discussion of the status of ethics. Some philosophers call this sort of thing meta-ethics. He gets to the first order review of the contents of ethics in the second part of the book and to the frontiers of how psychology, metaphysics, theology, law and political theory bear on ethics and vice-versa in the third part.

Mackie goes through a great deal of argumentation to make his points. He deals with a couple of potential distractions as a preliminary. One of these is a possible misunderstanding which might arise concerning standards of evaluation. It is a fact that there are objective standards of evaluation, but this does not mean that values themselves are objective. For instance it is deemed that justice is a value and in its service penalties may be meted out by law. The penalties can be specified and measured objectively. Whether or not justice has been done in such a case is a subjective judgment but the length of a prison sentence can be determined objectively. Another potential confusion arises from "intersubjectivity". Because a group of people share the same values does not mean that the values are objective. For example a group of children may prefer to play rather than learn arithmetic but this does not represent an objective determination of the superiority of play to education.

This finally brings us to Mackie's main arguments against objective values. The first argument comes from relativity: moral

codes vary from society to society and from period to period. There appears to be some societal influence over peoples' beliefs. Mackie cites monogamy as an example of this. People tend to approve of monogamy because they have a monogamous way of life, rather than having a monogamous way of life because they approve of monogamy. The second type of argument against the objectivity of morals comes from queerness. As Mackie says, if there were objective values they would have to be utterly different from anything else in the universe. They would have to resemble Plato's forms, e.g. like the form of the good. Such a form would have to entail both proscriptivity and an overriding motive. We would have to have a special faculty of intuition or moral perception completely different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else. Mackie asks how these moral qualities could be linked to the natural features of an action. Consider an act of deliberate, wanton cruelty. The cruelty is not a physical quantity: it has no mass, no energy, no smell, so how is it manifested and transmitted and what is its relationship to the form which is supposed to have been at its origination? The answer has to be that the cruelty is perceived as part of our subjective, mental evaluation of the act. Mackie's final argument against objectivity is that it is possible to explain why people would have come to suppose it to be the case.

If morality is subjective and not objective then we are on our own as regards directing our behavior. One response to this is found in the British tradition starting with Hobbes and Hume and continuing with Bentham, Mills and Sidgwick. This approach could be termed systems theoretic ethics because it proposes that our morality is comprised of various values, rules and principals which are empirically evaluated and developed in an evolutionary manner. Dewey contributed to this by drawing parallels between ethics and technology and Mackie built on the analogy in the subtitle of his book when he inferred that ethics was "inventing right and wrong". Pojman reacted to it in his title when he claimed that ethics was the discovery of right and wrong. The existentialist tradition which arose from the work of Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Kirkegard follows somewhat similar lines but puts some emphasis on the absence of a God, who Nietzsche famously proclaimed to be dead. With the later existentialists Sartre and Camus it became clear that the movement was developing a humanistic strain with an emphasis on literary expression and social responsibility. In a recent review of Existentialism Flynn (2006) sums it up by saying that knowledge was decidedly seen to be found in life and human experience. We have turned the circle back to Hume.

Another related discussion revolves around the question of whether ethics is a science or a praxis. The issue of the science of artificial or man-made things has been explored by Herbert Simon (1981). He argues that natural science results from discovery of the laws of nature whereas in engineering science knowledge is accumulated as a result of practice and falls into the realm of system theory. The content of both natural and engineering science is objective i.e. in both cases the propositions and deductions are available for inspection by the general public. But we distinguish between engineering and natural science by pointing out that in the former evaluation is done by comparing results with subjective emotions and values, while in the latter the comparison is with external sense data. Sidgwick argued that ethics is a science and that therefore values are objective. Mackie (1977) disagreed with Sidgwick and I offer this distinction between engineering and natural science as a way of concurring with Sidgwick that Ethics is a science and objective, while maintaining with Mackie, that values and the underlying emotions themselves are subjective. There is an interesting biography of

Sidgwick in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2006) in which his approach is reckoned to be closer to Aristotle's than the utilitarians because he claims that we have to "consider simply what conclusions will be rationally reached if we start with certain ethical premises". In other places he affirms his commitment to utilitarianism. Dewey was the first to point out the close relationship between ethics and technology and the comparison enables us to realize that ethical systems must be evaluated on their consequences, just as engineering practices are assessed. Just as different engineering techniques are applicable in different circumstances so are ethics "situational".

The distinction between subjective and objective has been used by Barnhart (2005) as a departure for some interesting ethical observations. If there were a conscious creator of the universe who somehow revealed moral laws, then Barnhart argues they could well be regarded as subjective. Calvinists believe everything, including morality flows from God's desires. In Barnhart's phrase "Ethics has subjective roots". Conflict comes about because different people have different desires. We learn that we have to cooperate to achieve our desires: and that is an objective fact. Barnhart thus argues that "oughtness" is objective. This then is the basis for viewing ethical systems as objective knowledge and an objective basis for our duty to follow its prescriptions. However, the existence of what Barnhart objective and subjective poles in ethics does not mean that our morals can be derived from the facts of the natural environment. There is in fact no way of deducing "ought" from "is" as G.E. Moore famously put it. In the next installment we shall see that certain rules of behavior are so advantageous that nature found a way around Moore's dictum.

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- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2006), Henry Sidgwick. See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sidgwick>

# Ron's Ramblings

By Ron Titus

[1] I saw Michael Moore's film "Sicko".

The film was supposed to be an attack on the horrendous healthcare system in the USA, but I found it more of an attack on the capitalist system as practiced in the USA (where seemingly everything costs money) as opposed to various socialist systems as presently practiced in many countries in the other parts of the world.

It had an effect (good, I think) on me: I am henceforth more aware that I myself am a capitalist in mind, and a socialist in "heart".

But I am not just a capitalist, I am a RICH capitalist. I have believed for some time now that rich people hate poor people, which means that I myself at least unconsciously hate poor people. To offset this, I remind myself that the earth doesn't belong to me, but rather: I belong to the earth! More on this later as I continue to evolve to I-don't-know-where.

[2] True democracy cannot happen by coercion from without, but only by consent from within. The USA has a history of intolerance for the free elections in foreign countries, particularly when that country has natural resources that the US wants or is a location for US military bases. So, what happens when a people democratically vote FOR a socialist form of government?

[3] After an HCOF (Houston Church Of Freethought) service, I asked Ariel Thomann for his take (comments) on violence. When is "turn the other cheek" appropriate/inappropriate for a humanist? He repeated what he learned from his son when his son was taking karate lessons:

The martial arts program director began with exercises in yoga & self-control. His conclusions: (1) When confronted, use reason. (2) When threatened, flee. (3) When cornered, kill.

(Ouch!)

[4] I got an invitation from a long-time theist friend to make a "retreat". He has been trying to get me back "into the fold" of the RCC (Roman Catholic Church) ever since he learned of my atheist convictions publicly shared several years back. I accepted the invitation because I suspect that I wanted to prove to myself and to him that I am open-minded and not afraid of being immersed "in the truth". I wanted to walk into a lions' den, and to walk out unscathed.

In general, RCC retreats are timeouts from daily routines to get in touch with the more serious purposes of life (eternal destiny). (Non-Catholics have retreats too, but may differ in direction and/or focus.) The intention of RCC retreats is to achieve or improve a relationship with "God". To facilitate this in "silent" retreats, retreatants are asked to refrain from speaking to one another and encouraged to speak "round the clock" to God. (St Therese of Lisieux defined prayer as "talking to God" and is a basic expression of a theistic religion.) Some modern retreats allow and even encourage conversing among the participants, which may include both males and females.

The retreat that I attended was held in another state, a "silent" one, and for about 40 adult males. I wanted to respect and love the people involved, but in the spirit of Sam Harris, I no longer can respect what is blatantly irrational. My personal challenge, therefore, was to be at once both compassionate and honest, have both an open mind and a closed mouth. The strongly suggested silence norm made keeping my mouth shut less difficult.

The RCC's Second Vatican Council (mid 1960s) called for an ongoing reform of all church norms, policies, and practices. It seems to me that the recent leadership of the RCC (Popes Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI) has been trying to "turn back the clock" and return to PRE-Vatican II norms, policies, and practices. "Blessed are the control freaks, for they shall inhibit the earth."

The retreat too seemed to be following in these footsteps. All the materials (printed and oral) suggested sustaining and even promoting a lot of what I perceive as offensive: thought control, members behaving as uneducated sheep, and missing all kinds of opportunities to teach and update.

In a ghetto situation, inhabitants are not allowed to communicate with people outside of the ghetto. In a retreat situation, retreatants are not allowed to communicate even with others INSIDE the retreat community. This is very much like the blind faith and blind obedience practiced in most military systems, which many of you know I oppose because they run counter to thinking, individual decision-making, and personal responsibility.

Noteworthy to me were these quotes by the Retreat Master who, without intentional malice, said: "Think of how peaceful it is to be with God' when you are in a blind waiting for the approach of a deer". "Trust in God's love. If a meteor strikes, nothing will matter." "Does Heaven exist? If God can create a universe, then He certainly can create a Heaven." (This reminded me of the Islamic Koran's proof for the existence of an afterlife judgment: "Doesn't the sun come up in the morning and doesn't the sun set in the evening?")

Checking through the book store, I perused *The Humility of God: A Franciscan Perspective*. I concluded that God has been described unwittingly as arrogant, jealous, threatening (and therefore threatened and fearful), pompous, etc. Yes, God has been described otherwise, but that only substantiates that the Biblical God is a composite of opposing attributes.

What came as a pleasant surprise to me was the retreatants' sense of humor; they all laughed at the retreat directors' introductory jokes. The one that I remember: Voices are heard off shore in a dens fog:  
"Ahoy! Move to your right."  
"No, move to YOUR right."  
"This is a battleship. Move to your right."  
"I am not moving. You move to YOUR right."  
"This a battleship of the United States Navy. MOVE TO YOUR RIGHT!"  
"This is a light house. Your call."

While driving home from the retreat, I found that 99 percent of the FM radio stations were pushing some form of religious (Christian) theism. If I had kept a written tab, I suspect that it would have been closer to 100 percent. I found it ironic that theists complain about atheists' "corrupting the world by controlling/monopolizing our airwaves".

The greater the distance I place between myself and my former stumping grounds (the RCC) the more ridiculous my former life and beliefs seem to me to be.

[5] A note to new readers and a reminder to you more seasoned readers: Not all humanists are atheists and not all atheists are humanists. In an effort to push humanism as distinguished from atheism, again I suggest that a humanist pushes honesty and justice while an atheist does not necessarily. It's not easy by a long shot, but is indeed challenging. Which is better? Honesty at the expense of compassion? or compassion at the expense of honesty? Humanism at the expense of one's life? Or one's life at the expense of humanism? Your call.

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## Food for thought and/or thought for indigestion

By Ron Titus

[1] "The man who doesn't read good books has no advantage over the man who can't read them."

[Mark Twain, quoted in the *Lowell MA Sun* and requoted in *The Week*, 2007 0525, P21]

[2] "A little learning is a dangerous thing."

[[Alexander Pope](#), An Essay on Criticism (poem written in 1711), *Writer's Almanac*]

[3] "To err is human, to forgive, divine."

[*ibid*]

[4] "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread."

[*ibid*]

[5] A fine is a tax for doing wrong. A tax is a fine for doing well.

[email from Ron Jones, 2007 0624]

[6] "If we can pay to have people killed (in wars) then we can pay for peoples' health care."

[Michael Moore, movie "Sicko", email from Jimmy Dunne, 2007 0704]

[7] "It always amazes me that we warn our kids to beware of strangers, when more than 90 percent of sexual abuse is perpetrated by family members."

[Tai Mendenhall PhD, "Crisis Land", *Psychotherapy Networker*, 2007 05/06, P 37]

[8] As the historian Stephen Henry Roberts (1901-71) once said: "I contend that we are both atheists. I just believe in one fewer god than you do. When you understand why you dismiss all the other possible gods, you will understand why I dismiss yours."

[Sam Harris, "10 myths and 10 truths about atheism", *The Los Angeles Times*, 2006 1224, email from Jimmy Dunne, 2007 0617]

[9] A superstition is a premature explanation that overstays its time.

[George Iles, quoted in *Book Reporter* and requoted in *The Week*, 2007 0525, P21]

[10] As a super class of politicized ideologues capture the Federal Government bureaucracy and alienate ever larger groups of people, it is inevitable that the United States – like most other nations – will become a nation where most people simply 'blow off' the rule of law as a simple front for the untrammelled exercise of power. The 'man in the street' doesn't rebel against laws. He simply disregards them and hopes he won't get caught.

The super wealthy, once they have bought control of the government apparatus, may find – as in most other nations – that they control an apparatus that doesn't control very much. In short, the Brazilian model may prove prophetic. Small numbers of very wealthy people huddle in walled

enclaves patrolled by private security people, and shuttled around in armored cars and private helicopters, in fear of the citizenry. (Hmmm, in a worst case scenario, perhaps the future will be more like that of Iraq, where the government hides in a Green Zone, while 'real life' takes place in the real world, aka The Red Zone'.) The future promises to be an interesting case study in evolution.

Those of us who wish for a nation of relatively equal citizens governed by relatively uncorrupted officials in a relatively peaceful environment where 'the average guy' has a relatively close relationship with other folks living in the same nation may be in for a disappointment. America's not going that way. A time may be coming for folks to imitate their forerunners and 'move on'. The future will tell. Indeed, we ARE all 'falling through time' and – despite all the rhetoric – America is proving to NOT be unique. It seems to simply be going through the same birth pangs that brought plutocracy and fascism to other nations – but a bit later than them. I offer these thoughts for those who (seem) to have an unsupported and empirically suspect faith (yes, faith) that 'America is different.' We shall see if that faith, like most, is simply an edifice built on hot air and wishful thinking.

[Tom Brucia, HOH Roundtable, 2007 0626]

[11] The premise of our action was the strongly held view within certain precincts of the White House that the president and those functioning on his behalf could carry out illegal acts with impunity if they were convinced that the nation's security demanded it. As President Nixon himself said to David Frost during an interview six years later, "When the president does it, that means it is not illegal." To this day the implications of this statement are staggering.

[Egil Krogh, "The Break-In That History Forgot", *The New York Times*, 2007 0607, email from John McGee, 2007 0630]

[12] Nothing is foolproof, except the White House.

[13] Alan Bates said "Belief is hanging on and faith is letting go". I extrapolate: Belief is hanging on to reason & rationality and faith is letting go of reason & rationality.

[14] Beliefs/conclusions are changed by thinking. Believing without thinking is faith. Faith therefore is believing without thinking.

[15] "Don't worry about the world coming to an end today. It's already tomorrow in Australia."

[Charles Schultz, creator of "Peanuts" (cartoon comic strip), email from Joan Howard, 2007 0713]

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# Graduation Prayer Report

By Joe Zamecki

Texas State Director, American Atheists, Austin, TX

[www.atheists.org/tx](http://www.atheists.org/tx)

I just sat through the first 20 minutes of the Round Rock High School graduation ceremony at the Frank Erwin Center in Austin. Here is my report:

A prayer was said to "God" and the word "God" was only mentioned once in the prayer, though the entire prayer was directed to "God" from everyone in attendance, or at least that was the implication from the wording of the prayer. It was "God" help us be strong and brave in the face of adversity...etc. It lasted about 40 seconds and was thoroughly offensive to me. All kinds of secular concepts were attributed to the universal control of that "God," as if no one there could possibly have graduated from that public school without being a devout Christian.

No one disrupted that I could hear, and it took great strength for me not to disrupt.

I got a graduation program and it doesn't mention the prayer. Instead it says "Our Thanks, Tulsu Gajera, Student Council Treasurer." That's the person who said the prayer. I suspect that the reason it was called "Our Thanks" instead of "Benediction" is that the vote over whether to have the prayer or not happened well after the programs were designed and printed. (3 of the 4 high schools' seniors voted to have the prayers at their graduations. None of the votes were landslides.)

I also don't like prayers to flags, which they also had in the form of the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag. Also before that, the school band played one stanza from America the Beautiful. Ugh.

I've attended several graduation ceremonies, only two of which directly involved me, and every time I go to one, I am made to feel like a total alien, a foreigner in someone else's land. It's hard to think of America being for the free after that. All because of someone's religion being injected into what should be a secular graduation for a secular public school.

One interesting note was that at least 150 of the graduates' chairs went unoccupied well into the ceremony. I theorize that some of them couldn't make it, didn't care, or were boycotting over the prayer. I thought of lots of good reasons to not attend one's own graduation, and it reminds me that those who didn't show up didn't get to make their views known there and then. That works and worked out fine for the religion pushers in public schools. Religion is a way to segregate people with the effectiveness of a criminal law. It's not 100% effective every time, but it sure seems that way.

I hope we as a movement learn something from each of these religious public school situations. I've learned that in public schools, where democracy doesn't normally exist, it doesn't work there either. Today's prayer pushing faculties were once students themselves, so there's no sense in expecting fairness out of either, just because of some silly election scheme.

Christianity will shove itself in where it doesn't belong, honesty be damned. It's no mistake that there's no commandment that says "Thou shalt not lie."

Other than that, it's a beautiful rainy day in Austin! :o)

If you'd like to help me with Atheist activism in Texas, please contact me!

## About the Houston Humanist Alliance:

The *Houston Freethought Alliance* is a collection of local humanist and freethought organizations in Houston, which have come together to provide a wider range of services, information, and activities to their members. While still separated in their membership, leadership, and schedules, member-organizations of the *Alliance* share the same newsletter and mailing lists. This allows our organizations to cooperate effectively and enables individual members to be kept informed of virtually all activities of interests to Freethinkers in the Houston area.

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## Publisher:

[1] The Houston Freethought Alliance Newsletter (HFA NL) is published monthly by the Houston Humanist Alliance (HFA).

[2] The purpose of the HFA NL is (1) publicizing events, i.e., keeping members informed of regularly and specially scheduled meetings, (2) providing for the public at large information about humanism and humanist thought, and (3) providing a platform for members to express their viewpoints and opinions.

[3] The HFA and the editor do not necessarily agree with nor endorse the views expressed herein. Many humanists and freethinkers pride themselves with being individuals. Consensus among Humanists is therefore difficult to achieve. No one humanist can speak for all other humanists.

[4] Anyone may quote from the newsletter but is asked to please give credit where credit is due, i.e., cite author, newsletter issue (number or date), & page.

[5] All articles, letters, and submissions of interest are welcome if on editor's desk by deadline (12:00 noon on the 15th of each month), postmarks not withstanding. E-mail format required. <mailto:Jim.Knierien@thermo.com> Name, phone number, & street address required for editorial contact purposes only.

[6] The editor reserves the right to edit all submissions for space or clarity, but never with the intent to alter the thrust of the author.

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## Explanation of iih symbol:

The ii of the iih represents two or more people. The h of the iih represents the humanness to which they aspire. A lower case h is used instead of an upper case H to indicate that it is better to become human (as opposed to inhuman) than it is to join a Humanist organization.

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### Membership and Contact Information:

Whether you are a Humanist, atheist, or Freethinker seeking to pursue a meaningful life without theism, or simply reexamining your beliefs and exploring the Freethought approach to knowledge and moral issues, consider contacting one of our organizations. We will be happy to answer any questions about Freethought, Humanism, or atheism.

Humanists of Houston (HOH): Houston chapter of the American Humanist Association (AHA) / Founded 1978 / Daniel Strain <mailto:dtstrain@yahoo.com>

Humanist Association of Montgomery County, Isaac Asimov Chapter (Asimov Humanists): Montgomery County chapter of the American Humanist Association / Ross Henry <mailto:rosshenry@mac.com>

*Houston Church Of Freethought (HCOF)* / Art Fay <mailto:afay3@houston.rr.com>.

Houston Atheists Meetup Group. Meets at least twice a month (once in central Houston and once in North Houston) to discuss the issues of the day and how they affect nonbelievers. / Nigel Bedrock [mailto:nige\\_the\\_atheist@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:nige_the_atheist@yahoo.co.uk)

### Statement of Principles:

*The following are the core principles upon which our member-organizations are allied. Individual member-organizations may have missions beyond the scope of the Alliance itself, but any Houston-based group whose mission is compatible with these principles is welcome to join our community of organizations.*

We are committed to freedom of thought and expression, as well as human rights and equality.

Our beliefs are based on healthy skepticism, physical evidence, the scientific method, and naturalistic philosophy - unfettered by faith, mysticism, the supernatural, or any other form of superstition.

We stand for the pursuit of moral excellence, ethical integrity, and social responsibility based on humanity's needs and happiness in *this* world and not in an alleged "after life."