

Dangerous beliefs

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Good evening, everybody! Thank you, David for inviting me to come to the Sea of Faith. As I have been asked to speak as a Humanist, I should explain that I have not consulted my fellow Humanists about it. This train of thought and opinion is my own, and any freethinker worth her salt would find points of disagreement with it. It started as a reflexion on the books of ‘new atheism’ which led me to feel they were somewhat misguided.

Let me start with a summary of what I’ll be saying. I assume the *thesis* of the ‘new atheists’ and the *antithesis* of the christian critics, and will essay a *synthesis* comprised of what I might call ‘incidental atheism’. After a thumbnail sketch of Humanism I’ll consider the nature of beliefs, and ask what makes a belief dangerous, with particular reference to metaphysical belief. There will be a short digression on meaning, to detach the meaning of life from religion. I’ll then suggest that danger is sufficient justification for criticizing someone’s belief. Three sources of zealotry will be considered, evangelical Christianity, militant Islam and new atheism. I’ll recommend dispute resolution between secular and religious interests. The key wisdom is to engage in dialog with those we have to live with and to negotiate a reduction of the harm caused by acting on dangerous beliefs. Considering the impact of religious schooling on civic health I’ll indicate where suffering could be alleviated, and finish on a note of Humanist optimism. I will try to avoid over-generalizing but, if I am guilty of it, please point it out in discussion later.

‘I’m a human being, and nothing human is alien to me.’ So wrote Terence, the ancient comic playwright who was previously a slave. Humanism shares that ‘universal’ sympathy and acknowledges an inclusive imperative. Humanists are freethinkers who identify with no tribe and set their face against racism. The *faith* of a Humanist is a confident acceptance of the human condition: it is not a faith that transcends humanity. We agree with Ludwig Feuerbach that divinity is an idea or ideal that was dreamt up by humans, not that humans were created by a god in his own image. Humanists are secularists and not attracted to theism, but a few might hold private devotions of a vestigial, spiritual kind. Some are refugees from church.

Today we admire the march of modern science. As science progressively reveals to us the workings of nature, the suggestion arises that we are getting closer to nature's reality. Once people comprehend that they don't have to pray hard for the Sun to rise each day, they can dissociate from the phenomenon and accord it objective reality. If we were muscular christians, on the other hand, we would climb up a mountain, and feel that the expanded horizon was closer to god's view and so we had come closer to god. These metaphysical interpretations of experience – nature and god – seem to be a matter of upbringing or personal taste; and *de gustibus non disputandum*.

Beliefs, now.

Humans by nature strive to make sense of their world, to generalize their immediate experience, partly as an aid to memory. The restless mind spins the yarns, out of which the imaginative and rational faculties fashion beliefs. Beliefs range in kind from expressive, habitual attitudes to cognitive propositions. Examples would be, on the one hand, a tribesman expressing tribal loyalty or a gambler's self-confidence expressed in his demeanour; and, on the other hand, a statement of fact, like 'this house is infested with termites'. In between, there are policies for action, like 'giving up alcohol would be good for me', rationalizations following action, like 'the man deserved to die', and opinions, like 'climate change is caused by human activity'. Only clearly defined propositions can be assigned absolute truth or falsehood – and I pass over them here. The other beliefs will feel true enough to the believer, usually being backed by some previous experience, and may be judged by an observer (whether well informed or not) to be more, or less, appropriate or delusional.

Every belief purports to represent reality – as Sam Harris points out – to some degree or other. The deliberate thinking-thru and interconnection of beliefs is more of an art than a science. But science does generate beliefs, such as working hypotheses about a definite physical system, current paradigms and adjudged policies of investigation; while the general belief that the universe is a single objective reality qualifies as being metaphysical, a principle beyond empirical knowledge. Theological beliefs are typically metaphysical, whether objective or subjective. The christian belief in god acting in the world is expressive and wishful rather than cognitive. Richard Dawkins, pretending that it is a physical question, challenges the christian to an objective, scientific investigation of the existence of god, which revives christian alarm that

science is contending for sacred ground. The intellectual device of ‘non-overlapping magisteria’ has been raised as a flag of truce. But the answer is simpler than that, I suspect. Metaphysical ideas are only ideas, stimulated perhaps from outside, but living in the mind with no apparent referents outside the mind and so no empirical truth. Comparing them is rather like comparing drawings, they can be similar or not – if you take a copy of Michelangelo’s fresco, ‘Creation of Adam’, and remove the figure of the old man, well, you just have a simpler picture. Or alternatively, metaphysical beliefs may be regarded as policies, recipes for living, having some effect (poorly understood) on well-being.

Is there justification for objecting to someone else’s belief? Like the rights to personal space and personal dignity, the private sense of destiny is to be respected by others (even if it is remarked upon), because mutual tolerance and respect of persons are essential to any kind of society. A belief that goes beyond self-belief can be examined to discern whose interests are being served. If it refers adversely to other people, then one may ask whether acting upon it would infringe their freedom or cause them harm. You don’t have to be a believer to raise such questions: in fact, the outsider’s view can be the clearer one.

What beliefs are socially harmful?

‘Every belief’, writes Sam Harris, ‘is a fount of action *in potentia*.’ We cannot say that a belief is harmful in itself – otherwise we would be giving the nod to thought-police! – until such time as it results in something harmful to the believer or others. So-called ‘honour killings’ have been defended by the perpetrators declaring, ‘women taken in adultery should be stoned’: so there’s a belief that is definitely harmful. Criminal prosecutors lay great store on uncovering the motive behind a crime, as an important factor contributing to it, even when there are other circumstantial factors involved. If it is contested, the motive can be difficult to establish, and the diagnosis of an underlying belief as *the cause* of the harmful action becomes an arbitrary judgment. When someone’s belief *resembles* another that has already done harm, we may say it *looks dangerous*, on analogy with a weapon. But we should not presume whether or how the weapon will be used.

‘Myth’ is an outsider’s word for a kind of shared belief. Most myths are socially harmless, unless they are exclusive in application, asserting racial or religious

superiority over other people. Examples of the former (the harmless kind) are the stories of world-creation from a cosmic egg – no ethical content there. Examples of the latter are the myths of the chosen people of Abraham or Muhammad, and of Aryan birthright in the case of the Nazis. Even there, a favourite story may sustain a community within its domain until someone turns it into a sword against the infidel. At that point we could say that it is dangerous. How does such a story become a sword? When it is brought forward from some dimly perceived reality by the metaphysical assertion of present reality. It is a political development employing metaphysical rhetoric.

In the expression of metaphysical beliefs, it is especially difficult to compare instances, because of complex and often idiosyncratic differences of *meaning* of the terms involved. Faith means different things to different believers, just as different personalities have different spiritual needs. Christopher Hitchens looks at history selectively and blames many past wrongs on religion and attributes all past merits to good old human nature. (That suits the Humanist, I should say.) The religious devotee adopts the opposite opinion: many of the merits are due to religion, and all the wrongs are due to human nature. Nonetheless, the *kamikaze* pilot had his suicidal goal, fulfilling some ultimate duty expressing a metaphysical belief that was obviously harmful. In war harm is often chosen in the hope of staving off a greater harm. Metaphysical beliefs, then, may be harmless, dangerous or harmful.

Do you value your life by what you would die for, sacrificing yourself, perhaps romantically, in a grand cause? Patriotism, for instance. *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*, wrote Horace, the poet laureate of imperial Rome, ‘Sweet and fitting it is to die for one’s homeland.’ The Latin words were inscribed on the chapel wall of the Sandhurst Military Academy, prior to the First World War, and they resound with tragic irony in the well known battle-poem of Wilfred Owen. Nowadays, suicide-bombers are celebrated on their own side for their heroic self-sacrifice, while the other side condemns them as cowardly because they attack unarmed civilians. Identification with your tribe polarizes conflict between tribes.

Meaning.

Meaning can be personal or social. Students of the humanities nowadays are told that there is no right answer. This latitude recognizes that, even if we all consider the same

story, the meaning we draw from it, or give to it, is a personal one. Of course the answer is expressed in language, the pre-eminent carrier of consensual meaning. For an experience to be personally meaningful you must be motivated and contribute some deliberate action. When you learn from an unfortunate experience, you recognize that allowing yourself to get into that situation had been unwise. So the personal meaning spans your purposive action leading to the experience and your reflexion on its consequences, but the kernel of it is the subjective value which it precipitates, apparently spontaneously. For example, you can create personal meaning by learning to play a musical instrument and developing a repertoire, and you find the satisfying values of elegance, nobility, harmony, conviviality, whatever (and possibly a disvalue or two). Such meaning in your life enriches you and contributes to your self-validation, your self-esteem.

The simple expression of values which emerge from ordinary meaningful experience would not have satisfied Socrates, an early personal trainer who insisted on definition and further analysis, which tend to grind all qualities to dust, in search of a philosophical value. The unexamined life is not worth living, he said – no pain, no gain. Perhaps he saw that Athenian youth was intellectually too ill-disciplined to cope with the military threat of Sparta. On the other side of the world, in China, a stable society was fraught with crushing convention, and the opposite remedy was called for: sit quietly, go with the unconscious flow and spontaneity will set you free, urged the Taoists. To strive or not to strive, that is the question; and we see that each may have its season.

Meaning arises also from the social intercourse of a culture or subculture. Language I have mentioned: words have semantical meaning for users when they refer to widely understood operations and recognized objects; their usage is a prime way of signaling whether a speaker is trustworthy or not. Work and play are fields of shared significance, and money is a social amenity of graduated meaning. Group identity contributes distinctive meaning – what it means to be a Hawthorn supporter, an Australian, a human being. Let no-one believe that life is meaningless without religious faith.

Responsibility.

As with any real danger, those who appreciate the inherent danger in a particular

discourse have a collective duty to warn those who don't. Parents warn children about fire; local authorities warn visitors about cliffs and surf rips; State agencies issue flood warnings and campaign against drunken driving. In such cases the warners know more than the warned, and their warnings can be trusted. In a political situation, however, trust is fragmentary. If totalitarianism is seen to be on the rise, our moral duty is to speak out against it and refuse to co-operate with it, to be an example tho not an authority. Our argument would point out likely disastrous consequences and offer ways of honouring the underlying beliefs safely. There is a difference, for instance, between giving out weapons to boys and holding weapons in an armory. Similarly with religious beliefs that *look dangerous*. We ought to promote a secular alternative and point out to 'people of the book' that their doctrines tend towards some unwholesome consequences which concern the whole society. To cultivate awe in the contemplation of god almighty can paralyse the young mind and cripple it with guilt; to rely for purposes of social control on the threat of divine wrath stultifies society; the systematic derogation of women leads to their mistreatment. Verily it is said, 'by their fruits ye shall know them' – not, you will note, merely by their beliefs.

Zealotry and wisdom.

According to buddhist psychology there is a general human compulsion to fix the flux of life, which generates addictive desires, like the craving for group identity or for religion. Where people not only practise a religion but wholly identify with it, any robust commentary from outsiders about the basic beliefs is taken as a stinging insult.

The politically powerful Organization for Islamic Co-operation continues its campaign to reform the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to elevate freedom of religion, so that all signatory States would protect all religions and beliefs from discrimination or vilification. Since 2005 the General Assembly of the United Nations, in Committee, has annually made a non-binding resolution entitled, 'Combating defamation of religions'. The latest was in November 2010, from which I quote.

Vilification of religions is a serious affront to human dignity ...
Emphasizing ... the need ... to ensure respect for all races and religions ...
7. Expresses deep concern ... that Islam is frequently and wrongly
associated with human rights violations and terrorism ... 17. Also urges all

States to take all possible measures to promote tolerance and respect for all religions and beliefs and the understanding of their value systems ...

24. Affirms that the Human Rights Council shall promote universal respect for all religious and cultural values ... (Unquote.)

Now this resolution does not make it illegal for anyone to criticize religion: but it calls intimidatingly upon member States to legislate against any expression that goes beyond ‘open, constructive *and respectful* debate of ideas’. That ‘vilification of religions is a serious affront to human dignity’ is a highly tendentious opinion. The International Humanist & Ethical Union has opposed these motions in the Human Rights Council, on grounds of freedom of expression and democracy. Australia, creditably, has voted against the motions when they came to the General Assembly. Granting sweeping rights to culture-groups, even well defined ones, would be curtains for the hard-won democracy to which we lay claim. In April this year the Human Rights Council gave ground to Humanist campaigning, by shifting the emphasis from protecting religion to combatting intolerance of persons based on religion or belief.

There are zealous religious challenges to our Australian society from two different quarters, evangelical Christianity spreading into the schools, and muslims being attracted to the cause of militant Islam. Humanists and atheists stand for secular public education and are doing some good work on that quarter, but I leave it and turn to the spectre of militant Islam.

What has atheism to offer? Certainly not vitriolic attacks upon traditional beliefs, which demonize the believers and polarize the conflict. It is said that the ancient Greeks had a word for everything. ‘Enthusiasm’ is Greek for ecstasy inspired by a god, and was applied disparagingly to religious zealots in bygone centuries; it is a very new thing to find enthusiastic *atheists*. Instead of zealous atheists we need sensitive, new-age secularists for this job. Their task – another Greek idea – is to find a ‘golden mean’ between extremes. A lot of people have very clear vision in one particular direction but are blinkered in other directions, which may be why serious problems often fester unsolved until emotions reach boiling point. That harmful point is quickly reached if you become intolerant with fanatics.

Constructive dialog between secularists and muslims might follow the principles laid down in *Getting to yes: negotiating an agreement without giving in*, by Roger Fisher

and William Ury. A nuanced approach would be required, since not all muslim societies are alike, and Islam is not a unified bloc. It would be an important agreement to admit that not every muslim feels it to be their religious duty to strike at the infidel enemy. Sam Harris would be surprised at that, because he was led to the opposite conclusion by his insistence that their beliefs must be coherent. ‘We are at war with Islam,’ he wrote implacably in 2004, ‘We are at war with precisely the vision of life ... in the Koran.’ But the scriptures are not fully consistent, so any prohibition on questioning them implies that allah is illogical and allah’s will paradoxical. No, ideas have to be fought with better ideas, not with bombs. The goal of the negotiation is harm-reduction. Whatever the agreement looks like, it will be a golden mean, which is in no way a platitude. The alternative to negotiating an agreed way of living together is permanent stigma for the muslims, more conflict and continual work for the police to do.

Sam Harris again swerves past harm-reduction with his vehement claim that even moderate religious faith is now a threat to American survival, because the moderates preach tolerance and won’t criticize dangerous religious ‘certainties’ in their midst. He falls into the trap, along with Richard Dawkins and the religious extremists, of shouting, who is not with us is against us. Humanists who are more inclusive can see the injustice and don’t tar moderates and extremists with the same brush. It makes better sense to oppose intolerance directly than to oppose tolerance.

Public health

Now, you may disagree with these opinions, and prefer instead the *Old Testament* prophets who castigated people for deviating from god’s word, for their moral degeneration. I suggest that showing definite harm is more persuasive than alleging moral lapse. The churches have always kept a close watch on ‘public morality’, of course. In the early 1900s, the ‘wowers’ decided to appeal to people’s sense of duty to their fellows in addition to their sense of duty to god and managed to close down half the pubs in Melbourne. Public health measures are generally accepted if they rest on more than mere moralizing.

Thomas Paine was a radical humanist in a time of social unrest, who said, ‘My religion is to do good.’ He had a friend, the poet William Blake, who was distressed by the conditions of life in the city. In *Songs of Experience* he wrote,

I wander through each chartered street
Near where the chartered Thames doth flow,
And mark in every face I meet,
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.
In every cry of every man,
In every infant's cry of fear;
In every voice, in every ban [i.e., curse],
The mind-forged manacles I hear.

By 'public health' I am really thinking of mental health as a community responsibility. As we are social animals, mental health and psychological resilience depend to a considerable extent on social relations. The sense of well-being in a whole society is indicated objectively by its mental health statistics. In the national survey of mental health and well-being, which was conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2007, those who had had a mental disorder in the preceding twelve months amounted to 20 percent of the population aged 16 and over. That is not something to be proud of. It shows up our neglect of the social fabric of our community. Could that be connected somehow with the growth of sectarian private schooling in recent years, I wonder? In Melbourne we are fortunate to have Patrick McGorry's early psychosis prevention and intervention centre, which is a model that others might follow. In addition to mental illness, there are alcohol abuse and unemployment that feed unhappiness, which spreads to others by domestic violence. We know that child abuse typically recurs in a cycle which is hard to break. Similarly, immature minds need protection from the deception perpetrated by pious adults in the form of religious indoctrination. An adult may be able to survive with contradictory beliefs, but it is 'bad faith' and unjust to impose religion on the young. The recent educational movement of positive psychology holds promise of strengthening the young against adolescent depression.

Shared humanity

All the problems of the world cry out for people to work together on the basis of shared humanity. In face of so many broken communities today, the need is there for more egalitarianism. Where the social environment is poorly developed, there is low social trust, low self-esteem, frequent interpersonal violence and suicide. Public health

studies show that societal cohesion is important for the health of individuals, and Scandinavia scores particularly highly. This message is well conveyed in the title of the book, *The spirit level: why more equal societies almost always do better*, by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (alho their argument leaves something to be desired in the way of rigour).

In Australia religious adherence has been dropping, while competitive commercialism has become rampant. I wonder whether that may be related to the dwindling of community life in recent decades. The rebuilding of co-operative communities might begin with the shared experiences of natural calamities and of prolonged aging.

Is Humanism utopian, and therefore ineffectual? I hear you cry. Well, I'd say it is a good blend of idealism and realism, and optimistic by temperament. The godless Humanist insight, that we must rely on *human* capacities to get thru life, may seem harsh. The poet T. S. Eliot's glass must have been half empty when he wrote, 'Human kind cannot bear much reality.' But the answering Humanist belief is that we *can* rely on human capacities: our glass is half full at least. If that confidence should eventually prove to be false, there is only nature to pass just sentence.

Recapitulation

In conclusion I hope I've conveyed to you a Humanist response to the dispute between theistic religion and scientific atheism. I have considered the nature of beliefs, and asked what made a belief dangerous, with particular reference to metaphysical belief. I discussed meaning, to detach the meaning of life from religion. I then suggested that danger is sufficient justification for criticizing someone's belief. Three sources of zealotry were considered, evangelical Christianity, militant Islam and new atheism. I recommended dispute resolution between secular and religious interests. The key wisdom was to engage in dialog with those we have to live with and to negotiate a reduction of the harm caused by dangerous beliefs. Considering the impact of religious schooling on civic health I indicated where suffering could be alleviated, and finished on a note of Humanist optimism. Thank you for listening.