

From the radical secularism of Spinoza to the secular humanism of Shermer: a connection between beliefs and brain function.

In the December 2011 issue of the *Humanist*, Dr. Rebecca Goldstein, a philosopher, author, and the wife of Stephen Pinker who is a renowned Professor of Psychology at Harvard, has an article entitled “A Confraternity of the Fatherless”. She relates how her thinking on matters religious evolved from Orthodox Judaism to her present Humanist views. The article is adapted from her speech in acceptance of the 2011 Humanist of the Year Award conferred by the American Humanist Association. The title of Dr. Goldstein’s article derives from Oscar Wilde’s letter from his jail cell where he was incarcerated for being gay. In this letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, Wilde states: “When I think about religion at all, I feel as if I would like to found an order for those who *cannot* believe: the Confraternity of the Fatherless one might call it, where on an altar, on which no taper burned, a priest, in whose heart peace had no dwelling, might celebrate with unblest bread and a chalice empty of wine”.

Dr. Goldstein points out in her article that she thinks Wilde is telling us that there is a kind of heroism in heresy. That it’s an achievement not to believe in God and his presumed manifestations, and those who disbelieve should feel no shame. Those who would urge shame on the intellectually honest and objective person have got it entirely backward. There is indeed a kind of confraternity for those who escape from beliefs inculcated when young by believers. There is a sweetness of unanimity that is one’s reward. It is heartening to learn of people who have grown up with diverse religious creeds and beliefs, yet have gained the ability from their accrued knowledge to look beyond faith-related assumptions, to embrace objectivity and reason. As Dr. Goldstein brings out, this was the case with Baruch Spinoza.

Spinoza, as noted in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, is now recognized as one of the most important philosophers of the early modern period. Of all the philosophers of the 17th century, none have more influence today than Spinoza. He was born in 1632 within a family of Sephardic, Marrano Jews who had left potential persecution in Portugal to settle in the seemingly more tolerant atmosphere of Amsterdam in the Netherlands. His education and contacts are of interest in the way his philosophy was molded. He was educated in his congregation’s school, the Keter Torah Yeshiva. Subject matter consisted of religious study, including instruction in Hebrew, liturgy, Torah, prophetic writings, and rabbinical commentaries. At seventeen he left this school to help in his father’s importing business,

during which time he came into contact with so-called “free-thinking” Protestants, some of whom organized into small groups they called colleges. He placed himself under the tutelage of an ex-Jesuit named Franciscus Van den Enden, who was a Latinist, a medical doctor abreast of the sciences of that day, and a passionate advocate of democratic political ideals. Van den Enden also had an irreligious cast of mind. Clearly his influence on Spinoza was considerable. Antecedents to his evolving philosophy were also such ancients as the Greek Sophists, the more contemporary Descartes, who had a mathematical appreciation of the universe, and Hobbes with his social contract. However, the particulars of Spinoza’s philosophy were his own. Overall his system is monist, deductive, and rationalistic.

Much to his credit, Spinoza founded modern biblical criticism. He was the one who first looked at the internal contradictions of the ancient Hebrew Bible, much of which became the Old Testament of later Christians. Spinoza decried the false Jewish claims of when and who wrote the Torah and some other parts incorporated into the Old Testament. Specifically he argued that the Torah, the five books of Moses, weren’t written by Moses but by at least four different authors and was probably compiled by Ezra who lived in the second temple period. Spinoza especially argued against the claim that Jews were God’s chosen people. At age 24, this led to the harshest writ of cherm or excommunication issued to Spinoza by the Sephardic community of Amsterdam. The story goes that when the news of his excommunication reached him, Spinoza said, “I wouldn’t have had the courage to do this on my own but since they throw me out, I go happily.” After his excommunication, he changed his name from Baruch, which in Hebrew means blessed, to Benedictus meaning the same in Latin. For all his attempts to disengage from his Jewish heritage, he was eventually excommunicated by the Catholic Church as well. Spinoza began employment as a lens grinder, because he was banded from his former business contacts. After leaving Amsterdam, He moved to Rijnsburg near Leiden and then to Voorburg outside The Hague. During the last 21 years of his life, he wrote his philosophic views before dying at the relatively young age of not quite 45. The cause of death was respiratory failure, perhaps due to silicosis from the dust from grinding lens, compounded by tuberculosis as was common in those times.

In line with his rejection of classical theism, Spinoza famously identifies God with nature. His phrase “*Deus sive Natura*” (“God or Nature”) captures this identification and is a succinct expression of his metaphysics. Spinoza’s God is the cause of all things because all things follow causally and necessarily from nature. This is in contradistinction from the traditional

Judeo-Christian concept of divinity where God is a transcendent creator who causes a world distinct from himself to come into being by creating it out of nothing, and to such theists who believe that God continues to manage all affairs. Some have suggested that Spinoza was a pantheist because he rejected the transcendence of God and any kind of anthropomorphizing such as attributing psychological and moral characteristics modeled on human nature. However, immanentist pantheists also believe that nature contains within itself not only natural elements but also an immanent supernatural and divine element. This latter unproven and irrational belief was not part of Spinoza's philosophy; he believed that worshipful awe or reverence is not an appropriate attitude to take before God or Nature. There have been others who declared Spinoza was an atheist. An early engraving of his likeness was captioned in Latin "Iudeus et Atheista" ("Jew and Atheist"), though it can be argued that Spinoza's Nature was God. Spinoza inspired the poet Shelley to write his essay entitled "The Necessity of Atheism". Spinoza and his work were highly regarded by Nietzsche. Karl Marx liked his materialistic account of the universe. George Santayana, the youngest philosopher scholar to be granted a full professorship at Harvard, wrote several works on Spinoza whom he described as his "master and model" in understanding the naturalistic basis of morality. It was Santayana who wrote "My atheism, like that of Spinoza, has piety for the universe but disdains those gods made in the image of man to serve his human interests". Bertrand Russell, in his insightful *A History of Western Philosophy*, praised Spinoza as the noblest of the West's philosophers.

In his posthumously published masterpiece, *Ethics*, Spinoza makes clear that his ethics is largely one of a liberation that is directly tied to the cultivation of reason. Our happiness and well-being lie not in a life enslaved to the passions and to the transitory goods we ordinarily pursue; nor to the related unreflective attachment to the superstitions that pass as religions, but rather in the life of reason. In his *Theological- Political Treatise*, Spinoza's aim was to argue that the stability and security of society is not undermined but rather enhanced by freedom of thought, meaning primarily the freedom to philosophize. The primary threat to this freedom emanates from clergy who play upon the fears and superstitions of people in order to maintain power. The will of their God is simply, as Spinoza put it, "in the sanctuary of ignorance".

Among numerous brainy quotes attributed to Spinoza, the following three may serve to summarize some of his major points: "I do not know how to teach philosophy without becoming a disturber of established religion." "I

call him free who is led solely by reason.” “Freedom is absolutely necessary for the progress in science and the liberal arts.”

Dr. Goldstein notes at the conclusion of her article, one often hears that we need God in order to be good, to ground morality, or at least enforce it. Such thinking holds that there must be a great police officer upstairs ready to give you a summons. Spinoza gives us a much more high-minded, noble and transcendent view of how we can live our lives on purely secular grounds. That’s why he was so despised and feared that the religious bigots of his day condemned him and called him Satan’s emissary on earth. Spinoza’s understanding of the irrationality of beliefs that anchor points of view in most religions has led to the current level of psychological and even neurobiological understanding discussed by such skeptical secular humanists as Michael Shermer.

Before discussing Shermer’s contributions of a current nature, it may be informative to be given contemporary terms. The encyclopedic definition of “Secular Humanism”, alternatively known as Humanism (often with a capital “H”), is a secular philosophy that embraces human reason, ethics, justice, and the search for human fulfillment. It specifically rejects religious dogma, supernaturalism, pseudoscience, or superstition as bases of morality and decision making. The term “secularism” was coined in 1851 by George Jacob Holyoake to describe “a form of opinion which concerns itself only with questions, the issues of which can be tested by the experience of this life.” There is the International Humanist and Ethical Union, which was originally based in the Netherlands with Julian Huxley as the first president. There is a number of regional clusters such as the separate humanist subgroup of the Unitarian Universalist Association. The founding president of the Council for Secular Humanism in America was Paul Kurtz. The list of humanists includes many top writers (e.g. Albert Camus, Umberto Eco, Kurt Vonnegut, etc.), scientists (Richard Dawkins, Albert Einstein, Sam Harris, Linus Pauling, James Watson, E.O. Wilson, Carl Sagan, etc.), philosophers (Daniel Dennett, Friedrich Engels, Christopher Hitchens, Bertrand Russell, etc.), and even entertainers (Steve Allen, Gene Roddenberry, Aaron Copeland, John Lennon, Charles Schulz, Frank Zappa, etc.). These and many more are also sometimes categorized as agnostics or atheists depending upon the biases of list makers. It should be pointed out that, though somewhat controversial, Secular Humanists are generally entitled to such protection under the law as afforded to religious institutions.

Dr. Michael Shermer is a psychologist and science historian who is a self-professed skeptic and secular humanist. He is the author of *Why People Believe Weird Things*, *The Science of Good and Evil*, and eight other books

on the evolution of human beliefs and conduct. More recently he has written *The Believing Brain* (published by Times Books in 2011) which is about how we construct beliefs and reinforce them as truths. He is also the founding publisher of *Skeptic* magazine, the editor of “Skeptic.com”, a monthly columnist for *Scientific American*, and an adjunct professor at Claremont Graduate University in Southern California.

In his book on *The Believing Brain*, Shermer upends traditional thinking about how we form beliefs. Simply put, beliefs come first, and explanations for beliefs follow. The brain is a belief engine. Using sensory data that flow in through the senses, the brain naturally looks for and finds patterns – and then infuses those patterns with meaning, forming beliefs. Once beliefs are formed, our brains subconsciously seek out confirmatory evidence in support of those beliefs, accelerating the process of reinforcing them – and round and round the process goes in a positive feedback loop. In this book, Shermer provides numerous real-world examples of how this process operates, from politics, economics, and religion to conspiracy theories, the supernatural, and the paranormal. By giving us a view of the rapidly advancing neuroscience techniques that can reveal where and how the brain operates, as well as the earlier comparisons of pathologic with normal function, Shermer demonstrates why science is the best tool ever devised to determine whether or not our beliefs match reality.

Spinoza challenged us to disregard beliefs that are faith-based and can lead to such religious fervor as often incites people to acts of intolerance and even abuse. Instead we should use reason as based on critical observation and analyses. Consider the most famous pronouncement by Einstein on the subject of God, since others try to fit his quotes, often taken out of context, with their beliefs. He was sent a telegram in which he was asked to answer the question of his belief in God in fifty words or less. He did it in thirty-two: “I believe in Spinoza’s God, who reveals himself in the lawful harmony of all that exists, but not in a God who concerns himself with the fate and doings of mankind.” This is taken from Walter Isaacson’s book entitled *Einstein: His Life and Universe*, page 335 (New York, Simon and Shuster, 2007). Shermer leads us further to equate our minds with brain function and to be aware of how we form our beliefs, typically buffeted by cognitive biases that in some instances are misleading and harmful. Reality exists independent of human minds, but our understanding of it depends upon the beliefs we hold at any given time. Shermer reminds us that science is skepticism and scientists have to be skeptical because many claims turn out to be false. Science is potent because it embodies well-defined methods for getting to answers about the world and indeed the universe. Where

philosophy and theology depend on logic and reason and thought experiments, science employs empiricism, evidence, and observational experiments. It is the only hope we have of avoiding the trap of belief-dependent realism. Shermer ends his book with the following: “In the end I want to believe. I also want to know. The truth is out there, and although it may be difficult to find, science is the best tool we have for uncovering it. *Ad astra per aspera!*”

As a scientist and secular humanist, I agree with such thinking. We have but to reflect on how far our understanding has come in the 5,000-year span from the ancient Egyptians who believed the heart was the seat of thinking and was therefore to be preserved in a canopic vessel for use in the resurrected body in the afterlife. This early false belief in the function of the heart still echoes in our love ballads and celebration of Valentine’s Day. The ancient Egyptians regarded the brain of no consequence and therefore extracted it piecemeal through the nose of the corpse, so it could be discarded during mummification. With progress that entailed studies in anatomy, physiology, and biochemistry within the expanding arena of neuroscience and its extensions in psychology, we can now understand that we do indeed have a “believing brain”. It is to be expected that through science we shall acquire more in the realm of truth rather than obfuscate the realities of nature with misdirected fantasies. Given the increasingly rapid accretion of knowledge, we may even hope for the acquisition of such truths as liberate us from the thrall of the malevolent distillate of intolerance, some of which stems from religions. “*Cogita tute*”.