

Ignorance, superstition hold back mankind

Yesterday, I had the privilege of participating in a panel discussion at The Classical Academy. Below are excerpts from my opening remarks.

I am here to defend rationalism. As a rationalist, I value reason and experience as the best ways we have of discerning truth.

The overwhelming evidence is that ghosts, demons, angels, the Holy Spirit, the power of prayer, astral projection, telekinesis, ESP, dowsing, faith healing, yogic flying and all other mystical phenomena have no reality beyond people's belief in them. When the evidence says otherwise, I will change my mind. But the more we learn, the more it becomes clear that virtually everything we have believed about the supernatural is wrong.

There are three reasons we should believe the supernatural is something we make up. Any one, it seems to me, should be enough to convince an intellectually honest person. All three together are nails in the coffin.

First, all claims of supernatural abilities fail the best test of reality humanity has yet devised: Double-blind experiments under controlled conditions. Set up a test designed to eliminate self-deception and bias, and any supernatural claim will collapse like tissue paper. Always.

Second, claims of supernaturally revealed truth contradict one another. If you think otherwise, I suggest you skim the Bible, the Bhagavad Gita, the Tao Te Ching, the Koran, the Sutras and the Book of Mormon. Better still, read them cover to cover.

Third, and most intriguing: Science is beginning to identify the origins of supernatural experiences in the functioning of the brain, along with the origins of morality. The new science of evolutionary psychology is making testable claims about universal human ethics, grounded not in theology but in the structure of the human mind. I will not live to see this new science mature. But it is tremendously exciting to be present at its birth.

I reject the idea that art, beauty, love and wonder are incompatible with rationalism. I have been fortunate to experience all these, probably more deeply and more passionately than most. None of them require any explanations outside the laws of nature as we currently understand them. Subjectivity



OPINION

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and inner experience are a vital part of being human. But there is no reason to believe they aren't scientifically explainable.

Some of you will want to know where God is in all of this. I'm a little reluctant to broach the topic, because I believe we're a lot less likely to kill each other when we keep our religious beliefs private. But you asked me to come here, so I guess I owe you something.

I flirt with atheism from time to time, but I find it personally unsatisfying. The idea that the universe is just here seems intellectually inadequate. The existence of God seems to me beyond the scope of human intellectual effort, at least for the next few millennia.

I recognize there are limits to scientific inquiry. I just don't think much of the alternatives.

From time to time, I find myself hoping God exists. And in moments of repose, I find quiet contemplation of the universe awe-inspiring and meaningful. But in light of the overwhelming evidence, I must conclude that reports of supernatural intervention in the world or in people's lives are simply mistaken. To say anything else is intellectually dishonest.

How does this affect my life? I try to be a good husband to my wife, and a good father to my children. I try to live my life with honesty and integrity. I fight ignorance, superstition and nonsense wherever I can, because they hold humanity back. I think some politics are better than others, and I work to advance political ideas that I believe will ultimately benefit humanity. I find all these things very fulfilling.

As a scientist, I try to add a few small bricks to the tower of human progress that mankind has spent hundreds of years painstakingly building. As a teacher, I train minds. I pass on what I have learned to those who will come after me. I hope that my views will inform their perspectives, and affect their lives for the better.

My children, my work, and my relationships with my fellow human beings will be my legacy. I find that tremendously satisfying. To hope for more would be, well, unreasonable. Thank you.

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