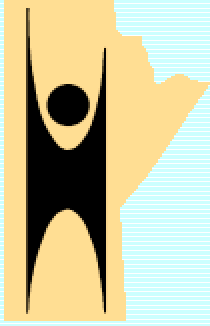


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Manitoba

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Editor & Librarian:
Donna L. Harris

ham_librarian@yahoo.ca

Humanist Association of Manitoba

Upcoming events

Humanist Association of Manitoba

Monthly Meeting

Saturday, April 12, 2008

Viscount Gort Hotel 1670 Portage Ave. at Route 90

***** NEW AGENDA *****

Meet and Greet 5:30 p.m.

Meeting / Presentation 6:15 p.m.

Dinner (may be ordered from Coffee Shop menu) 7:00 p.m.

Guest Speaker: Prof. Jim Silver

Jim will speak about the Lord Selkirk Park project and the research the work is based on. This inner city work has been supported by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Manitoba Office, for which Jim is a key resource person. Jim is a professor in the Department of Politics at the University of Winnipeg.

Hope to see You there!

Bullshit Party

Saturday, April 19, 2008

Main Floor, 77 Edmonton Street @ 7:00 PM

You're Invited! See page 6 for details

Next Monthly Meeting

Saturday, May 10, 2008

Viscount Gort Hotel 1670 Portage Ave. at Route 90

Guest Speaker: HAM member Kerem Usenmez

Topic: Changes that Kerem has noticed in his home country, Turkey

March Meeting – Skepticism Discussion

At HAM's March meeting, attendees first reviewed the content of Jim Clark's presentation on elements of an irrational world view, which led into a lively discussion, as we tackled such questions as "How do we promote a rational world view?" and "Would a full frontal attack on irrationalism work?"

It seems that no one is immune to a bit of irrational thinking. As we're all human, we all have our own "blind spots", where we rationalize our own odd bits of reasoning (just like I know the odds are 1 in 14 million, but I still keep buying LOTTO 6/49 tickets).

However, there are certain beliefs that leave us shaking our heads, wondering how any one in the world could possibly see any truth or value in it. A case in point: most of us cannot imagine allowing our daughters or sisters to undergo FGM, or female genital mutilation. The practice seems barbaric, especially as it's often done without any modern medical help such as sterilized instruments or anesthetic. It has absolutely no medical basis, and can lead to a wide range of negative consequences, including early death. Yet over 800 women in Sierra Leone recently protested... in favor of FGM. They took to the streets, telling those foreign donors who would seek to interfere to keep their money, citing the practice's importance to their culture and tradition.

One of the most interesting and useful things that was presented that evening, just might be a list of reasons why people believe things that are not true:

- They want them to be true
- The need for certainty
- A craving for the mysterious
- Overconfidence in their own intuition
- Excessive reliance on Authority and tradition as sources of knowledge
- Overconfidence in anecdotes and case studies
- Coincidence or chance
- Failure to seek or use negative evidence
- Selective memory for positive results
- Illusory correlations
- Hindsight or "after the fact" thinking
- Inadequate thought given to alternatives
- Placebo affect
- Circular reasoning.

These are all great principles to keep in mind, the next time we hear someone say something that sounds "wrong", but we just can't put our finger on the error.

Thanks go to Jeff Olsson for moderating a most interesting evening.

- Donna Harris

Humanist Association of Manitoba Joins Partners For Life

Partners for Life is a program put on by Canadian Blood Services whereby community groups can pledge to donate a certain number of units of blood each year. Blood products are needed every day to help people survive surgery, trauma, cancer, and other illnesses. Patients and healthcare teams rely on donors in order to have adequate supplies of blood for transfusion.

HAM has pledged to donate a minimum of 20 units of blood for 2008. For those who are already regular donors, mentioning the partners for life program and giving our ID number will ensure that your donations will count towards our total. That ID number is:

HUMA008484

HAM supporters may register online as Partners for Life members at www.blood.ca/partnersforlife. In the coming weeks, a plaque with our organization's name and number of donations to date will be on display at the William Avenue Blood Clinic.

We will be planning a group blood donation in the near future for those who would prefer the camaraderie and support of fellow members when donating. Basic information about the program and the donation process can be found at www.bloodservices.ca/ or by calling 1-888-2-DONATE.



IN MEMORY OF ARTHUR C. CLARKE

We were saddened to hear of the loss of Arthur C. Clarke. On March 19th, Clarke passed away in his adopted country of Sri Lanka, at the age of 90.

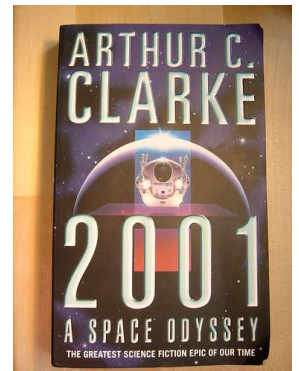
Clarke was a prolific author as well as an astrophysicist. Over the years, he wrote both non-fiction and science fiction. He and director Stanley Kubrick shared an Academy Award nomination for best adapted screenplay for "2001: A Space Odyssey." The film grew out of Clarke's 1951 short story, "The Sentinel".

Clarke is also credited with introducing the idea of the communications satellite, with satellites in geostationary orbits. However, he never patented the idea, prompting a 1965 essay that he

subtitled, "How I Lost a Billion Dollars in My Spare Time."

The famed science fiction writer, who once denigrated religion as "a necessary evil in the childhood of our particular species," left written instructions that his funeral be completely secular, according to his aides.

"Absolutely no religious rites of any kind, relating to any religious faith, should be associated with my funeral," he wrote.



"I'm sure the universe is full of intelligent life. It's just been too intelligent to come here."

- Arthur C. Clarke

Have You Ever Been Expelled?

Last week I was fortunate to observe the unfolding of an incredible story on the internet involving two well-known outspoken critics of religion.

Last year, biologist PZ Myers, who is best known for his blog Pharyngula, was interviewed for a forthcoming movie. It was portrayed as a look at the intersection of science and religion. It was only months later that Myers discovered that the film was now called Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed, and was really a critique of science, claiming that any scientist or academic who dared to question the official “party line” on “Darwinism” was being suppressed by “the elite few”. In other words, it was a film promoting the teaching of Intelligent Design, or creationism, in schools.

Well, last Thursday night, I read a most interesting entry on Myer’s site. He couldn’t wait, so he was posting from the Apple store in the Mall of America. He and his family & friends were there to attend an advance screening of the movie. Now, this was not a public showing. Individuals who wanted to attend filled out an on-line form, and sent it in. Myers did just that, listing himself and the others who were attending. He made no attempt to disguise who he was.

As they stood in line at the theatre, however, a policeman approached Myers and told him that if he didn’t leave immediately, he would be thrown out. That’s right, he was not allowed to view a movie in which he appears. So he stepped out of line, and let the rest of his party go in to the movie. Myers couldn’t wait to share the details:

I’m still laughing though. You don’t know how hilarious this is. Not only is it the extreme hypocrisy of being expelled from their Expelled movie, but there’s another layer of amusement. Deep, belly laugh funny. Yeah, I’d be rolling around on the floor right now, if I weren’t so dang dignified.

You see ... well, have you ever heard of a sabot? It’s a kind of sleeve or

lightweight carrier used to surround a piece of munition fired from a gun. It isn’t the actually load intended to strike the target, but may even be discarded as it leaves the barrel.

I’m a kind of sabot right now.

They singled me out and evicted me, but they didn’t notice my guest. They let him go in escorted by my wife and daughter. I guess they didn’t recognize him. My guest was

Richard Dawkins.

He’s in the theater right now, watching their movie.

It was thrilling to sit at the computer and watch the interest this incident generated. That post gained comments faster than water pours into a leaky boat. By the time I would finish reading, another dozen comments would have appeared. There were 1260 comments in two days. Right now, the total stands at 1465. The next day, Myers finally gave us a real update.

Those who had gotten in to see the movie were pretty uniform in their critique. Reviewers report that it’s not a very good, or even entertaining, movie. Richard Dawkins put up his own review of the movie on his website, and Dawkins and Myers even sat down for a short video-taped discussion of the evening.

Generally, the incident is being viewed as a huge public relations gaffe on the part of the filmmaker – hypocritically “expelling” a scientist who was actually interviewed in the movie, and letting the “bigger fish” – the author of hugely popular “The God Delusion” – walk right in. The filmmaker, Mark Mathis, later admitted that he “banned pz (Myers) because I want him to pay to see it.”

Only time will tell what kind of impact Expelled will have once it’s officially released. But it’s already gained enough of the kind of attention that I’m sure the filmmaker could well do without.

“...educators and scientists are being ridiculed, denied tenure and even fired – for the “crime” of merely believing that there might be evidence of “design” in nature, and that perhaps life is not just the result of accidental, random chance.”

- the official Expelled the movie website

Book Review

The Emotional Lives of Animals

Reviewed by Neil Schipper

Marc Bekoff, **“The Emotional Lives of Animals: A Leading Scientist Explores Animal Joy, Sorrow and Empathy”** New World Library, 2007 (hard cover) 256 pp.

We can usually tell pretty easily when the human animals close to us are happy or sad, afraid or angry, and often, it's equally easy to identify these same emotions in non-human animals. With about half of all households in North America having pets, one would think that the notion that animals have real emotions is pretty fully accepted. Apparently things are not that straightforward.

Marc Bekoff is a lauded biology professor specializing in cognitive ethology – the study of animal minds – and an activist for the ethical treatment of animals. He wants more of us to fully appreciate the extent to which differences between animal and man are differences in degree, not kind, and moreover, that when it comes to emotions and even morals, the differences are far less than imagined.

Much of the book contains stories about animals emoting, and there are some pretty good ones. We meet elephants that grieve listlessly for days following the death of a comrade, a dog that spontaneously and with no prior training becomes the “seeing eye” dog to a blind companion dog, wolves that leap with joy upon the return of an individual that had been separated from the pack for several days, and so on.

Drawing upon recent neuroscience research, he describes likenesses

among mammal brains across several species, likeness in structure and function. Not only are certain specialized types of neural cells present to some degree across species, but neurochemical release patterns that are associated with specific emotions in humans also occur in other species under conditions of apparently similar emotional states. It's amazing stuff, but the treatment here is pretty thin.

Both the stories and the neuroscience are used to support the notion that animals do experience, not only the very basic emotions, but quite a wide gamut of them, including things like empathy, jealousy, disgust, longing, selflessness, a sense of fairness and so on.

Along the way, Bekoff describes his own working life, much of which is spent observing animals at play. The goal is to further the understanding of play, an activity that may not obviously seem to enhance an individual's reproductive fitness. He describes his own findings and those of others that support the view that animals play for their own subjective happiness, and, that the *drive* to play is an adaptation that allows animals to practice crucial life skills, like aggressive and defensive manoeuvres, pursuit of a mate, and perhaps most surprisingly, social skills like cooperation and negotiation.

Bekoff laments that despite the mounting evidence, within the scientific community there lingers uncertainty about whether it is sufficiently established that animals have feelings. A hundred and fifty years after Darwin opened inquiry into *Continued next page...*



Executive

**Barrie Webster
Barry Hammond
Helen Friesen
Heather McDonell**

Members at Large:

**Randy Gibson
Donna Harris
Brian Latour
Jeff Olsson
Grant Rogerson
Neil Schipper
Sophie Shulman**

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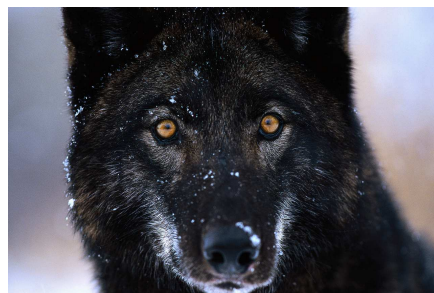
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BOOK REVIEW (continued)

these matters, first by proposing the interrelatedness of all life by the evolutionary process, and then more specifically by observing the striking similarity between the emotional expression of humans and that of many higher mammals, this seems surprising.

He suggests a number of explanations for this. One is a reticence by animal scientists to appear non-rigorous to their colleagues. Proving that an animal is having any specific conscious experience by relying on anecdote and analogy is considered problematic. Another is a matter of convenience. If the idea of human-like feelings in animals were fully embraced, this would render more serious the need for rethinking the often exceedingly cruel ways that research science uses animals. It would also lead to the questioning of how society at large treats animals raised for our food.



But there are some big questions that the author himself avoids. How do we reconcile the fact that empathetic and cooperative social-living species are prone to ripping to shreds, on a daily basis, individuals from other empathetic and cooperative social-living species? Surely "having emotions" is not simply an all or nothing feature of living things. Are there any working theories that might allow us to quantify emotional features of species? If not, aren't we just left with a perspective where we can't distinguish, in ethical terms, humans, foxes, worms and mosquitoes?

The author maintains a warm and caring tone throughout – he's an animal lover, has been since he was a kid, and does not try to conceal it – but the book suffers somewhat from what are nearly proclamations of his own compassion. This is a book about emotions that, while borrowing the language of science, appeals in large part to the reader's emotions.

BULLSHIT Party - Details

Once again, we're getting together at Jeff & Leslie Olsson's residence to screen a couple of episodes from Penn & Teller's TV series, Bullshit. Be prepared for laughter and great conversation.

WHERE: 77 Edmonton Street
Rec Room, Main Floor

HOW: Buzz code 147 for entry to the building
BYOB

Please RSVP. Jeff's email address is Jdolsson@shaw dot ca. (just replace dot with a .)