

Reason, to be cheerful

From Wade Schuette

Thank you for the excellent coverage of “Seven reasons why people hate reason” (26 July, p 41). As Immanuel Kant said, “Immaturity is the inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another” (p 42). If culture is akin to a person, what this describes is perhaps an 18-year-old young adult.

What we are sorely lacking is the vision of advancing to the equivalent of marriage – or civilisation. A good marriage is one between two adults who are capable of living separately just fine, but who prefer to live together. Neither one dominates and both benefit.

American language has no word for this, since “adult” and “mature” have been taken over to mean “able to purchase cigarettes and pornography”. This is extraordinarily relevant, since our civilisation is breaking down not because of a lack of independent reasoning, but of this re-linking step that forms a synthesised larger reasoning, perceiving and acting unit – a meta-person.

It seems to me that many of the attributes of human beings which appear to be “bugs”, so far as pure reason goes, will turn out to be “features” that allow this synthesis to take place and work.

This topic falls into the category of subjects forbidden in the US that Noam Chomsky describes in your online video (www.tinyurl.com/nmchomsky). Anything even remotely extolling its virtues would be denounced as socialism, communism, terrorism or the latest smear of the day.
Ann Arbor, Michigan, US

From Norman Fry

Only near the very end of your commentary on reason did I find a mention of the view that there is a need to move beyond reductionism (26 July, p 53). In the latter part of the 20th century some scientists started to recognise that natural phenomena, from consciousness

to climate, occur on various levels that may not be adequately explicable entirely by reference to the levels below.

I will never be fully explained as the sum of my biomolecular processes, for example. The use of models shows how higher-level results can be clearer than the noisy, and hence observationally uncertain, lower-level local inputs: the number of circulation cells in the atmosphere’s equatorial belt is far more definitive than the noisy signal of recorded temperatures. The 19th-century reductionist science of the climate deniers will forever be demanding a non-noisy – in fact, unreal – demonstration of local temperature changes and mechanisms. Twenty-first century science, however, should be focused on ending the warming that causes floods, drought and starvation when rainfall shifts due to changes in the cell pattern.

Woolaston, Gloucestershire, UK

Advertising ethics

From George Taylor

Lawrence Krauss warns of the Templeton Foundation’s apparent desire to use science to reveal the existence of God (2 August, p 52). I suggest that it represents a danger to science on a deeper level: not because it mixes science and religion, but because it confuses religion with God.

The necessity of belief in a supernatural, omnipotent creator god is a feature of the Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Other world religions tend not to sport such a powerful creature or, where they do, not to make statements about its nature. Nor do they compel or require belief and public displays of faith.

It is the element of compulsion that sets the Abrahamic religions apart as movements more interested in temporal influence than in spiritual well-being.

Despite the protestations of the faithful, they are political

ideologies. Take a look at the Templeton Freedom Award (www.templeton.org/prizes/templeton_freedom_awards), for example. For this, the foundation has teamed up with the Atlas Economic Research Foundation – which is devoted to propagating neoliberal economic theory throughout the world – to fund, promote and support think-tanks, particularly in developing countries, that will share the Templeton/Atlas vision.

The Freedom Awards website states that “to overcome poverty and hopelessness and create a flourishing global society, economic freedom must advance all over the world. The market order needs to replace central planning. Individuals operating outside the legal economy need to be brought into a legal order respectful of contracts and property rights.”

This same “free market” economic hegemony has reduced millions to the very poverty and hopelessness from which Templeton and Atlas claim to want to rescue them. This is the nature of the beast behind the hand of friendship extended towards scientists.

Buntingford, Hertfordshire, UK

From Lucia Singer

I felt smugly justified in my suspicion of any organisation whose name includes both the

the whole corpus of scientific knowledge can be incorporated within a broader narrative beyond science” (2 August, p 22). Any science-religion debate should, at the very least, be symmetric – also considering whether the whole of religion can be incorporated within the scientific narrative.

I imagine that most atheists would hold that religion is a product of the human mind, worthy of study by psychologists and sociologists, but saying nothing about anything outside the human mind. This part of the discussion is noticeably missed by organisations claiming to unite science and religion. For this reason “debates” promoted by the Templeton Foundation are not really worthy of discussion (or advertisement) in a scientific magazine like this.

Wantage, Oxfordshire, UK

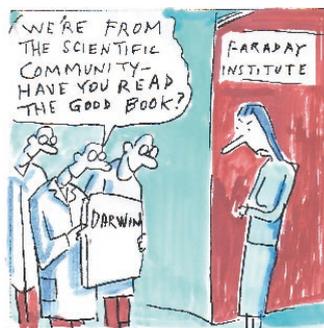
Cut!

From Brian J. Morris, School of Medical Sciences and Bosch Institute, University of Sydney; Daniel T. Halperin, Harvard School of Public Health, Boston; and Jeff D. Klausner, San Francisco Department of Public Health and University of California, San Francisco

Vivien Marx’s article on male circumcision, for which we were interviewed, contains some useful information and is certainly timely (19 July, p 40). However, a few errors appeared.

There are already over half a dozen randomised clinical trials (RCTs), covering more than just HIV. These show no changes in sexual satisfaction, function or behaviour, but do show a reduced incidence of genital ulcer disease and herpes (also in female partners) and human papilloma virus and trichomoniasis. The figures on factors such as infant urinary tract infections, inflammatory skin conditions, penile cancer and cervical cancer are so convincing that RCTs would likely be deemed unethical.

The recent Johns Hopkins



words “science” and “religion” after Denis R. Alexander from the Faraday Institute for Science and Religion stated that “the science-religion debate... is about whether

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University study that Marx cited did not find that “men who are circumcised when they are already HIV-positive are more likely to infect their partners”. There was no statistically significant difference in HIV transmission, though couples who resumed sex before wound healing had more HIV infections six months after surgery.

We predict that circumcision will one day be accepted as vaccination is now. We also realise that there is still resistance. The remaining critics within the medical community employ arguments contradicted by the bulk of research.

Then there is the anti-circumcision movement, whose emotive, unscientific propaganda on this issue is legend.

This is frustrating for international health agencies and experts trying to communicate sound, evidence-based public health messages. The World Health Organization estimates that scaling up circumcision could prevent some 3 million AIDS deaths in Africa over the next 20 years.

More extensive scientific appraisals can be found at <http://go.worldbank.org/XWKGJDCZGo> and www.circinfo.net

From James Badger

It was flattering to see my modest study mentioned. But I am not a “circumcision advocate” as Vivien Marx suggests.

I see the medical benefits of circumcision as indisputable, but I also acknowledge that it involves modifying the body for what is only a potential benefit, so I understand the cultural and philosophical reasons why some parents choose against it.

Marx also failed to mention that my survey of 185 men and women was a piece of journalism for a magazine, not a peer-reviewed paper. It also found that circumcised men had intercourse more frequently, and that the female partners of circumcised men were more likely to reach orgasm. These are relevant issues,

and it would be good if a more substantial study were funded. *Rozelle, New South Wales, Australia*



Transsexual terms

From Oliver Franks

Your report on a gene variant associated with transsexuality called female-to-male transsexuals “transsexual women” and vice versa (2 August, p 14). This perpetuates the myth that a transsexual person is a member of their assigned sex with a mental problem, rather than a member of the sex they identify with who happens to have a physical problem. Every reference to transsexual people with the wrong gender contributes to public doubt in their sanity – and thus doubt in anything they say and do. *York, UK*

In vitro ex cathedra

From Nicholas Sharland

Michael Brooks asserts that the Catholic Church ought to alter its position on in vitro fertilisation (26 July, p 18), but fails to deal with its reason for not doing so. To persuade the church of IVF’s benefits requires convincing it either that the embryo is not as morally inviolable as its teachings state; or else that the loss of embryos during IVF is not a necessary consequence.

The first goes against every principle of the church.

The second is unlikely to win Pope Benedict XVI over while the failure rate of implanted embryos

remains double that for traditional pregnancy, even if he did accept scientists’ right to be “demonstrating God’s good side”. It remains, however, a more hopeful approach than appealing to modernity and citing precedents in other faiths. While the church believes IVF is wrong, it will oppose it no matter who, which or how many disagree. *Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey, UK*

Green milk

From David Weldon

Chris Collins asks about the possibility of a “milk machine” (2 August, p 23). My father, Frank Weldon, for many years president of the UK’s Society of Dairy Technology, worked in the 1950s and 1960s with at least one company trying to replace the inefficient cow with a machine for turning grass into milk.

The cow won. While chemically very similar to the real thing, the milk the machines produced was rather too green for public taste.

That was the least of its



problems, however. It was generally agreed that its taste was similar to the fluids found in the cow’s number two stomach, though I don’t think this was ever experimentally verified.

Church Stretton, Shropshire, UK

Area of uncertainty

From Kris Ericksen

Reviewing *Guesstimation* by Lawrence Weinstein and John A. Adam, Matthew Killeya tells us

that “never again will you take a newspaper figure at face value without feeling the need, and confidence, to guesstimate your own figure” (19 July, p 47). In the same issue we are told that “the amount of space [China] heats with pumps almost quadrupled between 2004 and 2007 to 30 million square kilometres” (p 24).

It would be amazing if an area larger than the 25 million square kilometres of the North American continent were heated in this fashion. Or should that be 30 million square metres, that is 30 square kilometres? Maybe you need to issue this book to everyone in your office. *Wellington, New Zealand*

For the record

● We said the Antiproton Decelerator facility at CERN is “due to switch on in the next year or two” (2 August, p 15). In fact it has been running since 2000; it is an experiment to study the deflection of low-energy antiprotons that will start soon.

● Reporting doubts about the diagnosis of dementia, we described the DSM-IV as a “clutch of cognitive tests” (2 August, p 18). In fact, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (IVth edition) defines hundreds of mental disorders and conditions and diagnostic criteria for them. The researchers argue that the DSM criteria for dementia may not be appropriate for certain cultures and countries.

● An editing error made John Polkinghorne say that academic exploration of the interface between science and religion is not “an endeavour to transcend the limitations inherent in the scientific strategy of bracketing out questions of meaning and value” (9 August, p 20) when in fact he wrote that it is just that.

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