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New Age or Old Nonsense

by Keith Parsons

(Keith Parsons lectures in philosophy at Georgia State University. This article is reprinted by permission from the Georgia Skeptic, June, 1989. The first part of this article appeared in the Jan-Feb issue of The Skeptic.)

Another keystone of the New Age movement is its relativism. When backed into a corner by resolute skeptics, Shirley MacLaine and other New Age gurus will often take refuge in the claim that their beliefs are "true for them" or "their reality." What could it possibly mean to say that something is "my reality" or "true for me?" One possible reading of such statements is that they mean "Don't confuse me with the facts, my mind is made up." However, I think this would be an overly shallow construal. When New Agers appeal to "their reality" they are not signifying a refusal to face reality. Rather, they are signalling that they take "reality" to be an entirely relative term. That is, they do not think that there are objective states of affairs that are as they are, independently of what individuals might believe. That is, they don't think there is any truth about the world over and above what people think is true about the world. You've got your "reality" and I've got my "reality" and everything is cool so long as we each do our own thing and don't try to lay a heavy head trip on each other.

What would lead anybody to espouse such a relativism? Surely, for instance, either reincarnation occurs or it doesn't. If reincarnation is "true for you" and if fact it doesn't occur -- well, you're just wrong.

In fact, such relativism is self-vitiating. Consider the statement "There are no states of affairs that exist independently of what people believe to exist." Now this statement, let's call it "S," is offered as an unrestrictedly general statement about all states of affairs. However, S itself purports to assert a state of affairs; namely, it purports to assert the state of affairs that there are no objective states of affairs. Hence, if S is true, it applies to all states of affairs, including the one asserted by S. Hence, if S is true, then "There are no states of affairs that exist independently of what people believe to exist" cannot assert a state of affairs that is true independently of what people think. Hence, if S itself cannot claim to be objectively true, there would seem to be no reason for anyone to accept it who does not already think it true.

Hand-in-hand with such relativism is the New Age's emphasis on metaphysical idealism -- the doctrine that reality, including physical reality, is somehow created by "mind." A favorite theme of New Agers is that whatever happens to

us is somehow a product of our choices. For instance, if we get cancer of the pancreas, are victims of violent crime, get run over by a bus, or are struck by lightning, we have somehow "chosen" our fate. That is, circumstances that the unenlightened would naturally regard as beyond their control are asserted actually to be realities that they have somehow brought into existence.

Besides creating the unattractive spectacle of blaming the victim (Is the child starving in the Sudan supposed to have chosen her circumstances?), what is wrong with such idealism? what is "mind" and how could it create reality? Tremendous recent advances in neurophysiology, cognitive science, psychology, and philosophy of mind all seem to indicate that such "mental" phenomena as thinking, feeling, and consciousness are products, state, or perhaps better, functions of the brain. When New Agers talk about "mind," however, their talk has a decidedly dualistic flavor. They seem to regard mind as an independent substance, a self-subsistent entity that exists over and above the brain. Indeed, for New Agers enlightenment is supposed to consist in getting in touch with "higher self" -- the self that exists on a higher "spiritual plane."

There are two sorts of problems with this dualistic view of mind. One sort of problem is that if the mind is conceived as a wholly non-physical, incorporeal entity, it is hard to see how we could meaningfully talk about it. To talk meaningfully about something we have to have some means of identifying that thing, some way to pick out that thing as an item of discourse and to distinguish it from other things. With physical objects, we identify them by locating them in space and time. With abstract objects, like the set of natural numbers, we have formal definitions that uniquely specify these things. Neither mode of identification seems possible with disembodied minds. They are not located in space and time, though, mysteriously, they are capable of acting in space and time. Further, it does not seem possible to uniquely specify them with formal definitions.

Suppose, for instance that you are facing a major ethical dilemma. Perhaps you are trying to decide whether to quit your job and enter the Peace Corps. You take a walk to help you settle the issue in your mind. Suddenly a disembodied voice speaks to you: "This is your guardian angel! Don't quit your job! You have responsibilities to your family. Also, you can make a great contribution in your field. Your talents would be wasted in the Peace Corps." Then you suddenly hear another disembodied voice: "No! Don't listen to him! He's not your guardian angel, he's a devil sent to tempt you! I'm your guardian angel, and I tell you to quit your job and join the Peace Corps!"

Now in such a situation, how are you to tell which is the angel and which is the devil? Indeed, how are you to know that there isn't just [one] disembodied being that is mischievously making both voices? Even worse, how are you to know whether or not you are just hallucinating these voices? Such difficulties illustrate the problems involved in identifying disembodied agents.

Suppose, though, that New Agers claim that mind or spirit is not quite so ghostly, but is rather a form of energy that science has not yet identified, though such identification is possible in principle. Perhaps mind is something like Reich's "orgone energy." The problem here is the utter lack of evidence for any such mysterious energy. Out-of-the-body and near-death experiences can all be accounted for in terms of brain activities. The alleged evidence for reincarnation is all of a highly dubious and questionable nature. There are no unresolved scientific problems that would be settled by theories positing such energy. Hence, there seems to be no reason to introduce talk about such a mysterious sort of energy.

When asked to justify their view that mind creates reality, New Agers will often make vague reference to quantum mechanics (QM). What is it about QM that makes New Agers so fond of it? Is there anything about QM that supports metaphysical idealism (the view that mind creates reality)?

QM is weird and wonderful. It imposes definite limits on the old Newtonian, deterministic physics (It doesn't, contrary to what is often implied, completely eliminate such physics. Newton's laws are just as applicable to macro-sized objects as they ever were.) But there is nothing in QM that supports New Age doctrines.

New Agers like to point to the so-called "measurement problem." According to QM, some parameters, such as the momentum or position of a particle, have no definite value at all until a measurement is made of that particular quantity. Thus, we bring it about that a particle has momentum or position by our decision to measure one or the other such property (Heisenberg's uncertainty principle rules out the possibility of making a simultaneous measurement of

momentum and position). Hence, New Agers declare, we create reality. Consciousness determines the position or momentum of a particle.

However, the view that consciousness determines the dynamic properties of particles is only one, and far from the most widely-accepted interpretation of the "measurement problem." Indeed, QM, considered purely as mathematical mechanics, entails no single interpretation. The standard interpretation of QM, the "Copenhagen Interpretation" holds that not consciousness but interaction with macroscopic measuring devices is what determines the position or momentum of a particle. Even a "consciousness" interpretation does not indicate that the properties of sub-atomic particles are [created] by consciousness. At most, it indicates that certain of those properties are [relational] properties, i.e. that momentum, for instance, is not an inherent property of particles, but is a relation between an objectively existing particle and the mind that cognizes that particle. In short, there is nothing in QM that New Agers can employ to argue for their view.

It seems, therefore, that the conceptual foundations of the New Age are very shaky. There is nothing in that foundation to recommend it as a new world-view. Indeed, the New Age lacks the most fundamental property that a new world-view must have; it is not [new]. The New Age is just a revival of the Old Age. Trance-channelling is just 19th century spiritualism all over. Reincarnation is as old as the Vedas. Crystal healing is just like healing with relics of the saints. Clairvoyance is older than the Oracle of Delphi.

Further, the New Age is not a single, coherent philosophy. It is a crazy quilt of doctrines, practices, and beliefs patched together out of all sorts of pre-scientific, magical, and mytho-poetic ways of thinking. The only thing all of these diverse elements have in common is an antipathy to the modes of scientific rationality that define our civilization. Perhaps our present modes of scientific rationality do need to be transcended. However, the way to grow is not to return to childhood.

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ONLY A THEORY: UPDATE

by **Scott Faust**

This is a follow-up to an article that appeared in the last two issues of *The Skeptic*. This article discussed the addition of evolution to science textbook requirements in last year's Texas textbook proclamation, #66, and the controversy which resulted. It concluded with a description of this year's proclamation, #67, the final version of which has since been adopted (on March 10th).

Proclamation 67 -- the good news: The State Board of Education adopted the document with no changes to the science sections. There was no move by the board to introduce anti-evolution language like that in Proclamation 66. The board's failure to further endorse that language by its application to parallel sections of the new proclamation will send a salutary message to publishers, and make things a bit more difficult for anti-evolution activists in textbook hearings this year under Proclamation 66.

Proclamation 67 -- the bad news: The SBE adopted the document with no changes to the science sections. Although the board adopted many changes recommended by petitioners to other portions of the proclamation (e.g. history, language arts), similarly beneficent recommendations for science do not seem to have been seriously considered. Those below were among ones relevant to matters already discussed in this article.

Proclamation 67 contains a modified descendant of Proclamation 66's infamous section 6.3: "examining scientific evidence and information to test, modify, or refute scientific theories." Among criticisms: theories are abandoned, not refuted (refutation implies an outmoded philosophy of justificationism); hypotheses are more frequently tested than theories, which are only rarely abandoned completely; the section is redundant and confusing (what is "information"?), to test already implies to modify and "refute"; etc.

Applied (Introductory) Biology lists "6.1 scientific theories of evolution" under the heading "6. theories of evolution." Does the heading mean to include nonscientific theories of evolution? As one reviewer asked, would we say "6. theories of gravity; 6.1 scientific theories of gravity?" Another problem is the plural "theories." To the extent that there actually are multiple theories of evolution, distinctions concern mechanisms or patterns of evolution. "Mechanisms" and "patterns," however, are already included as subheadings (6.3 and 6.4). Reviewers suggested changing the heading to "evolutionary biology," and using the singular, "theory," in 6.1. The reference to "theories of evolution" is also found in Life Science.

The reasons that no desirable changes were made probably include a lack of assertiveness by the science staff at the Texas Education Agency (although their initial draft proclamation did avoid all but a remnant of the anti-evolution language in Proclamation 66), and a perception by SBE members that the suggestions involved insignificant fine tuning, or that by leaving science alone this time around they could avoid further controversy. Proclamation 67 is, never-the-less, probably the best proclamation for science texts that Texas has had in decades.

I would also like to take this opportunity to make a couple of corrections to my article.

I erred or may have given false impressions in comments about People for the American Way and its Texas director Mike Hudson in the final paragraph of part II. PFAW will be very much involved in Texas Textbook adoptions. Hudson and/or other representatives will probably testify at hearings, PFAW is a part of the TEST coalition referred to in that paragraph, and PFAW is considering updating and rereleasing their 1985 publication *A Consumer's Guide to Biology Textbooks*. Also, Hudson is not moving out of Texas altogether, but will maintain residences both here and in southern California. He will now have general responsibility for the Southwest, rather than for Texas exclusively.

The reference to *Acts & Facts* (the newsletter of the Institute for Creation Research) at the end of footnote 11 in part II does not apply to anything in the footnote, but to material edited from it. ICR president and leading creationist Henry Morris, who has frequently speculated about Satan's personal involvement in developing and disseminating evolutionism (see *The Troubled Waters of Evolution*, 72-5 and *The Long War Against God*, claimed that the "Satanic origin of evolutionism ... [is] the only viable explanation of such a ... completely unscientific and impossible delusion."

In the last footnote to part II, I listed some ways in which readers could participate in textbook adoptions, including the suggestion that they share information with State Textbook Committee members. Those who plan to testify before the Committee or SBE on textbooks should know that there are restrictions upon the kind of contact that petitioners can have with committee members. NTS member Ronnie Hastings should be able to clarify this matter for those who are interested. (Committee hearings begin July 9. A written request to appear must have been received by June 15. Corresponding dates for SBE hearings are November 8 and October 12.)

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REPORT ON MIOS PROGRAM ON WATER CANOPY

by John Blanton

The Metroplex Institute of Origin Science (MIOS) is a local group supporting the "creation science" concept. MIOS meets on the fourth Tuesday of each month at the Wadley Blood Center. I urge skeptics to attend these meetings and weigh the evidence presented there. Contact me for details. The following is a report on one of their meetings, which was attended by Scott Faust, Ron Hastings and myself:

The speaker of the evening was Dr. Clyde V. McKnight, who holds B.S. and M.S. degrees in physics from the University of Texas at Austin and a Ph.D. in atmospheric science from the University of Nevada at Reno. Dr. McKnight

spoke on the physical basis for a water canopy that would have preceded Noah's flood (and would provide the flood waters themselves). We three from the NTS were there, eager to hear what support a qualified scientist could provide for the biblical flood story.

Dr. McKnight started by citing some of the usual, non-scientific, bases for the flood, such as the direct description of the flood in the Bible and the biblical implications of conditions in the time preceding the flood. Then, before he detailed his thoughts on the physical basis for such an event, particularly the basis for the water canopy, he outlined some of the personal beliefs that have helped him form his hypotheses.

Dr. McKnight stated that he firmly believes the "laws of physics are operative at all times (e.g., gravity and the second law of thermodynamics always apply). However, he went on to state that "Miraculous events are not subject to scientific analysis," that "the effects of miracles are [however] subject to scientific analysis," and, finally, that "the laws of physics are at the discretion of God." He went on to state that "Unfounded conclusions have no scientific basis," and there is "no [such thing as] continuous miracles."

The four concepts for a water canopy are, as Dr. McKnight described them, 1) an ice canopy model, 2) a water canopy model, 3) a cloud canopy model and 4) a water vapor canopy model. Dr. McKnight quickly threw out the first three models as having no valid bases. They were either insupportable by physical laws or else do not coincide with the biblical record. The vapor canopy model, however, he asserted was the "most logical model."

The hypothesized water vapor canopy in the earth's atmosphere would be equivalent to forty feet of liquid water covering the surface of the Earth, and it would be stabilized by temperature inversions. Its presence during the biblical period prior to the flood would have the following effects:

Heat from the sun would be trapped in the earth's atmosphere (the greenhouse effect). Differential heating of the vapor canopy (equatorial solar heat flux versus polar heat flux) would produce jet stream-like flows in the atmosphere (Dr. McKnight concedes this is only a guess and that no analysis has been done to support this contention). These jet stream flows would produce uniform ground temperatures from the equator to the poles (and result in a more ideal earthly climate).

There are objections to this vapor canopy model, and Dr. McKnight has outlined them: *A temperature of approximately 220 degrees F at its base would be required to keep this layer in vapor form, and the addition of a regular atmosphere of air below this layer would result in a two-atmosphere surface pressure.* Dr. McKnight, however, sees this doubling of the surface pressure resulting in the presence of larger animal life forms [than we have now] prior to the flood. He credits this possibility to the increased partial pressure of oxygen under these conditions, and he cited hyperbaric chamber evidence (without giving specifics) to support this.

Finally, the condensation of all of this water over a short period, Dr. McKnight stated, would result in the release of 10.86×10^{24} calories of heat energy, and this would cause a 2100 degree Celsius temperature rise in the atmosphere. I was sitting in the front row while Dr. McKnight was giving his talk, so I could not see Ron Hastings sitting in the back, getting ready to make an objection. This last statement stopped Ron cold. The figures agreed with what Ron had come up with, and he just threw up his hands. There was no need for a skeptic to come to a meeting to get a physics lesson from a creationist.

Dr. McKnight stated that due to these facts, the flood could "not [be] supported by the laws of physics," and "a miracle is the only answer."

I, personally, had no trouble with that. My only objection would have been with any contention that there was a scientific basis for the flood. Dr. McKnight and I both work for the same giant electronics company, and the following day I sent him a note through the company mail telling him how much I enjoyed his talk and how I agreed with his contention that there was no scientific basis for the flood. The following is Dr. McKnight's reply in full:

March 11, 1990

Dear John,

Thanks for your note - giving talks is not exactly my cup of tea. Most of the people I know would not try to do away with the miraculous, but there may be some problem knowing exactly what part of such an event supersedes natural laws - esp. an event like the flood. There are some who have a problem ever finding a specific point where they will say it was supernatural. Other events which we would call "miracles" do not violate any natural laws - as in many of the events of the book of Esther.

As to there being no physical, scientific basis for the flood, it depends on what you mean. I believe that the cause of the flood was supernatural in some respects. There is, however, a physical, scientific basis for the flood in the geologic record. Modern science is no longer comfortable with the idea of a world-wide flood and its possible religious implications. It has set about to reinterpret data which was previously accepted as resulting from such a flood. I did try to emphasize that science can evaluate the results of a miracle -this would include the flood.

I really feel that belief in the miraculous is an area where we have much in common with evolutionist. Although there is no real evidence to support the theory of evolution (and much to the contrary); yet the theory is adhered to with an unshakable religious faith because "the only alternative is unthinkable."

Sincerely yours,

Clyde

One of the benefits of putting out your own newsletter is that you get to have the last word.

Dr. McKnight has missed the point entirely. By hanging his argument on a miracle, he has defeated it entirely. If he is allowed to invoke a miracle whenever his thesis gets into a bind on a scientific basis, then he can have anything he wants. He doesn't need to do field research, and he doesn't need evidence. He is free to make any assertion he wants (even one that does not agree with the biblical account), and no one can successfully contradict him. There is absolutely no way to rationally counter an argument that allows for miracles (in favor of the argument). To attempt to do so would be like playing chess with an opponent who has his hand on your king. Check your opponent and, bingo, the game is over. He invokes a miracle and removes your king.

To validate his case, Dr. McKnight must prove it from the weakest position. He must discard all of his special privileges and his what if's. He must then bring forth real evidence of such overpowering magnitude and credibility that no argument will stand up against it. That is the way that science works. That is what stands behind the laws of gravity, thermodynamics and quantum mechanics. And right now, that is what stands behind the present theories of biology and geology.

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Summer Science

The Science Place in Dallas is offering "Summer Science" for children from kindergarten to grade nine. These programs are fun one or three-week classes covering science topics from pond life to dinosaurs and music to household chemistry. This year, the Science Place is also offering "Sci or Fi?" a course for grades five through seven dealing with the scientific evidence, or lack of it, for such things as the Sasquatch, the Loch Ness Monster, and UFO's. Tracy Herring of the Science Place told us that the course was very popular when offered last year. It aims to show kids how science checks out strange claims by examining the evidence pro and con and applying principles of reason and common sense. At least six topics are covered in the three days the class runs. The instructors are usually local teachers with a science background. Ms. Herring said that the course doesn't cover more "controversial" subjects like astrology, the occult or creationism, but then the works of Erich von Daniken alone could supply all the classroom material necessary.

If you're interested, call The Science Place at (214) 428-5555. Classes start June 12, and run through August.

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