

A MANUAL FOR CREATING ATHEISTS

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Foreword by Michael Shermer

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Foreword by Michael Shermer

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CHAPTER I

STREET EPISTEMOLOGY

street /strēt/

Noun: A public thoroughfare.

e·pis·te·mol·o·gy /i·pis·tə-ˈmä-lə-jē/

Noun: The study of knowledge.

This book will teach you how to talk people out of their faith. You'll learn how to engage the faithful in conversations that help them value reason and rationality, cast doubt on their beliefs, and mistrust their faith. I call this activist approach to helping people overcome their faith, "Street Epistemology." The goal of this book is to create a generation of Street Epistemologists: people equipped with an array of dialectical and clinical tools who actively go into the streets, the prisons, the bars, the churches, the schools, and the community—into any and every place the faithful reside—and help them abandon their faith and embrace reason.

A Manual for Creating Atheists details, explains, and teaches you how to be a street clinician and how to apply the tools I've developed and used as an educator and

philosopher. The lessons, strategies, and techniques I share come from my experience teaching prisoners, from educating tens of thousands of students in overcrowded public universities, from engaging the faithful every day for more than a quarter century, from over two decades of rigorous scholarship, and from the streets.

Street Epistemology harkens back to the values of the ancient philosophers—individuals who were tough-minded, plain-speaking, known for self-defense, committed to truth, unyielding in the face of danger, and fearless in calling out falsehoods, contradictions, inconsistencies, and nonsense. Plato was a wrestler and a soldier with broad shoulders. He was decorated for bravery in battle (Christian, 2011, p. 51). Socrates was a seasoned soldier. At his trial, when facing the death penalty, he was unapologetic. When asked to suggest a punishment for his “crimes,” he instead proposed to be rewarded (Plato, *Apology*).

Hellenistic philosophers fought against the superstitions of their time. Lucretius, Sextus Empiricus, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and others combated the religious authorities of their period, including early versions of Christianity (Clarke, 1968; Nussbaum, 1994). They thought the most important step was to liberate people from fear of tortures of the damned and from fear that preachers of their epoch were spouting. Hellenistic philosophers were trying to

encourage stoic self-sufficiency, a sense of self-responsibility, and a tough-minded humanism.

Street Epistemology is a vision and a strategy for the next generation of atheists, skeptics, humanists, philosophers, and activists. Left behind is the idealized vision of wimpy, effete philosophers: older men in jackets with elbow patches, smoking pipes, stroking their white, unkempt beards. Gone is cowering to ideology, orthodoxy, and the modern threat of political correctness.

Enter the Street Epistemologist: an articulate, clear, helpful voice with an unremitting desire to help people overcome their faith and to create a better world—a world that uses intelligence, reason, rationality, thoughtfulness, ingenuity, sincerity, science, and kindness to build the future; not a world built on faith, delusion, pretending, religion, fear, pseudoscience, superstition, or a certainty achieved by keeping people in a stupor that makes them pawns of unseen forces because they're terrified.

The Street Epistemologist is a philosopher and a fighter. She has savvy and street smarts that come from the school of hard knocks. She relentlessly helps others by tearing down falsehoods about whatever enshrined “truths” enslave us.¹

But the Street Epistemologist doesn't just tear down fairytales, comforting delusions, and imagined entities. She offers a humanistic vision. Let's be blunt, direct, and honest with ourselves and with others. Let's help people develop a trustfulness of reason and a willingness to reconsider, and let's place rationality in the service of humanity. Street Epistemology offers a humanism that's taken some hits and gained from experience. This isn't Pollyanna humanism, but a humanism that's been slapped around and won't fall apart. Reason and rationality have endurance. They don't evaporate the moment you get slugged. And you will get slugged.²

The immediate forerunners to Street Epistemologists were "the Four Horsemen," each of whom contributed to identifying a part of the problem with faith and religion. American neuroscientist Sam Harris articulated the problems and consequences of faith. British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins explained the God delusion and taught us how ideas spread from person to person within a culture. American philosopher Daniel Dennett analyzed religion and its effects as natural phenomena. British-American author Christopher Hitchens divorced religion from morality and addressed the historical role of religion. The Four Horsemen called out the problem of faith and religion and started a turn in our thinking and in our culture—they demeaned society's view of religion,

faith, and superstition, while elevating attitudes about reason, rationality, Enlightenment, and humanistic values.

The Four Horsemen identified the problems and raised our awareness, but they offered few solutions. No roadmap. Not even guideposts. Now the onus is upon the next generation of thinkers and activists to take direct and immediate action to fix the problems Harris, Dawkins, Dennett, and Hitchens identified.

A Manual for Creating Atheists is a step beyond Harris, Dawkins, Hitchens, and Dennett. *A Manual for Creating Atheists* offers practical solutions to the problems of faith and religion through the creation of Street Epistemologists—legions of people who view interactions with the faithful as clinical interventions designed to disabuse them of their faith.

Hitchens may be gone, but no single individual will take his place. Instead of a replacement Horseman, there are millions of Horsemen ushering in a new Enlightenment and an Age of Reason. You, the reader, will be one of these Horsemen. You will become a Street Epistemologist. You will transform a broken world long ruled by unquestioned faith into a society built on reason, evidence, and thought-out positions. This is work that needs to be done and work that will pay off by potentially helping millions—even billions—of people to live in a better world.

For the reader eager to get started talking others out of their faith, the tendency will be to skip to chapter 4. This is a mistake. The early chapters are designed to give you an understanding of the mechanism of belief. Effective interventions depend upon understanding core ideas and definitions covered in chapters 2 and 3.

NOTES

1. Other falsehoods include faith as a virtue; the importance of passionate belief; radical subjectivity; cognitive, cultural, and epistemological relativism; metaphysical entities that scrutinize and then ultimately punish or reward us; men who allegedly received revelations in the desert, or through golden plates; not blaspheming and being sensitive and respectful to the faith-based delusions of others; feeling shame in not knowing; unreflective injecting of pervasive egalitarianism into our judgments; unsupported beliefs about what happens to us after we die, etc.
2. On September 10, 2010, my friend, Steven Brutus, gave the graduation speech for The Art Institute of Portland at the Gerding Theater in Portland, Oregon. I've included portions of it here because it perfectly

sums up the vision of Street Epistemology:

Hard-boiled means that you look at things straight on. You play it straight. You don't sugarcoat it, you don't play it cute, you don't pull your punches. You look at the cold, hard truth. You lay things out truthfully. That's your healthy skepticism. You become the investigator—you have to be your *own* private investigator—you're the detective—so you better learn how to handle yourself. You're going to go to some tough places, the other side of the tracks, and there's going to be some bad guys around—some tough cookies, some palookas and gorillas and femme fatales and some snakes... .

The tough guy adheres to a moral code in a world that has no moral code. It has no moral values—basically no values at all. The tough son-of-a-bitch stands for something, unlike pretty much everything around him. He's a stand-up guy in a sit-down, shut-up world. Philip Marlowe in particular is all about hanging on to his decency and humanity in a world that's chipping away at his soul, at his spirit and

honor. The tough-guy hero is always an exception, a lone wolf—she’s independent, strong, brave, self-reliant—they’re a little bit on the outside, they’re isolated, estranged, they’re out there on the margins—pretty close to *amoral* territory. But he’s always got a stance, a code, a worldview. They’ve seen it all—not much shocks them—they’ve been around the block—these are principled people... .

What makes them the exception is that they’re tough, they hang in there, they won’t go down for the count. But not *just* that—it’s also that they’re fighting for something—*fighting the good fight*—they’re not in it for themselves—they’re principled, they’ve got their pride, their honor, their dignity. But they never talk about it. They don’t tell you how great they are, they don’t tell you what great stuff they’re doing for you—they just do it. They don’t preach. They act.

[T]he tough guy hero is “inner directed”—he has what psychologists call an “inner locus of control”—the opposite of an “external locus of control”—he’s not going

to worry too much about what the next guy thinks of him. He knows that he's got to get his game face on, tough things out on his own, stand on his own two feet, put his pants on one leg at a time.

I am ... talk[ing] about toughening up and finding some strength in yourself to be self-confident and able to take some hits and to stay in the game—to come back from setbacks—to be resilient.

Socrates ... said that wisdom is the key to happiness. Socrates was a skeptic about happiness, because we do not possess wisdom—no one he knows has wisdom. I guess I should say that whatever it is that you have learned from teachers—including me—and I hope it is a great deal—it is not *wisdom*. That you will have to search for in the school of hard knocks and—if you find it—it's going to be something you earn on your own—you'll have to learn it on your own—it will also be on your own terms. But tell the rest of us about it, if you find it—tell everyone—help as many people as you can.

CHAPTER 2

FAITH

This chapter has two parts. The first part clears up the terms “faith,” “atheist,” and “agnostic.” It does so by offering two definitions of faith: “belief without evidence” and “pretending to know things you don’t know.” It then disambiguates “faith” from “hope.” Once the meanings of these terms have been clarified, the second part of the chapter articulates faith as an epistemology, underscores the fact that faith claims are knowledge claims, and then briefly articulates the problems and dangers of faith.

THE MEANING OF WORDS: FAITH, ATHEIST, AND AGNOSTIC

As a Street Epistemologist, you’ll find subjects will attempt to evade your help by asserting that *every* definition of faith offered is incorrect and that you “just don’t understand” what faith really is.

When pressed, the faithful will offer vague definitions that are merely transparent attempts to evade criticism, or simplistic definitions that intentionally muddy the meaning of “faith.” More common still are what Horseman Daniel

Dennett terms “deepities.”

A deepity is a statement that looks profound but is not. Deepities appear true at one level, but on all other levels are meaningless. Here are some examples of deepities:

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1)

“Faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things; therefore if ye have faith ye hope for things which are not seen, which are true.” (Alma 32:21)¹

“Faith is the act in which reason reaches ecstatically beyond itself.” (Tillich, 1957, p. 87)

“Faith is faith in the living God, and God is and remains a mystery beyond human comprehension. Although the ‘object’ of our faith, God never ceases to be ‘subject.’” (Migliore, 1991, p. 3)

“Making faith-sense tries to wed meaning and facts. You can start with either one, but it is important to include the claims of both.” (Kinast, 1999, p. 7)

“Having faith is really about seeking something beyond faith itself.” (McLaren, 1999, p. 3)

... and additionally, virtually every statement made by Indian-American physician Deepak Chopra. For example, Chopra's tweets on February 7, 2013, read:

“The universe exists in awareness alone.”

“God is the ground of awareness in which the universe arises & subsides”

“All material objects are forms of awareness within awareness, sensations, images, feelings, thoughts”

One could easily fill an entire book with faith deepities—many, many authors have. Christians in particular have created a tradition to employ deepities, used slippery definitions of faith, and hidden behind unclear language since at least the time of Augustine (354–430).

The word “faith” is a very slippery pig. We need to get our hands on it, pin it to the ground, and wrap a blanket around it so we can have something to latch onto before we finally and permanently subdue it. Malleable definitions allow faith to slip away from critique.²

Two Definitions of Faith

The words we use are important. They can help us see clearly, or they can confuse, cloud, or obscure issues. I'll

now offer my two preferred definitions of faith, and then disambiguate faith from hope.³

faith /fāTH/

1. *Belief without evidence.*

“My definition of faith is that it’s a leap over the probabilities. It fills in the gap between what is improbable to make something more probable than not without faith. As such, faith is an *irrational* leap over the probabilities.”

—John W. Loftus, “Victor Reppert Now Says He Doesn’t Have Faith!” (Loftus, 2012)

If one had sufficient evidence to warrant belief in a particular claim, then one wouldn’t believe the claim on the basis of faith. “Faith” is the word one uses when one does not have enough evidence to justify holding a belief, but when one just goes ahead and believes anyway.

Another way to think about “belief without evidence” is to think of an irrational leap over probabilities.⁴ For example, assume that an historical Jesus existed and was crucified, and that his corpse was placed in a tomb. Assume also that eyewitness accounts were accurate, and days later the tomb was empty.

One can believe the corpse was missing for any number of reasons. For example, one can believe the body arose from the dead and ascended to heaven, one can believe aliens brought the body back to life, or one can believe an ancient spirit trapped in the tomb merged with the corpse and animated it. Belief in any of these claims would require faith because there's insufficient evidence to justify any *one* of these particular options. Belief in any of these claims would also disregard other, far more likely possibilities—for example, that the corpse was stolen, hidden, or moved.

If one claims knowledge either in the absence of evidence, or when a claim is contradicted by evidence, then this is when the word “faith” is used. “Believing something anyway” is an accurate definition of the term “faith.”

faith /fāTH/

2. Pretending to know things you don't know.

Not everything that's a case of pretending to know things you don't know is a case of faith, but cases of faith are instances of pretending to know something you don't know.⁵ For example, someone who knows nothing about baking a cake can pretend to know how to bake a cake, and this is not an instance of faith. But if someone claims to know something on the basis of faith, they are

pretending to know something they don't know. For example, using faith would be like someone giving advice about baking cookies who has never been in a kitchen.

As a Street Epistemologist, whenever you hear the word "faith," just translate this in your head as, "pretending to know things you don't know." While swapping these words may make the sentence clunky, "pretending to know things you don't know" will make the meaning of the sentence clearer.

To start thinking in these terms, the following table contains commonly heard expressions using the word "faith" in column one, and the same expressions substituted with the words "pretending to know things you don't know" in column two.

"FAITH"	"PRETENDING TO KNOW THINGS YOU DON'T KNOW"
----------------	---

"My faith is beneficial for me."	"Pretending to know things I don't know is beneficial for me."
----------------------------------	--

"I have faith in God."	"I pretend to know things I don't know about God."
------------------------	--

“Life has no meaning without faith.”

“Life has no meaning if I stop pretending to know things I don’t know.”

“I don’t pretend to know things I don’t know enough to be an atheist.”

“I don’t have enough faith to be an atheist.”

Alternatively, if atheist is defined as “a person who doesn’t pretend to know things he doesn’t know about the creation of the universe,” the sentence then becomes, “I don’t pretend to know things I don’t know enough to be a person who pretends to know things he doesn’t know about the creation of the universe.”

“You have faith in science.”

“You pretend to know things you don’t know about science.”

“You have faith your spouse loves you.”

“You pretend to know things you don’t know about your spouse’s love.”

“If everyone

abandoned
their faith,
society
would
devolve
morally.”

“If everyone stopped pretending to know things they don’t know, society would devolve morally.”

“My faith is true for me.”

“Pretending to know things I don’t know is true for me.”

“Why should people stop having faith if it helps them get through the day?”

“Why should people stop pretending to know things they don’t know if it helps them get through the day?”

“Teach your children to have faith.”

“Teach your children to pretend to know things they don’t know.”

“Freedom of faith.”

“Freedom of pretending to know things you don’t know.”

“International Faith

“International Pretending to Know Things You Don’t Know Convention”

Convention”

“She’s
having a
crisis of
faith.”

“She’s having a crisis of pretending to know things she doesn’t know.”

Alternatively, “She is struck by the fact that she’s been pretending to know things she doesn’t know.”

Disambiguation: Faith Is Not Hope

Faith and hope are not synonyms. Sentences with these words also do not share the same linguistic structure and are semantically different—for example, one can say, “I hope it’s so,” and not, “I faith it’s so.”

The term “faith,” as the faithful use it in religious contexts, needs to be disambiguated from words such as “promise,” “confidence,” “trust,” and, especially, “hope.”^{6 7} “Promise,” “confidence,” “trust,” and “hope” are not knowledge claims. One can hope for anything or place one’s trust in anyone or anything. This is not the same as claiming to know something. To hope for something admits there’s a possibility that what you want may not be realized. For example, if you hope your stock will rise tomorrow, you are not claiming to know your stock will rise; you want your stock to rise, but you recognize there’s a possibility it may not. Desire is not certainty but the wish for an outcome.

Hope is not the same as faith. Hoping is not the same as knowing. If you hope something happened you're not claiming it did happen. When the faithful say, "Jesus walked on water," they are not saying they *hope* Jesus walked on water, but rather are claiming Jesus actually did walk on water.

Thought Challenge!

In my May 6, 2012, public lecture for the Humanists of Greater Portland, I further underscored the difference between faith and hope by issuing the following thought challenge:

Give me a sentence where one must use the word "faith," and cannot replace that with "hope," yet at the same time isn't an example of pretending to know something one doesn't know.

To date, nobody has answered the thought challenge. I don't think it can be answered because faith and hope are not synonyms.

Atheist

“I contend we are both atheists, I just believe in one fewer God than you do.”

—Stephen F. Roberts

Of all the terms used in this book, none is more problematic, more contentious, more divisive, or more confusing than the term “atheist.”

This confusion is understandable given that the word “theist” is contained in the word “atheist.” It is thus natural to assume a type of parallelism between the two words. Many of the faithful imagine that just as a theist firmly believes in God, an a-theist firmly disbelieves in God. This definitional and conceptual confusion needs to be clarified.

“Atheist,” *as I use the term*, means, “There’s insufficient evidence to warrant belief in a divine, supernatural creator of the universe. However, if I were shown sufficient evidence to warrant belief in such an entity, then I would believe.”⁸ ⁹ I recommend we start to conceptualize “atheist” in this way so we can move the conversation forward.

The atheist does *not* claim, “No matter how solid the evidence for a supernatural creator, I refuse to believe.”¹⁰ In *The God Delusion*, for example, Horseman Dawkins

provides a 1–7 scale, with 1 being absolute belief and 7 being absolute disbelief in a divine entity (Dawkins, 2006a, pp. 50–51). Dawkins, whom many consider to be among the most hawkish of atheists, only places himself at a 6. In other words, even Dawkins does not definitively claim there is no God. He simply thinks the existence of God is highly unlikely. A difference between an atheist and a person of faith is that an atheist is willing to revise their belief (if provided sufficient evidence); the faithful permit no such revision.

Agnostic

Agnostics profess to not know whether or not there's an undetectable, metaphysical entity that created the universe. Agnostics think there's not enough evidence to warrant belief in God, but because it's logically possible they remain unsure of God's existence. Again, an agnostic is willing to revise her belief if provided sufficient evidence.

The problem with agnosticism is that in the last 2,400 years of intellectual history, *not a single argument* for the existence of God has withstood scrutiny. Not one. Aquinas's five proofs, fail. Pascal's Wager, fail. Anselm's ontological argument, fail. The fine-tuning argument, fail. The Kalam cosmological argument, fail. All refuted. All failures. [11](#)

I dislike the terms “agnostic” and “agnosticism.” I advise Street Epistemologists to not use these terms. This is why: I don’t believe Santa Claus is a real person who flies around in a sleigh led by reindeer delivering presents. I am a Santa Claus atheist. Even though there’s nothing logically impossible about this phenomenon, I’m not a Santa Claus agnostic. (That is, a large man in a red suit delivering presents at the speed of light is not a logical contradiction.) “Agnostic” and “agnosticism” are unnecessary terms. Street Epistemologists should avoid them.

EPISTEMOLOGY AND KNOWLEDGE CLAIMS

Now that the terms “faith,” “atheist,” and “agnostic” have been clarified, we can have a meaningful discussion about “belief without evidence” being an unreliable way to navigate reality. We can also examine the dangers of formulating beliefs and social policies on the basis of insufficient evidence.

Faith Claims Are Knowledge Claims

The term “epistemology” comes from the Greek “episteme,” which means “knowledge,” and “logos,” which means “reason and logic” and “argument and inquiry” and therefore, by extension, “the study of.” Epistemology is a branch of philosophy that focuses on

how we come to knowledge, what knowledge is, and what processes of knowing the world are reliable.

Conclusions one comes to as the result of an epistemological process are knowledge claims. A knowledge claim is an assertion of truth. Examples of knowledge claims include: “The moon is 52,401 miles from the Earth,” “My fist has a greater diameter than a soda can,” and “The Azande supreme God, Onyame, created the world and all lesser gods.”

Faith is an epistemology.¹² It’s a method and a process people use to understand reality. Faith-based conclusions are knowledge claims. For example, “I have faith Jesus Christ will heal my sickness because it says so in Luke” is a knowledge claim. The utterer of this statement is asserting Jesus will heal her.

Those who make faith claims are professing to know something about the external world. For example, when someone says, “Jesus walked on water” (Matthew 14:22–33), that person is claiming *to know* there was an historical figure named Jesus and that he, unaided by technology, literally walked across the surface of the water. “Jesus walked on water” is a knowledge claim—an objective statement of fact.

Much of the confusion about faith-based claims comes

from mistaking objective claims with subjective claims. Knowledge claims purport to be objective because they assert a truth about the world. Subjective claims are not knowledge claims and do not assert a truth about the world; rather, they are statements about one's own unique, situated, subjective, personal experiences or preferences.

Think of subjective claims as matters of taste or opinion. For example, "Mustard on my hot dog tastes good," "John Travolta is the greatest actor who's ever lived," and "The final season of *Battlestar Galactica* wasn't as good as the first two seasons." These are subjective statements because they relate to matters of taste. They are not statements of fact about the world. They do not apply to everyone. Contrast these statements with, "The Dalai Lama reincarnates." This statement is a knowledge claim. It's an assertion of truth about the world that is independent of one's taste or liking; it's a faith claim masquerading as a knowledge claim, a statement of fact.

Faith claims are knowledge claims. Faith claims are statements of fact about the world.

Faith Is an Unreliable Epistemology

"Your religious beliefs typically depend on the community in which you were raised or live. The spiritual experiences of people in ancient Greece,

medieval Japan or 21st-century Saudi Arabia do not lead to belief in Christianity. It seems, therefore, that religious belief very likely tracks not truth but social conditioning.”

—Gary Gutting, “The Stone,” *New York Times*, September 14, 2011

Faith is a failed epistemology. Showing why faith fails has been done before. And it’s been done well (Bering, 2011; Harris, 2004; Loftus, 2010; Loftus, 2013; McCormick, 2012; Schick & Vaughn, 2008; Shermer, 1997; Shermer, 2011; Smith, 1979; Stenger & Barker, 2012; Torres, 2012; Wade, 2009). There’s no need to recapitulate this vast body of scholarship. Instead, I’ll briefly explain what I find to be one of the principal arguments against faith.

If a belief is based on insufficient evidence, then any further conclusions drawn from the belief will at best be of questionable value. Believing on the basis of insufficient evidence cannot point one toward the truth. For example, the following are unassailable facts everyone, faithful or not, would agree upon:

1. There are different faith traditions.
2. Different faith traditions make different truth claims.

3. The truth claims of some faith traditions contradict the truth claims of other faith traditions. For example, Muslims believe Muhammad (570–632) was the last prophet (Sura 33:40). Mormons believe Joseph Smith (1805–1844), who lived after Muhammad, was a prophet.
4. It cannot both be the case that Muhammad was the last prophet and someone who lived after Muhammad was also a prophet.
5. Therefore: *At least* one of these claims *must* be false (perhaps both).

It is impossible to figure out which of these claims is incorrect if the tool one uses to do so is faith. As a tool, as an epistemology, as a method of reasoning, as a process for knowing the world, faith cannot adjudicate between competing claims (“Muhammad was the last prophet” versus “Joseph Smith was a prophet”). Faith cannot steer one away from falsehood and toward truth.

This is because faith does not have a built-in corrective mechanism. That is, faith claims have no way to be corrected, altered, revised, or modified. For example, if one has faith in the claim, “The Earth is 4,000 years old,” how could this belief be revised? If one believes that the Earth is 4,000 years old on the basis of faith, then there’s no evidence, reason, or body of facts one could present to

dissuade one from belief in this claim.¹³

The *only* way to figure out which claims about the world are likely true, and which are likely false, is through reason and evidence. *There is no other way.*

THE DANGER OF FAITH

“No amount of belief makes something a fact.”

—James Randi

The pretending-to-know-things-you-don't-know pandemic hurts us all. Believing things on the basis of something other than evidence and reason causes people to misconstrue what's good for them and what's good for their communities. Those who believe on the basis of insufficient evidence create external conditions based upon what they think is in their best interest, but this is actually counterproductive. In the United States, for example, public policies driven by people who pretend to know things they don't know continue to hurt people: abstinence-only sex education, prohibitions against gay marriage, bans on death with dignity, corporal punishment in schools, failure to fund international family planning organizations, and promoting the teaching of Creationism and other pseudosciences are but a few of the many misguided conclusions wrought by irrationality.

The less one relies on reason and evidence to form conclusions, the more arbitrary the conclusion. In aggregate, conclusions that result from a lack of evidence can have incredibly dangerous consequences. The Taliban, for example, have rooted their vision of a good life on the Koran. By acting on what they perceive to be divine injunctions revealed to God's Prophet, they think they're creating a good life and a good society. They are not.¹⁴ ¹⁵ Consequently, the conclusions they act upon—covering women and beating them, beheading people who have rival interpretations of the Koran or who act in ways they deem un-Islamic, perpetrating violence against females who seek an education, denying citizens basic freedoms, executing people for blasphemy—take them away from a good life. They've misidentified *the process* that will allow their community to flourish because they've identified and used faith, not evidence and reason, as a guide.

How do we know the society the Taliban created has not led to human flourishing? By virtually every modern metric: exports versus imports, literacy, economic aid, public health, life expectancy, infant mortality, household income, GDP, Happy Planet Index, etc. Afghanistan under the Taliban was an unmitigated catastrophe. It is not in anyone's interest, particularly the people who live under their tyranny, to have created a dystopian, premodern,

misogynistic theocracy.¹⁶ (If you don't think they created a dystopia, or if you're a relativist and think they created a society that's merely different, not better or worse, from Denmark, for example, then there's nothing I can say to you. Nothing I write in this book will persuade you.)

The vast majority of people use faith to understand the world, to guide their actions, and to ground their institutions. Nation-states like Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Mauritania, Somalia, Sudan, and Iran adhere to Islamic law (sharia) as the basis for state law. This is a problem that would be unimaginable in its scope and severity were it not for the fact that we're currently witnesses to this epistemic horror show, such as the beheading of homosexuals, blasphemers, adulterers, and apostates and radically disproportionate treatment of individuals based upon their gender.

Yet there is hope. Faith is slowly falling into disrepute. The forces of unreason are diminishing in number. Thousands of new Horsemen, Street Epistemologists, are emerging.

DIG DEEPER

Books

Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* (Harris, 2004)

Stephen Law, *Believing Bullshit* (Law, 2011)

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Videos

Peter Boghossian, “Jesus, the Easter Bunny, and Other Delusions: Just Say No!”
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QualiaSoup's YouTube channel, "UK Secular Humanist Discussing: Science & the Natural World, Critical Thinking, Atheism, Philosophy, Religion," <http://www.youtube.com/user/QualiaSoup>

The Atheist Experience, "The Atheist Experience is a weekly cable access television show in Austin, Texas geared at a non-atheist audience. Every week we field live calls from atheists and believers alike, and you never know what you're going to get!" <http://www.atheistexperience.com>

Thunderf00t's YouTube channel, "The true beauty of a self-inquiring sentient universe is lost on those who elect to walk the intellectually vacuous path of comfortable paranoid fantasies," <http://www.youtube.com/user/Thunderf00t>

NOTES

1. The Book of Alma is one of the books in the Book of Mormon. The complete title is "The Book of Alma: The Son of Alma."

Religious belief is very often defended through the use of clever semantics. There are some important things to note about these dodges. When a person of faith is questioned over one or

more specific, illogical tenets of their belief, they often respond with, “Well, of course I don’t believe that,” leaving the Street Epistemologist at a disadvantage since the believer continues to profess their unaltered faith-based belief regardless. If pressed further, the believer will either respond with deepities or with a somewhat different version of “why” they continue to believe despite a lack of evidence. This entrenched position results in a cycle of indefinite repetition. My sense is that those who use meaningless words to protect their emotional ties to faith are engaging in self-deception. (This type of “conversation” is not twosided; it is a monologue masquerading as a dialogue.)

The emotional satisfaction of religious belief vitally depends upon the beliefs being taken literally; the epistemic defense of such beliefs crucially depends on taking them nonliterally. This type of cognitive disruption does not bode well in the search for truth.

What nearly all *sophisticated* believers do is simultaneously deceive themselves while alternating between two stances: they absolutely don’t believe in *that*—of course he didn’t walk

on water—while voicing unflappable conviction about *this*—the world was created by a higher power. When defending epistemically, they characterize the belief as not literally requiring the existence of a Special Person (“God loves us” means “Love is important,” “Love prevails in the end,” etc.), but then as soon as they have satisfied the epistemic challenge, they reframe the belief more literally (“God loves us” means “There is a Special Person who loves us”).

I think this latter issue is far more important to address than critics of faith realize, and it is probably a more common phenomenon (not limited to intellectuals) than one might think. It is at least a part of what the believer is doing when replying to criticism by simply and mysteriously saying, “You just don’t understand.” The other part is, “You lack detailed familiarity with the culture, history, and theology of my religion.”

This is a separate issue, and is often enough true, though the response to that is like replying to someone who points out *Star Trek* is fiction by saying, “You wouldn’t say that if you had the detailed and rich experience of being a Trekkie

that I have,” which is, of course, absurd.

2. Hebrews 11 defines faith, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence [elenchus] of things not seen.” What is interesting is the use of the term “elenchus” in this passage.

“Elenchus” in Homer (8th century) is variously: to put to shame, to treat with contempt, to question with the aim of disproving, with the aim of censure, accusation, to accuse someone and perhaps to convict him—oftentimes in uses where superior officers dress down rank and file soldiers. In courts of law the term is also used: to bring charges, to bring accusations, but also to bring proofs, evidence, to offer convincing proofs. Pre-Socratics like Parmenides (early 5th century) use it as Socrates does: as argument, scrutiny, cross-examination for the purpose of refutation or disproof.

In Koine, the verb *elencho* is “I accuse, rebuke, reprove,” and also “I expose, I show to be guilty, I prove” (in the sense of putting the lie to a public statement). It’s in John 3:20; 1 Cor 14:24; Eph. 5:11, 13; James 2: 9. Souter’s *Lexicon of the New Testament* lists *elenchus* as

“proof, possibly a persuasion” (Souter, 1917). This evidence points to a straightforward fact: in the Apostolic Age, the word *elenchus* expands in an important new context to take on the sense that is on stage in Hebrews 11, that is, people began using the word in a new way. They advocated, practiced, and helped make a success of using the word “*elenchus*.” Socrates used this term to indicate a rigorous process of argumentation by strict application of logic. In the new sense *elenchus* is used as conviction or persuasion or some other species of willing and satisfied affirmation—without argument—without going through the Socratic process of rigorous argumentation.

Socrates earned the right to claim a conclusion from philosophical examination. The anonymous author of Hebrews writes instead that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction or persuasion (*elenchus*) of things not seen. If Socrates were to hear this phrase, I imagine he’d say, “This may be conviction, but it is not an argument, not a crossexamination and test by scrutiny, but is a jump without any justification—without proof, and without earning it. Where is the virtue in this?”

3. For more, see American mathematician James A. Lindsay's, "Defining Faith via Bayesian Reasoning" (Lindsay, 2012). Lindsay provides a cogent analysis of faith using Bayes' theorem.
4. The exceptions to this are those people who are not pretending. These individuals are either delusional, or they're victims of a wholesale lack of exposure to alternative ideas and different epistemologies. In the latter case, many people in the Islamic world fall into this category. For example, most of the people in Saudi Arabia are not pretending to know something they don't know about the Koran. They've never encountered nor been given an opportunity to genuinely engage in competing ways of understanding reality. In a very real sense, they're epistemological victims. Additionally, anyone reared by fundamentalist parents deserves credit for the exceptional struggle from indoctrination to enlightenment.
5. A recent move by apologists is to avoid the use of the word "faith" entirely, and instead to use the word "trust." Given that the word "faith" is inherently problematic, I think this is an excellent strategy. The counter to this, however, is identical: "Without sufficient evidence how do you know what to trust?" If the response is, "There's sufficient evidence," then

your reply should be, “Then you don’t need faith.”

6. In this vein, I’ve also heard faith defined as, “An attitude about things we don’t know.” When asked to spell out the nature of this attitude, it seems to be a kind of confidence or assurance or untroubled conviction, which in normal parlance is what we associate with the attitude of a person who has adequate justification for saying, “I know.”

The problem with defining faith as “an attitude about things we don’t know” is that it functions in exactly the same way as an attitude about things we do know. From a critical perspective the question is, “How can an attitude that does not have sufficient justification to warrant belief work in the same way as an attitude that flows from actually having sufficient justification to warrant belief?” And the straightforward answer is: it cannot.

Because people adopt this kind of attitude it’s therefore fair game to call them on this and say, “You are not justified in this assurance or conviction that you have. And the fact that you are not worried about it shows that you have not aimed your intellectual honesty at this attitude—in fact, you seem to be afraid or unwilling to do

this—when the honest thing would be to say, ‘My faith is not like knowledge, it is not justified, but is something else ... maybe (charitably) a choice.’”

7. An alternative definition of “atheist” is: a person who doesn’t pretend to know things he doesn’t know with regard to the creation of the universe.
8. Some noted atheists, like American historian Richard Carrier, view atheism as an identity (Carrier, 2012). Others, like Horseman Sam Harris, do not. My opinion is that self-identification as an atheist is a personal choice. (Personally, I’m more interested in balancing my home and work lives, or in getting a full night of sleep.)

I am frequently asked if atheism is part of my identity. My answer is always, “No.” As odd as it may seem, given this book, my career, and my speaking engagements, atheism is not a part of my identity. My lack of belief in leprechauns is also not part of my identity. I don’t define myself by what I don’t believe or what I don’t do. I don’t do a lot of things. I don’t practice tai chi. The lack of tai chi in my life is also not part of my identity.

I do not define myself in terms of opposition to other people: I don't refer to myself as an atheist even though the vast majority of people do not consider themselves atheists.

When friends who are atheists come to our home, we don't sit around talking about the fact that there's insufficient evidence to warrant belief in God. We also don't talk about the fact that we don't do tai chi. I don't identify as an atheist because nothing extra-epistemological is entailed by the fact that I do my best to believe on the basis of evidence. Neither my reasoning nor my conclusion about the probability of a divine creator means I'm a good guy, or I'm kind to my dog, or I'm a patient father, or I have an encyclopedic knowledge of science fiction, or I'm fun to have at a party, or I am good at jiu jitsu. If "good critical thinker" were to be substituted with "atheist," then perhaps it would be clear that atheism entails nothing beyond the fact that one doesn't believe there's sufficient evidence to warrant belief in God.

Whether a person is an atheist or a believer is immaterial with respect to morality, and yet, moral ascriptions are frequently made to atheists and to the faithful. For example, currently

there's a (hopefully) short-lived movement called Atheism+. Among Atheism+'s tenets are social justice, support for women's rights, protesting against racism, fighting homophobia and transphobia, critical thinking, and skepticism (McCreight, 2012). The problem with this is, as Massimo Pigliucci writes, "atheism simply means that one lacks a belief in God(s)... . That lack of belief doesn't come with any positive position because none is logically connected to it" (Pigliucci, 2012). Many people try to make atheism into something it's not. Atheism is not about racism, homophobia, or not practicing tai chi; it's simply about not having enough evidence to warrant a belief in God. Atheism is about epistemology, evidence, honesty, sincerity, reason, and inquiry.

Finally, perhaps because I don't view atheism as an immutable characteristic, like eye color, I don't consider it an identity. I'm willing to change my mind if I'm presented with compelling evidence for the existence of a God or gods. I can understand why many theists consider belief a part of their identity, as they often claim that they're unwilling to change their minds. One may be more likely to consider

something a part of one's identity if it's not subject to change.

9. In an e-mail I asked American physicist and best-selling author Dr. Victor Stenger where he places himself on the Dawkins' God Scale. Vic replied, "8. It's not a matter of belief. It's a matter of knowledge. I have knowledge beyond a reasonable doubt that there is no God" (personal correspondence, August 15, 2012). For more on why he thinks this, see *God: The Failed Hypothesis* (Stenger, 2007).
10. Aquinas' five proofs: (1) motion (as nothing moves itself there must be a first, unmoved mover), (2) efficient causes (something must exist that is not caused), (3) possibility and necessity (because everything that's possible to exist must not have existed at some point, then there must be something that necessarily exists), (4) gradation of being (because gradation exists there must be something that occupies the highest rung, perfection) (5) design (because natural bodies work toward some end, an intelligent being exists to which natural things are directed).

For more on Pascal's Wager, see footnote 11 in chapter 4.

Anselm's ontological argument, from *Proslogion II*: "Thus even the fool is convinced that something than which nothing greater can be conceived is in the understanding, since when he hears this, he understands it; and whatever is understood is in the understanding. And certainly that than which a greater cannot be conceived cannot be in the understanding alone. For if it is even in the understanding alone, it can be conceived to exist in reality also, which is greater. Thus if that than which a greater cannot be conceived is in the understanding alone, then that than which a greater cannot be conceived is itself that than which a greater can be conceived. But surely this cannot be. Thus without doubt something than which a greater cannot be conceived exists, both in the understanding and in reality."

For more on the fine-tuning argument, see footnote 5 in chapter 7.

For more on the Kalam cosmological argument, see footnote 3 in chapter 7.

11. One of my Arts and Sciences colleagues asked me, "If faith doesn't have the earmarks of an epistemology, why call it an epistemology? For an

epistemology to be an epistemology, must empirical evidence play a significant role?” What he was getting at was that with faith, because empirical evidence does not play a role (or as philosophers say, faith “fails to satisfy the conditions” of an epistemology), why call it an epistemology?

There are many epistemologies, like rationalism and pragmatism, which do not rely upon empirical evidence. Descartes, for example, has a rationalist epistemology. For Descartes, reason by itself without any experience of the world is a source of knowledge. I don't have to go out in the world—I can be a brain in a vat attached by electrodes to a computer, and just from the process of thought alone I can come to knowledge about the world. That's basically a rationalist position. Hume, Locke, and Berkeley would deny that position and respond, “No, by itself reason can organize experience but it's not a source of knowledge about experience. There's only one source of knowledge about experience and that is empirical content, an encounter via the senses with the physical empirical universe.”

Historically, Kantians are yet another school. Their position is that both rationalism and

empiricism are correct in different ways. For Kant, concepts without experience are empty but experience without concepts is blind; knowledge is a combination of the organizing function of the mind and sensory input.

Then there's the pragmatist school, fallibilism, and also intuitionist positions that allow for different kinds of knowledge. All of these schools define knowledge slightly differently.

Faith is an epistemology because it is used as an epistemology. It is epistemology as use; people use faith as a way to know and interpret the world. For example, approximately a third of North Americans think the Bible is divinely inspired, and more than half think it's the actual word of God (Jones, 2011). It's a common belief among Americans that angels or spirits guided the hands (depicted by Caravaggio's 1602 "Saint Matthew and the Angel"), or whispered in the ear (seen in Rembrandt's 1661 "The Evangelist Matthew Inspired by an Angel," Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo's 1534 "Saint Matthew and the Angel," and Guido Reni's 1640 "St Matthew and the Angel"), of the Gospel writers. Consequently, the faithful root many of their beliefs in the authenticity of

the Bible. That faith is unreliable, or discredited, only makes faith unreliable or discredited, it does not entail that faith is not an epistemology.

Part of the confusion on the part of those who don't use faith to navigate reality is that they understand that faith is an obviously unreliable process of reasoning. Consequently, they either don't view faith as an epistemology, or they don't think others *really* use it as an epistemology. They view it as something else, something weird, something other, something personal, something malicious, perhaps even something redemptive.

But at its root, faith remains an epistemology. It is a process people use to understand, interpret, and know the world.

Faith produces knowledge claims. Claims that arise out of epistemologies unmoored to reason are exactly like other claims that arise out of other epistemologies—they are assertions of truth about the world. Faith claims may be endemically flawed, bizarre, or highly implausible, but they are still knowledge claims.

12. An exception is the so-called Satanic verses from the Koran. In his early suras, Muhammad made compromises with popular, preexisting goddess worship; later he revoked these verses—calling them Satanic verses—and created a new principle permitting newer revelations to supersede earlier revelations. Thus there is another way to figure out which claims about the world we should accept and which are likely false, though not through reason or evidence. The new principle is based upon the latest revelation. Later suras in the Koran supersede earlier suras. Unfortunately, many of the more militant suras are found later in the Koran.
13. I've never understood such claims of the faithful—in this example, Muslims who state that other Muslims do not have the correct interpretation of the Koran. Once one buys into a system of belief without evidence, it's unclear on what basis one could make the claim that there's a correct or incorrect interpretation of the Koran.
14. There are many ways we can rationally determine what's in our own interest and what sort of communities we should construct. For example, in *The Theory of Justice*, American philosopher John Rawls offers us thought experiments to reason our way to an ideal political and economic system

(Rawls, 2005). He details ways to create mutually agreed upon principles of justice.

15. One doesn't have to look to the most extreme examples to find other instances of people misconstruing what's good for them. Fad diets are a more pedestrian and close-to-home example. A few years ago I met someone at a local gym who ate pounds of watermelon everyday in the hope that this would help him lose weight and regain his health. He didn't lose weight and he didn't regain his health. He didn't manage to do either because eating pounds of watermelon every day is almost certainly not an activity that will lead one to health or to sensible weight loss.