

# IDD-HUMANIST NEWSLETTER

The Newsletter of the

American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disorders (AAIDD) Humanist Action Group

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This newsletter expresses the opinion of members of this subgroup and not necessarily of AAIDD

*All data presented are opinions and alternative opinions may be printed in later issues. Send feedback and submissions to [jrmullin@verizon.net](mailto:jrmullin@verizon.net)*

## Arguments for the existence of a god – Pascal’s Wager

I hope this is the start of series of reviews of proofs of gods. There are many of these and some are rather enticing. Some are rather pathetic. But there seems to be someone who strongly believes in any of them and will present them as a way of converting people to their beliefs. These are often complicated logical arguments and tough to evaluate while in a heated discussion of their validity. I hope to present these arguments, their problems, and perhaps suggest the clearest and simplest rebuttal. This may help explain why the argument is false to you or your loved one with IDD. I am not saying there is no god. I don’t believe in one but many humanists do. All I am saying is that these proofs aren’t good enough.

There are many wording of Pascal’s Wager. It was first penned by the 17<sup>th</sup> Century scientist, mathematician, and philosopher, Blaise Pascal. He recognized that there cannot be a proof to determine if gods exist but God either exists or doesn’t. It is pretty clear that he was referring to Yahweh, the Judeo-Christian god, when he speaks of God but this argument can be used with other belief systems too. He then looked at what he saw as the advantages and disadvantages of belief. If a god exists, then a worshiper will be given an eternity of happiness while the disbeliever will not and probably will suffer for eternity. If there is no god, the worshiper has lead a moral life and lost little and the non-believer has gained nothing. Therefore, it is a better wager to bet on the existence of a god than not.

There are a number of challenges to this wager and we can see the logical problems if we look at this point by point:

- **God must exist or not exist** – actually not much to argue there except that there may be another type of powerful entity that is not a god but could have created the universe. Perhaps its intent was to watch us suffer in our lives. Perhaps there was a different god, like Baal, who expects different worship. Perhaps there is more than one.
- **If God exists, the good worshiper will be rewarded with an eternity of happiness** – this presupposes an after-life, that is goes on forever, and that it is

pleasurable. Any of these might be untrue. Additionally the good after-life may be given to people based on their behavior rather than if their beliefs.

**If God exists, the non-believer will suffer for eternity** – again this presupposes an after-life, that it goes on forever, and that it will not be pleasurable for some. The old Universalists branch of the Unitarian-Universalists, believed that everyone went to heaven. Earlier versions of hell involved just wandering through the world forever, invisible and unable to be with God. It also presupposes that going to hell is the definite result of non-belief rather than on what kind of life one led.

**If God doesn't exist, the worshiper has lost little** – This might be true if churches didn't take a lot of time and money. There is also a history of religious wars and of creeds which denied proven knowledge and a better understanding of the world we live in. You can see this in the people that believe in creationism in spite of poor evidence and a wealth of solid evidence to the contrary.

**If God doesn't exist, the non-believer has gained nothing** – perhaps but also lost no time and money or scientific understanding.

You may notice that I am not impressed with this wager. There are so many weak points in it that there doesn't seem to be any advantage to worshipping left. Our problem now is which arguments are suitable for an easy to understand and brief rebuttal if this wager is presented to someone.

Some of the better quick arguments are

- a.) worship costs time and money; religions can start wars
- b.) you might be worshipping the wrong god
- c.) heaven, if there is one, could be a reward for being good instead of for going to church
- d.) this argument is equally good for proving any god including Zeus and the flying spaghetti monster

You might see some others are easier to teach than the ones I suggested. As we will see, there are hundreds of arguments for god (I suppose someone might say that a good argument against the existence of a god is that no one can come up with the definitive proof for one. That argument however has many of the weaknesses discussed above). I usually say to go over these things before they're an issue but in this case, there is just too much information. Perhaps as we review other proofs we will see common faults we can use.

Next: **the Celebrity Believer**

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## The Flying Spaghetti monster

This is basically a humanist joke. It started with a letter by a graduate student, Robert Henderson, to the Kansas State Board of Education saying that if intelligent design should be taught in schools then his beliefs about a flying spaghetti monster should also be taught since they have equal validity. He didn't impress the school board but he did impress a lot of other people on the internet and the Flying Spaghetti Monster (FSM) became quite the craze. There are books about it, posters, t-shirts, prayers, commandments, and even a church of sorts, the Pastafarians. The Wikipedia has a good discussion of it and much of this material is based on their article. See [http://uncyclopedia.wikia.com/wiki/Flying\\_Spaghetti\\_Monster](http://uncyclopedia.wikia.com/wiki/Flying_Spaghetti_Monster). The website for the church of FSM is at <http://www.venganza.org/>. I would have included a picture with this article but I wasn't sure what the copyright status is but pictures are easy to find on the internet.

The interesting thing about the FSM is, despite its obvious satire, it is very hard to argue that everything that one can say about a god wouldn't apply to the FSM as long as you were open to the idea. Much as that should make it a great argument, it is not taken well by religious people who generally don't like to admit when they've lost philosophic debates

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## Odds and Ends

The next issue won't be out before the AAIDD annual meeting in Charlotte, NC in June. If any of you are there, I'd love to have someone show up for our business meeting on Wednesday morning of the conference. I hope to visit the Unitarian Universalist Church of Charlotte that Sunday since I booked an early flight.

Speaking of UU churches. I expect to be elected president of mine this June which shows that one can be active in a church even if an atheist.

I am going to start reprinting articles from early newsletters because readers don't always go back that far in reviewing old newsletters. The first of these follows.

Remember in reading this newsletter, all links are meant to work if you click on them. In the rare case where I get it wrong when composing, paste the address into your browser

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## On Cultural Differences (first published in the July 2004 issue)

*We are extremely fortunate to have an article by a guest writer, Valerie White. Valerie is very busy in Humanist activities. She is a former Vice-President of the American Humanist Association and on the board of directors of the Secular Organization for Sobriety additionally contributing a regular column to their newsletter. Valerie is a Humanist Celebrant and former President of the Unitarian Church of Sharon (MA) and is a frequent speaker across the country on polyamory. And the list goes on! She is also a valued friend and one of the most authentic people I know.*

Once in a while, as I bumble my oblivious way through life, I bump up against a hard, surprising fact which makes me notice cultural differences. The first such incident I remember happened on my morning commute to a battered women's shelter in the inner city. The bus I took was used almost exclusively by people of color; often mine was the only white face on the bus. No one ever gave me a hard time, and I soon relaxed into my journeys, reading my book and staying just aware enough to notice when my stop was getting close.

One morning, as the bus pulled away from a stop, there was a loud report. Before I could even think, "Was that a shot?", everybody on the bus dived for the floor. People were screaming, "Go, go, get out of here!" I crouched on the floor too.

So when the driver laughed, I was surprised. "It's okay, folks," she said. "I just ran over a basketball." The incident brought home to me what a sheltered and privileged life I have led, never before having been in a situation where the response of ordinary people going about their daily lives, when they hear a loud sound, is to hit the deck.

A couple of weeks ago, I was on another Boston bus, this one heading out the Mass. Pike to Newton. On this bus, almost all the ridership is white and white collar. As we rolled along, there was suddenly another loud report. The bus had had a blowout. People looked up from their books and newspapers. A couple pulled headphones off their ears. Nobody said anything and nobody moved.

Last night, I had another one of these epiphanies, at a prison fellowship program I attend. As we sat in our discussion circle, twelve black and two white inmates and three white "outmates", including me, we were all recounting who had taught us to tie our shoes, and whom we had taught to tie theirs. One man of color, who had previously disclosed that he had fetal alcohol syndrome, explained that his mother had taught him to tie his shoes, and



that she wouldn't let him go outside until he had tied them to her satisfaction. He was having trouble and tried over and over, getting more and more frustrated.

"I felt like I belonged on the yellow bus," he said. There was an affirming murmur and many nods. I was confused. "What yellow bus?" I asked. They tried to explain. The bus which picks up special needs kids is yellow, they told me. You know, the retarded ones, the ones wearing helmets because of autism. I subsided, still confused. All school buses are yellow, I thought. What's the point?

I was on my way home before it dawned on me. For me, raised in affluent, white, geographically large suburban school districts, the yellow bus was the way almost all the kids got to school, including me. In the inner city, many kids walk to school, or use a student pass on a city bus (like the one which ran over the basketball). Only the kids with special needs, who have to travel farther to a special school or who can't handle public transportation, take the yellow bus.

I had just run smack up against another cultural difference.

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Jim Mullin

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