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Editorial by Peter Ellerton

We spend a lot of time as rationalists bemoaning the lack of critical thinking skills apparent in daily discourse. There is little joy to be found in news media reports, political statements, radio and television commentary or in the world of advertising. The blogosphere, of course, is more often than not an adventure in irrationality, more a soapbox derby than reasoned debate.

It's pretty easy to spot thinking done badly, but not so easy to define what it means to do it well. This may seem a strange statement, but really there is no definition of critical thinking that is agreed upon by everyone. Academics work themselves into knots trying to figure out what all this stuff means, but it's not always any better for the rest of us trying to just get a hold of a working definition.

A good example is advocating basing policy or decisions on reason. One would think that doing so leads down a clear path to a particular outcome, but this is simply not the case. If it were so easy, then all reasonable people would have converged on pretty much the same outcomes by now. Cleary, they haven't. And trying to define who is reasonable as those who agree with you is a little unhealthy – it's a bit like defining clever people as those who laugh at your jokes. I write a bit more about this in in the article Reasons to be Cheerful, in which I suggest we need to be careful in asking people to behave 'reasonably'.

Still, our hands are not tied because of this. As an analogy, there is no agreed upon definition for human health, but that doesn't mean we can't recognise and treat ill-health when we see it.

Jesse Richardson, a Brisbane based worker in advertising, provides a nice solution to some of the problems of unreasonableness through his website www.yourlogicalfallacyis.com, in which most of the common fallacies of reasoning are presented in an extremely accessible and user-friendly way. The story of his international success in this venture bodes well for supporters of rationality.

Warren Bonett, of Embiggen Books in Melbourne, carries on the critical thinking theme as he outlines how thinking critically in publishing could use a bit of a leg up. Warren's book store is famous for promoting reasoned debate, and for backing this up with a selection of books based in science and rationality that is pretty much unparalleled in the country.

Rod Bower gives an update on the Sean Faircloth tour, outlining the wonderful opportunities to hear Sean speak and also the collaboration between groups and individuals from across the country that has enabled this event to look so promising.

Returning to Brisbane (shifting the centre of gravity from down south just for this issue), Travis Hilton takes us through his website http://SomewhereToThink.com.au, which he has developed as a portal for the wider freethinking community. He also highlights the Secular Party of Australia as an alternative voice in Australian politics.

I'll end this by offering up what has been put together as an 'expert consensus' on critical thinking that was developed in the 90s. A lot of the big names in education and critical thinking contributed to this, and maybe it's a useful thing to carry around. Basically, the idea is that a good critical thinker will have a certain set of cognitive skills, and some affective dispositions, or characteristics. So, for your consideration, here they are.

Cognitive Skills

1. Interpretation (Categorization, Decoding Significance, Clarifying Meaning)

2. Analysis (Examining Ideas, Identifying Arguments, Analyzing Arguments)

3. Evaluation (Assessing Claims, Assessing Arguments)

4. Inference (Querying Evidence, Conjecturing Alternatives, Drawing Conclusions)

5. Explanation (Stating Results, Justifying Procedures, Presenting Arguments)

6. Self-Regulation (Self-examination, Self-correction)

Affective dispositions

Approaches to life and living in general:

- inquisitiveness with regard to a wide range of issues

- concern to become and remain generally well-informed

- alertness to opportunities to use CT

- trust in the processes of reasoned inquiry

- self-confidence in one's own ability to reason

- open-mindedness regarding divergent world views

- flexibility in considering alternatives and opinions

- understanding of the opinions of other people

- fair-mindedness in appraising reasoning

- honesty in facing one's own biases, prejudices, stereotypes, egocentric or socio-centric tendencies

- prudence in suspending, making or altering judgments

- willingness to reconsider and revise views where honest reflection suggests that change is warranted

Facione, Peter A. *Critical Thinking: A Statement of Expert Consensus for Purposes of Educational Assessment and Instruction. Research Findings and Recommendations.*, 1990.

Peter Ellerton

From the President...

As the RSA's Sean Faircloth tour comes closer, it's hard not to notice the many instances where Australia is not a genuinely secular state.

The most recent example is the Federal Government's decision to deny Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) status to Primary Ethics, the organisation set up to deliver ethics education in NSW to those children whose parents choose to withdraw them from Special Religious Education. As a result, the future of ethics classes in that State may be in doubt.

In March 2012 the RSA was invited to appear before the NSW Legislative Council Inquiry into Ethics Education (see the RSA website, www.rationalist.com.au, under Media/Submissions and Letters). In our presentation, while recognising the value of ethics classes, we submitted that setting up an alternative to SRE was not the best way to go.

Why? Because separating children into different groups according to their (parents') religious beliefs or lack of belief only exacerbates social division. It actively undermines what is still a strong Australian value, whether you're from the left or the right of the political spectrum: a commitment to a tolerant and pluralist society. Far better to keep kids all together and let them learn about a range of world views under the guidance of professionally trained teachers.

Part of the problem is that Primary Ethics relies on volunteers. Recruiting, training and managing the hundreds of volunteers needed to cover all NSW schools that want ethics classes was always going to be a big ask.

It was interesting to note that the opponents of Ethics Education in NSW, led by Upper House Member Fred Nile, eventually accepted the continued provision of Ethics Ed. Why? A cynic might say it was simply a tactical retreat. Perhaps they knew that denying DGR status to Primary Ethics would ensure the organisation is slowly but surely starved of the resources it needs to survive. In contrast, the churches are guaranteed tax deductibility because 'the advancement of religion' is automatically considered to be charitable!

Whatever the technicalities of the DGR decision, it's clearly plain wrong that churches can rely on extensive and guaranteed government subsidies to peddle their wares while an attempt to provide parents with an alternative is starved of funds.

In collaboration with a number of other secular, atheist, humanist and skeptic groups, the RSA has come up with a "10 Point Plan for a (Genuinely) Secular Australia". One of these points reads:

 "Education must be strictly secular, not promoting any particular religion." To be more specific, we say that national and state curricula should include the study of a range of religious and non-religious worldviews, taught by professionally trained teachers; and that government resources should not be used to support particular religious views, programs of religious instruction, or the employment of religious functionaries in educational settings.

See the RSA website (www.rationalist.com.au) under Articles/Papers by RSA Members/Manifesto for a Secular Australia for the full 10 Point Plan.

I urge all RSA members to come along to one of the Sean Faircloth events and hear more about how we can, and must, take action to protect Australia's secular heritage.

**Meredith Doig,
RSA President**

Logic For The Ordinary Person

By Jess Richardson

A while ago I was trying to explain logical fallacies to my two boys Daniel and Caleb. They're smart enough kids, but, you know, they're still kids - and so I tried to come up with really simple ways of explaining the concepts behind some of the more common fallacies. Usually the best way to explain a logical fallacy is to give an example, and so that's what I did. But it got me to thinking that perhaps the explanation of the fallacy itself could be more easily communicated.

I had the idea to create a logical fallacies poster that explained some of the fallacies clearly and that I could hang up in their rooms to help with their critical thinking skills, and so I began putting something together.

Now, most sceptics and rationalists will have shared my experience of finding people on the internet who are wrong about things, and who clearly need to be shown exactly how and why they're wrong about things - sometimes at great length and to the detriment of other events that might be going on in one's life. Often I'd find myself linking people to a logical fallacies site so that I didn't have to go through the process of explaining the particulars of what a genetic fallacy is, and why that thing they just said was one.

Many of the existing fallacies sites, however, either looked terrible in terms of design and user interface, or they were quite verbose and academic in their language. Unsurprisingly many of the people I was linking to these fallacies sites weren't particularly academic, and so it seemed a bit of a wasted opportunity to actually communicate something valuable and change people's minds.

I think maybe we have a bit of a tendency to be insular as a freethinking community, when really what we should be doing is focussing our efforts on people who aren't yet aware of how being rational can positively affect one's life as well as the world at large. What we really should be doing is trying to teach the uninitiated how to think rationally; and so whilst using religious examples of fallacious thinking can be quite amusing for atheists like me, I think it probably does the cause a great disservice. Instead of a fallacies site imparting the skill of rational thinking so that religious people

come to their own rational conclusions, they become defensive and unreceptive to a seed of doubt that might grow into something more.

You can probably see where this is going - the simple explanations, graphics, and funny examples I was coming up with for the poster would work well as a website too, right? So I bought the domain 'yourlogicalfallacyis.com' with the idea that I could set it up such that if your homophobic uncle was saying "If we allow homosexual people to marry, the next thing we know it will be legal to marry your sister or a goat!" all you'd have to do is link him to yourlogicalfallacyis.com/slippery-slope to show him why his thinking was fallacious.

I loved the idea of setting up a resource to spread rationality that was simple enough that kids (and religious fundamentalists) could understand it, but not patronising in the way that things made for kids often are. Additionally I saw putting a site like this together as a way to balance out my ethical 'karma' because, I'm sorry to say, I work in advertising (pause for cynical frowning). And, ah, I'm sure the irony of an advertising guy creating a logical fallacies website isn't lost on you, dear reader.

So anyway, after several months of development with the help of a few web developer friends - Som Meaden and Andrew Smith - we put together a logical fallacies website that looked pretty clean and simple, had clear explanations and examples, and also had the poster available as a free creative commons high resolution pdf file.

We launched the yourlogicalfallacyis.com site in March of 2012 and it went great guns: the site has had over two million unique visitors, and has been tweeted by the likes of Stephen Fry, PZ Myers, Ben Goldacre, Jimmy Wales, and our own Wil Anderson and Dr. Karl, as well as being featured on reddit.com, boingboing.net, upworthy.com and about 6,000 other sites. It has been featured in Skeptical Inquirer in the USA and Skeptic Magazine in the UK and as of writing in March 2013 the site is attracting between five and ten thousand unique visitors every day.

What I'm most stoked about, though, is that the site and poster are being used in school curriculums all around the world. I realised some time ago that all the things I care about are often thwarted by ignorance, and that it's very difficult to change the mind of an adult. However, if we're able to teach children how to think for themselves, we have a real chance at changing the world for the better in the long term. If, for instance, we could raise an entire generation of kids who could spot logical fallacies and spin, what kind of a difference would that make to our media and politics as a society? I reckon it would be quite a profound shift. In fact to take it one step further, I'd hazard a guess that if philosophy and critical thinking were incorporated into the national curriculum, we would see one of the most dramatic shifts in consciousness in the history of the world.

Our education system as it stands does so much good, and the teachers who work with our kids don't get nearly the credit that they deserve. However, the fact remains that our curriculum currently teaches children knowledge, but does very little in the way of teaching children how to think: how to think critically, how to think rationally, and how to think about their own thinking.

The way I like to think of it is that it's like we teach children all about the components of a car, but we don't bother to teach them how to drive the thing. Some of them pick it up pretty well anyway, but many of them drive dangerously, don't check the oil, and don't seem to know the road rules. And like driving, critical thinking takes practice before you get good at it. I think it's time that we started teaching our children how to think critically, and gave them the opportunity to practice doing so while their minds and identities are still forming (100 hours before they get their licence at least!). Because there are too many adults who will simply never change their minds and for whom reason simply isn't relevant. And the consequences of such ignorance may mean nothing short of the extinction of our species, in my honest and fearful opinion.

If you'd like to help me spread at least a little bit more rationality in the world, feel free to download a free poster from the website, and/or paste a link to it on your social networks.

Bookselling: Critical thinking as a code of ethics

By Warren Bonett

To be a utilitarian means that you judge actions as right or wrong in accordance with whether they have good consequences. So you try to do what will have the best consequences for all of those affected — Peter Singer

All bookshops have employees assigned to the role of buyer. It's their job to surf the flood of catalogues in order to pick out the occasional droplets of content for their shops. Each shop and buyer will have individual biases. If a Venn diagram were to be constructed here, the circles would represent: prior sales history, intuition on 'what will go', personal taste and whatever specialty or not the bookshop may have. Further up the publishing stream, publishers themselves will have a similar cluster of filters for their own book commissioning or buying needs. Each buying or production choice that is made has consequences.

Wherever businesses are on the bookselling spectrum, for most, critical thinking will be just another subject category to consider, rather than a method to be applied to the overall process itself. If such a methodology were to be implemented, these different parts of the industry would have to use quite different approaches based upon where they sit in the book supply chain. In addition to traditional editing and proofreading, the publisher would assess texts for logical fallacies as well as seeking comment from recognized experts in given areas regarding key parts of the thesis. On the other hand the bookseller is in a similar position to the end user, they have to gauge the book from the book blurbs and information about the author and as such, some level of trust is relinquished to the publisher.

I won't use the limited space here to describe the critical thinking methodology we at Embiggen Books apply when buying books for our shop. You can probably make a pretty accurate guess on how we go about it. Suffice to say, critical thinking implies that we care about the accuracy, honesty and truthfulness of what we read, what we say, and crucially what we sell. It requires that we be aware of the various ways that we, and the authors who we sell, can deceive ourselves. All of this has known and unknown consequences. However much we as booksellers try to navigate this terrain attentively, we will still make mistakes. Perhaps in a future issue I'll be able to outline our approach in more detail, but for now, I'd rather continue with a brief argument as to why I think the critical thinking ethos is the most important challenge to face publishers, distributors and sellers of other people's content.

If we could reduce a publishing code of ethics down to one line it might read as follows: 'Try to make your content truthful and accurate wherever relevant and possible'. Obviously this doesn't really apply to fiction or art, but in the endless cosmos of nonfiction it largely does. I liken the application of the critical thinking ethic here to quality control for a manufacturer of electrical goods, ensuring the safety of the products with fully working internal wiring. Publishers and booksellers have the same obligation to produce and sell their products with safe and accurate ideas 'wiring'—or at least better than they would be without such checks.

Unfortunately publishers frequently produce, and booksellers sell, material whose internal wiring is so poor that were they mass-produced electrical goods they would probably be defendants in multiple class action suits. Hundreds of thousands of completely bogus books on diet, health and medicine, psychological well being, history, science, archaeology, business success etc., are being produced, have been produced and are influencing the decisions of millions of people — in some cases these are literally life and death choices. In newspapers there are means of redress if substantial errors are made. However inadequate they may be, there's still some way of tackling mistakes and false claims. With books there's virtually none. And they have a shelf life that may even outlive the person who buys it — affecting generations.

Consider the printing of misinformation about vaccination; or the book published in 2010 by Amazon which contained advice for paedophiles; or the range of books prophesying the end of the world in 20XX; or those that promote racist or homophobic views based on pseudoscience; or the books on natural therapies for children.

The list of subjects I could list is horrendously long. It doesn't surprise me that people say unsupported things, but it continually leaves me bewildered that publishers put their weight behind them.

Leaving the highbrow arena of mainstream publishing behind for a moment, in the world of Marvel comic books, an idea and a line can be seen again and again. It's the moral of almost every comic they've ever produced: *With great power comes great responsibility*. In the world of content delivery, publishers are both superheroes and supervillains, often at the same time. They're not in the same position as an individual with an opinion and something to say. In the world of the internet a blog can theoretically reach billions, but in practice without the recognition and distribution power of some publisher, the majority of writers will not get an audience much larger than if they were to stand on Speaker's Corner on a soapbox. Publishers provide corporate legitimacy and industrial strength distribution. It should come with industrial strength responsibility too. In light of this it should be horrifying to learn that few trade publishers even have a code of ethics, especially one that relates to the accuracy of the information they publish.

Obviously we, as individuals or companies, can't always know which nuggets to pick when it comes to sifting for the best information, but we can put in place practices to mitigate mistakes and improve as we go. It should be part of standard corporate responsibility for companies selling information products to quality check the ideas wiring of the things that make them money. Peer review journals do this with varying degrees of success and so the bones of a model for mainstream publishers are there for fleshing out.

Building a code of ethics around the ideals underpinning critical thinking would be the easy bit. Getting the industry to adopt it would be another thing entirely. Perhaps consumer groups could start to apply pressure to industry bodies like the Australian Publishers Association or the Australian Booksellers Association. Perhaps the code could be applied or awarded by an external body like the International Organisation for Standards (ISO). Whichever way it happens, it's important the conversation at least begins. When and if it does, I guarantee, one of the first issues that will be raised will be that of freedom of speech. And maybe one day I'll write in these pages why that excuse just won't wash.
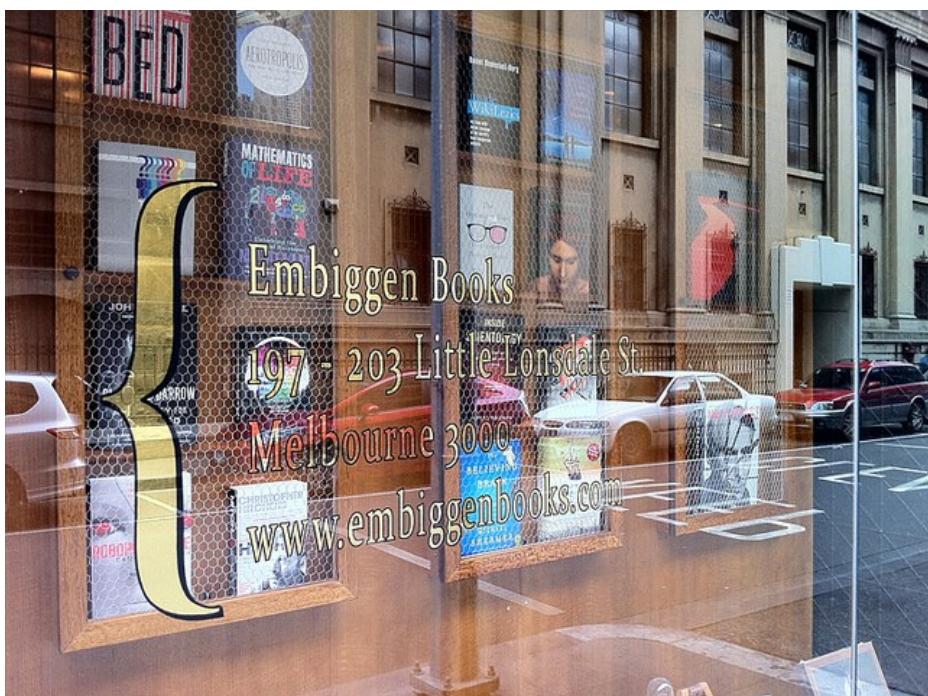
Warren Bonett runs Embiggen Books, a bookshop and venue hosting talks by a wide range of speakers. You can learn more about Embiggen Books or see who's speaking there next by visiting their website www.embiggenbooks.com. Or you can visit the shop if you are in Melbourne—197-203 Little Lonsdale Street

Sean Faircloth in Australia and NZ, March-April 2013

As announced in the December Newsletter, the RSA with others has arranged for Sean Faircloth, author of *Attack of the Theocrats, How the Religious Right Harms Us All and What We Can Do About It* to appear in Australia in March/April. During the last three months there has been a flurry of activity around the organisation and aims of this tour.

The WA Humanists and the NZ Association of Humanists and Rationalists have shared the lead and have taken direct responsibility for events and arrangements in their areas, as has our own committee member Anthony Englund in Sydney. The Humanist Society of Victoria has also been involved in the planning and has made a significant financial contribution as well.

The weekly tour planning meeting includes attendees from the groups mentioned above and also the Progressive Atheists, the University of Melbourne Secular Society, The Freethought Student Alliance, and the Victorian Skeptics. Last, but by no means least, we've welcomed the voluntary PR and media expertise of Nicole Eckersley who came to design a flyer and has stayed to do a whole lot more. Behind the scenes there have been flights, accommodation, press appearances, posters and flyers, and ticketing to arrange, and even plans for showing off our cities to Sean!

In a related and parallel effort a number of people from different freethought groups (and a progressive Christian) came together to consider what a "10 point Plan for a Secular Australia" might look like. The result has been issued as a press release and put into a flyer for distribution during the tour. It's hoped this will start a conversation to refine and focus both the plan and the efforts of freethinkers over the coming months.

Tickets sales for the major events of the tour have started well and we hope to have full houses to hear Sean's message. If you haven't got yours yet the links for online purchase are shown below. Apart from hearing Sean yourself, please try to bring someone with you who might get involved in the necessary work of promoting secular government, both in Australia and in the wider world.

Sydney Opera House : 4pm, Sunday 24 March

With AC Grayling, Fr Frank Brennan SJ and the Hon. Pru Goward

Tickets at www.sydneyoperahouse.com/tickets/Detail.aspx?id=17179869542

University of Melbourne : 7pm, Tuesday 26 March

With Simon Taylor

Tickets at www.trybooking.com/CHQZ

Kyneton Mechanics Institute : **7**pm, Wednesday 27 March

Tickets at www.trybooking.com/CISB

Wheeler Centre Melbourne : 12:45pm Thursday 28 March

Free short talk and book signing

For more details: http://wheelercentre.com/calendar

University of Western Australia : 7pm, Tuesday 2 April

Tickets at www.theatres.uwa.edu.au/events#human
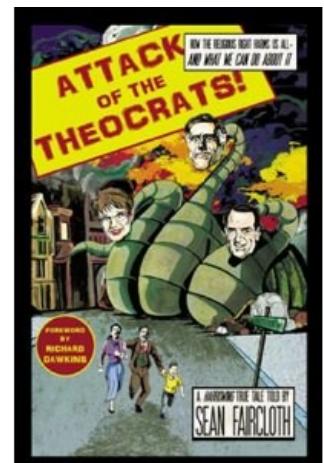
Check www.rationlist.com.au for further details as they develop.

Opinion—tell us what you really think

Bigots Should Not Govern

by Tony Krins

Being the highly socialised creatures that we are, we all need to adhere to rules in order to maintain social order, personal security and general satisfaction. All these social rules can simply be divided into "Laws" and "Morals".

Laws may be defined as rules of conduct that are enforced using (legal) punishments. In a civilized society, these laws and punishments are democratically arrived at through Parliament.

Morals, on the other hand, may be defined as rules of conduct that are preferred (not enforced) by some or most of the members of a society.

Laws can be enforced without eroding an individual's basic human rights. To enforce morals on the other hand, does erode an individual's basic human rights and this can be described as Bigotry. Even just wanting to, or trying to enforce a moral position can reasonably be described as bigotry. When the leaders of a society cannot or do not keep a clear distinction between laws and morals, then the society becomes less civilised as the basic rights of individuals are eroded by institutionalised bigotry. This happens when Parliamentarians are bigots. The most common kinds of bigotry are religious bigotry and political bigotry.

It is the responsibility of Parliamentarians to keep a clear distinction between laws and morals so that they can lead (rule) in a democratic and civilized way. Sadly, they often fail to do this and are not held accountable for their bigotry. The boundaries often become blurred and mistakes are made when their parties deny them a free vote or when they vote in Parliament according to their own moral position or "conscience".

In order to avoid these mistakes, I propose *The Five Anti-Bigotry Rules* for voting on the floor of Parliament:

1. If a motion meets with the support of the majority of his/her constituents and is consistent with his/her own moral position, then he/she should vote for the motion.

2. If the motion does not meet with the support of the majority of the constituents (electors) and is not consistent with his/her own moral position, then he/she should vote against the motion.

3. If a motion meets with the support of the majority of the constituents, but is not consistent with his/her moral position, he/she should either vote for the motion or abstain from voting.

4. If the motion does not, or would not, have the support of the majority of the constituents, but is consistent with his/her own moral position, then he/she should either vote against the motion or abstain from voting.

5. A Parliamentarian should not vote along party lines if he/she knows the motion is at odds with the wishes of his/her constituents' wishes.

If a Parliamentarian is arrogant enough or ignorant enough to flout any of these 5 rules, then he/she is guilty of Bigotry, is uncivilised and quite unfit to rule or lead. It is the role of Parliamentarians to make, amend or repeal laws, but it is not their role to make, amend or repeal morals.

Some examples of cases where we have allowed bigots to cross the line between laws and morals in the Australian Government, and allowed them to get away with it, include:

- The imposition of religious rules and actions on non-believers (even in Parliament itself),

- Discrimination against people of different sexual orientation,

- Interfering with choices in family planning,

- Withholding aid funds from family planning overseas,

- Funding hospitals that deny people the right to surgical sterilisation,

- Denying women access to therapeutic abortion,

- Denying people the fundamental right to make end of life decisions.

How can we prevent our leaders from stooping to such bigotry? We can do this by encouraging or demanding that the Press "out" the bigots and "rate" bigotry levels among individual Parliamentarians at frequent intervals, especially before elections. In addition, the public should be educated about bigotry and its dangers to our civilised society. We should be giving all Parliamentarians, and indeed leaders of all kinds, "bigotry scores" or "bigotry ratings". This will allow all of us to vote more intelligently for a more civilised democracy that more effectively protects fundamental human rights for all .

A Portal For The Rational

by Hilton Travis

As we are constantly being reminded, the Atheist, Freethinker, Humanist, Rationalist, Secularist, Skeptic (or however you wish to view it) community is widely varied. Trying to get any form of consensus across its many branches is akin to herding cats. Looking at all the different constituent sub-groups in that community you can see why we are being told this all the time.

Well, after sitting in my chair and being a keyboard activist for quite a while, I decided to make a change, take an active part in this community and attend some group meetings. After about a year of attending various groups in and around Brisbane, I found there were still groups that I'd never heard of and nor had many others – 'How', I thought, 'can we be a community if we don't even know who is out there?' So I searched the Internet for a portal that could help me locate the various groups around Brisbane and Australia and, well, Google was not my friend.

'Time for some more action,' I thought. If no-one else had set up a portal for our wider community, then, as I have a web hosting account, a brain and a few spare minutes, it would be something useful I could do. So, after a fair bit of thought about a name which could cross the boundaries of the various community groups, I came up with http://SomewhereToThink.com.au – a site where people could find various Critical Thinking groups.

The main purposes of the http://SomewhereToThink.com.au site are therefore to:

1) Act as a portal for people to find various groups in any particular region and then to head off to the sites of those groups to find out more information about them,
2) Give a single, filterable calendar showing all of the activities on any particular date,
3) Link to some blogs that may well help your critical thinking skills in various areas and
4) Provide further resources, via the Further Thought page, which you can use yourself and offer to others to help develop their critical thinking skills.

Our community is most definitely a varied one – no-one could rationally disagree with that. This does not, however, mean we don't have common threads run through the various sub-groups upon which we can pretty much all agree. Separation of church and State is one of these common threads – indeed, this is a key issue in the foundation on which many of our goals are built.

Separation of church and State is a core tenet of a truly Secular society where all religions are given an equal footing and none are allowed special privilege to unduly influence State matters. Sean Faircloth, the Director of Strategy and Policy at the Richard Dawkins Foundation, has an upcoming tour where he will be giving presentations on "Reclaiming a Secular Australia". It should definitely be worth catching if you have the chance. As Sean will not be making it up to Sunny Queensland (and yes, I can actually see some sun right now for a change), I'll be making the trip down to see him and speak with him on March 28th in Melbourne along with some members of the Secular Party of Australia, after which I will be attending the SPA meeting on Monday evening (details of all the Sean Faircloth meetings and the SPA meetings can be found on, you guessed it, the http://SomewhereToThink.com.au website.)

It should be of deep concern to rational Australians that the Australian Liberal Party is even more religion-focused, considering there is an upcoming Federal Election and undue attention is being given to organisations like the Australian Christian Lobby. If we are to have a true separation of church and State, so we can make rational, evidence-based decisions on how best to govern our country, we need to look at alternatives to the major parties where valid alternatives exist. The Secular Party of Australia is one of these alternatives – they have run in many elections in the past and will be running a number of candidates in this upcoming Federal Election. I encourage you to have a look at their website, their policies and their core belief in the separation of church and State. Offer them the support necessary to be able to provide a rational voice in Australian Government to counter the irrationality of basing decisions on whichever religious group is shouting the loudest.

Equal should mean equal.

So, feel free to have a look at the http://SomewhereToThink.com.au website, to let me know about groups not yet listed, to offer suggestions on sites to be added to the Further Thought page and to think critically about the future of Australia and how you can play a vital role. We need rational people making rational decisions on the future of this country and its people.

Hilton@SanityDefender.net

Reasons to be Cheerful

By Peter Ellerton

No one thinks they're not reasonable. The vilest shock jock thinks he (it usually seems to be 'he') is a bastion of rationality. Climate science deniers claim their rationality through scepticism (failing the grade on both counts). Anyone opining over a backyard barbeque will speak as the voice of reason. This is a problem for organisations that encourage people to be reasonable; the reply will always be 'I am!' So, where can we go from there?

The usual path is to start talking about evidence, but again, what passes for evidence changes from person to person and from context to context. Ah, but we mean *scientific* evidence, don't we? Well, fair enough, but it's not always a question of readily accessible evidence when negotiating a thorny point. Economies are notoriously difficult creatures to predict, and much of the evidence that should inform our management of them is vague. For example, does reducing taxes for the wealthy drive investment and see economic returns overall? (Well, the evidence seems to say 'not much'). Moreover, much debate is not over facts but over values, and what they might mean for our future. Not only religiously prescribed morality, but also what we value as a society and as individuals within a reasonably free market.

The appeal to reason and evidence is therefore a much more nuanced request than it might first seem. By leaving it at this statement, we leave ourselves open to too speedy an acquiescence on the part of those whose views we would like to change. It becomes inevitable that we fall into contradiction rather than argument: 'I am being reasonable!' 'No, You're not!' The discussion has to be about what we consider evidence and what we mean by reasonable to have any lasting traction.

We also have to consider if there is only one line of sight to be drawn from evidence and reason to any particular outcome. Should there be only one? Do we know what it is? The answer is no, by and large, and it is a mistake to imagine a simple appeal to rationality will inevitably end in concord. People just aren't built that way, and nor is human reason. What's more, to insist that they should be is wishful thinking in which the religious are often accused of indulging.

Here's an analogy. People reason in the same way they build houses. We can assume that to call something a house suggests a minimum standard in terms of its durability and effectiveness at keeping the weather at bay. Some houses are somewhat shabby but might be fine for a beach shack. Others are architectural wonders, still others solid and utilitarian. Similarly, some arguments must just withstand shallow scrutiny while others are robust and seemingly unassailable.

People can generally satisfy the basic demand to provide some reasons as justification for a particular view. We might not like them, or we may think them rather poor, but they can be given. Just as there is no point in walking into someone's house, that has served them well, and insist they change its design, splashing into someone's worldview and demanding a redesign of their thinking will not be effective either. The best we can hope for is that people remain *amenable* to reasoned debate, that the value of a reasoned approach is upheld and what, after all the dust dies down, should remain. It's kind of like suggesting a room might benefit from a bay window, or access to a deck. Such suggestions work better from a guest than they do from an intruder.

To take the analogy further, while we can allow people their own houses as we can allow them their own reasoning, we can also insist that housing built for public access be constructed to a certain standard. This is to be both pluralistic and secular.

We all bring different premises to an argument, and the day that we don't will be a sad one. It's not necessarily the difference in premises or assumptions that hinders us, it's how these assumptions are both arrived at and used in further debate that creates problems. Commitment to a process of reasoning, as the true language of the public sphere, is all that we can and should ask of people.
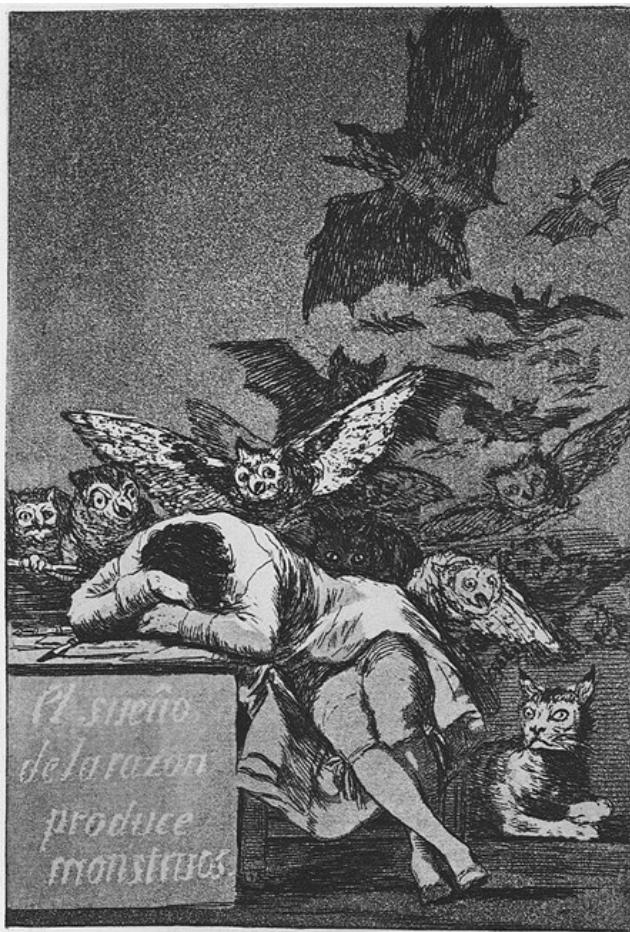
Francisco Goya's Caprichos (1799), El sueño de la razón produce monstruos. (The sleep of reason brings forth monsters.)

The American president, Barack Obama, has put this well - in this case in terms of religious motivations (and assuming the mentioned principle exists...).

> *Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. It requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason. I may be opposed to abortion for religious reasons, but if I seek to pass a law banning the practice, I cannot simply point to the teachings of my church or evoke God's will. I have to explain why abortion violates some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths, including those with no faith at all.*

(http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/
resources/quotes/barack-obama-on-translating-
religious-motivation-into-policy-at-call-to-
renewal-conference)

Replace 'religiously motivated' with 'ideologically motivated' and 'abortion' with any issue you like, and the sentiment remains valid.

What this means is that a focus on processes rather than end points is more sustainable, and arguably a more coherent approach, than simply listing what is or is not permissible as a 'rational' outcome. We cannot mandate a single rational path through an issue, but we can insist that any path be a rational one.

This means inevitable disagreement, but that's exactly the condition in which reasoned debate thrives; it is not to be discouraged. A state of constant flux is, in fact, the ideal state. Those of us who value reasoning can say we are winning as long as debate is occurring (which is different to saying we have won). Pluralism and reason together provide both the cause and the need for secularism, and one cannot celebrate any one of these without also celebrating the others.

I have no doubt that at this stage there will be significant grinding of teeth by some readers, as charges of accommodation are made and examples of blatant irrationality allowed to flourish are brought forth. Well, I share your pain.

There are of course times, when irrationality and ideology send their teams onto the arena, that you have to send in the heavy hitters, I reply. One cannot muck about with alternative medicines when lives are at stake, for example, and one should not allow religious intrusion into the state-funded classroom. On matters of public policy we must demand rationality, even as we acknowledge that others can believe in their private lives what they wish (notwithstanding aspects of child health and welfare that must be public policy rather than parental rights).

I'm not backing away from necessary hard action; I'm rather saying that not all argument need be conflict. Rationality and secularism should have all the vitality and optimism of pluralism. Engagement in rational debate is one of the most enjoyable things a person can do, and we should enter into it in a spirit of adventure and appreciation. Rationality is not a weapon to be wielded; it is the best means possible by which humans can collectively progress. While it's true that it takes two to tango, they'll both be more likely to keep doing it if at least one of them is having fun.