

FIG LEAVES

Volume 13 Issue 11

November 2004

November FIG Meeting: Tuesday, 9 November 7:00 PM

FIG'S Post-Election Meeting Means Your Turn to Talk!

We think that a November 9 meeting--one week after the elections--is best for this kind of program because you can lament or celebrate the results. Tell us what you believe we can expect in the next four years. But we don't want this to be just a political session. We want you to tell us about anything else you think would interest us. It may be a poem you have written, or that someone else has written. Or it may be about some important event in your life, like how you lost your faith in faith.

Those already signed up to speak include **Wolf Roder** on "Why there will never be an Atheist society," **Charles Hughes** on "Why do we voters elect the candidates that we do? Do these votes really go to the Electoral College?" **Joe Levee and George Maurer** on "Highlights of FIG history," and **Edwin Kagin** on a topic to be announced.

The only limitation is that you **speak for only 10 minutes** so we give others a chance.

Step right up, Ladies and Gentlemen!

December FIG Meeting Sunday 12, December

We are pleased to announce that on Sunday, December 12, Ellen Johnson will speak to FIG. She will speak on: **Civil Rights For Atheists: An Action Agenda.**

Ellen Johnson is President of American Atheists, and a leading spokesperson for Atheist civil liberties. She has presented testimony on behalf of the organization to numerous government agencies, including the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. Ms. Johnson also lead our historic "break through" meeting with officials of the White House Liaison Office.

A wife and mom with two children, Ms. Johnson is vitally concerned about the cultural issues affecting Atheist families of all description.

Join Us!



Quote Religious faith depends on a host of social, psychological and emotional factors that have little or nothing to do with probabilities, evidence and logic. This is faith's inescapable weakness. It is also, undeniably, its greatest power.

—Michael Shermer, *Scientific American* (July 2004) *Unquote*

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Events - PLEASE NOTE SCHEDULE CHANGES

November Meeting

Tuesday 9 November 7:00 PM
at the Vernon Manor
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, Ohio

November Potluck

Tuesday 16 November 6:30 PM
At the home of the O'Kains

December Potluck

Tuesday 7 December 6:30 PM
At the home of the Brian Sellers

December Meeting

Sunday 12 November 7:00 PM
at the Vernon Manor
400 Oak Street, Cincinnati, Ohio



October Meeting Report

Frankenstein's Cat and Other Biomedical Fantasies
Bill Jensen, Oesper Professor of Chemical Education and
History of Chemistry, University of Cincinnati.

Our speaker immediately launched into an outline of his presentation. First he would discuss the origins of the myths themselves, then discuss their causes and wind up drawing some conclusions.

Born in 1797, Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein* started life as Mary Godwin, the only daughter of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. Her parents began their careers as hack writers of eminent and forgettable novels. Though they wrote these novels early in their careers they became famous later on writing radical political tracts. Godwin in 1793 wrote a famous work, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, and Wollstonecraft an even more famous work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792. Although both were middle-aged and had both written opposing the institution of marriage, they proceeded to "tie the knot" when they discovered that Wollstonecraft was four months pregnant with Mary. Within eleven days of the subsequent birth, Wollstonecraft died due to an infection resulting from the incomplete removal of the placenta. This was not an unusual occurrence in this period. Godwin was not only left with a new daughter, Mary, but also with her half-sister, Fanny, who was the illegitimate daughter that Wollstonecraft had as a result of an earlier affair she had with a married man. After a few years, Godwin married a widow named Clairmont, thereby acquiring her two additional children as well.

At age 17, Mary met the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley who had become an avid follower of her father's political views. Percy immediately abandoned his wife and eloped to the continent with the teenager who was soon pregnant. In May of 1816, after a miscarriage and another pregnancy they again fled to the continent. This time they were accompanied by one of Mary's stepsisters, Claire Clairmont who happened to be infatuated with the poet Byron and was soon pregnant by him.

They rented a villa on the shore of Lake Geneva in Switzerland and formed a household consisting of pregnant Mary, Percy, pregnant Claire, Byron and his personal physician, John Polidori. It was here in May of 1816 that Mary at the age of 19 outlined her first novel, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*.

After they returned to England, she prepared her manuscript for publication. About this time she finally married Shelley after his wife committed suicide. The novel was first published in 1818 in three volumes without the author's name appearing on the title page. That was not an unusual practice at the time. First time authors often had the affectation of using a *nom de plume* or publishing their works anonymously, until they could "test the literary waters" and decide whether they really wanted to take responsibility for it.

According to the preface to the first edition, which is widely thought to have been written by Percy rather than Mary, the novel was conceived as part of a contest among the occupants of the villa to see who could invent the best horror story. In a more extensive



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preface to the edition of 1831, Mary provided some additional insight into the novel's origins: "Many and long were the conversations between Lord Byron and Shelley to which I was a devout but nearly silent listener. During one of these various philosophical doctrines were discussed and among others the nature of the principle of life and whether there was any probability of its ever being discovered and communicated." This is an important clue as to the novel's philosophy and vision. It is by her own admission heavily influenced by the opinions of Byron and Shelley as perceived by an infatuated and impressionable young teenager in the presence of the two foremost Romantic Poets of her age. This particular clue which she provides us is one that has been almost totally ignored by commentators on the novel. As an example, both Byron and Shelley were fascinated by the myth of Prometheus and you see that she used Prometheus in the sub-title. Both poets wrote works featuring Prometheus.

Bill then moved on to the myths surrounding the story of Frankenstein. The **first myth** is that the monster is named Frankenstein. Most people should know that Doctor Frankenstein is the creator of the monster, not the monster himself who is never given a name. The confusion began in the 1940's with such movies as *Frankenstein Meets Wolfman* and *Abbot and Costello Meet Frankenstein*. Now it is virtually universal as a result of the propagation of various TV comedies and Saturday morning cartoon shows. If you ask any young child who Frankenstein is, they will invariably identify the monster.

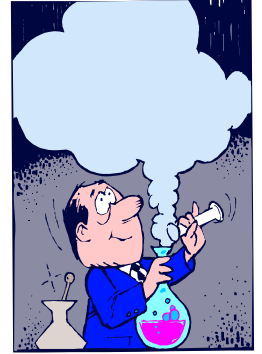


Myth No. 2: The novel is set in mid-nineteenth century Germany. It turns out that the novel is largely set in 18th century Switzerland. The story is told in the form of letters, a common device in novel writing at the time, which are dated merely as 17__ from an Arctic explorer named Robert Walton to his married sister Margaret Seville, back in England. Walton discovers an exhausted Frankenstein who has been pursuing his monster across the Arctic wastes. Before he dies in Walton's arms, Frankenstein tells his story to Walton who embeds the account in the letters to his sister. The monster's own story is told to Frankenstein, and is embedded in Frankenstein's account. So you have this kind of convoluted one story embedded in another story and this story embedded in the letters.

From internal references inside the novel, the date can be further narrowed to the 1790's because at one point in the novel Frankenstein reports of having attended a course of science lectures as a young teenager in which the professor "discoursed with the greatest fluency on potassium and guan, on sulfates and oxides." These terms were introduced by the

French chemist Lavoisier and his collaborators in 1787. They didn't come into common usage until the 1790's. On the other hand, potassium and guan were unknown in the 18th century until their electrochemical isolation by Sir Humphrey Davy in 1807-08 nearly two decades later.

Myth No. 3: Frankenstein was a doctor of medicine. No, He never studied medicine. Nor did he become a doctor. He entered the University of Ingolstadt where he studied only natural philosophy (physics) and chemistry. Having accidentally discovered the secret of life at age 19, his second year at the university, he dropped out of school, but remained in Ingolstadt teaching himself anatomy and physiology, and working on his creature which he finally succeeds in activating at age twenty.



Myth No. 4: Frankenstein is a baron: No he's the son of an upper class Swiss public servant and is born and raised in Geneva.

Myth No. 5: The monster is created in a castle using electricity. No, in the novel there is no castle, no hunchback assistant, no thunderstorm. The monster is created by Frankenstein in his student lodgings. No reference is made to electricity or galvanism. No attempt is made to reveal what the secret of the monster's reanimation is. Bill then made some side trips and leaped into a discussion of Galvani, Volta and Aldini and their experiments in the field of electricity and animal magnetism and in the case of the latter, experiments that were very bizarre. His conclusion was that Mary Shelley missed all this by putting her novel in the 1790's and she cut off the developments that would have been most pertinent to giving her novel some sense of scientific plausibility.

Myth No. 6: The monster is a hideous creature stitched together from assorted body parts. It is covered with grotesque scars and has bolts protruding from his neck. Again no, Frankenstein in the novel says he designed his creature, which was nearly eight feet tall, so that its limbs were in proportion; its features beautiful, however due to some odd side effects of the chemicals he used the skin is an odd yellowish color and has tightened to reveal the underlying arteries and muscles.



As the monster is portrayed in the revised edition of 1831, and as portrayed by the actor Thomas Cooke, who played the monster in a two-act play, *Frankenstein, or the Man in the Monster*, the





monster actually looks not like the monster we're accustomed to seeing, but like an ancient Greek with a complexion problem.

Myth No. 7: The monster is an inarticulate brute. No, repelled by his creation, Frankenstein abandons his creature and flees back to Geneva. The deserted and bewildered monster takes refuge in a shed next to a cottage owned by a peasant family named Delacey. By listening in on the family the monster learns to speak French. In addition the monster teaches himself to read having found a case of French translations of Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Plutarch's *Lives*. He actually discusses what he learned from reading these.

By reading Goethe the monster attained the proper sense of adolescent *angst*. After reading it he said: "Ah, my person



is hideous, my stature gigantic, what does this mean, who am I, whence did I come, what is my destination?" A typical alienated teenager. By reading Plutarch, he gets a sense of nobility, duty, goodness and you find a remark like this: "I was, of course, led to admire lawgivers, Numa, Solon and Lycurgus in preference to Romulus and Theseus." But it's the

reading of Milton's *Paradise Lost* that is the key to the whole thing. By reading *Paradise Lost*, the monster gets the idea that his creator has in some way betrayed him. From papers he finds in the coat he takes from the laboratory he deduces that Frankenstein is his creator and pursues him back to Geneva where they engage in a series of philosophical conversations including such topics as the duties of god to his creations, the meaning of life and happiness, good and evil, etc.

Myth No. 8: Frankenstein is possessed by the *hubris* of modern science. No, Frankenstein is persuaded to create his monster not by the wonders of modern science but by his addiction to the outdated literature of alchemy and occultism as presented by Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus and Albertus Magnus. Some of the literature on alchemy attributed to Magnus, who was a Catholic theologian, are thought to be forgeries. They have been blaming the wrong people all these years. It was actually not the scientists who inspired the author it was instead the occultists.

Myth No. 9: The novel is about science gone wrong. No again. At no point in the novel is there a discussion of the abuse of science. The monster persuades Frankenstein to create a mate for him and Frankenstein agrees but later reneges on his promise causing the monster to become so incensed that he threatens Frankenstein. Their battle finally ends when Frankenstein dies on the Arctic wastes and the monster destroys himself on his own funeral pyre.

— reported by George Maurer

Headscarf ban for Christian nuns?

Now, Roman Catholic nuns, teaching in German state-schools, may have to remove their habits before going into classrooms. If there is a local ban on Muslim teachers wearing headscarves at school, it must apply to teaching Christian nuns also, ruled the German Federal Administration Court. "Local exceptions for certain forms of religious clothing are out of question."

In September 2003, the Federal Constitutional Court ruled that the decision about Muslim teacher's headscarves should rest with the states. In April 2004, predominantly Roman Catholic Baden-Wuerttemberg (BW) was the first German state to pass a ban. It was almost unanimously backed by the state parliament - dominated by a coalition of the opposition Christian Democratic Union and the liberal Free Democrats.

The move was triggered by Fereshta Ludin, who was denied a teacher's job in BW five years back, as she insisted on wearing her scarf. She filed a case and quoted the constitution granting her freedom of religion. The case went up to the highest court, which ruled in September 2003 that there was, in fact, no law that could stop Mrs. Ludin from wearing her scarf at school, but that the states should be free to pass such a law. BW was the first to do so. Meantime five out of the sixteen states are in the process of passing similar legislation.

While the ban of Muslim headscarves enjoyed wide support in BW, there is strong opposition against Christian nuns being forced to shed their headgear. Law professor Ferdinand Kirchhof, the author of the anti-headscarf legislation, defends the nuns' habits as "professional clothing," which cannot be subject to a ban.

-- Source: *Rationalist International Bulletin*, no. 133, 29 Oct. 2004

Website News

gofigger.org & freeinquirygroup.org

The Institute for Humanist Studies, our website host, has been in the process of switching our site from one server to another. Those changes are now complete - the website has been updated.

The section for Humanist Books has 10 new book reviews added to the website. If you have questions, comments or requests, feel free to e-mail me at webnut@gofigger.org.

Check it out!



Robots: Our Bodies, Our Selves? by Massimo Pigliucci, (November 2004)

No, this column is not about Isaac Asimov's famous science fiction novels concerning the interaction between robots and humans. Rather, this month's essay has been inspired by the reading of Antonio Damasio's *Looking for Spinoza*, the third in a series of books by this neurobiologist that attempts to unravel the mysteries of consciousness (the other two are *Descartes' Error* and *The Feeling of What Happens*).

One of the often recurring instances of anti-naturalistic prejudice is the refusal to admit that the mind is a result of the activity of the body; no ectoplasm needed, as philosophers of mind put it. Few today would reject the notion that the body itself is very much like a machine. I was reminded of this rather obvious conclusion during a recent trip to the dentist: listening to a mechanical tool working its way through my teeth in order to fix the problem as I was having a root canal operation. It occurred to me that there was little difference between my predicament and a mechanic working on my car. This is a rather novel conception of the human body: before the work of philosopher-scientist René Descartes in the 17th century it would have been inconceivable even for most scientists to think of the body as a machine.

But the mind, as most people would still say today, is an entirely different matter. After all, Descartes himself stopped short of extending his reductionist analysis to human thought. Though it isn't at all clear whether he did so out of genuine conviction or in an attempt to avoid the fate of his contemporary Galileo. Consider the following instance, reported by Damasio in *Looking for Spinoza*. A group of neurosurgeons in a hospital in Paris was conducting a fairly routine operation on a patient affected by Parkinson's disease. The idea was, since the woman wasn't responding to drug treatment any longer, the medical team would go straight into her brain and stimulate specific regions of the brain stem by electrodes. This procedure usually yields stunning results, which completely erase the symptoms of the disease, greatly improving the patient's quality of life, at least temporarily.

In this particular instance, however, something went wrong. When one of the electrodes was activated, the patient suddenly stopped talking, began looking very sad and started crying uncontrollably, eventually explaining how her life was meaningless and she wished to die. It is important to note that the individual in question had never shown symptoms of depression before. Even more stunningly, the talk of suicide, the crying, and the sad expression all decreased and then disappeared minutes after the electrode was removed by the medical scientists! If this doesn't sound like a machine being

turned on and off at will by a simple electrical stimulation, I don't know what will convince you.

A crucial reason why Damasio is interested in cases like the one of the French woman affected by Parkinson's lies in the exact sequence of events and what it tells us about the nature of human thought. Notice that the facial signs of sadness appeared first, followed by the crying, and only significantly later by the articulation of the feeling of emptiness and despair. The same sequence has been found in other experiments and it suggests that feelings are generated by the brain's thinking about, or perceiving, the body's emotions. That is, emotions are simpler physical phenomena, while feelings are more complex, second-order, mental events.

Still not convinced that we are very sophisticated biological machines, in both body and mind? Then consider another fascinating example from Damasio's book. One of his own patients was affected by a bizarre and rather disturbing condition, which provides a stunning insight into the mind-body connection. The man in question suffered occasional episodes during which he would begin to lose the feeling of the lower parts of his body, as if under local anesthesia. The loss of feeling continued gradually upwards throughout the body, until it reached the throat, at which point the man passed out. A similar condition affecting a female

patient did not cause her to lose consciousness, despite the frightening experience of no longer feeling her limbs and trunk. Tellingly, this second patient retained a sensation of her internal organs. Damasio suggests the intriguing possibility, based on these and similar cases, that we have a mind only until we have a body sensation even if highly incomplete, as in the case of the second patient. No body, thus means no mind. What more compelling evidence could there be that dualism is dead.

Damasio goes further. In his book builds a convincing, if circumstantial, case for the radical idea that the mind actually is a monitoring system of the internal and external state of our bodies. The mind, then, is not a thing, but a process by which animals with complex brains keep track of and control how their bodies are behaving. We seem to be well on our way to truly explain consciousness as a biological phenomenon. All of this, of course, is no reason to think that we are "just" robots in the demeaning sense of being "mere" machines without meaning. There is nothing trivial or simple about the working of the human body and mind. Moreover, human life has value for other humans. Scientific evidence of the kind I discussed here is meant to help us understand how we generate, literally, our selves, not to tell us how much we should value those selves from an ethical perspective.



FIG LEAVES



Election Comment

by David Koepsell, Executive Director, Council for Secular Humanism

Tuesday's election was not about John Kerry or George Bush. The news is much bigger than a candidate. The election was about a certain fundamentalist view of a Christian God. Specifically, all indications are that self-described evangelical and born-again Christians already make up 42% of the American public, and made up a major voting bloc at yesterday's polls. It seems that Karl Rove's ability to mobilize a mere 4 to 5 million more of these voters than in 2000 tipped the scales for George W. Bush Tuesday. So-called "values" issues were at the top of the agenda for voters who were in many cases bussed by their churches in record numbers, and asked by their churches to vote for George W. Bush for God and country. At the same time, in eleven states, the culture war continues through state measures that passed overwhelmingly specifically banning same-sex marriages. What does this all mean for those of us who support free-thought, secularism, science and the values of the Enlightenment? Frankly, it means we have to fight harder than ever.

The voters who made themselves heard yesterday believe that the Christian bible is the basis for our government and the sole source of morality. They believe that bible tells them that abortion is murder, that stem cell research is likewise immoral because of the ensoulment of fetuses at conception. They believe that creationism ought to be taught in schools, and they largely believe that public education, and numerous other public programs, ought to be dismantled and privatized. They believe in reversing the separation of church and state enshrined in the Constitution, and in supplanting it with a Christian theocracy modeled after a myth of this country's allegedly Christian roots.

They believe the worst sort of person in the world is a secular humanist. They make no secret about this belief.

But what they ignore, and the message we need to work hard to get out, is that there are other, secular humanist values which are at the core of our democratic republic. These values include: social justice, tolerance, diversity, personal liberty, scientific progress, democracy and secular government. In fact, most Americans share these values with us, and we must do more to promote them as the core of secular humanism, and build bridges with Americans who share these truly American values.

In sum, we have a long hard slog ahead to reclaim the values of the Enlightenment this country was originally founded upon. We have significant battles ahead in the Congress and the courts to challenge the constitutionality of faith-based initiatives

that have been implemented by Executive Order, without congressional oversight, and to prevent new initiatives that would allow churches to engage in open political endorsements and activities while still retaining their tax exemptions. We can expect the re-emergence of measure that would limit challenges to displays of the Ten Commandments, and other attempts to subvert the First Amendment.

No other organization exists that stands against all of these initiatives and beliefs, and stands up for the secular, rational values upon which this nation was founded. The Council for Secular Humanism is the largest organization supporting secularism, science, reason, and ethical alternatives, and against the retrograde, theocratic values of the evangelicals who voted Tuesday.

We can fight these battles and will with your help. You have been there for us, and we will be there for you. Now, more than ever, we must hold the line against those who feel they won a mandate Tuesday. In time, and with your help, we can prove that it is mankind's wisdom and hard-won experience--not a reflexive obedience to religious mythology--that make this country "the land of the free and the home of the brave."

Quote.....

Hurricane Charley - forget "Mother Nature" - it's Father God !!!

Then He [Jesus] arose, and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm. Matthew 8:26 (Psalm 65:7; Psalm 89:9; Psalm 107:29)

For those who accept and understand the authority, universality, and immutability of the holy scriptures (the Bible), it is abundantly clear in both the Old and New Testaments that the Lord God, Creator of the Universe, the earth, the seas, the heavens and the planets, controls HIS Creation! Therefore, for those who understand the sovereignty of the Creator over all His Creation, it should be understood that He either caused or allowed Hurricane Charley to come ashore the coast of Florida as a Category 4 hurricane, when it did, where it did, and with the effects that it had.

From: Columbia Christians for Life <CCFL@sc-online.net>
Tuesday, 17 August 2004

COMMENT: What kind of an evil monster do these people worship? — WR

.....Unquote.



December Meeting Sunday, 12th 7:00 PM

November Potluck: Tuesday, 16th 6:30 PM



FIG Leaves
P.O. Box 19034
Cincinnati, OH 45219

FIG

Our Purpose

The Free Inquiry Group, Inc. is a non-profit organization founded in 1991. FIG is allied with the Council for Secular Humanism as well as an affiliate of the American Humanist Association and of the American Atheists. Our members are mostly secular humanists. However, we welcome to our meetings anyone interested in learning about or furthering our purpose.

To foster a community of secular humanists dedicated to improving the human condition through rational inquiry and creative thinking unfettered by superstition, religion, or any form of dogma.

In accordance with our purpose, we have established the following goals:

- To provide a forum for intelligent exchange of ideas for those seeking fulfillment in an ethical secular life.
- To develop through open discussion the moral basis of a secular society and encourage ethical practices within our own membership and the community at large.
- To inform the public regarding secular alternatives to supernatural interpretations of the human condition.
- To support and defend the principles of democracy, free speech, and separation of church and state as expressed in the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights.

For more information, write the Free Inquiry Group at the address above, e-mail figleaves@fuse.net, or leave a message at (513) 557-3836. Visit our web site at gofigger.org