Mother Nature Is Not a Male Chauvinist

As a working neurobiologist, I agree with Christina Hoff Sommers (“Mother Nature Is Not a Feminist,” *FI*, Summer 2000) that research on the neurobiology of sex differences should not be suppressed. Sommers should be happy to hear that reports of this research’s demise are greatly exaggerated. If she were to go to the Society for Neuroscience meeting this year, she would be able to attend numerous talks and posters on the subject, many of them by feminist female scientists.

I hypothesize that the reason Sommers’s ideas have received a poor reception has less to do with a feminist anti-science agenda than with the bizarre ideological use to which Sommers puts the data she supposedly defends: she seems to think that these data indicate there is something wrong with teaching people how to rise above their biological predispositions.

When compared with the evidence for sex differences, the evidence that humans are biologically predisposed to aggression, xenophobia, and eating too much fat (among other things) is just as convincing. These behaviors also have a neurobiological basis and are also rooted early in development. But would Sommers say that this means that these behaviors are “normal, healthy, and by implication best left alone”? Biological predispositions on their own tell us little about how to build a just or healthy human society.

I am grateful to those “meddling” science teachers who taught me to play with test tubes rather than lip gloss. And since the birth of my daughter, I have watched with wonder and joy as fathers of my generation take on the difficult day-to-day tasks of child rearing, achieving emotional relationships with their children that their own fathers would never have dreamed of.

Sommers mocks the idea that children can be freed from gender stereotyping. But those of us who have tasted that freedom aren’t laughing.

Karen Allendoerfer, Ph.D.
Cambridge, Massachusetts

I have long had a fantasy of giving a talk to a feminist audience, tracing the advances made by women, and ending by saying “so great has this progress towards equality been that I now confidently predict that twenty years from now women will be as tall as men.”

Therefore, I was strongly sympathetic to the op-ed by Christina Hoff Sommers in which she makes it clear that some feminist theory is founded on fallacies. Clearly there exist genetic differences between men and women. However, I did not agree with all the conclusions she draws from that point of view. Humans have a strong genetic predisposition toward violence. This does not make it wrong to train children to behave in a nonviolent way. On the contrary, I believe that the human ability to behave in a way that is in conflict with instinct is a great and unique strength.

If boys are predisposed to play with boys, it may be appropriate to allow them to play only with boys, or it may be appropriate to train them to play in groups in which girls and boys are mixed. It takes a much stronger argument than is given by Ms. Sommers to show that the latter is wrong.

Should we not, whenever it is reasonable, behave as if it were true that there are no differences between women and men, even if we know that there are real differences?

Alwyn Eades
Hellertown, Pennsylvania

Like Christina Hoff Sommers I favor scientific research, no matter where it leads. But it seems that any “nature vs. nurture” research has difficulty removing itself from ideological corruption, and gender research, like racial research, is not exception. I suspect this possible corruption—not the science—is the concern of some feminists.

Sommers’s gender incidents at school, the presumed results of feminist pressure, probably don’t represent a prevailing trend across the country, but maybe they should. Can our schools ever help to curtail our macho obsessions that, over the past 50 years, encouraged us to invade any country we disliked (Vietnam being the most sustained example), and seems to pervade all economic and social levels in our society in various ways?

In any case, opposition to gender research has never been the thrust of the feminist movement with its general push for equality, and its traditional concerns for pay equity, pensions, health care, violence, sexual harassment, and abortion. Sommers herself articulates the reason for supporting feminism: in her op-ed she says gender research has never been the thrust of the feminist movement with its general push for equality, and its traditional concerns for pay equity, pensions, health care, violence, sexual harassment, and abortion. Sommers herself articulates the reason for supporting feminism: in her op-ed she says gender research has never been the thrust of the feminist movement with its general push for equality, and its traditional concerns for pay equity, pensions, health care, violence, sexual harassment, and abortion.

Finally, comparing the creationist/evolution controversy (the folklore of Bible stories vs. science) to issues regarding gender research seems, at best, careless. I prefer a different analogy: using Bible stories to replace evolution theory (tradition resists modern science), is like using gender differences to support male superiority (tradition resists modern notions of equality).

Perhaps Mother Nature should be—and might be—a feminist!

George Flynn
Chicago, Illinois
Christina Hoff Sommers’s article reminds me of an incident that happened when I was teaching an introductory sociology class a number of years ago and discussing gender differences. Taking an approach like that of Sommers, I said some gender differences could be inborn or hormonal and mentioned an article I had just read in the journal *Science*, which reported finding sex differences in shapes or proportions in rat brains.

Obviously, for a journal with the prestige of *Science* it was a sober scientific investigation and not an attempt to document a doctrinaire case. After class a student came up to me and said she didn’t believe there were inborn gender differences. I told her that while one might question the relevance of the article for humans I had it in my office down the hall and she could see the photographs showing the differences. I invited her to come and take a look. No, she said, she would rather think that there were no differences and she didn’t want to see the article.

I hate to think that someone with a mind so closed could graduate from a university, as I assume she did, and claim to be an educated person, yet I think it happens all the time.

**Robert E. Forman, Ph.D.**

Colville, Washington

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**The Search Continues**

As a prime witness for the U.S. Air Force on Roswell, and having researched that subject thoroughly, I have had numerous thoughts concerning aliens (“Minds Beyond,” *FI*, Summer 2000). You can forget the terrestrial visitations. All I found was a huge media exploitation and a rather naive public.

I am not necessarily sold on radio waves as a prime means of communication. Even about 30 years ago, an article in the *New York Times* suggested neutrinos as a future means of everyday communications. That still looks like a few centuries away at best, but consider what worlds thousands of centuries more advanced might be using.

The most tempting mode would be via tachyons, probably artificially produced. These faster-than-light particles eliminate the major problem, time lag.

How about programming variable stars? Sounds far out, but there has already been mention of modifying our Sun to delay its termination. It may be that only aliens at our own technological level use radio waves.

What about the others? With sensors far more advanced than ours, they can check us out without leaving home. Right now, on their holographic televisions, you may be waltzing around some living room. If the images arrive much later in the future, you have achieved a pseudo-immortality more probable than the dream concoctions of religions.

But where do you look? I am very dubious about advanced life within a galaxy, with an avalanche of deadly radiations from numerous sources, especially as you go in deeper than our position. The safest location would be in intergalaxial space, perhaps without even use of the scattered stars out there. They may use their own manufactured energy sources.

Donald Tarter (“Looking for God and Space Aliens”) talked about advanced aliens joining us in an evolutionary course leading to “an as-of-yet-unknown destiny.” I like that concept, and the most logical goal would be to prolong the life of this universe by slowing its expansion toward a cold death and replacing decaying protons.

In the meantime, the best gift they could give us, would be photo coverage of the birth of this solar system. Maybe that would finally finish off the primitive creation myths that still prevail.

**B.D. Gildenberg**

Tularosa, New Mexico

While reading the articles concerning the “Minds Beyond” supplement, my mind wandered back to one of the first instances, that I can remember, questioning my religious upbringing.

In junior high school I was deep into UFO mania, buying anything that was related to the whole genre. I was embarrassed to admit that I was taken in by the hysteria. In any case my mind was full of tales of aliens and spaceships regularly visiting our planet. In this context, during an open question day, I thought about what kind of religious beliefs an alien race would profess to hold. So I asked the teacher who, after the class laughter had died down, seriously responded with a “I don’t know.”

It would not be my last question doubting my faith, and it would take another ten years to finally lose all belief in a god, not to mention the fairy tales of alien abductions, autopsies, and the like. But that first question has always been on my mind and, as the years progressed, another disturbing one surfaced. In human history it has been common for one people to impose their religion on another, thereby devaluing the native population. Would an alien race be also so inclined to push their beliefs upon the people of Earth? It is a sobering thought and one that makes me hope that the first words we translate from an alien tongue would be the secular “Hello, Earthlings” instead of the religious “Bless you, Earthlings.”

**Joseph Olszewski Jr.**

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

It does seem likely to me that the necessary conditions for life to arise are present elsewhere among the billions of stars in our galaxy. The reason that signs of intelligent life have not turned up could be that the presence of life forms advanced enough to send signals into outer space is a very fleeting phenomenon. Our civilization has only been producing detectable signals for about 100 years, since the invention of radio. And the basis for our advanced technological society is the tremendous storehouse of Earth’s fossil fuels that accumulated over millions of years. These fossil fuels will gradually be exhausted over the next 100 years. At present we do not have any means of maintaining industrial civilization without fossil fuels.

Secular humanists often seem to place as much faith in human ingenuity as religionists place in God. It takes a real leap of faith to see how we are going to avoid a collapse and massive die-off over the next 50 years as we run out of oil and gas. So it seems likely to me that the life span of our advanced civilization will be less than 200 years, a

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in the Old or New Testament is the only basis of “morality” is ill-informed. Had the candidates taken an introductory philosophy course at their universities, they would have seen that there is within Western civilization an historic non-religious and rational humanist basis for morality. Moreover, humanist values are central to American civic virtues—a commitment to human rights, including freedom of conscience, autonomy of choice, the right to dissent—none of which is easily found in the ancient religious documents. Indeed, these documents have been used in the past to justify the divine right of kings, aristocracy, and oligarchy.

Our political leaders should be cautious before they seek to judge public policies by their own religious biases. A cherished aspect of American democracy is respect for diversity. We need to resist any attempts by the reigning plutocrats to impose religious conformity as the test of American patriotism.

Making Sense of Memes

I do not agree with Michael Bradie (“Do Memes Make Sense?” FI, Summer 2000) that this line of research is a waste of time; the fact that we are beginning to see that we replicate and imitate seems to me to be a major breakthrough. Surely no one in our past deliberately set out to repeat the horrors of history. Where I agree with him, however, is that memes cannot possibly be both the cause of cultural traits and the traits themselves. In the hope of resolving this issue, I offer the following as the cause of inherited traits, and the mechanism behind them.

Our autonomic nervous system, the mechanism that is involved in our “fight and flight” responses, not only causes our bodily functions to run on an unconscious level, but also causes us to behave in certain ways unconsciously—most notably as if every encounter were a crisis. The biological harm done by this anachronistic system has been recognized, but what has not been fully recognized is the harm done to our relationships.

Being imitators who have evolved the added ability to both use language and record it has helped us to pass on what we have learned, but this added attribute has also helped us to pass on our misconceptions. It is for this reason that, since recorded history, it has always been the best of times and the worst of times.

Memes has made us see what was before unconscious, but now that it has become conscious, let us hope that it isn’t perverted, as was the theory of evolution. Using anachronistic ideas to judge evolution, many embraced Social Darwinism and we found ourselves in a world at war. Many others still refuse to recognize that evolution is a fact. History will repeat itself until we realize the harm of our mind-closing, selfish fight or flight responses.

As far as the theory of memes is concerned, right now the odds are that those holding different ideas will fight it tooth and nail, and those who see a profit in replication and imitation will use this knowledge for their own advantage.

Michael Bradie’s criticisms of memetics are unconvincing. He begins by questioning the grounds for believing in memes by giving an example where bright lights in the sky could be called “mystemes.” He says that mere labeling does not generate anything of interest. Yes, but even in the act of questioning memes he creates a meme, whose common name is “UFO.”

He then questions the analogy between genes and memes, saying the connection is only interesting if the mechanisms in both are identical. But an analogy may be imperfect but still useful. An example is “neural nets” where there is only a loose analogy to human neurons. Still, there are many successful applications, and a rich formalism has grown up around them.

He wonders if characterizing religions as memes is useful in explaining religion. Well, there are other memes that are very useful. For example, the separation of fields of science into specialties and sub-specialties has very little to do with reason. The division is usually done around scientific conferences where memes are traded; memes explain this phenomenon well. Why, after all, is chemistry not a part of physics anyway?

He asks if describing religions as memes can explain why some religions survive and others do not. But in the field, evolution provides only a partial explanation why better genes survive. If a superior fruit fly is born, it may not live to pass its genes on simply because some big animal squished it. Christianity is notorious this way in its behavior toward other religions; it is simply a hostile environment for other “memes.”

His questions are easily answered, and it seems like answering the objections actually provides more insights into the value of memes than his criticisms did.

Antony Van der Mude
Summit, New Jersey

(REVIEWS

LETTERS

WRITE TO FI

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An Open Letter to Nontheistic Philosophers

We are at a most crucial crossroads in our society. We are at the dawn of what should be an ultra-scientific and therefore rational age. However, the level of religiosity, both at home and abroad, seems to be at an all-time high. I have spoken with many of you on an individual basis about your becoming more active in public speaking and debating on behalf of nonbelief. A number of you have expressed reservations about publicly engaging in a sustained struggle to dismantle the religious dogma that permeates virtually all of society.

I can understand how academic professionals may have a certain reluctance to participate in frequent verbal confrontations that could become quite acrimonious and sometimes even circulike. However, I must urge all of you to reconsider any reluctance that may be currently holding you back from a more visible public profile on behalf of nonbelief. Our society is in the grip of a perverse mindset. Those who uncritically accept unproven supernatural mythologies are revered as having reached the highest levels of morality. Those who courageously apply the faculties of reason and logical thought are looked upon as immoral and as embodying ultimate evil. The conscientious nonbeliever, incredibly noble in courage and in will power to follow reason through to its ineluctable conclusions, is shunned rather than lauded.

To me this shows that our culture is intellectually and morally sick. Billy Graham writes a simple-minded and idiotic book about angels and most of our neighbors in this country shed tears of sentimentality. If someone stands up and explains why Graham’s assertions are pure fairy tales, that person is looked upon as a devil.

How much longer will we continue to endure a society in which blind faith fidelity to mythologies are revered and the exercise of disciplined intellect is shunned?

All of you are in a position to be major spokespeople, before the general public, for the cause of nonbelief. I am not just referring to academic debates. I am looking forward to presentations and speeches before civic groups and all sorts of organizations in society at large.

I have already begun to participate in such activities. I have publicly debated such theists as Peter van Inwaggen, Greg Bahnsen, and, of course, William Lane Craig. Though I am spending ever-more time cultivating the skills to be an Ingersoll of the twenty-first century, I do not want to be the only one whom the media and society will take note of as being a willing public spokesperson for nonbelief.

All of you have demonstrated an extraordinary ability to compose devastating arguments against religious dogma. Many of you have made an academic career out of refuting the supernatural claims of theism. However, notwithstanding the overpowering force of your arguments, the vast majority of society remains in complete ignorance of what you have written and said.

I urge each of you to seriously consider becoming more publicly visible in the struggle to promote nonbelief. Freeing modern civilization from the shackles of religious belief is a worthy objective. It is a goal of such momentous value that it justifies embarking on a more intense campaign of public outreach. I, as a lawyer, should not be the only one from within our nontheistic ranks actively seeking out opportunities to speak and debate before the general public in an effort to promote freethought. You, our professional philosophers, should also be doing this. If any of you are still reluctant, I would like to discuss your hesitation with you.

Among you are some of the most highly cultivated minds around today. It is a tragedy that the vast bulk of society is unaware of the sheer voltage of intellectual firepower that you have arrayed against supernatural belief systems. I do not fully accept the tired and outdated dichotomy between common understanding and technical genius. There is not one of you receiving this who could not tailor your brilliant academic arguments for popular consumption. Each of you is capable of articulating a challenge to the supernatural, or to some of the other contradictions inherent in theism, in a way that the average person could comprehend.

In the seventeenth century, freethought had a glimmer of hope that Spinoza’s works would make a major dent in the dominant power of religious dogma. It never came about. In the eighteenth century, freethought had a glimmer of hope that Thomas Paine’s Age of Reason would rout much of the entrenched power of religious dogma. It never came about. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, freethought had a giant opportunity to shake the mind control monopoly of religious dogma through the oratory of Robert Ingersoll. Sadly, to the vast majority of society, today, Ingersoll and his works are unknown. The scientific advances of the twentieth century were supposed to weaken religion’s stranglehold on the human mind. We ended that century with religion as deeply entrenched, if not more so, than ever.

We cannot continue to miss opportunities to spark a true public movement that questions the supernatural. Those of you receiving this have the ability to be part of this movement. Let’s please all discuss this further. Let the early twenty-first century truly be the time when freethought finally obtains an ineradicable foothold in the popular marketplace of ideas.

For those of you reading this in England, what I have said here pertains primarily to the United States but is also of substantial urgency in Great Britain and, of course, in many other countries.

Edward Tabash
Los Angeles, California

Edward Tabash is a constitutional lawyer in Beverly Hills, California. He is also a part time judge for the Los Angeles County Superior Courts and chairs the Center for Inquiry West. He is the legal advisor to the Campus Freethought Alliance.