

# *V. Values and Ethics*

## A Positive Solution for Plagiarism

By Jeff Karon

*Jeff Karon is a visiting instructor in the English department at the University of South Florida and contributor to The Chronicle of Higher Education. In this essay, Karon evaluates the different approaches that college instructors take to addressing the problem of plagiarism and presents his own positive approach and explains why he takes it.*

We know that students plagiarize. We suppose that plagiarism, as well as academic dishonesty in general, has increased over the past few years, decades, or century—depending on which academic ax we choose to grind.

The caveats are familiar: Perhaps cheating just is easier than it used to be (most honors students who are caught plagiarizing say they did so because it was “easy”). Perhaps we are better at detecting plagiarism because of software such as Google and Turnitin. Or perhaps we forget that every generation, at least since the ancient Romans and Greeks, complains that the next one is composed of lazy, possibly illiterate, youngsters willing to cut ethical corners.

But a good dose of skepticism toward the doomsayers doesn’t make the worry go away. For example, a July 21 article in *The Chronicle* on a New York University professor who vowed to stop pursuing plagiarists has drawn 249 comments, several of which were impassioned denunciations of institutional responses to the problem. Dealing with student plagiarism is a nagging, seemingly endless problem for academics, judging from the number of articles, blog posts, and forum discussions on the topic. Indeed, I’ve contributed to some of those discussions but have yet to find any consensus emerge.

I’ve organized and participated in conference panels on plagiarism, held workshops for college instructors and schoolteachers on the subject, and for several years have used the methods I’m about to describe. I also began my teaching career with a zero-tolerance policy, which meant that I have been involved in campus judicial proceedings, a step that drains just about everyone touched by the accusation.

But as the Internet has matured, I decided that I did not want to spend time as a cyber-cop. More important, my goal should be to help inculcate honor and integrity rather than build a culture of fear and accusation.

It’s easy to find excellent articles and Web sites on dealing with plagiarism. From those sources, we can develop four general guidelines for an effective response:

- The solution should be positive; that is, show students how to act as responsible scholars and writers. The same tone should be reflected in the syllabus. I have seen many syllabi in which the penalties for plagiarism are laid out in excruciating detail, with no positive

models or behavior mentioned. Surely by now we know that positive motivation trumps the negative variety.

- It should help students avoid plagiarism rather than focus on our catching it.
- The solution should objectively strengthen both students and teachers.
- It should also make students and teachers feel as though they are stronger.

Those seem to me to be minimal requirements, yet they often are not met in practice. Before laying out a workable solution, let's review some approaches whose weaknesses contribute to the seemingly endless discussions of plagiarism:

**Draconian consequences.** The instructor who threatens maximum damage if plagiarism is detected usually stakes out the moral high ground. Syllabi and accompanying class discussions list everything that will befall the student, including possible expulsion.

**Strength:** If applied consistently, without regard for extenuating circumstances, this approach seems to work particularly well for teachers who are both imperious and admired by their students. I knew one colleague, a tenured professor of literature and writing, who threatened to ruin, as nearly as possible, the reputations of offending students. Somehow he still inspired them.

**Weakness:** Instructors who use this tactic set an adversarial tone at the beginning of a course. Although some can inhabit the Professor Kingsfield character from *The Paper Chase*, many simply come off as nasty or suspicious. And approaching plagiarism this way is dispiriting—it never energizes students or teachers. In the end, it often doesn't prevent enough plagiarism to counter its weaknesses.

**Preventive construction.** A teacher who is concerned about plagiarism and has read about strategies may attempt to construct every assignment in a way that precludes plagiarism.

**Strength:** Rethinking assignments—freshening them up—often produces new energy in a course. Those who reflect often on pedagogy will be attracted to this approach.

**Weakness:** The approach often means devising assignments with a narrow scope. But it's important to train students to explore widely. They need to be able to sift through all sorts of sources, and closely tailored assignments may be too restrictive. Such assignments certainly don't simulate the strengths needed in graduate or professional school. And sooner or later, we either will run out of ideas for assignments or will be lulled into a false sense of security.

**Dedicated discussion.** Some teachers discuss extensively in class the nature and consequences of plagiarism, believing that such time is well spent.

**Strength:** Some students may not understand what constitutes plagiarism or its consequences. By discussing it carefully in class, instructors demonstrate an awareness of that problem.

**Weakness:** Merely talking with students, especially about a critical topic, is a poor way to ensure that they will act correctly. Giving quizzes on the topic is a move in the right direction. But a quiz still encourages passivity. Plagiarism and academic dishonesty are actions taken by people; powerful lessons about it require actions as well.

**A workable solution.** The first writing assignment I give students in my writing courses involves plagiarism as a topic. I ask them to investigate and read resources on the Web assembled by experts on the subject such as Nick Carbone, a new-media consultant for Bedford/St. Martin's, and Bruce Leland, a professor emeritus at Western Illinois University. I ask students to take notes on the readings, especially on how both authors are unhappy with standard approaches to preventing plagiarism and academic dishonesty. I tell them to pay special attention to Carbone's discussion of Dos and don'ts, a list he developed after deciding that his previous approaches to fighting plagiarism adopted an inappropriate tone, and to Leland's extensive list of resources that instructors can use to deal with plagiarism.

Then I ask students to find a Web site that offers free essays for download. I provide a central source, such as "Cheating 101: Internet Papers" though there are many others. Each student has to download one paper (or as much of one as is permitted by the site) and analyze its strengths and weaknesses. They must bring to class a copy of the paper as well as their notes on their reading, and deliver oral reports.

The idea is for students to read materials written by teachers for teachers, rather than something written just for students. The explicit lesson is for them to learn about plagiarism and academic dishonesty. An implicit lesson is that instructors already are aware of free papers and other Internet dodges. Even if a faculty member is not particularly computer-savvy, students will assume from this assignment that he or she understands how to track down plagiarism.

By analyzing these "free essays" before the class, students learn firsthand that the papers available over the Internet often are far inferior to what they could produce on their own. When they occasionally happen on a strong paper, they will remark that it is too good: No professor would believe that such a professionally written piece had come from a student for a course assignment.

You need not guide the students' choices of papers: Their own interests and majors will do that. Through this assignment, they are engaging in research from the first day of the course, and are practicing critical reading. They understand that you will treat them like adults, since you have assigned them to read authoritative, friendly articles from Web sites that speak to adult professionals. And other than require that they concentrate on a paper's strengths and weaknesses, you need not guide the analyses: Students of all writing levels will demonstrate that they can pick apart someone else's work.

Faculty can substitute other Web sites or articles, of course. But they should give students separate credit for their Web-site notes and for their critique of the downloaded paper—both of which should be physical copies. Students who took notes can be distinguished easily from those who did not, which allows instructors to teach the lesson that strong scholars or professionals take notes. The physical copies also allow instructors to collect the assignments if they run short on time for the oral reports, though I encourage faculty to allow everyone to present.

This assignment builds: (1) a direct awareness of plagiarism and its responses; (2) research skills, since students immediately follow and analyze reliable Web sources; and (3) presentation skills, all without creating a hostile or adversarial atmosphere. The assignment can be adapted for large (or online) courses by creating a blog or online discussion area, although nothing beats the

in-person connection. (I also ask students to introduce themselves by name every time they present. My philosophy is to maximize what any assignment can achieve.)

I have employed this approach with undergraduate and graduate, traditional and nontraditional students. During the past two semesters, I used it in online classes to great effect. Any method that makes both students and professors feel strong is worth trying.

## Discussion Starters

1. Discuss the various approaches to plagiarism Karon presents that instructors tend to use. What is your opinion on each approach and how effective it would be?
2. Evaluate Karon's approach to plagiarism: the assignment he gives to counter plagiarism and the positive approach he uses. Do you feel that his approach is better than the other ones presented in combating plagiarism? Why?
3. What is your opinion on academic cheating (plagiarism and cheating on tests)? Is such cheating commonplace at your school? Why do many students cheat, and how do they justify it?

# Why Money Doesn't Buy Happiness

By Sharon Begley

*Sharon Begley is the senior health & science correspondent at Reuters and former science editor and science columnist at Newsweek. In this essay, Begley presents findings that support the contention that greater wealth doesn't buy greater happiness and that Americans' obsession with material gain is misguided.*

All in all, it was probably a mistake to look for the answer to the eternal question—"Does money buy happiness?"—from people who practice what's called the dismal science. For when economists tackled the question, they started from the observation that when people put something up for sale they try to get as much for it as they can, and when people buy something they try to pay as little for it as they can. Both sides in the transaction, the economists noticed, are therefore behaving as if they would be more satisfied (happier, dare we say) if they wound up receiving more money (the seller) or holding on to more money (the buyer). Hence, more money must be better than less, and the only way more of something can be better than less of it is if it brings you greater contentment. The economists' conclusion: the more money you have, the happier you must be.

Depressed debutantes, suicidal CEOs, miserable magnates and other unhappy rich folks aren't the only ones giving the lie to this. "Psychologists have spent decades studying the relation between wealth and happiness," writes Harvard University psychologist Daniel Gilbert in his best-selling *Stumbling on Happiness*, "and they have generally concluded that wealth increases human happiness when it lifts people out of abject poverty and into the middle class but that it does little to increase happiness thereafter."

That flies in the face of intuition, not to mention economic theory. According to standard economics, the most important commodity you can buy with additional wealth is choice. If you have \$20 in your pocket, you can decide between steak and peanut butter for dinner, but if you have only \$1 you'd better hope you already have a jar of jelly at home. Additional wealth also lets you satisfy additional needs and wants, and the more of those you satisfy the happier you are supposed to be.

The trouble is, choice is not all it's cracked up to be. Studies show that people like selecting from among maybe half a dozen kinds of pasta at the grocery store but find 27 choices overwhelming, leaving them chronically on edge that they could have chosen a better one than they did. And wants, which are nice to be able to afford, have a bad habit of becoming needs (iPod, anyone?), of which an advertising- and media-saturated culture create endless numbers. Satisfying needs brings less emotional well-being than satisfying wants.

The nonlinear nature of how much happiness money can buy—lots more happiness when it moves you out of penury and into middle-class comfort, hardly any more when it lifts you from millionaire to decamillionaire—comes through clearly in global surveys that ask people how content they feel with their lives. In a typical survey people are asked to rank their sense of well-being or happiness on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 means "not at all satisfied with my life" and 7 means

“completely satisfied.” Of the American multimillionaires who responded, the average happiness score was 5.8. Homeless people in Calcutta came in at 2.9. But before you assume that money does buy happiness after all, consider who else rated themselves around 5.8: the Inuit of northern Greenland, who do not exactly lead a life of luxury, and the cattle-herding Masai of Kenya, whose dung huts have no electricity or running water. And proving Gilbert’s point about money buying happiness only when it lifts you out of abject poverty, slum dwellers in Calcutta—one economic rung above the homeless—rate themselves at 4.6.

Studies tracking changes in a population’s reported level of happiness over time have also dealt a death blow to the money-buys-happiness claim. Since World War II the gross domestic product per capita has tripled in the United States. But people’s sense of well-being, as measured by surveys asking some variation of “Overall, how satisfied are you with your life?,” has barely budged. Japan has had an even more meteoric rise in GDP per capita since its postwar misery, but measures of national happiness have been flat, as they have also been in Western Europe during its long postwar boom, according to social psychologist Ruut Veenhoven of Erasmus University in Rotterdam.

A 2004 analysis of more than 150 studies on wealth and happiness concluded that “economic indicators have glaring shortcomings” as approximations of well-being across nations, wrote Ed Diener of the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and Martin E. P. Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania. “Although economic output has risen steeply over the past decades, there has been no rise in life satisfaction...and there has been a substantial increase in depression and distrust.”

That’s partly because in an expanding economy, in which former luxuries such as washing machines become necessities, the newly affluent don’t feel the same joy in having a machine do the laundry that their grandparents, suddenly freed from washboards, did. They just take the Maytag for granted. “Americans who earn \$50,000 per year are much happier than those who earn \$10,000 per year,” writes Gilbert, “but Americans who earn \$5 million per year are not much happier than those who earn \$100,000 per year.” Another reason is that an expanding paycheck, especially in an expanding economy, produces expanding aspirations and a sense that there is always one more cool thing out there that you absolutely have to have. “Economic success falls short as a measure of well-being, in part because materialism can negatively influence well-being,” Diener and Seligman conclude.

If money doesn’t buy happiness, what does? Grandma was right when she told you to value health and friends, not money and stuff. Or as Diener and Seligman put it, once your basic needs are met “differences in well-being are less frequently due to income, and are more frequently due to factors such as social relationships and enjoyment at work.” Other researchers add fulfillment, a sense that life has meaning, belonging to civic and other groups, and living in a democracy that respects individual rights and the rule of law. If a nation wants to increase its population’s sense of well-being, says Veenhoven, it should make “less investment in economic growth and more in policies that promote good governance, liberties, democracy, trust and public safety.”

Curiously, although money doesn’t buy happiness, happiness can buy money. Young people who describe themselves as happy typically earn higher incomes, years later, than those who said they were unhappy. It seems that a sense of well-being can make you more productive and more likely to show initiative and other traits that lead to a higher income. Contented people are also more likely to marry and stay married, as well as to be healthy, both of which increase happiness.

If more money doesn't buy more happiness, then the behavior of most Americans looks downright insane, as we work harder and longer, decade after decade, to fatten our W-2s. But what is insane for an individual is crucial for a national economy—that is, ever more growth and consumption. Gilbert again: “Economies can blossom and grow only if people are deluded into believing that the production of wealth will make them happy...Economies thrive when individuals strive, but because individuals will strive only for their own happiness, it is essential that they mistakenly believe that producing and consuming are routes to personal well-being.” In other words, if you want to do your part for your country's economy, forget all of the above about money not buying happiness.

### **Discussion Starters**

1. Evaluate the evidence provided in the essay that money does not buy happiness unless it moves a person from poverty to the middle class. Beyond that, why does more money not translate to more happiness?
2. Why, according to the essay, have Americans bought into the false belief that making more and more money to buy more acquisitions leads to happiness?
3. Does the essay make you rethink the American obsession with money and materialism? What is your personal perspective on what makes people happy? What do you value most in life?

# Teaching Humility in an Age of Arrogance

By Michael Patrick Lynch

*Michael Patrick Lynch is professor of philosophy at the University of Connecticut and author, most recently, of *The Internet of Us: Knowing More and Understanding Less in the Age of Big Data*. In this essay, Lynch bemoans the current trend towards intellectual ignorance that creates bias and hinders reasoned thought and the ways in which the current political culture fosters it and the internet reinforces it.*

“Humility” isn’t a word that most academics — or Americans — identify with. Indeed, if there is a single attitude most closely associated with our culture, it’s the opposite of humility. The defining trait of the age seems to be arrogance — in particular, the kind of arrogance personified by our tweeter in chief; the arrogance of thinking that you know it all and that you don’t need to improve because you are just so great already.

But our culture’s infatuation with this kind of arrogance doesn’t come out of the blue. Trump is a symptom and not the cause of a larger trend, one that rewards dogmatic certainty and punishes those who acknowledge the possible limitations of their own point of view. Liberal white male professors like myself are hardly immune. And part of the academic culture we’ve helped to create — including the rise of aggressive “no platforming” tactics to prevent conservatives from speaking on some campuses — has only fed into the perception that academics are no more willing to engage in dialogue and debate than Trump supporters.

Fueling this trend of know-it-all arrogance is the oft-cited polarization of the American people, encouraged by our use of technology. The internet didn’t create this polarization, but it does speed it up. That’s partly because the analytics that drive the internet don’t just get us more information; they get us more of the information we want. Everything from the ads we read to the political news in our Facebook feed is tailored to our preferences. That’s incredibly useful for buying shoes and finding good restaurants. It is easier than ever to get and share information, but the information we get often reflects ourselves as much as it does anything else. Less noticed is that this has an effect not only on how we regard others, but on how we regard ourselves.

One way the internet distorts our picture of ourselves is by feeding the human tendency to overestimate our knowledge of how the world works. Most of us know what it’s like to think we remember more from high-school physics or history than we actually do. As the cognitive scientists Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach have detailed recently, such overestimation extends farther than you might think: Ask yourself whether you can really explain how a toilet or a zipper works, and you may find yourself surprisingly stumped. You assume you know how things work when you often don’t know at all.

This sort of ignorance is partly due to the fact that human beings aren’t isolated knowing machines. We live in an economy of knowledge that distributes cognitive and epistemic labor among specialists. That’s a good thing — no one person can know everything, or even very much. But put all the doctors, scientists, mechanics, and plumbers together, and we collectively know quite a bit.

Yet this often means we blur the line between what's inside our heads and what's not. Some philosophers have argued that this blurring is actually justified because knowing itself is often an extended process, distributed in space. When I know something because of your expert testimony — say, that my car's alternator is broken — what I know is partly in your head and partly in mine. If that's right, then living in a knowledge economy literally increases my knowledge because knowing is not just an individual phenomenon.

Suppose this extended, distributed picture of knowledge is right. Add the personalized internet, with its carefully curated social-media feeds and individualized search results, and you get not one knowledge economy, but many different ones, each bounded by different assumptions of which sources you can trust and what counts as evidence and what doesn't. The result is not only an explosion of overconfidence in what you individually understand but an active encouragement of epistemic arrogance. The Internet of Us becomes one big reinforcement mechanism, getting us all the information we are already biased to believe, and encouraging us to regard those in other bubbles as misinformed miscreants. We know it all — the internet tells us so.

Ideology plays a significant role here. We know people disagree with us on a range of issues, from climate change to taxes to vaccines. Indeed, we disagree on so much that it can seem, as one political commentator recently put it, that there are no facts anymore. That's a way of expressing a seductive line of thought: There just is no way of escaping your perspective or biases. Every time you try to get outside of your own perspective, you just get more information filtered through your own perspective. As a consequence, objective truth is just irrelevant — either we'll never know it or it doesn't exist in the first place.

This is an old philosophical idea. The Greek philosopher Protagoras expressed it by saying “man is the measure of all things.” That can seem liberating — we all get to invent our own truth! And it has certainly had its fair share of contemporary supporters. Academe, in particular, has been complicit in devaluing objective truth and in the subsequent rise of intellectual arrogance.

The postmodernist generation of humanists (and I am one of them) grew up in the 80s and 90s distrusting metanarratives and the very idea of objectivity. But while these movements rightly made us aware of how the implicit lines of institutional, gendered, and racial power affect what passes for truth in a society, they were sometimes taken further to encourage a complete — and often incoherent — rejection of the idea that anything is true (except that rejection itself apparently).

Skepticism about truth is really more self-rationalization than good philosophy. It protects our biases and discourages us from trying to see ourselves as who we really are. More than that, a rejection of objective truth invites despotism simply because it collapses truth into whatever those in power allow to pass for truth in your bubble. And once that is accepted, then the very idea of speaking truth to power becomes moot. You can't speak truth to power when power speaks truth by definition.

Our cultural embrace of epistemic or intellectual arrogance is the result of a toxic mix of technology, psychology, and ideology. To combat it, we have to reconnect with some basic values, including ones that philosophers have long thought were essential both to serious intellectual endeavors and to politics.

One of those ideas, as I just noted, is belief in objective truth. But another, less-noted concept is intellectual humility. By intellectual humility, I refer to a cluster of attitudes that we can take

toward ourselves — recognizing your own fallibility, realizing that you don't really know as much as you think, and owning your limitations and biases.

But being intellectually humble also means taking an active stance. It means seeing your worldview as open to improvement by the evidence and experience of other people. Being open to improvement is more than just being open to change. And it isn't just a matter of self-improvement — using your genius to know even more. It is a matter of seeing your view as capable of improvement because of what others contribute.

Intellectual humility is not the same as skepticism. Improving your knowledge must start from a basis of rational conviction. That conviction allows you to know when to stop inquiring, when to realize that you know enough — that the earth really is round, the climate is warming, the Holocaust happened, and so on. That, of course, is tricky, and many a mistake in science and politics have been made because someone stopped inquiring before they should have. Hence the emphasis on evidence; being intellectually humble requires being responsive to the actual evidence, not to flights of fancy or conspiracy theories.

In a democracy, intellectual humility as I've defined it is most important for those in power, be it political power or a more diffuse but wide-ranging cultural power. That's partly what makes institutions that encourage and protect rational dissent — like a free press and academic freedom — of such crucial importance. It is not just, as John Stuart Mill argued, that free inquiry is apt to see truth win out in the end — an overly optimistic view, I've always thought — but the fact that researchers can pursue lines of inquiry even if they make those in power uncomfortable. Such institutions, at their best, encourage the pursuit of truth via evidence — and as such, they have the potential to remind us that power, and our own bubbles, are not the measure of all things.

Yet institutional protections themselves are not quite enough. We need to incorporate intellectual humility — what John Dewey called the “scientific attitude” — as a cultural norm. “Merely legal guarantees of the civil liberties of free belief, free expression, free assembly are of little avail,” Dewey noted, “if in daily life freedom of communication, the give and take of ideas, facts, experiences, is choked by mutual suspicion, by abuse, by fear and hatred.”

Dewey knew that democracies can't function if their citizens don't have conviction — an apathetic electorate is no electorate at all. But our democracy also can't function if we don't seek, at least some of the time, to inhabit a common space where we can listen to each other and trade reasons back and forth. And that's one reason that teaching our students the value of empathy, of reasons and dialogue, and the value and nature of evidence itself, is crucial — in fact, now more than ever. Encouraging evidential epistemologies helps combat intellectual arrogance.

Overcoming toxic arrogance is not easy, and our present political moment is not making it any easier. But if we want to live in a tolerant society where we are not only open-minded but willing to learn from others, we need to balance humility and conviction. We can start by looking past ourselves — and admitting that we don't know it all.

## Discussion Starters

1. What is “intellectual arrogance” as described in the essay? In what way is “humility” its antidote?

2. How does intellectual arrogance lead to biased opinion and hinder a search for truth?
3. How does the internet, or how Lynch contends that we use it, keep people in their “know it all” bubbles? Do you agree?
4. How does intellectual arrogance get in the way of the reasoned, evidence-based dialogue that Lynch contends is lacking in both political and personal communications? Do you agree?

# Dusting Off GOD

By Tom Bartlett

*Tom Bartlett is a senior writer for The Chronicle of Higher Education. In this essay, Bartlett ignores the question of whether God exists and focuses on the scientific evidence that religion produces positive behaviors among people.*

When a moth flies at night, it uses the moon and the stars to steer a straight path. Those light sources are fixed and distant, so the rays always strike the moth's multilensed eyes at the same angle, making them reliable for nocturnal navigation. But introduce something else bright—a candle, say, or a campfire—and there will be trouble. The light radiates outward, confusing the moth and causing it to spiral ever closer to the blaze until the insect meets a fiery end.

For years Richard Dawkins has used the self-immolation of moths to explain religion. The example can be found in his 2006 best seller, *The God Delusion*, and it's been repeated in speeches and debates, interviews and blog posts. Moths didn't evolve to commit suicide; that's an unfortunate byproduct of other adaptations. In much the same way, the thinking goes, human beings embrace religion for unrelated cognitive reasons. We evolved to search for patterns in nature, so perhaps that's why we imagine patterns in religious texts. Instead of being guided by the light, we fly into the flames.

The implication—that religion is basically malevolent, that it “poisons everything,” in the words of the late Christopher Hitchens—is a standard assertion of the New Atheists. Their argument isn't just that there probably is no God, or that intelligent design is laughable bunk, or that the Bible is far from inerrant. It's that religion is obviously bad for human beings, condemning them to ignorance, subservience, and endless conflict, and we would be better off without it. But would we?

Before you can know for sure, you have to figure out what religion does for us in the first place. That's exactly what a loosely affiliated group of scholars in fields including biology, anthropology, and psychology are working on. They're applying evolutionary theory to the study of religion in order to discover whether or not it strengthens societies, makes them more successful, more cooperative, kinder. The scholars, many of them atheists themselves, generally look askance at the rise of New Atheism, calling its proponents ignorant, fundamentalist, and worst of all, unscientific. Dawkins and company have been no more charitable in return.

While the field is still young and fairly small—those involved haven't settled on a name yet, though “evolutionary religious studies” gets thrown around—its findings could reshape a very old debate. Maybe we should stop asking whether God exists and start asking whether it's useful to believe that he does.

Let's say someone gives you \$10. Not a king's ransom, but enough for lunch. You're then told that you can share your modest wealth with a stranger, if you like, or keep it. You're assured that your identity will be protected, so there's no need to worry about being thought miserly. How much would you give?

If you're like most people who play the so-called dictator game, which has been used in numerous experiments, you will keep most of the money. In a recent study from a paper with the ominous title "God Is Watching You," the average subject gave \$1.84. Meanwhile, another group of subjects was presented with the same choice but was first asked to unscramble a sentence that contained words like "divine," "spirit," and "sacred."

The second group of subjects gave an average of \$4.22, with a solid majority (64 percent) giving more than five bucks. A heavenly reminder seemed to make subjects significantly more magnanimous. In another study, researchers found that prompting subjects with the same vocabulary made some more likely to volunteer for community projects. Intriguingly, not all of them: Only those who had a specific dopamine receptor variant volunteered more, raising the possibility that religion doesn't work for everybody.

A similar experiment was conducted on two Israeli kibbutzes. The scenario was more complicated: Subjects were shown an envelope containing 100 shekels (currently about \$25). They were told that they could choose to keep as much of the money as they wished, but that another member of the kibbutz was being given the identical option. If the total requested by the participants (who were kept separated) exceeded 100 shekels, they walked away with nothing. If the total was less than or equal to 100, they were given the money plus a bonus based on what was left over.

The kicker is that one of the kibbutzes was secular and one was religious. Turns out, the more-devout members of the religious kibbutz, as measured by synagogue attendance, requested significantly fewer shekels and expected others to do the same. The researchers, Richard Sosis and Bradley Ruffle, ventured that "collective ritual has a significant impact on cooperative decisions."

Another study that found that religious people were, in some instances, more likely to treat strangers fairly. Or the multiple studies suggesting that people who were prompted to think about an all-seeing supernatural agent were less likely to cheat. Or the study of 300 young adults in Belgium that found that those who were religious were considered more empathetic by their friends.

The results of other studies are less straightforward. A Harvard Business School researcher discovered that religious people were more likely to give to charity, but only on the days they worshiped, a phenomenon he dubbed the "Sunday Effect." Then there's the survey of how belief in the afterlife affected crime rates in 67 countries. Researchers determined that countries with high rates of belief in hell had less crime, while in those where the belief in hell was low and the belief in heaven high, there was more crime. A vengeful deity is better for public safety than a merciful one.

None of that research settles the value of belief, and much of it is based on assuming that certain correlations are meaningful or that particular techniques (like the one used in the dictator-game study) actually prime what researchers think they prime. And questions remain: How effective is religious belief, really, if it needs to be prompted with certain words? And is the only thing stopping you from robbing a liquor store really the prospect of eternal hellfire?

Still, a growing body of research suggests that religion or religious ideas, in certain circumstances, in some people, can elicit the kind of behavior that is generally good for society: fairness, generosity, honesty. At the very least, when you read the literature, it becomes difficult to confidently assert that religion, despite the undeniable evil it has sometimes inspired, is entirely toxic.

That is David Sloan Wilson's point, or one of them anyway. Wilson, a professor of biology and anthropology at Binghamton University, is an atheist (as was his father, the novelist Sloan Wilson) who is interested in finding out what religion does, from an evolutionary perspective, for individuals and societies. Why does belief in the supernatural cut across cultures, and why has it persisted for millennia? He took a crack at such dauntingly large questions in his book *Darwin's Cathedral*, arguing that religion bestows an array of evolutionary advantages on groups of believers.

Wilson is in his early 60s, thin, white-haired, excitable. You get the sense that he might bubble over at any moment, and sometimes he does, issuing a four-letter invective in the midst of a multisyllabic explication. His most recent book is *The Neighborhood Project: Using Evolution to Improve My City, One Block at a Time*. There isn't much Wilson thinks Darwin can't do. The professor's Skype handle is "evostud."

In two blog posts, one in March and one in May, Wilson questioned whether Richard Dawkins "might fail to qualify" as an evolutionist for, among other shortcomings, ignoring research on the evolution of religion. He has scolded the New Atheists for a militancy he sees as equivalent to religious fundamentalism. Firing shots at Dawkins is old hat for Wilson. When he reviewed *The God Delusion*, in 2007, he called Dawkins "deeply misinformed" on evolution. (Dawkins replied that the purpose of the book was not to discuss "religion's possible evolutionary advantages.") In a recent interview, Wilson declared that Dawkins and his fellow New Atheists "don't understand the nature of the beast" and yet still "go on and on in a very ignorant fashion."

Like Wilson, Scott Atran, an anthropologist at France's National Center for Scientific Research, is an atheist ("Yes!" he exclaimed when asked) and an evolutionist whose book *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* was one of the first, along with *Darwin's Cathedral*, by Wilson, and *Religion Explained*, by Pascal Boyer, to chart a course for the field (the first two books were published in 2002 and Boyer's in 2001). In his book, Atran, who also teaches at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and the City University of New York's John Jay College of Criminal Justice, calls religion an evolutionary byproduct, a sort of cognitive accident. He's since modified his view to take into account the apparent culturally adaptive upside of faith. Atran, whose most recent book is about faith and terrorism, describes New Atheism as moronic. "I don't see anything in the New Atheists' work that tells us anything at all about religion," he says, "and I think their ad hominem attacks are ridiculous."

That view is echoed by Dominic Johnson, a professor of biopolitics at the University of Edinburgh, who has written about how the threat of supernatural punishment appears to enhance cooperation. The trouble, he says, is that the New Atheists have become the face of science. On one side, there is anti-science fundamentalism. On the other, there are pro-science New Atheists. "Whatever they say tends to be taken as the scientific perspective on religion, that it's representing the whole of science," Johnson says. "That's a problem."

The New Atheists have deemed Wilson not only wrong but dull. For Wilson, though, it's the New Atheists who have become a bore. If you've seen one video of Dawkins slaying a naïve believer, you've seen them all. If you've read one New Atheist anti-God tome, you know what the others will say. Wilson insists that trying to discover why we believe is more intriguing than the debate over whether anyone is up there looking down.

## Discussion Starters

1. Evaluate the various studies presented in the essay that suggest that religious people are more generous, kinder, and more empathetic than non-religious people. How compelling do you find the studies? Why might religious people be more generous and kinder, assuming they are?
2. Scientists studying the effects of religion are not interested in whether a God actually exists. If a system of belief that produces virtuous behavior is based on a possible false premise (the existence of God), does it really matter? Is the behavior more important than its source?
3. While the existence of God has long been debated, how do you account for the pervasiveness of religious faith for thousands of years across all societies? Have the findings of modern science weakened the impact of religion?

# A Nation of Promiscuous Prudes

By Victor Hanson

*Victor Hanson is a noted historian, social critic, syndicated columnist, and author whose latest book is *The Savior Generals*. In this essay, Hanson explores the “schizophrenic” attitudes of Americans towards morality, providing multiple examples of how prudery and promiscuity exist side by side in our morally ambiguous society.*

More than 500 people were killed in Chicago last year. Yet Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel still found time to berate the fast-food franchise Chick-fil-A for not sharing “Chicago values” apparently because its founder does not approve of same-sex marriage.

Two states have legalized marijuana, with more to come. Yet social taboos against tobacco smoking make it nearly impossible to light up a cigarette in public places. Marijuana, like alcohol, causes far greater short-term impairment than does nicotine. But legal cigarette smoking is now seen as a corporate-sponsored, uncool and dirty habit that leads to long-term health costs for society at large in a way homegrown, hip and mostly illegal pot smoking apparently does not.

Graphic language, nudity and sex are now commonplace in movies and on cable television. At the same time, there is now almost no tolerance for casual and slang banter in the media or the workplace. A boss who calls an employee “honey” might face accusations of fostering a hostile work environment, yet a television producer whose program shows an 18-year-old having sex does not. Many colleges offer courses on lurid themes from masturbation to prostitution, even as campus sexual-harassment suits over hurtful language are at an all-time high.

A federal judge in New York recently ruled that the so-called morning-after birth-control pill must be made available to all “women” regardless of age or parental consent, and without a prescription. The judge determined that it was unfair for those under 16 to be denied access to such emergency contraceptives. However, if vast numbers of girls younger than 16 need after-sex options to prevent unwanted pregnancies, will there be a flood of statutory rape charges lodged against older teenagers who had such consensual relations with younger girls?

Our schizophrenic morality also affects the military. When America was a far more traditional society, few seemed to care that Gen. Dwight Eisenhower carried on an unusual relationship at the front in Normandy with his young female chauffeur, Kay Summersby. As the Third Army chased the Germans across France, Gen. George S. Patton was not discreet about his female liaisons. Contrast that live-and-let-live attitude of a supposedly uptight society with our own hip culture’s tabloid interest in Gen. David H. Petraeus’ career-ending affair with Paula Broadwell, or in the private emails of Gen. John Allen.

What explains these contradictions in our wide-open but prudish society? Decades after the rise of feminism, popular culture still seems confused by it. If women should be able to approach sexuality like men, does it follow that commentary about sex should follow the same gender-neutral rules? Yet wearing provocative or inappropriate clothing is often considered less offensive than

remarking upon it. Calling a near-nude Madonna onstage a “hussy” or “tart” would be considered crudity in a way that her mock crucifixion and simulated sex acts are not.

Criminal sexual activity is sometimes not as professionally injurious as politically incorrect thoughts about sex and gender. Former New York Gov. Eliot Spitzer, found to have hired prostitutes on a number of occasions during his time in office, was given a CNN news show despite the scandal. But when Miss California Carrie Prejean was asked in the Miss USA Pageant whether she endorsed same-sex marriage, she said no and thereby earned nearly as much popular condemnation for her candid defense of traditional marriage as Mr. Spitzer had for his purchased affairs.

Critics were outraged that talk-show host Rush Limbaugh grossly insulted birth-control activist Sandra Fluke. Amid the attention, Miss Fluke was canonized for her position that federal health care plans should pay for the contraceptive costs of all women. Yet in comparison to Miss Fluke’s well-publicized victimhood, there has been a veritable news blackout for the trial of the macabre Dr. Kermit Gosnell, charged with killing and mutilating in gruesome fashion seven babies during a long career of conducting sometimes illegal late-term abortions. Had Dr. Gosnell’s aborted victims been canines instead of humans—compare the minimal coverage of the Gosnell trial with the widespread media condemnation of dog-killing quarterback Michael Vick—perhaps the doctor’s mayhem likewise would have been front-page news outside of Philadelphia.

Modern society also resorts to empty, symbolic, moral action when it cannot deal with real problems. So-called assault weapons account for less than 1 percent of gun deaths in America. Still, the country whips itself into a frenzy to ban them, apparently to prove that at least it can do something without wading into the polarized racial and class controversies of going after illegal urban handguns, the real source of the nation’s high gun-related body count.

Not since the late 19th-century juxtaposition of the Wild West with the Victorian East has popular morality been so unbridled and yet so uptight. In short, we have become a nation of promiscuous prudes.

## **Discussion Starters**

1. Hanson provides a number of examples that America is at the same time “prudish” and “promiscuous.” Evaluate the validity of the comparison that he uses in each example.
2. If America is in fact both “up tight” and “unbridled” sexually, what do you think accounts for this “schizophrenic” attitude?
3. What are the consequences in a society that sends out mixed messages on what constitutes right-or-wrong behavior? What effect do these mixed messages have on younger people?

# The Way of All Flesh

By Ted Conover

*Ted Conover is an author, journalist, writer-in-residence in the Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute of New York University, and contributor to numerous publications. In this essay, Conover relates his experience as an inspector in a high tech cattle slaughter house and details the process in a way that may make readers look at their next steak differently.*

The cattle arrive in perforated silver trailers called cattle pots that let in wind and weather and vent out their hot breath and flatus. It's hard to see inside a cattle pot. The drivers are in a hurry to unload and leave, and are always speeding by. (When I ask Lefty how meat gets bruised, he says, "You ever see how those guys drive?") The trucks have come from feedlots, some nearby, some in western Nebraska, a few in Iowa. The plant slaughters about 5,100 cattle each day, and a standard double-decker cattle pot holds only about forty, so there's a constant stream of trucks pulling in to disgorge, even before the line starts up a little after six a.m.

First the cattle are weighed. Then they are guided into narrow outdoor pens angled diagonally toward the entrance to the kill floor. A veterinarian arrives before our shift and begins to inspect them; she looks for open wounds, problems walking, signs of disease. When their time comes, the cattle will be urged by workers toward the curving ramp that leads up into the building. The ramp has a roof and no sharp turns. It was designed by the livestock expert Temple Grandin, and the curves and penumbral light are believed to soothe the animals in their final moments. But the soothing goes only so far.

"*Huele mal, no?*" says one of the Mexican wranglers: "It stinks, doesn't it?" He holds his nose against the ammoniac smell of urine as I visit the pens with Carolina. We are new U.S. Department of Agriculture meat inspectors, getting the kitchen tour. The wrangler and his crew are moving cattle up the ramp. To do this, they wave sticks with white plastic bags tied to the ends over the animals' heads; the bags frighten the cattle and move them along. For cows that don't spook, the workers also have electric prods—in defiance, I was told, of company regulations—that crackle when applied to the nether parts. The ramp really does stink. "Yeah," I say in Spanish. "Why does it smell so bad?"

"They're scared. They don't want to die," the worker replies. But that's what they're here to do, and once on the ramp, they're just a few moments away from it.

While the inspectors work at Cargill Meat Solutions, we are not employed by them. Rather, you could say, we are embedded. The company accommodates us along the chain, at four special places on the kill floor. The kill floor, a singular circle of hell, is a hubbub of human and mechanical activity, something horrific designed by ingenious and no doubt well-meaning engineers. Herb, our immediate supervisor, shouts a few things, but the kill floor is so loud that I have no idea what he's saying—and little understanding, at first, of what I'm seeing.

Though it's called a floor, it's actually a room, about the size of a football field. It's filled with workers on their feet, facing some fraction of a cow as it passes slowly in front of them, suspended

from the chain. Three workers are perched on hydraulic platforms fitted with electric saws, which they use to split hanging carcasses in half, right down the middle of the spinal column.

The key to comprehension is the chain, which moves the carcasses around the enormous room. It begins on the eastern wall, just beyond the area where the cows come in from the outside. This is the only section of the room hidden from view, behind a partition. But Herb takes us up onto a metal catwalk and through a heavy door. From there, grasping a railing, we can look down on the killing.

Passing one by one through a small opening in the wall, each animal enters a narrow, slightly elevated chute. On a platform just above the chute is a guy called the knocker. Suspended on cables in front of him is something that looks like a fat toaster oven with handles on either side: a captive-bolt gun. The knocker's job is to place the gun against the animal's forehead and pull the trigger. Most of the time, the cow immediately slumps forward, blood oozing from the circle where the thick steel bolt went in and came out. If one shot doesn't do the trick, the knocker does it again.

Meanwhile, down on floor level, a second worker wearing a helmet with a face mask and protective padding has reached into the chute from below and attached a cuff around the animal's left rear leg. Once the cow has been knocked, the chain hoists that leg and then the rest of the animal up into the air, and the body begins its journey around the room.

Carolina and I watch this for some time without talking. The knocker moves slowly, patiently waiting for his gun to achieve good contact with the animal's forehead. It usually takes more than one try, as the animals duck down or try to peer over the side of the chute, whose width the knocker can actually control with a foot pedal. One cow, unlike the others, lifts her head up high in order to sniff the knocking gun. *What could this thing be?* It's her last thought. The knocker waits until her wet nose goes down, then lowers the gun and *thunk*. She slumps, then gets hoisted aloft with the others. The knocked animals hang next to one another for a while, waiting for the chain to start moving—like gondolas at the base of a ski lift. From time to time an animal kicks violently, sporadically. “They're not really dead yet,” says Carolina, which I can hear because she's close to my ear and it's slightly less loud in here. In most cases, apparently, what she says is true and intentional: the pumping of their hearts will help drain the blood from their bodies once their necks are sliced open, which will happen in the ensuing minutes. By the time the chain has made a turn or two, the kicking will stop.

Dismemberment proceeds by degrees. At different posts, workers make cuts in the hide, clip off the hooves, and clip off the horns, if any. The hide is gradually peeled from the body, until finally a big flap of loose skin is grasped by the “downpuller” machine, which yanks the whole thing off like a sweater and drops it through a hole in the floor. Here, for the first time, the cow no longer looks like a cow. Now it's a 1,200-pound piece of proto-meat making its circuit of the room.

Soon after, the heads, now dangling only by the windpipe, are detached from the body and go off on their own side chain. The huge tongues are cut out and hung on hooks adjacent to the heads: head, tongue, head, tongue. They turn a corner, pass through a steam cabinet that cleans them, make another quick turn, and meet their first inspectors.

I didn't eat beef at all during the time I worked at the pack. Seeing the knocker at work was part of the problem. So was standing near the cattle as they were herded up the doomsday ramp. And then there were the heads, eyeballs intact, and the highly rationalized industrial setting, the

idea of a powerful enterprise devoted to wholesale killing. And if you believe that animals might have souls – sometimes I do – then you might relate to my mental picture of a spiritual highway spiraling upward from the knocking room, through the ceiling of Cargill Meat Solutions, and into bovine heaven, with a constant stream of cattle arriving every day.

### **Discussion Starters**

1. What is your initial gut-level response to the essay? What details of the kill-and-dismember process, if any, do you find most disturbing?
2. Is there an ethical issue with killing animals for human consumption? Do you get a sense of the author's viewpoint? Does this essay make you think any differently about the next steak put before you?
3. People seldom if ever connect the meat they eat with the slaughtering of cattle presented in the essay. The essay makes us graphically aware of the connection. Is this a good thing, or does it really matter?