

THE PATH OF REASON

A PHILOSOPHY OF NONBELIEF

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CHAPTER I. FAITH AND REASON COLLIDE

UNEXPECTED ANSWERS

A white dove hovered over the baptistery. It was frozen amid a stained glass mosaic of yellow, red, and blue. The window served as the backdrop to choirs and sermons, and it dominated my view as I sang my heart out, a seven-year-old boy happy to be in church on a Sunday morning. I would be baptized under that window after professing my faith, and for years I would know no other religion than that of the conservative Baptist churches I attended.

My childhood was filled with church bus trips, youth camps, and Bible studies. By the eighth grade, I had decided either to become a minister or to find a way to use my artistic talents to spread the gospel.

A turning point came when I was in high school. One Sunday morning, in my church's youth group, I asked a question. The answer I received did not make any sense at all. The issue was predestination, and I questioned the idea that God already knew what we were going to do. If that was right, then it could not truly be said that we have free will. It would be years before I realized the full implications of the argument. Meanwhile, it opened up a floodgate. Questions poured out of me, and I began the great search for answers.

In college, I learned of possibilities — so many possibilities that I finally came to doubt that the answers could ever be found. I still believed in God, but it was not the God of my childhood. It was a benevolent God, to be sure, but what form this great consciousness took and how he, she, or it interacted with our world were other questions entirely.

Late one afternoon in the family room of a house in England, where I was living as an exchange student, I sat down to write a paper called, “My Philosophy.” It wasn’t for a class; it was a project I had taken on for myself. While the wind outside swirled snow around the trees, I scribbled words down on paper, trying to make sense of what I believed. My ultimate conclusion was, “I don’t know.”

I lived for twenty-five years with that mindset, thinking that the universe was so complex, vast, and amazing that although somebody might know the answers, I definitely did not. With each day, it seemed decreasingly likely that I ever would. Still, I continued to hope and look.

Along the way I learned computer programming. I learned principles of logic through computer games. I began to appreciate science and what those who were involved in it did. They were looking for the same answers I was, but their methods were different. I often felt that those methods were so limited that it kept researchers and scientists from seeing greater truths.

In my early forties, I began several writing projects and one of them turned out to be a continuation of the paper I had begun when I was in England so many years before. The conclusion was the same, but I had a lot more to say about what I didn’t know. While writing, I challenged myself with a rule that would not only change what I wrote, but would change me as well. It would cause me to undergo the biggest transformation I had undergone since I left Christianity in high school. The rule was quite simple — whatever I wrote about my philosophy had to be consistent. Anything self-contradictory was not allowed.

I made a list of principles that aided me in maintaining consistency. They functioned as guidelines for separating truth from falsehood, and were ideas such as, “Personal attacks upon people have nothing to do with what the truth actually is. What’s important is the idea, not the person.” I did not realize it at the time, but what I had begun to compile was a list of logical fallacies and what I was learning was critical thinking. As I employed these principles, I found that certain ideas had to be eliminated from my philosophy, and many of them turned out to be pure speculation anyway.

As part of the project, I began researching many issues that had confused me over the years, everything from reincarnation to out-of-body experiences. I studied evolution and the biblical prophecies of the “End Times” that had always frightened me. I learned repeatedly, as if it were being pounded into my head, that I had given far too much credence to unfounded ideas.

But the big shocker came when I reanalyzed the concepts of God and the soul. There were fewer reasons to believe in these things than I had thought. It was only when the number of reasons for not believing in these things far outweighed the reasons I had for believing in them, that the scales tipped, and I

found that I — who had once been a boy singing “How Great Thou Art” with such reverence and joy — had become an atheist.¹

I felt as if I had sat on a mountaintop for years awaiting enlightenment, only to give up, come down off the mountain, and have the answers handed to me by a passerby.

It seemed an unlikely conclusion, even to me, but despite the stigma that the “A” word held, there was something to be said for my newfound philosophy. It had answers to some of the biggest questions I had ever asked, and although those answers were not what I expected them to be, they were satisfying in their own way. I realized, after the fact, that there was no reason the answers should have matched my preconceptions in the first place. Reality doesn’t work that way.

Meanwhile, I had a book to finish and this development meant a significant rewrite. The difference was that now I had a conclusion. I had something to say.

In addition to providing philosophical insights and fresh presentations, it is my hope that this book can help those who are seeking answers in the same way that I was. If they have found that religion, ideologies involving the supernatural, and spirituality in general, are in some way lacking or unsatisfactory, perhaps they may find an alternative here that they had not previously considered. If I could have had this book in my hands as a teenager, it could have prevented a tremendous amount of confusion, internal conflict, unnecessary guilt, and wasted time.

Chapter 1 starts with some basics. I explain a fundamental assumption that underscores my philosophy (and any practical philosophy, for that matter) and then I jump right into the issue that is at the center of many contemporary philosophical debates. The issue is whether faith or reason is the best way to understand our world or if, possibly, a compromise can be found. By comparing faith and reason and by exploring how they work, I show that they are not compatible. In many ways, they contradict each other. The result is that a choice must be made. While faith is always an option, the only rational option becomes reason. This is the choice I made, and it is used as the foundation for the chapters that follow.

¹ The definition of atheist most commonly used in the atheist community (and in popular books on the subject, such as *Atheism: The Case Against God* by George H. Smith, *Losing Faith in Faith* by Dan Barker, and *Natural Atheism* by David Eller) is that an atheist is someone who lacks belief in God, but who doesn’t necessarily deny that God exists. Some would call this an agnostic position, but agnosticism covers a wide range of topics besides belief in God, so it is fair to say that one can be both an agnostic and an atheist. My own position on the existence of God varies depending on what version of God is under discussion. The section titled “God” provides the details.

In Chapter 2, I apply reason to some major philosophical questions. The conclusions are not statements of absolute certainty, but there is good reason to think that they are extremely likely. Those conclusions are that there is no God, we don't have souls, and that although life can have great meaning, it is not assigned by any external force. I was shocked that I had reached these conclusions, but once I got over my emotional objections to them, as well as the societal attitudes towards them that had been ingrained in me since youth, I discovered that these ideas could be remarkably liberating.

Chapter 3 provides a cursory review of some of the principles involved in logical and rational thought. Much of the emphasis is on the logical errors that people make while involved in philosophical debate (as well as in their everyday lives). Several of these logical fallacies come into play in other chapters of the book, and an awareness of them becomes indispensable in more ways than one. With the tools of reason (such as science, logic, and critical thinking), one can achieve a better understanding of the world. Without these tools, achieving clear understanding is almost hopeless.

Chapter 4 shows what happens when you take these tools and use them in an examination of many mystical and New Age ideas. This chapter directly addresses the questions and concerns of believers (of many different sorts) that must sometimes be resolved by individuals before they are able to completely accept the conclusions I reached in the previous chapters. This was the case for me as well. When I discarded my religious heritage, I wasn't at all ready to discard faith altogether. Instead, I took a good look at a wide range of beliefs because I was convinced that there had to be something out there that gave me the answers I wanted. It was this process of examination and elimination that spurred me towards my eventual destination. Those who read this book may find that they have gone through (or will go through) a similar process. No doubt, readers will come from a variety of backgrounds and each will have his or her set of ideas about how the world works. It is because of this that I cannot lay out a straight and narrow path that explains how to get from where they are to where I am, but by addressing an eclectic assortment of beliefs and principles, I can provide some examples of how reason can enable one to make sense of it all.

Chapter 5 is brief but important. As I make the transition from New Age and supernatural beliefs to the faith of Christianity, it helps to address two things that conservatives who believe in "God the Creator" have difficulty with — evolution, and how, without a prime mover and without some kind of guiding hand, our universe came to be.

Chapter 6 deals specifically with Christianity. This chapter is akin to Chapter 4 in that it again shows that reason is the key required to solve some tricky

problems. Like the individual sections in Chapter 4, the importance of this chapter varies depending upon the reader's background. For those of us who were indoctrinated into Christianity at a young age, it becomes crucial to work through the ideas here, despite the validity of the arguments that take place in the first few chapters of this book.

Chapter 7 does what few if any books on these topics do: it examines the implications of a skeptical philosophy. Having deconstructed many worldviews, it is here that I begin the work of building a new one. Most of the people who read this book will be those who agree with me, and they already know that a philosophy that does not include the concepts of God and the soul can be just as fulfilling, if not more so, than one that does. There are people of religious faith, however, who find it hard to imagine that this could be possible. I can do little more than reassure them that, after all the disassembling is done, there is the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel — a new way of looking at the world that is rich with potential and vivid in its clarity.

Author Robert G. Olson expresses it this way:

“But no!” the existentialist answers. You were in despair in the first place. It is for that reason you have heard and understood me when I stripped you of your illusions. All that I have done is to make you fully conscious of your despair, and now if you will listen further I will help you master your despair.”²

Once the illusions are gone, there is a greater reality waiting underneath. In communicating this, I draw upon concepts borrowed from Eastern ideologies such as acceptance and living in the moment. Also explained is the idea that although understanding the world requires reason, when it comes to dealing with the world, we are not confined to a life of strict rationality. A philosophy based on realism by no means has to drown in it. Rather, realism allows for creativity and provides an appreciation of what it truly means to be human.

A BASIC ASSUMPTION

Let's just get this out of the way. The philosophical issues addressed in this book are based on the assumption that world around us is real and that there is such a thing as an objective reality. It is an assumption, but it is an assumption we largely have to accept as we go about our daily lives. It's fun to play with the idea that we are taking part in a huge computer simulation like in the movie, *The Matrix*, just as it is an interesting game to imagine that the world around us

² Robert G. Olson, *An Introduction to Existentialism* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1962), p. 3.

is nothing more than a dream of God. These are entertaining ideas, but they are not very useful.³

I bring this up now because it is often brought up in the middle of philosophical arguments where it does not belong and where it only causes confusion. The assumption that the world is real is, by nature, an underlying assumption and should be shared at the start. If we don't presuppose this, then all of our discussions about the world become pointless. There is no reason to have any discussion at all if nothing we are talking about is of any substance. Claiming that reality is not objective undermines all claims, including itself. Any basis or standard that we might have for future conversation is lost. In short, progress cannot be made without, first, taking reality for granted.

It is common for people to accuse nonbelievers like me of "believing" in many things, which is a point I'll address in more detail as we progress. One of the things nonbelievers are told they believe in is "reality." The confusion here is simple. My assertion about reality is an assumption, not a belief. (I clarify the difference between these two things in the section titled "Contradiction and Self-Correction.")

Members of the school of thought sometimes referred to as postmodernism express a similar viewpoint to those who disagree with the idea of an objective reality. Postmodernists hold the opinion that all viewpoints about reality, as well as other topics, are open for interpretation. They state that there are no "right" or "wrong" points of view; there are only "different" points of view. According to those who think this, everything is relative and the words "true" and "false" have little or no meaning.

Postmodernists are in a similar position to those extreme skeptics who deny reality. Their arguments undermine their own viewpoint. In the case of postmodernism, their idea is equally valid as everyone else's, but that also means that it is can never be shown to be a better idea. If all ideas are equal, then there is no standard or basis by which to judge and evaluate ideas and the world around us. Without that, comprehension becomes impossible, and the mind is doomed to mental chaos.

I have encountered a hint of the postmodernist attitude when the subject of this book comes up. It is the proverbial double-edged sword. The benefit is that my viewpoint is treated with tolerance. It becomes "just another opinion" and is

³ By saying that reality is objective, I am also claiming that reality exists independently of our perceptions. If I die, the world would continue to exist, as it would in the case of any of us. The Philosophy 101 question, "If a tree falls in the woods and no one is around to hear it, would it still make a sound?" has a very simple answer. Sure it would. Sound is defined as vibrations at a certain frequencies, and these exist regardless of whether we are around to hear them.

no more challenging than my choice of ice cream flavors or my preference for a certain color. The drawback is that my viewpoint is given no special regard. It is just another of many, none of which holds any special precedence.

Like the subjectivists and the postmodernists before them, the religionists who dismiss my philosophy this way often fail to recognize that they have simultaneously pushed their belief system into an ethereal region where it is also of marginal importance. If all of our worldviews are that arbitrary, then any one belief (or nonbelief) system is in no position to claim superiority over any other, even those that claim to be “the one true religion.”

When everything is subjective, the world becomes an ideological twilight zone. In addition, any solid philosophical basis we might have for our decisions and actions is also lost. However, with this kind of subjectivism and the distracting idea of a nonobjective reality out of the way, a lot can be accomplished.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

My interest in philosophy has always been a practical one. I seek to understand the world so that I can get the most out of life and live the best way possible. The better I understand life, the more likely I am to make better decisions. Naturally, I seek out the best possible information so that I can do this.

So how do I obtain that information? In general, there are not a lot of options. There is reason, which is a way of thinking about and understanding the world that includes the formal disciplines of science and logic, as well as critical thinking (which I'll cover in Chapter 3), and logic in general. A second option is faith. There are many who claim that we should use faith in those instances where reason fails, and in so doing they form a worldview based on a mixture of faith and reason. These are our three choices for how we go about understanding the world — faith, reason, or a combination of the two.

This quickly brings us to the core issue at the center of the whole discussion — the value of faith versus the value of reason. I will consider the option of whether there is an acceptable compromise between them, but faith and reason must first be examined on their own before that can be done effectively. The crux of the debate is not an issue of good versus evil (therein lies the confusion for many a religionist). It is an issue of what faith and reason are qualified to explain and how important we hold these two approaches to be.

Before I expand on why this is the central issue, I need to define some terms and explain their usage. Far too many discussions of these issues disintegrate because this is not done first.

In the paragraphs above, I explained what I mean by reason and what it entails. When talking about faith, I will, for the sake of variety, use the word interchangeably with belief. Mostly, I will be referring to belief in the supernatural or belief in things that are out of the ordinary, and which cannot be proven true. Belief, in this sense, only applies to things outside of us. I will not be using the terms faith and belief to mean imagination, trust, confidence, or hope (all of which I highly value, but they are not the topic of discussion). The word “faith” is often used when the words “trust” or “confidence” should be used instead, resulting in a multitude of misconceptions. I will also not be using the word “faith” to refer to an act of will where one continues to believe despite having doubts.

By necessity, I will also be speaking of the two very generalized groups of “believers” and “nonbelievers.” There are so many varieties of belief out there that I could never detail the idiosyncrasies of each one, and because of this, I have had to clump them all together. I am sure that there are Christians out there who do not want to be put in the same group as those who believe in alien abductions and that there are those who believe in alien abductions who do not want to be identified with certain Christians. No doubt there are a variety of disagreements between people who belong to these groups.

Still, they all have something in common — that they believe in something — and that is the only commonality I am speaking of when using the term “believers” inclusively. The Christian agrees with the ghost hunter that the soul continues after death. They just don’t agree on how and where. Carlos Castaneda⁴ and the Christian agree that there is a level of reality beyond what we see. This reality may be inhabited by angels, demons, or vaguely defined entities, but those are not things we normally see, touch, and feel in our everyday lives.

Alien abductees fall into the category of believers because they are unable to show solid evidence to support their notions. All they can report are personal experiences. Thus, their position has to be regarded as belief rather than knowledge.⁵

Similarly “nonbeliever” is used as a blanket term that applies to all those who consider themselves to be purely scientifically and logically minded — the skeptics, rationalists, and the like. I will often substitute the word “skeptic” for nonbeliever.

Because I cannot address all beliefs at once and cannot account for all varieties of individual belief, I am forced to generalize about faith. As we progress, keep in mind that, when I am talking about faith, I am speaking about many types of belief and not just the religious variety. Some readers may be of the opinion that

⁴ See the section, “The Death of Carlos Castaneda” in Chapter 4.

⁵ See the section “Criteria” for an in-depth look at this issue.

what I say about faith is not true in relation to their own ideology. I would ask such readers to examine their beliefs to ensure this is correct. In Chapters 4 and 6 of this book I will demonstrate that what I have to say remains true in regard to many ideologies.

Fortunately, I have already dealt with the objection that “everyone believes in something.” Those who employ this argument might also say that I “believe in an objective reality” or that I “believe in reason.” This objection is answered and invalidated when we distinguish between what is believed and what is known. I go into this in detail in the section “Separation of Knowledge and Belief,” but it can be addressed very simply here: There’s no reason to “believe” in something you know. Once you have convincing evidence of something, it no longer qualifies as a belief.

This returns us to the central issue — the value of faith versus the value of reason. One way we know that “faith versus reason” is at the very heart of this discussion is that if we thoroughly pursue any debate about these topics, it will lead to this point of contention.

An argument between a Christian and a non-Christian may begin with a debate over the meaning of a biblical passage, but that leads to the issue of whether the Bible is valid. From there the conversation goes to whether or not God authored the Bible, then to whether the idea of God is valid, and finally to the issue of belief in God. To say that it comes down to faith does not take into consideration that there is an alternative to faith. Ultimately, it comes down to how faith holds up against reason. A discussion of the ideas of good and evil will lead us to the same place.

In my own personal struggle with philosophical issues, and in discussions I have had with others about these topics, that is exactly where an examination of the issues led.

It can be seen in the accusation lodged by believers at nonbelievers and vice versa.

“You don’t understand faith!” the believer exclaims.

“You’re so illogical!” cries the skeptic.

The Christian apologist C.S. Lewis acknowledges this to be a central issue at the very beginning of his book *Miracles*, where he separates people into the two groups of Naturalists and Supernaturalists, just as I separate people into the groups of believers and nonbelievers.

Karla McLaren, a former writer of New Age books who is now a skeptic, states that what lies at the center of the debate between believers and nonbeliev-

ers is that they have a different culture.⁶ I would agree that the two groups have different cultures, but I would add that culture is based upon the ideas a group of people adopt, ideas that are often mutually engaged through unspoken agreement. In the end, disagreements still revolve around the issue of reason versus faith.

These core ideas affect a multiplicity of issues so that, indeed, there are different cultures, cultures that are becoming more plainly visible in today's America. The attitudes of individuals within groups vary from topic to topic, but we do find that generally there are huge disagreements in which the two parties of believers and nonbelievers mean something entirely different when talking about entire categories of words and ideas. They don't have the same basis of meaning when talking about such primary concepts as logic, science, evidence, knowledge, fact, truth, belief, assumptions, theories, investigation, research, proof, morality, and even reality. No wonder there is so much confusion, misunderstanding, and conflict.

In Southern California there is a group called "Atheists United," which meets at the Center for Inquiry in Hollywood. The Center for Inquiry was built by an organization called CSICOP, the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. These skeptical and atheistic organizations are associated with each other because they share a common agreement — that science and reason are essential ways of understanding our universe and that any method of understanding the universe that *contradicts* science and reason is incorrect. The skeptic and those who go by the name "atheist" often have similar mindsets.

Two camps have now been established, believers and nonbelievers. The focus of the debate between these groups is the value of faith and reason in comparison to each other. How effective are they when it comes to explaining the world? How good is the information upon which we base our worldviews? By identifying this core issue, it becomes possible to determine if the conflicts can be resolved or if everyone is going to have to "agree to disagree."

IDEOLOGIES ON PARADE

For a moment, I want to take a look at the reputations of, and societal attitudes towards, faith and reason. These, no doubt, change from location to location and from generation to generation, so I will only speak to the attitudes that are prevalent in America at this time (the early twenty-first century).

⁶ From article titled "Bridging the Chasm between Two Cultures" by Karla McLaren, *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine (New York: The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, May/June 2004) p. 47.

I would initially note that those who adopt just about any position considered extreme are usually not received well by the general public. Fundamentalists often bear the brunt of ridicule. Atheists are viewed as the opposite extreme and are not held in a positive light, either. This is quite possibly because in any society, an “extreme” ideology is, by default, one that is not held by the mainstream. In a different society, where few people believed in God, an atheist position would no longer be thought of as extreme.

I have been both a fundamentalist Christian and an atheist, although I spent a fair amount of my life as neither. Because I now label myself as both a skeptic and an atheist, I find that there are many who do not regard my philosophical stance as either reasonable or well-intentioned. The biblical summary of what an atheist is and does — and therefore the general Christian attitude towards atheists — is exceptionally negative. The Bible says, “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good.”⁷

While specific faiths certainly don’t get much positive attention in the media, belief in general tends to get a warm round of applause. Faith is held in high esteem. This attitude is reflected in many movies where the skeptic says that something — an event, a monster, or a ghost — is impossible and cannot exist. By the end of the story, the skeptic has been proven wrong, or possibly eaten and devoured by the very thing he or she said was impossible. The skeptic loses.

The theme that belief of some sort is preferable to nonbelief is so prevalent that I breathe a sigh of relief when I don’t encounter it in a book or movie.

Logic and science are associated with the cold, sterile whiteness of the lab coat and considered to be without heart. People have trouble picturing the skeptic as being imaginative or the scientist at home playing with his children. It is an inaccurate and unfortunate stereotype. There is a deeper conflict here, often described as “heart versus mind.” We are urged to “follow our hearts” and “trust our feelings,” but the intellect is mistrusted. Yet, what we call our heart and feelings are, of course, the emotions brought on by our thoughts. If the focus is on emotions alone, then the balance between heart and mind is thrown off. In an effort to be kind and good, the steady guidance of the intellect is neglected. The heart and mind should be employed together, not in disregard of each other.

There is the general conception that without belief of some sort, a person cannot be moral or ethical. There are plenty of reasons to behave ethically outside of belief systems, but this is not widely recognized. In a recent headline, the Boy Scouts of America revoked the membership of an Eagle Scout for this very

⁷ See Psalms 14:1 and Psalms 53:1. All Biblical quotations in this book are taken from the King James Version.

reason.⁸ They felt that because he professed to be an atheist, he had no moral standards. Nothing could have been farther from the truth.⁹

The skeptic is often at a disadvantage because he finds himself criticizing things that people have an emotional and personal investment in. It is not surprising that this should make the skeptic unpopular. It does not help the skeptic that he or she must also state the same old skeptical adages repeatedly. Some people find it offensive, but it commits the far greater crime of being tedious.

The skeptic is accused of being a spoilsport, of taking away the mystery, but, in contrast, the skeptic views himself as performing a service — he’s solving mysteries. His intent is not to be a naysayer, but rather to separate truth from falsehood and provide answers. He’s helping!

I remember solving a puzzle that a friend of mine gave to me. Delighted and proud to have figured it out, I showed the solution to my friend.

“It’s not any fun anymore because of you,” he said. That’s the skeptic’s dilemma.

The difference in mindset between a believer and a skeptic is similar to the difference between a person who enjoys a movie for what it is and a person who is bothered by inconsistencies and plot holes. Both parties may find the other’s attitude to be irritating. With movies, it’s not really a crucial issue, but when it comes to understanding life, it is. The skeptic plays detective with life. Like Columbo, *The Monk*, or Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot, they are always looking for details that don’t fit.

To add to the distance between reason and faith, faith (especially religious faith) is considered sacred and personal. Those who criticize religious faith are not going to be well received, and often such criticism is perceived as a personal attack. Reason, on the other hand, does not have such an aura of sanctity about it and can be attacked quite freely.

If I could sum up the general societal attitude towards belief and disbelief, I would say it was this: “It doesn’t matter what you believe in, as long as you believe in something. Reason is nice, but it lacks heart. Either way, keep your belief or your lack of belief to yourself.”

The biggest losers in this battle of image are the nonbelievers. This negative image doesn’t help me at all when it comes to communicating what I have to say.

⁸ Associated Press, November 4, 2002. The Scout’s name is Darrell Lambert.

⁹ See the section titled “Dangerous” for an explanation of why ethics do not require belief.

SEPARATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEF

Knowledge and belief are two different things. If they were not, there would be no reason to talk about them separately, compare them, contrast them, or make any other distinctions. I realize, however, that being different from each other is not necessarily the same as being completely separate from each other, so I need to go one step further to make the point that knowledge and belief should be treated as two separate entities.

I'll illustrate with an example. I have a television set in my front room. I know the TV is there. I can weigh it, take pictures of it, and turn it off and on. If a team of scientists were to show up at my doorstep, they would verify that my television set is real. I can safely say that I "know" I have a TV. But couldn't I also say at the same time that I "believe" I have a TV? Over the years, there have been many philosophers and laypersons who have said that, yes, there are points at which knowledge and belief overlap. I object to defining these terms this way, because when you do, it creates confusion. The differences between knowledge and belief become distilled and de-emphasized.

Technically, I could adopt the more common usage of these terms and still make my case, because my arguments have little or nothing to do with the ways that they supposedly overlap, but everything to do with the ways in which they are different. In his book, *Natural Atheism*, David Eller makes a great (and relatively elaborate) case for treating the notions of knowledge and belief separately.¹⁰ I have to agree with Eller on this one. If I know I have a TV set in my living room, I no longer have any need to say that I "believe" I have a TV set in my living room. Knowledge starts where belief leaves off. The two concepts should not be combined, and viewing them as separate provides a greater degree of clarity.

As we continue, I will outline the differences between knowledge and belief so that we can draw a dividing line between them. (Note, also, that knowledge is not the same thing as reason. Reason is a means by which some types of knowledge are arrived at.)

Failure to recognize the differences between knowledge and belief is the mistake made by those who would accuse me of believing in reason, science, or evolution. The same people might say, "Everyone believes in something, whether they know it or not," or "Atheism is a religion." I think that what people are trying to accomplish with these claims is to put everyone on the same playing field. It is another way of saying, "You can't criticize me because you're doing the same thing," or the reverse: "You're no better than me; you're a believer too." It's

¹⁰ In *Atheism: The Case Against God and Why Atheism?*, author George H. Smith (no relation) uses the "overlapping" definitions of knowledge and belief, but still arrives at the same conclusions as David and I.

another version of the postmodernist game. In some cases, it is the result of the confusion between the words faith, trust, and confidence. Either way, it accomplishes very little, but more importantly, the statement is wrong to begin with.

Some people will claim that they “know” something when what they really mean is they have an exceptionally strong feeling about it. The other day I heard a disc jockey say that he “knows” that his soul will continue on after death. In the sense that I use the word “know” in this book, and in the way that it is used in scientific circles, his statement would be incorrect. He may be convinced that he is right, and he may have strong emotions about it, but he does not “know.”

Josh McDowell, author of the Christian apologetic book, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, also makes the same error. He does not appreciate what it means to have real evidence. If he had true “evidence,” the very nature of Christianity would change. It would no longer be a faith.

Everyone’s worldview contains some elements of knowledge and fact, but what confuses the believer is that they do not know where to draw the line between knowledge and faith. Certain facts may contribute to a faith, but they are not the faith itself.

When science and logic discover something, whatever has been discovered is, by default, no longer unknown. Science and logic move things from the realm of the unknown into the realm of the known, or at least to an acceptable level of certainty. The realm of faith gets a tiny bit smaller and the realm of knowledge grows proportionally. When a thing is known, it is no longer an article of faith. Faith must always deal with the unknown.

Those who say, “I can’t defend my faith; it’s just what I believe. Faith is faith...” are acknowledging (often unknowingly) that faith is separate from any information gained via reason. If it was not, then faith, in any regard that it is considered rational, could justly be attacked via rational means.

By the same token, to try to defend faith by rational means makes no sense. Every time someone tries to defend creationism with science or tries to defend the existence of God with some facet or feature of the universe, they have fallen into the trap of trying to make faith seem like knowledge when it is not. It is an immediate contradiction. There is no point in trying to logically justify something that cannot be logically justified.

There are some believers, however, who readily acknowledge the difference between faith and reason. An Internet posting I recently read referred to them as “sophisticated believers.” Indeed, a believer, religious or otherwise, who understands the nature of his or her beliefs, knows that there is no rational defense for them and does not offer one.

CRITERIA AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

When I speak of reason, I am referring to the ability to use rational, logical, and analytical thought. Reason also includes the formal disciplines of science and logic, as well as critical thinking. Critical thinking involves using logical thought in verbal and written discourse, and involves principles of argumentation as well as knowledge of logical fallacies.

A main and vital difference between reason and faith is that reason has strict criteria and faith does not. Both critical thinking and the formal discipline of logic require the ability to recognize invalid arguments. Science also has strict criteria so that errors can be avoided. These criteria are often employed through testing methodologies, and if something is found to be inaccurate or false, then it has to be discarded.

(Incidentally, not everything in the disciplines of logic and science, as they are widely perceived, is about “proof” and “facts.” In science, the point is to find out as much information as possible and to ensure that the information is as accurate as can be. It would serve us well to replace our demands for proof with requests for acceptable evidence.)

Criteria are necessary because human beings can misperceive the world around them and make mistakes. We are perfectly capable of seeing and hearing things that are not there, and it is easy to make errors in reasoning.

That is not to say that faith doesn’t have any criteria at all, but it is to say that the criteria used for faith are not precise. Those criteria are subjective and can change from person to person, topic to topic. As a result, there are a continually growing variety of religious denominations, so-called “spiritual” principles, and levels of New Age thought. How do you know which one is right and which one to choose? You can’t, because there are no sound guidelines.

Faith claims to get its information (its “truths”) from a variety of sources — personal experience and divine inspiration among them. Persons of faith are usually able to point to certain things that have led them to believe what they do. Some will even claim that they have logical reasons or “evidence” for their beliefs. It is here that a great number of disagreements between believers and nonbelievers occur.

One of the largest disagreements arises over the value of personal experience as a means of knowledge. Personal experience, I am sorry to say, does not qualify as evidence. Many find this to be both surprising and confusing.

The reason personal experience does not qualify is because it is so terribly unreliable. If personal experience did count, then we would have to take every

UFO abductee at his word and every person who reports seeing Bigfoot in his backyard as an authority.

That is why the credibility of witnesses is often brought into question in court. People can lie or make mistakes. It is only when the word of a witness is not discredited, and when it does not contradict anything already known, that what the witness has said is deemed acceptable for use. To be considered scientific evidence, a statement must meet a set of criteria that is even more rigid.

Let's say I go into the woods, see a leprechaun, and then come back out and report it to my friends. They would have good reason to disbelieve me. If I claim to have evidence of the leprechaun's existence just because I saw him, then I am misusing the word "evidence." Evidence would only be the appropriate word if I brought back a DNA sample from the leprechaun or if I (heedless to his offering of a pot of gold) captured him and brought him back in a net.

I might become a believer in leprechauns because of my experience, but I could not claim that I "know" leprechauns exist in any sense that would be accepted by the skeptical community. It would qualify as faith rather than knowledge, and I would have little choice but to accept the skeptic's derision.

As a skeptic, however, I would be more inclined to question my own experience. If that experience conflicted with all that I otherwise knew to be true, it would make more sense that there was something about the one experience that was awry. You cannot throw out everything you have learned just because of a single unexplained incident.

Many people, who have gone through the same philosophical changes that I have, find that they have had to debunk their own personal experiences. People who have had near death experiences, encounters with ghosts, and dreams that came true the next day, have become skeptics. They first doubt these experiences and then they try to account for them in a way that satisfies their own curiosity. It's part of the process.

The words "personal experience," by the way, mean "in the experience of one person." I have to clarify this because there are those who argue that scientific experiments are nothing more than "the personal experiences of a lot of people," and are therefore no more valid than singular experience. The contradiction is that you cannot have "multiple" counts of personal experience because personal experience is defined as happening to only one person. The experiences of many people must be evaluated differently. Confirmation by consensus is sometimes the only way we have of validating information. It's not like we can ask inanimate objects or animals, so our best option is to ask each other to confirm the results of our experiments. We have nowhere else to go.

Because the Christian faith is the one I have the most experience with, and fought the longest inner battles with, this is often what I turn to for examples.

There are those among the Christian faith who would accuse me of never having been a Christian, even though I became a Christian at age seven when all I had was the faith of a child. They would say it is impossible for a Christian to become an atheist. In support of this, they recite I John 2:19, where Paul says, “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.”

In addition to the fact that this is a great example of circular reasoning, those who would quote this verse to show that I was never a Christian refuse to accept my personal experience. If they did, it would prove them wrong.

Fair enough. None of us can use it as evidence.

You will find the plea to personal experience throughout New Age literature as well.

“You’d believe it, if it happened to you,” comes the claim from all corners of the believer’s world. “Get out there and try it!” they say, “And then make up your mind for yourself.”

Skeptics have their own version, a version that is reflective of their desire for verification. “Investigate it!” skeptics say, “And investigate it thoroughly. Get out there and get to the bottom of things.”

CONTRADICTION AND SELF-CORRECTION

Reason has another criterion that makes it even more distinct from faith. It cannot contradict itself.

This also answers a question posed in the section, “A Basic Assumption,” which was the question of the difference between an assumption and a belief. A proper assumption cannot contradict what is already known to be true. If it is found to be incorrect, it must be discarded, modified, or the prior evidence against the assumption must be demonstrated to be wrong. A belief, though, does not have to meet these conditions. It *can*, but it is not required to.

With beliefs, you can run into contradictory information and keep on going despite it. Some believers may resent what that implies, so I’ll explain further.

The principle of self-correction is fundamental to all disciplines of reason and is, just generally, a good rule to live by. When a person reaches an insurmountable obstacle, he or she should find another way around. If we realize we have made a mistake in the past, or are currently doing something wrong, we should change rather than make the same mistake repeatedly. Integrity demands it.

In the scientific world, when a scientist publishes an idea in a scientific journal, other scientists eagerly jump on it, looking for problems and errors. When the idea survives this criticism and scrutiny, it gains strength in the scientific community, but if not, then reassessment is required.

Liberals get accused of being wishy-washy when they gain new information and then change their actions or positions accordingly, but it would be far worse to keep on doing or believing something for the sake of appearing consistent. Sadly, this happens all too often. There is a very human tendency to continue to act in the same manner even though acting that way has proven detrimental in the past. People refuse to change their ways because they consider it an admission that they have made a mistake. They try to portray themselves as steadfast and persistent, when what they really are is stubbornly wrong. If people act this way and their motives are pure, then they may end up doing the wrong thing because they think it is “the right thing.”

In my own philosophical struggle, I did this with the idea that nothing was impossible.¹¹ Even after I had developed cogent arguments against it, I still clung to the idea desperately. When I finally let it go, pathways of thought opened up to me that I had previously been unable to follow, accept, or understand. Concepts that are treasured too highly can become obstacles in one’s path, preventing a person from seeing the big picture.

Self-correction is required by reason, but not by faith. With faith, if one has severe doubts and questions, it is regarded as virtuous to continue believing despite them.

Someone (to choose an inoffensive example) may believe that he or she can fly like Superman. We know that humans cannot fly. They aren’t built for flight, they don’t have wings, they can’t defy the laws of gravity by simply choosing to do so, they don’t have the bone structure for it like birds do, and they weigh too much. Still, as far as belief goes, none of that matters. I can choose to believe I can fly and you can argue with me all day long, but if I want to continue believing it, there is little you can do.

If, later, I jump out of a second-story window and break my leg, I still do not have to give up my belief that I can fly. I can just rationalize it by saying that I have to concentrate in order to fly and, clearly, I just wasn’t concentrating enough.

I can believe whatever I want; but if I use reason, I must follow certain rules.

¹¹ See the section, “Possibilities and Impossibilities” for details.

REASON ON THE DEFENSIVE

Circular reasoning is the logical error of using something to justify itself, such as saying “I am not a liar.” Throughout this book, I use the principles of reason to justify reason. Am I therefore using circular reasoning and being illogical? The answer is no, because there are things outside of reason that justify it. Outside validation is the escape from circular reasoning.

Reason is validated by the solid and highly visible results it achieves. Science has given us amazing technologies, lengthened our lives through innovations in medicine, and enabled us to go places and see things we never could have experienced without it. Logic has helped us to develop mathematical theories and solve problems. Critical thinking can help us figure things out on a daily basis.

Just as the results of reason justify its validity, so do its foundations. The techniques and methods of reason were established through vigorous testing and examination to do exactly what they do — weed out the false, bring knowledge to light, and show that the rest is inconclusive.

Without reason, the only other option we have is the chaos of irrationality. It’s one of the most clear-cut, either/or situations there is.

The last two sections make it clear that reason is much more strict than faith. This is the source of many complaints lodged against reason.

Few will question reason’s usefulness or its results as expounded upon above. There is a huge debate, though, about whether reason is enough to answer the big questions that supposedly lie outside its domain. How do we know that the criteria of reason do not rule out things that are possible but are just not scientifically or logically verifiable? Can reason give us a complete understanding of our universe?

The answer, from many, is a resounding “No!” Reason is not enough, they say; it is far too limited. Reason and our meager human minds are inadequate to deal with the great mysteries. To understand those, reason must be transcended! This is the claim of the religionist, the mystic, the Taoist, and a multitude of others. It unites the believers in single opposition to the nonbelievers. The skeptic who refuses to accept anything outside the bounds of reason is then labeled as “narrow-minded” or “too scientific.”

In dealing with this complaint, the nonbeliever must walk a fine line. It is unreasonable to assume that reason can and will explain everything. That is too big an assumption. If I were to claim that, then I would be guilty of “scientism,” and those who accuse me of “believing” in reason would be justified. Reason would have gone from being a tool to a religion.

There are some things, even though they are not contradictory to reason, that reason may never be able to explain. Take, for example, historic events that we will never be able to re-create. There may be things going on in other parts of our world or the universe that we can't see or get enough information about to ever fully explain. There is much that the individual discipline of science does not know and may never know. There is no need to assume that it will. Let's just wait and see.

Reason is also limited in its predictive abilities. There are too many free and random variables that prevent us from knowing what is going to happen in the future.

Reason may be able to explain the causes of human behavior, but it will never be able to fully explain the motives and behaviors of the individual if the individual is irrational. If their mental processes are chaotic, they become just as inexplicable as the mysteries of the past and future.

Those who crave mystery need never worry. There is no shortage of the unknown and there will always be plenty to speculate about.

(I would also say that even if we do show reason to be the perfect tool for *understanding* our world, I do not think it is the ideal tool for *dealing* with the world. Dealing with the world requires an entirely different skill set. We'll get to that in Chapter 7.)

Meanwhile, the debate over the limits and usefulness of reason continues. Are its criteria its strength or its weakness? Does the strictness of reason prevent it from recognizing certain possibilities?

It should not be overlooked, however, that certain beliefs, once they are adopted, can be narrow in scope and eliminate possibilities as well. They might even rule out completely feasible possibilities! The problem of being considered narrow-minded is not restricted to the nonbeliever.

We will soon see that this leads us to a choice, but first we need to understand a little more about how faith stands up in comparison to reason.

WHY SPECULATE?

Many people contend that their faith, whatever it may be, does not contradict reason. Faith, as such, is not irrational but non-rational. According to this description, faith takes over where reason leaves off and fills in the gaps that reason is incapable of filling. Reason is deemed inadequate to the task of answering our questions and it is thought that something else must do the job. In such a scenario, reason deals with the known, and faith deals with the unknown.

Because faith deals with the unknown, it must, by definition, be speculation and therefore a guess. It might be a guess based on what someone has told you, based on the teachings of a church, or based on personal experience, but it remains a guess. Whatever the reasons for a faith are, they are not substantive reasons according to the definitions provided by the discipline of reason. This is an inevitable result of knowledge and faith being separate.

The question then becomes, why bother with belief at all? Why is it so important to have faith and to make a huge personal investment in a poorly substantiated idea?

When I considered myself an agnostic,¹² this was the stance I took. Why speculate? Why not just stay with what you know and wait for the answers to become available? I felt as if there was this huge pressure to believe.

“You must believe in something!” came the command.

“No!” I responded, “How about if I suspend judgment until I have actual answers?”

I often felt like I was playing the children’s game in which someone hides a present behind his back and insists that you guess which hand it is in. All I wanted was for him to show it to me.

I understand that it is human nature to speculate. We love to make theories, guess, postulate, and place bets, when we have no idea what the truth is or what it will turn out to be.

When I was younger, my philosophical premises were riddled with speculative thought — ideas about what could be, what might be, and what the possibilities were. I found these ideas to be fascinating. They were, but they were also pointless.

What happens is that, when people’s philosophies are incomplete, they sometimes fill in the gaps with speculation, and then they turn around and treat this speculation as fact or as all the explanation they need. It’s dangerous, because if one wants, he or she can build an entire belief system on speculation. I call it “building a tower of maybes.”

Speculation becomes a problem when people build such elaborate mental constructs and then say, “It makes sense, so it must be true.” Truth requires a lot more than just internal cohesion.

Science fiction authors create worlds with geographies, histories, peoples, cultures, and even languages that seem to make perfect sense. These authors even manage to keep it all internally consistent. But it is fantasy. As with all speculation, it doesn’t mean a thing.

¹² At the time, I preferred the term “I-don’t-knowist” because it more clearly expressed my position.

Speculation even tempts the skeptic, and when we try to guess at explanations for things we do not have enough information about, we can look silly as well.

So where's the need?

There are myriads of answers to this, especially in the religious arena, but the most common of them can immediately be addressed by using critical thinking.

In the upcoming section, "Dangerous," I address the argument that without belief of some sort, we would not have moral guidelines. The main point is that this argument is irrelevant. The consequences of not believing have no bearing on whether belief is correct or, for that matter, on *which* belief is correct. The truth is independent.

In what is known as Pascal's Wager, the philosopher Blaise Pascal proposed that you should choose faith over disbelief because that way you could be sure you weren't going to Hell. Pascal made the mistake of thinking it was an either/or situation. He did not realize there were more than two options to choose from. There are plenty of faiths out there. According to some of them, members of all of the other faiths are going to Hell. If I choose Christianity, the Muslim religion might turn out to be correct, and then I would die and go to Hell as an infidel. There are even Christians who say that other Christians are going to Hell because of specific doctrines they believe in such as "once saved always saved."

Belief guarantees nothing.

Many people find faith to be a source of comfort or they find the notion of reality without the assertions of their faith to be so unpleasant that they refuse to discard their beliefs.

"I could not live in a world where unfairness exists, where the good are not rewarded and the bad are not punished," some say.

"I could not live in a world where there is such cruelty, if I did not know there was a God," comes a similar argument.

What such statements mean is, "I could not cope without my faith."

Again, the relevancy of this needs to be called into question. To set reality aside because one doesn't like it is denial. If the truth isn't comforting, but believing in something that isn't true *is* comforting, is it worth being in denial to feel good? Some feel it is, but, as I will discuss in Chapter 7, faith is not necessary in order to feel good about one's self and one's place in the world. We can stand face-to-face with reality and not be unnerved.

What believers also often miss concerning religious faith is that reason has already given us the answers we need. There no longer exists a gap that faith needs to fill.

When science began investigating the nature of things, some religions encouraged it because it was felt that science would confirm the truths behind religion. Instead, science discovered explanations that did not agree with what religion had presupposed.

Science has explained how the universe came into being, how the planets were formed, and how human beings came to be on the earth. The things that faith once proposed explanations for have been explained differently by science, and with methods that have more accuracy and validity.

In some cases religion adapted to what science discovered, but in many others, it flat out refused the answers that science gave.

The philosophical period known as “The Enlightenment” was the period when mankind discovered that the answers to many major philosophical questions could be found outside of religion and in reason alone. It was this that caused Nietzsche to declare that God was dead. It was not a spiritual enlightenment. It was an enlightenment of the mind. Humankind discovered that the world of the spiritual was neither real nor needed.

Reason had provided new answers. Believers just don’t like them.

The questions posed by faiths other than the religious variety may also be answered by reason. Investigation and research, as painful as they may sound, are far more likely to yield solid answers than guesses will. When reason cannot answer questions, speculation, and clinging to speculation as if it were reality, are of little value.

Faith is overrated. When it comes to understanding the world around us, there is no need for it.

COMING TO BLOWS

The last major point to be made when comparing faith and reason is the one that proponents of reason often begin with: that faith contradicts reason. This is where everything gets ugly. It is a strong point of contention for many believers, while many nonbelievers consider it obvious.

There are many reasons people are unable to see that faith and reason are at odds. For the longest time, I suffered from this problem myself. I did not recognize contradictions within my own belief system or the contradictions between my beliefs and reason.

In the mind of the believer, these contradictions are re-labeled as “mysteries.” They are not seen as contradictions but as problems that (if they are to be resolved) will be resolved later, possibly via divine revelation. To the believer, it is nothing to worry about.

What such people fail to see is that they are facing a contradiction in the present. The principles of logic will never change and what is now a contradiction will always be a contradiction.

The believer also claims that certain things “transcend” reason, but in every case where they are said to do so, those things must also *contradict* reason. This changes the argument. Reason is no longer just inadequate when it comes to explaining the universe. It has supposedly become *wrong* in its explanations. Those are two very different things.

Many people fail to understand the full extent of how reason and faith contradict each other because they do not understand exactly what science, logic, and critical thinking entail.

While researching this book, I visited many atheistic and skeptical websites and read the comments of their many detractors. I visited the sites of believers and read their commentaries. I even read some of the books they recommended. Every single instance of belief was erroneous in some logical or scientific way. This holds true for every religious faith I have encountered throughout my life.

In Chapter 3 of this book, I examine certain critical thinking principles in detail. When these are taken into consideration, logical errors made by claimants of the supernatural leap out like a three-dimensional image against a flat background. Chapters 4 and 6 of the book are filled with examples of how belief and nonbelief conflict with each other. The conflict between evolution and fundamentalist creationism is the most prominent example, but just one among millions. By the end of these chapters (if it isn’t clear already), it should be obvious that there is a vast chasm between faith and reason through which a river of muddied water flows.

A CHOICE

The statements below provide brief summaries of the previous sections comparing faith and reason. Let’s perform a quick review of what I’ve established so far and see the results.

Reason is thought of as useful, but without a heart.

Faith has a better reputation than reason and is often considered sacred.

Reason and faith are separate. Something we *know* is not simultaneously a belief.

By the same token, what we believe should not be called knowledge.

Reason has strict criteria to determine whether it is correct.

Faith does not have strict criteria, which makes faith exceptionally vulnerable to error.

Reason does not allow personal experience as a criterion because it is too unreliable.

Faith does.

Reason is based on what we know and must not contradict itself.

Faith can be based on anything and can contradict itself.

Reason has built-in mechanisms for self-correction.

Faith does not.

Many aspects of reason, especially its foundations, are self-evident.

The results of reason demonstrate its validity.

Without reason, we cannot make sense of things.

Reason is accused of being so strict that it rules out potential possibilities.

Faith is so lenient that it can allow anything to be true.

Faith is often based on, and justified by, speculation.

There is no need for faith.

With very few exceptions, faith contradicts reason.

To choose faith when it contradicts reason is, by definition, irrational and illogical.

With all of this in mind, one is faced with a choice — reason or faith. Choosing any belief that contradicts reason is a choice to be irrational. It's inescapable. People can choose belief if they want, but they are being dishonest with themselves if, after this explanation, they fail to recognize the inherent irrationality of their position. They would be like the philosopher Kierkegaard, who knew it was illogical to believe in Christianity but chose to do so anyway. One of the few existentialists who believed in God, this was the source of much of his angst. Kierkegaard had reached the point where he and I would have had to disagree. We would both agree his choice was illogical and that he had just made a different choice than I.

If someone chooses a belief that is not contradictory to reason (if he or she can find or invent one), then they are doing nothing more than indulging in speculation. There is nothing wrong with that unless they are making decisions based on it. Then, I would think, they would want better information.

While the information that reason provides may not have 100 percent certainty (which I discuss in the next section), it is much more reliable than what we can obtain through faith. This is why it only makes sense to utilize reason, especially when it comes to the big questions about the nature of our world and the universe.

LEVELS OF CERTAINTY

Epistemology concerns itself with the nature of knowledge. I have already offered some epistemological premises by stating that reality is objective, by stating that knowledge is often obtained through reason, and by providing some of the criteria for knowledge.

Knowledge is not 100 percent certain. I do not know of anything that we can be completely and totally sure of. This was implicit the minute I started my philosophy with an assumption. Certainly, the many varieties of knowledge are not equal. Knowledge, therefore, comes on a sliding scale, ranging from just below 99.999 percent all the way down to “likely, but without any evidence.” Below that point, when we reach “unlikely and without any evidence,” things fall off the scale and become belief.

It would be a mistake to say that knowledge can be ranked on some sort of precision scale, and it is hardly necessary either. All we need is a rough estimate of how reliable our information is. The crucial point, in regard to the philosophy I present here, is one I’ve already made: that the information provided by reason is far more reliable than that provided by faith.

At the time of this writing, “certainty” is a popular buzzword. I have seen it lodged as a criticism against atheists and fundamentalists alike with the implication that “if you’re absolutely certain, then you have adopted an unrealistic attitude.” It is also sometimes meant to imply that if you are absolutely certain, you are probably wrong. I would agree with the first implication, but I am wary of the second. Regardless, I have already made it clear that a rationalistic position by no means necessitates an attitude of certainty.

However, it should be noted that certainty and 100 percent certainty are two different things. A person can be confident of his or her worldview, and even be “convinced of it,” without being guilty of the crime of “certainty.” The rationalist has good reason to be confident of his viewpoint, especially when it is based on education, intelligence, discipline, and intense scrutiny of the questions involved. If the rationalist or skeptic errs at all, he errs on the side of caution. Meanwhile, reason provides him with an excellent set of tools to prevent him from being gullible.

A question that is commonly asked of nonbelievers is, what if you’re wrong? When this question comes from the religionist, it is sometimes meant to imply that if you are wrong, you are going to Hell. It leads to Pascal’s Wager, which I have already covered. But, in a more generalized sense, it’s a good question. It’s a question that keeps you honest, and it’s a question that the skeptic and the scientist are very familiar with, because they continually ask it of themselves.

If skeptics or scientists are wrong about something, they are supposed to do what they can to learn where they went wrong and do what they have to do to get back on track. They learn from their mistakes, incorporate the new information, and adapt. On the other hand, if religious believers are proven wrong, their whole belief system may be in danger. They may have to rebuild their worldview from the bottom up and deal with the emotional consequences of the change in ideology. They are less flexible and far more vulnerable than non-believers. The “What if you’re wrong?” question goes both ways. Moreover, when it is posed, we learn whether people are merely confident in their worldviews or if they are demonstrating an unwarranted certainty.

KOANS

The Tao is a concept central to much of Eastern philosophy. It has had millions, if not more, words written about it, yet it is said to be above all words. It cannot be described, captured, encapsulated, or explained. The Tao just is. It can easily be said to be the Eastern equivalent of a New Age, non-personal God, and in some ways, it is treated much the same. It is said that logic and reason are not enough to understand it and, even more than that, are hindrances to understanding it.

The koan was developed as a teaching tool to help those who meditate to transcend logic and gain enlightenment. The Eastern religions do not describe enlightenment or tell us exactly what it is — if it is a continual transcendent state, a single mystic experience, or what — but it is made clear that those who have attained enlightenment must still live in, and deal with, this reality.

One way to achieve enlightenment is to meditate on koans. Koans are self-contradictory riddles, created with the intent of moving people “beyond” logic. The most common and frequently quoted koan is “What is the sound of one hand clapping?”

Zen literature is full of such riddles and equally contradictory stories. Reading stories of how people attain enlightenment can be taxing. Their stories seem crazy, and in many senses, they are. That’s the whole point.

After reading a book of them, I sat down and wrote one of my own as an example:

A master talks to his student and asks him to report the next day with the one word that sums up all existence.

The student spends the afternoon and following morning meditating on his master’s question. He shows up the next day and says to the master, “Zen.”

The master shakes his head, and the student walks away.

The next day at noon, the student appears before the master and says, "Light."

The master again shakes his head. This continues for months. The student tries many words, "love," "emptiness," "joy," "Buddha," "sparrow," "death," "experience," and so on.

One day the student does not appear before the master. The master finds the student and approaches him. The student is sitting and meditating. He looks up at the master and then, quietly, resumes meditating.

"You have done well," the master says, and walks away.

The message is simple — reason is inadequate when it comes to ultimate understanding.

When you cross the Pacific from America to the Orient, you will find that the issues of contention over philosophical questions remain the same. It is still faith versus reason. At least the Eastern mystics were one big step ahead of Western thinkers. They realized that it was futile to try to logically justify a belief.