

[Beauty in Religion](#)

Sunday, January 4, 2009 at 3:24pm

I'm going to veer way off course and talk about some of the things I can appreciate about Religion, despite the fact that I do not think highly of it (understatement).

Intense emotions come into play once someone contemplates death, or infinite X (where X = darkness, light, suffering, happiness, etc). Factor in an all-knowing, loving God who knows you better than you know yourself, or a God that'll kick your ass hard enough for your ancestors to feel it - and you get some pretty amazing human achievements.

I have not visited the pyramids of Giza, but I do know that those incredible and amazing structures could never have come about without the threat of the pharaoh haunting the shit out of the people once he died. But the sheer complexity and size is amazing! I just got back from NYC, wherein lies the "world's largest cathedral". And I was completely blown away. The sheer magnitude of the structure, organ, stained glass and orchestra was quite humbling indeed.

A song I have come to know and love, turns out to be the [Lord's prayer in Swahili](#) (lyrics found [here](#)).

Everything from the Temple of Artemis, to the Aztec altars in Mexico to the Oracle of Delphi just show the capability of motivated humans to do extraordinary things. Not to mention pilgrimages!

I just wish we'd take all this energy (or in the case of the ancients, labor) and use it for something that actually *matters*. At least I think I can appreciate some of the beauty that comes out of it all.



[Julien Léger](#) at 2:42am January 5

The death of God breaks the link between the world and its transcendent creator. Apart from hope for salvation and a unified center of morality, Truth is jeopardized (the theory that defines true statements to be those that correspond to the way the world is in itself). The competitors of religion for the Truth become problematic too, since they insist that the world not be structured so that 2 or more readings may be legitimate. So if the world was not created, why might not every human theory encounter undecidability in its structure? Where is the locus of truth if there is no God to bear it?

The atheist-rationalist, seeking stability and control in this life without God inflates truth as he deflates God. And this inflation signifies (for Nietzsche) a failure to explore the implications of the death of God so celebrated. The atheist retains faith in truth, a disguised faith, decried by Nietzsche.



[Michael Leukert](#) at 4:58am January 5

very interesting. your comment reminds me of cognitive dissonance, something i am struggling with currently.

however, your statements (and this nietzsche fella's) are, i think, in complete ignorance of many definitions in the "field" of logik: the mathematical study of truth. in this field, truth is merely a property of variables and higher formulas. consider boolean algebra, where variables and formulas are either equivalent to 0 or 1. here truth has exactly the meaning of equivalency, or more clearly: the number one (so called "truth") and the number zero (apparently "falsehood") are USED to show the equivalency of a variable to a "real world" phenomenon. even more clearly: to tie a variable to a real world phenomenon. an example: the local variable lazlo_hot might be defined as being 1 when the temperature measured in my (nonexistent) son's mouth is above say 39°C, and else it is 0.



[Michael Leukert](#) at 4:58am January 5

if we didnt want to tie variables and formulas to "real world" situations, we could define truth and falsehood however we wanted to, as whatever kind of property we want to, as complicated as we could ever think of as far as i care. btw, "truth", whatever romantic notions i might have about it, is also used to show that two variables or fomulas are equivalent. see de morgan's law as well as tautologies. afaik, "truth" is merely related to tying variables and formulas to our perceptions in the world. variables and formulas being exactly attempts to describe our perceptions with written symbols, and nothing more. and since we dont know if our perceptions are true or not (brain in a tank and descartes), we only know one and only one "truth" or "thing" for sure: something exists, namely: we ourself.



[Michael Leukert](#) at 4:59am January 5

therefore, in my opinion, this annoying "truth" everyone talks about so much is nothing more than the recognition of our own existence, the very idea of existence (which is arguably just the existence of information and no more, or is that a contradiction?).

fazit:

to claim that truth is anything more than the disappointing and "relatively meaningless" mathematical property i defined above is highly arrogant, in my opinion.

ps

when im stuck somewhere waiting for a bus or something, i sometimes try to disprove "i think, therefore i am". that would mess a lot of arrogant people up.



[Gaëtan Landry](#) at 1:02pm January 5

That's not beauty in religion Andrew, that's beauty/art influenced/caused by religion. One may certainly ask the question if works of that... let's say "grandeur" ... would've been undertaken were it not for religion. Studying people like Bach, who produced truly stunning work with his Ave Maria

(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWi0x_aOzeM&feature=related), also produced things like La Chaconne

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5bVRTtcWmXI&feature=related>) which is unrelated to anything religious.

Most cathedrals certainly are as stunning as they are grandiose, but so are most of European architecture from the renaissance, and Gothic architecture in general. Religion was the enterprise of the people, so drove many projects. It's fair to say that religion was the muse of many artists, but had religion not been around, we'd simply have had different artists, with different muses, driven by whatever would've had power and money in its stead. Etc. etc. etc.



[Gaëtan Landry](#) at 1:16pm January 5

But there is, I suppose, a certain beauty in religion. There's no single driving force that can produce communities like religion did, and this is the greatest social weakness of rational atheism. It makes no promise, offers no "drive", and does not give any incentive to do anything. You are on your own when it comes to finding meaning in your life, and finding reasons to do things. I'm however, not at ease calling "beauty" this ease of finding meaning in life, or this ease of community-building. It's herding sheep versus herding cats, so rational atheism will never be as good as religion in doing that. Cohesive communities are automatically assumed to be good things by most; I'd be hard pressed to call such communities "beautiful" if what makes them cohesive is demonstrably nonsensical.



[Gaëtan Landry](#) at 1:22pm January 5

As for Micheal's comment above, boolean truths, or other trivial truths of the nature "Is the temperature lower greater or equal to X" is not what is debated here. What is debated are the "truths" derived from epistemological standards that do not guarantee epistemological certainty. Some statements are inherently unprovable. But an unprovable statement may nonetheless be true, even in the boolean sense.



[Amie Geall](#) at 1:51pm January 5

Howdy all.

I am not going to get too involved in this - just one quick thing - as a religious person I do

not want to be seen bias as discussing the beauty in religion - of course I think there is. As an overall general comment to the discussion, one extremely influential individual in the debate about beauty, art, and religion is a person named Akiane. She was born into a Atheist family but even at an age as early as 5 yrs old she began to have visitations from the Spirit of God and began to paint and write in poetic form what she saw. It was astounding. She shortly become world reknowned for her art and poetry - her work has been rated as highly as the classical artists/paintings known throughout the world like DaVinci, etc. Anyway, her visitations continued and her art become more and more exquisite. Her parents did not know what was happening to her but had to admit she had been in touch with a Divine being. Read the rest of her story and see her art at www.artakiane.com



[Andrew Manderson](#) at 7:29pm January 5
Thanks to everyone for their contributions =)

The reason why I don't accept Nihilism is the simple fact that even though I have no access to the rewards of an afterlife, I *do* have an incentive to encourage a life with order and appreciation - just because it is more desirable than a depressing, anarchistic "no consequences" society. So I guess Julien is right that my "faith" lies in humanity's similar desire to live a more "ordered" (I know you can blow that wide open, but bear with me) life.



[Gaëtan Landry](#) at 9:26pm January 5
I don't accept Nihilism either, but your "incentive to encourage a life with order and appreciation" is not rooted in rational atheism (here defined as the "lack of belief in the existence of gods and deities due to a lack of intellectually sound reasons to believe in it). It's non-sequitur from one to the other. Is all I'm saying.

Nietzsche also wrote on this, and came up with the concept of overmen (Übermensch) as a solution, which I find interesting and compelling. Now I haven't read the source material (Thus Spoke Zarathustra), or the rest of Nietzsche for what matters, so I don't know whether I really "got" what he was trying to argue, or if I'm aligned with Nietzsche on this. But the brief overviews of the concept of overmen I've seen "struck a chord" with me.

I'll read him eventually.



[Michael Leukert](#) at 11:43pm January 5
hm, an Übermensch is supposed to be a person who has understood and successfully integrated the concept of eternal return into their life... but this eternal return idea is nonsense, there is an infinite number of states of the universe, as space is also infinite. in

fact in three dimensions. not saying anything against nietzsche, but that was a long time ago... or ive completely not understood.

i had to look up epistemology. what are epistemological standards, i couldnt find them, this late, too tired? 5am here. the regress problem is the same proof as with the boolean logic...you only know of your own existence, all other things are only beliefs, that might or might not be true depending on how the die fall. in fact, you can encode all epistemowhatever beliefs, and afaic all episte-truths in boolean logic, as well as all epis-knowledge (proven to be exactly 1 formula: selfexistence). thats what boolean logic is there for. or again, ive completely misunderstood.



[Andrew Manderson](#) at 11:51pm January 5

I'm lost. I think I'll get back to this once I get up in the AM



[Michael Leukert](#) at 10:47am January 6

ugh, iw as so tired, shouldnt have posted. with the first para i meant: i googled Übermensch and then wikid eternal return. and since space is infinite, im wondering if eternal return is nonsense. and therefore the Übermensch just a silly Gedankenexperiment. anyone know about these things?

in the second para i really didnt understand what Gaëtan said with epistemology, so i wikid it, and thought it was the same concepts as logik, just worded differently. especially since this infinite regress in epistemology proves we actually know nothing for sure, other than our own existence of course. the rest of our knowledge would be uncertain: educated guesses. and i proposed that all epistemology can be described with logical formulas, though i havent the time to try doing something like that right now. anyone know about such things?

are epistemological standards simply the probability of something? i dont understand. all i find is massive amounts of text with frustratingly little meaning.



[Gaëtan Landry](#) at 11:39am January 6

Ok, I'll give you a quick overview of the terms I used. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that is concerned with the question "How do you obtain knowledge?" and "What is knowledge" and similar questions.

What I call epistemological certainty (I don't know if that's what philosopher's would call it, but whatever) is the much strived for 100% guarantee that your statement is an absolute truth. For example, $2 + 2 = 4$ has been demonstrated using mathematics, and so you ACTUALLY KNOW that this statement is ACTUALLY TRUE. You therefore have epistemological certainty on the topic of $2 + 2 = 4$.

Now there are others things that can be ACTUALLY TRUE, but which cannot be proven with 100% certainty. For examples, yesterday I ate a whole cauliflower with ranch sauce. However, I do not have epistemological certainty that I ACTUALLY ATE the cauliflower since I cannot prove that I'm not a just brain in a vat (see wiki "Brain in a vat"), who just THINKS I ate the cauliflower.



[Gaëtan Landry](#) at 11:53am January 6

Small digression: On the topic of his own existence, Descartes coined "I think, therefore I am". This did not guarantee that he was "human" as opposed to a brain in a vat, but it did guarantee (to him at least) that he existed in a form or another.

Back to my cauliflower. The fact that I cannot distinguish between me "only thinking I ate the cauliflower" and me "actually eating the cauliflower" does not mean that the statement "I ate a cauliflower yesternight" is a relative truth. It is still a "boolean truth" (fully true, or fully false), I just cannot be "epistemologically certain" that I ate the flower.

This is where epistemological standards come in. Epistemological standards are what you go by to determine what you consider "true" in the absence of methods that will 100% guarantee that the result of the method is not erroneous. It both addresses "boolean truths" such as the answer to "Is the temperature above or below 40 degrees?"



[Michael Leukert](#) at 11:55am January 6

ok, im starting to understand.

but i still think the only thing i know is that i exist. i dont actually know $2+3=5$, i just assume it is highly likely. i see when i have two oranges in one box, and three in another, and i empty both into a third box, i suddenly have 5. but isnt that just a perception that i see....? if the all the oranges in the world dont necessarily exist, how can i be sure that addition even exists? also, arent there are places where the plus-relation $2+3$ does not equal 5? something like quantum mechanics?



[Gaëtan Landry](#) at 12:02pm January 6

The epistemological standard of most people would be using a thermometer to measure the temperature, and to go by what the thermometer said. If it reads 25 degrees, it's below, if it reads 50 degrees, it's above. But your thermometer could be broken, or the Flying Spaghetti Monster (check on Wikipedia if you haven't heard of it) could be using magic to make the thermometer read 25 degrees when it would otherwise read 50 degrees. Or you could be insane and delusion yourself into reading 25 when it says 50. Hence sometimes you cannot achieve epistemological certainty, even if the question has

a definite answer in theory. In fact there are very few topics where you can achieve epistemological certainty.



[Michael Leukert](#) at 12:09pm January 6

thank you for the examples, im understanding the terms now.

how about a real-number algebra for logik, instead of boolean values? does this exist? if not, why not? we could augment the (currently text-heavy) field of philosophy to something approaching theoretical computer science or mathematics...or not?



[Gaëtan Landry](#) at 12:19pm January 6

OK quick break to address the $2+3=5$ thing, then back to my more detailed explanation, then back to the topic at hand.

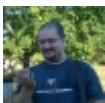
You can know that $2 + 3 = 5$ because the number 2, 3, and 5, and the symbol + and = have been DEFINED to behave that way. If $2 + 3 = 5$ is somehow not true, you either are not speaking of the concepts 2, 3, 5, +, = as in the agreed upon context (For example in a modulo 3 group, you take the "normal answer" and subtract the greatest multiple of 3 you can, and that's your final answer, see "modular arithmetic" on wikipedia, so $2 + 3 = 2$), or redefined "2" to mean "14" or "=" to mean "!=". These are concepts, and reality does not affect concepts. We just choose to apply concepts to reality. It just so happens that the concepts of "normal addition" ($2 + 3 = 5$) applies well to your situation with oranges. But you can find things like $7 + 8 = 3$ too (look at a clock and you'll see what I mean).



[Gaëtan Landry](#) at 12:32pm January 6

As for real values for logic, it all depends on what you want them to mean. For example to the question "Is the download complete" you can assign the usual "1" to mean yes and "0" to means no. But you could decide to generalize and assign the value 0.06 to mean "The download is 6% complete" and you end up with a progression bar. But you could also decide to assign the value 0 to mean yes, and 1 to mean no, and decide to generalize and assign the value 0.06 to mean "there remains 6% to download for completion".

Mathematics has all sorts of useful tools. But these are tools, and not descriptions of reality. Boolean tools are used to deal with "either or" statements. You could rebuilt all of "boolean logic" using the values 3.14 and 2.78 if you so wished, but you would have to go through a lot of trouble, and would end up with a system needlessly complex to describe "either or" statements.



[Gaëtan Landry](#) at 12:43pm January 6

So, to conclude, at the end of the day, it comes to people who think that "faith/belief/personal revelation/what have you" is a good epistemological standard versus those who think it's not. I cannot fathom for the life of me why someone would think faith-based approach is a viable option to determine for all the obvious reasons (prompting biases, cognitive biases, cultural biases, etc...).



[Michael Leukert](#) at 12:51pm January 6

i was thinking of an abstract value x in the real domain $[0,1]$, which would be the brain in a vat probability. then the value of the statement "i exist" is 1,0, but the value of the statement "i exist and am hungry" would be $1,0*x$, the value for "i exist and $2 + 2 = 4$ " would be $1*x*x*x*x$, an uncertainty for the existence of 2, the existence of the +relation, the =relation, and the existence of 4.

just a crazy thought, ill think about it tonight tho.



[Michael Leukert](#) at 12:53pm January 6

yeah, i thought the faith based approach would be restricted to uneducated people, but there are plenty of profs, also math profs, who live by it. i dont understand :(



[Michael Leukert](#) at 12:54pm January 6

what are some of the topics where you can achieve epistemological certainty?

ok, im going to try to rephrase my question mathematically:

the plus relation requires at least 2 true elements in order to be executed correctly, or to be a true statement. but since the only thing i know for sure is my own existence, there are no two such true elements. all oranges could be fake. all clock hours could be fake. so i could be speaking about the same concepts, but it still might be false.

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what do you study? or did you study?



[Gaëtan Landry](#) at 1:43pm January 6

Well most of them would be found under mathematics or theoretical logic. The only other thing I can think is my own existence through "I think therefore I am", but that certainty is limited to only me.

Addition does not rely on two elements being "true". Is "two" a "truth"? Is "three" a truth? No, they are not; they are concepts, ideas. Addition is an operation. Same goes for equation. The equal relation is not something that "requires two truth", it simply is the

relation between things that are the same. $2 = 2$ is a truth, but "2" is not a truth on its own, it's simply a concept. $X^2 = 4$ is a true statement only if x is either 2 or -2.

IMO all epistemological certainties are trivial because they all refer to concepts and the relation between concepts. "I think, therefore I am" may be the only non-trivial thing I can be epistemologically certain of.

And I study physics, but I debate religion to kill time. So I'm versed in theology, philosophy, and evolutionary biology on top of that.



[Michael Leukert](#) at 2:07pm January 6

oops, very good point, false=false is true. im going to think this all through thoroughly eventually, and maybe write a note. if you want, i can then send you the url..i would appreciate critical feedback.