



# The Separationist



## SHL Potluck Party 2008

5:00 PM / December 21, 2008

30 Town Creek Drive / West Ashley



Please join us for a potluck party on the day of the Winter Solstice, Sunday, December 21, 2008. Starting at 5 p.m., we'll celebrate our friendship with a purely social gathering at the West Ashley home of Frank and Frances Hay. Or, you can arrive early at 3PM and participate in this month's Humanist Book Discussion group meeting. (See page 4 for driving directions to the Hay house and for more information about the book group meeting.)

Of course, being a potluck, partygoers are expected to bring food to share, but there are no rules about what to bring or sign up lists. Bring any food and/or beverage you like. Somehow it always seems to work out so that we get enough of our our five basic food groups: appetizers, salads, main courses, side dishes and deserts.

Also, please don't forget to bring along any re-sellable books, CDs or DVDs you want to donate for our annual freethought book auction. (This year proceeds will go towards gifts for the residents at the Carolina Youth Development Center. See page 2.)

We hope to see you there, and we would like to extend a special invitation to people on our mailing list who rarely come to meetings, as well as past speakers who are not members. There will be no meeting at Gage Hall this month but we will return to our regular meeting format in January.

Reminder: As announced in the last issue, our Charity of the Quarter for November and December is Planned Parenthood. Please remember to bring a checkbook to the Potluck Party to make a donation through the SHL.

## Atheist and Freethought Community is One of the Top Contributors to Microlending Charity, Kiva

If the current economic climate has left you wondering if there is anything useful you can do with your money, Kiva may be one answer. Founded in November 2005, Kiva is a non-profit organization that allows anyone with an internet connection and \$25 to make small loans to individual entrepreneurs in developing countries. At any given time on their web site at [www.kiva.org](http://www.kiva.org), there are names, photos and profiles of dozens of individual entrepreneurs and the projects they are asking to finance. Recent examples include Sorn Hom and Charles Oiambo. Mrs. Hom is a 56 year old mother of three in Cambodia who raises rice with her husband. She wants to borrow \$375 over 12 months to buy a water pump to irrigate their fields. Mr. Ojiambo is a married father of 6 in Uganda who wants to borrow \$1000 over 11 months to expand the products he offers in his general store. The web site allows you to choose the entrepreneurs you want to help and make loans in increments of \$25. Many

lenders are usually involved in any one borrower's loan. At the end of the loan period you can get your money back, re-lend to someone else, or donate it to Kiva to help with operating expenses and those of their field partners that administer the loans. Since its inception, Kiva has made over 70,000 loans totaling over \$50 million dollars. But there's still more....

Lenders are invited to form teams and the teams are ranked on the site by total dollars loaned. Currently the top team is "Team Obama", but in close second is "Atheists, Agnostics, Skeptics, Secular Humanists and the Non-Religious," Not too far behind are "Kiva Christians" in third place.

Join the atheist team, help those less fortunate than yourself, and help keep the team highly ranked so others learn about us!



### SHL Volunteers at Carolina Youth Development Center



New curtains in a bedroom that we painted at the CYDC

Volunteers from SHL have contributed a large number of hours and approximately \$800 to our ongoing volunteer effort at Carolina Youth Development Center. We've painted all of the girl's rooms in the PAL (Preparation for Adult Living) cottage. Fourteen SHL members participated. In November, we reupholstered their dining room chairs and made curtains for most of the bedrooms and made repairs to the kitchen. Nine SHL members assisted with these

tasks. The SHL quarterly charitable contribution was used to buy paint, paint brushes and rollers, upholstery fabric, curtain material, curtain rods, cabinet door handles and other materials. In addition, the proceeds from the Book Sale at our Potluck Party in December will be used to purchase gift cards for the residents (see page 1).

Beginning in December, our ongoing volunteer efforts at the PAL cottage will primarily consist of tutoring, mentoring and skills training. A tutoring sign up sheet has been posted and a knitting class will begin in December. Anyone interested in tutoring or anyone who has a special skill they would like to share with the girls should contact Nancy Worley at 763-4044 or at [volunteers@lowcountryhumanists.org](mailto:volunteers@lowcountryhumanists.org).

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Newsletter Editors: Laura and Alex Kasman

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## Where the Discovery Institute's Consciousness Argument Goes Wrong

by Alex Kasman

The Discovery Institute in Seattle is the “intellectual center” of the Intelligent Design movement. For years, they have been arguing that the theory of evolution is a religion accepted on faith rather than evidence, and conversely that Creationism is a science. Neither approach has been successful in achieving their ultimate goal: replacing science with religion in public school classrooms.

Their arguments on this topic have been so flawed that even non-experts can see their folly. They completely ignore the tremendous amount of evidence that evolution accounts for the diversity of species and try to focus attention instead on nearly trivial “gaps” in our present understanding, gaps which have a tendency to disappear as we explore them more closely. And, of course, they have had no more luck arguing that their brand of Creationism is a form of science as it is clearly very thinly veiled theology.

According to the article “Declaring war over the brain” by Amanda Geffer in the 25 October issue of *New Scientist*, they appear to be trying out a new tactic to replace this failed approach. The Discovery Institute's new tactic, it seems, is to use the concept of “consciousness” to attack not just the theory of evolution but science itself.

The fact that we are *conscious*, that we not only react to the world around us but actually have an experience of it, is a very interesting topic that has been a subject of investigation in philosophy and science for centuries. It must be admitted that at this point, it is something about which science has very little to say. For instance, consider the fact that we actually have no way of determining whether another person has such awareness other than to ask and trust them when they tell us that they do. Moreover, as there is no other test for this sort of experiential consciousness -- at least at this point -- there no way for us to definitively determine whether a non-human animal truly experiences pleasure when we pet it, or whether it is just an automaton reacting emotionlessly with noise and motion as a toy might be programmed to do. Still, some scientists believe that we are just beginning to get to a point where we can address these questions scientifically.

The Discovery Institute seems intent on pointing to the present inability of science to address consciousness as proof that science itself is flawed. One big problem with this argument is that science now can address many things which it was unable to in the past, and nothing at present rules out the possibility that in the near future this “gap” too will be closed. Consider the fact that 100 years ago science did not know how hereditary information was passed from parent to child. I suspect that the Discovery Institute -- if they had existed at the time -- would have argued that genetics was therefore in the realm of the supernatural and beyond the reach of science. It took quite a while after

Mendel's initial work on genetics before the structure of the DNA molecule was understood and the genetic code was “broken”, but it is now clear that as amazing and complex as genetics may be, it is clearly something natural and within the reach of science. Similarly, although we now know stars and our sun are balls of gas held together by gravity and producing energy through nuclear fusion of hydrogen into helium, they too appeared inexplicable and miraculous a thousand years ago. Clearly, our present inability to explain something in natural terms does not prove that no natural explanation exists.

**The “God of the Gaps” is an argument that has failed many times before as science has progressed and answered questions that some argued were beyond its scope.**

A second problem with the Discovery Institute's new attempt to advance their cause using the example of consciousness is that it fails to acknowledge the long and largely unsuccessful history of philosophical attempts to grapple with what is called “The Mind-Body Problem”. Even those who wanted to argue for some sort of supernatural “self” separate from the physical body had trouble accounting for some things which are immediately obvious to us from daily experience. Consider, for instance, the effects of drugs and alcohol on a person's behavior and the loss of mental abilities as a result of serious head trauma. How about the fact that when a person faints from loss of blood flow to the brain, they don't simply lose awareness of the physical world coming to them through their senses but actually stop thinking all together? One would think that if the mind really was a separate entity, it would not be so directly affected by purely physical changes: drunkenness could affect your muscles but your thoughts would stay

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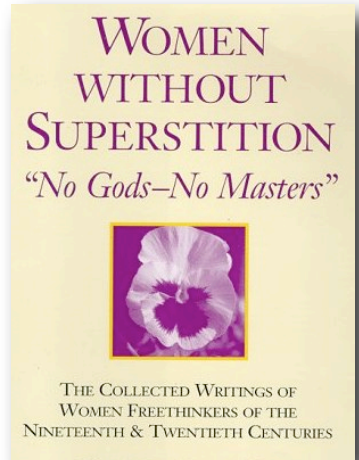
## Potluck Party Driving Directions

**30 Town Creek Drive in the Wespanee Subdivision near Charlestowne Landing:**

- From I-26, take Exit 216A.
  - Keep to the left at the fork just before the 3rd stoplight, Hwy. 171.
  - Turn left onto Fort Royal Ave. at the 7th stoplight from I 26. There is a BP station on the right. Take the 2nd left off Fort Royal Ave., Town Creek Drive.
  - #30 is a single story wood house on the right, near the cul-de-sac.
- 
- From Charleston, take Hwy. 61 and bear right onto Hwy 171 at the fork near Rite-Aid. There will be a stoplight and a BP station on the left shortly after you get onto Hwy. 171.
  - Turn right at the light onto Fort Royal Ave.
  - Take the second left, Town Creek Drive.
  - #30 is a single story wood house on the right near the cul-de-sac

## Humanist Book Club News

The December meeting of the SHL book club will not be held in the usual location but instead will be at the home of the Hays (see direction at left). The book discussion will begin at 3PM and end before the party starts at 5PM.



This month, Sue Edward will lead a discussion of "Women Without Superstition: No Gods, No Masters," a collection of writings by female freethinkers edited by the FFRF's Annie Laurie Gaylor. Although some book sources seem to have run out of copies of this popular anthology, the book can be ordered from [www.ffrf.org](http://www.ffrf.org), and participants are welcome to attend the discussion even if they have not had a chance to read the book.

## "The Value of a God" by Kanixsu Darwin

*[Note: The Separationist editors very much appreciate unsolicited contributions to our newsletter from SHL members, like this entry from Kanixsu Darwin. Please consider writing something for us and send it to [newsletter@lowcountryhumanists.org](mailto:newsletter@lowcountryhumanists.org) or hand it to us at a meeting.]*

One person stands in front of a soda machine and prays for a soda, and nothing happens. The day turns into night and nights turn into days.

Another person goes to a soda machine and puts the proper amount of change in it, and out pops a soda.

Another person goes to a soda machine, prays, then puts in the proper amount of money, and out pops a soda. That person will then say that God answered their prayers.

This last person can get the media involved by saying it was a miracle. The person leaves out the part that they had to put money into the machine to get the soda. All that the media reports is that the person prayed and the prayer was answered by a god.

## For Secular Americans, Lip Service Beats No Service

by Herb Silverman

Following is an excerpt from an article by Secular Coalition for America President (and SHL Vice President) Herb Silverman. The entire article appeared in the Washington Post's "On Faith" section and can be read in its entirety at [http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2008/11/for\\_secular\\_americans](http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2008/11/for_secular_americans) :

About a month before this recent election, some local progressives in South Carolina asked if I would help Democrat Linda Ketner in her Congressional campaign against conservative incumbent Republican Henry Brown. At first they thought I was joking when I said I didn't even plan to vote for her, and would leave blank that portion of my ballot. They ticked off a number of issues on which Ketner was better than her opponent. I agreed, even adding a couple of my own. My problem with Ketner was a 30-second TV ad in which she proclaimed her love of God three times.

I have gradually begun withdrawing support from otherwise acceptable candidates who make personal religious beliefs a focal point of their campaigns. In taking a longer view, I described how the Religious Right moved beyond merely saving souls to becoming a formidable political force. My friends discounted this reasoning. The Religious Right may have been thrown a few crumbs by politicians, they said, but mainly all they have received in return for their support is lip service. When my companions asked if I, an atheist, would settle for so little, I replied without hesitation: "YES! We'll take lip service!"

I would be thrilled to see politicians court us by accepting invitations to speak at atheist and humanist conferences, as they do at religious events. I would love to hear them say we were founded as a secular nation, with no mention of any gods in our Constitution, and speak about the value of separating religion from government. I'd be delighted to hear them defend atheists and agnostics from our detractors, reminding Americans that freedom of conscience extends to citizens of all faiths and none.

Yes, even if their words changed nothing about public policy, lip service would be a wonderful new dimension in the relationship between politicians and secular Americans--it would mean public acknowledgment that we exist.

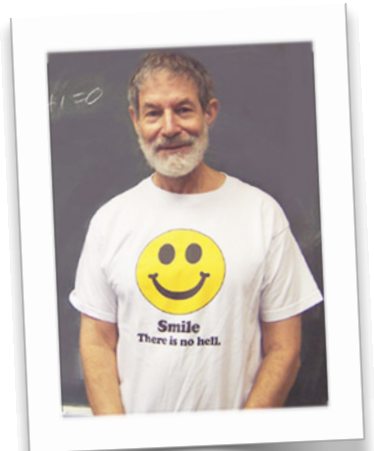
(Consciousness / Continued from Page 3)

clear, a brain tumor would not be able to alter someone's personality as we know that it does in many cases, and the non-physical mind of a person who has fainted would continue thinking and wondering how it had lost the connection to its body. The fact is, even philosophers who did not have access to the most advanced science had to give up on the notion of a non-physical mind as being simply logically untenable. Now that we have MRI scans of brains and case studies of patients after neurosurgery, it is even *more* obvious that whatever consciousness may be, it is something physical and not something supernatural.

But, the *biggest* problem with their new argument is a difficulty that they are going to have with any future argument as well and not dependent on the specifics of consciousness. This biggest problem is a complete misrepresentation of the purpose of science and science education. Science does require us to investigate phenomena and to try to explain them in natural terms. It turns out that this is a very useful approach, as it has allowed us to invent cell phones, eradicate smallpox, and land a space craft on a comet. We were able to do all of these things without reference to the supernatural. But, that does not mean that science is based on the assumption that there *is* nothing supernatural. Plenty of scientists do believe in the super-

natural. I don't, and I see evidence in science to support my disbelief, but neither science itself nor science education is as *anti*-religious as the Discovery Institute suggests. Most importantly, despite their claims that teaching science in school somehow violates their own freedom of religion, science classes in American public schools today are essentially religiously neutral. The students are taught about those things which *can* be understood in purely scientific terms, but they are not told either that this means there is no such thing as the supernatural or that there certainly are supernatural things that science cannot explain.

In conclusion, if the Discovery Institute is planning to discuss the question of consciousness instead of the theory of evolution in the future, then this really is an improvement. At least there really *is* a gap in our understanding of this subject in scientific terms. However, the "God of the Gaps" is an argument that has failed many times before as science has progressed and answered questions that some argued were beyond its scope. The question of what consciousness actually is and why it exists at all is quite interesting, but the Discovery Institutes' arguments that it *might* be something supernatural are not a good reason for replacing the present neutrality of science education in public schools with the sort of enforced religious education that has been their goal all along.



## Post-Election Thoughts from the Friendly Atheist by Hemant Mehta / Humanist Network News / Nov 5 2008

Barack Obama is the new president and I would think most atheists are thrilled about this choice (especially given the alternative).

I was among Obama's earliest supporters (Is Obama Too Pious for the Nonreligious, *HNN*, Jan. 17, 2007) and I am proud to say I voted for him. In fact, I was at his rally last night and will be writing about that event on my own site shortly.

But now that his presidency is looming, let's talk about the changes I predict we can hope for from an Obama administration as well as the issues that will not be addressed – not every issue, but the ones that have special meaning for atheists:

**Gay Marriage:** Will it become legal across the country under an Obama presidency? No. Obama has said he believes in "traditional" marriage (though he does support civil unions). He has also said that he believes gay marriage is an issue that should be resolved by each individual state. Because of that hands-off approach, I think we will see more states allowing gay marriage. Not every state will support equal rights by the end of Obama's term, but more will be heading in that direction.

**Faith Based Initiatives:** Will they disappear? Nope. In fact, they'll be expanded by Obama. However, the money will be carefully monitored and it will be used only on secular programming. In other words, proselytizing would not be allowed with federal money and discrimination in hiring would be prohibited. According to the Huffington Post, Obama said the following:

*Make no mistake, as someone who used to teach constitutional law, I believe deeply in the separation of church and state, but I don't believe this partnership will endanger that idea — so long as we follow a few basic principles. First, if you get a federal grant, you can't use that grant money to proselytize to the people you help and you can't discriminate against them — or against the people you hire — on the basis of their religion. Second, federal dollars that go directly to*

*churches, temples, and mosques can only be used on secular programs. And we'll also ensure that taxpayer dollars only go to those programs that actually work.*

**Sex education:** Age-appropriate sex education will likely be passed; abstinence only funding will be dropped.

**Separation of church and state:** Obama was a constitutional lawyer. He knows of and respects the wall of separation. Rest assured it won't be purposely breached (although Obama will make reference after reference to his own religious faith in his speeches, annoying atheists regardless).

**Other predictions:** Embryonic stem cell research will be federally funded in time. Rational Supreme Court justices will be appointed. We will see more funding for science education. A woman's right to choose will be protected. Laws against drug use will be revamped; it won't be illegal to possess small amounts of marijuana, for example.

I also think we'll see the number of non-theists in public office double or triple in two years' time, from one--Pete Stark (D-CA), to perhaps, two or three, due to the Democratic majority in Congress!

In short, an Obama administration means that we will be heading in the right direction when it comes to social issues. Is it everything that an atheist could want? Of course not. That is still political suicide. But for now, we should be satisfied with this tremendous leap toward a more enlightened country.

If you voted for Barack, you deserve a pat on the back.

*[Hemant Mehta is the Internet's "Friendly Atheist" and the author of the book "I Sold My Soul on eBay". This article is reprinted from the Humanist Network News, a publication of the Institute of Humanist Studies. The political views represented are solely those of the author and are not intended to represent the the views of the SHL or its members. - The Editors]*



Many SHL members were moved by the wonderful quote from Unitarian Minister, Kendyl Gibbons, with which our November speaker, Mike Werner, ended his talk. Here is her beautiful and thought provoking essay:

*If there is no personality governing the universe and promising us love, justice, and meaning on some ontological bottom line, then it is all the more necessary for us, flawed and finite as we are, to give love, to enact justice, and to build meaning here and now.*

*Let there be only the cold whistling of the solar winds out to the ends of space; let the past and future merge into a Mobius strip of endless, beginning-less flow; let there be no everlasting arms, no judgment, either indulgent or severe: let there be nothing, nothing, nothing at all but what we are and what we have in this moment in this matrix of energy/matter, in this movement in the dance of entropy. It is enough; more than enough; measure pressed down, shaken together and running over. It is marvelous enough and terrifying enough, mysterious enough, holy enough to fill me full and overflowing with wonder.*

*The love I give and receive (and withhold and reject) is precious and sacred and not to be lightly held precisely because it is all there is, not just a spoonful out of some inexhaustible supply. The justice I do not do is not taken care of at the end of the day, like a parent picking up forgotten toys; its opportunity is lost forever, and the suffering that results is real suffering, not ultimately wiped away by a tender Hand. How much sacred significance can we endure?*

*Something about that reality is a needless, gracious gift; the eternal surprise that there is anything instead of nothing, and that the anything includes us and our awareness. Something about it makes us understand that we are painfully finite; that our time is limited, our individual abilities and understandings limited, that we are parts and participants in a project that endures beyond us and is greater than ourselves. And something about that reality calls us, allures us, demands of us that we grow, into all the wisdom and justice and love of which we are capable, because that is the fulfillment of the deepest reality of what we are.*

*Look around you. Everywhere, on all the sidewalks and byways of the world, women and men hunger for the meaning in life, and find it in the ardent sod, the warmth of sun and breath of air; in the miracle of the setting sun and the altar of the ocean; in the struggle of now, salted with wishes and dreams, in human love and understanding. The person who hungers for the meaning in life is you, is me, is each of us, whatever words we use to try in vain to say what fills us, what makes us all that we are and out of that emerges demandingly, our inherent worth and dignity. Surely possible, oh, yes; for every day we wake and make it so; and every breath we take says that unfathomable Yes to the life that is all we have, that is all we know, that is our hunger and our fullness and is, beyond all that we need, enough.*

*-Kendyl Gibbons*