

The following essay is my 1034 word reaction to a talk I attended in Learning Center 130. I sent the essay to the student newspaper opinion editor. The red sections are the 145 words the paper chose to print as a letter to the editor. In my view the paper cut the most important points I hoped to make. What do you think? 2/29/08

A Science Guy Comments on a Religious Guy's talk

On the evening of Thursday February 21, 2008 Craig Hazen gave a talk entitled "Is Faith Reasonable in a scientific world?" He began with a joke about a sauna in Finland, told a funny story about cats and buttered toast and then, with much fanfare, he performed a "miracle".

He stood in the center of the stage, relaxed with both hands by his side. Then he quickly raised his right arm out to his right side until it was perfectly horizontal, fingers together and perfectly aligned. In case we missed it, he did the same thing with his left hand. He went on to tell us how in graduate school long ago he had discussed this ability with a biology professor, asking why his hand moved. He said that according to Newton "I was a body at rest and I should have remained at rest unless acted upon by an outside force. So why did my arm move?" After a long and technical discussion from the professor about muscles and neurons and action potentials, another student in the professor's lab shouted "You did it. You moved your arm." To which Hazen replied. I think you are right. I think I moved my arm. And one thing I know for sure is that I am not my body, although I am closely associated with it." To him this proved the existence of a soul, spirit or mind which is not physical, but metaphysical.

I found his standards of proof to lack rigor. No scientist would accept that as proof. This was a religion guy, plain and simple. He claimed to be a scientist, but I quickly came to doubt that he really knows what science is. He said science works and we all know that. So he respects science, but he was not at all scientific in this thinking or in the actions he described.

He went on to say science is not the only way of knowing. He said "I am sure there is a part of me that is not physical. I just know that", he said. Of course, this is pre-scientific thinking. I know the truth because I just know it. I was now getting concerned that students were getting extra credit for this lecture in their various college classes. This was religious entertainment. No wonder I recognized no other professors in the room.

He went on to say all cultures have postulated a soul or spirit and neither science nor physics are able to tell us anything about it. That is simply not true. That feeling of having a spirit that is independent of the body could easily be a myth based on a cognitive illusion. It is an experience that is very much produced by a healthy brain. It is not supernatural. It is natural because it happens, much as a flashlight with charged batteries produces a beam of light. There is simply no evidence that our beam of spiritual light can possibly exist without the healthy brain to generate it. It is the product of the interaction between our genes and our environment. Yes we are unique and wondrous spirits that are very short lived. We have the capacity for both good and evil. We can live moral and meaningful lives. We can be productive members of our families and communities even without myths and superstitions.

And Newton's law of motion was not intended to apply to the situation in which Hazen humorously applies it. Life seems to contradict at least one other of Newton's laws. Newton said that matter tends toward maximum randomness and minimum energy. But living things all seek fuel sources and produce energy that enables them to move toward increasing complexity at least for a time until systems fail from age, illness, injury or death. All of life seems to be at odds with such simplistic laws of physics. This does not make life supernatural. It makes the so-called Laws imperfect, yet one more fallacy in the history of human thought. Science can and does study consciousness and our sense of self, when and how the self develops in children and more. Science can and does address the issue of free will, but that must be saved for a longer essay.

One of Professor Hazen's main points was that faith need not involve any "leap of faith". It is possible, he said, to seek evidence, to find the truth and then decide to have faith in that truth. No leaping required. Unfortunately he took several big leaps right in front of us during his talk. For example he posed the question "Do you think it is wrong to torture babies for fun?" He claims that a close scientifically minded friend had difficulty answering that question because he realized that, to say yes, would imply the existence of some absolute moral principles that simply cannot be explained by science. The premise is absurd. Scientists all over the country are now studying morality from an evolutionary perspective. His example is easy to explain. Cats do not torture their kittens, dogs do not torture their puppies. In fact, I suggest that any species that found infant torture, in any way, acceptable (never mind fun) would have perished long ago, a short lived, dead end on the evolutionary tree. So nature makes it repulsive to us. Genetics do not give us ideas. Genetics cause unconscious responses that shape behavior in combination with nurture. Morality can be studied scientifically.

I won't go on with more examples of leaps, but there were a few. **I found the evening to be interesting and Professor Hazen to be entertaining, but far less scientific than he imagines. I was disappointed that his talk did not live up to the hype of the publicity. He seems to be an entertainer, not a deep thinker. I wanted to know how one can believe in creationism when we all know that evolution is real. I heard other students say the same. I guess we were hoping for more than "I found my faith, now seek and find your own."**

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