

THE ATHEIST

Newsletter of the Atheist Community of Austin, a Nonprofit Organization
P.O. Box 3798, Austin, Texas 78764 • 512.371.2911 • www.atheist-community.org

November 2003 - Volume 7.11



Upcoming Events

Sunday, December 7, 12:30 PM, Lecture by Prof. Robert Solomon, "Philosophy, Sprituality, and Atheism". Austin History Center.

Watch your e-mail for an announcement of our annual **Solstice Party** as well as the next **ACA Potluck**.

Lecture Meeting News: Professor Robert Solomon

Dr. Robert Solomon will be our December lecturer, speaking on the topic of "Philosophy, Spirituality, and Atheism". His lecture will take place in the Mayor's Room of the Austin History Center at 12:30 PM on Sunday, December 7. of "Philosophy, Spirituality, and Atheism." This lecture is open to the public.

Dr. Solomon is the Quincy Lee Centennial Professor of Business and Philosophy and Distinguished Teaching Professor at the University Texas at Austin. He is currently President of the International Society for Research on Emotions. He is best known for his course on existentialism and for his teaching in the Plan II Honors program.

He is the author of more than 40 books including *The Passions*, *In the Spirit of Hegel*, *About Love*, *A Passion for Justice*, *Up the University* and (with Jon Solomon) *A Short History of Philosophy, Ethics and Excellence*, *A Passion for Wisdom*, *A Better Way to Think About Business*, *The Joy of Philosophy*, and *What Nietzsche Really Said* (with Kathleen M. Higgins), *Spirituality for the Skeptic*, *Living with Nietzsche*, and *Not Passion's Slave* (Vol. I of a three-volume series, *The Passionate Life*).

Dr. Solomon regularly consults and provides programs in business ethics for corporations and organizations around the world.

Activities promote visibility and community support

In recent months ACA members have participated in a number of activities with the goals of making the ACA more visible in the community at large, reaching out to potential new members, supporting other activist and charitable organizations, and increasing the ACA's effectiveness as an organization. A few of these activities have included:

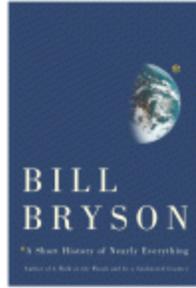
- ◆ ACA booths at the **Northeast Community Harvest Fest** and at the **Austin Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce's Nonprofit Expo**.
- ◆ **"Trick-or-Canning"** Food Drive for the Capital Area Food Bank. ACA members collected more than 100 pounds of food.
- ◆ ACA donations to the **Texas Freedom Network** and **University Atheists and Agnostics**.
- ◆ Membership-generated donations to the **Austin AIDS Walk** and the **Lilith Fund**.
- ◆ Participation in **"Worry Free Advocacy: Understanding Nonprofit Lobbying Rules and Election-Related Activity"**, a workshop sponsored by Austin Community College, Protex: Network for a Progressive Texas, and the Alliance For Justice.
- ◆ Participation in November's Austin **"Atheist Meetup"**. The next meetup is scheduled for Tuesday, December 16 (location to be determined). For details, go to www.meetup.com and type "atheists" in the topic search bar.
- ◆ Weekly advertisements in the *Austin American-Statesman*. ACA member Marion Alsup has been placing these ads, mostly at her own expense, for several years now. Many thanks to Marion for her efforts.
- ◆ An advertisement in the *Austin Gay and Lesbian Yellow Pages*.

Ideas for more community outreach activities are always needed, as are more volunteers. If you have suggestions for future activities, please bring them up at one of our meetings, or e-mail one of the following people: Allan Campbell, Activism Committee Chair (adc@mail.utexas.edu); Jeff Jones, Board Co-Chair (jeffj@austin.rr.com); or Michelle Gadush, Board Co-Chair (mgadush@yahoo.com).

**Book Review: *A Short History of Nearly Everything*,
by Bill Bryson**

Reviewed by Janet Swisher

A few years ago, Bill Bryson was a successful author of books related to travel (such as *In a Sunburned Country*) and language (such as *Mother Tongue*). However, he knew next to nothing about science, having been turned off by the astoundingly dull science textbooks of his childhood. One day on a long plane flight, he says, “it occurred to me with a certain uncomfortable forcefulness that I didn’t know the first thing about the only planet I was ever going to live on.” So he decided to spend several years to reading everything he could about science and talking to whatever scientists were willing to talk to him, and then write a book about it. Nice work if you can get it. The result is *A Short History of Nearly Everything*. While the title is obviously a play on Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time*, Bryson’s book is broader in scope—really “nearly everything” from the origins of the universe and the earth and life, to quantum physics, geology, atmospheric, molecular biology, evolution, paleontology, and paleoanthropology. On top

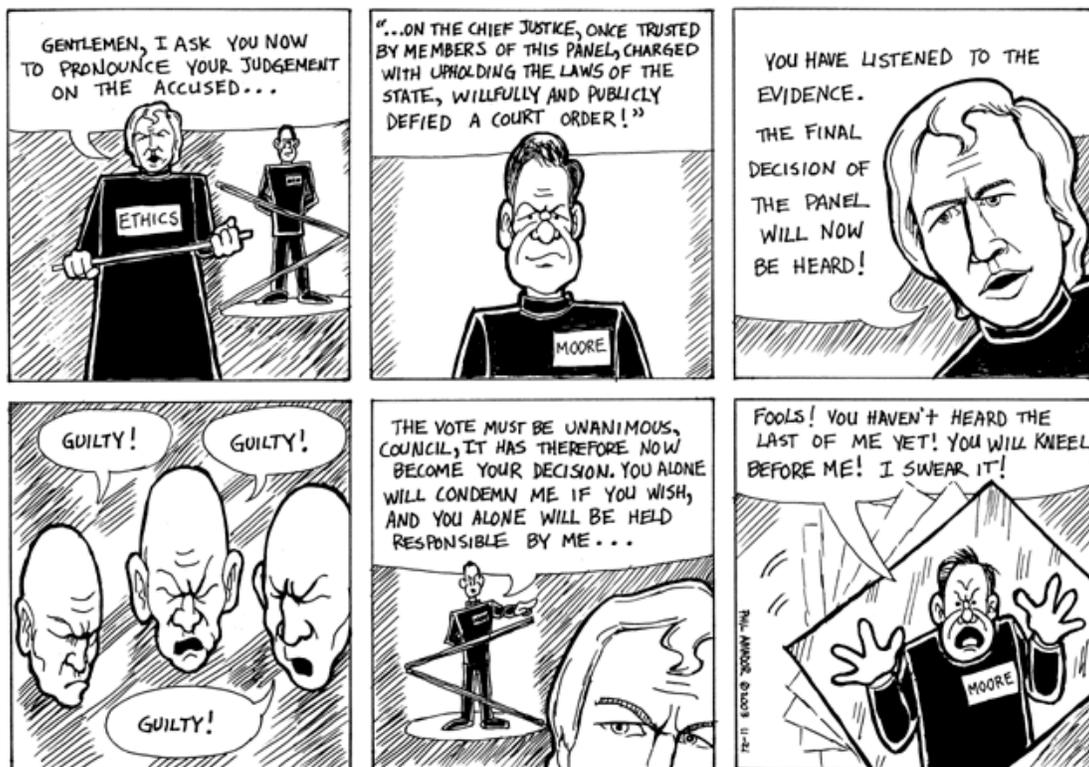


of all that, he also tries to tell the story of how we came to know what we know. In just under 500 pages.

This book is a highly readable and entertaining survey of the history and current state of scientific knowledge. If you are the sort of person who reads every new science book that comes out, you won’t find much new in this book, but you’ll probably have fun reading it. If you more the sort of person that Bryson used to be, you’ll find this a painless introduction to wide variety of topics, a starting point for further journeys. Bryson is at heart a storyteller, and he is at his best when telling the stories of the “curious characters” who discovered various facts — especially the early scientists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For example, as Bryson tells it, Newton might not have gotten around to writing down the ideas in his *Principia*, if Edmond Halley hadn’t asked him for help on a bar bet with Robert Hooke and Christopher Wren. (You’ll have to read the book to get the full story.) His exposition of scientific facts, while not quite as juicy as his anecdotes, convey a layman’s sense of wonder. He manages to emphasize how very lucky we are to be here, without resorting to the easy out of “it must be God’s plan”.

This book is not a “must-have” for science geeks, but it could make a good holiday gift for non-geeks.

Cartoon by Phil Amador



AAI News: 2004 Convention to focus on the "Real Family"

by *Bobbie Kirkhart*

Comedienne Julia Sweeney, biologist Massimo Pigliucci, and freethought activist Ed Buckner, along with other stars of the atheist community, will be featured at the tenth annual Atheist Alliance International convention in Colorado Springs. Sweeney will be the 2004 recipient of the Richard Dawkins award for outstanding contributions to the atheist cause. The convention, to be held April 9-11 at the Wyndham Hotel, set scenically in the shadow of Pike's Peak, will follow the theme Focus on the Real Family, and in keeping with that theme, there will be programs for all ages. Attendees are invited to bring their children and grandchildren.

Cost for the weekend is \$175, including all five meals, for registrations received before February 15, After that it is \$185. Full-time students under 25 get the program free, but if they want to take meals with the group, they must pay \$75. The hotel is offering single or double occupancy rooms for a special rate of \$59 per night.

In addition to the regular program, there will be special events for teenagers. Children 4-12, will participate in a Camp Quest program and child care will be available for younger tots, making this an opportunity for the entire family to enjoy a weekend together. Price of these programs has not yet been set, but they will be offered at cost.

Beginning in early December you may register online at Atheistalliance.org, and your local group will have mail-in registration forms in your next newsletter.

The Atheist Community of Austin is an affiliate of Atheist Alliance International (AAI), an organization of independent religion-free groups and individuals in the United States and around the world.

THE ATHEIST

A publication of the Atheist Community of Austin.

Editor: Jill Ford

Contributing Writers for This Issue: Bobbie Kirkhart, Janet Swisher

Cartoonist:: Phil Amador

Articles, announcements and letters to the editor are always welcomed.

Write to jillf@austin.rr.com.

Opinions expressed in *The Atheist* are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Atheist Community of Austin.

Regularly Scheduled ACA Events:

Saturdays:

"The Non-Prophets" Internet audio show airs every other week from 2:00 - 3:30 PM at www.atheistnetwork.com. Archives can be played at www.atheist-community.org.

Sundays:

Bagel Shop Meetings take place every Sunday except the first Sunday of the month at 10:30 AM at the Hot Jumbo Bagelry (307 W. 5th Street).

Monthly Lecture Meetings take place the first Sunday of every month at 12:30 PM in the Mayor's Room of the Austin History Center, which is located at 9th Street and Guadalupe. Some members usually gather around 11:00 for a pre-lecture brunch at Dario's Mexican Food Restaurant, 1800 E. Sixth Street.

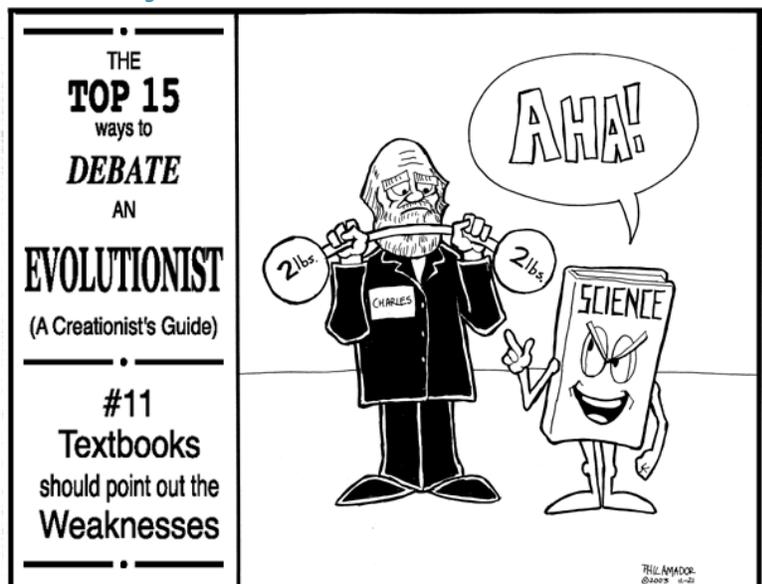
"The Atheist Experience" Live Call-in TV Show: 4:30 - 6:00 PM, on Austin Access Channel 10.

Mondays: Godless Gamers takes place at 7:00 PM at the home of Russell and Ginny Glasser. Contact Russell (rglasser@apollowebworks.com) for directions.

Thursdays: Atheist Happy Hour takes place at 7:30 PM at Antonio's Tex-Mex restaurant near the intersection of IH 35 and US 183.

E-Mail Discussion/Announcement Lists: Lists include a general discussion list, an "ask an atheist" list, a gamers' list, a social announcements list, and a singles' list www.atheist-community.org/email.htm

Cartoon by Phil Amador



Court rules Ten Commandments monument can stay at Texas capitol; Van Orden plans appeal

The 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals has ruled that the Ten Commandments monument on the Capitol grounds does not violate the First Amendment prohibition on establishment of state-sponsored religion and can stay in place.

Thomas Van Orden, a local atheist attorney, had sued to have the six-foot tall red granite monument removed, arguing that it amounts to state endorsement of Judeo-Christian beliefs above all others.

The Court of Appeals' unanimous ruling stated, "We are not persuaded that a reasonable viewer touring the Capitol and its grounds, informed of its history and its placement, would conclude that the state is endorsing the religious rather than secular message ...".

The Fraternal Order of Eagles donated the monument to the state in 1961 with the stated purpose of combating juvenile delinquency and promoting a personal code of conduct for youths. The court's ruling was based in part on its finding that the Legislature's intent in accepting the monument secular - commending the Eagles for their efforts in fighting juvenile crime.

The monument's physical location also played a part in the court's ruling. Because the monument was placed "on a direct line between the legislative chambers, the executive office of the governor and the (Texas) Supreme Court building" but is not physically connected to any of them, it "is presented as relevant to these law-giving instruments of state government, but from a distance."

Thomas Van Orden told the *Houston Chronicle* that he plans to appeal the ruling to the U.S. Supreme Court. He also said that he believed the Appeals Court ruling was written in such a way as to force the Supreme Court to take the case, since it represents a direct contradiction to other states' appeals court rulings on Ten Commandments cases.

The ACA provided some financial support for Mr. Van Orden's trip to New Orleans to testify before the Appeals Court and will look at ways to support his continuing efforts in this case.

Sources: *Austin Chronicle, Houston Chronicle, Associated Press, East Texas Review*

Victory for science education: State Board of Education approves biology texts

On November 7, the Texas State Board of Education voted 11 - 4 to adopt all 11 biology textbooks under consideration. Religious groups and proponents of "Intelligent Design" theory had lobbied the board to reject many of the books on the grounds that they do not adequately present the weaknesses of evolutionary theory.

The faction of the board in favor of rejecting the textbooks argued that failing to criticize evolutionary theory constituted a breach of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills Standards (TEKS). The TEKS require curricula to allow students to "analyze, review and critique scientific explanations, including hypotheses and theories, as to their strengths and weaknesses using scientific evidence and information."

Numerous scientists and educators, clergy, and community activists (including ACA members) argued that the theory is well established and is a cornerstone of modern science. The legitimate scientific debates over evolutionary theory are at a level beyond the scope of high school classes.

This decision will impact dozens of states since Texas is the nation's second-largest buyer of textbooks and Texas textbooks are used in many other states.

Sources: *Associated Press, Plainview Daily Herald, People's Weekly World*

Alabama "Ten Commandments Judge" ousted

Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore was removed from office on November 13 because he refused to obey a court injunction ordering him to remove his 5,000-pound Ten Commandments monument from the rotunda of the state judicial building. Moore had taken it upon himself to install the monument in the middle of the night in July 2001.

Moore was halfway through his term as Chief Justice, having run on the platform of "acknowledging God as the moral foundation of law". After his trial ended, Moore said that he had consulted with political and religious leaders and would soon "make an announcement that could alter the course of this country." It is speculated that he may run for public office, perhaps even President.

Source: *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*