



Natural Rational Religion: Is It Possible?

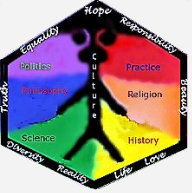
Trevor J. Rogers

www.GlobalBeliefs.org

Feedback@GlobalBeliefs.org

Agnostics Group
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We will cover:

- A theoretical analysis, of Philosophy;
- A practical analysis, of Science and History;
- Expression in Religion and Culture;
- Personal and Political action; and finally,
- A comprehensive vision.

We will consider:

- *what we know, what we don't know,*
- *what we value, and what we feel.*

Let's begin with the simple idea that **religion is about beliefs and values, meaning and purpose.**





Reasonable – Corrigible – Beliefs

Our beliefs are ***corrigible – they can be corrected:***

- tentative, working hypotheses;
- not fixed, arbitrary, or dogmatic;
- not held on faith alone – when we don't really know;
- *as far as possible* based on, or consistent with, reason and evidence;
- updatable as we gain more insight, evidence and refine our reasoning.



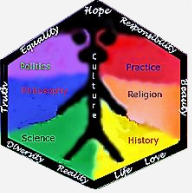


Philosophy

So let's start with our **theoretical analysis of philosophy.**

- Our core choices aren't scientific or historical conclusions based solely on reason and the evidence. despite what some Sceptics or Rationalists might say.
- They are ***philosophical*** choices based on what we know and feel.





Epistemology: What is Truth?

Whether we have “free will” is a fundamental dilemma.

On the one hand:

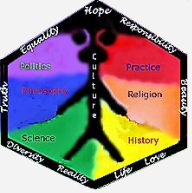
Everything that happens is either caused or chaotic!

- ❖ ● Perhaps all our beliefs and values are **caused** by the laws of nature; OR
- Perhaps *God* knows and controls what we will do even before *we* do it. Either way it would seem we don't have free will.
- ❖ Yet again, perhaps some things, including our beliefs and values, are not caused by anything!

That doesn't mean we have free will.

It only means that our beliefs and values are arbitrary – **chaotic**





Action, Belief and Faith

When there is uncertain or conflicting evidence on an issue:

- *If it is possible*

we must accept our ignorance and not jump to conclusions.

- *But often that isn't possible: some action is called for.*

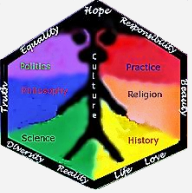
**Then we have to make a choice,
to act or not, as best we can.**

This is a **leap of faith**: simply making a choice
on the evidence we have to hand, hoping it will be OK.

This **faith is minimal**. The choice is forced on us.

It would be silly to make a leap of faith **despite** the available
evidence or when it's **not necessary**.





Revelation

If **reason is limited**, can we can find the **truth through revelation**?

- If we could justify preferring one set of revelations over another, we wouldn't need the revelation to know what is right and good.
- So we would need to **arbitrarily choose** which revelation, which interpretation, and which rules to follow.
- It's not a solution to choose arbitrarily, on groundless faith.





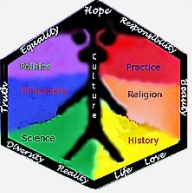
What we Value

Ultimately, despite our uncertainty,

- We all effectively **choose to believe in the *Truth*: that it is valid to seek the truth.** This fundamental choice reflects a **core value**, even if it is obvious or done unconsciously.
- We are also forced to value ***Diversity***, because we have to allow that a reasonable person could make a difference choice.

There is some mystery about this; we learn to ***embrace the mystery.*** We don't *value* mystery as something to strive for, but we live with it.





Metaphysics: What is real?

Appearances based on perceptions are only indirectly related to reality.

- Science still doesn't tell us what the ultimate nature of reality is. Scientific theories are approximations, in limited areas, and likely to be revised.
- But scientific progress continues to strengthen the case for materialism: that all phenomena, including mental events and consciousness, are identical with material interactions.





Partitioning reality with language

We construct our perception of reality and partition reality with language.

- We all interpret reality in terms of space and time, and impose causality on it.
- **Different cultures partition the world differently**, into different concepts.
- We all construct our 'world' out of generally ill-informed cultural norms.

But still ...

- Some experiences aren't adequately described in words, like smells, and music.
- Many people have **wordless 'spiritual' experiences**. These don't involve disembodied minds, but can affect our emotions, feelings and life choices.





What we Value

But still **we value the idea of a shared, natural, public *Reality*.**

Despite its subjectivity, uncertainty, cultural differences & social constructs, the idea of a **public *Reality*** is the basis for all our communications.

And this analysis causes us to extend the meaning of valuing ***Diversity***, because reasonable people can partition the world differently.



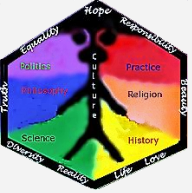


Theology: Does God Exist?

Time only allows me to make a few points on this contentious issue.

- The burden of proof for any kind of god is on the believer.
Like the celestial tea pot, on the other side of Saturn, we don't have to disprove the existence of something that's undetectable.
- There is no reason to believe in any of the kinds of God that people propose.
and
- **No religion explains existence itself.**





What we Value

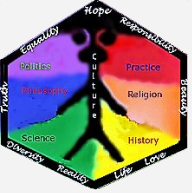
Even if there is no god or supernatural beings, we (mostly) still **choose to continue the struggle to live.**

We can explain this:

- There are evolutionary explanations for these drives.
- Even a difficult life can have its good moments.
- Human nature has its *humane* side.

We choose to value ***life*** rather than death: we choose *this natural life*, rather than a non-existent, *supernatural* afterlife.





What is the nature of Mind?

Consciousness is not the single ongoing, unitary experience that philosophers and religionists fantasise about. Eg:

- We weave in and out of consciousness.
- Some people have multiple voices in their head.

Religions equate minds with souls (or eg the Hindu atman) but don't explain how souls are created, or consider life before (the first) birth.

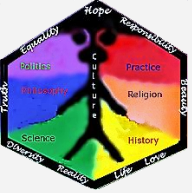
Science tells us there is no consciousness or mind without a working brain.

What we Value

Again, we value this *potentially comprehensible* natural **life** as opposed to incomprehensible, supernatural mind.

We value **life** and **love** even more because they are ephemeral.





Ethics: Why be good? What is goodness?

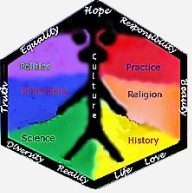
We know that ethics don't come from God – or from science!

- Acting in fear of God or bad karma is not goodness: *it's being practical.*
- If we know God is good *it's because we already understand goodness.*
- We know that many rules, from God, the Bible or Qu'ran, in fact are bad.
- Science and history tell us what *did* or *does* happen, but can't tell us what we *should* do.

Ethics *in most of us* is in fact driven by the feelings of compassion and altruistic behaviour we acquired as humans evolved.

However, we can't just rely on evolution, which many use to justify selfishness or that 'might is right' or that the strong should win.





Ethical Choices for Core Values

- **We choose as a core value *love*,**
to do what we can to reduce suffering in all sentient beings.
- **We choose to assign *responsibility*** to others and ourselves,
when there is
a potential for social or personal intervention to be effective.
- **We also choose as a core value *equality*:**
there are no reasonable grounds to believe one person *innately*
deserves more chances for a better life than another.





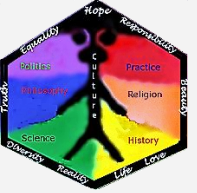
Aesthetics: What is Beauty?

- Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,
It's the choices we make!
- Many of us find pleasure and experience the mysteries of life,
by seeking out contact with the world's natural wonders,
or participating in “cultural” experiences,
like music, dancing, movies and so on!

What we Value

We make daily choices that are more than simply utilitarian,
reflecting that we value *beauty*.





Core Values from Philosophy

Values an Agnostic, Sceptic or Atheist can obtain from philosophy are:

***Truth, Diversity, Reality, Life,
Love, Beauty, Equality and Responsibility.***

As we discuss later, the final core value we propose is ***Hope.***

We can't conduct scientific tests to prove or disprove our philosophical conclusions or the validity of our core value choices.

These nine **core values** are ***orthogonal*** and **coherent**. That is

- They don't overlap.
- Choosing one doesn't imply another.
- They fit together.

We need to choose *all* of them.





Practical Analysis: Science & History

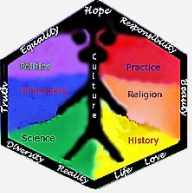
Science tells us, eg:

- How the universe evolved after the big bang;
- How life began;
- How suffering began in primitive nervous systems;
- How suffering can be minimised;
- How humans became as we are:
conscious, cooperative, caring and competitive.

History tells us, eg:

- How humans spread around the world;
- How agriculture and civilisations developed, and many collapsed;
- How technology, business and government, spread;
- How colonialism devastated most of the world;
- How human rights have slowly progressed





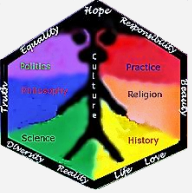
A Core Value and *Derived* Values

- History tells us that there are grounds for ***Hope***. It still takes a leap of faith to believe that personal and political action is valid.

***Hope* is a *core* value, guiding our choices, based on our global experience, rather than a theoretical philosophical analysis.**

- The scientific and historical methods are based on ***core*** values like Truth and Diversity that we rephrase or combine into eg Transparency and Respect. These can be called ***derived*** values.





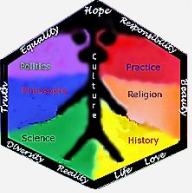
Effecting or Instrumental Values

Science and history help us to work out the best choices, which are **instrumental**, ie they help to put into **effect**, our **core** values. We revise such **effecting** values as new evidence comes to light. For instance:

- As science learns more about human behaviour we can devise better justice systems, to reinforce core values of **equality** and **responsibility**.
- History's lessons support **effecting** values, such as: *productivity, rule of law, human rights, freedom and democracy*.

Atheists such as Sam Harris confuse these **effecting** values from science with **core** values from philosophy.





Ancillary Values

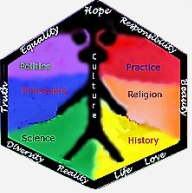
History shows:

- It takes ***courage, strength*** and ***self-discipline*** to follow our chosen path in our personal lives; and
- Political action needs ***loyalty*** and ***commitment***.

These we call ***ancillary values***. They aren't *core* values because

- they are also used for evil purposes ,
such as Nazism and terrorist attacks; and
- they are useful guides only in support of ***justifiable core*** values.



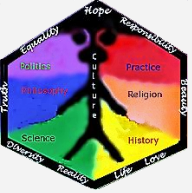


Science, History and our Feelings

Science and history are not just cold, hard facts. They affect our feelings.

- Science helps to explain **why we are as we are**, and why we behave as we do. It makes us feel normal.
- Long term, global history **helps us to free ourselves** from our limited personal histories, to escape from identity politics, to overcome our parochialism and short sightedness, to seek more universal values.
- Science and history form the basis for our universal narrative, of our origins and our destination, and helps us to find our place within it.
- Science and history provide good strategies to achieve our core values.
- These stories and strategies will be **replaced only by better ones** as we learn more.





Expression: in Religion and Culture

We need to move on to a more sophisticated understanding of religion.

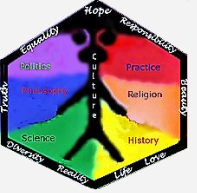
Religion is humanity's attempt to find meaning and purpose. It's about what we care about most, our "**ultimate concerns**", guiding how we live.

Despite their differences **religions have a common structure:**

- an explanation of our **origins**, a paradise lost, the beginning of suffering, and why we are in need of help;
- behavioural rules to **reduce suffering** or gain redemption;
- sources of inspiration, **exemplary models**, as prophets or teachers;

These form a grand narrative in which many find meaning and purpose.





Religion, Culture and Values

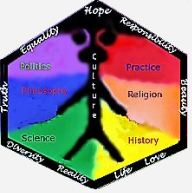
Religion, culture, media and the arts actually **don't provide *core*** values, but **they explore ways to *express*** our values. Their stories certainly strongly influence what we value.

How we choose to interpret sacred texts, literally, or as allegories, or as fairy tales, generally **reflects** our **pre-existing values**.

Wisdom can be found in selected religious stories, just as they can in selected literature and movies, *regardless of whether they are historically true or scientifically valid*.

We must calmly acknowledge and **take from religions and the arts whatever wisdom they offer and discard the rest**.





Religion, Culture and our Feelings

Religion, culture and the arts help to connect us to the world.

The best of religion adds richness and depth to our universal narrative and our part within it.

The best of art and culture, distributed via different media, give us a huge variety of ways to embellish the universal narrative and provide insights into our roles within it,

as children, friends, lovers, spouses, parents, volunteers, teammates, workers, managers, professionals, citizens, public servants, politicians, **and the multiple identities we have, based on age, gender, race, caste, class, sexual preference, religion or nationality filling out and colouring the multiple stories in which we find our meaning and purpose**



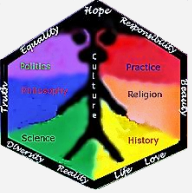


Action: in Personal Lives and Politics

- Our analysis of these beliefs and values in all knowledge domains, gives us a **basis for developing rational, evidence based guidelines** for our:
 - psychological and physical health, personal relationships and ‘spirituality’;
 - economics, government, the environment, civil society and education.

Unsurprisingly, it’s often a question of **balancing one value against another.**





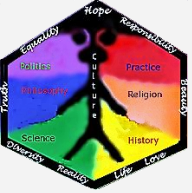
How does this affect our feelings about life?

We may initially feel overwhelmed by complex arguments. But ...

This analysis **provides** us with **the confidence**:

- **that our personal striving is valid** and justifiable;
because it is based on sound analyses and life affirming value choices;
- **and in the political sphere**, the confidence
to join the struggle for justice, human rights, and
to humbly, but assertively defend liberal democracy.





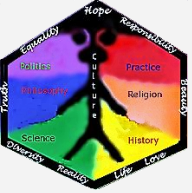
Integrating into a comprehensive Vision

Firstly, we accept that some mysteries can't be resolved. We can only embrace them.

- No science, religion or philosophy resolves the mystery of existence itself or answers the ultimate question: “why?”
- Perhaps we'll never resolve the dilemma of causality or chaos versus the free choice needed for truth and justice.
- Perhaps we'll never adequately explain consciousness, our sense of beauty, or 'spiritual' experiences.
- Our universal narrative, which we say provides a coherent, comprehensive story, is just another social construct.

But it's ***a good*** social construct.

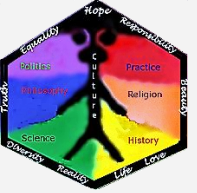




Confronting Post Modernism

- Our grand narrative is based on the global scientific consensus and long term global history, not parochial, short term, western imperialism.
- Our values such as **truth**, *diversity*, **love** and equality, mean we oppose **ignorant**, *closed*, **cruel** and oppressive societies.
- These global values reflect explicit informed choices made in many cultures, not just “the West”;
- **Because in real life we have to act,**
despite social constructs, the uncertainties & our ignorance.
- The valueless paralysis of post-modernism is part of the problem, not the solution.



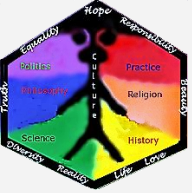


Secular Rituals

This vision includes natural, **secular rituals** as part of our daily lives.

- On a personal level, secular rituals include, eg:
birthdays, marriages, funerals, academic awards, daily activities like brushing teeth, and communing with nature, like bushwalking or surfing.
- On a community level, secular rituals include:
 - annual celebrations such as New Years, the rituals of business, democracy, the law, the military, sport and entertainment;
 - but mostly our routine acts of consideration and politeness as we deal with other people.

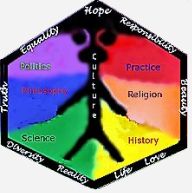




Is this a religion?

- This approach certainly has characteristics that are similar to religion:
- A focus on our **ultimate concerns** providing values, meaning & purpose.
 - A **universal narrative** describing our origins and our place in the world;
 - An explanation of the **causes of suffering** and ways we can address it;
 - An associated, justifiable **set of values** to guide our behaviour;
 - **Exemplary models**, and a wealth of literature;
 - **Rituals** for conducting and celebrating our lives;
 - Embracing the **mystery** of existence and the majesty of the universe.





Court Cases

Australia's High Court, in the 1980s, accepted that Scientology was a religion and hence is entitled to tax exemptions.

- The Court determined that Religion typically involves:
supernatural beliefs, and a **canon of conduct** linked to those beliefs.
- This matches similar opinions of other Courts, eg in the USA.
defining religion by the **content of its beliefs** rather than their purpose.
- They defined a supernatural belief to involve:
 - ***more than the reality normally perceived by our senses,***
 - ***more than mere reason*** and the evidence.

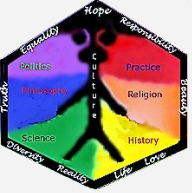




Reality and Perception

- We really do believe in a reality that is beyond our ordinary perceptions:
 - Sound scientific ideas such as Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle and Poppers Falsifiability Principle lead us to accept that science will never know the true nature of reality.
 - Our notions of reality are also socially constructed, so we aren't sure what ultimate reality is.





Faith as well as Reason

- We choose our core values, *to some extent* on faith:
 - Despite the scientific evidence that eg
 - our behaviour, beliefs and choices are caused, or random;
 - we are in fact not all equal; and
 - despite the historical evidence of
 - selfishness, suffering and grounds for despair;
 - our core value choices such as ***equality*** and ***hope*** are ***to this extent*** contrary to, perhaps *more than*, reason and evidence.

But we need to be even more sophisticated than this about the legal definition of the supernatural.





Natural Rational Religion: A Reasonable Global Way

Trevor J. Rogers

www.GlobalBeliefs.org

Feedback@GlobalBeliefs.org

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