

THE EUDAIMONIST

The Official Newsletter of the Fellowship of Reason

January 2005 Newsletter

"Advocating Heroic Engagement with Life"

Volume 7, Number 1

International Section (Received by all local chapters)

Mission Statement

The Fellowship of Reason® is an open, benevolent, and vital rational moral community in which we celebrate our lives, our freedoms, and our philosophy of reason. We study ethics.

Five Questions with Sam Harris

Author of *The End of Faith: Terror, Religion and the Future of Reason*

Interview by Chris Snider

[This is the first installment of "Five Questions with...", an occasional series in the FOR newsletter featuring interviews with notable personalities in the worlds of philosophy, science, history, art and literature. Look for new installments in the near future!]

Sam Harris is a Stanford-based philosopher, doctoral candidate in neuroscience, and author of *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason* (W.W. Norton, 2004, ISBN 0393035158), a frank, uncompromising, sometimes politically incorrect, and often blatantly angry book in which he argues that religious faith is incompatible with the goals of human happiness and societal stability. Although Harris reserves his most scathing comments for "fundamentalist" Islam, he is also critical of the West; Harris maintains that in the process of domesticating Christianity, the largely secular West has also created a mindset that makes challenging a person's "faith" – however irrational – virtually taboo. Critics suggest that Harris oversells his case, exaggerates his arguments, and conveniently ignores data that might tend to disprove his claims. For example, Harris readily blames a number of historical ills (like war) on religion, yet waves aside religion's humanitarian achievements, asserting that people can find plenty of reasons to do good without the catalyst of faith. He even makes such provocative statements as "Some propositions are so dangerous it may even be ethical to kill people for believing them." (Readers are advised to consider this in the book's greater context.)

Nearly as controversial as his stark assessment of faith's effect on the 21st century is Harris's prescription for a better future – in addition to the usual call to put *all* belief

systems to the same rational litmus test, he advocates further exploration of Eastern "mystical" traditions, pointing to their potential introspective benefits and traditions of peaceful coexistence. Unfortunately, Harris doesn't spend enough time on this topic to explain to the satisfaction of most rationally-minded Westerners how Eastern mysticism can be reconciled with the rigors of science - but surely open minds will not reject off-hand this novel suggestion without further inquiry.

Love him or hate him, Harris is a man confident in his conclusions and crystal clear in making his case. Learn more about Sam Harris and *The End of Faith* on his official website, (<http://www.samharris.org>).

Q: What got you interested in neuroscience, and how has your study of it affected your philosophical outlook?

Sam Harris: I actually came to my interest in neuroscience through philosophy. During my study of philosophy at Stanford, I found that most philosophers of mind were waiting for the neuroscientists to tell them what was really going on in the brain. I decided that I wanted to get a handle on the details myself. Clearly, any full description of what we are as human beings -- including our spiritual possibilities -- must now include a description of how the brain works.

Q: Although you don't mention it explicitly in *The End of Faith*, it seems fairly clear that you're no fan of "non-overlapping magisteria", the phrase coined by the late Stephen Jay Gould to describe the idea that religion and science need not be in conflict. Do you see any way in which these two human endeavors can co-exist productively?

Sam Harris: No. There is only one magisteria. Whatever is true, ultimately, is what should guide our behavior and our thinking about the world. If there really is a God who hates homosexuals, we should want to know this. Needless to say, if such a God exists, we would not want to anger Him, and we should not tolerate gay marriage. If such a God is a figment of our Iron Age imagination, however, we

should not accommodate the irrational concerns of those who persist in believing in Him without evidence. One can't have it both ways. The facts really matter. All we can do is proceed on the basis of the most rational and non-dogmatic appraisal of the evidence. Such an appraisal suggests, of course, that the books like the Bible and Koran were written by men and women like ourselves.

Q: Fundamentalist Islam seems irreversibly entrenched in a huge swath of the world, with new generations of children being indoctrinated every year. Given this reality, how on earth will it be possible to reverse that trend and create a "reason friendly" culture in any practical timeframe?

Sam Harris: I am not hopeful about this, but I agree that it is necessary. It seems that moderate Muslims (wherever they are) must win a war of ideas (or a war) with their coreligionists. How such a process of reformation will get underway when we are mired in our own pietistic ignorance is anybody's guess. (Twenty-two percent of Americans claim to be *certain* that Jesus will return to earth sometime in the next fifty years; another 22 percent think he probably will.)

Q: You make an amazing statement in *The End of Faith*: "Mysticism is a rational enterprise. Faith is not." Can you explain this for a non-religious audience?

Sam Harris: Mysticism, as I define it, is simply a rigorous method of introspection - one which aims at the deliberate transformation of a person's perception of the world. There is nothing irrational about such a practice. One does not have to believe anything on insufficient evidence in order to run such an experiment on oneself. One can practice meditation, for instance, without believing anything preposterous about the world. Religion, on the other hand, is little more than the unabashed embrace of the preposterous.

Q: If you were to outline a successful reason-based lifestyle, what would its four or five main attributes be?

Sam Harris: I think one attribute will suffice: intellectual honesty. One should not claim to be certain about things no one cannot be certain about. One's convictions should scale with the evidence. This precept alone would level all of our faiths, along with the faith-based identities that have Balkanized our world into separate moral communities: Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, etc. It is time we started talking sense to one another - because only rational conversation, only a willingness to have our beliefs modified by new evidence and new arguments, guarantees open-ended collaboration among us. The respect we accord to religious dogma is antithetical to such open-ended collaboration. Faith is a conversation stopper. Now that people are flying planes into our buildings over theological grievances, it is time we realized this.

Disclaimer

The opinions expressed in the columns appearing in this newsletter are those of the author and not necessarily the views of the organization. The Fellowship of Reason, Inc speaks only through its Articles of Incorporation, the Bylaws, and the actions taken by the Board of Trustees as a board and recorded in the minutes of the corporation.

About the name: *The Eudaimonist*

A eudaimonist is a person who holds the philosophy of Eudaimonism. Eudaimonism is the name of the philosophy of the Fellowship of Reason. Eudaimonism means "well-being-ism". The ethics of Eudaimonism has as its standard and goal human flourishing. For a historical context of the word *eudaimonism*, please read Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

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Local Section: Atlanta Chapter Calendar and Contact Information

FOR Treasurer's Report

Total 2004 Income: \$5,186

Total 2004 Expenses: \$3,643

Expenditure per member: About \$73

Our Fellowship of Reason is a valuable, thriving community. Everyone's participation, productive work and generosity allow us to deliver a high value for your annual dues while growing to a strong financial position.

January Birthdays

January 18 Vera Norman
January 30 Mark Sulkowski
January 31 Sally Hull

February Birthdays

February 5 Michael Norman
February 23 Ellen Lewit

FORum Schedule and Tentative Themes

- Sunday, February 6, 2005 **Heroes**
- Sunday, March 6, 2005 **The Art of War**
- Sunday, April 3, 2005 **Growth**
- Sunday, May 1, 2005 **Friendship and Fellowship**
- Sunday, June 5, 2005 **Science**
- Sunday, July 3, 2005 **Freedom**
- Sunday, August 7, 2005 **Personal Performance**
- Sunday, September 4, 2005 **Education**
- Sunday, October 2, 2005 **Leadership**
- Sunday, November 6, 2005 **Myth and Mystery**
- Sunday, December 4, 2005 **Community**
- Sunday, January 1, 2006 **Personal Mission**

Adult Education: 1st Sunday at High Noon

Begins at noon before FORum David Ziebell facilitator.

FORUM, February 6, 2005: 1st Sunday

Begins at 1 p.m. SHARP!

Remember: Time limits will be vigorously enforced!

Theme: Heroes

Hospitality—**Dan Barber**
Historian/Timekeeper—
Welcome—**Allison Byrd**
Celebration of Freedom—
Celebration of Visitors—
Celebratory Announcements—
Celebration of Literature—**Mike Brady**
Celebration of Heroes—**Tom Welch**
Celebration of Talent—
Oratory—**Martin Cowen**
FORum—**President Chris Snider**
Announcements—
Closing Quotation—

Reason Runners: Sunday 8 a.m.

We meet every Sunday morning at 8 a.m., except FORum Sundays, at the southwestern entrance to Piedmont Park on 10th Street. Breakfast at Flying Biscuit follows at 9 a.m. Walkers and joggers welcome! Martin Cowen coordinator: 770-471-9800.

Invisible College: Thursday 7:30 p.m.

Special edition on Thursday, February 3, 2005, 7:30 p.m. Alex Hall, Ph.D. Vera's house.

FOR Toastmasters : \$148 Member Benefit

Martin Cowen coordinator: 770-471-9800

Special Offer to FOR Members Only

The Fellowship of Reason, Inc. will refund your Toastmaster® membership dues up to \$148 on the following conditions: (1) you must be a member of the Fellowship of Reason, Inc. and remain a member until all conditions are completed; (2) you must join a Toastmaster® club after this offer and achieve Competent Toastmaster status; (3) you must give an Oratory at Forum; and, (4) you must keep and deliver to FOR, Inc. your receipts for dues.

If you comply with these conditions, FOR, Inc. will reimburse you for your actual Toastmaster ® dues up to \$148.

Philosophy Club: 1st/3rd Tuesdays 7:30 p.m.

Philosophy tapes are played to a small private audience in the living room of a volunteer on the 1st and 3rd Tuesdays of each month Free.

Fiction Book Club: 2nd Tuesday 7:30 p.m.

Members and friends of FOR, Inc meet on the 2nd Tuesday of every month at John and Beth's house to discuss a marvelous book. Beth Holley is the coordinator of the book club 404-754-7519.

Non-Fiction Book Club: 2nd Saturday 11 a.m.

Members and friends of FOR, Inc meet 11 a.m. on the 2nd Saturday of every month at Chris and Allison's house to discuss a marvelous non-fiction. Allison Byrd is the coordinator of the non-fiction book club 678-585-0406 or Allibyrd@charter.net

Potluck: 3rd Saturday 7:30 p.m.

Members and friends of FOR, Inc. meet on the 3rd Saturday of every month for a potluck supper. Bring something good to eat or drink to share. Our next potluck is Saturday, February 19, 2005 at Christopher Sulentic's house.

Film Night: 5th Saturday 6:30 p.m.

Members and friends of FOR, Inc enjoy a monthly movie night at John's studio using his extraordinary equipment. FOR's next movie night is Saturday, January 29, 2005. "Don Juan De Marco" (1995). Cast includes Marlon Brando, Faye Dunaway, and Johnny Depp. Arrive at 6:30 p.m. Doors will be locked for safety! Movie starts at 7:15 p.m. Free.

Pub Night: 4th or 5th Wednesday 8 p.m.

Members and friends of FOR, Inc meet on the 4th Wednesday of every month at Manuel's Tavern at 8 p.m. for adult beverages and adult conversation. FOR's next pub night is Wednesday, January 26, 2004, at 8 p.m.

FOR Symphony: Six Thursday nights in the 2004-5 ASO Concert Season

Our third concert is at 7 p.m. in Symphony Hall on Thursday, January 27, 2005. .Martin Cowen is the coordinator of FOR Symphony 770-471-9800.

Membership Information:

- Regular membership: \$35 per year if paid prior to October 31, 2005
- Contributing membership: \$70 per year if paid prior to October 31, 2005
- Lifetime membership: \$700 if paid prior to October 31, 2005

A gift from Lifetime Charter member David Ziebell

SPIN, OLYMPIAN

On ice she sets, the turning all around;
My love's sapphire eyes burn bright with spark
Of joy, as light she spins to echo sound
Of music, and rightly shows all else seems dark.

Assured woman, poised as child at heart,
And free to see, seems effortless in grace.
But human skill, long practiced, sparks her art,
And art frees quiet smile to light her face.

While underfoot the earth spins still, she wills
A vision be: of slim neck laying back, leg free
Slows spin as hands rise up, breast sighs: her psyche thrills.
This balanced sculpture sparked by her decree.

Her power, joy, and pride, a synthesis,
And in my mind the gleam of genesis.

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THE SUMMIT

I Muse: My Reach.

Day and Night, My Joy
To Hold Friends Just So-
Armstrong, Watt, and Tycho.

They Going in Peace
Clear Sight from Tower,
Building with Power,

Circles on Circles.
And I Climb on All.
No Shoulder as Tall.

I, Braving the Storm,
Reacher, and Preacher,
To Gaze - Far Seer.

To Grasp: The Peak

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Contact information:

Visit us on the web at www.fellowshipofreason.com

To talk to somebody about FOR call Chris at 678-585-0406, Vera at 404-577-7968, Martin at 770-471-9800, or Dan at 770-831-3010.

A subscription for 12 monthly issues of this newsletter is \$15 per year.

Fellowship of Reason, Inc. is a Georgia nonprofit corporation and a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) corporation.

The Meaning of Membership in FOR, Inc.

In order to enjoy the benefits of the Fellowship of Reason, Inc. you need not be a member. All of our activities are free and open to the public. A number of non-members regularly participate with us and are most heartily welcome.

Why then become a member of the Fellowship of Reason, Inc.?

The Fellowship of Reason, Inc. exists by virtue of the generosity of its members and friends. People you know contribute money, property, services, and time in order that the value we all enjoy continues to exist. The services by performers at FORum, by executive committee members, by hosts and hostesses, and by planners of events are vital to the existence of FOR. Those volunteer services are, in fact, FOR.

Membership is, simply, a clear statement that you wish the Fellowship of Reason, Inc. to continue to exist. Membership is not the only way to make this statement. Some non-members are generous contributors of money, property, and services. In fact, we all benefit by the mere attendance of non-members at FOR events.

If you want FOR to continue to exist, won't you clearly say so by becoming a member today?
