

Affirmation

By Jim DeLaHunt, 10. November 2002

Good morning, my name is Jim DeLaHunt. I was asked to give you my "affirmation". I think what they want is "my personal answer to the great question of Life, The Universe, and Everything". Now I don't know if I have anything more interesting to say than anyone else, but this week it's me they asked to talk.

You can think of my affirmation as a four-legged stool. The first leg is summarised by the phrase:

"I believe in the Standard Model, as Revised from Time to Time". (repeat)

I buy the rational, scientific theory of the universe. I respect the authority of the scientific method that grinds and refines hypothesis and observation into successively better theories. I don't see any particular need for any gods or reincarnation or heaven in that model, so I am an atheist and a humanist. I believe that this one life is all any of us get.

But rational, scientific thought contains its own limits, and this is the second leg. Hugo Wittgenstein wrote this lovely phrase:

"Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen."

Kurt Gödel put it this way, in his Incompleteness Theorem:

"If \mathbf{c} be a given recursive, consistent class of formulae, then the propositional formula which states that \mathbf{c} is consistent is not \mathbf{c} -provable."

Or, to translate that into English and apply it to my rational, scientific theory of the universe: I believe there are some things that are true about the universe, which rational scientific theory won't be able to prove are true. So, to get to those other truths, I need to reach beyond logic and science, to the arts, to music, to ritual, to physical experience, to emotion, and other touchy-feely stuff. This makes me a rational, humanist, atheist who is happy with spiritual ritual like candles and bells and singing hymns.

Now we come to the third leg. In college, I studied technology as a human activity. We liked to say that “Engineering isn’t applied Science; Science is applied Engineering”. In other words, engineers mess around with gadgets and make something work, because it’s cool and useful. They may well not know how it works scientifically, but they don’t need to. The story is that James Watt got the idea for steam power by watching a lid pop off a tea kettle. He didn’t run the numbers for the Ideal Gas Law. Only later did someone come along and figure out the physics of water vapour inside a steam engine.

By the same token, for thousands of years humans have been experiencing the human condition, and inventing religion. I see religious ideas as pragmatic responses to the human condition, responses that survive because they work. A scientific explanation for why they work is nice to have, but not required.

I see religion as engineering of the human condition. I welcome ideas from the world’s religions, as part of the humanity’s accumulated wisdom about the human condition and what to do about it.

This brings me to the fourth leg of my affirmation, which is “duty and responsibility”. What really matters in this world? My conviction is that what matters is doing something useful. I feel a duty, or a responsibility, to take my energy and ideas and invest them in making the world a better place. I believe that my duty is proportional to my privilege, to the head start I have received in life. So as someone who has benefitted from a lot of privilege — being white, male, straight, healthy, from a functional family, with enough money — I consider I have a responsibility to do a corresponding service towards making the world better.

So there you have the four basic legs of my personal answer to the question of Life, the Universe, and Everything. This is my tentative affirmation, subject to revision from time to time. Thank you for listening, and I look forward to hearing your affirmation in the future.