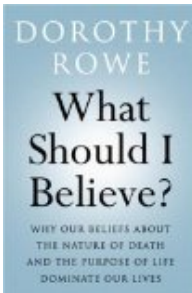




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Review - What Should I Believe?
 Why our Beliefs about the Nature of Death and the Purpose of Life Dominate our Lives by Dorothy Rowe
 Routledge, 2008
 Review by Massimo Pigliucci, Ph.D.

Dorothy Rowe's book amounts to a spectacularly missed chance to make a significant contribution to the very important questions the author set out to address. The book promises to provide an answer to "why our beliefs about the nature of death and the purpose of life dominate our lives," but ends up being a bizarre hodgepodge of self-help psychology, uninformative case studies, and a large number of disconnected personal observations -- the whole thing peppered here and there with philosophical and even political considerations.

One of Rowe's central themes is the "sudden" political power that religion seems to have acquired in modern society, except of course that the inter-mingling of politics and religion is hardly new, as it has marked much of humankind's recorded history. The author correctly points out that religion affects everyone, believer or not, but her thesis is that most of us strive to make up our minds about what to believe because beliefs have a dramatic impact on the way we live our lives. While the latter is certainly true, I have seen little evidence that people genuinely wish to question and revisit their beliefs (with some exceptions, of course). Instead, most of us grow up with whatever set of beliefs we inherit from our parents and cultural surroundings, and hardly give it a thought throughout most of our lives. And even when we do question them, it is hardly as a result of Socratic introspection, and more likely because of some highly emotional event we have experienced (not at all the ideal occasion to start philosophizing about

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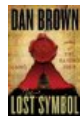
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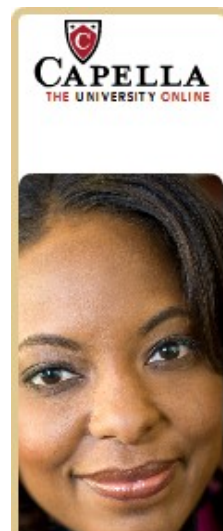


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the meaning of one's life). As a psychologist, surely Rowe appreciates all of this, but she hardly provides any new or extended insight into the human psyche which would truly help answering the question of why we hold onto certain beliefs, regardless of how irrational they may be.

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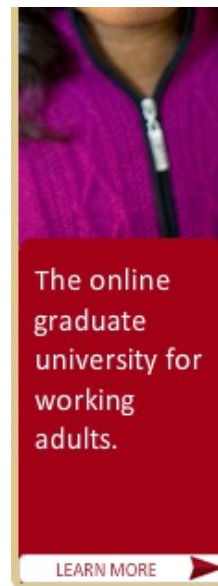
Of course when we go from what people actually believe (and why) to what they should believe, as announced in the title of the book, we cross the divide between science and philosophy. Here is perhaps where Rowe misses the greatest opportunity. To be fair, moving meaningfully between science and philosophy is not easy, and there are plenty of examples of scientists making big pronouncements about philosophy while it is clear that they do not understand the field, and vice versa with some philosophers making the sort of comment about science that only a naive observer would cough out. It is not for nothing that half a century after C.P. Snow's famous (or infamous, depending on your point of view) essay on "the two cultures," the problem of inter-disciplinary miscommunication remains as difficult as ever.


Still, I find Rowe's approach unhelpful, if well intentioned. She seems to advise her readers to create "religious or philosophical metaphors" that express their set of beliefs as a tool to find meaning and help toward the goal of living peacefully with others. That certainly is a worthwhile goal, and it is equally true that our lives tend to be positively affected when we manage to find meaning in what we do. But to equate religion and philosophy that way is a bit simplistic, and it does a great disservice to philosophy.

When I approached this book I was hoping that a scientist interested in philosophy, and obviously critical of the excesses of religion, would proceed to put together a coherent picture of both what we do believe and what we should believe, while keeping out the irrationality of faith. After all, if there is anything that is antithetical to thoughtful inquiry it is precisely faith (religious or secular that it may be, of course). Instead, by the end of the book the reader has been treated to a scatter of interesting observations, which however get lost into a miasma of unhelpful personal interviews with patients mixed with not-that-helpful general philosophical pronouncements. Someone else should write this kind of book again, this time getting it right.

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Massimo Pigliucci is a Professor of Philosophy at the City University of New York whose essays can be found at rationallyspeaking.org. His forthcoming book is *Nonsense on Stilts: How to Tell Science from Bunk* (University of Chicago Press).



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