Of all the claims made by the major reli-
gions, supernaturalism most requires countering.  It is the negation of the principle that reason is the necessary and sufficient – indeed, the only – tool for making sense of the facts of existence.  And if supernaturalism were true, if it were a valid concept for understanding the real world, then the value of reason would be doubtful in practice and worthless in the abstract.  Understanding this is key to Freethought.

“Supernatural” comes from the Latin, meaning above or beyond nature.  The term – and presumably the idea of entities and forces – “principalities and powers,” as Paul puts it in his Letter to the Ephesians – that are beyond or above the natural world – first shows up in the 15th Century.  It took that long for the idea of an observable world governed by “Laws of Nature” to have firmly taken hold.  Thus, the 1400's are generally considered the beginning of the Renaissance, the end of the Late Middle Ages and the beginning of the Early Modern period.  Christopher Columbus' first voyages to the Americas occurred at the end of that century.  And within 300 years the Scottish philosopher David Hume wrote in his 1748 Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, in a section “Of Miracles,” that:

“No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood be more miraculous … no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle.”

In the early 20th Century the discredited idea of supernaturalism reappeared under a new name: “paranormalism.”  For some time, by this title, it even enjoyed something of a reputation as a subject amenable to scientific study.  This was parodied in the film Ghostbusters.  But, popular belief to the contrary, there has never been any credible evidence for the paranormal.

Yet there remain many defenders of superna-

Copyright 2018 The North Texas Church of Freethought  All Rights Reserved
analysis. It is, as Jefferson put it, “to reason otherwise.” It is, in fact, to reject reason. Yet no one completely rejects reason. Even supernaturals accept and make use of the generalizations of objective experience with which we reason. It is only when believers come to consider their peculiar supernatural faith-beliefs that they choose to disregard reason. It is supernaturalists who must therefore account for and justify their departure from reason, not “naturalists” who do not choose to deviate from it. For if “naturalism” requires justification, then supernaturalists’ disregard of reason in favor of faith at whatever point they choose to do this becomes all the more difficult. For they need both to justify their reliance on a naturalist approach up to that point as well as their disregard of reason after it.

Now there are two other senses in which we may think of supernaturalism. The first is the inference that there is a reality beyond what the German philosopher Immanuel Kant called “the veil of perception.” It is this world that Kant called “noumena” that gives rise to our perceptions and measurements of “phenomena.” For we do not perceive things directly with our senses. Even the machines we use to detect what our senses cannot have their limitations. It is as if, as the Greek philosopher Plato speculated, we perceive shadows projected on the wall of a cave in which we are imprisoned by our physical nature. For all we know, we are “brains in vats” being fed all of our sensory experiences by extraterrestrial/extrdimensional beings. But we can discern no way of overcoming this handicap for now. And there are no facts and no reason – none – to suggest that anything or anyone from the world of “noumena” is in contact with us.

The second sense in which human experience can be considered to surpass or transcend objective reality is that so much of it is subjective. All of our perceptions are colored by our personal circumstances and individuality. Two people may perceive the same thing but are affected by it differently. It is all the more apparent when it comes to internal sensations and specially emotions connected with family and friends, to say nothing of our hopes and fears, expectations, ambitions and so on. Here subjectivity dominates and how we try to make sense of it all is not as clearly connected with reason. Even science can say very little about such things despite the fact that, in principle, all the physical events in our brains could be mapped and measured.

If there is a “supernaturalism” with which religion may legitimately be concerned it is this, which is the fundamental insight on which the Church of Freethought is predicated.