



Street Epistemology

Basic Strategy

By

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What is the purpose of “street epistemology”? Atheist author and blogger Sam Harris asked that question of the man who created street epistemology – Peter Boghossian (<https://www.samharris.org/blog/item/street-epistemology>)

Sam Harris: “What was your goal in writing *A Manual for Creating Atheists*?”

Peter Boghossian: “My primary goal was to give readers the tools to talk people out of faith and into reason.”

Harris asked Boghossian other questions about the purpose and goal of street epistemology. Boghossian made it clear that atheism is a by-product of what he tries to do when talking people out of their faith:

“Once they question the value of faith, all the unevidenced and unreasoned beliefs will inevitably collapse on their own. In that sense, the book is really about getting people to think critically—the atheism part is just a by-product.”

I’ve been writing about street epistemology for several years and have heard from street epistemologists who claim that leading someone to become an atheist is **not** the purpose of street epistemology. That comment is a bit surprising given that Boghossian’s book is titled *A Manual for Creating Atheists*. It would seem that those street epistemologists are disconnected from the purposes of the creator of street epistemology.

Many people call Boghossian a strategist and tactician, so we might ask then ‘what is his strategy?’ ‘What are his tactics?’

Basic Strategy: Creating Atheists

Boghossian is clear throughout his book on **creating atheists** that the purpose of street epistemology is ... **creating atheists**. When a street epistemologist tells me that creating atheists is not the purpose of street epistemology, my usual response is that either they do not understand the purpose of street epistemology or they are covering the clear purpose stated by the creator of street epistemology. Here are some comments from Boghossian about *A Manual for Creating Atheists*.

“God, for example, is a conclusion arrived at as the result of a faulty epistemology.”

“The result is a book that will get the reader quickly up to speed—through step-by-step guides and conversational templates—on all the academically grounded, street-tested techniques and tools required for talking people out of faith and superstition and into reason.”

“The lessons, strategies, and techniques I share come from my experience teaching prisoners, from educating tens of thousands of students in overcrowded public universities, from engaging the faithful every day for more than a quarter century, from over two decades of rigorous scholarship, and from the streets.”

“Street Epistemology is a vision and a strategy for the next generation of atheists, skeptics, humanists, philosophers, and activists.”

“Enter the Street Epistemologist: an articulate, clear, helpful voice with an unremitting desire to help people overcome their faith and create a better world—a world that uses intelligence, reason, rationality, thoughtfulness, ingenuity, sincerity, science, and kindness to build the future; not a world built on faith, delusion, pretending, religion, fear, pseudoscience, superstition, or a certainty achieved by keeping people in a stupor that makes them pawns of unseen forces because they’re terrified.”

“But the Street Epistemologist doesn’t just tear down fairytales, comforting delusions, and imagined entities. She offers a humanistic vision.”

“A Manual for Creating Atheists offers practical solutions to the problems of faith and religion through the creation of Street Epistemologists—legions of people who view interactions with the faithful as clinical interventions designed to disabuse them of their faith.”

A Course Change?

Some street epistemologists have told me within the past year that though SE started for the purpose of talking people out of their faith, that’s not true now. They say their purpose is to help people determine the best way to come to knowledge. When I’ve asked them why every street epistemologist

I know is an atheist, they respond that critical thinking will lead to atheism. Some say that atheism is the “default position.”

Here is the perspective from *The Complete Street Epistemology Guide How to Talk About Beliefs* –

“The term ‘Street Epistemology’ (SE) originates in Dr. Peter Boghossian’s book, *A Manual for Creating Atheists* (AMFCA). In the book, Dr. Boghossian describes how people often use faith as an epistemology — that is, as a way of coming to knowledge and justifying their beliefs. His central theme is that unreliable epistemologies, such as faith, are used to arrive at potentially harmful false beliefs. Because faith-based belief systems typically encourage or require adherents to spread the belief system, he uses the metaphor of “virus of the mind” to describe the effects faith has on people. Faith gains traction by presenting itself as a reliable method, akin to trust, by presenting reasonable doubt as an epistemological failing.” *Introduction*

The SE Guide does offer this caveat –

“While the authors of this guide were inspired by AMFCA to practice SE, we have since encountered a wide range of claims and epistemologies — not always religious or faith-based. In this guide we do not use ‘virus’ or ‘intervention’ metaphors because we are considering not only faith used as a way of knowing, but all ways of knowing and all kinds of beliefs. Some ways of knowing may indeed turn out to be reliable enough to justify the belief.”

Even though “intervention” plays a big part in Boghossian’s book (Chapter 4: Interventions and Strategies), it would seem that today’s street epistemologists don’t use the ‘intervention’ term.

We understand that Boghossian continues to believe that “faith” is a virus of the mind and that SE is for the purpose of talking people out of their “faith virus” through ‘interventions.’

Still On Course

Even with what street epistemologists have said to me and other Christian apologists this past year, I believe they are all still on course with the purpose of talking people out of their faith and creating atheists. Nothing in their written or visual materials leads me to think otherwise.

One of the charts used in *The Complete Street Epistemology Guide* shows a Greek temple with “God & Afterlife” on top of four pillars – Holy Book, Prayer, Prophecy, Miracles – which are on top of a foundation of “Unreliable Epistemology” – Tradition, Revelation, Faith, Testimony. The chart is part of a section of the guide called “Eliciting the interlocutor’s epistemology.”

The bias is clear: belief in God is an unreliable epistemology. That means people trained in street epistemology are biased against the possibility of belief in God being a reliable epistemology before they meet their first theist. Their strategy continues to be clear: theism is an unreliable epistemology, so talk theists out of their belief in God.

I wrote an article about that a few years ago –

“As one street epistemologist says about himself on his YouTube channel – “I ask random people how they arrived at their God belief, and if they are using a possibly unreliable method to arrive there, try to help them discover that.” That sounds reasonable. He wants to know how people arrive at their belief in God and if in his judgment they used a ‘possibly unreliable method’ to arrive at that belief, he will ‘try to help them discover that.’

Think about that for a moment.

The atheist is looking for possibly unreliable methods to determine belief in God, which means he or she is claiming to know the reliable method to determine belief in God. But, wait a minute! Do atheists believe there is a reliable method to determine belief in God? Of course they don’t. If atheists believed there is a reliable method to believe in God, they would believe in God because they know the method upon which they can rely. The fact is that atheists don’t believe in God and don’t believe there is a reliable method to know God exists. It’s obvious that the statement about helping people discover that they’re using an unreliable method to arrive at belief in God is a ruse, a clever trick.

Street epistemologists present themselves as people who can help other people ‘have more reliable ways to come to knowledge’ (motto of StreetEpistemology.com). That gives anyone who is interested in discerning the truth behind the methodology of street epistemology a

measuring stick. We can look for both reliability of methodology and gaining of true knowledge ...

Because I've been on both sides (atheist and theist) I have some background in what each side is doing and why they're doing it. The current methodology known as 'street epistemology' does not live up to its claims of trying to help people find a reliable method to arrive at belief in God. They are trying to talk people out of their faith. When a street epistemologist talks with a person who believes in God they see them as being irrational, superstitious, unreasonable and illogical. Many atheists involved in street epistemology think that people who believe in God are mentally ill and need serious and immediate treatment for their illness."

Breaking Down Street Epistemology

Back to issues with *The Complete Street Epistemology Guide*. Though they state that "Street Epistemology is based on Socratic Method combined with the field of epistemology," they also write that "You don't need to study epistemology to get started: knowing how to formulate good questions will work in most cases to uncover unreliable justifications." *Interesting*. Street epistemologists don't need to study epistemology to get started using "epistemology" on the street? I wonder what Socrates would think of that? I know what I think of it. Street epistemologists should change their name to "street atheists." That, I think, is an honest way of talking with people about beliefs.

The SE guide goes on to say that the better the street epistemologist understands epistemology, the more easily they can see where a person's "implicit epistemology may be unreliable." They say that having some understanding of epistemology will help a street epistemologist offer more in terms of "reliable alternatives." However, the street epistemologist doesn't have to move beyond knowing nothing about epistemology to do street epistemology.

How in the world does someone who knows nothing about epistemology qualify to be a "street epistemologist"? I think that's important to note early on in our investigation of SE strategy and tactics. It sounds like sending people with little to no understanding of what they're doing is part of the SE strategy. It seems all that is needed to be a street epistemologist is be an atheist who wants to spread doubt about believing in God.

One of the best-known street epistemologists who trains atheists to do street epistemology identifies himself on Twitter as "Skeptic | Secular | Provisional Atheist | 98/100 | Disabuser of Faith | Imparting the Gift of Doubt | Is the confidence in your belief justified?" Pretty clear where he stands "socratically" as he talks with people about their belief in God. His stated purpose as a skeptic, secular, provisional atheist, is to "disabuse" people of faith and "impart" the gift of doubt.

And, there, is the point. The **presented and practiced strategy** of street epistemology is on a consistent course to talk the “faithful out of their faith.” Many street epistemologists today try to hide the true purpose and strategy of street epistemology, but the people who train street epistemologists are clear in their intent. They want to “talk people out of their faith.”

I strongly recommend that Christian parents, students and educators **not let their guard down**. I also strongly recommend that Christian parents and educators **prepare** students to meet these street epistemologists with solid “reasons” *why* they believe *what* they believe. Christianity is based on powerful historical evidence, logic and reason. Let’s ensure that Christians know that. Street epistemologists ask a question that Christians can answer with a resounding “yes!” Is the confidence in your belief justified? **Absolutely!**

In the next part of this special series about street epistemology, we will look at their **tactics**.