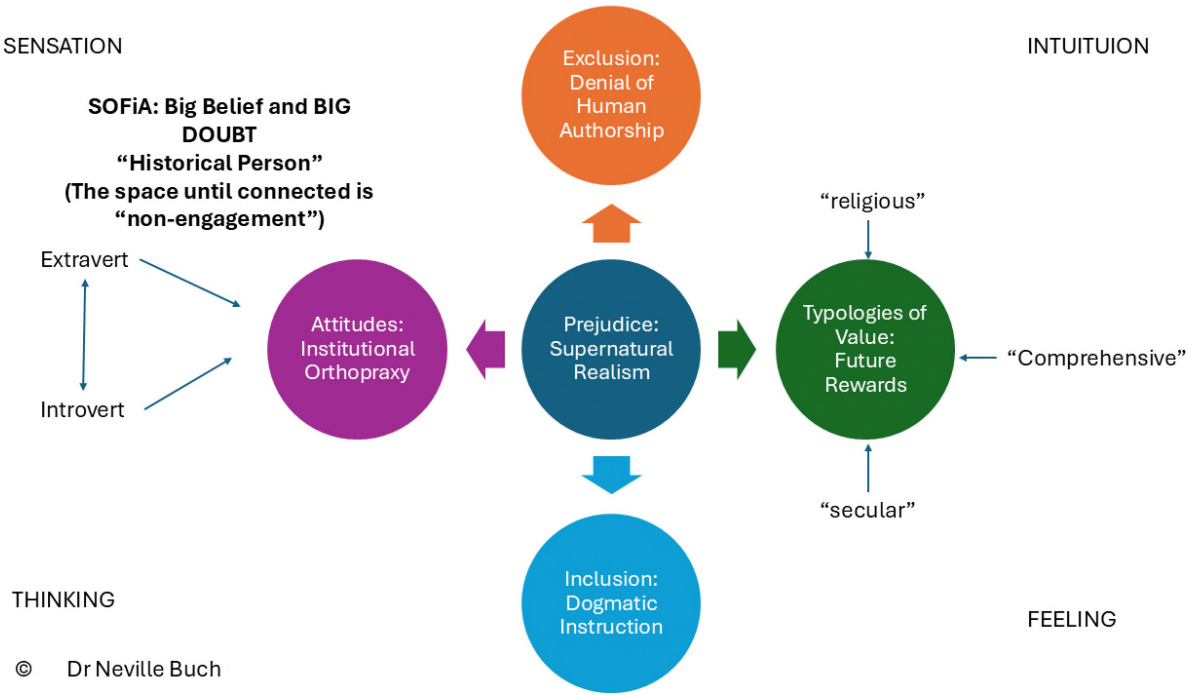
Dr Neville Buch

Abstract

SOFiA (Sea of Faith in Australia), founded in 1995, represents a significant movement within the Australian intellectual landscape that seeks to navigate the transition from traditional religious dogmas to a post-metaphysical, human-centered spirituality. Drawing heavily on the work of *Don Cupitt*, the organization utilizes the metaphor of the "Sea of Faith" to describe a historical moment where the tide of supernatural belief is receding, leaving behind an "outgoing ocean-tide" of unverifiable doctrines. This transition creates a tension between *"Big Belief"*—the inherited structures of objective, supernatural religion—and *"Big Doubt"*—the radical Socratic skepticism and Nietzschean nihilism required to see through human-made fictions. SOFiA advocates for a religion of *"solar ethics"* and *human authorship*, where faith is understood not as an intellectual acceptance of the supernatural, but as a commitment to *meaningful action (the deed)* and the cultivation of a flourishing life within this world. By integrating the insights of thinkers like *Wittgenstein, Habermas, and Bernard Williams*, SOFiA fosters an open forum for *intersubjective mutuality* and the critical examination of how we construct our world through language and symbols.

Understanding history is philosophy in practice


SENSATION
INTUITUION
SOFiA: Big Belief and BIG DOUBT
"Historical Person"
(The space until connected is "non-engagement")
Extravert
Introvert
Attitudes: Institutional Orthopraxy
Exclusion: Denial of Human Authorship
Prejudice: Supernatural Realism
Inclusion: Dogmatic Instruction
"religious"
Typologies of Value: Future Rewards
"Comprehensive"
"secular"
THINKING
FEELING
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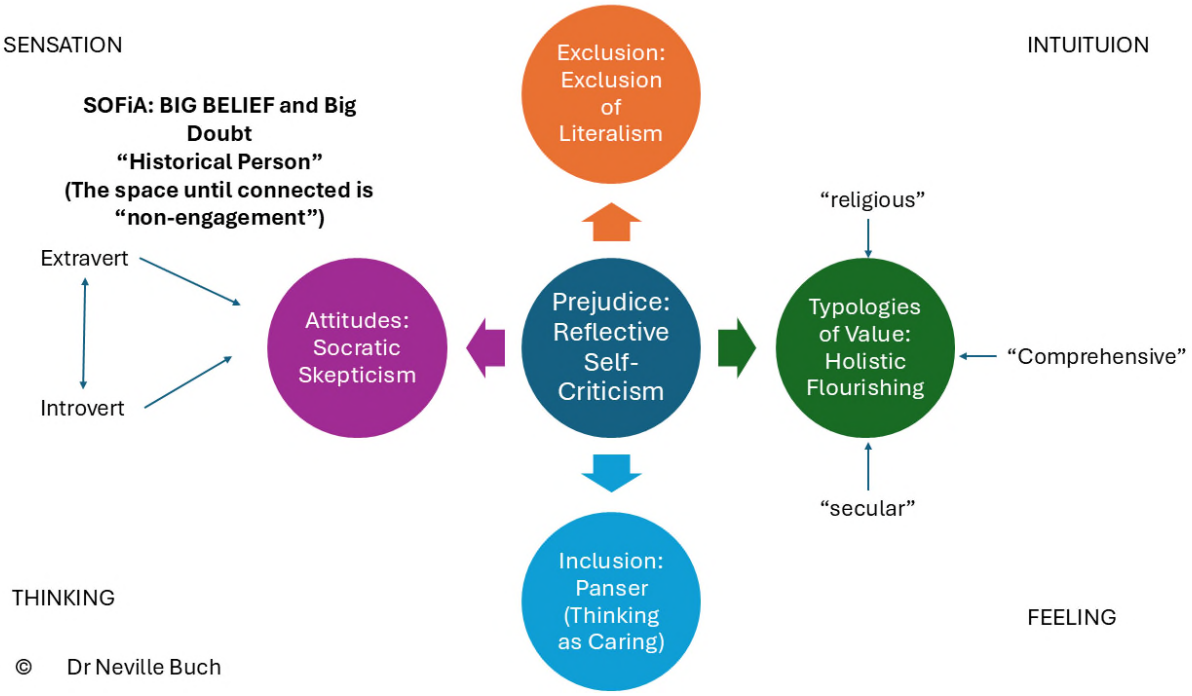
SENSATION
INTUITUION
SOFiA: BIG BELIEF and Big Doubt
"Historical Person"
(The space until connected is "non-engagement")
Extravert
Introvert
Attitudes: Socratic Skepticism
Exclusion: Exclusion of Literalism
Prejudice: Reflective Self-Criticism
Inclusion: Panser (Thinking as Caring)
"religious"
Typologies of Value: Holistic Flourishing
"Comprehensive"
"secular"
THINKING
FEELING
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The Receding Tide: Analysing Big Belief and Big Doubt in SOFiA

I. The Origin of the Sea: From Cupitt to SOFiA

The organization *SOFiA* was established as an Australian branch of the movement inspired by the theologian *Don Cupitt*. The name itself is an abbreviation of *Sofia* (wisdom) and a reference to Cupitt's seminal work, *The Sea of Faith*. The core objective of the organization is to provide a "safe container" for individuals to explore the *unravelling of the mythos and authority of religion* which once held society together. In the Australian context, SOFiA has operated as a "level playing field" where the boundaries between the secular and the religious are blurred, allowing for a *"humanism without doctrines"*.

II. "Big Belief": The Departing Tide of Supernaturalism

In the lexicon of SOFiA, *"Big Belief"* refers to the traditional "Age of Faith," characterized by an intellectual acceptance of *supernatural, metaphysical, and unverifiable propositions*. These beliefs often posit an "all-just, omniscient judge" or a future "supernatural home".

1. **The Crisis of Meaning:** SOFiA identifies a contemporary *"crisis of meaning"* resulting from the collapse of these rigid structures. This is viewed as an *"immense regression"* or a "historical forgetfulness" where the original intuition of religious meaning has been lost to literalism.

2. **The Church as the Grand Inquisitor:** Following Dostoevsky's imagery, SOFiA's thinkers often argue that the institutional Church has become obsolete, clinging to *inefficiencies and discriminations* while loving power more than the "living faith" it was meant to foster.

3. **Religious Categories as Symbols:** A hallmark of SOFiA's thinking is the *demythologization* of belief; God is not an objective entity but a humanly-constructed *symbol* used to make sense of the world.

III. "Big Doubt": The Nihilism of the Critical Intellect

To counter the "black box" assumptions of traditionalism, SOFiA embraces *"Big Doubt."* This is not a passive uncertainty but an *active, Socratic skepticism* and a "Nietzschean nihilism" that purges errors from public knowledge.

1. **Life in the Void:** Drawing on Richard Tarnas, SOFiA emphasizes that *"no interpretation is final"*. To reach "Big Doubt" is to "see through" all substantial fictions and find that there is *nothing substantial behind our metaphors*.

2. **The Leap of Faith:** Influenced by *Kierkegaard and Nietzsche*, SOFiA suggests that even in a world of doubt, humans face a constant need for *choice-making*. This requires a "Leap of Faith"—a decision to live as if certain values are true even when one struggles to believe them.

3. **The Paradox of the Impossible:** Following *Tertullian's Paradox*, SOFiA acknowledges an "inherent and necessary incomprehensibility" at the centre of faith. The "whole point of the idea of God is that *God is impossible*," and we must go through this realization to fully understand the human situation.

IV. The Synthesis: Solar Ethics and Practical Faith

The resolution of the conflict between "Big Belief" and "Big Doubt" is found in a *post-metaphysical religiosity* that prioritizes the "deed" over the "creed".

1. **Solar Ethics:** This concept represents what religion can become in a postmodern world—a way of *finding happiness within this world* through action rather than dogma.

2. **Human Authorship:** Religion is reclaimed as a form of *human authorship*, linked to reason, freedom, and responsibility. Humans are the AUTHORizers of their own texts and meaning.

3. **Panser (Thinking as Caring):** The intellectual work of SOFiA is tempered by the procedural necessity of *"panser"*—thinking as *tending to wounds*. Meaningful action requires bridging abstract doubt with a *"compassion-focused pedagogy"* that addresses human safety and flourishing.

V. Conclusion: Navigating the receded Sea

SOFiA provides a platform for those who are *"at sea"* but wish to remain "realists" who can "say yes" to life despite the "mortal no" of traditional religious collapse. By rejecting the "mechanistic paradigm" of scientism and the "dogmatic paradigm" of fundamentalism, SOFiA pursues a *"true humanism"* that affirms the dignity of the person and provides psychological solace for the "God-shaped hole" in the human heart.

Dynamic of Cognition (DoC) Analysis: SOFiA Thinking

The following table maps the cognitive shifts within SOFiA's framework from traditional religious "Prejudice" toward a "Revisable Knowledge" based on humanistic values.

DoC Component	Analysis of "Big Belief" (Receding Tide)	Analysis of "Big Doubt" (Reflective Ascent)
Prejudice (Centre)	**Supernatural Realism:** The conviction that "God" is an external, objective, and interventionist entity.	**Reflective Self-Criticism:** The starting point of making the familiar (tradition) strange and questioning one's **historical bearings**.
Attitudes (Thinking/Extrovert)	**Institutional Orthopraxy:** Adherence to "Creeds" and ecclesiastical power structures over individual inquiry.	**Socratic Skepticism:** An active commitment to **truthfulness and sincerity** over "widely-believed falsehoods".
Typologies of Value (Feeling/Introvert)	**Future Rewards:** Valuing faith primarily as a means to "salvation" or a "future supernatural home".	**Holistic Flourishing:** Prioritizing **human well-being, beauty, and imagination** within this world.
Exclusion (Sensation/Intuition)	**Denial of Human Authorship:** Banishment of the idea that religious values are **human-made cultural products**.	**Exclusion of Literalism:** The active refusal to accept outdated, concrete definitions of the "divine" or "supernatural".
Inclusion (Thinking/Feeling)	**Dogmatic Instruction:** The inclusion of "scare tactics" (e.g., Hell) to enforce obedience to a creed.	**Panser (Thinking as Caring):** The inclusion of **empathy and social justice** as the core of religious "deeds".

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*Analogy***:** SOFiA's approach to belief and doubt is like a *ship's captain* navigating an ocean where the traditional charts (dogmas) have been lost; while *Big Doubt* acts as the powerful *currents* that threaten to pull the ship apart, *Practical Faith* serves as the *rudder of care*, steering toward the *oasis of flourishing* not by relying on a distant shore, but by the skill of the journey itself.

SOFiA