

## The Moment of Indecision

### *Dialogue with Josh M. Beach*

**Josh:** You had an argument with your roommates over evolution during your junior year of college. It sounds like “God” eventually won the argument in your mind, but you don’t exactly state why. Before you were able to intellectualize this issue, did you just *feel* that despite the evidence “God” must exist? What was this feeling based on? A tradition that your parents had instilled in you? Or did you personally *feel* “God’s” existence at some point, and if so, what does this mean?

**Ian:** I left this experience deliberately vague. My roommate, at least for a time, persuaded me that evolution was a valid explanation for life, supplanting God and Creationism. This was intellectual. The return to theism was followed by the “frost” experience on my bedroom window. This was religious. That is, the “frost” experience is explained, not intellectually, but religiously.

This sounds like a weak argument, but again “argument” presupposes an intellectual understanding of an experience, and what I want to convey is that the experience was more religious than intellectual. This experience seemed to say to me that, despite the validity of evolution, God still exists. John Hick in the essay, “Religious Experience as Experience-As,” explains the different levels of experience and the different levels of interpretation based on one’s perception and worldview. For instance, a man falls into a lake and is at risk of drowning. A very basic, empirically-based worldview sees only the facts – the man in the lake and the man’s utterances as he flops in the lake. Another person walking by sees the drowning man, and

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another interpretation presents itself: the situation now carries a moral character, the decision to risk one's own life to save the drowning man or the decision to spare one's life while ignoring the man. Finally, a large trunk floats by, and the drowning man grabs it to save his life. He thanks God, thereby invoking a third interpretation, the religious worldview. As Hick himself explains, this idea of possible interpretations does not prove God, but rather provides the "epistemological framework" for a religious interpretation.

Likewise, I interpret my "frost" experience by this epistemological framework, thereby ascribing it to God.

**Josh:** I understand the subjective basis of a "religious" experience; however, the way one describes that experience is cultural. Thus, your assumption that this experience proves the existence of the "Christian God," as your essay puts forth, seems based solely on the fact that you were brought up a Christian and the only language you have to describe religious phenomena is Christianity. Why did you only go looking for Christian books at the bookstore? Why didn't you also go looking for some literature on the anthropology or psychology of religious belief? So while I'm ready to grant that you had a "religious" experience, this does not justify in any way your belief in Christianity, as apposed to any other religion. It also does not prove that a "God" exists outside of your subjective experience. It sounds like you really needed a God and did what ever you could to rationalize your notion of Christianity, thus, your "religious" experience and your turn exclusively to Christian literature all seem to be defense mechanism. While you were introduced to a secular explanation of the world, you didn't fully investigate it, nor did you investigate the foundations of Christianity.

**Ian:** xx

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**Josh:** You state that “irrelevance did not mean non-existence.” From a rational standpoint, this is of course true, but utter nonsense. If someone wants to talk about the metaphysical or supernatural then the burden of proof is on the believer, otherwise, you are asserting a purely private claim. Many people believe in imaginary creatures, magical powers, and all sorts of nonsense. So if this is an intellectualized belief, what proof do you have in your mind that makes you believe in a “God”? If you don’t have any proof, what are you basing this belief on? Tradition? Social convention? To be intellectually honest you must base your belief on something, and you do admit at one point, “My concepts of ‘faith,’ ‘inspiration’ and ‘Scripture’ were vague, and supported only by tradition and authority.” So are you jumping through intellectual hoops here just to prove your parents and pastor right?

**Ian:** Can rational truth be also considered nonsense? I think it’s important to clarify exactly the weight of Darwinism on theism. Many mistakenly believe that Darwinism provides a disproof of theism. The reality is that Darwinism suggests that theism is unnecessary to the explanation of biological life. To conclude, therefore, that God does not exist is a sort of non sequitur. Recognizing this reduces the force of Darwinism on theism.

There are many classical proofs for God’s existence – teleological, ontological, etc. – but, personally, I find the moral argument the most convincing, the idea that our moral intuition points to something supernaturally *Other*.

But, what is more, I’m not certain that the claim of burden of proof necessarily rests with the theist. This is a question raised in my reading of your essay, where you liken belief in God to belief in Elvis. On a basic level, this presupposes that the claim to (any) belief obligates one to the burden of proof. Is this presupposition true?

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**Josh:** These arguments are very sloppy, and again, based on an a priori truth that you assume is correct. First of all, there is no proof for God's existence outside of the private religious experience of an individual, which is may or may not be objectively true. The rest of the logical games that theologians have played are utter nonsense, and there is a wealth of philosophical literature to logically or empirically demolish each classical argument.

Second, Darwinism is not the only scientific theory that demolishes claims for God's existence, or that prove that particular religious traditions are not the personification of absolute truth. Personally, I think the strongest claims against religion are textual and sociological. All religious traditions, texts, and claims are historically and socially contingent, and thereby, full of human contradictions, falsehoods, and antiquated concepts of the world. Personally, the whole Judeo-Christian-Islamic conception of God as a "king" is absolute ridiculous and pernicious, but logical given the socio-political foundations of human society. Had you actually done some intellectual digging, you would find that there is no real proof for the existence of God, *as he/she/it is defined in most world religions*. This is not to say that a "God" does not exist. But all claims for particular "Gods" can quite easily be dismissed, including the notion that Jesus is "God."

Finally, yes, according to the rules logic and rhetoric, the burden of proof is on the person who makes a claim. Now, I may make a claim and you might believe me with no evidence, but this is not logical - it is faith. Now I'm not saying that faith is a bad thing. In fact, we all have faith in various propositions about the world. I woke up this morning believing that my body was physically sound and that the world would not end in some violent catastrophe by dinner. Did I have any proof when I awoke. None. Jesus was right, humans do not live by bread alone.

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We each live with all sorts of unfounded beliefs and hopes and dreams. But just because I believe something or have faith in something does not make it so. That is just silly.

**Ian:**

**Josh:** You state that C.S. Lewis finally gave you the proof you needed to fully believe in “God.” The existence of universal values was that proof. And both you and Lewis seem to believe that these values must have their origin in “God.” But you have no proof to connect values to “God,” nor do you offer proof that there are in fact universal values. Evolutionary psychologists have in fact demonstrated some deep set moral reasoning in human beings, which research shows exists from age 3 or 4, but these moral judgments can be adequately explained by natural, evolutionary processes. What is your evidence that “God” is the *first cause* of values? You might as well argue that “God” is the first cause of wind, water, humans, steak, and bubble-gum. You seem to circle back to the creationist fallacy that you rejected.

**Ian:** I think there’s a misunderstanding here. That something may be explained naturally does not invalidate its objectivity. Just because someone can explain why I get hungry does not invalidate the necessity of food. Providing a natural explanation of the moral character of humanity does not invalidate the objectivity of moral judgments. A natural explanation is a non sequitur to moral objectivity, neither invalidating nor validating it. The point is this: moral objectivity can only be adequately explained by God.

One way to look at this is by the classic concepts of “indicative” and “imperative.” The “indicative” describes the facts of the world. The “imperative” states what should be or not be. Science, as Edwyn Bevan states, can only speak in the “indicative,” never in the “imperative.” The insistence that something *should be* or *should not be* lies outside the realm of Science. It is the province of the Metaphysical – or, simply, God.

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Josh: Again, you are making the same assumptions without realizing you are making assumptions. Yes, moral judgments exist. Yes, humans make imperative claims. It not follow that these *must* come from a transcendent "God." That is utter nonsense. You assume that morality comes from "God," but yet you cannot explain to me why this is so. Thus, I'm left with only one conclusion: You claim that "God" is the source of moral values because you want to and this supports your personal belief. Fine. But this does not make your belief true. And as I've said, there is a lot of evidence to suggest that morality is a very human phenomenon. So, to invoke Occam's razor, if we can explain morality in biological, psychological, social, cultural, and legal terms than why posit some transcendental grounding? The answer, tradition. You cling to the antiquated notion that some absolute truth exists and that it is grounded in a transcendental "God." While this is a comforting and useful notion, it is a fairy tale. I, for one, do not think we should live our lives or structure our societies on fairy tales.

Ian:

**Josh:** You emphasize that Paul of Tarsus was an actual historical personage who can be connected to books of the *Bible*. So what! What you don't address are the inconsistencies between books in the *Bible* in terms of a "Christ" focused religion, especially the New Testament (see Bart D. Ehrman's *Jesus, Interrupted*). You also don't discuss how Paul and John (and many other followers) change Jesus' message and turn him into the "Christ" (Akenson's *Saint Saul*), and there seems to be disagreement over what books Paul actually did write (see Borg & Crossan's *The First Paul*). When you take a good look at the actual history surrounding the *Bible* in terms of both historical events and the writing *Biblical* figures (both canonical and non-canonical), there is little evidence to support Christian claims that Jesus is "God" – in fact, there

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is little evidence to say much at all about the historical person known as Jesus. So again, where is your evidence for belief?

**Ian:** To see “Christ” in the Bible is the work of Biblical Theologians, which admittedly those outside of Christianity are wont to reject. Questions about the historical Jesus – the claim that St. Paul changed Jesus’ message – and the theological inconsistencies of the Bible are not givens in Theological scholarship. David Kelsey in “Uses of Scripture in Theology” claims that the concept of “Scripture” is analytically dialectical to the concept of “Church” (and, to be complete, the concept of “Doing Theology”). What this means is that “Scripture” and “Church” evolved together – dialectically – over several centuries whereby the Church “selected those books of Scripture that best revealed their own self-conception as ‘Church’” and at the same time “Scripture served to shape the Church’s self-identity.” This dialectical relation indicates (inconsistencies notwithstanding) a theological unity within the Bible.

What is more, N. T. Wright in “Meaning of Jesus” argues that St. Paul carried the message of Jesus with consistency. This follows from Wright’s understanding of the “historical Jesus,” which sees Jesus as self-aware of his messianic purpose.

All these claims are not, of course, incontrovertible. What I want to put forward is the fact that neither side’s claims are givens. Personally, for textual and theological reasons, I see the argument of consistency as the stronger argument.

**Josh:** For once, I completely agree with your argument. And I appreciate the humility and logical consistency. Through your notion of the "dialectical" evolution of the community "church" and the textual/conceptual "theology," you basically say that the Bible and Christian theology is whatever the church says it is. What they said yesterday was officially "true," and what they say tomorrow, even though it contradicts yesterday, will still be officially "true." I

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completely agree with this statement. This is the social construction of truth. Of course, just because a community believes something does not make it objectively or absolutely true. Hence, just because some Christians, like Paul, believed that Jesus was the Christ and God does not mean that these claims were true.

**Ian:**

**Josh:** You seem to suggest that while skepticism seems the only rational answer to religion, you cannot abide living with skepticism. Why is living a life of skepticism so distasteful to you? I find it quite liberating and the only intellectually honest approach to life. You can't abide skepticism, thus, all you have is "faith." So aren't you just taking Pascal's irrational wager? To me, all of your arguments seem like smoke and mirrors when all you really have are (1) traditional beliefs in "God," (2) a fear of a world without "God," and thus (3) an emotional need to believe in God and live in the "light." You know of course what Nietzsche said about all of this? Be brave, break away from your delusional illusions, face the stark and random universe, and make your own way.

**Ian:** Let's say someone told a child, "You can never *prove* that your mommy and daddy love you. The only assurance you have of their love is their word (and people commit insincerities) and faith. But don't worry about this lack of proof or your uncertainty. Just be." If someone told a child this, I doubt this "intellectually honest approach to life" would provide even an iota of satisfaction.

The question of God is a big question – even bigger than whether my parents love me. It's a big question because, first, it disturbs my intellectual need to know. And, second, it has the power to dictate my life. I think all honest theists would agree that actions and values are predicated on the assumption of God (or non-God).

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So the “intellectually honest approach to life” is actually a subtle and perhaps unconscious decision to live a life in empirical uncertainty, which, for the dictates of actions, amounts to arbitrariness. I want to know what is *right*: I want to know what is the *objective good*. This to me is the truly intellectually honest approach to life.

**Josh:** This does really address my question. Your answer is quite circular. You basically say I need to believe because I need believe. You want to know what is "right" and "objectively good" because you assume these things to exist. Its like someone searching for aliens or bigfoot. When asked, "Why?" they respond because it exists and I must find it. Now aliens may or may not exist, but most of us would be quite skeptical because we've never seen aliens and they whole notion is a bit fantastic. What interests me is why this person believes so firmly in the existence of this hypothetical being? So again, stripping away all your rationalizations, what makes you believe so firmly? Why do you need to believe? And would you life fall apart if you did not? I once believed as you did, and was equally fearful of a world without God, but I've adjusted to the notion quite comfortably and I find satisfaction in many provisional truths.

**Ian:**