

The Moment of Indecision

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The Moment of Indecision

By Ian Chung

Atheism haunted me for one day. It was my third year of undergraduate studies, during which I lived with four others in Rowell Jackman Hall, an apartment-style residence for students at the University of Toronto. One late night, something on television prompted a discussion on evolution. I was the only Christian among my dorm-mates. I don't remember the exact nature of the t.v. show, but I do remember the complacency with which my friends accepted evolution, and it irked me. My Christian upbringing protested by flinging petty arguments. I said that no real proof existed for evolution. Chris, a biology major, brought out his textbooks and displayed photos of snake fossils in progressing stages towards wings, feathers and birds. I stated that the fossils were unverified and maybe even doctored, and that no real proof existed for actual mutation. Again, Chris adduced another text documenting cases of real mutations in organisms, most of which were micro-organic but with evidence of macro-organic mutations as well. He proceeded to instruct me with diagrams and photos and documentations on Darwinian evolution while I listened, alternating between lucidity and stupor. It lasted two hours, two hours to shatter Creationism, and God was dead.

I went to sleep then spent the next day in a kind of blurry oblivion. This experience – a dramatic paradigm shift – had colored the world all grey. For one day I didn't believe in God. That evening, I sat with my dorm-mates watching a movie, but staring blankly at the television because something kept nagging at my mind. I rose and said I was visiting the store. I sought to

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be alone and to get some air. But Chris said he wanted to come along, and I couldn't say no.

We walked towards the store, sauntering despite the cold winter evening. Our breaths vented in clouds with each exhalation. Chris described the interesting shapes that formed with the frost on his bedroom window. He bought a jug of cola at the store while I waited, and then we returned to our residence.

It was two or maybe three hours into sleep when suddenly I woke. I felt a nag again. I opened my curtains and looked out the window. The air outside permeated through the glass in a frigid draft, and staring out I believed that, for some reason, despite the fallacy of Creationism, and despite the cogency of evolution, God presided over all. For my window had frosted too. This was probably the nearest I ever came to a mystical experience. My religious life has been mostly prosaic. This experience, too, lacked any shock or resplendence and was largely dull. Perhaps it was nothing. Retrospection always sullies experience with doubt. But a good outcome did ensue: evolution no longer disturbed me.

C. S. Lewis and Edwyn Bevan, two of my greatest mentors, taught me the ethic of "intellectual honesty." Of course, I only learned this two years later, but already, now, the ethic stirred in the beginnings of an inchoate form, and later the writers gave it verbalization. Three weeks ago I would never have peeked into a book on Darwinism, but now I needed to know how evolution aligned with theism – if Darwin was compatible with God. Around Christmas, our family gathered, and my cousin, himself an antagonist to religion, urged me to read a book, *The Blind Watchmaker* by Richard Dawkins.

The book, an advocacy of Darwinian evolution, employs in its title an allusion to William Paley's "watchmaker" argument for God. Walking along a beach, Paley explains, many objects scatter along the shore – stones, shells, algae, and other detritus from the sea. An object shines

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conspicuously, different from all the other objects. Examination shows that it ticks in even increments and the hands move evenly too with the ticking; prying it open, numerous gears and dials reveal great intricacy. The object demonstrates order. Such order distinguishes it from the other objects on the shore. Therefore, the “watch,” Paley argues, must have a watchmaker. Likewise, the order of the solar system, from the even progression of day and night to the seasons and the orderly movement of the planets, suggests a maker – God. This is the teleological argument, the argument from design.

Dawkins demolishes this argument. He demonstrates through perpetuation, survival, adaptation and mutation that such organic design needs no sentient “maker.” The Darwinian principle adequately explicates the evolution and sophistication of organic life. What is more, Dawkins shows in an experiment that a simple environment, using electricity as a catalyst, can spark organic matter. Even the beginnings of an organism can be plausibly demonstrated. The book, that is, demonstrates how sophisticated organic life evolves, and how an organic something can come from “nothing.”

Reading the *Blind Watchmaker* produced two effects. The first is the emotional notion that is confounded by the idea of complex organic life assigned to a principle. Evolution (from a simple organism to a human person with eyes, skin, and organs) is a mammoth progression made plausible, it seems, by sheer time. Can a principle and time produce such organic complexity? But this is an emotional point, not a rational one. The second is the rational point that recognizes the Darwinian explanation of life as related to theism by *irrelevance*. Logically, one cannot prove that God does not exist (or that anything does not exist). For such proof, assumed under the scientific epistemology of empiricism, would mean the existence of something concrete (i.e. open to the senses) to demonstrate something non-existent (which itself is an oxymoron). No

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amount of empirical evidence can prove that something does not exist; it's a contradiction in terms. Rather, something's non-existence can be argued by a *reductio ad absurdum* argument (that its hypothetical existence, or the implication of its existence, logically contradicts a known fact) or by another argument that demonstrates greater cogency. Dawkins takes the latter approach and provides a natural explanation for life, which in a world today that presupposes a materialist epistemology, is more compelling than "God created the heavens and the earth." Darwinian evolution then, in explaining the progression of life, renders God *irrelevant*. Richard Dawkins' book is thus fittingly entitled, not the "Absent" Watchmaker, but the "Blind" Watchmaker.

So Dawkins showed me the full logical force of Darwinian evolution on theism – irrelevance. Though this by itself did not prove anything to me, I still believed in God, for irrelevance did not mean non-existence. Gradually, I came to see belief in God less as a religion and more as a philosophy; gradually, the emotional or mystical quality behind theism was supplanted by intellectualization. I believed because of the non-conclusiveness of irrelevance. And as intellectualization grew, the religious life deteriorated. I still prayed, and I still drank with my friends; I still attended church, and I still wasted time and opportunity on vapid pursuits. I lived for six months in this emptiness.

One particularly empty day, I walked downtown from Bloor to Dundas, turning into the World's Biggest Bookstore. I browsed through the magazines, then the bestsellers, and then rode the escalator up to the Literature section on the second floor. All the novels blended as uninterestingly as sand on a beach. I wandered into the Religion section, and there my eyes caught sight of a little book in a plain blue spine, *A Grief Observed*. This was the only book I purchased that day. Though short, it took me two months to complete it. It was dull, and I

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lumbered through every page, struggling, finally, to the end (my ethic then was to finish every book I opened.) Then I returned to the bookstore. Browsing through Religion again, I noticed the blue spine, and then spent more time reading other titles by the same author. The title of another book caught my interest, and I purchased it. It was *Mere Christianity*. And I finished it in three days.

I remember feeling thankful for the new Tim Hortons café near my residence. I could never read in peace at my dorm where four other residents blasted music, television and videogames all night. Tim Hortons offered a warm, quiet, all-night refuge where I could spread out over two tables and chairs and read in total comfort and serenity until four a.m.

Until *Mere Christianity*, I had never recognized C. S. Lewis. Even *A Grief Observed* was purchased because of its melancholy title while oblivious of its author. Reading *Mere Christianity* felt akin to meeting a life-defining personality. A writer whose name I can't remember proposed the notion that one is influenced by a philosophy, an idea, a religion, an argument even, not because of its logical cogency, but because its words resonate with something existing in the depths of one's soul. Instantaneous friendships or loves are ignited by a strange chemistry.

I followed right by Lewis through all two hundred pages. Just as Dawkins had rationally explained Darwinism, Lewis rationally explained theism. He characterized belief in God with clear rationality and logic, making it as compelling as any philosophy of the highest intellectual order. But the experience extended beyond the mere appearance of logic: it made sense too.

In the centre of Lewis's most poignant drive of his case for theism lies the idea of *values*. Like the unknown author again, this resonated with me. For as Lewis expounds, all persons, explicitly or implicitly, maintain a sense of values, the assumption of right and wrong. This

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sense of values is the presupposition in all arguments from language to policy to ideology. For instance, a man bumps a woman. The woman indignantly demands an apology; the man claims it was an accident, and accidents require no apology. Both the demand and the claim presuppose, for authorization, notions of right and wrong – that a bump should be followed by contrition and penitence, or that an accident requires none. This common notion of right and wrong provides the context for argument. Its opposite would simply proclaim, “To hell with your values!” Or policy: hats for teachers are prohibited in class. Why? Hats attenuate the semblance of authority. Why maintain authority? So students learn. Why should students learn? Wherein the idealist will reply, "Because learning is valuable"; or the academy owner will reply, "Learning leads to retention which leads to profits." And, again, both ends – learning and profit – presupposes notions of right and wrong. Utilitarianism (mandates that benefit the majority are the good), the Categorical Imperative (mandates that may be applied universally are the good), the Golden Rule (mandates that are empathically honoring are the good) – every moral philosophy can be reduced to its presupposition: the notion of good, of right and wrong, in other words, the primacy, at its fundamental, of values.

This sense of values, as Lewis says, provides “a clue to the universe” (*Mere Christianity*). To base values on humanist or materialist ideals leads one into circularity or arbitrariness, thereby invalidating it. The validity of values can only be sustained by the assumption of something objective – in traditional language, “God” – “for which Spirit,” writes Edwyn Bevan, “is its origin and ground and goal” (*Symbolism and Belief*).

Slowly, my theism was solidifying but still only intellectually but no matter, for as Lewis says, “Those who feel nothing from a choir song of praise may find that their hearts sing unbidden while working through a tough text on theology with a pipe in their teeth and a pen in

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their hand.” When I picked *Mere Christianity* off the bookstore shelf, I unleashed also an inundation of more Lewis literature from *Surprised By Joy*, *The Problem of Pain*, *The Abolition of Man*, and *Miracles* to his collection of essays, and finally, for the first time, to the *Narnia Chronicles*. C. S. Lewis then sparked a further interest. I was completing my degree in Philosophy and Religion by this time, and I desired to pursue, naively, the “highest philosophy,” that is, Theology. In fall 1997, I entered Theology at Wycliffe, University of Toronto, taking the academic route and not the professional. During the three year graduate degree, I lived in residence; the residents comprised of a diverse mix from Christian to those without religious affiliation, from aspiring Anglican priests to secular academics, but all were graduate students with a sense of courtesy and respect.

I learned a lot from Wycliffe while also acquiring many bad habits. I drank more; beer or sherry or wine became a part of our discussions. We, four or five of us, would begin in the Cody Hall library, quietly reading and sometimes asking a question or sharing an insight. “A beer?” a friend would suggest. And that was the beginning of the end: so many interminable hours spent at the pub drinking pints while discussing and arguing theology.

That was the good.

There was also the bad. First, I acquired a lot of intellectual skepticism. A major instance of this was Textual Criticism. Wycliffe is known for creating, besides Anglican clergy, apostates. Textual Criticism was originally a secular discipline that was applied to the Bible mostly beginning in the 17th and 18th centuries (“mostly” because the early Patristic Fathers of the Church also conducted an elementary version of textual criticism). And depending on one’s approach, it can be devastating. But depending on one’s approach. Many fundamentalists maintain such concepts as Scriptural inerrancy, infallibility and inspiration, the corollary of

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which is the absolute “perfection” of the Bible, that is, perfect in historical accuracy, genuine authorship, internal consistency, etc. Textual Criticism then, with its proofs of inconsistencies, extra-canonical similarities, and theological manipulations demonstrated through multiple external sources, destroys notions of “perfection” ascribed to the Bible. And this often destroys faith. Statistically at Wycliffe, twenty percent of graduate candidates quit.

But at the other end is the opposite approach. My approach was that of an evangelical Protestant upbringing (not fundamentalist) who believed by faith that the Bible was inspired – whatever that meant. My concepts of “faith,” “inspiration” and “Scripture” were vague, and supported only by tradition and authority. So learning about the textual flaws of the Bible was nothing new; it resonated congruously with my intuition. However, learning about the textual validity was shocking: there was actually a Paul of Tarsus whose authorship can be verified by textual methods like internal consistency, theological integrity and external and extra-Biblical attestations. *Mark* was the earliest of the Gospels, written less than forty years after Jesus’ death. *1 Thessalonians*, though, even predated Mark by almost twenty years. The experience was like a child who, though never really believing in Santa Claus, discovers that such a figure did exist.

Like gold rusting, though, the merits of this discovery was soon replaced by vitiation as I realized the subjectivity of the historical-critical approach to the Bible, for the same method leads to different conclusions, and we end up again at the beginning. Textual Criticism revealed both the textual accuracies and the flaws, ultimately resulting in the de-mystification of the Bible. Thus, Biblical “authority” was impugned, replaced by skepticism.

The second and more pernicious effect was that skepticism extended to that point upon which I had formerly based my theism. For I had simply assumed a “good.”

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In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis demonstrates that all such polemics presuppose the existence of “values,” a “good,” that which “ought” to be. This carries logical and practical implications within a theological context. Ironically, a friend studying to be a priest presented this point: I drank a lot, I spent a lot on music CDs and books (so much that they were to me like proverbial “possessions”), I failed to give my money to the poor, and I indulged while many in Toronto suffered. In short, I was not behaving well.

A contradiction existed in my life. My theism was based on Lewis’s argument that values presuppose God. The practical corollary is that belief in God should render good actions or that a correlation exists between belief and practice: if you believe in God, then you should be good. If I believe in God – that God is everywhere, including here with me, and watching me now – if I really believe this, then I would behave accordingly; I would be good. But as a fact I was not always good; my behavior failed to fit my belief. This point, along with my vices, logically concluded the opposite: I am not good, therefore I do not really believe in God.

I strove for the absoluteness of values, but vainly because the modus tollens logic precluded it, and because my efforts to reorganize my vices into a “complex good” betrayed itself in convolutions and contradictions, and because any final effort to redefine “good” in the face of intuition and honesty and tradition resulted in total subjectivity. Skepticism had broken into moral absolutism.

Moral skepticism, like atheism years before, haunted me, but for much longer this time. Near the end of my second year in Theology, there was this emptiness. The emptiness was lasting and profound. (Years later, I found references to this sense of emptiness in Graham Greene, Kate Chopin, Blaise Pascal and especially Robert Frost in *Desert Places*.)

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During our communal dinner one evening, a colleague mentioned in passing a writer's understanding of "meaning." I looked up. I asked her for the source. She answered, *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis. Later I opened the book and skimmed through its pages, stopping at the point where Lewis addresses this search for "meaning" in life. He uses the analogy of people living in complete "darkness" with no concept of "light." A person one day remarks, "It's awfully 'dark.'" "What do you mean?" says another. He answers, "I don't know. I feel that it's 'dark.'" And this intuition of "dark" may be considered veridical because "light" exists.

In the same way, "emptiness" may suggest "meaning." A man or a woman may possess the intuition that all of life, all the universe and existence, is meaningless, "a chasing after the wind" (Ecclesiastes). But in the intuition lies a faint hope: as "dark" suggests "light," "Emptiness" may suggest "Meaning."

I use capitalization and the word "may" for a reason. Lewis's analogy works, but not without a flaw. The flaw, I believe, is that we have a clear conception of "light" – we can measure it, quantify it, manipulate it and produce it. In short, "light" can be literally defined. "Meaning," and "Emptiness," on the other hand, cannot be so precisely defined. The lack of a precise definition, then, indicates that the concept itself might be illusory. So "Emptiness" *may* suggest "Meaning."

Certain concepts, however, are inherently indefinable. "Happiness," for instance, cannot be precisely defined. Many objects or events may produce it, and the same object or event may destroy it. A boy is happy to eat several pounds of chocolate, but his mother is not. "Happiness" carries different meanings to different people; the concept eludes precise definition. The same is true of concepts like "justice," "intelligence," "art" and "love." Unlike "light" or "tree" or

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“planet” or even “universe,” these concepts evade precise definition because they are abstract concepts. And abstract concepts are not necessarily false.

“Emptiness” and “Meaning,” too, are abstract concepts and, by analogy, not necessarily false. The conventional terms are borrowed and capitalized because of a resemblance between the abstract and the conventional, and because the terms help to suggest, essentially, something felt but ineffable. But analogies are imperfect arguments, and the problem remained: how to profess a belief in theism in the face of bad behavior.

Edwyn Bevan in *Symbolism and Belief* provides two categories for theistic belief: immanence and transcendence. Immanent theism claims that “God” is somehow invested in nature and the universe, somehow intrinsically a part of it; thus philosophies and religions arise based on animism and pantheism. Transcendent theism claims that “God” exists “apart” from the universe, that the two exist in separate “realms.” The monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, are transcendent religions.

While reading *Symbolism and Belief*, I discovered also a series of essays by the modern British philosopher, John Hick, and it was like finding a key and its lock in two random and separate places. One of Hick’s essays (*Soul-Making Theodicy*) in particular dealt with two important implications of transcendent theism. The first is that any theology or philosophy of transcendent theism or transcendent metaphysics must necessarily employ figurative language. This idea is facilitated by a contrast to language used by science. Science may conceive of objects and ideas literally, and this is corroborated by its epistemology based on empiricism. Sense-perception, the faculty employed by empiricism, offers literal labeling and conceptions. In contrast, transcendent theism, in which God is believed to be “apart” from the “realm” of our universe, and therefore our senses, provides no faculty by which to perceive God, and its

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epistemology is essentially identical to revelation. Theists therefore are relegated to the use of figurative language in constructions on theology.

The second point is that the premise of transcendent theism implies an “epistemic distance.” That is, just as a physical gulf exists between God and the universe, an epistemological gulf also exists separating God’s mind from that of humanity’s – “epistemic distance.” Hick employs this concept to describe the lack of a positive epistemology by which to conceive of theism, thereby affirming the essential *revelatory* nature of transcendent theology. The implication is that all transcendent theistic beliefs by nature is imperfect; no person can possess a completely certain belief in God. And, therefore, always existing in such a theistic belief is the element of *faith*.

Reading this for me was itself dramatically revelatory. The concept of “epistemic distance” had a paradoxical effect. First, it stated that faith is required to fill the gap of unbelief, and therefore intellectually veridical certainty is impossible in transcendent theistic belief. Second, “epistemic distance” explained the reason for bad behavior, ascribing it to the lack of intellectual certainty and therefore the lack of “pressure” normally attached to physical presence. The modus tollens problem, then, is too simple. Bad behavior need not conclusively prove that theistic belief is false. Theistic belief, though not complete, may still be valid, and bad behavior is explained by the concept of epistemic distance. And this for a while brought me peace.

Only for a while, for, ultimately, even John Hick, Edwyn Bevan and C. S. Lewis fail to demonstrate with sufficient cogency the truth of theistic belief. Lewis makes an attempt with the moral argument for God, but the modus tollens fact demonstrates a possible refutation, and though this itself is explained by epistemic distance, epistemic distance itself is simply a possible explanation within a hypothetical existence where Transcendence is essentially separate from our

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universe. All fail to provide a “positive” argument for God. Rather, in Hick’s words, they provide the “epistemological framework” for theistic belief.

This would disturb me, if not for the fact that all philosophies, ideologies and beliefs are based on an epistemic gap, or faith, including that field purported to provide the most concrete of all truths, science. As stated earlier, we live in an age where the materialist epistemology reigns; faith is small, replaced by the demand for “signs.” But this perhaps is even untrue, and even materialists have more faith than they know. Alfred North Whitehead in *Science and the Modern World* states that science during the Enlightenment developed from the assumption that the universe is built upon order, and order exists because God exists. David Hume further in *Human Understanding* expounds the scientific epistemology. One of the principles of the scientific method is the ability to make predictions; predictions, then, are validated by the assumption of the uniformity in nature. Simply, the uniformity of nature and a prediction assume that the future will resemble the past. Because the future cannot be empirically proven, the principle becomes an assumption, presupposed under the notion of universal order. Fundamental to science is (in academic language) a presupposition or (in religious language) faith.

There is a point where all roads lead to the same destination, and having considered everything from Creationism to Darwinian evolution to Textual Criticism to moral absolutism to moral relativism to scientific empiricism to epistemic distance, the final destination was utter Skepticism. This is philosophical; religious language would call it Agnosticism. A normal man would call it Despondency.

So these three remained – Theism, Skepticism, and Despondency – all in continuous alternation and spiraling down to the greatest of these, Despondency.

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So why do I call myself a Christian? There's no absolutely satisfying reason why, except for this perception I have at times of intense goodness, this perception I have of badness and how every infinitesimal bad, before an Infinite God, is a grave evil, this perception of a desire for the "myth" (Lewis) that tells of a Power who deigned himself in a "strange love" (Bevan), stooping down to sinful humanity and saving it because "God is love" (*1 John*), and this perception that all this happened for real by way of the books provided me and the frost on my window, all interpreted by "religious faith" (Hick).

But most of all, it's the recoil against the homelessness of Skepticism: the choice to exist in thrall to those moments of indecision and to remain a Skeptic and to live always with this "epistemic distance" striving for but never reaching a whatever; or the choice to submit to this perception of utter powerlessness in myself to attain this peace, at the mercy of a Power who can remain veiled and leave me lost, or self-reveal and bring me home.