Atheism: a Dialogue
between
Chuck Colson
and
An Atheist Friend

Chuck: Thanks for being willing to participate. I am looking forward to our discussion. I must admit that I miss the discussions we used to have in your office during the collegiate days. So, I will start us off: If you were to formulate why you do not believe in the Christian God, what would be your major arguments?

Jim: In all honesty, I wouldn't express it in terms of arguments that lead me to my skepticism. I don't think the factors that lead one to say yes or no to theism are, so to speak, freestanding and conclusive. I think it's more like a Gestalt that forms, a pattern that emerges when one thinks about the issue as a whole. No particular part of the pattern is absolutely clear or certain, but when you put it all together, a view emerges as most likely to be true.

The philosopher John Wisdom (great name, right?) makes this point in his essay "Gods." He says to imagine that two explorers come upon an open space in the wilderness. One says, "This space is not a jungle; this is a garden." The other says, "No, there's no gardener here; all this can be explained in other ways." Each of them can point to some things that support her particular hypothesis: on the one hand, there do seem to be some

cultivated flowers; on the other hand, some parts of the area are overgrown and chaotic. So, they decide to wait to see if the gardener appears. But day after day they don't see him. But the first explorer says, "Well, this gardener is very stealthy, or maybe even invisible." And the second says, "Wait, there's not a gardener at all; if there were there would be some clear evidence." And so on and so on. This dispute won't come to an end when one of the explorers comes up with a knock-down argument to prove her point of view. At some point all the evidence--never complete and never entirely clear--will coalesce into a Gestalt. The explorers will say, one way or the other, "Here's the way the overall pattern looks to me."

I think that's the way belief or disbelief in God is. It's not a matter of knock-down arguments that settle the matter. It's that a pattern emerges.

In my case, the pattern that has emerged is that I don't think the world is a garden, and I don't think there's a gardener who tends it. What are the things that I'd point to that lead me to that Gestalt? I'll just mention a few. First, the presence of enormous quantities of evil in the world, and the lack of (to me) convincing ways to explain it. Second, the lack of any need for theism to explain either how the world works or how morality develops. (Before natural science got so smart, I think there was an explanatory need for theism; not any more.) Third, the lack of a convincing error-theory for religious skepticism. (I.e., if theism is true, there's no very convincing way to explain why skeptics like me end up as skeptics: it's hard to argue that we're dumber than average, or that we're wicked, or whatever. On the other hand, there are better error-theories for religion itself: Nietzsche

makes a good start at them, and so does Freud. It's easier to explain why, if theism is false, smart and decent people do believe than it is to explain why, in theism is true, smart and decent people don't.)

Now, I say again, no one of these problems is clearly unsolvable. Neither the skeptic nor the believer has a knock-down argument for her or his position (any more than the explorers in the wilderness do). At a certain point one says to oneself: What seems more likely to me? Is it a garden, parts of which are out of control, or is it a jungle parts of which seem to be orderly? To me, following Bishop Butler in saying "Probability is the guide to life," it seems to me that it's more probable that it's a jungle with some accidentally pretty spots than a cultivated garden with some accidentally bad areas. But, hey, that's just a pattern affirmed on grounds of probability; not a certainty grounded in particular arguments.

So, I'd say it's a mistake to think that skepticism is tied to particular anti-theistic arguments, just like I think it's a mistake to think that theism is tied to pro-theistic ones. Neither the believer nor the skeptic is grounded in that way.

Chuck: Well said.

In your response, you seem to advocate that a cumulative case emerges from patterns of evidence for the existence/non-existence of God. All one can do, as an "explorer," is evaluate the evidence and choose the direction most probable to him/her. The

individual's view is not final or conclusive, it is simply the responsible conclusion the individual arrives at after evaluating the evidence. I hope this is a good reading of your response.

While I agree that faith/non-faith in God is not typically a response to one argument, I would disagree with the idea that faith in God comes as the result of evaluating the evidences of a cumulative case and hedging your bets. While faith may emerge from evidential investigation, I do not believe that faith pays rent to evidence. Faith is supported and affirmed by evidences (God spoke the creation into existence and ordered all events by His providence; therefore, all the facts of the world testify to Him), but belief in God does not receive its warrant from evidences. Therefore, I also do not believe that unbelief is grounded in a lack of evidences as Bertrand Russell claims.

The demand for evidential justification is a tricky one. How someone evaluates evidence and argument all depends on the baggage they bring to the table. Bishop Butler assumed that investigating individuals were neutral subjects. That was where he went wrong. The claim to neutrality in investigation and argumentation belongs on the dung hill. Christian theists and skeptics alike all evaluate the evidences according to the basic commitments of their hearts (presuppositions). In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* Thomas Kuhn points out that no one is attempting to make their interpretation honest to "the facts", but rather "the facts" are determined by reference to the individual's system of interpretation. Therefore, our systems of interpretation (presuppositions) determine how we look at the world. No one is a neutral explorer.

The cumulative case arguments for the existence/non-existence of God are often constructed without proper consciousness of the system of interpretation being applied to the evidence. As the arguments are presented in this fashion, they purport the myth of objectivity. Therefore, everyone should quit acting as if they objectively evaluate the evidences in some neutral laboratory before arriving at the likely rational conclusion. Both explorers possess different commitments that control their interpretations of the evidences.

As a Christian, I presuppose the lordship of Jesus in all of life. Therefore, I am obligated to see all of reality in the light of who Jesus is and what He has revealed in His word (the Bible). When evaluating evidences for belief, I base my judgments on Scripture. These are my presuppositions. Obviously, my presuppositions do not quite square with your basic beliefs about life. So, where does that leave us? Are Christians and skeptics left to guffaw at one another while understanding that both sides possess presuppositions that taint the evidence? No. Even due to the fact that we possess different paradigms for interpreting our world, I believe that by weighing the coherence of our worldviews much fruitful dialogue is available from this point.

For instance, you mentioned three specific concerns that have contributed to the formulation of your own personal Gestault (problem of evil, lack of need for theism due to moral and scientific developments, and lack of convincing error-theory for religious skeptics). I want to address each of these in turn.

First, as a Christian, the problem of evil is a difficult dilemma. The Bible simply does not provide all the answers to the issue. However, it is also not a problem that is left unaddressed by the authors of Scripture (i.e. The Book of Job). In fact, the Bible as a whole could be said to be a book about the problem of evil. It begins with the entrance of sin and evil into the world through Adam's failure to crush the serpent in the Garden. It ends with Christ leading His Church in stomping the serpent and destroying sin and evil through His death, resurrection, ascension, and final return. Therefore, it is not as if the Bible's pants are shanked in public by the question.

Though the problem of evil is mysterious, I believe a larger problem emerges from the question for the skeptic. Namely, where does the basis for the moral judgment that evil exists come from? Since human beings are simply "interesting pieces of meat" living in the relativistic and chaotic world of naturalism, where does the foundation for morality lie? Is morality defined individually, communally, or universally? How is it that this decision is made? Doesn't even the assertion, "The individual 'ought' (moral obligation) to define his/her own morality structure," possess moral tiebacks? How does one then justify this moral statement?

Second, you mentioned the intelligence of modern natural science eliminating the need for God. However, I do not believe that natural science possesses wisdom beyond its years. As Kuhn discusses, scientific data is interpreted through pre-existing systems of interpretation. Therefore, in the field of the natural sciences, the data is interpreted

largely by scientists committed to the naturalistic worldview. I do not find it that impressive when well-trained scientists feign objectivity when their "religious" presuppositions govern them as much as any Christian. For instance, the scientific establishment's unwillingness to relent of its faith in the theory of naturalistic evolution is quite perplexing to me. I find this especially true due to the numbers of modern critiques of the theory (See Philip Johnson, Michael Denton, and Mike Behe). Gould and Dawkins are long on assertion and short on evidence. Just because they say so does not make it so. Those are the rules according to their own community. However, Darwinian naturalism has become lodged in the academic mind as an indefeasible position. Why should naturalistic science be accepted so unreservedly? Are undocumented theories sufficient to construct worldviews? Do the commitments of your heart overly sway the weight of the evidence?

Third, the failure of Christian theists to propose a convincing error-theory for religious skeptics concerns you. My answer flows from my theology. John Calvin (I believe the most loved/hated and appreciated/misunderstood individual to live outside of Jesus) taught that after the fall men became totally depraved. The doctrine of total depravity does not state that individuals are as wicked as they possibly can be, but rather, it simply states that the whole of man is now subject to sin. Therefore, all of humanity's noetic, volitional, and emotional capacities are corrupted by sin.   As a part of this corruption, man suppresses the truth of God that is naturally known to him/her (Romans 1) out of the desire to promote his/her own autonomy. Such suppression evidences itself in two ways: practical atheism, living as if there is no God, and conscious atheism, flatly denying

God's existence. I am not saying atheists are any more morally corrupt than other people, I am simply saying that they are corrupted along with everyone else. Atheism is simply an outworking of man's quest to bolster his own autonomy by suppressing God's truth. As far as Marx and Freud, again, it is simply a matter of perspective.

At bottom, I do not believe that the skeptic can justify predication or moral values without operating on Christian presuppositions. When critiquing evil, forming logical arguments about science, or asserting belief in other individuals, skeptics operate off of "borrowed capital" from the Christian worldview. So, the skeptic may engage in rational dialogue and make moral decisions (you do so everyday); however, he/she does so inconsistently. I do not believe that the atheist can live in the world his/her beliefs demand (no meaning, value, truth). Therefore, in seeking to salvage something, the skeptic floats a loan from the bank.

I realize that I addressed a lot of issues above, so I will summarize my main question. What is the justification for the presuppositions informing your epistemology and ethical system?

Jim: Thanks for your careful response.

I agree with Kuhn (and Nietzsche) that one's presuppositions shape what one initially sees, but I don't draw from that insight the conclusion that one's presuppostions determine

the truth of what one eventually comes to see. That is, I do think it's possible to become

aware of one's presuppostions and then to take steps to compensate for them. Of course

that's not easy, but I think it can be done. So, yes, no one starts out as a *neutral*

explorer, but it is possible to become a more and more *objective* one.

Is complete objectivity possible? Probably not, if one is talking about a single individual.

My hope would be that such objectivity becomes possible in a community when lots and

lots of points of view compete freely and with equal chances of acceptance. I would be

frightened either by hardcore "naturalists" who won't seriously consider alternatives to

their own convictions or by hardcore "supernaturalists" who won't do the same. I'd hate

to see either camp retreat into a position that says there's no way to evaluate final

outcomes since such outcomes all completely depend on where one starts from.

Thus I don't find an evidential approach useless or prejudiced. Not everything that starts

out as "evidence" will still seem evidence when the last dog dies (to quote a former

president of the US), but I don't think the idea of evidence is therefore shown to be an

empty one. Of course I agree that not everyone looks at theism as an issue to which

evidence is central and determinative. I think it should be, of course. As to why, I guess

I'd say it's because any issue so historically dangerous as theism (and especially

monotheism) must be treated as carefully as possible. When people are willing to kill

others over matters of religious belief and unbelief--and say what one likes about stiff-

necked scientists, it's hard to find a case in which they are willing to kill those who

disagree--those matters need to be judged cooly and with a maximum attention to canons of

(possible) objectivity. If people want to, say, not pay attention to evidence in relation to whether they want to run Microsoft or Macintosh as their computer operating system, I'd think that a mistake, but I'd also say it's not so important an issue that we can criticize them. I think it's different with theism. In light of its history (not to mention its contemporary manifestations), I think one has an obligation to treat it as the sort of commitment one ought to make only on the basis of compelling evidence, evidence that has been gathered and evaluated by processes as objective as we can make them.

You seem to favor coherence as an alternative to evidence. I see that as a false contrast. Coherence (or the lack of it) is one sort of evidence, not an alternative to it. I have no doubt that a religious world-view can be made as coherent as a non-religious one. (I doubt that either can be made *totally* coherent.) But coherence is not an end in itself. One wants a coherent world-view that is also maximally supported by all the evidence relevant to it.

I know I don't have time to show how the force of moral/ethical judgment is coherent with a non-theistic world-view. I'll just say two things, both too brief to be convincing to you. First, if there's a problem about the force of moral/ethical considerations, I don't see how the existence of God solves it. That is, I think the standard objections to a divine command theory of ethics (i.e., to rooting the binding power of moral considerations in the will of God) are not yet answered. God's commands would be morally/ethically

binding only if we could somehow know that God is good, but that can't be established by appeal to his commands.

Second, I think the idea that only theists can take moral/ethical considerations seriously depends on the assumptions that moral/ethical considerations must bind us absolutely (and thus that only a metaphysical absolute [i.e., God] could generate a moral/ethical absolute). But I don't think that moral/ethical considerations are ever absolute in that sense, nor do they need to be in order to motivate our allegiance. To put it in Kantian terms, morality/ethics is a system of hypothetical imperatives, not categorical ones. And a non-theistic account of hypothetical imperatives doesn't seem like much of a stretch.

As I say, I recognize those are quick and dirty summaries of arguments that would (assuming I could actually provide them) take thousands and thousands of words. So I know they're not, as they stand, convincing. But maybe they at least indicate the direction a full response to your challenge would take.

One final word about Calvin's error-theory of religious skepticism: it seems to me to be self-defeating, since if our reason (noetic capacity) is so corrupt that skeptics can't see or appreciate the evidences for theism, how do we know it's not so corrupt as to prevent us from seeing the irrationality of this error-theory itself? As an error-theory (i.e., a *reasonable* explanation of how a given error has come to be so generally made), it must appeal to just the capacity for reason that it simultaneously devalues. I can't see how a thoughtful Calvinist would find that persuasive.

Chuck: In *The City of God*, Augustine explains that two kingdoms exist in the world. One is the city of man while the other is the city of God. The two possess different ways of life, divergent means for understanding reality. I believe Augustine was on target with his assessment because he was being faithful to the Bible.

After all, the Bible is essentially a tale of two kingdoms. Two divergent paths emerge from the early Canaanite vs. Sethite genealogies (Genesis 4-5), to the preaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:13-29), to the final end of the separation of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46). The two kingdoms oppose one another due to their departure from two separate locations. They approach life from anti-thetical points-of-view. One seeks to place man as the final arbiter of reason and value while one seeks to place all valuations of reason and morality under God. One kingdom is constructed on the autonomy of man while one is founded on the rule of Jesus.

While I know that you reject this brief sketch of a Christian worldview, it is essential to understand when weighing my argumentation. This is especially true when it comes to evaluating the cogency of presuppositions. In the Christian worldview, two types of presuppositions exist, believing and unbelieving. Though multitudes of beliefs are associated with each category, initially they set out from one of two camps. Human beliefs demonstrate a fundamental loyalty to their starting point all the way through their system. The fundamental loyalties of the heart profoundly influence what one sees. Just

as firing a rifle, the initial trajectory of the barrel is crucial to the final destination of the bullet.

As for skepticism, I believe that the fundamental loyalty is the autonomy of the self. The self is exalted as the judge and arbiter, often along with other humans in a community, of reason and value. The evidences collected from the world by the self are used to weigh what is reasonable and good. As stated previously, the problem for the skeptic lies in the grounds of justification. For instance, by what standard does one determine that human beings should reason logically? Is it a self-refuting appeal to logic itself? Surely not, that would fail to justify anything. Is rationality to be justified by the community observing that everyone benefits in a positive sum game from acting rationally? I do not believe that this is the answer either due to the work of one of your own, David Hume. The naturalistic worldview simply cannot justify the move from "is" to "ought." Observations about matter, motion, time, and chance do not obligate anyone to do anything. Arguments for moral values suffer from the same vices (So, one has the equal right to have Aunt Betty over for dinner or to have Aunt Betty for dinner). Therefore, I do not believe that skepticism possesses the resources to justify any meaningful predication or theory of value.

I believe that the system of thought committed to the autonomy of the self is inherently self-defeating. A house may stand, but no foundation supports the structure. The skeptic is left with nothing but solipsism. Therefore, honest skeptics will embrace the meaninglessness and purposelessness of life and forsake all allegiance to rational

predication and moral values. Ivan Karamazov was correct in saying that if God does not exist, then "everything is permitted."

None of this is surprising to the Christian theist. It is God's world we live in here on the earth. Therefore, reality cannot be properly understood unless we think God's thoughts after Him. All attempts to justify worldviews opposed to Him will end in such incoherence (yes, coherence is evidence) because they do not accord with reality. Therefore, the unbeliever is forced to rent office space, unconsciously of course, from the Christian worldview, in order to begin to construct a theory of epistemology and value.

All of this takes us back to Calvin. You stated, "If our reason is so corrupt that we cannot see or appreciate the evidence for theism, how do we know it's not so corrupt as to prevent us from seeing the irrationality of this error theory itself." If I understood you correctly, you objected to Calvin by saying that John appeals to the capacity for reason that total depravity simultaneously devalues. Therefore, how can one trust corrupt cognitive equipment to function properly for anything, including an accurate assessment of Calvin's error theory?

In response, I need to address several matters. First, I need to explain that natural revelation is not natural theology. That is, natural revelation is not an argument from design or cosmology (natural theology) for man to consider, but it is the direct revelation of God Himself. In Romans 1:18-20, the apostle Paul explains that men have "clearly seen" and have "understood" that God exists through what has been made. So, the

revelation of God is clear to all men obligating them to believe. Calvin called this

revelation the *sensus divinitatis.* There is nothing "unseen" or any data up for

argumentation concerning the evidence for God's existence in Calvin's theology. The

noetic effects of sin do not interfere with the reception of the natural revelation of God.

However, Paul does move on to explain how the noetic effects of sin interact with the

knowledge of God. Instead of accepting the revelation, humans "suppress the truth in

unrighteousness" (Romans 1:18) and "exchange the truth of God for a lie" (Romans

1:25). The noetic corruption of humanity is not presented as an impediment to rational

thinking (i.e. discerning the truthfulness of Calvin's error theory or 2+2=4). Rather,

noetic corruption is presented as a denial and distortion in the sinner's mental operations

in Romans 1 that allows him to forsake what he knows to be true and embrace the lie.

Therefore, the Bible does not present noetic corruption in terms of barriers to rationally

understanding arguments. In fact, God often engages unbelievers in rational

argumentation in the Bible (See Isaiah 1) in the attempt to provoke repentance. The

complete rational ability of the believer to predicate is not jeopardized by the doctrine of

total depravity.

However, the doctrine of total depravity would affirm that the unbeliever is a mixture of

rationality and irrationality. Since the unbeliever rejects God's interpretation of the facts

in the Bible, she is committed to irrationality. However, as unable to live coherently with

a skeptical worldview, the unbeliever borrows from Christianity's epistemology and

value theory in order to preserve some order and meaning. So, Reformed theologians

believe that the skeptic is convoluted, still existing as the image of God with the sensus divinitatis within driving him to rationality, and thoroughly committed to the rejection of the Christian interpretation of reality leading to irrationality.

Finally, the individual can know that Calvin's error theory is not irrational because it is found in the Bible. With the consensus of my community, Calvin faithfully reproduces Paul's argument from Romans 1 in his error theory. The Scripture is the ultimate interpreter of reality because it is God's interpretation of the world. Our knowledge of the world is only accurate as we "re-interpret" His thoughts from His Word (this is part of my presuppositions which possesses evidences, backed by the Bible of course). Therefore, the unbeliever encounters ultimate rationality when faced with the claims of Scripture. The claims are ultimate rationality because they are God's Word (the type of argument goes for morality as well; i.e. the commands are good because God is good as Scripture says).

After all these words, I think it is plain to see that we possess divergent views of reality. My critique is that the skeptic cannot know or value anything due to his commitment to his personal autonomy. He is left in utter irrationality. The revolt against the meaningless and purposeless life left for the skeptic evidences the sensus divinitatis within humanity. The proof for my position mainly lies in the failure of all the others. As Cornelius Van Til writes, "The only "proof" of the Christian position is that unless its truth is presupposed there is not possibility of "proving" anything at all. The actual state of affairs as preached by Christianity is the necessary foundation of "proof" itself." So,

all worldviews depend upon the Christian interpretation of reality. The necessary justification for their presuppositions only exist in the Sovereign, immutable God of Scripture. My argument presupposes the Word and the Lord of the Word. Without them, nothing can be known.

But, I doubt my meanderings are convincing to you. I know that I have failed to address all the issues you presented and to present all of my arguments as thoroughly as I would have liked. At bottom, there are difficulties when it comes to believing in God and His revelation in nature and Scripture that I cannot resolve. However, the mystery is not owing to the possibility that they are not true. The mystery exists because every fact that I encounter in this world has its final explanation in the infinite God. No man will be able to see everything clearly, but only the man who believes in the Christian God has the warrant to believe in an explanation at all.

Thank you for participating with me. I value our friendship and am grateful for your willingness to dialogue. You have helped me tremendously in this short assignment. We are well past my word requirement, but the extra mile was worth the effort.

I do hope you see a distinctly Christian position in the above defense. I did my best not just to be another "shop in the mall."

Additional readings for the assignment selected from the following works:

Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, (Phillipsburg, Presbyterian & Reformed, 1998).

Richard Pratt, *Every Thought Captive*, (Phillipsburg, Presbyterian & Reformed, 1979).

John Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*, (Phillipsburg, Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995).

John Frame and Paul Kurtz, *Do We Need God to Be Moral?* (Reprinted from Dallas Morning News, Ethics Syllabus, 2001).

Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, (Phillipsburg, Presbyterian & Reformed, 1976).