

Conversation with a Skeptic

An Introduction to Metaphysics

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1. Two Kinds of Nothing

The two voices are A (skeptic) and B (theologian).

A: How can you believe in a God who creates a world full of nasty parasites and innocent suffering and all kinds of wickedness and random destruction? Or rather, how can you say he is all-powerful and all-knowing *and* all-good? Surely he can't be all those things, if he produces a world riddled with unpleasantness?

B: And yet we believe that the same God who invented (or at least permitted) mosquitoes and earthquakes and the freedom of men to be wicked also became a little baby and let himself be tortured to death on the cross. Does that make him easier to understand? Not really. The first question is whether it is true that God exists, and what he is. Then we can worry about whether to love him, or fear him, or ignore him.

A: I am OK with that, I think, but how do we start?

B: Shall we agree to assume that the world makes sense – that it is not just absurd? At least for the sake of argument.

A: Well, as a scientist I have to assume that, otherwise I wouldn't be trying to work out the reasons for things. But if it does make sense, the sense it makes is going to be expressed by some kind of equation or theory of everything, not a God.

B: We'll see about that. I haven't explained yet what I mean by "God". All we need to assume right now is that the world makes sense, that there are reasons for everything. Even things that happen at random need to be explained as lawful exceptions to a rule. Their randomness itself, their existence, cries out for an explanation. If we didn't try to fit existence into the big picture, we'd be giving up on part of our search for understanding. Right?

A: I suppose. But I feel uneasy about where you are going with this.

B: That's actually quite significant. You know I am going to try to argue for a God, and you don't want to be manipulated into agreeing with me. That's evidence of your integrity, I hope. But in the case of many people it would mean the opposite – they don't want to follow an argument that goes in a direction they don't want to go. Their minds are made up already.

A: It's not just that. I want to be sure I don't concede too much too quickly. For example, just because I assume that "the world makes sense" doesn't mean that I must be capable of arriving at the knowledge that makes sense of it. The search may be endless.... Anyway, I'm prepared to give you the benefit of the doubt. But only if I can go back and unpick some of these assumptions later, if we end up where I don't want to be.

B: Fine. Most people are too busy to think things through, let alone think them through twice. So let's proceed. We are assuming the world makes sense. The first big jump I want to make is this. The only way the world could make the maximum sense is if the world *as a whole* makes sense – if the world has a reason or explanation. I don't mean the things in it, but its very existence as a world. The fact that there is something there, and not nothing.

A: But what if it always existed? What if every possible universe exists somewhere? What if the laws of nature themselves evolve randomly? What if something comes from nothing by a kind of random fluctuation in the quantum field? You must have heard all these modern theories.

B: They may be modern, but the ancient philosophers came up with very similar theories. All very interesting, no doubt, but irrelevant to my point. I am talking about a reason for anything to exist, whether it goes on forever or not. If the world is made of numbers, or is some kind of holographic projection, or is the product of randomly changing laws, then the laws, the projection, the numbers either exist or they don't. If they exist, they need an explanation, a "sufficient reason".

A: But what kind of explanation could there be for existence itself?

B: Let's call it X, whatever it is. What would X have to be, to serve as a sufficient explanation for existence as such? To start with, it couldn't be something that itself needs a reason for existing, or else we'll just have pushed the problem a stage further back. If X is to be a sufficient explanation for existence, it has to be something that itself "just is", that doesn't need an explanation, or which is its own explanation.

A: That's exactly what I say about the universe. It *just is*. It doesn't need an explanation of the type you want to provide.

B: But don't you see? The universe and everything in it is not the *type of thing* of which you can say it "just is". The universe is a certain way, it contains certain things, each of which is this or that thing, different from all other possible things. It has certain features, and not others. In other words, we always have to go on from the "is", to be more specific. The only thing that *just is*, is existence itself.

A: But "existence" is an abstraction!

B: It only seems abstract to us, because we are trying to imagine it by looking at what

everything has in common – existence – and leaving out the particular characteristics that differentiate one thing from another. That’s the way our minds work. But *in itself* “X” is not abstract. It is more real than anything else. It would have to be. It has no limitations. It is “unrestricted being”. It is not restricted to being one thing, one type of thing, over against another.

A: But it seems to me that “to be” means to be *this* or *that*. The “restriction” of being a thing, as you call it, is the condition for it to exist at all. Without the canvas and the paint, there would be no painting. If you take away everything specific, what’s left is nothing at all. The restrictions actually define the thing.

B: In a way, you’re right. The limitations reveal a particular “form”, the nature of the thing. Every particular thing can be defined over against something else, because it has unique limitations. A lion is not a tiger; a valley is not a mountain. The positive quality of being a lion corresponds to the negative quality of not being a tiger (or anything else). The positive and negative are like two sides of a coin which we grasp at one and the same time. But what if there was something that didn’t have *any* limitations? It couldn’t be defined against anything else (except maybe pure nothingness). We could no longer grasp what it is.

A: That’s because it would be nothing!

B: Not necessarily! There are two kinds of nothingness. One kind is absolute limitedness. Take away everything positive, and you get nothing. That’s what you are thinking about. But there is another kind of nothingness. This time you take away the *limitations*, the negative boundaries. What’s left is purely positive. It contains everything positive that we grasp in things, plus infinitely more.

A: But how can the positive, the particular quality of the thing, survive without the very boundaries that define it?

B: Here’s an analogy. A thing is like an island, defined by its coastline. Dry up the sea, and all the islands join up. You no longer see islands. In fact what there is to see is now too big to see at all. That’s only an analogy, of course, and not a very good one, because after all, what is an island without a beach? The point I am trying to convey is that what we see and like in the island – that which makes it what it is (including the beach!) – is manifested or revealed in this world by the boundaries, but it isn’t created by them. The positive is always primary, and the negative depends on that. As in the case of the coin, it is the side that tells you the *value* that is primary, and the flip side merely comes along with it.

A: I still don’t quite see it.

B: Well, you are right, it is a matter of *seeing*. So let me take a slightly different tack. I have been talking as though the world was made up of objects, each separate from all the others. But that is not quite accurate. Nothing exists alone. The island is part of an ocean,

or part of an archipelago. The tiger is part of a world with lions and mountains and plains and forests in it. So somehow what a thing *is* cannot consist *just* of its own limitations, its own definition. It must include its relationships with everything else, its place in the world as a whole. In this way every particular thing participates in something less restricted, namely the whole of which it is a part.

A: Like an ecosystem, I suppose. But how does that relate to “X”?

B: The lion or the tiger needs or implies the whole, and the whole needs it just as much. It is not merely a part of the whole; it is something positive in its own right. So the whole and the part are correlative. The whole is not just a collection of parts heaped together, but a coherent system, and a system has a beauty all its own, even if it could not exist without the parts. But if each contains something positive that the other doesn’t – if the part needs the whole and the whole needs the part – then they both participate in something even less restricted, and that is what we have been calling “X”.

A: Why? I mean, why does it have to participate in some third thing?

B: Because “to be” includes both. It includes things *and* their relations, the parts *and* the whole. Let’s recap. I started with the hypothesis that the world is caused by an “X” which is the kind of thing that needs no explanation (to avoid an infinite regress). I went on to ask, what would have to be the case for it not to need an explanation? If it were “this” rather than “that”, it would need an explanation for being what it is and not the other. So X must be the kind of thing that “just is”. We might say that its essence (i.e. *what it is*) is simply *to be* – without any further qualification or definition. If it exists, it exists necessarily. The reason you couldn’t follow me in the next part of the argument was that you couldn’t see what that might mean – you couldn’t visualize it. I tried to give you an imaginative model, but you were buying it. The point is, I don’t claim you *can* visualize what I am talking about – and you shouldn’t expect to.

A: There is something else you just said that worries me. You called X an “hypothesis”. But there is one big difference between this and the hypotheses that we employ in science. This one isn’t testable. In science I might posit the existence of something that is impossible to visualize – in physics it happens all the time – but I can run an experiment to prove or disprove it empirically. With your hypothesis that seems to be impossible. Some people would say that makes it meaningless, or at least useless.

B: I have two things to say to that. Firstly, even science doesn’t consist entirely of testable hypotheses. It makes certain assumptions – such as the universal applicability and consistency of natural laws. Certain core assumptions are the bedrock of the rational method itself. They are axioms. They have to be treated as self-evident. Others, like the conservation of momentum, are almost as basic. In the case of the present argument, I said that we would *assume* the world made sense. I argued that *if* it makes sense as a whole – if existence itself makes sense – there has to be an X such that X “just is”. Such an X has “necessary” existence; that is, its nature is to be. But all this was based on the first assumption we made. And perhaps the world doesn’t make sense after all.

A: So you admit you haven't *proved* the existence of X. It's just an axiom that we need to make the world a more rational place. I'll buy that – for now. But I'll still need to be convinced that this “X” is “God”. What's the second thing?

B: The second is that we don't need even to get into that particular discussion, because in fact I want to argue that our hypothesis *is* testable. But first we have to work out some implications of the hypothesis – just as, in science, you test a theory by testing the predictions that it enables you to make. We'll begin to do that in the next session.

2. A God Worthy of the Name

A: You were about to explain what might be said about X. I think you were also going to try to prove its existence. But that means dealing with real-life experiences. If you want to show that X is empirically verifiable in some way, and if X is worthy of being called “God”, then you’ll also have to deal with the main counter-evidence I mentioned right at the beginning, namely the existence of suffering.

B: I’ll come to that soon enough, but first let me ask you a question. You see something, right? It doesn’t matter what.

A: Er, yes.

B: Well that tells us that light exists, if by “light” we simply mean *that by which something is seen*. But a definition like that doesn’t tell us much about light – for that we have to look at our experiences more closely. We have to examine, somehow, our experience of seeing, in order to work out how light functions and what else we can say about it. We must go through a similar process with the concept of God. If anything exists, then there is a God, if by “God” we simply mean that by which something “is”. But that doesn’t tell us much, yet, about God.

A: Too right.

B: But now at least we have a peg, “X”, or God, on which to hang certain things. We can pin our existence on it, to begin with. What else can we say? I explained that X must be pure existence, and that means “to be” without limits – to be literally “in-finite”. If so, then it contains everything that the world contains, plus everything else that might exist.

A: How does that follow?

B: Because infinite means infinite. And because, if we pick out anything positive, anything good or beautiful in the world, the quality that is in that thing has to be coming from X. There is nowhere else for it to come from. So although we have to remind ourselves that we don’t really know what we mean when we say this (because our finite minds cannot grasp the infinite), it isn’t *wrong* to call God wise, or merciful, or kind, or beautiful, or radiant, or strong, or intelligent. All those things – and a lot more – can serve as “names” of God or ways of describing him because each of them must be a bit like what God is (some of them more than others). Each is a kind of analogy, a symbol of God. The infinite contains them.

A: Ah, but if God contains everything, he contains the evil as well as the good. That’s not going to help you much!

B: What do you mean by evil and good? Is it just the distinction between things that you like – that happen to suit you – and things that don’t? If so, then what is evil for you might be good for someone else, and vice versa. A lion sees an antelope as lunch.

Nothing wrong with that, surely? But the strength and beauty of both lion and antelope must be in God.

A: What about moral evil, though? Take a man who tortures and kills an innocent child for pleasure. There is something evil about that. It isn't just that being tortured doesn't happen to suit the child. There is something objectively wrong about what that monster is doing. Do you agree?

B: Of course I agree.

A: So if X contains everything – OK, we're calling it God now – if God contains everything, then he contains the evil that that man is doing. Evil is part of God, then.

B: I wonder where you think the distinction between moral good and evil comes from, in a Godless universe? But let's not pursue that now. I agree that what that man is and does is in God. Nothing is outside God.

A: Then how can you think that God is all-good?

B: I can answer that once we know what "evil" is. It seems to me that what we call evil is basically a destructive act perpetrated on something good. The good comes first, because without it evil would have nothing to attack. But if evil is the destruction of some good that would otherwise exist, we can't say that it *exists* in its own right. It is parasitic on the good. And that means that while the evil man is in God, as are the crimes he commits (insofar as they exist), the evil that he does – even to himself – only exists as a negative, as a reduction of the good that would have been there otherwise. The world has less goodness in it because of what the man does. But God contains all the good there is, including the good that might have been.

A: You mean he doesn't contain evil after all?

B: That's right. He contains *the man who does evil*, but only insofar as that man is not "pure" evil – because that implies he would have destroyed himself completely. God, who is pure necessary existence, contains all that is good, all that we love and admire in the world, and there is no darkness in him at all.

A: So God is all good, according to you, and no evil. That's a nice idea. Very cosy for you. And yet what is it to me? A theory of God is all very well, but what difference does it really make to anything? It doesn't motivate me to change my life, if that's what you are after.

B: You haven't really absorbed what I've been saying. If he exists, God is the infinite source of being, of existence, of everything that is good in the world. That means he is nothing less than the Holy Grail, the object of everyone's ultimate desire, the secret of happiness, the very meaning of life and love. How can you not regard this as the most important question there is? No wonder that, all through history, people have built their

civilizations around the search for this God, or the attempt to connect with him.

A: But everything you've said suggests to me that God is just a "thing", like a great light that automatically shines. That isn't what most people mean by God. They want a God who thinks, who speaks, who decides, who acts. They want a *personal* God. That is what they *mean* by God, if they mean anything. And that is precisely the kind of God I can't believe in.

B: You are forgetting that persons are part of nature. *We* think, *we* act. If everything reveals the nature of God, albeit in a fragmentary way, then persons do as well, not just sunsets and butterflies and eagles and lions. God is the source of personality, of intelligence, of will, of love, every bit as much as he is the source of existence, of rainbows, and flying foxes. In that case he has personal attributes too. He doesn't just emanate. He decides. And if the existence of everything in the world depends on him, then we have to say not just that he is the origin of everything, but that he "creates" it. He is the Creator. Is that godlike enough for you?

A: I just don't see the logic. You say he has a will, but he doesn't have a body. He can't actually *do* anything. He has nothing to do it with.

B: God has to be perfectly simple – in the sense of being not composed of parts, being perfectly unified. That follows from the fact that he is the fullness of what it means to exist. A body, which is composed of parts and is in a particular place, is limited by its very nature. God isn't. Our conception of action is based on pictures in our head of bodies doing things – limited, bounded things, doing stuff to other things of the same type – but what I am saying is that God brings things about in some other way. He simply causes them to happen. That is, he causes events to take place just as he causes things to exist.

A: So you're saying again that God really is impossible for us to understand. I mean, all we have are pictures in our head of composite things, and God can't be like that at all.

B: That's right, we can't picture him – although, as I've also been saying, we can deduce certain things about what he must be like. Or rather, we can use our words to point in his direction. "He's like that, only infinitely more so." Not very satisfying, I admit.

A: Not satisfying at all. Is there any way of getting a clearer picture?

B: There are two ways, both (in a sense) equally empirical. You could call them the ways of the East and the West. The first is the way of the Buddha – and not just him, of course, but the Neoplatonists and many others. By stilling the noise in our heads and souls, by integrating our consciousness, we can become directly aware of that reality to which we belong, and from which we come. We may not call it "God". It might be preferable to call it Being, or Beyond-Being, or the One, or the Good – or just "X". But it is that of which we have been speaking. Since it is the primary reality, then if it exists it exists in everything. It exists not just outside but within ourselves, and it must be

possible to discover it there. Many people have taken that interior path, and found their way to it. Of course, they differ on what they think they've found, and how they choose to describe it, and what they do when they get there.

A: What about the other way?

B: The other way is outward. It is based on the fact that God reveals himself. We will speak of that next time.

3. *Face to Face with God*

B: We can theorize all we like about God, as I have been doing, but if God exists then he will reveal himself in various ways. If God is being, or the source of being, he can't exactly keep himself to himself. Every existing thing is a kind of announcement of his presence, and a revelation of what he is like. That is the basis for all nature mysticism. But it is also the case that some things reveal him more than others. Nature is not "flat". There are mountains, there are sunsets, there are epiphanies where more aspects come into view. What do you think is the highest, most complete image of God in nature?

A: The sun.

B: The sun is powerful and bright. Mountains are majestic. The ocean is awe-inspiring. Peacocks are beautiful. But human beings have a richer mix of all these things – a measure of energy, of nobility and beauty – and in addition to these we have an intelligence that those other things lack, plus a capacity to love. So I would say a human being makes a more complete image. More complete because richer, more varied, not because we possess any of those qualities to an infinite degree.

A: So human beings turn out to be made in God's image – how nice and biblical! But I suppose you'd also say that some of us are more in God's image than others?

B: Because all humans are different, each has a unique way of representing God that is a bit different from everyone else's. But the image is in the species, in the shared humanity.

A: But to say that God reveals himself by being reflected in creatures, including man, doesn't take us much further than we were before. I suppose it is fine for people who like to sit around and contemplate "the God in things", but for the rest of us it changes nothing.

B: Exactly! It changes nothing. But if God wants to reveal himself to the maximum extent possible in his creation, there is one more thing he can do – and that does change things. He can speak. He can enter into conversation.

A: Now you really are projecting human characteristics on to God. God has no body. If he's perfectly "simple", in that sense, it means he can't speak.

B: He can do perfectly what our speaking does imperfectly. In a sense he does nothing *but* speak. He communicates himself through everything he does, to anyone who is listening. He speaks to the plants as sunshine and rain. He speaks to us in the same way through what happens to us. But we are more than plants. Consider what it means to be a person, to have an interior life, to be intimately related to others. Is it not the case that I cannot know you simply by observing you? You have to reveal to me what you are thinking, and why you are acting the way you do. I can guess, but I can't know you until you open your mouth and tell me what's going through your head. Or to put it in a more

elevated way, until we enter into some kind of communion together – a shared “space” that isn’t just a physical space.

A: You’re talking about love.

B: Yes. We sometimes say that a person can only be truly “known” by someone who loves him. Love creates that bond, that link between spirits, which enables a person to be known more fully. Only what we call “persons” are capable of love – I mean, that is a kind of definition of what it is to be a person: to be capable of love. And to be a *person* in that sense – having an interior dimension in which my self can be shared with another, with someone I choose to show it to – is to be potentially open to having that kind of relationship with God.

A: Only if God is a person too.

B: If he is the creator of persons, he cannot be less than personal, surely? If he contains love, he cannot be incapable of it himself. The same goes for freedom, and love implies freedom. To open up to someone is a free act; it can’t be forced. If it is forced, not only is it not love, it doesn’t even reveal the true self, since the violence creates a new barrier. We can’t force God to reveal himself; but he may choose to do so, and if he does, it will be out of love.

A: I’m sorry, the move from “X”, which is a kind of theoretical cause of everything, to a God who chooses to act out of love is too much of a stretch for me.

B: That’s exactly the reaction many pagan philosophers had when Christianity came along. Partly it seems to be limiting God by likening him too much to a human being. But the relationship does not limit God, any more than his being the “creator” limits him. It is creation that is limited – it is limited by having to reveal the attributes of God, and above all by having to reveal love as the meaning of everything. The world is not “random”, it has a form, a purpose, a design. And the final purpose of everything is to provide the setting for God to reveal his nature as love, which he can only do through us.

A: Talking of love sounds so sentimental!

B: And yet I mean by it something quite precise. Love is not just a feeling, but the action of giving and receiving. In that sense you could say that God’s action of creating the world is an act of love, because it gives existence. But Christianity reveals not just that God loves, but that *God is love*. That is to say, the very act of existing without limits (which we were speaking about earlier when we defined “X”) is an act of love, an act of giving and receiving.

A: You are losing me, I’m afraid.

B: That God is love can’t be revealed by the universe as such, or the cosmos as a whole, because that merely points to God as creator, as the model and source of everything. It

can only be revealed, as I said, by God's somehow sharing his nature with us, as one person can share with another person. God's nature has to be understood "from within". A human being has to be admitted to the intimate relationship that God has, not with us as creatures, but with his own self. God can only be known by God. If we are to know God, it has to be with God's own knowledge of himself.

A: How is that even possible?

B: God becomes man. Which means that God gives himself to one man in the way he eternally gives himself to himself, holding nothing back. By doing so, he makes that man his own Son, a divine self. And by our relationship to that man we enter into that relationship God has with himself, that relationship of perfect love which is his act of being. But we would never have known this was possible – it would not have occurred to us – unless it had actually happened, historically. Theology in that sense is based not on speculation but on experience, on the reasonable interpretation of evidence.

A: What evidence?

B: The evidence of those who have gazed into God's face. The traces of that experience are visible in the Gospels, as the effect it had on the men and women whom we meet in Scripture. The experience of meeting a man, Jesus, who spoke and acted as God but who was also in relationship with God – someone who seemed to be both God and yet not-God. That relationship is something that human language struggles to account for, eventually settling on the notion of "Trinity". And don't forget that this Son of Man and Son of God was killed by men, rose from the dead, and has made his presence known in the lives of those who believe in him.

A: But why, if God could give himself to a man so completely as to be incarnate as that man, did he not do it to everyone? Why not unite himself with everyone straightaway, and save himself all the bother of needing to persuade them all by word of mouth, one by one?

B: Every circle has a centre. Being unique is part of what makes it the centre. God's glory is expressed in the world partly by variety and diversity. That means us. The myriad different lives and journeys, all converging in a place beyond our imagination, the threads all woven together: that is what the world is.

A: All of this is an extension of your original hypothesis. But you still haven't proved it. You said there was some kind of empirical test we could perform.

B: We test it by living it. There is no other laboratory. According to the hypothesis, God exists and wills everything that happens. Furthermore he makes himself present in an even more intimate way within the world, by entering into a personal, face-to-face relationship with human beings through Christ. He extends this relationship through the Church. If all this is true, it implies that in order to find happiness and fulfillment, we should live in a certain way. We should live as if God exists and as if he can see and hear

us. That implies prayer. And we should accept the teaching of the Church. If you do all of that, you will receive proof.

A: Yes, after death! I'm not sure I am willing to wait for that, or throw my life away on the chance that all this will turn out to be true.

B: I don't mean after death. I mean in this life, right away. I haven't quoted Scripture yet. Let me do so now. "Jesus said, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or mother, or father, or children, or lands, for my sake, and for the gospel's sake, but he shall receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life" (Mk 10: 29-30). The "hundredfold" – as well as the persecutions – is something that Christians who try to live their faith can attest to. Whether you decide to take it seriously is up to you – but try to be aware of the real reasons for your decision, either way.

This is a work in progress.