

THE BOX

Answering the Faith of Unbelief

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The Box: Answering the Faith of Unbelief

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Quandary in a Garden
of Weeds

The clouds are alive with hues of red and orange. Butterflies flit about the flowering meadow as the sun disappears behind distant mountains. Without warning, Mr. C pushes me off the edge of a steep cliff towards the center of a boiling volcano. Cast into utter darkness, I scrape and tumble down the sharp lava slope and almost suffocate in a blizzard of goose feathers that once was my expensive, top-of-the-line, favorite parka. The inferno below dances in anticipation of my imminent arrival as I grab the branch of a huge Christmas tree jutting out from the side of the crater and

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hold on for dear life. As I dangle in the smoke, my neighbor Mr. C re-appears standing on the tree trunk, holding a red chain-saw. He looks at me with a devilish grin and pulls the ripcord. The buzz of the saw fades as I descend with the dismembered tree branch in my hands, a string of red and green lights wrapped around my neck, and some rather unseemly thoughts in my head about Mr. C! As I fall closer and closer to the abyss an Apache helicopter appears and peppers me with high-caliber bullets. “Hello?!” I yell in disgust. “Ever hear of a rescue mission?!” Nearing my certain doom, I cry out with weeping and gnashing of teeth for mercy when I hear a soft voice and feel a gentle hand on my shoulder. I begin to shake. Crying again for help, my desperate plea is answered by an epiphany, a celestial and rapturous voice: “Wake up dear.”

The morning sun glows warmly on the horizon as an exhausted Mr. A sits deep in thought on a pile of dirt in his garden. He had intended to pull weeds, but is bothered by

the thoughts that kept him awake for most of the night. He chuckles at his nightmare and wonders how a few hot peppers before bedtime could produce such realistic and ridiculous drama. But that was just a sideshow. Something bigger is on Mr. A's mind—something real, beyond his mere earthly existence and the crazy world of jalapeño-inspired dreams.

What, then, is bothering Mr. A? Well, in the span of a few weeks he has gone from being a hard-core atheist to a rather non-committal agnostic, and he doesn't really know why. His recent conversations with his friendly neighbor Mr. C were unlike any he had experienced with other Christians over the years, and he is still not sure what to make of it all. Mr. C didn't fit the description of an arrogant and ignorant hypocrite, and that was a problem.

For the first time in his life, Mr. A is questioning his own ability to make claims about the existence of God. And worse, he is no longer sure where he would go when he died, a question made more urgent by his nighttime adventure, perhaps. In countless discussions with other religious folks (sometimes

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arguments, sometimes near riots), Mr. A had always walked away confident in his ability to tackle the big questions and convinced that he could accept or reject the arguments for God and Christianity as he saw fit. Today, however, he is not so sure. And so he sits, deep in thought on a pile of dirt in his garden as he ponders the delicate beauty of a butterfly on a nearby flower. Mr. C approaches...

Mr. C: Good morning Mr. A, are you in need of a lawn chair? Weeds do find it difficult to grow when they are being sat upon, but it may be a bit time consuming, I think. Should I bring you lunch later, oh troubler of dandelions?

Mr. A: You are too witty for me today, oh troubler of atheists. Pushed anybody into a volcano lately?

Mr. C: A what?

Mr. A: Never mind.

Mr. C: Okay [looking a bit perplexed]. Interesting you should use a biblical reference, Mr. A, is that possible?

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Mr. A: I can still remember a Bible story about some nasty king calling a prophet the ‘troubler of Israel.’ My parents made us all go to Sunday school when we were little, thinking it might teach us a few things and keep us out of trouble.

Mr. C: Did it work?

Mr. A: I suppose that depends who you ask. It certainly did not keep me from pondering my existence on a pile of dirt in my garden.

Mr. C: No doubt the neighbors will think you have good reason to do so.

Mr. A: I intended to pull weeds, but I can’t stop thinking about your illustration of the little brown box. I lost a great deal of sleep over it last night. How could something so simple say something so profound, and how did I miss it for all of these years?

Mr. C: I am glad that you have been thinking about it.

Mr. A: I am not about to join your Bible study, Mr. C, but the idea that my

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views of God are built on faith,
and blind, unjustified faith at that,
is not comforting. Perhaps I might
visit your study group someday, but
don't hold your breath.

Mr. C: I will not hold my breath, Mr. A, but
I will continue to pray. In the
meantime, I do enjoy our talks, I hope
they can continue.

Mr. A: I would enjoy that, though my wife
might have something to say about it
—she is protective of my sleep, you
know. In any event, I do agree that
pulling the weeds would be more
effective than sitting on them, so I
best get on with it. But one more
thing, Mr. C—by any chance is your
chain saw red?

Mr. C: Why yes, Mr. A, how did you know it
was red? Would you like to borrow it?
Mr. A? Mr. A!? Why are you running
away?

Mr. A is thinking. And more than that, he
is considering what he thought impossible

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just a few weeks earlier. He enjoys his talks with Mr. C, but they challenge him to the very core of his beliefs. Moreover, he was graciously able to answer the toughest questions Mr. A was able to throw at him. But why? What had Mr. C said that had brought Mr. A to his crisis of faith? And what was it about Mr. C's little brown box that cost Mr. A his sleep?

We'll soon go back in time to listen to the talks between Mr. A and Mr. C that brought Mr. A to his reflections in the garden. But before we do, we need to set the stage with some preliminary remarks about the nature of atheism, arguments, and unbelief in general.

Atheism Can Be a Bit Intimidating

A few years ago, I stumbled upon an article in the Wall Street Journal entitled, “Hitchens Book Debunking The Deity Is Surprise Hit.”¹ Other titles, such as *The God Delusion*, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, and *Letter to a Christian Nation* are wildly popular. “This is atheism’s moment,” declared one publisher. They are even “flying off the bookshelves” in the Bible Belt, said another (though suspicion has it that Christians are buying the books to study the tactics of their antagonists).² Debunking God is big business.

Atheists like to argue that science and

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reason have delivered us from the unscientific and naive faith of religion. Modern folks no longer need an imaginary god for comfort or to explain the world. Reasonable people examine the facts of the universe, draw scientific conclusions, and leave the obsolete notion of a god on the bookshelf with other fairy tales.

Perhaps this sounds familiar? For the modern university student it may have been the morning lecture. Imagine happy young Christians prancing off to college to find everything they hold dear mocked and dismissed as foolish. “Do you seriously believe Jonah was in a whale for three days and lived, or that all people and animals descended from the passengers on Noah’s ark? Can you reasonably and scientifically believe the earth was created in six days, or that the first woman was formed from the rib of the first man, and that the *universally accepted* theory of evolution is false?” And topping it all off (with a lowering of the voice, raising of an eyebrow, and peering over the eye glasses), “you don’t *reeeally* take the Bible *literally*, do you?”

It can be a bit intimidating. Right or wrong, no one enjoys being viewed as an unscientific

dunce. The pressure to modify biblical truth and history to make them acceptable to modern sensibilities is pervasive and strong, especially if one seeks the favor of the academic community or public opinion, to say nothing of the peer pressure that young students feel. We are daily tempted to lower God to our level, as one who is also subject to the “natural” laws of the universe, as opposed to the One who created, upholds, and transcends them.

In this short study, we will examine the “reasonable” and “scientific” claims of the atheist and agnostic as compared to the “unreasonable” and “blind” faith of the Christian. Could it be that the reverse is actually true? Could it be that Christian faith is neither blind nor unreasonable, while the best arguments of atheism and agnosticism are built on unsupportable leaps of blind faith?

The results may surprise you.

Endnotes

[1] Jeffrey A. Trachtenberg, June 22, 2007, p. B1.

[2] Ibid.

The Presumption of Omniscience

Identifying and demonstrating that the sophisticated arguments of atheism are built on unreasonable assumptions of faith involves asking the simple question, “How do you know what you claim to know?” Careful and gracious application of this question is the surest method for exposing atheism as unreasonable and unscientific. Of course, principles may be easy to learn, while their effective use in different situations may require time and experience (as with baseball, the violin, *and* apologetics). Nonetheless, as illustrated by the dialogue between our very own Mr. Christian (“C”) and

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Mr. Atheist (“A”),¹ this simple method is easy to learn and effective when used with wisdom and grace. Also, we will see that *atheists presume a measure of knowledge only possessed by the very God they deny*. Let’s listen in...

Mr. C: Mr. A, great to see you. Are you well?

Mr. A: I am, thank you. And you?

Mr. C: I am well, thank you. Can I ask you a question, Mr. A?

Mr. A: Of course, Mr. C, but no doubt you will be at me again for my atheism.

Mr. C: You are my friend, Mr. A, and I would like that friendship to extend into eternity.

Mr. A: I do appreciate your attitude.

Mr. C: Here is my question. I have on my desk a beautiful antique box with a rustic brown finish. Can you tell me what is inside my little brown box, Mr. A?

Mr. A: Jewelry, perhaps?

Mr. C: I am afraid not. Do you have another guess?

Mr. A: I have not seen the box, and I have

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not opened the box—how could I know what is in the box?

Mr. C: Your answer is quite reasonable, Mr.

A. You most readily and humbly admit your human limitations. How about my garage, Mr. A, do you know what is in my garage?

Mr. A: You know I have never been in your garage. I have no idea what is in your garage, though I know it does not contain your cars.

Mr. C: It's a bit too crowded, I'm afraid. Tell me, have you traveled through outer space recently, or left your physical body to roam around another dimension?

Mr. A: Do I look like Dr. Who, Mr. C?

Mr. C: Do you agree, then, that you are currently limited to three, maybe four dimensions of existence?

Mr. A: Of course I am limited. I am also limited according to my physical abilities and in my ability to understand your choice of questions, Mr. C.

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Mr. C: Do more than three dimensions exist?
More than four, five, ten, or a hundred?

Mr. A: You tell me, Mr. C, how could I possibly know? I have never been beyond my earthly existence to render a guess. You are asking me questions that I cannot possibly answer. Do tell me your point, Mr. C.

Mr. C: Mr. A, does God exist?

Mr. A: Of course not, I am an atheist.

Mr. C: I know you are an atheist, and up until now you have been reasonable in admitting your human limitations. Why have you gone from being entirely reasonable to utterly irrational?

Mr. A: What do you mean, ‘utterly irrational’? There is absolutely no evidence for the existence of God. You are the one claiming that someone we cannot see exists; perhaps the burden of proof is on you to prove to me that God exists.

Mr. C: I am unable to prove to your satisfaction that God exists.

Mr. A: That is exactly my point, Mr. C. There is no evidence for God, and you have admitted as much in saying you cannot prove to me He exists. I am surprised you have given up so soon.

Mr. C: I did not say there is no evidence for God, Mr. A. What I mean is I cannot, by argument alone, convince you *to your satisfaction* that God exists, as you are confronted with the evidence of His existence everywhere and at all times, yet still do not believe He exists. If the entire universe declares God's glory, including the design and order of all created existence, the provision of all good things, and your own conscience and consciousness,² how can I bring to you some new or additional proof that will convince you that He exists? In this way I cannot prove to you He exists, though the evidence for His existence is clear, conspicuous, comprehensive, and compelling, to such an extent that the Bible says you are without excuse

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for not believing in God and giving Him honor and thanks.³

Mr. A: I know, I know, that was last week's discussion. So, why the questions?

Mr. C: You are willing to admit your human limitations with respect to my brown box and garage, and your limited human existence. How, then, at the same time can you claim to know about everything in the universe?

Mr. A: Know everything in the universe!? I claimed no such thing, Mr. C. What have you been smoking? I know you were a hippie in the sixties, were you not, Mr. C?

Mr. C: Well, I... don't change the subject. But tell me, what would you have to know to tell me with certainty that God does not exist? Would you not have to know all that can be known of the entire universe *and beyond* before you can with certainty say that God does not exist?

Mr. A: I am not sure, I have never thought of it that way.

Mr. C: In order for one to say that God does not exist with certainty, one would have to know all that could be known about everything in the universe *and beyond*, including every possible dimension. In saying God does not exist, you are implying that you are omniscient and have sufficient data and ability to know with certainty that God does not exist.

Mr. A: I am doing no such thing.

Mr. C: I know you would never overtly claim to have infinite knowledge, an attribute of God. Nonetheless, one would still need to possess knowledge about everything in the universe *and beyond* to say God does not exist—an attribute of the very God that atheists say does not exist. And while you have been most reasonable in admitting that you cannot possibly know what is in my wooden box and garage without actually looking inside them, you are at the same time willing to make a claim that requires

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a knowledge and ability infinitely greater than what is required to know the contents of my wooden box and garage. You seem to have gone from a very rational position, admitting your human limitations with respect to the universe, to a very irrational one that speaks as if you know all things, which you admit you do not.

Mr. A: I look at the universe and I do not see the evidence for God, so there is no God.

Mr. C: Are you telling me that what you cannot see cannot exist? Is that not taking the place of God by saying, in effect, that what you cannot see or know cannot exist? Are you saying that what can and cannot exist in the universe is determined by your limited understanding of it? Is that reasonable?

Mr. A: I know that you just want me to go to heaven, but my human limitations require me to eat.

Mr. C: So God has created us, Mr. A. I look

forward to our next conversation.

Mr. A: I look forward to it as well, Mr. C.

This simple illustration reveals the basic flaw of the atheist's claim. On the one hand, Mr. A is reasonable to concede the limits of his knowledge in admitting his ignorance of the content of Mr. C's wooden box and garage. On the other hand, he is unreasonable in claiming that God does not exist, for he would need to know everything about the entire universe and beyond to legitimately make such a claim. He would have to be God to deny God, whom he says does not exist. And while he acknowledges his limited ability to know many aspects of the universe (including the box and garage), he knows for sure it is all uncreated, self-existing, self-ordering, and unrelated to God, for God does not exist.⁴ The assumed ability to make "authoritative" assertions about that which cannot possibly be known apart from omniscience or a direct revelation from God is basic to all atheistic arguments. This is the foundation or assumption of faith upon which atheistic arguments are built. In

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short, the atheist has faith in his or her own ability to know what cannot possibly be known apart from omniscience or a direct revelation from God. The atheist presumes the ultimate authority or standard of truth to be his or her own opinion. At issue, then, is whether or not this is a trustworthy and reasonable foundation for the atheists' arguments. As we have seen, if the foundation is faulty, so are the conclusions of the argument. The following discussion of miracles will further illustrate this principle.

Endnotes

- [1] The technique of using illustrative dialogues was often used by Cornelius Van Til in his writings. Though the sophistication and insight of dialogues written by Van Til far exceed those I have written, I have nonetheless borrowed his technique.
- [2] See Psalm 19:1-6, Acts 14:17, Romans 1:19-21, 2:14-15. Theologians call this "general" revelation as distinguished from "special" revelation, Scripture.
- [3] All people have a "sense of divinity," a knowledge of God. Romans 1:18-21 tells us that all people "know" God because God has made Himself known to them, though unbelievers sinfully suppress this knowledge. Believers know God in a different way

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than unbelievers, as their knowledge includes a true understanding and love for God, whereas unbelievers suppress and distort the knowledge of God in order to deny Him. When Scripture speaks of unbelievers not knowing God, it refers to the intimate and personal knowledge of God possessed by believers.

- [4] Indeed, no argument or evidence could be presented to convince him otherwise apart from the power and work of the Holy Spirit and Scripture. The Bible clearly teaches that unbelievers are “hostile” to God (Colossians 1:21, Romans 8:7), they “cannot understand” and “cannot accept the things of the Spirit of God” (1 Corinthians 2:14), they are “darkened in their understanding” (Ephesians 4:18), and spiritually “dead” such that the excellent things of God and Christ are viewed as “foolish” (Ephesians 2:1, 1 Corinthians 1:18-23). Everywhere they are confronted with the evidence and knowledge of God in their hearts and in the beauty and blessings of the created universe, yet they “suppress the truth” of God “in unrighteousness” (Romans 1:18-22). Accordingly, unbelievers are neither objective nor neutral in their understanding and interpretation of God and His created universe.

About the Author

Craig and his wife Angelica live and minister in Pennsylvania, where they are delighted to be redeemed in Christ. Craig received his AB in Economics from Cal Berkeley, MBA from UCLA Anderson School of Management, ThM from Dallas Theological Seminary, and PhD in Systematic Theology from Westminster Theological Seminary. He is the author of *The Infinite Merit of Christ: The Glory of Christ's Obedience in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards*; *Reading Religious Affections: A Study Guide to Jonathan Edwards' Classic on the Nature of True Christianity*; and coming in 2015, *God the Reason: The Divine Perfections as the Source of Life, Thought, and Unshakable Faith*. His blog can be found at www.PilgrimsRock.com.

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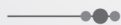
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