

The Great God Debate: 1995

Marc Edward DiPaolo (May 25, 2008)



Does God exist? A great topic for a philosophical debate. Here was my attempt to argue for the existence of God in a college classroom.



One of the many things that I didn't like about Dr. Quentin Shepherd was that the professor never stood up when teaching but remained fixed to his desk and lecture his class with a permanent air of casual disdain. The massive dry-erase board behind him was, as ever, devoid of notes. A copy of the philosophy hardcover Shepherd had published remained open on his desk at all times. I had come to class that day with bluebook and ballpoint pen in tow, prepared to take my written final exam. Then the announcement came.

"I know this is all a bit sudden," Shepherd began, his Beatles' accent stronger than ever, "but the exam will not be written as I had told you before. There's been a death in my family, and I intend to leave the country within the next few hours. This means I won't have time to mark your test papers and still be fair to all of you."

Shepherd did appear distracted to me, as he continued fidgeting with a number two pencil on his desk and tapping the soles of his feet against the gray tile floor.

"Instead, what I want to do is have a class discussion, like we've always had all year. It'll be an oral exam testing what you've taken away from this class. I'll also gauge how much you have improved your abilities to debate an issue philosophically."

Uh oh, thought I. This is not good for me at all.

When I had first signed up for Medieval Philosophy, I had thought that the course would be about what the old philosophers believed, instead of about what the professor thought of what they believed. Shepherd never once allowed the students to immerse themselves in the texts and truly experience them intellectually. Instead, the texts were examined at arm's distance and were passionlessly torn to shreds by Shepherd himself. By the end of the semester, I could safely say I'd learned nothing about philosophers such as Boethius and Aquinas other than that Shepherd thought they were morons. Oh, I had read the texts assigned, but I didn't understand a word of them because Shepherd couldn't be bothered properly explaining them.

As I sat there, regretting ever signing up for the course, Shepherd chose to begin the class discussion in the way he had dozens of times before. "Robin," Shepherd smiled, once again picking out the prettiest girl in the class to give his attention to. "Pretend you're a man. You're in a bar on campus and you're trying to pick up the girl next to you. The problem is, she says she's Catholic and says she can't go to bed with anyone until she's married. Now, as a philosopher, how would you handle a situation like this?"

I almost smiled. Of course! Brilliant! Why talk about Saint Augustine during a medieval philosophy final when you can talk about bars instead?

Robin Haiduc began her answer without a pause. "Well, Quentin, in order to fight a belief like that, you have to go to the root of the problem - find out what her conception of God is, why it causes her to abstain from sex and attack that conception."

"Very good. How?"

Robin inclined her head thoughtfully. "I'd point out that we had no idea what God wishes because he never speaks to us. For all we know, he approves of sex outside of marriage."

"What if she said that Jesus is God?"

"I'd say that God is supposed to be an eternal being. As such, he cannot be born and he cannot die. Jesus was a man."

"The typical Catholic response here would be, Jesus was God and man."



“That statement is unintelligible,” shot back Robin. “It has no meaning. He is either one or the other. You can’t have it both ways.”

Shepherd looked insufferably pleased that everything he had said during the course of the semester was being repeated back to him verbatim. “If she’s a good Catholic school girl, she may be intelligent enough to challenge this by saying Jesus was an aspect of God that was infused into a human mother. When his body died, his divine essence returned to the eternal God and lived on.”

“How can an eternal being interact with temporal life?” Robin asked archly. “The two planes of existence are entirely separate and cannot interact. And that’s only if you accept the possibility that, as Plato suggests, that there is a realm of the Eternal. In our experience, everything dies. Belief in the immortality of anything, be it animal life, or a human soul, or an eternal God is implausible in itself. I mean, can you picture what an eternal being looks like? What would the Eternal Realm look like? How can one exist outside of time and space?”

I scowled. I wasn’t about to argue the agnostic view just to get a good grade. I’d feel as if I were betraying my religion. Still, the moment I offered a contrary view, Shepherd would go after him with both barrels. Shepherd was a philosophy Ph.D. with decades of sophist training and I was an English major who was flustered easily during classroom debates. It wasn’t a fair contest.

“Marc,” Shepherd said, and I almost jumped from my chair. “You look tense. Are you ready to go next?”

I shifted in my seat. Let’s get this fucker over with, I thought. “Yes.”

Shepherd leaned back in his chair. “Tell me what you think of God.”

“Do you want my personal opinion?” I asked.

“I want your opinion as a student in a philosophy class.”

“Can I use an analogy to start off?”

“If you must.”

“I write novels,” I began. “None of them are published, but I’ve written two for my own personal enjoyment.”

Shepherd raised his eyebrows in confusion. “And?”

“You see, writing is the closest I can come to playing God. I am the God of the universe I create in my novels.”

Shepherd seemed interested at last. “Go on.”

“Before I begin work on a novel, I flesh out the personalities of the characters involved,” I explained. “I assign them strengths and weaknesses and I build vague plot outlines around them. Yet every time I start writing, I find that sometimes the characters that I’m writing about develop a life of their own and take control of the story away from me. Do you understand?”

“No.”

I felt the eyes of everyone in the class on me. I wanted to explain my point as quickly as possible and then be quiet and invisible again. “If I create a character that’s inherently brave or generous she has to act that way consistently, even if the plot might move more in the direction I want it to if she suddenly turns cowardly at one point. But that’s cheating and unrealistic. I have to respect the character and allow her to take control of her own fate and move the story forward in her own way. I can create the situation she’s in and nudge her in a particular direction, but she can only go where I want her to go if it’s in her nature to do so. I generally don’t know exactly what scene I’m



going to write next until I know where she wants to go at the end of the current scene I'm working on."

I felt myself getting emotional and I didn't understand why. Maybe because all eyes were on me. How many of them were friendly? How many of them wanted to see me stumble? Shepherd certainly did.

"In this situation, I'm the Eternal Being," I said. "I'm an outside force interacting with my character's limited world. Sometimes I prod her, sometimes I leave her alone, but I love her because I created her, and she doesn't even know for sure that I exist. And that's how I understand God. That's how I understand the relationship between an Eternal Being and a Temporal Object. That's how I reconcile human Free Will with God's foreknowledge of events and ability to influence history."

I stopped, feeling drained by the explanation. To my left, a pallid philosophy major with a low forehead nodded in approval.

Shepherd cleared his throat. "Well, Mr. Paul. If you expect to pass this class by reciting that nonsense, then you are sadly mistaken."

"I liked it, actually," volunteered the pallid philosophy major.

"Good thing you're not the teacher then, Roger," Shepherd shot back, silencing any further rebellion.

I cut in before Shepherd could go on. "I've plenty more to say on the subject. What were the problems with what I said? I'll address each of them as best as I can."

Shepherd leaned forward in his chair, looking directly at me. "I've been asking you the same questions all semester and you continue to fail to answer them using proper philosophical arguments or terminology. How can you say an Eternal Realm exists if you can't picture it? How can God exist if you can't picture him? If they did exist, wouldn't we know about it?"

"All it takes is a little imagination to conjure up images of these concepts," I said. "I've been watching Doctor Who for years. They show the Eternal Realm all the time. It's a big, white void. I don't understand what's so difficult to understand."

Shepherd recoiled. "'Doctor Who?' I suppose you think you're being funny. 'A big, white void?' That's exactly the kind of thing I'm talking about. You talk about abstractions as if they are concrete - as if I have the foggiest idea what you're talking about. How can I visualize a void? Why is it white? Is any of this intelligible at all?"

"We're discussing concepts that are at the edge of human understanding," I admitted. "It all seems like hocus pocus now, but it might not in a few decades. If we don't imagine in our minds the possibility of an Eternal Realm, we can never investigate with science whether or not it exists."

"It is like Professor Meizel, the astronomy guy told me. Scientists didn't know that neutrinos existed until a few years ago. But the picture they had of space was missing a puzzle piece, so they posited the possible existence of neutrinos, went looking for them, and then found them. But if they hadn't posited the existence of neutrinos first, using intelligence and the imagination, they would have never found the neutrinos. Maybe God is a neutrino."

"God is a neutrino?"

"Maybe."

"Are aliens neutrinos, too?"

"Maybe. And maybe time travel is a neutrino, too."



Pushed to the limit of his patience, Shepherd finally stood. "All I'm doing here is questioning the basic tenants of Christianity and demonstrating that none of them hold up to scrutiny. The intelligent, open-minded person is capable of questioning his own faith. You refuse to question your faith, so you are neither intelligent, nor open-minded and should not pass this class."

"By your method, the open-minded person only sees the bad in all philosophies," I argued. "At what point does questioning do more harm than good? Happiness in his life depends upon people having hope and faith. You don't get either of these through only questioning. The truly open-minded increase their knowledge by taking the good from everything. You now, I'm tired of religious people telling me to never question and intellectual people telling me never to hope or dream. They've both got it wrong. You can have it both ways. You must, or you're not a whole person."

"You're not a whole person if you allow the Church to think for you," Shepherd countered. "People who follow its tenants blindly are sick and need to be cured."

"All ideologies can become a sickness if people use them as an excuse not to listen to other points of view or to what their hearts tell them is true," I countered. "Catholics aren't the only zombies. There are plenty of atheist professors and party-line voters who need to start some serious self-examination before they just assume they have all the answers."

"As long as people continue to seek truth in religion or politics, our entire species will never progress beyond where it is now. The very notion of a universal truth is evil and must be crushed. You call my worldview bleak, but you, Marc, are the one with the truly bleak view if you think that people aren't intelligent enough to make up their own truths."

"But-" I began.

Shepherd held up an impatient hand. "This conversation is over. I'm not discussing this anymore with you. You've just earned a C- on your final exam."

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