

# Debating with Epicurus

Jesus said to him, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

-John 14:6

This is one of the more familiar scriptures from the Gospels. So familiar, I think, that many people don't really understand what it means. Jesus *is* Truth. The two are one in the same. To seek Jesus is to seek the Truth. But the reverse is true as well: to seek the Truth is to seek Jesus. Isn't this wonderful news? *Any* honest attempt to seek and understand the Truth is an attempt to seek and understand Jesus! When you open a book for an answer, you are seeking Jesus. When you give directions to someone who is lost, you are helping them find Jesus. When you and your friends debate if Team Blake or Team Kelly will win this season of The Voice, you are seeking Jesus. I know *we* don't normally think of life this way, but this is the way the saints think: find Jesus in everything one does. And finding the Truth is something we can do. Indeed, we have a special title for the saints who looked for Jesus by seeking the Truth. We call them Doctors of the Church. And seeking Truth involves almost everything in our lives.

Of course, we are imperfect beings in a corrupted world and facing an opponent who actively tries to confuse us even more. We see this in many places in the Bible, but Jesus is quite explicit in John 8:44 when He said, "You belong to your father the devil and you willingly carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in truth, because there is no truth in him. When he tells a lie, he speaks in character, because he is a liar and the father of lies."

All too often, when the Truth is staring us in the face, we find ourselves in the role of the Skeptic. We might be scared of what the Truth is. We might be in denial of the Truth. We might be too tired to care. Sooner or later, we all play the part of Pontius Pilate and ask, "What is truth?" (John 18:38) But unlike Pilate, who then walked away (John 18:39) and finally washed his hands of the matter, we do not need to give up.

Jesus assures us, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened." (Matthew 7:7-8) As long as we persevere, we will one day overcome any obstacles we come across, even if it is the day we join Jesus in Heaven. We may take a long and troubled route at times, we may even have a crisis of faith, but as long as we persevere, we *will* still arrive at our destination.

There are many tools we can use to help us in our search for the Truth, with prayer being the most powerful. All the traditions and rituals of the Church are specifically designed to help us on our way. And we have our ability to reason.

Father Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) pointed out that the Christian, the Pagan and the Atheist can all find common ground in seeking the Truth ("Prolegomena On The Subject of God"). Never underestimate the power you have to evangelize simply by seeking the Truth in whatever form it takes. In order to evangelize rational Truth, you have to use philosophy. Fortunately, I guarantee that all of you already possess some ability to do this.

Whenever you are trying to figure something out, you are forming a philosophical argument. It might be trying to decide if you are ready for the algebra test or need to study more. It might be which

shoes to buy. It might be whether to go to college or jump right into the job market. Whenever you bounce ideas off a friend, you are having a philosophical discussion. You might be guessing who will win the next world series. You might wonder who will show up with whom at prom. Before too long, it might be for whom to vote for to run your government.

While we all have to form our own philosophies in life, some philosophies are clearly stronger than others. It is one thing to claim a team will win the championship because, after a player-by-player review of talent, that team is considered the strongest. It is quite another to claim a team will win because they have the best looking uniforms. Eventually the game will be played and both claims can be shown to be either true or false. But until that outcome is finally determined, one is quite justified in believing in the more detailed analysis because one expects it to be right more often than the other.

In philosophy, we all take a position we hold as true and provide evidence as to why we believe it to be true. Here is a famous dilemma by Epicurus (who lived about 300 years before Christ) that is still used by Atheists today to question the existence of the gods:

"Is god willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him god?"  
-Epicurus.

At only eight sentences long, we see that even a short, simple argument can be quite powerful. Epicurus (whose followers invited Saint Paul to the Areopagus in Acts 17:18) presents only two pieces of evidence with logical conclusions, and then based on this evidence, asks two legitimate questions about the existence of an all-powerful, all-loving god.

And before I go on, I want to point out that, as stated, Epicurus is not attacking our Faith. He is merely asking how such a god is possible given the self-evident reality we live in. He is not judging Theists, but rather asking them to explain an apparent dilemma. Sadly, such respect for those we disagree with is very rare today, as is a genuine desire to learn something outside our comfort zone. As Christians, we are called to respect the Human Dignity of those we disagree with, and here is an example of an Atheist doing just that.

Now, just because someone makes an argument does not mean we must accept their conclusions. If we disagree with their conclusions, then we should try to look for flaws in their argument. If we cannot do so, then we should consider the possibility that they might be right. And this is why I think so many people are scared of philosophy when it comes to religion. They have a very justified fear for their soul if they get things wrong. But Jesus tells us that He *is* Truth, therefore any honest search for Truth must eventually lead back to Jesus.

When we critique an argument, there are four things to look for. The first is the logic of the argument. You might be surprised just how often simple logic problems pop up with even the most respected philosophers. And they happen so often that many patterns have been identified and are collectively called fallacies. One is called the "Genesis fallacy," where one assumes something is true or untrue based on who said it. We see the childhood neighbors of Jesus make this fallacy in Luke 4, and they attempted to kill Him as a result. I see no fallacy in what Epicurus stated here; that is one of the advantages of having short arguments.

The second standard to look for is the relevancy of the evidence provided. It may be incorrect or simply out of place. To say that a team should win the championship because it has the best looking uniforms falls into this category. Why should the appearance of a uniform affect game play? To say that the universe revolves around the Earth is likewise going to be heavily challenged in any debate today. I do not see how the two explicit statements made by Epicurus can be challenged, nor the implied statement that evil exists in this world.

The third method to critique an argument is to provide evidence that is relevant but has been left out. I feel we can make a case against Epicurus here, because he was ignorant of Jesus and how Jesus not only could, but did, put an end to evil. But we must also recognize that this answer is incomplete, because there still is evil in *this* world. In order to account for the evil that still exists in this world, we need to provide an alternative theory to the one implied by Epicurus. This is the last method I need to share with you.

Providing an alternative theory is very powerful, but it is not a "hall pass" that lets one believe whatever it is one wants to believe. It oftentimes requires laying down groundwork by inserting additional evidence relevant to the debate (such as Jesus dying *and* resurrecting). It must account for *all* the relevant and credible evidence provided by you and the one you are debating with. Finally, it cannot be less credible than the previous argument. Put another way, one cannot discredit an unlikely solution by coming up with an even less likely one. Suppose I go to some remote part of the world, a place I have reason to believe no modern man has ever been before, but I find a watch on the ground. I cannot propose a credible theory that the watch just happened to materialize there by the random movement of atoms in order to defend my original theory that no modern man has ever been there before me.

You may agree or disagree with Epicurus, that is okay. But what we are looking for is *why* you agree or disagree.

Raymond Mulholland  
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