

## Russell's Teapot: A Christian Perspective

If I were to suggest that between the Earth and Mars there is a china teapot revolving about the sun in an elliptical orbit, nobody would be able to disprove my assertion provided I were careful to add that the teapot is too small to be revealed even by our most powerful telescopes. But if I were to go on to say that, since my assertion cannot be disproved, it is an intolerable presumption on the part of human reason to doubt it, I should rightly be thought to be talking nonsense. If, however, the existence of such a teapot were affirmed in ancient books, taught as the sacred truth every Sunday, and instilled into the minds of children at school, hesitation to believe in its existence would become a mark of eccentricity and entitle the doubter to the attentions of the psychiatrist in an enlightened age or of the Inquisitor in an earlier time.

-Bertrand Russell

Russell's Teapot is an argument by analogy to demonstrate the absurdity of religion. It was first proposed in an unpublished paper by Bertrand Russell. In it, Russell made the claim that if an absurd idea, such as a teapot in orbit between the Earth and Mars, was found in ancient scrolls, then a cult of followers would blindly believe in it and whatever divine powers it was supposed to have. This argument was specifically formulated to move the burden of "proof" from the atheist to the theist. This teapot argument has inspired many similar arguments. Some of the more well-known include the Flying Spaghetti Monster, the Invisible Pink Unicorn and Carl Sagan's The Dragon in My Garage. Russell's argument has fit quite well with the attitudes of today's postmodern culture, and it helps explain the self-contradictory position of the so-called "agnostic-atheists," which includes the late Christopher Hitchens.

Despite its popularity, I feel this analogy is severely flawed. Much has already been said concerning this argument, both for and against it. But I want to begin by addressing a flaw so basic that it appears to have gone unnoticed by even the smartest of philosophers. By being specifically formulated to shift the "burden of proof" from the atheist to the theist, Russell is making the assumption that "proof" is necessary for either party. I reject this premise. If proof could be had for either the existence or the nonexistence of God, then there would be no debate to begin with as the matter would have already been settled. So, right from the start, we see that Russell's Teapot is an absurd argument.

In fairness to Russell, he did not make this argument in a vacuum. The debate on who was to provide that "proof" raged long before he came along with his teapot. There are plenty of theists who demanded atheists prove the nonexistence of God, and *vice versa*. Many efforts by both parties over centuries have tried to find this "proof," and none of them can claim the degree of certainty that "proof" suggests (which is generally accepted to be expressed as a scientifically falsifiable hypothesis). The problem is, both sides were wrong about this. Russell (and most who have commented on the teapot, either for or against) failed to recognize the real problem: the scientific idea of "proof" is only possible for material things. It is flawed logic to assume that science can verify the transcendental concepts, as science was never meant to do so (and, indeed, simply cannot). All who make a claim for proof, either for or against God, are acting on what is called "bad faith," which is believing in something without a sound, rational reason to do so. It is not sound or rational to say science can prove or disprove the existence of God.

But, flawed logic or not, we can see Russell's impact on the skeptical way of thinking today. Russell himself claimed he was really agnostic, but he felt he should have been an atheist. I think this revelation is key to understanding both how his teapot came to be, as well as why it is so popular in the postmodern way of thinking. By claiming that it fell on the theist to prove the existence of God, it would seem he could absolve himself from the dilemma of what he really was and what he wanted to be. If he did not have to prove his atheism, then he could be more comfortable with himself by making a decision to not make a decision. I have to admit that this motive is speculation on my part. But what is not speculation is that a great many people today call themselves "agnostic-atheists," and justify themselves by claiming it is the theist's problem to prove otherwise. Christopher Hitchens did this quite elegantly in his famous debate with William Lane Craig at Biola University in April 4, 2009. So, what is an agnostic-atheist?

The acedia (intellectual laziness) involved in the agnostic atheist concept is easy to see, but it is deceptively effective in debate. Still, while acedia is strong evidence that the agnostic-atheist is acting in bad faith, this alone does not mean that the concept is wrong. Sometimes people are right for the wrong reasons. Furthermore, exposing the flaws are not as simple as one would expect. One has to realize that its greatest weakness is also its greatest strength: by not taking a stand on anything, no argument can demonstrate that they are wrong. If one argues that one can only be either agnostic or atheist, the reply is that neither agnosticism nor atheism requires belief in God, so both can be taken together. If one asks if God is possible, they will reply they don't know. If one asks if they have any other alternatives to God, they will say they don't need to come up with alternative theories, as it is not their job to prove God: that is the job of the theist. Note that at this point, the agnostic atheist is resorting to "gaslighting," putting the blame on the Theist for their own non-position on the matter. I could go on, but I hope I have demonstrated how slippery this concept is. They attack the theist from the position of an atheist, but then fall back to being an agnostic to counter anything the theist says in return.

To have a meaningful debate with an agnostic atheist, one needs to hold them accountable to their own claims, and not fall for any gaslighting. In my experience, the key is to take "proof" out of the equation, insist it is a matter of believing in "good faith" (i.e., backed by rational evidence), and then ignore any gaslighting that comes up. One can then provide evidence and see if they have any counter-arguments to it. If so, then we again have a healthy debate. If not, then one can point out they have nothing to say to the theist about the beliefs the theist has. Any effort to deny this will be based on having no evidence, and then the agnostic atheist will be seen to be acting in bad faith.

Now that the intent, influence, and consequences of Russell's Teapot have been discussed, what about the analogy itself? I think it fares rather badly. It is always dangerous to use argument from analogy because they are, by definition, an imperfect representation of the truth that they are trying to explain. If it were the truth itself, it would not be an analogy. Virtually any argument from analogy can theoretically be discredited because of the inherent imperfection, so using it needs to assume some good will on the part of the interlocutor. And it is hard to gain said good will when the argument itself calls the interlocutor a bad faith fideist. But we can be true Christians, overlook the slight, and transcend bad feelings. And when we do so, I still think this analogy is poorly presented.

Even when good will exists in a debate, argument from analogy can still be discredited by showing how the imperfections outweigh any benefit the good parts provide. This is a bit subjective in nature, but the harder it is to reach the eventual breaking point, the better the analogy is. The key in deciding whether or not the analogy is good depends on how well it fits the point it is trying to be

made. In this case, Russell is trying to make a point that there is absolutely nothing rational about religion, and in doing so, has created an analogy that is as bereft of rationality as he could come up with. I think this is a mistake on Russell's part, as I do not have to prove that any religion is true or not. All I have to do is show that there are rational aspects to religion, and cracks in his analogy begin to appear. The more rational aspects I can show, the less appropriate his analogy becomes. And what Russell seems unable to see is that all religions have some degree of rationality to them, or else they would not be followed. No one created a religion (except for perhaps Russell and those who mimicked his analogy) simply because they had nothing better to do than to push their imaginations to the limit.

All religions, at the fundamental level, seek to know the truth of why things happen. Indeed, even the most primitive and simple [legitimate] religion seeks an answer that science cannot provide because, as the famous atheist Friedrich Nietzsche pointed out, all science can do is give a better description of something, it will always fail to explain. For example, it is easy to criticize a pagan for believing that lightning is something thrown down from the sky by angry gods when science tells us that lightning is a massive electric current moving either from cloud-to-cloud or cloud-to-Earth. But all science really did was say that lightning is a massive amount of electrons moving at once because there was an electron imbalance and a conduit was found to balance it out. This is an impressive discovery, but it is only an *observation*. It does not explain the ultimate *why* they behave in that fashion. Theism, no matter how primitive or simple a particular religion is, seeks to find out this "why," and its answer is invariably "because a will made it so." Science and theism both seek the truth, but while science tries to explain *what* is happening, theism tries to understand why science works at all. I fully understand that the skeptic will not accept this, but I needed this to lay the foundation to show the rationality behind theism.

To begin with, we see in all [legitimate] religions that beliefs have a rational connection between the would be worshiper and his deities. No deity in any religion was ever worshiped without some context to the life of the worshiper. Going back to the lightning example, the worshiper fully recognized the reality of lightning and its power. However incorrect his primitive assumptions may have been on the matter, he was still successful in recognizing that a relationship between the lightning and himself existed. Science has changed this relationship, but it does not deny that a relationship exists. The teapot, however, not only has no obvious relationship to any human, but Russell deliberately made his argument such that no relationship is possible (it was described as being too small to be detected by any telescope). Russell's analogy, by being so heavily overstated, lacks this rational relationship that is essential to worship.

Secondly, I want to build on this point and discuss the gods themselves. There are two basic types of gods within the pagan myths: mysterious, all-powerful beings without distinct images or proper names (what I like to call Shadow Gods) and those who have been portrayed in relatively definitive forms (no matter how exotic or outrageous) with proper names. Most of the latter type started out as a Shadow God that was given a name and form. When this happened, they quickly and invariably diminished in power as the specific attributes and domains associated with them likewise identified what they could *not* do. When a need came up that was outside the domain of the existing gods, a culture would either adopt a neighboring god to fill the void, or make a new one up altogether. There is certainly a rational evolution of events here, and this phenomenon is recognized by anthropologists as a worldwide, historical truth. The one exception was the Hebrews, who remained faithful to their all-powerful, nameless and imageless God. So, if this teapot is to fill the role of a god, or at least represent a god, exactly how does it fit with the historical rationality of other gods? In short, it does not.

It is clearly not a Shadow God, as it is a well-defined image with a specific name. It really doesn't fit the role of a diminutive god, as it is completely removed from any context in which its image could be useful to the worshiper. I have considered the idea of it being a god of hospitality, but then I cannot find a rational reason to explain why a god of hospitality would be so extremely isolated from mankind. It seems to me that one would expect a god of hospitality to be, well, hospitable. No matter how I try to fit this teapot in with how any historical religion developed, it collapses under its own programmed absurdity.

In the final analysis, Russell has been a major influence on modern skeptics. He has given them the key to a very devious "argument" that best works when the theist assumes it is rational. Had this analogy been used to discredit bad faith in general (there are many bad faith believers in both the theist and skeptic ranks), then I would find no objection to it. But since we know from his own admission that it was to show how all theists believe in bad faith, I find it backfires on him. All he really did was show how poorly founded his own beliefs about theists were. If I may be allowed to use my own argument of analogy, Russell pointed a finger at the theists, and had three more pointing back at him.

Raymond Mulholland  
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