

Name

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Russell's Teapot and the Belief in God

With the use of today's social media, information, ideas, and ways of thinking spread much more quickly than they did even three decades ago. Memes, aspects of culture, catch hold of society's fancy or imagination in such a way that buzz words are generated overnight. Along with such rapid firing of ideas, though, comes controversy. With controversy often comes the demand for proof that this or that is true. However, not everything can be proven as true or false, especially when it deals with philosophy, or how one wants to view life and one's relationship to the world around him. The question of beliefs and burden of proof brings to mind Russell's Teapot, also known as the Celestial Teapot or the Cosmic Teapot.

Bertrand Russell was an agnostic who felt that when an individual makes a claim, such as the existence of God, that the burden of proof fell on the individual who made the claim as opposed to others who did not accept the claim. The inability of society to disprove the existence of God does not mean that God exists, and it is not left to the non-believing segment of society to prove that God does or does not exist. As an illustration, Russell developed the analogy of a celestial teapot, an object that supposedly is located somewhere between Earth and Mars and that orbits the Sun. In this analogy, the teapot is so small that it cannot be seen even with the use of the most powerful telescope in existence. It would be unreasonable to expect people to simply accept that this teapot exists. It is equally unreasonable to expect people to disprove the existence

of the teapot. Rather, it is left to the person who asserts that the teapot does exist to prove its existence.

Russell went on to relate this analogy to the belief in God. He said that there is no scientific proof that God does or does not exist, that individuals insist that proof is within the spiritual experience of the individual, what he feels in his heart and soul. However, those who do not profess to believe in God are often persecuted or shunned in some manner by society for not accepting the existence of God, even though there is no conclusive, scientific proof that he exists. Russell asserts that this stance is unfair, that the burden of proof does not rely on the unbeliever, but that it is the believer who is responsible for proving his assertion. Russell says that in reference to the celestial teapot, people can readily dismiss the idea as absurd. However, if the idea caught hold in the imagination of society, was taught to the young, and became part of that society's cultural fabric, then anyone who disbelieved the existence of the teapot would to some degree be criticized or ridiculed by the majority of the society who did believe in its existence. Even though there would be no scientific evidence of its existence, society would challenge the disbeliever to prove it did not exist, rather than for the believer to prove it did.

In *The Demon-Haunted World*, Carl Sagan also created an analogy to illustrate the same point. In his analogy, Sagan insists that a dragon lives in his garage. Upon entering the garage the guest does not see a dragon. The guest says, "Okay, let's spread flour on the floor so that the footprints appear. However, Sagan replies that will not work because the dragon floats in the air. A heat sensor will not work because the dragon's fire contains no heat, and so on. Sagan can insist that the dragon does exist, but the lack of any evidence indicates that it probably does not. Although Sagan is left to prove the existence, he cannot. Even though there is no evidence that the dragon does or does not exist, a reasonable individual will assume it does not. Russell and

Sagan relate this to the belief in God. If there is not scientific proof that indicates the existence of God, then why is that belief so prevalent in the world?

Some individuals feel that Russell's and Sagan's analogies are too simplified, that they involve more than simply accepting or rejecting an unsubstantiated belief. For example, in reference to the existence of the teapot, on the surface it may seem that one can simply say that the teapot does or does not exist. However, if one accepts that God exists, that greatly affects how one perceives the creation of the universe, as well as questions concerning the after-life. If one does not accept the existence of God, then one is left to explore other theories on how the universe was formed, and one may accept that death is finality. Then there is a question as to whether one is a believer or a non-believer, an atheist. One can also be agnostic, believing or not believing, but not sure on either side. Finally, there is the consideration that many people feel the need to believe in something. Not to believe gives them a sense of non-direction or hopelessness in life, that no one has control of the universe or is looking out for them and how they progress through life.

It is this need to fill a spiritual void, to feel that something bigger and more powerful is in control that influences so many people to disregard whether or not there is scientific proof that God does exist, since one cannot prove that he does not exist. Therefore, religious beliefs remain subjective in nature.

Works Cited

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