



Getting Down to Gut Level

One Question Helps the Sceptic



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STEPHEN WAGNER'S MONTHLY UPDATE

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Dear Friend,

“Evil exists. Therefore, God does not.”

Atheists are quite fond of this argument. For example, Christopher Hitchens used it against the formidable William Lane Craig at [Biola University on April 4](#). (Over 15,000 listened to that debate in person or via satellite.)

The argument strikes fear in the hearts of many Christians. After all, it's undeniable that evil exists. Here's the good news: like many other “sophisticated” arguments, this one is usually simpler than it first appears. Sometimes, the so-called argument has little to do with arguments at all.

Consider my conversation with a student named Jim on the campus of Colorado State University last fall. He countered my argument for the value of the unborn, saying that they are not able to breathe on their own, so they cannot be persons.

He then said that even those who *can* breathe on their own (i.e. “persons”) have no rights. To Jim, all rights claims are merely useful fictions. Rights aren't real. Or, if they are real, we can't really *know* it.

Before long, Jim and I were talking about whether God exists. I noted the richness of a worldview that includes God's existence. He was candid: “I would like to believe in God, but I just can't.”

“Why not?” I asked. Jim began describing many of the evils in the world. It appeared Jim was making the same argument as Mr. Hitchens. *Or was he?*

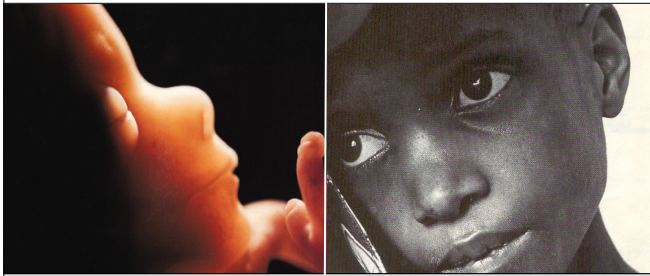
“Jim, is your concern with evil an intellectual or emotional concern? Is it that you have a rational argument that shows God doesn't exist – something you could put in syllogism form, like, ‘If evil exists, God can't exist. Evil does exist. Therefore, God can't exist.’? Or, is it that *it just doesn't sit too well with you that God allows evil?*”

I tried to give Jim a safe place for honesty: “I think you know me well enough from our conversation to know that I think emotions are valid and important.”

In saying this, I didn't mean that emotions are good arguments, but that they are an integral part of human experience. I was signaling to Jim that if his concerns *were* emotional, I wasn't going to simply dismiss them. Since many on college campuses posture themselves as purely intellectual, I expected Jim to maintain that he had a rational argument. He surprised me.

“It's emotional,” he said. Ah! Common ground! “It doesn't sit very well with me either,” I responded. Like Jim, I'm troubled in my gut about the evil in the world. (over →)

**How Could a Good God Allow Evil?
Finding Common Ground**



Atheists and Christians. Pro-choice and pro-life. All may struggle with doubts about God's existence or goodness because of evil in the world. Some may focus on suffering and poverty in Africa (right). Others see the legal killing of the unborn (left) as the unspeakable evil of our day. “How could a good God allow this?” Here's common ground: *We just don't feel good about the way God has allowed the world to be. Acknowledging our complex emotions as emotions is the first step to getting clarity about the doubts that arise from them.*

I was encouraged that Jim returned the next day to JFA's free speech board kiosk where we further discussed our views in front of our own "debate" audience: students I had helped train for the outreach. At one point, the students took over the conversation (right) and I was able to look on with satisfaction as both the students and Jim had a good exchange.



One simple question helped my conversation with Jim: "*Would you characterize your argument as intellectual or emotional?*"

It's a question we should ask atheists, abortion advocates, and even ourselves.

Sometimes a person will say something that sounds like it's a rational argument, but it's actually a vague emotional sentiment. Before responding with an intellectual argument to an "argument" the person may not even be making, take the time to clarify.

If it's the emotions doing the work, it won't help to deal with them intellectually. It will feel like a wall has gone up. You're at an impasse. To remove an emotional barrier to belief, you'll have to deal with the emotions first. That's not simple, but I'd rather engage the complexity of it than miss the mark completely by leaving things only in the intellectual arena.

Don't misunderstand. I'm not downplaying the value of intellectual sophistication. For example, there is a rational argument that attempts to show that because evil exists, God must not exist. I mentioned it to Jim and he agreed it had already been refuted decisively.* People may attempt that argument. Or they may have a gut feeling like Jim. My point is simple: keep the two types of content distinct.

There's another reason to discern between intellectual and emotional statements. Emotions are very special, integral parts of people. When we validate a person's emotions by listening carefully as they share their feelings (seeking to "get them" – see my [March 2009 newsletter](#)), we show that we're interested in more than just debate. We're also interested in the people with whom we're debating.

That's why a simple clarifying question can be powerful. It helps you respond to a person's actual concern. That not only saves you time. It's also good manners. For most people, connecting with their emotions is essential to communicating to them that they matter.

Be on the lookout for emotional sentiments masquerading as bona fide arguments. You don't have to disqualify emotions from the discussion. Simply seek to put them in their proper place. In doing so, you might place a stone in the person's shoe. That's true, whether you're talking with a media favorite like Christopher Hitchens or a student like Jim from CSU.

In Christ,

Stephen

* See [Answering the Problem of Evil](#) (available from www.str.org) featuring William Lane Craig and Greg Koukl. It's the best resource I've encountered on the problem of evil. I'm indebted to this material for helping me distinguish the two types of arguments against God's existence. See www.str.org to order.

NOTE: If you enjoy my newsletters and believe in the work I'm doing with Justice For All, would you consider joining my team of regular supporters? Rebecca & I are aiming to finish our support-raising by the end of summer. At present, we've raised 78% of our monthly need. Fill out [THIS SHORT ONLINE FORM](#) (or call 800-281-6426) to let us know if you would consider helping us get to 100%. Thanks! -SW