

A.S.A. Jones on the Age-Old Rock Question

A friend of mine recently asked if I had seen this site:

<http://www.ex-atheist.com/index.html>

Wouldn't you know, it's another Christian apologetics site! This one is by A.S.A. Jones, [who "deconverted" from atheism to Christianity](#). The landing page at her site has a quote at the top which states:

It isn't a matter of validating or invalidating arguments. It's about being able to see those same arguments from a different perspective. . . What I discovered was an intellectual riddle that couldn't be solved by the logical mind. It had to be solved by the intuitive heart.

I gather from this that Jones prefers to look at theistic arguments from a perspective other than one that is concerned with whether or not they are valid. And if they are arguments for a position that consists of "an intellectual riddle that couldn't be solved by the logical mind," then I can see why someone confessionally invested in the position they are offered to defend would choose to look beyond the invalidity of its supporting arguments.

So I took a look and poked around. I found that Jones [thinks that J. P. Holding](#) "is the most thorough researcher and honest apologist I have ever read." They say that another sucker is born again every minute.

I also found a small article devoted to the age-old perplexing question [Can God create a rock that is so big that He wouldn't be able to lift it?](#) I've seen many treatments of this conundrum, and this one is quite typical. Jones rushes to call it an illogical question. But what exactly makes the question itself illogical? Jones never makes this clear as her effort is spent on analyzing surrogate rephrasings of the original question, and when it comes to actually answering the question on its own terms, we'll find that she affirms both horns of a contradiction anyway. Let's take a closer look.

Jones compares the original question to the following:

A genius is so smart that he should be able to successfully pass any test, including a test that would qualify him as an idiot.

For one, this is a statement, not a question, so already Jones is bleeding off the page. Also, this statement equivocates on the word 'test', since it is implied to mean one thing in the main part of the statement, but something else in the follow-up phrase. It is thus a play on words. Cute and clever, but hardly equivalent to the question being considered in the article. Indeed, what would a test intending to qualify those who pass it as idiots look like? And what would count as passing it?

Jones then says that the question on whether or not her god can create a rock so big that it cannot lift it "contains a contradiction." But where does the question do this? What's so contradictory about the question itself? Jones says that it is "the same type of contradiction that is made when we say that someone has accomplished the impossible." I don't think so. On the contrary, Jones is begging the question at this point by assuming what she needs to prove. On the face of it, I don't see anything at all impossible or contradictory about the proposal that someone can create something so big that he cannot lift it. After all, human beings do this all the time. Human beings create grand pianos, assemble heavy construction vehicles, build tall skyscrapers, etc., things that their creators and builders cannot themselves lift because they're far too heavy. So I don't see where the question itself contains any contradictions or inherently affirms that the impossible is possible. Consider this question: "Can a person assemble an object that is so big and heavy that he cannot lift it?" Obviously the answer is yes: we do this all the time. So where's the contradiction? Is it in the question? Or, is it in the idea of an omnipotent god? On my worldview, I have no problem answering the question I have posed, so the problem is not in my worldview.

Jones then wants to rephrase the question again. This time the concern is to tackle the following rendition: "Is God so powerful that he can successfully do anything, including things that he couldn't do?" This question is markedly different because the use of "anything" here makes the question open-ended, whereas the original question was specific. The apologist is using the new version to exploit the open-endedness afforded by swapping out the specifics of the original question and replacing them with "anything," which allows Jones to double-back against it, thus purporting to show that the original question is similarly contradictory. Jones needs to resort to sleight of hand

to shore up the claim that the original question "contains a contradiction," even though we already saw that the original question itself is not inherently contradictory, for it is very possible for a personal agent to create something so big and heavy that he cannot lift it.

Jones then tentatively offers the answer "no," sticking with the safety of the tautological statement "God cannot do those things that God cannot do," which departs from all specificity that might tarnish the expedience hopefully gained with frequent rephrasings. After all, theists certainly don't want to take a stand that they will later regret. All of this is powered by having slipped into the imagination gear: "No matter how big a rock is created, God will always be able to move it. God is not powerful enough to compromise His own power."

But giving a definitive answer such as this is unsettling for god-believers, because they want their god to still come out on top. At this point, she is affirming a deficiency: her god is all-powerful lite - that is, really really powerful, not so powerful that it can create a rock so big that it cannot lift it. That's because any rock it creates, it will be able to lift it. This actually suggests that the dimension at which the rock would become too heavy for Jones' god to lift cannot be reached by its creative powers. It's not her god's lifting abilities that are deficient, but its ability to create a rock whose weight exceeds its lifting ability. Thus it remains possible to suppose that there might be a point at which a rock becomes too heavy even for Jones' god to lift, but its creative powers would never allow it to create something quite that big. Its creative powers thus have a limit: whatever it creates will still be within its ability to move, lift, toss around, juggle, etc. So, this is emotionally unsettling for the theist, because it exposes a limitation on her god that she finds intolerable. At this point, she's like a little kid who insists that her favorite superhero is invincible no matter what. And she'll ball up his fists to anyone who tries to challenge her beyond the limits of her own reasoning ability.

So Jones then says that it is possible to answer "yes" to the question after all! She says, however, that we need to "get beyond the deficiency of language in order to understand the concept behind the question" first. But what "deficiency of language" does she have in mind here? And what exactly is the "concept behind the question" that can be understood only if we "get beyond the deficiency of language"? This is all a set-up for toning down the meaning of "all powerful" (again), which is what Jones needs to do in order to finally address the question. A theist's claims about the powers of her god always come with an inexhaustible list of reservations. The term 'all powerful' now becomes "hyperbole," not intended to "be carried to hyper-literalism that renders it incomprehensible." Is this an admission that the statement "my god can do anything!" is really incomprehensible? That's what it sounds like to me at this point. Jones tones it way down to mean "the most powerful thing that can possibly exist." But what specifically "can possibly exist"? Such a question involves a lot of "presuppositions" - that is, prior assumptions which would factor into assessing what is possible. For the theist, she's drawing not only from subjective assumptions (since she's already granted primacy to the subject by affirming the existence of a god in the first place), but also off her own imagination (for everything she's talking about when she talks about what her god can do or has done is grounded in what she imagines, not in something she has witnessed firsthand). The question is thus reduced to a trivial thought experiment whose inputs are imaginary and whose outcome will inevitably be useless anyway.

At this point Jones summarily disarms herself:

Can the most powerful thing that can possibly exist create a rock so large that it could not lift it? Yes, it certainly could.

So what has Jones gained through this article? She answered the question both no and then yes, after calling it contradictory. Thus she's affirming two horns of a contradiction. She should have just done this in the first place instead of trying to provide an analysis which only succeeds in making her more confused than when she started.

However, at this point, Jones is still not entirely comfortable, for she wants to change the topic to questions about motivation: "we may ask why, and if, it would choose to do such a thing, it would still remain the most powerful thing that exists." This of course was not the original question, and it is not at all germane to whether or not a personal agent can create something so big that it cannot lift it. But the theist, always on the run from the light of reason that she cannot ever fully escape, needs to throw this out there in order to camouflage her commitment to a contradiction. One can think of many reasons why a personal agent might create something too big for it to lift it, but we must remember that when a man does this, he is not setting out with this outcome as an end in itself. Rather, this is simply one of many consequences of his efforts to meet his goals. When he builds a skyscraper, for instance, he's not building it so that he can say "Look! I created something too heavy for me to lift!"

When we get to goals and motivations, what goals and motivations could a god have? It has no needs, and anything it could possibly want (to the extent that it would even be sensible to say that it has any wants in the first place) could

be provided just by wishing for it. But of course, the Christian god is characterized as both angry and unchanging, which suggests that it must be eternally miserable anyway. So its wants could never be satisfied anyway.

Jones ends by giving a roundabout admission that her analysis up to this point is worthless, saying that she would "still prefer the answer, 'I can't give a smart answer to a dumb question!'" But then again, where did she establish that the question is dumb in the first place? Ah, that's right, her 7 year old daughter told him this.

Well, as you can probably tell, I'm not very impressed. In fact, if I were a theist, I'd point out that the question illicitly assumes that the Christian god is beholden to the effects of gravity. I would add to this that my god is so powerful that it can turn gravity on and off as it pleases, and be done with it. I don't think I've ever seen a Christian deal with the question in this manner, but I think this would be more appropriate given the magical powers they ascribe to their god. After all, gravity would simply be an effect of the cartoon universe it created. And what cartoonist is bound to the effects he puts into his cartoons? Blank out.

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [2:00 PM](#)

6 Comments:

[Zachary Moore](#) said...

One of the more amusing aspects of Christianity is its tendency to affirm both sides of a contradiction, and then unblinkingly call it a "mystery."

[July 10, 2006 5:39 AM](#)

[olly](#) said...

Haha, I agree at Zach. But then I also disagree.

What a mystery!

At any rate, the rock debate is one of my all time favorite, because really the only retreat is into their faith, or into absurd re-defining, as you've shown. Well argued!

-olly

[July 11, 2006 3:32 PM](#)

[Chris](#) said...

Is it possible for a logician to formulate a conundrum that even he can't resolve?

Perhaps a better question would be, "Can God create a man who can deny the existence of God?"

Bravo! Quite impressive. Perhaps us Christians should just begin worshiping you. Clearly you qualify.

[July 11, 2006 9:09 PM](#)

[Not Reformed](#) said...

Nice 'gravity solution,' Dawson. :) I haven't heard that one before, and I felt kind of silly that I hadn't.

You've solved the ultimate problem of Christianity!

Oh wait...can you fix the 'problem of evil' now too?

[July 12, 2006 5:47 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Thanks, NR. I'm surprised I hadn't seen this little tidbit pointed out before in other treatments of the problem. It seemed quite obvious to me the first time I encountered the issue. Just have god be able to turn gravity on and off, and then there's no problem! Presto! The cartoon universe to the rescue!

The problem of evil...? He he! "And for my next trick..." Actually, I don't think there is a solution to the problem of evil in Christianity. Typically Christian "solutions" essentially turn on rendering the terms 'good' and 'evil' meaningless. And Bahnsen's solution ("God has a morally sufficient reason for the evil that exists") only tells us that we could never trust his god. But is that a solution? No, not at all, for it does not address the problem, it only strikes a compromise.

Chris asked: *Perhaps a better question would be, "Can God create a man who can deny the existence of God?"*

I think of it this way: "Can a cartoonist create cartoon characters which deny the existence of the cartoonist which created them?" The answer of course is yes, a cartoonist can certainly do this. But suppose that after the end of the cartoon the cartoonist becomes hot and angry with his cartoon characters for denying his existence as their creator. Now, would that seem rational to you?

Regards,
Dawson

[July 12, 2006 7:55 AM](#)

[Chris](#) said...

I think the question is interesting because it presupposes a characteristic of God that is not in evidence (he being limited) and therefore forecloses against the most probable answer.

[July 12, 2006 8:09 AM](#)