

# A Conversation with an Atheist

By Dan McKenzie

Person 1: It annoys me when people bring up the notion there is a God. The whole debate around whether or not God exists is a nonstarter for me. Why believe in God?

Person 2: Right. Why believe in God when you can know God?

Person 1: Because there is no God to know!

Person 2: To know God, you need God-knowledge. God doesn't make sense as a belief because by saying God is a belief you're stating that God may or may not exist. All beliefs lack certainty. But when people say they don't believe in God it's usually the biblical God they're referring to. In other words, they are saying they don't believe in a big daddy who sends people to heaven or hell depending on how many 'Our Fathers' they'd recited. Oh, not to mention, God is pretty unpopular these days considering all the violence, confusion and corruption he has inspired for so long. So to understand God for Westerners like us, you need to clean the slate and start from scratch.

Person 1: Why should I even care?

Person 2: Because in spite of all the religious baggage, understanding God is really about understanding the world. When you understand God, you understand that everything is the way it is and couldn't be otherwise. God isn't just some bedtime story to comfort you when life doesn't give you what you want. God is a part of the equation, because it's really hard to formulate who you are and what the world is without knowing God. Let me try to define it in a way that makes sense to your 21st century-tuned intellect.

Person 1: Surprise me.

Person 2: What is it that brought you into this world?—and don't tell me it was your mamma because your mamma has no idea how to biologically create a human being! What is it that right now is circulating your blood, indicating that you're hungry, and putting thoughts in your head? What is it that's growing everything: the grass, the flowers, the trees, and the hair on your head?

Person 1: Um, nature?

Person 2: Ok. For now, let's say nature is the effect and God is the cause. God is responsible for all the objects including you and me. In short, God is everything. Like a spider spinning its web, God is the intelligence, the energy and the material behind all creation.

Person 1: Sounds like more 'big daddy' to me.

Person 2: But God isn't an old bearded man doling out rewards and punishments. God isn't even a person with human qualities. God is a principle, like gravity. In other words, God is impersonal. God is only in charge of rewards and punishments in so far as whether or not you follow *dharma*.

Person 1: And how do you define *dharma*?

Person 2: *Dharma* is the laws governing our experience—namely, the physical, psychological and moral laws. Physical laws exist so that fire is always hot and sugar is always sweet. Psychological laws exist so that certain circumstances, like feeling loved, leave the mind peaceful; while others, like being exposed to violence, leave it agitated. Moral laws exist so that lying, stealing or hurting others feel wrong; and being helpful, cheerful or showing compassion feel right. While we all understand intuitively that there are universal laws, very few people actually understand that to live a relatively peaceful life, all you need to do is follow them! Look, *dharma* basically comes down to the following: respect nature, mind your thoughts, and don't be a jerk.

Person 1: And *karma*?

Person 2: Good question. *Karma* shows whether or not nature, God, is currently on your side or not. It's like this: Go against *dharma* and nature will rub you the wrong way, it will cut you down and make you feel the pain. Go with *dharma* and for the most part, it's smooth sailing. This is why it's good to know God, because without God-knowledge you're a rudderless ship. In the end, God isn't watching you. God is just handing out *karma*, the results of your actions. Again it's all impersonal. The laws are built into the system.

Person 1: What system?

Person 2: The field of experience, the cosmic order...*this!*

Person 1: Ok, so If we maintain that God or nature exists and that the creation is

governed by laws, then what created God? And please don't tell me it's turtles all the way down.

Person 2: Ok, let's see if you can follow the logic. Through an empirical process we can show that the source of everything is unborn, changeless, limitless, non-dual awareness. In other words, we are able to show that everything resolves into awareness.

Person 1: You'll need to unpack that for me.

Person 2: For now, let's assume that all experience is non-dual because without non-duality *this* doesn't add up, in spite of what science says. According to science, the universe is random, its origin was an explosion that came out of nothing, and consciousness evolved from some dead matter. Now that's a bit of a stretch even for most scientists, so hear me out. From a person's point of view, strip away the body-mind-sense complex, every limb, every part that you call "me" and you have just awareness—the essence of who you are. I don't have to ask you if you're conscious because it's obvious. From God's point of view, take away all of God's stuff—everything in the universe—and you also have just awareness. We say the universe, God, is conscious. The universe isn't random, because if it were scientists wouldn't be able to, for example, do any calculations. It's only because of consistent natural laws and patterns that we are able to navigate the world at all. You can infer the intelligence behind all creation. Everything here is just knowledge made manifest. How else do you get a towering oak from a small acorn? For this reason, we say the universe is intelligent.

Person 1: You mean 'intelligent design'?

Person 2: Right, it's one area where we're actually in agreement with the bible thumpers. So, up until now we've learned that God is a figurative entity—a name for awareness plus various powers including the knowledge, energy and matter to make stuff. We'll call these powers, *maya*. From this, we're able to state:

*Awareness + maya = God*

Ok, so we've defined God. But how about a person?

*Awareness + body-mind-sense complex = person*

Interestingly enough, both God and the person have awareness. Follow? Everything just resolves back into awareness, even God and God's stuff. It's a bit counterintuitive,

but the essence of the universe isn't dark matter, it's pure, attributeless, non-dual awareness. With me so far?

Person 1: I think so. So you're proposing we are the same as God?

Person 2: Yes and no. We share the same essence as God, just like all clay pots are made of clay, but obviously we cannot wield God's powers and we aren't omnipresent. We are God from the perspective that we are a product of God and by the fact that we share the same essence—awareness—but that's as far as it goes. But let's not diminish the fact that we share the same source, that's pretty cool. It also helps to remind us that everything has been given to us, including this body, mind and intellect. But back to your question, "What created God?" Where it gets tricky is when we look at all of God's stuff. We say God's creation is beginningless. God's creation is beginningless because it exists in awareness and awareness, we say, is a causeless cause. Awareness just is. It's what is never born and never dies. Awareness has no limitations because if it did, it wouldn't be whole, complete, changeless, or non-dual. We say awareness is real and all objects, including thoughts, are only apparently real. By the way, "real" is defined as that which is always present and never changes. Objects—and that includes thoughts, emotions and feelings too—are always changing and unreliable, so they don't qualify. All objects are also made up of other objects, unlike awareness which is whole, complete, and independent of parts. Now this is the tricky part: Because all objects are only apparently real—meaning, they are always changing into something else—they are beginningless, because something that isn't real can never be born.

Person 1: You're making my head explode! Objects don't exist?

Person 2: Objects do exist because they are experienced, but they are not real. It's just like the story of the guy who mistakes a coiled rope for a snake. At the moment of his misinterpretation, the rope is a snake. It's not until the error is corrected that the "snake" becomes a rope again. The "snake" exists but isn't real. Objects exist because we experience them as so, but on closer examination they flunk the test. They are ephemeral, passing, something one moment and something else the next.

Person 1: So, then what are objects?

Person 2: When looked at closely, just a temporary aggregate of smaller parts, but really they are just thoughts. All objects exist as thoughts. We don't actually sense objects, just their properties—color, shape, texture, taste, smell, etc. From the various sensory inputs, the mind automatically takes the properties, aggregates them and applies a name and form so that *wet* and *translucent* becomes "water" and *yellow, hot,* and

*crackling* becomes “fire.”

Person 1: So, we’re living in a thought universe?

Person 2: Bingo. How’s that for non-dual vision!

Person 1: Um...Ok, I guess. But you still haven’t answered my question.

Person 2: Right—“Where does God come from?” Let’s see...Because awareness is never born and never dies, awareness is eternal; and because awareness is eternal, so is God. Remember, the essence of God is just awareness, and because awareness is beginningless and God’s stuff exists within awareness, God is beginningless. Since God has no beginning, God is not born. God simply is. But here’s the catch, God isn’t real.

Person 1: What? Wait, you just took 15 minutes to argue your case for God and now you’re telling me God isn’t real? I guess that proves my point.

Person 2: Which is?

Person 1: There is no God.

Person 2: Remember what I said—by our definition only awareness is real. God only exists because of awareness. God is dependent on awareness and so, is only apparently real, just like all God’s stuff. Nevertheless, we still experience God’s creation. So, you can’t just write off God. You’re in this dreamscape whether you like it or not. Everything you have is given to you, even if it isn’t real by our definition. God isn’t to be dismissed, God is to be known.

Person 1: But how is God able to create anything and most importantly, why would it want to?

Person 2: I don’t know, maybe God was bored? Or maybe God just wanted to know itself so it created conscious beings with senses that allow God to see, smell, taste, touch and hear its creation? It’s a mystery why anything exists at all. The deeper you dive into this creation, the more bizarre it gets. Open one door and there’s another, and then another—an endless spiral of doors to be opened. Or you can look at it like a puzzle folded within another puzzle, where the macrocosmic mirrors the microcosmic and vice versa. It’s seeing the ocean in a drop of water and all that.

Person 1: How so?

Person 2: God's stuff is just patterns, patterns everywhere, and God is very frugal. Take nature's fractals for example. The veins under your skin appear like the veins in a leaf, which look like the branches of a tree, which appear like the river-made veins found on the surface of our planet. Nature is just a fixed set of laws and patterns applied over and over again. From a few we get the many, just like from the 26 letters of the alphabet we're able to assemble thousands of words, essays and books. So what do you think of God so far?

Person 1: To me, it sounds like you're just explaining nature but in a way that suggests there is an awareness and intelligence behind it.

Person 2: Yep, God isn't about guilt, fear or asking for a new HDTV. God is to be worshiped, not because we should fear God, but because we know we aren't in control.

Person 1: Control of what?

Person 2: *This*, the results. Once you know God and how God's field of experience works, you just let go. You really have no choice. It's complete acceptance and with that acceptance, a big sigh of relief, frankly.

Person 1: But I have free will, I don't need to negotiate with God.

Person 2: Even if you could, God's laws are still non-negotiable, and from your point of view, you do have free will and a certain degree of control, but looking at the big picture, you're totally dependent on God. No action takes place without the blessing of everything else. It should be obvious that there's a network of constant support operating here. Americans, in particular, take pride in self-reliance, but it's all just a big joke, something writers romanticizing about the old West made up. You didn't do anything to get to where you're at.

Person 1: Wait a minute...

Person 2: Look, everything has been given to you—your parents, your shelter, your education, your clothing, your food, your partner, your entertainment... Don't you see the infinite actions that had to take place so that you could be here talking to me right now? There's an old Zen monk who likes to say he can see the whole universe in a single sheet of paper, and he's right! Look at everything that had to occur for even a single sheet of paper to manifest—the sun, the water, the tree, the lumber jack, the chainsaw, the truck, the factory, the salesperson, the retailer, and on and on. The sheet

of paper didn't manifest itself, and neither did you or any of that which you believe you have control of. Your sense of control is just an illusion, all results come from the field of experience. Do you see how this works? *No action takes place without the blessing of all things in the field.* Not even your ability to make decisions. How much control do you have even over your own thoughts?!

Person 1: Um...Ok. But if your God exists and is so wonderful then why all the evil and bloodshed in the world? Why would anyone worship such a sadist?

Person 2: God doesn't cause the world's problems, ignorance of God does. People act out of fear and desire and create suffering. Take away ignorance and everything is totally fine. Furthermore, in this world of duality nothing exists without its opposite. You cannot have heat without cold, sweet without bitter, or beautiful without ugly. What would you have 'beautiful' to compare with if everything were beautiful?

Person 1: You have an answer for everything, don't you? Maybe this is just another elaborate story invented by some old "yogi" living in a cave.

Person 2: Look, this isn't a smart-a-thon to see who can make the other guy paint himself into a corner. There are no winners. We're all swimming in the same fish bowl, here. I'm just calling out what you, and everyone else, intuitively already knows. We might not be able to put our finger on it, so we come up with all kinds of names for it—God, Isvara, Allah, Jehovah, "Him," "Her"...whatever you want to call it, it doesn't really matter. It's all impersonal, like the weather. But you might find there's a certain usefulness to having God-knowledge. It helps alleviate ignorance—the cause of suffering—and it promotes healthy habits like gratitude and letting go—two of this world's best remedies for alleviating stress. You and I can argue all day and night whether or not God exists, but one thing you cannot deny is *this*, that is, *this experience*. You cannot deny that what you're witnessing is being simultaneously created, maintained, and recycled by a power greater than you. This you cannot deny, my friend. Call it nature if you will. I'll stick with God.