

Analyzing an Anonymous Text: The Professor and the Chalk

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There is a supposedly true story available in YouTube videos and other places on the Internet. It describes an incident in a college classroom in which an atheist professor is confronted by a Christian student. As far as I know, the original author of this story is never identified: it is an anonymous text. A careful linguistic analysis may be able to answer two questions about the story:

- Is the document what it purports to be, i.e., a description of an actual incident in a college classroom?
- What can we glean about the author from the text?

To be clear, this report is not an attempt to either promote or denigrate the Christian religion. I am simply analyzing a particular anonymous text that happens to be aimed at a Christian audience.

A transcript of the text of the video is included as an appendix to this report.

Structure of the Video

The video that tells the story is a series of slides with text, but no images, and no animation except for the fade-out/fade-in transition between the slides. While all the text is in the same sans-serif font, it does not have a uniform font size, and is larger on slides that have only a few words.

The text can logically be divided into two parts, the first somewhat longer than the second (3:18 minutes versus 2:11 minutes; 490 words versus 309 words). The first part is the narrative itself, told in third person. The second part is addressed to the viewer. As will be explained below, the two parts appear to have different authors.

In the video whose link is in the Appendix, there is a soundtrack consisting of two songs, one played immediately after the other:

1. “It Ends Tonight” by the All-American Rejects.
2. “Tomorrow” by Avril Lavigne.

Other versions of the video might have different soundtracks. The audio portion of the video, however, is outside the scope of this linguistic analysis.

The Narrative

The main part of the text describes an incident in a philosophy class at “USC” (presumably the University of Southern California, though there are other less prominent schools that have those

initials¹). There are two main characters in the narrative, an atheist professor of philosophy and a Christian freshman student, plus 300 witnesses, the other students in the lecture hall.

In the orientation section of the narrative (to use William Labov's term), it is explained that the professor is a "deeply committed atheist" whose goal in this course is to disabuse his students of any belief in God. The climax of his class is a supposedly empirical demonstration. He drops a piece of chalk onto the floor, saying that if God existed, he "could" (though "would" is implied by the context) prevent the chalk from breaking when it hits the floor. In the particular scene described in the narrative, the Christian student is the only person ever to claim that he still believes in God or Jesus after the professor has made his arguments, and does so immediately before the chalk experiment.

On the day described in the narrative, with the Christian student literally standing up for his faith, the professor prepares to drop the chalk, but it happens to slip out of his fingers. Its fall is broken by the fabric of his pants, and it rolls onto the floor without breaking. The professor rushes out of the room, and the student takes over the class to talk about the Christian faith.

Is the story true?

The first words of the narrative are "This is a true story." This assertion of the factual nature of the story is what gives it its power, allows it to validate the Christian faith of those who read it, and, the author probably hopes, help to convert non-believers. The story implies that God stepped in to prove an atheist wrong. But is the story really true? Is there any internal evidence for or against its authenticity?

We can examine three aspects of the story to address this question: whether it includes any independently verifiable facts, whether the story is internally consistent, and whether there are significant questions left unanswered by the story.

Verifiable facts

One way to evaluate the story's truthfulness is to compare what it says with information that can be obtained from other sources. Unfortunately, the narrative contains no such bits of information. While it's true that the University of Southern California exists, that is not an indication that the events described happened there. The following are some basic verifiable facts that could have been included, but were not.

When did this happen? The narrative only says "Just a few years ago." Perhaps that means that the event happened within, say, five years previous to the time the story was written down, but there are also no clues about when it was written.

What was the professor's name? He is identified as a professor of philosophy and an atheist, but is not given a name. Without his name, it is impossible to confirm that he ever worked at USC, or to find his curriculum vitae and see what he has written about religion or atheism in an academic context.

What was the student's name? We know that he was a freshman and a Christian, but otherwise he is not identified. So it cannot be confirmed that he attended USC at any time.

1. University of South Carolina, University of Southern Colorado (now Colorado State University–Pueblo).

What was the name of the class? If the class were named, it could be compared with records at USC. We assume that it was a class in philosophy, but even that is not spelled out. A professor in one department may at times teach a class in a different one.

What was the student's major? This is relevant because at one point (slide 21), the text says that the student was required to take the class for his major. This information could allow someone to see if a class as described was ever required for that major.

Has anyone corroborated the event? According to the story, the incident had 300 witnesses, all of whom remained for half an hour after the professor left in order to listen to the student talk about his Christian faith. Have any of them published their own perspectives on the event? None are referred to in the video.

Internal consistency

If this is a story that describes a particular incident, then the different parts of the story should agree with one another. That is not the case. The story as told contains a number of internal inconsistencies.

Was the class required? Slide 4 refers to the class as “one required class,” implying that it was required of all students at the school. That may explain the very large class size, said to be 300 students. But slide 21 says that the student “was required to take the class for his major.” This implies that the class is *not* required of all students, but only those with one or more particular majors. And when the student is introduced in slide 19, he is described as a “student who happened to enroll.” This phrasing, “happened to [do something]” indicates that there was no compelling reason for this student to take this particular class. It implies that the class wasn't required, but perhaps the student picked it because he needed another class for the semester and this one fit his schedule.

What is the professor's question? In the orientation section, it says that every year the professor asked the same question of his students, after explaining why God couldn't exist: “If there is anyone here who still believes in Jesus, stand up!” But in the particular incident described in the story, he asks the class a different question: “If there is anyone here who still believes in *God*, stand up!” [Emphasis added.] These two questions refer to two different assertions, possibly three. (“Do you believe in Jesus” could refer to either a belief that Jesus of Nazareth was an actual historical person, or to a belief that the historical Jesus was the son of God.) The professor would have had to make a different philosophical argument to refute each of these assertions.

Is the professor's logic really impeccable? The professor in the story is described as someone who is very good at making philosophical arguments. “His students were always afraid to argue with him because of his impeccable logic.” “... no one had ever really gone against him because of his reputation.” And it is implied that the professor's lectures convinced the students that “God couldn't exist.” Yet the professor's words and actions belie such a description. He seems to know little if anything about how philosophical arguments work. Consider:

- *Ad hominem* attacks. A basic course in logic while he was in college himself would have taught the professor that an *ad hominem* attack (attacking your opponent instead of his argument) carries no weight, and should never be used. Yet this character shouts “You fool!” at anyone who doesn't agree with his conclusion—a crude *ad hominem* attack. If the professor

had instead shouted “Show me the flaw in my argument!” at the student, that would have been in character for a professor of philosophy.

- Missing arguments. The professor states, “If God existed, he would keep this piece of chalk from breaking when it hit the ground!” But he gives no logical reason why his proposition should be accepted as true.
- Jumping to an illogical conclusion. When the chalk failed to shatter, “The professor’s jaw dropped as he stared at the chalk. He looked up at the young man, then ran out of the lecture hall.” (Slides 33 and 34) The implication is that the professor immediately saw the hand of God in the event, and was mortified that he had been so wrong. But the logical reaction would be for him to apply “Occam’s razor,” and assume that the simplest explanation that fits the facts is likely the right one. That is, the one that requires the fewest assumptions. To believe that God caused the chalk not to break requires several assumptions that are unlikely from the point of view of a professor of philosophy. (God exists, despite the professor’s strong belief and “impeccable” arguments to the contrary; God can micromanage events, and break the laws of physics; God chose to do so in this case, even though he had not interfered in the last 20 years.) An alternate explanation requires only a single, unremarkable assumption: the professor was not holding the chalk tightly enough as he talked.

Unanswered questions

The story seems to leave out information that would help in understanding it, and in adding credibility.

What arguments did the professor use?

The story says nothing about the logic that the professor used to disprove the existence of God. There are arguments for and against the existence of God that would be known to a professor of philosophy with a particular interest in the subject. But the story gives no details at all about which arguments he used against belief in God, or which arguments for such belief he undermined, and how. Since this information is missing entirely, it raises the question: did the author or any of the author’s informants actually attend the professor’s class?

Where did the author get the information to write the story?

The story includes statements about people’s thoughts and private lives, but no indication of whom the author talked to in order to obtain this information.

- The professor was a “deeply committed atheist....His primary goal...was to prove that God couldn’t exist.” (Slides 3 and 4) Was this information in the course description and/or faculty biography? Did the author interview the professor? If the author obtained this information directly from the professor, why not the professor’s explanation of why he ran out of the lecture hall?
- “His students were always afraid to argue with him because of his impeccable logic. Sure, some had argued in class at times, but no one had ever really gone against him because of his reputation.” (Slides 5 and 6) What research backs up these statements about the emotions and thought processes of the students? Who provided this information?
- “In twenty years, no one had ever stood up.” (Slide 19) How did the author research this? Who could reliably confirm such a statement?

- “Most of the students thought that God couldn't exist.”(Slide 17) According to the story, the class had 300 students each year for 20 years. How many of these 6,000 students and former students did the author interview in order to determine what “most of the students” thought? No indication is given.

The story includes some information about the internal life of the student who stood up. We are told he is a Christian, but that is obvious from his actions later in the story. However, the narrator also claims that “he had heard stories about his professor.” “He was afraid.” He “prayed every morning” for courage. He hoped that nothing could shatter his faith. Such information could only have come from the student himself.

When the professor prepared to give his demonstration, the chalk “slipped out of his fingers, off his shirt cuff, onto the pleat of his pants, down his leg, and off his shoe.” Who would know what happened during that fraction of a second at this level of detail? Not the Christian student, because he was at the back of a large lecture hall. The professor might know, but if he told the author this much, why didn't he also report why he reacted to the incident the way he did? The logical source of the information is a student sitting near the front of the class, watching the demonstration carefully. But except for the Christian student who stood up, the class is treated as a crowd of 300, not as individuals.

So, overall, the author would need to have interviewed the student, the professor (about his atheistic beliefs but not about his dramatic exit from the lecture hall), at least one other student in the class, and a significant fraction of the thousands of students who had seen the chalk demonstration over two decades, in order to obtain the information presented as fact in the narrative. This seems unlikely. The more believable explanation (Occam's razor again) is that the author has used the “omniscient narrator” device—a technique used in fiction writing. He or she has simply invented elements that make for a good story. Or even invented the entire incident.

Conclusion - Veracity

Despite the statement at the beginning of the narrative—“This is a true story”—there is no evidence that the incident described actually occurred. That is, there is no corroborating evidence supplied, whether in the form of verifiable details like the names of the people involved, or pointers to witnesses' stories on the Web or elsewhere.

In contrast, there are many indications that the story is a work of fiction. The story has multiple internal inconsistencies, for example: in details such as whether the class is required, and in the disconnect between the professor's description and his actions. There is also important information left out, such as the sources of the author's information about the class and its history.

There is no reason to believe that this story is true, despite the claim at the beginning.

Who are the Authors?

The text of the video, as noted above, has two sections, though they are not identified as such. The narrative of the classroom incident ends on slide 36. Slides 37 through 61 consist mostly of a series of rhetorical questions addressed to the viewer. Were the two sections written by the same person? This is unlikely. For the sake of convenience, I will refer to the two authors as “the Storyteller” and “the Questioner” in the following sections.

Who is the Storyteller?

One thing that should be obvious to most readers—and unremarkable—is that the Storyteller is a native speaker of English. The story has no obvious “contamination” from some other first language in the form of grammatical or spelling mistakes, or sentences with odd word orders. And he or she uses the American convention of putting final punctuation (exclamation points) within the closing quotation marks, rather than following the British practice of putting the punctuation outside.

Also obvious is that the author is a Christian. The hero of the story is a Christian student who ends up teaching his classmates about “God’s love for them and His power through Jesus.” (Slide 36). The villain is a simply drawn atheist character. But what can also be said is that the Storyteller is not very knowledgeable about other religions. This is evident by the way the author conflates “believing in God” and “believing in Jesus.”

Does a belief in Jesus mean a belief that Jesus is the son of God? If so, both the Jews and the Muslims believe in God without believing in Jesus. The Jews see him as a wise teacher; the Muslims revere him as a prophet, in a line that includes both Moses and Muhammad.

If, on the other hand, the Storyteller would acknowledge that Jewish and Muslim views count as “belief” in Jesus, then by implication, someone can believe in Jesus without believing in God. Like the Jews, many Buddhists accept Jesus as a wise teacher. But Buddhism is a religion without a god. And many Hindus see Jesus as a holy man—but the Hindus believe in multiple gods.

Either way, believing in God and believing in Jesus are not the same thing, except from a narrow Christian point of view.

It also seems that the Storyteller has never studied philosophy, or at least has never taken a formal course in philosophy. There is no evidence of any actual knowledge of philosophy in the story as written. As detailed above, the professor of philosophy does not act in a way that such a person would be expected to act. And curiously, the class in philosophy doesn’t seem to actually teach the students anything about philosophy. Instead, as it is described, the entire semester is devoted to the professor presenting one side of a narrow philosophical argument. There is no indication that the students have studied other ideas on the topic, or have had to create and defend their own arguments.

Why would a major university schedule such a course, much less make it a required course? This is not explained, and seems to be unlikely. This is one clue that suggests that the Storyteller has not gone to college at all: he or she did not consider such dynamics.

The other clue is the quality of the Storyteller’s writing. Yes, it is grammatically correct, and coherent at the sentence and paragraph level (despite a few minor typographical errors). But at the larger scale, there are inconsistencies and missing information. The experience of writing academic essays in college and having them graded on criteria such as this would likely have added more rigor to the Storyteller’s writing.

In sum: The Storyteller is most likely an American high school student or graduate with little or no college, and specifically has not taken a college-level philosophy course. He or she is a Christian, but seems to have no knowledge of the theological discussions about the existence of God within Christianity, or of how other religions view God and Jesus.

Who is the Questioner?

The second part of the text has a different writing style than the first, and based on linguistic evidence has a different author. While the first part was a third-person narrative, the second part is addressed directly to the reader, and includes a number of rhetorical questions. But the conclusion that the second section is the product of a different writer is not based solely on this switch from third person to second person.

The two authors use punctuation differently. The text as a whole contains no periods. This may be a stylistic choice by whoever copied the text onto the slides. But otherwise, the narrative is properly punctuated, with sentences ending with exclamation marks or question marks as appropriate. (And in one case, triple exclamation marks for emphasis.) But only seven of the Questioner's 12 questions end in question marks. One of the Questioner's sentences ends in both a question mark and an exclamation mark, a combination that the Storyteller never used. And where an ellipsis might have been appropriate to indicate that the author's thought had trailed off, the Questioner used 14 dots instead of three. (Slide 42)

There is one important lexical difference between the two sections. The Storyteller consistently referred to "Jesus," but the Questioner uses the title "Christ" for the same referent.

It is not known when the narrative was written: based on internal evidence, it could have been written anytime in perhaps the last century. But the Questioner's reference to things passing through cyberspace indicates that this portion of the text was written sometime after the introduction of the World Wide Web in 1993, and likely even later, after the Web had become a part of everyday life for Americans.

The Questioner is a less sophisticated writer than the Storyteller. Despite the inconsistencies in the narrative as a whole, the individual sentences and paragraphs in the narrative are clear and coherent. This is not so with the Questioner. Consider this sentence: "Isn't it funny how simple it is for people to trash God and then wonder why the world's going to hell[?]" The author has begun the sentence with two stock phrases, "Isn't it funny" and "how simple it is" that don't seem to go together well, and follows them with two clauses that also don't fit together smoothly. The Questioner does not have as good an ear for language as the Storyteller does.

In sum: The Questioner is a believing Christian, and wrote the second portion of the text sometime after 1993. He or she is a high school student or graduate, but is not as sophisticated a writer as the Storyteller.

Conclusions

The story that is claimed to be true by its author is actually a fiction. The incident described never happened.

The text of the video was written by two different people. Both are Christians. Probably neither of them has a college education, or much knowledge of religions other than Christianity. One author wrote the story of the classroom incident and the other author wrote the series of rhetorical questions that follow, possibly at different times.

Appendix: Original Text

“This Will Keep Us All Thinking”

Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6h09cF5uEDA>

Note: The video is a series of slides, several words per slide, no periods. For the sake of clarity, I have added paragraph breaks as they seemed appropriate, and added slide numbers in brackets. The quotation marks and other punctuation are as they appeared in the original. (J. Devney)

[1]This one should keep us all thinking

[2]This is a true story of something that happened just a few years ago at USC [3]There was a professor of philosophy there who was a deeply committed atheist [4]His primary goal for one required class was to spend the entire semester to prove that God couldn't exist [5]His students were always afraid to argue with him because of his impeccable logic

[6]Sure, some had argued in class at times, but no one had ever really gone against him because of his reputation

[7]At the end of every semester on the last day, he would say to his class of 300 students [8]”If there is anyone here who still believes in Jesus, stand up!” [9]In twenty years, no one had ever stood up [10]They knew what he was going to do next

[11]He would say, “Because anyone who still believes in God is a fool” [12]If God existed, he could stop this piece of chalk from hitting the ground and breaking [13]Such a simple task to prove that He is God, and yet He can't do it”

[14]And every year, he would drop the chalk onto the tile floor of the classroom [15]and it would shatter into a hundred pieces [16]All of the students would do nothing but stop and stare [17]Most of the students thought that God couldn't exist [18]Certainly, a number of Christians has slipped through, but for 20 years, they had been too afraid to stand up

[19]Well, a few years ago there was a freshman who happened to enroll [20]He was a Christian, and had heard stories about his professor [21]He was required to take the class for his major, and he was afraid [22]But for three months that semester, he prayed every morning [23]that he would have the courage to stand up no matter what the professor said, or what the class thought [24]Nothing they said could ever shatter his faith...he hoped

[25]Finally, the day came [26]The professor said, “If there is anyone here who still believes in God, stand up!” [27]The professor and the class of 300 looked at him, shocked, as he stood up in the back of the classroom

[28]The professor shouted, “You FOOL!!! [29]If God existed, he would keep this piece of chalk from breaking when it hit the ground!”

[30]He proceeded to drop the chalk [31]but as he did, it slipped out of his fingers, off his shirt cuff, onto the pleat of his pants, down his leg, and off his shoe [32]As it hit the ground, it simply rolled away unbroken

[33]The professor's jaw dropped as he stared at the chalk [34]He looked up at the young man, then ran out of the lecture hall

[35]The young man, who had stood, proceeded to walk to the front of the room and shared his faith in Jesus for the next half hour [36]300 students stayed and listened as he told of God's love for them and His power through Jesus

[37]You have 2 choices [38]1. Pretend you never read this [39]2. Pass this along to your Christian and non-Christian friends, giving them the encouragement we all need every day [40]When you choose option 2, you have chosen to STAND UP

[41]In light of the many jokes we tell to one another for a laugh, this is a little different [42]This is not intended to be a joke, it's not funny, it's intended to get you thinking.....

[43]Isn't it funny how simple it is for people to trash God and then wonder why the world's going to hell

[44]Isn't it funny how we believe what the newspapers say, but question what the Bible says

[45]Isn't it funny how everyone wants to go to heaven [46]provided they do not have to believe, think, say, or do anything the Bible says? Or is it scary?

[47]Isn't it funny how someone can say, "I believe in God" but still follow Satan [48](who, by the way, also "believes" in God)

[49]Isn't it funny how you can send a thousand jokes through e-mail and they spread like wildfire [51]but when you start sending messages regarding the Lord, people think twice about sharing

[52]Isn't it funny how the lewd, crude, vulgar and obscene pass freely through cyberspace [53]but the public discussion of Jesus is suppressed in the school and workplace?

[54]Isn't it funny how someone can be so fired up for Christ on Sunday [55]but be an invisible Christian the rest of the week?

[56]Are you laughing?!

[57]Isn't it funny how when you go to tell someone this, you won't [58]because you aren't sure what they believe, or what they will think of you for telling them

[59]Isn't it funny how I can be more worried about what other people think of me than what God thinks of me?

[60]Will YOU pass this on? [61]I did