

Josh

The Answer to the Chicken and Egg Question

I inherited my obsession with chickens from my father. My father believed that the Jewish people were married to the chicken long before their incompletely documented liaison with the land of Israel and the Almighty. He loved to expound upon the parallels of the chicken and the Jews, claiming that they were not only connected by a hapless predilection for repeated incarceration and mass destruction, but more importantly by the proximity of their status as primordial archetypes. What semblance could be more obvious?

The chicken and egg versus Adam and Eve. To my father, this historical affinity and no other provided the metaphysical key to human - and therefore by deduction - Jewish suffering. To my mother it meant the delay of many desserts.

“Sometimes the clues we are given on this earth are so obvious as to escape detection by mortals. You don’t even have to know Torah. Do you think God really expects the world to know his intentions through the contents of a book that most people can’t even read, let alone understand? What about the Yukagiry people of Siberia? Do you think they can read Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek or Latin?” We didn’t know the Yukagiry people, but if they were anything like our neighbors, the Rosenbergs, they could indeed read Hebrew. My father, however, could not.

“If there is any truth to be grasped, God knew that it had to be not only universally applicable but also universally accessible. To grasp the origins of existence and the nature of suffering, all you need to do is: Study the chicken. It’s that simple.”

Over the years my father had grafted a detailed lore onto the history of the Jews. Our bedtime stories consisted not of palatably altered fairy tales in which the hero or heroine emerges wise or rich beyond logic as the result of a good deed or clever retort, but rather of ancient and sundry permutations of pithy encounters of the early Canaanites with chickens. My father never failed to point out that the “fowl that may fly above the earth” was the first animal mentioned in Genesis on the *fifth* day, an entire day *before* the creation of man, and quoted Genesis 1:20-22 liberally, though not precisely, that the first commandment given to “be fruitful and multiply” was granted to *winged fowl* and not, as commonly believed, to the human being.

In spite of my father’s professed atheism, my mother tried to adapt to his peculiarities by instilling in us a respect for God’s discretion in not mixing up the archetypes. She painted absurd scenarios of how the world might have appeared had the chicken actually been the main proprietor of the Garden of Eden. My father never actually argued that the apocalyptic course the world had taken many times over would have remained unchanged without the advent of poultry, but was convinced that the existence of our forefathers’ feathered fowl did hold answers which God had hidden purposely. Not out of spite, vengeance or misdirected power, but rather because God recognized that a truth which was uncovered by way of toil and logic was worth more on the heavenly scale than one which emerged as a result of providence or vision (the latter, my father contended, was usually the result of pathologically discombobulated neural pathways). And the fact that one could actually eat a chicken only served to support his contention that the analogy was divinely intended for human consumption.

As a result, when company was present our grace before meals unfurled as follows:

“Let us not forget the true meaning of God’s goodness by concentrating on the material goods that lay before us on this table. Let us give thanks to Him for having given man dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air and over the cattle and over the earth and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth, and not the chicken.”

That part about the “creeping things that creepeth upon the earth” always got us giggling, and we just assumed that the redundant style and comic imagery of this prayer were provided for our benefit. We used the phrase at every convenient opportunity to poke fun at our schoolmates. Yet only long after we were full-grown adults did we discover that, although the archaic language my father borrowed for this prayer was totally incongruous with his otherwise unvarnished manner of speaking, the *creeping things that creepeth upon the earth* was not the result of a homespun reformation of biblical writ, but actually appeared verbatim as the last sentence of Genesis 1:26.

The prayer, however, never failed to elicit an expression of suppressed surprise by our mother and our dinner guests. It also never ceased to amaze us how not one of those subjected to my father’s crowning subliminal contention that the chicken may have actually been considered as a possible candidate for the dominating beast of the world, ever challenged or even questioned the passage.

Even his theories on the origins of anti-Semitism were related to the connection of Jews and chickens. Neither my mother nor my father subscribed to the pervasive view that the earliest cause of anti-Semitism was the Judaic insistence upon monotheism in a predominantly pantheistic world. While historians agreed that the disparate tribes of the Holy Land were challenged and angered that a tribe amongst them could propose to have direct access to the one and only God - namely *their* God - my father postulated that it was not spiritual chauvinism that created the chiasmic animosity, but rather culinary envy. Hebrews had the chicken. Heathens had none.

My father somehow even convinced my mother that the primary and sole cause of anti-Semitism was that the Jews were the first to enjoy the delights of poultry, well before their compatriots even knew how to breed it. Later forms of economic anti-Semitism, which are commonly believed to have begun as a result of medieval Christian laws of money handling, were considered by my father to be a gross anachronism. The accepted historical view acknowledged that the Catholic Church considered the handling of money a dirty affair, the indulgence in which Christians should be prohibited, leaving Jews as the logical recipient of the task and therefore the only visible culprits of the ubiquitous and constant economic hardships which plagued the common folk right up to Hitler.

No, my father contended, economic plight was not the root cause of the problem, but merely one of its symptoms. His reasoning was not simplistic, and actually took economic history into account, if only peripherally. It is well known that in the Christian era, Jews were prohibited from owning certain valuable items like land and jewels. Based upon this historical detail, he even postulated that the saying, *you can’t have your cake and eat it too* originally derived from the concept that you could not have *gold* and eat it too. Jews could not *have* gold. Therefore they *ate* it.

He used two pallid sources of evidence to illustrate this: chicken soup and the golden egg. According to the symbolism of the wedding, the *goldene yukh* (unceremoniously translated from the Yiddish as the glistening pearls of fat in chicken soup) has been served since time immemorial at the Jewish nuptials to symbolize a future life of gold and riches for the

newlyweds. My father, however, read into it further proof of the perennial inseparability of Jew and Chicken.

And the Golden Egg in the Jack and the Beanstalk story was no coincidence. My father held that this was simply one of the last remnants of ancient Jewish lore that propagated the archetypal connection of Jew and Chicken - namely the Gentile Jacob's ladder.

"If you haven't noticed the similarities between Jacob (Jack) and the ladder (the beanstalk), you've missed the point entirely," my father explained, "and just exactly *what* comes as the reward at the end of the story?" he asked us with Rabbinic intonation.

"The Golden Egg!" we children shouted dutifully.

Taking day five of biblical creation as his lead, my father not only reconstructed the events of history back to the Jew and Chicken dialectic, but also ventured to solve the basic question of what came first, the chicken or the egg.

He claimed that the flaws of all existing theories rested upon *one* basic omission and that this basic omission reduced the entire edifice to rubble. This he likened to Raskalnikov's grave oversight in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Raskalnikov believed himself to be above the laws of society and tested his theory of the *overman* by committing the "perfect" murder - a murder unmotivated by emotion.

Analogous to all misguided modern chicken and egg solutions, Raskalnikov's downfall came about due to one weakness: the subconscious desire to be caught. The criminal mind craves recognition and thus leaves an unconscious trail, which then enables his pernicious act to become discovered.

Similarly, my father was able to slay all of his dinner table opponents who thought they had solved the chicken and egg question by the seemingly insignificant, yet nonetheless fatal oversight. Ironically, this omission had nothing to do with 19th Century Russian literature, nor with any existing biblical passage. No, according to my father, contemporary chicken and egg solutions omitted one gritty, primal, essentially mudbound aspect necessary for its proof:

Humidity.

More precisely: *Twelve percent humidity.*

We all knew that his final conclusion based upon this attribute lacked originality, not least of all because it required the assumption that there is a God. Therefore conversations at the table often opened with a perusal of well known ontological proofs of the origin of God's existence. After a time, the stubbornness of my father's meanderings wore down the patience of his guests to a gaping and tattered exhaustion, the desperation of which left him free to pursue the more popular and entertaining question of the chicken and egg.

But the discussion following the less humorous investigation of the origins of a deity also left guests relieved and therefore less stringent in their logical faculties, which was exactly where my father wanted them. He likened his own methods to those of Socrates, who he claimed pummeled his students to agreement by simply outlasting them.

Even when it was clear to all present that my father was not only vastly inferior in his reasoning capabilities, but disproportionately zealous in flaunting them, it should be noted that he was not interested in actually proving a theorem. His motivation was the stuff of a

less noble nature, one that circumvented the spirit of scientific objectivity, substituted by a proud instinct bent unswervingly on proving the superiority of his unique and simplistic discovery in the face of a seasonally rotating captive audience.

The tastelessness of winning an ineptly mounted argument did not escape his attention. It could even be argued that my father successfully elevated mediocrity to a high art form. When we pointed out that no true marksman could ever derive pleasure from killing a deer by accidentally stunning it with the headlights of a Land Rover then smashing it with the bull rack, my father retorted with irritation,

“Who’s talking about smashing our guests with an automobile? We don’t even own a Land Rover!” He was no friend to rhetorical device.

Some of the guests he corralled were prominent in their fields and displayed methods of induction not only superior to those of my father, but strikingly original and elegant. Yet my father’s final complacent, utterly mono-logic punch line never failed to elicit a reaction of dour confusion. The guest was forced to concede that the complete lack of affectation with which my father flaunted his result did in fact render his reasoning commendable. All the more so because it was born of a man who was awarded entry into college by winning an orphanage spelling contest.

No one who ever witnessed the cyclical Socratic scenario in our household could remain undazzled by the carefully honed stage craft, the exquisite timing and delivery of the *pointe* of my father. Admittedly, there was also a certain amount of sadistic pleasure we all gleaned from watching the uninitiated guest squirm in what we hyperbolically called the “electric chair.” But whenever it became clear to us that the person poised in that chair was intellectually superior to my father and we mentioned the fact, he simply cocked his head to the side, gave us a sidelong glance and said,

“Nothing is superior to the power of the common man’s logic.”

Although my father was neither common nor logical, there was style and a certain plebeian grace, which we gladly agreed to accept as logic’s surrogate.

One night we were joined by a well-known and respected biologist who became the unwitting participant in an uncharacteristically sparse discourse. His real name was Professor Pylepec, but we secretly called him *Dr. Zygote*. When all were seated, my father opted to use my mother’s chicken casserole as his port of entry.

“I hope you like the casserole my wife prepared tonight, Professor, as she doesn’t skimp on the eggs. We’ve had a lot of guests here with cholesterol problems, so usually we would ask before you showed up whether or not you can stomach a concoction like this.”

“My cholesterol level is fine, and I love casseroles.” Professor Zygote answered.

My father continued,

“I told her she shouldn’t make a chicken casserole, as the idea of using a chicken and an egg in one dish seemed to just beckon the time-worn question of ‘which came first’ as the starter to a dinnertime conversation, and the kids get bored by discussions of a metaphysical nature.”

“Oh, really. Maybe they haven’t been properly initiated into the subtleties of the problem.”

The transition was smooth as it was predictable.

“Problem is,” my father said, “they always hear the same answer.”

“Which is?”

“Well, I’m sure you know - the egg, of course.”

“I’m afraid I’d have to give the same answer to that though.”

“Everyone does,” my father conceded, “it’s the Zeitgeist, I guess.”

“I wouldn’t say that. From a biological point of view the answer is fairly clear. If of course, you accept evolution as a given.”

“Evolution? The kids know a bit about that, but why don’t you give your take on it, Professor?”

The unsuspecting Zygote complied.

“If we answer the question in the exact way it is proposed, ‘what came first, the chicken or the egg?’ we would have to say the egg came first. But the egg that came first would have been from a *non-chicken*, a prehistoric animal such as a dinosaur.”

“Why wasn’t it a chicken, Professor?”

“Chickens came later on the evolutionary scale. But I assume you want us to restrict ourselves to one species, in which case, we need to reformulate the question to: What came first, the chicken or the *chicken* egg?”

“Fair enough. What’s your answer to that?” my father asked coyly.

“Well, we do have to make one more limitation to our term ‘chicken egg’ before we proceed to answer it. Namely, by ‘chicken egg’ do we mean an egg which is *laid* by a chicken, or one which is *hatched* by a chicken?”

“That sounds like a trick question. If we limit it in the way you suggest we’ve answered the question through the definition itself.”

“Different definitions do yield various results, no question,” agreed the professor, “so you’re right when we’re talking about an egg which is *laid* by a chicken. Semantically we have already answered the question: The chicken came first.”

“Agreed.”

“On the other hand, if we are talking about an egg which is *hatched* by a chicken, it still leaves the possibility open as to what *laid* that particular egg.

“So,” my father asked, “what are we missing?”

“Evolution.” Professor Zygote explained, “We know that eons ago there were [non-chickens](#) who were close to what we know today as the modern chicken, but not quite. At some point, however, we would find a zygote for what we would now call a chicken. Before this embryo becomes a chicken, it must gestate in an egg first, and this egg would be a *chicken egg*

hatched by a non-chicken. It follows, then, that the *non-chicken* egg came first, and the *chicken* came second. So, assuming that we do accept evolution, the egg came first, but it wasn't a chicken egg."

"Well, what about the *first* non-chicken egg then, Professor? Where did that come from?"

The discussion had taken on its anticipated Socratic character. We yawned audibly.

"At least from a biological and hence scientific point of view," Professor Zygote continued, "we see evolution as the only logical way of moving from a simple state to a more complex one."

"Does that mean the chicken is a more complex organism than an egg, then?" my father asked.

"Yes, it certainly is. An egg is a single cell. All higher life forms begin as a single cell. Precisely this property of life beginning on a basic level is what allows evolution to proceed at all, as all genetic changes must happen at the basic level, not in the full-grown organism."

"But taken literally, when is the point when the modern contemporary chicken emerged from an egg?"

"If we take evolution as a given," the professor answered, "we then assume *a priori* that at some time there was a modern version of the chicken which emerged from an egg laid by an *almost modern* chicken."

"This may sound silly, but someone once said that the egg was the chicken's idea of getting more chickens," my mother offered.

"It's silly, but not too silly to invite examination," assured the professor. "Even using Augustine's cosmological argument one can solve that."

"Can you explain that to the children?" my father requested. My mother peered over her glasses at us.

"Sure, it's simple enough for most kids to understand. Even if the opening lines use florid rhetoric, those lines open the argument and need to be included. Augustine wrote that,

'All creation, with one voice, cries out that it has been created. It does not owe its being to itself, but to another. For, being made (facta) they had a beginning.'"

"Okay," my father countered, "that just says that there is a beginning. It doesn't say what made all of creation."

"No, it doesn't," agreed the professor, "but Augustine continues:

'If they had a beginning, then there was a time in which they were not. Either they were made by another agent who was not made, but ever living, or they were made by themselves.'"

"But how could they be made by themselves?" my father asked.

“Well, that brings us to the chicken and egg problem, doesn’t it? Augustine didn’t specifically deal with the chicken. But he did take the question of self-creation seriously enough to provide a logical argument explaining its absurdity, which went as follows,

‘If they were made by themselves, then in order to make themselves they must have been already, ideo sumus quia facta sumus; non ergo eramus, antequam essemus, ut fieri possemus a nobis.’”

My father’s nose twitched almost imperceptibly.

“But couldn’t creation have been made by another agent that was itself created?”

“Sure, but then that other would be a part of creation, and not God.”

“So,” my father intoned, “if I can sum up what we have now, you have proven that God was the first agent who produced an egg from a non-chicken, which through evolution mutated the product of that egg into a modern chicken.”

“That sounds like a reasonable summary.” Professor Zygote conceded, “Do we all agree?”

We nodded. The end was approaching and we weren’t going to delay it with flattering queries.

“And what about you?” the professor looked at my father.

“Well, Professor,” my father sighed, “having grown up in a provincial orphanage where we had close contact with farm animals, among them chickens, I would have to include one detail of no small importance.” My father was mounting his attack now.

“Which is?” Zygote asked.

“As you may know, it takes 21 days to hatch a chicken egg.”

“I didn’t know exactly, but that sounds right.”

“Well,” continued my father, “unhatched baby chicks have a high mortality rate, mostly due to poor ventilation inside the egg and improper humidity conditions.”

“Is that so?”

“It is. The chick embryo’s oxygen requirement continually increases during development, so the humidity inside the egg has to be just right for the chick to be able to live.”

“I suppose that is true of most mammals,” offered the professor.

“The egg weight has to decrease by about 12 percent through water evaporation prior to hatching. If humidity during incubation is kept too high, not enough water can evaporate inside the egg and the chick drowns in the surrounding liquid.”

“Poor struggling chicks,” my mother said, as she placed the pound cake in the middle of the table, “what a horrible way to die.”

“But not an uncommon way,” my father said. “If the humidity is too low, it causes the membranes within the shell to dry out and stick to the chick, preventing it from turning inside the shell, so it can die within one or two minutes.”

“That’s fascinating and certainly awful, but how do you connect that to the chicken and egg? So which do you think came first?” Dr. Zygote leaned forward.

We all knew the answer except the professor. His brow was furrowed and he was rubbing the thumbnail of one hand with the thumb of the other.

“The answer is simple.” My father leaned back.

“What, then?” Zygote was growing impatient.

“Do you really want to know?”

“I’m dying to know. Tell me the answer!”

“Tell him the answer already before you drive everyone insane.” My mother served the cake.

“All right, I’ll tell you. The answer is...the chicken.”

“*The chicken?*”

“Yes, the chicken.”

Silence.

“Could you explain how this answer can go against the entire corpus of modern science?” The professor held his head.

“Certainly. Even if we adopt Augustine’s proof of the existence of God and all the facts of evolution you so eloquently presented, we have to consider all of the facts, which include those of humidity and time. If we blindly accept the Bible’s assertion that the world was created in six days, and that it takes more than three times that to hatch a chicken; and taking for granted the extreme difficulty it takes to hatch a chick in the first place with all its moisture needs; and finally, taking into account all the things the Almighty has to do; do you really think he has the time to sit on an egg?”