An Analysis of John Wisdom’s *Gods*

In John Wisdom’s essay, *Gods* he tells a story of two people returning to their neglected garden. To their surprise, a few of their old plants were doing surprisingly well. The first person seeing liveliness in their old plants hypothesizes that a gardener had been coming to the garden and tending to them. The second, seeing weeds and general chaos, chooses an opposing hypothesis, and decides for himself that there is no gardener tending to their neglected garden. Upon this disconnect in their initial observations, the two people decide to investigate the garden further. They look closely at the garden and its surroundings, collecting all possible empirical data, and share with each other everything they learn. Even after further investigation, neither person is swayed from their original hypothesis. So they decide to question the neighbors to see if anyone has seen a gardener tending to the garden. The neighbors state that they have not seen anyone. The first person, seeing beauty in the arrangement of the plants, says the gardener could have come at night, or even that the gardener could be invisible. The second remains unconvinced that a gardener comes.

There is an interesting transition in the way that the two people deliberate the existence of the gardener. In the beginning, their respective opinions are mere hypotheses, and neither has yet cemented their beliefs in the existence or nonexistence of the gardener. At this point, either could be swayed by conclusive empirical evidence counter to their original perspective. For example, the gardener could appear from the surrounding forest to tend to the garden, leaving the skeptic to be forced to admit the existence of a gardener. On the other hand, it is surely possible to convince the believer in the gardener to turn on his beliefs. For example, they could find several other similar patches of plants in the near surroundings, which could convince the believer that it is a random occurrence. At this point, either could be convinced to sway in their beliefs by hard, empirical evidence from the world surrounding them. Before the deliberation continues, this type of argument could be compared to most scientific arguments, where people form hypothesis and then investigate the world around them to find evidence that either supports or disproves their claim. As the disagreement continues, both people examine the garden further, and neither changes in their original beliefs about the garden. Despite all the empirical evidence that they can gather, their perspectives vary critically. At this point, the further procession of the argument is unlikely to be impacted by empirical evidence; the disagreement lies in the way that conclusions are drawn from the evidence. This can be compared to the way that lawyers argue. Neither has evidence that the other does not, but each tries to spin the evidence to tell a story which benefits their client. This is vastly different from the way that the two people were arguing earlier in the narrative. Wisdom makes the point that the way that philosophers of religion must argue is the latter method, where all the evidence is already gathered, and the argument is about the conclusions that are drawn from the evidence, rather than evidence itself.

Even though the two people are presented with identical empirical evidence, their outlooks are entirely different. While one observer sees the garden as neglected, the other sees as cared for by a gardener. Similarly, while one person can see the world as neglected, the other can see as looked after by God. An atheist can point to natural disasters, pointless sufferings, and inherent chaos, and come to the conclusion that the world is without a God. At the same time, and with the same empirical evidence, a believer can see beauty in the world through love, happiness or joy, and believe the world to be cared for by a divine being. This marks a disconnect between empirical evidence and faith. In both cases (the gardener and the divine being), the empirical evidence presented is the same. The difference in the two hypothesis is that one has faith that the gardener, or God, exists, and this faith is unlikely to be lost based on further investigation of the respective surroundings.

One important point that John Wisdom makes in his gardener parable is the effect that a person’s perspectives can have on their opinion. He makes the observation that, “the one calls the garden by one name, and feels one way toward it, while the other calls it by another name and feels in another way toward it” (Wisdom 68). It is clear that the difference is not rooted in empirical evidence gathered by either of the two travelers. The difference, in this argument, revolves around the perspective of each traveler. Each clearly sees the garden in a vastly different light, and this effects their faith in the existence of the gardener. This can be compared to the way that theists and atheists see the world. While theists have one perspective on the world, which allows them to have everlasting faith in their God, atheists see the world from a different perspective, and are skeptical to the existence of God. The differences in these perspectives, as well as what effects these differences, are interesting topics left undiscussed by Wisdom. Regardless, it is clear that perspective can greatly influence opinion, especially when dealing with tricky intangibles such as mysterious gardeners, or God.

Through his gardener parable, John Wisdom is able to articulate that there are some claims about the world which are not claims that have an empirical basis, but are rooted in an individual’s perspective on the world. This is an interesting concept, but poses problems for some of the traditional arguments for the existence or nonexistence of God. For example, this seems to undermine the teleological argument. This argument, summarized briefly, states that the inherent complexity of the world was clearly created with purpose, and “we must infer an intelligent grand designer to account for the purpose-revealing world” (Pojman 32). The reason that the teleological argument is undermined by *Gods* is that the teleological argument is based on empirical investigation of the world. John Wisdom would argue that another observer may have a differing perspective on the world and its purpose. Another observer may see chaos in the world, and conclude that with all the randomness associated with the continuation of existence, there is no possibility of intelligent design. Because the teleological argument is dependent on empirical evidence gathered from the world, it loses some level of validity.

On the other hand, John Wisdom’s logic can be used to undermine some arguments that are contra to the existence of God. For example, the problem of evil is one that has bothered theists for a long time. For if there really were an all-powerful, all-knowing God, why would he allow any evil to exist? There have been many solutions posed to the problem of evil, for example the penal theory, tapestry theory and free-will defense. Observing evil in the world is an empirical observation, and therefore critically different opinions can form for the existence of God based on an individual’s perspective. Where one person may see evil in the world in the form of cancer and death, another person may see these as necessary for the continued existence of the human race. If not for cancer and death, the world would quickly become overcrowded, which would cause food and water to become scarce, causing more suffering in the long run. Therefore it is possible for one to view the evil in the world as necessary for existence. Since the problem of evil is based on observations about the world, it also loses validity because of its dependence on empirical evidence. Like most solutions to the problem of evil, this solution is not particularly satisfying, but does provide logical evidence that evil in the world does not hinder the possibility of the existence of God.

In different versions of Wisdom’s *Gods*, the two travelers who come across the garden continue their deliberation about the existence of the gardener. They decide to pitch tents and set watch overnight to see if a gardener appears. When none appears, the believer proposes that the gardener may be invisible. So they decide to patrol the garden with bloodhounds. When they are still unable to find evidence of a gardener, the believer proposes that the gardener may not have a detectible scent. So they continue in this fashion, surrounding the garden with an electrified fence adding infra-red cameras, and other security measures, but nothing is able to detect any signs of a gardener. Even though they are unable to detect the gardener in any way, the believer maintains that a gardener comes, and each time, proposes another way that the gardener could evade the traveler’s detection. Clearly, at this point the believer’s faith in the existence of a gardener is becoming preposterous, and it is becoming increasingly unlikely that a gardener is coming to tend the garden. Antony Flew makes a remark that in this case, the gardener “Dies the death of a thousand qualifications”. Each time the skeptic makes an attempt to prove the believer wrong, the believer changes in their belief in the gardener, and creates another qualification for its existence, until the sum of the qualifications make the existence of the gardener either preposterous or meaningless. Flew makes the remark that this is something that theists must be cautious to avoid when posed with arguments contra to the existence of God. For if a believer simply changes his belief in God every time another argument comes his way, God will die a similar death of “a thousand qualifications”.

Now, imagine that the gardener exists, and that you are the gardener. Two travelers return to their neglected garden, which you have been tending in their absence. They begin to examine the garden closely, ask questions of the neighbors, and patrol the garden. It is entirely reasonable to be wary of the travelers, and avoid the garden. As the travelers increase security surrounding the garden with bloodhounds, electric fences, and infrared cameras, it would be reasonable to continue to avoid the garden. Thus, the traveler’s observation of the garden has effected the return of the gardener. Drawing again on the parallels between the gardener and God, is it possible that human observation has caused God to be wary of return His garden?