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Study Guide for Skeel's "True Paradox: How Christianity Makes Sense of Our Complex World"

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Introduction to David Skeel's *True Paradox, How Christianity Makes Sense of Our Complex World*. InterVarsity Press, 2014.

Introduction and study guide by Kerry E. Irish, Professor of American history at George Fox University, Newberg, Oregon

In *True Paradox*, David Skeel compares Christianity with modern materialism or humanism to determine which of them best explains the complexity of human life. Following C. S. Lewis, Skeel believes the world is complex. Thus any true religion or philosophy must help explain that complexity. Therefore, any hope that this is a simple book must be abandoned now for Skeel's entire premise is that the world is not a simple place. Indeed, in the first paragraph of the book he declares his theme is Christianity and Complexity.

Skeel's book is not a traditional defense of the Christian faith. In fact, in the introduction Skeel explains the weaknesses of the traditional philosophical defense, and the more recent legalistic attempts, to defend Christianity. In the first case philosophers, both secular and Christian, appeal to a common set of beliefs that most human beings no longer share. If the Christian philosopher's conclusions disagree with their values they simply conclude there was something wrong with the reasoning. In other words it is difficult to reason someone into the Christian faith. Skeel does not mention that the human mind, even that of philosophers, is not as rational as philosophers claim. If it were, there would be but one philosophy as all of us would reason toward it eventually. In other words, life is too complex for philosophy alone.

The second mode of defense Skeel rejects is the legalistic one in which Christians and materialists attempt to put the other side on trial and poke holes in their belief systems. The problem with this practice is that truth is not the goal, only victory. Christians, Skeel believes, are honor bound to speak the whole truth.

Skeel prefers to defend the Christian faith by examining how it explains the truth of human existence more fully than any other system. The result is not a thorough defeat of materialism or materialists. It is rather a gentle apologia that hopefully provides non-Christians cause for interest in Christianity, and Christians a deeper sense of the value and truth of their faith.

I hope you enjoy and profit from reading David Skeel's *True Paradox*. This study guide is divided into five parts, each corresponding to a chapter of the book. The book may be easily read one chapter per week for a Sunday School class or Christian book study. May the Lord Jesus Christ bless your reading.

Discussion One, Chapter One, Ideas and Idea Making

1. According to David Skeel, what is the single most complex and mysterious feature of our (human) existence? 37
2. What terms does Skeel use to describe consciousness? 38
3. Skeel Writes, “We can learn a great deal about the plausibility of a religion or philosophy from its insights into the **purpose** of idea making. If a religion or philosophy is true, it should give us helpful insight into what that purpose is.” 38, 39

What, then, is the purpose of our idea making capacity from a materialist perspective?
4. How does Christian belief expressed in the Scriptures “**The Heavens reflect the glory of God ... and human beings are made in God’s image**” answer the question concerning the existence of our idea making capacity? 44... (Psalm 19:1 and Genesis 1:27)
5. What is Skeel’s first example of the usefulness of our idea making capacity? Please explain in twenty-five words or less.
6. Skeel’s second response to the question as to how Christianity accounts for ideas and idea making is centered on “**personal usefulness.**” What does this mean? 46...
7. How do we know if Christianity serves this purpose?
8. Skeel’s third response to the question as to how Christianity accounts for human ideas and idea-making falls under the description of Universality of Ideals. What does he mean? 49...

9. What are the two examples of Christian morality that Skeel uses to give evidence of the universality or truthfulness of Christianity? 52-55
10. What anti-Christian argument is reflected in Skeel's question "Why are Christians so Bad?" 56
11. How does Skeel respond? 56-58
12. What is the second version of the question concerning bad Christian morality? 57, 58
13. What is Skeel's argument in the section entitled "A World of Testimonies"? 59-61.
14. Which if any of Skeel's arguments were most persuasive to you?

* Preview of Chapter 2.

In Chapter 2, we take a look at Beauty and the Arts. The first thing we notice is that our sense of beauty is very much connected to our ability to create and hold ideas. Secondly, beauty is extraordinary, even unexpected, and often fleeting. We long for it, but it escapes us by evaporating, declining, or most tellingly our joy in it simply slips away. How is this possible? Any religion or philosophy that claims to be true must shed light on the paradox of beauty.

Study Guide, Discussion Two, Chapter Two, Beauty and the Arts

1. What are two emotions that humans have often associated with beauty? 63
2. Though we may disagree as to what is beautiful, most of us do agree on what? 65
3. What is the paradox of beauty? 65
4. How does materialism explain the basic idea of beauty and the role it plays in our lives? 65-71
5. What is the strength of the pantheist perspective and its weakness? 71...
6. What is deism and how does it explain beauty? 73-74
7. Vastly more interesting than deism for me is Gnosticism which was probably an early Christian heresy. What is the enchantment or power of Gnosticism to explain life in general and beauty? 74-76

8. How does Christianity explain beauty? 76...
9. Skeel, then, believes that Christianity provides a superior explanation of why we have the idea of beauty. But he does not stop there, he goes on to suggest that Christianity actually helps explain why we consider something beautiful. What is Skeel's view of how Christianity defines the beautiful?
10. What does beauty have to do with truth? 83...
11. For Skeel, what is one of the most powerful reasons he is a Christian? 85-86
12. Which, if any, of Skeel's insights did you find helpful or quite unconvincing?"

Preview Chapter Three, Suffering and Sensation

Chapter three is probably the most important chapter of the book as it deals with one of the great questions troubling human beings, especially Christians: Why is there evil if God is good? Any Christian understanding of this problem must begin by putting man and God in their proper relationship. God is infinite, man is finite, and hence Isaiah admonishes all of us:

For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are my ways higher than your ways,
And my thoughts than your thoughts.

Isaiah 55: 8, 9

Discussion Three, Chapter Three, Suffering and Sensation

1. What is the most difficult dilemma for Christianity? 90
2. How does a materialist respond to the existence of such evil in the world? 91
3. How does a pantheist respond? 91
4. How did the Gnostics (dualists) explain suffering and evil? 91
5. How does the Christian view of the universe differ from dualism? 92
6. How does Augustine, one of the Church's great intellects, explain the existence of evil in God's good universe? 92

7. How did C.S. Lewis add to Augustine's explanation of evil? 92-93
8. But how then explain the existence of apparently random acts of nature that kill and destroy? 93
9. What is the Christian "shortcut" and how does Skeel respond to it? 98
10. Though Skeel cannot fully accept the view that the sin of mankind, in addition to causing his own fall, led to the corruption of the world, he does believe that Christianity ultimately answers the question of the existence of good and evil better than the materialists. How so? 95-107

Skeel answers the question by breaking it into two parts. 1) Why me, and 2) is suffering immoral?
11. Which of these arguments do you find most persuasive or inadequate?

Preview, Chapter Four, *The Justice Paradox*. Is it true that human beings have generally been optimistic about creating a more just society? Have human beings succeeded in this attempt? How do Christians and materialists differ over the cause of this seemingly inherent desire for justice?

Study Guide, Discussion Four, Chapter Four, The Justice Paradox

1. What is the human conceit or hubris regarding judicial systems? 110
2. What is the “Justice Paradox”? 110-111
3. How does the American experience of the last 220 plus years suggest the truth of the justice paradox? 112-113
4. Does pantheism provide a plausible explanation for the existence of the Justice Paradox? 114
5. How about the Gnostic form of Dualism and its answer to the question concerning the paradox of justice? 114, 115
6. How does deism address the justice paradox? 115

7. What is the materialist response to the justice paradox? 116
8. What is the shortcut temptation for materialists? 120, 121
9. What is the Christian response to the justice paradox.121...?
10. What is the basis for a Christian justice system? 126
11. Which if any of Skeel's arguments did you find compelling or confused?

Preview, Chapter Five, Life and Afterlife. Where does the idea of heaven come from?
What do materialists say about heaven? What is heaven like?

Study Guide, Discussion Five, Chapter Five, Life and Afterlife

1. What do Christians need to explain that materialists do not? 137
2. The Christian belief in heaven “flows directly” from what other Christian concepts? 137
3. How did materialist Richard Dawkins describe the Christian ideal of heaven? 140
4. Materialists believe that Christians are motivated to believe in God by the concept of rewards in heaven. Not surprisingly, Skeel disagrees. For Skeel, why should Christians believe in God? 141
5. Even if some Christians do begin their Christian life as a means to gain a heavenly reward, what usually happens? 141-144
6. Describe Skeel’s evidence for heaven. 145
7. What is heaven like? 146-158
8. What are your thoughts on heaven?

Other Writings by Kerry Irish

Study Guide for C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*. Thousands of people have used my free study guide to help them understand Lewis's classic little book.

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Study Guide for Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*. Thousands of people have used my free study guide to understand Bonhoeffer's popular book.

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The Second Great Awakening and the Making of Modern America.

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The Apostle's Creed. [An analysis of the meaning of the Apostle's Creed.]

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Thoughts on the Importance of Attending Church.

https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac/72/

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, His Life in Brief. [This short introduction to Bonhoeffer is included in the study guide for *Life Together*.]

https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac/14/

C.S. Lewis: Reluctant Convert. [This short introduction to Lewis is included in the study guide for *Mere Christianity*.] https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac/71/

Billy Graham: Life and Legacy (A five-page biography of Billy Graham)

https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac/95/

Thanksgiving: Facts and Fantasies (An essay on the origins and development of Thanksgiving) You will be surprised. https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac/96/

An Historians Christmas (An essay examining the birth of Christ from an historian's perspective). https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac/97/

The Great Awakening and the Coming of the American Revolution

https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac/100/