

The Color of Belief

“Thank you all for coming.”

“Thank you all for coming—for joining in . . . for participating in, this project.” There was a low desk, and the man behind it seemed unsure. His voice wavered uncontrollably. The desk sat on a cheap, worn carpet which covered the the whole floor. The room was wide and long, but had a low ceiling. The building had been built at the edge of the desert, originally for some long-forgotten initiative. Today, it was used for other, lower-budget, projects. Three volunteers had selected themselves to live here for the next month, in total seclusion from the outside world.

The cramped interior of the room contained three seats, apart from the speaker's, located at the far back of the room. In the first sat Annie Chan, 26; in the second, Simon Beckshaw, 54; in the third, Jake MacIntyre, 22.

“You may call me Doctor Elijah, or just 'Elijah'. I am your director. I don't need formalities, and I very much want familiarity—I want you to get to know me.” Elijah picked up a single red ball. “I'm not about to do anything fancy; nothing to fool you.” The volunteers saw him put the ball inside a small cardboard box and shut it tightly.

“What's in the box?” he asked immediately.

Annie, Simon, and Jake all looked at him quizzically, momentarily bewildered by the stupid question.

“A red ball,” Annie said after a second.

Elijah showed them that she was right. Closing the box securely again, he set it on a small portable table at the head of the room.

“We will reconvene here tomorrow,” Elijah stated factually.

The next day, Annie, Simon and Jake returned to the room.

“What's in the box?” Elijah asked again.

They said that the red ball must still be in the box. Elijah again told them that they were correct.

“The experiment requires that we spend time in this room,” Elijah told them. Let's talk about something.”

So, they sat in a loose circle on the floor. Elijah explained that he never was very good with people, and so, in connection with this project, he was confronting his social problem as a way to break the ice. As he elaborated, it became clear that Elijah was the product of a mixed childhood which diverted him into the sciences. He had lived everywhere from Spain to China, spoke 4 languages fluently, and had finally settled down as a researcher several decades ago, keeping his job ever since. The others officially introduced themselves in turn to each other, and they all soon fell to talking happily. A few hours later, the group split, and Elijah again reminded them that the red ball was in the cardboard box.

The next few days passed similarly. Elijah continually asked what was in the box—he said it was just his job too, and that it was compulsory for him to do so—and the four talked among themselves for a good time. Each time, Annie, Simon and Jake responded, reasonably, that the red ball was still in the box, which had obviously not moved from its place on the table.

Elijah was required to stay within the building adjoining the low-slung room at all times.

Though Elijah did lots of lab work, he did not, as he put it, “miss the outdoors”. Annie, Simon, and Jake had comfortable, separate residences within the research grounds. As the facility was mostly abandoned, they had entire buildings to their own devices. Still, living (more or less) together had made the three volunteers great friends, but they could only see Elijah when they assembled in the room at certain times. It was this time, Elijah said, that he most enjoyed. Apart from asking them what was in the box, he said his superior had given him the time predominantly for relaxation, which he evidently had needed.

Annie, Simon, and Jake were required by “the project”, as they had come to call it, to stay on the research grounds—which were spacious and quite beautiful—at all times. They had become accustomed to the weather, which was usually cool, but filled with sunshine, and their evergreen surroundings: xeriscape gardens planted years ago by the original builders of the compound.

On the last day of the project, Annie, Simon, and Jake were gathered at a stone table near an artificial pond before their daily meeting with Doctor Elijah.

“He's really quite nice,” Simon said simply, referring to Elijah, for want of anything more specific. Annie and Jake agreed, but Simon had sounded troubled when he had said it.

“That's a pretty minimalistic way of saying it.” Jake said after a time, stating the obvious. “He's more than 'nice'. He's been like a father to me. He's always kind and friendly. It's like we're getting paid for being here doing nothing. This is no 'project'; we are not working on anything; this is a paid vacation!”

There was a small pause. They had all thought this at one time or another, but hadn't really thought it very important until now.

“I don't get the whole 'red ball' thing.” Annie commented. “The ball inside that box—it hasn't moved, and yet the 'project' seems to revolve around it—why is it important?”

“It can't be important in and of itself,” Simon returned. “It's just a research mind game to trick you. The 'research' is some conflated attempt to fool us. What if it's actually blue?—It could happen”, he added defensively, “I saw some new blue paint cans beside a tool cupboard in the Eastern Garden that definitely weren't there—”

“Nonsense!” Annie cut in, abruptly. “You're being paranoid. We saw him put the ball in the box; the ball was red, right?” Jake nodded as Annie looked at him for support. “Anyway, all the buildings around here are painted the same drab blue-grey—that paint is probably just for janitorial touch-up work! Why would Elijah keep buckets of *building paint* just to paint a stupid plastic ball blue? It doesn't make sense. And besides, the box has sat in *precisely* the same position since he put it there. For God's sake—there's dust from that fetid room *encrusting it in place*. How could the ball have just *magically* changed color?”

Annie paused, rather surprised by her own vigor.

“Because that's the sort of thing researchers do,” put in Simon. “They'd do it just to confuse us. That's the way these experiments work. The paint was darker than the buildings are. So it exists only to paint the ball! Either way, even if the ball is not blue, I'm sure it's no longer red.”

“But how?” Annie asked, more politely this time. “The box hasn't moved. He's just testing our memories, if anything. Do we have reason to think otherwise? No! The reasonable thing to do is to remember what's inside the box—the red ball.” and Jake agreed.

As this was the last day of the project. Annie, Simon, and Jake met as usual in the room. Elijah was already there.

“What's in the box?” Elijah asked again.

There was an uneasy pause that surprised everyone.

“What's in the box?”

“What's in the box?”

Simon said, slowly and with a measured, almost careful tone, “In the box—is a blue ball.”

Elijah appeared surprised. He looked curiously, almost cautiously, at Annie and Jake. “Do you two agree with Simon?”

Annie, suddenly, as if afraid of dissenting, “A red ball.”

Elijah nodded his head in acceptance of her statement. “Hmmm,” he pondered. “This is a very sudden change from your previous views . . . Jake? Your thoughts?”

Jake thought a good deal longer, then agreed with Annie: “It's a red ball.” he concluded.

Elijah nodded again, more slowly, as if thinking. Slowly, he rose and retrieved the box from the table. Dust drifted from the table, and the latter groaned mechanically.

“Sorry,” Elijah said, coughing slightly at the particles. “The air filters in this room broke in the afternoon heat many years ago. Since then, there's been no money to fix it.”

Annie poked Simon. “See?” she said, self-satisfied, “He didn't paint the ball!” Simon grunted noncommittally.

Elijah calmly opened the box—and showed it to be completely empty.

Annie gasped briefly, while Jake and Simon looked confused.

“It is only now that I can tell you the truth about this project,” Elijah said quietly. “Simply put, I removed the ball myself the first day. I needed you to believe, at first, that the red ball was still within the container. And why would you have doubted me? I'm your friend—and that's exactly what I have been this entire month. The deception was only at the beginning, before we became better acquainted. It's true—I *am* difficult with people; doing the act before you could 'feel me out' allowed me to completely conceal my guilt.”

All the volunteers looked aghast, as they knew they had been tricked.

Elijah took a breath and continued: “You just answered my question. It is a question that has gone unanswered for ages, largely because no one realized it was a question—and now I have found the answer. I took a simple idea—that the ball is contained within the box—and made you cherish it. You believed it; you wanted to believe it—who can doubt their own eyes? But I made it less simple.”

As Elijah mentioned each volunteer in turn, they sat uncomfortably:

“I contrived to have Simon find the blue paint. I hoped he would bring it up in conversation; and indeed I heard him do so (what do you expect?—the whole place is rigged). I wanted him to introduce *doubt* into your situation. I wanted him to doubt your group belief, and have convincing, (but not incriminating), evidence. But I didn't want him to be too sure himself, either. He could not have done so more perfectly.

Annie stood steadfastly to her, very rational, deeply-held, belief—it was supported by her prior experience—'The reasonable thing to do is to remember what's inside the box—the red ball.'—perfectly put, Annie! Well done!

Jake, if I am not mistaken, was more or less undecided after Simon introduced doubt, but it was in the *very final* moments of the experiment, when I asked him his decision, that he chose the older belief, supported by his former experience.

So what was this question I sought to answer? What have I learned? I've been wanting to do an experiment such as this for a very long time. No one has ever experimented with belief before, and yet most of us live immersed in our own beliefs every day. We believe that pain is *fundamentally bad*, that pleasure is *fundamentally good*. We believe that people think like we do and we make our decisions accordingly. We believe that we need to eat to live, but have we ever put it to the test and gotten some proof? If others tell us that someone has, are we not believing them in turn? And we must believe that the universe will make something of us if we can continue to exist on a day to day basis in seeming mundane activity! Most of us believe in a divine protector that had the spunk to create an entire universe and us within it. Others believe equally strongly that they do not believe in a God, with

equally unconvincing evidence. The Bible is a collection of works thousands of years in the making, and yet we believe that it has not been corrupted in this process. And atheists? They believe that other beliefs cannot be valid because they have not been substantiated, and yet, the irony is that this itself is too a belief. Indeed, every belief has a chain of beliefs behind it—a chain that could be argued in infinite ways using conflicting 'proofs'. But *even then*, we have to realize that a belief is not about proof; it's about describing truth. Whose description is 'best'? In the case of beliefs in gods, massacres happened for that argument.

But again, 'What is the question?' No: 'what is the answer?'—but that will inevitably bring us back to the question again. The experiment shows that the argument is about the former beliefs of humans. Questions like 'Why are we here?' and 'What is God?' take on the same importance of 'What's in the box?' in a crucial way—the controversy. The experiment shows that people will either change, or hold to or revert to their previous beliefs in the face of being exposed to conflicting evidence directly or indirectly, respectively. The issue always boils down to belief; and the evidence anyone could present, whether it be books like the Bible, or science and lack of miracles, the evidence both ways boils down to nothing more substantial than your evidence: metaphorical dust and paint. At once crumbling into nothing, and again, as a veneer that is a distraction to the truth. 'What color is the ball?'—the ball was never there. You lose!

And when you finally found out what is in the box, you found that *nothing* was just as exact and real a truth as *something*. Each of your beliefs was shattered, and each of you reacted accordingly. Annie, you genuinely believed that the ball was red, and Simon, you believed that it was not. Jake, you reverted to the belief you were more familiar with, and in the end, all of you were wrong.”

Later, Annie, Simon, and Jake stood slowly and walked to the edge of the compound, where a transport shuttle took them away, all of them, in silence.