

CHAPTER 4

THE ISSUES OF APOLOGETICS

The classic arguments for the existence of God

Through the centuries apologists and theologians have developed several ways to demonstrate the existence of God, using logic and observations. These methods have been called the classic arguments. They can be divided into two major types: *a priori* (logically independent of sense perception), and *a posteriori* (logically dependent on sense perception). The *a priori* arguments are considered to be deductive in nature, and their conclusions are said to be certain. The *a posteriori* arguments, being based on sense experience and on limited observation, are inductive in nature, and can yield only probable conclusions.

These arguments are discussed in all standard theologies and standard apologetics texts. A well thought out historical summary is provided in the *Great Books Syntopicon*, ch. 29, esp. pp. 551-557, with detailed index following. A helpful summary in chart form is in H. Wayne House, *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine*, pp. 34-38.

Here is a brief list of these arguments, in the approximate order in which they have been discussed in Christian apologetics:

Ontological argument

Propounded by Anselm; supported by Descartes and Spinoza; opposed by Aquinas and Kant.

Assumes that God must be conceived as “a being than which nothing greater can be conceived.” And since necessary existence is greater than possible existence, this idea must include the idea of absolute existence. Hence, the non-existence of God would involve the thinker in a logical contradiction, which is impossible. Hence, God must exist.

Aquinas and others answer that while the non-existence of God may involve us in a logical contradiction of thought, such a difficulty does not preclude his non-existence in reality.

Innate knowledge argument

Propounded by Augustine, Calvin, Locke, Hodge, more recently by Alvin Platinga.

States that all people have a natural knowledge or understanding of God's existence and claims on them. This knowledge may come from reflection on our own existence or that of the universe (when it does, it overlaps the cosmological argument). Evidence for this view is seen in the nearly universal belief in some sort of God or gods. Atheists are the exception.

“He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”
(Eccl 3:11)

Opponents argue that apparently not all men have this innate knowledge, and that the various views of God are contradictory. Beliefs in God may be the result of cultural environment.

Cosmological argument

Propounded by Augustine, Aquinas, Newton, Berkeley, Descartes, some modern creationists, recently by Craig; opposed by many philosophers (e.g., Hume, Kant).

The existence of the universe must have a cause; this cause must be separate from the universe and greater than the universe, that is, God.

Aquinas expanded this argument with five major sub-points, called the “five ways” to prove the existence of God: argument from motion (echoing Aristotle), argument from efficient cause (as Berkeley and Locke), argument from potentiality (similar to Platonists), argument from the gradation of things (similar to Descartes), and argument from the governance of the world (similar to the teleological argument, as in Newton).

William Lane Craig (*Apologetics: An Introduction*) points out that the reigning theory of the beginning of the universe (the “big bang”) requires us to believe that the universe is finite in time, with a beginning and an end; hence, it is not eternal, and something or someone other than itself must have started it. There is a detailed description of this argument as developed by Islamic scholars in the Middle Ages by Craig (*The Kalām*

Cosmological Argument, also his *Time and Eternity: An Exploration of God's Relationship to Time*).

Critics of this argument maintain that whatever caused the universe, it need not be a personal God. Perhaps the universe is eternal (materialism, oscillating universe theory); perhaps other natural events can account for the "big bang." In any case, the development of our present universe after the "big bang" can be accounted for by natural forces and laws, with adequate time for chance events. And wouldn't God himself need a cause?

The common idea that the universe developed "by chance" is refuted by R. C. Sproul, *Not a Chance: The Myth of Chance in Modern Science and Cosmology* (1994).

Teleological argument

Propounded by Aquinas, Newton, Butler, Paley, modern creationists; opposed by many philosophers (e.g., Russell); brought up to date by Michael J. Behe, *Darwin's Black Box: The Biomedical Challenge to Evolution* (1996) and *The Edge of Evolution* (2007), and by Fazale Rana, *The Cell's Design: How Chemistry Reveals the Creator's Artistry* (2008); excellent summary of use of this argument by Thomas C. Oden, "Without Excuse: Classic Christian Exegesis of General Revelation," *JETS* 41/1 (Mar., 1998), 55-68; also John C. Hutchison, "The Design Argument in Scientific Discourse: Historical-Theological Perspective from the Seventeenth Century," *JETS* 41/1 (Mar., 1998), 85-105. Recently astronomer and physicist Hugh Ross has contributed much to this argument: *The Fingerprint of God: Recent Scientific Discoveries Reveal the Unmistakeable Identity of the Creator* (1991), and *The Creator and the Cosmos: How the Greatest Scientific Discoveries of the Century Reveal God* (3rd ed. 2001), *A Matter of Days: Resolving a Creation Controversy* (2004), *Origins of Life Biblical and Evolutionary Models Face Off* (co-authored with Fazale Rana, 2004); these arguments continue to expand with new discoveries of the fine-tuning of the universe (cf. the frequently updated list of items at www.reasons.org, under "Evidence for Design"). [For additional resources, see the discussion on Intelligent Design in the previous chapter.]

There is apparent design in nature (*telos* in Greek means end, purpose, goal). Random chance cannot account for the intricate, complex, beautiful workings of nature. These are seen in inanimate laws and objects, and in living things. A purposeful God, a grand Designer must stand behind what we see. The modern Intelligent Design movement has published many updated forms of this argument.

Opponents answer that there is much chaos in nature; there is no apparent design or purpose. By and large the universe is cold, uninviting, and cruel. Life as we know it can be explained through random chance and evolution, which is a scientific certainty.

For a recent attempt to explain the complexity of the universe by natural causes, see Charles W Petit, “The Cosmic Code: Does the Universe Run on a Simple Computer Program?” *U. S. News* (Aug. 19, 2002); this article popularizes the book by Stephen Wolfram, *A New Kind of Science* (2002). Atheistic physicist Murray Gell Mann has founded the Santa Fe Institute, to study ways to explain design from naturalistic causes (see his *The Quark and the Jaguar* [1994]). A fairly technical defense of the necessity of intelligent design of the information found in complex systems is William A. Dembski, *No Free Lunch: Why Specified Complexity Cannot Be Purchased without Intelligence* (2002); the cover features a molecular depiction of the flagellum of one-celled bacteria—the example made famous by Michael Behe’s *Darwin’s Black Box* (2001); cf. also his later works, expanding on the design argument—*Science and Evidence for Design in the Universe* (2003), *The Edge of Evolution: The Search for the Limits of Darwinism* (2007), *Darwin Devolves: The New Science About DNA That Challenges Evolution* (2019).

See the excellent article showing how “language” in the mind and in DNA and RNA requires a Creator with mind—John R. Baumgardner and Jeremy D. Lyon, “A Linguistic Argument for God’s Existence,” *JETS* 58/4 (2015) 771-786.

For the objection of the problem of evil in the universe, see John E. Hare, “The Problem of Evil,” ch. 5.1 of *Evidence for Faith*, ed. by John Warwick Montgomery, pp. 231-52; also the entire issue of the *WRS Journal* (*Theodicy: God’s Justice in an Evil World*) 3:1 (Winter, 1996)

Moral argument

Propounded by Kant, Pascal, recently by C. S. Lewis.

All people know that certain thoughts or actions are “right” or “wrong.” But these categories would have no meaning without the existence of some moral standard outside of ourselves. This is God, the supreme moral law giver. Without God’s existence, there could be no moral categories.

Pascal’s variation: “Pascal’s Wager”: better to assume Christianity true, with resulting goodness, holiness, happiness, hope of eternal life, than to assume it false, with resulting discord, meaninglessness, and death.

Critics say that the world does not show a moral bias; moral laws made by society for its own purposes; concepts of morality not the same in various cultures. Christianity has produced much evil, they say.

Traditional historical and biblical arguments

Along with proponents of the classic arguments for God, Christians have continued to defend the truth of God and his revelation against historical, critical, and literary attacks. This work is carried on regularly in the various departments of theological seminaries, for instance. Topics include the authenticity of the stated authors of the biblical books and the accuracy of the Bible's historical statements.

Theological arguments defending the character and attributes of God continue as well, often counteracting objections to the Christian faith and morals (e.g., the work of Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?: Making Sense of the Old Testament God* [2011], *Did God Really Command Genocide?: Coming to Terms with the Justice of God* [2014]).

Modern apologetic approaches

[For a helpful classification of apologetic approaches into four main categories plus an integrative approach, see Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *Faith Has Its Reasons: An Integrative Approach to Defending Christianity* (Navpress, 2001). The following categories and the lists of typical adherents are taken from this source.]

Classical apologetics

Classical apologists attempt to prove that God exists, that Jesus is his Son, and that the Bible is God's Word from some other basis. They use primarily reasonable arguments, such as the traditional theistic proofs (cosmological argument, moral argument, some use the ontological argument). They also show that competing worldviews are self-contradictory or do not explain reality. Usually they first try to show that Jesus is the Son of God, and then use his testimony to show that the Bible is God's Word. They would say that arguments from science do not prove Christianity to be true, but that they confirm Christian or theistic belief.

Typical adherents: Thomas Aquinas, B. B. Warfield, C. S. Lewis, Norman L. Geisler, Peter Kreeft, William Lane Craig, R. C. Sproul

Evidential apologetics

Evidentialists hold a high opinion of science and its ability to discover truth. For example, scientific apologist Hugh Ross states his beliefs in this way:

God speaks inerrantly through the words of the Bible. God speaks inerrantly through the facts of nature. The two revelations are totally consistent. In nature, God reveals Himself through His design and ordering of the physical processes. God also directly intervened, as described in Genesis, to shape the natural world through fiat miracles (special

creation). Objective evidences are the effective tool for establishing truth. Propositions [from presuppositional apologetics] are effective in exposing error. (*Science and the Bible* syllabus, p. 1:8)

According to this approach the unbiased or scientific investigation of nature leads to the necessary conclusion that there is a Creator, who possesses the attributes which the Bible ascribes to God. Only the Bible provides a testable model of the creation of the universe that stands up scientifically. If scientists are confronted with this evidence, yet still refuse to accept Christ, the problem is a moral one, not an intellectual one.

Traditionally, the arguments most favored by evidentialists are the cosmological, teleological, and historical arguments for the existence of God and the truth of Christianity. The historical evidence for the resurrection leads us to accept its truth, and therefore the truth of Jesus' claims and teachings, including the inspiration of the Bible.

Typical adherents: Joseph Butler [and William Paley], James Orr, Clark H. Pinnock, John Warwick Montgomery, Richard Swinburne.

Reformed [presuppositional] apologetics

Presuppositional apologists generally take a dim view of empirical evidences. Some say they are useless because no knowledge can be learned purely by the senses (Clark); others say that they cannot be properly interpreted by sinful minds (Van Til). In general, these apologists come from the Reformed tradition, and believe that God alone can reveal himself to the mind, and does so for the elect. We are to receive the Bible as his Word, and then all other knowledge is made clear in its light. This is the gift of faith from God.

The apologetic method of presuppositionalism frequently is negative. The strategy is to show unbelievers that the system they hold is contradictory or irrational. Then, when the person realizes that he has no rational reason to believe and live the way he does, the gospel is presented as a self-consistent whole that meets the intellectual and moral needs we have. The apologist relies on a straight presentation of the gospel, prayer, and a life of Christian testimony to be used by God to bring the elect to salvation. Biblical truth has its own force if accompanied by the conviction of the Holy Spirit. If a presuppositionalist uses scientific or historical arguments, it is in the negative capacity of showing the person that his supposed rational beliefs are not consistent with the evidence he himself claims to follow.

Typical adherents: John Calvin, Herman Dooyeweerd, Cornelius Van Til, Gordon H. Clark, Alvin Plantinga.

Fideist apologetics

While the evidentialist depends on empirical evidences primarily, and the classical and presuppositional apologists may use such evidences in certain situations, the fideist swears off these evidences totally. Fideist apologists believe in God in spite of evidences, not because of them (cf. Kierkegaard's famous statement, "I do not believe in Christianity because it is logical, I believe because it is not logical"). This tradition tends to downplay the intellectual aspect of belief, making faith a personal relation rather than intellectual assent to propositions.

These apologists have no problem accepting science or history, regardless of modern conclusions which might negatively impact Biblical statements. Faith operates in a separate sphere, and should not be interfered with by empirical knowledge, or even by logic. This group therefore has little interest in science as having a bearing on religion. Our decisions for or against Christianity arise not from our intellect, but from our personal feelings and inclinations.

Typical adherents: Martin Luther, Blaise Pascal, Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, Donald G. Bloesch.

Integrated apologetics

While most adherents to the four main categories of apologetics believe that their system is incompatible with the other three systems, there are some who believe these systems are not mutually contradictory, but can be combined in some way. These apologists will use the approach that seems to best fit the situation or the person being talked to. For example, these apologists would use scientific arguments with people who are influenced by science in a more positive way than a presuppositionalist would, but would use philosophical arguments with other people. With some they may forgo evidences altogether, appealing to the emotions—a fideist approach.

Typical adherents: Edward J. Carnell, Francis A. Schaeffer, David K. Clark, C. Stephen Evans, John M. Frame.

Debate over Presuppositionalism versus Evidentialism

Presuppositionalists strongly reject using the classical arguments for the existence of God. These arguments, they say, give up too much. These arguments assume that the person with whom you are arguing has an open mind to the truth, and that it is possible to begin where sinful man is mentally and proceed and demonstrate through reasoning to demonstrate the existence of the true God, with the result that he will accept the truth. It also assumes that often these arguments are valid—a point that presuppositionalists are not always ready to accept.

This procedure is considered to be impossible. Sin has so darkened the mind in both its presuppositions and in its operations that it is impossible to believe in the true God through this means. If any god could be arrived at, it would not be the true God, against whom Adam and Eve rebelled in the Garden. One procedure used by presuppositionalists can be called the argument from consistency.

Consistency argument. Propounded by many Reformed apologists (Bavinck, Van Til, Clark, to some extent Schaeffer).

Christian theism is the only system which accounts for all points observable in the human condition and the revelation given by God. Without Christian theism no fact has meaning, and even meaningful communication becomes impossible. Rational thought and communication are possible only because of the God of Christianity.

This view rejects the other “proofs” as inadequate or unsuitable for unbelievers. It will use evidential arguments only to demonstrate fallacies in the beliefs of opponents, not to demonstrate the truth of Christian theism.

It is called “presuppositionalism” because it begins by presupposing either the Christian or the non-Christian presuppositions for sake of argument. The non-Christian presuppositions are shown to lead inexorably to a universe of isolated “facts” which have no meaning for each other or for the universe at large. The Christian presuppositions, on the other hand, provide a meaningful universe, the creation of God, and a revelation from this God which leads to life and meaning.

[In addition to the writings of Cornelius Van Til and Gordon Clark, see Greg Bahnsen, *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith* (1996). A good, sympathetic assessment of Van Til is by Timothy I. McConnel, “The Influence of Idealism on the Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til,” *JETS* 48:3 (September 2005) 557-588.]

Opponents say that this approach uses circular reasoning: assuming the truth of what is to be proved. It provides no reason acceptable to the inquirer for adopting Christian theism, any more than adopting any other claim to supernatural religion (e.g., Islam).

[See, e.g., criticism in *Evidence for Faith*, ed. by John Warwick Montgomery: Ch. 1: William J. Cairney, “The Value of an Evidential Approach; Ch. 2: Herman J. Eckelmann, “An Evidential Approach to Biblical Christianity”; also, for a good defense and illustration of Evidentialism, J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind* (1997).]

Other presuppositionalists tend to avoid this philosophical approach to apologetics, and emphasize the methods of direct evangelism, prayer, and the Christian life. Some combine these methods with particular evidential defenses of the Christian faith at points under attack (as John Whitcomb's works on creationism; Whitcomb, however, says these scientific studies are useful primarily for helping to exegete the Scripture, not to confirm the Scripture).

Some have criticized the Princeton theologians (C. Hodge, A. A. Hodge, B. B. Warfield) for being rationalistic and ignoring the force of presuppositionalism's arguments. However, more careful study shows this not to be the case; see Paul Kjoss Helseth, "'Re-imagining' the Princeton Mind: Postconservative Evangelicalism, Old Princeton, and the Rise of Neo-Fundamentalism" *JETS* 45:3 (Sept 2002) 427-450.

A biblical apologetic

As seen in the section of apologetic passages in the NT, Christ and the apostles use a variety of evidences to show the truth of the biblical system. Some of the classic arguments are parallel to these passages. For example, the teleological argument is similar to passages in the Psalms (as Ps 19) and to Paul's apologetic with Gentiles (Acts 14, 17; Rom 1), in that it directs our attention to the creation as revealing characteristics of its Creator, including power, intelligence, and will. The definition of a fool in Psalms 14 and 53 as one who denies any divine consequence for good or evil by saying "There is no God," is similar in thrust to the classic moral argument.

In spite of these passages, the Bible more particularly points to the internal evidences of revelation. The very existence of God is never questioned. The Scriptures simply assume God to exist: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Many Bible passages describe God's attributes. The prophecies of the Bible, fulfilled in Bible times, are often spoken of as giving evidence of the divine inspiration of the prophets (cf. his challenge to the idols in Isa. 41:21-29).

Of course, the life, miracles, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the primary apologetic in the NT. Not only did he fulfill the OT prophecies of the Messiah, but the testimonies of John the Baptist, of the Father, and of the eyewitnesses who saw him all show that he is indeed the one he claims to be, the Son of God.

The NT also emphasizes the vital nature of the testimony of Christians. Their witnessing, Christian lives, and prayers all lead to the salvation of people who know them.

Today it is imperative for Christians to follow this basic apologetic. In addition, Christian teachers should be able, as God enables, to answer particular objections to the faith in the various fields of history, archaeology, biblical study, or science, or at least be able to point the way for further help. While use of the classic arguments may not prove the God of the Bible,

they can provide, with Christian presuppositions (if used cumulatively, as Hodge points out), further confirmation of the God of revelation. They also can be used in an ad hominem fashion to confound attacks against Christianity.

Louis Berkhof has offered this helpful evaluation of the “rational arguments” for God:

In evaluating these rational arguments it should be pointed out first of all that believers do not need them. Their conviction respecting the existence of God does not depend on them, but on a believing acceptance of God’s self-revelation in Scripture. If many in our day are willing to stake their faith in the existence of God on such rational arguments, it is to a great extent due to the fact that they refuse to accept the testimony of the Word of God. Moreover, in using these arguments in an attempt to convince unbelievers, it will be well to bear in mind that none of them can be said to carry absolute conviction. No one did more to discredit them than Kant. Since his day many philosophers and theologians have discarded them as utterly worthless, but to-day they are once more gaining favor and their number is increasing. And the fact that in our day so many find in them rather satisfying indications of the existence of God, would seem to indicate that they are not entirely devoid of value. They have some value for believers themselves, but should be called testimonia rather than arguments. They are important as interpretations of God’s general revelation and as exhibiting the reasonableness of belief in a divine Being. Moreover, they can render some service in meeting the adversary. While they do not prove the existence of God beyond the possibility of doubt, so as to compel assent, they can be so construed as to establish a strong probability and thereby silence many unbelievers. (*Systematic Theology* [Kindle Locations 527-537]; GLH Publishing; Kindle Ed.; thanks to Andrew Hoy for this reference)

If we work diligently to witness for Christ in our day, we will, as Peter tells us, always be ready to give a reason for the hope that is within us. God has used faithful apologists to win many souls for Christ; may he use us as well!