

Apologetics 3 – What An Unbeliever Needs and the Transcendental Argument

“You shall not tempt [make trial] of Jehovah your God” (Deut. 6:16). When Satan tempted Jesus to do so—to push God into offering proof of the veracity of His word (as quoted by Satan)—Jesus rebuked Satan, “the accuser,” with these very words from the Old Testament. It is not God whose integrity and veracity and knowledge is somehow suspect. It is that of those who would accuse Him and demand proof to satisfy their own way of thinking or living.²

John Frame: “The New Testament commends those who believe even without empirical signs (John 20:29), and it condemns those who refuse to believe without such signs (Matt. 12:39; 16:1ff.; 1 Cor. 1:22). There is a difference between walking by faith and walking by sight (2 Cor. 5:7; Heb. 11). The world says, “Seeing is believing”; Jesus says, “If you believed you would see the glory of God” (John 11:40).

What the Unbeliever Needs

The unbeliever does not primarily need a confrontation with **evidence**. He primarily needs a confrontation with **authority**: God’s authority over him, and yet God’s love and patience with him in Christ.

Paul tells us that the unbeliever already has enough evidence to condemn him: the witness of creation, his own conscience, and a deep awareness of God’s existence in his own existence (Rom 1:19). Every time he makes a moral choice for good or evil, every time he makes or insists upon logical and reason, every time he loves and admires beauty, he testifies that he lives in a Personal universe made by a Person.

So based on this fact, believers can encourage unbelievers to admit what they know to be true—that God exists and that there’s a difference between right and wrong. We simply proclaim the message and trust that God will use it to draw people to Himself.

Rather, we must encourage and even demand that unbelievers submit to and obey the Bible whether they recognize its authority or not. We do not hold the Bible up for critical scrutiny. We simply proclaim its truths and let the chips fall where they may.

Also, keep in mind that in the evangelism process the believer is not trying to argue a non-believer into submission. He’s not trying to win a debate, thereby intellectually convincing the non-believer that the Gospel is true. He’s simply announcing the good news, planting the seed. It’s God’s business to make an unbeliever responsive to the message. In fact, without God’s work in the unbelieving heart, no one would respond positively to the Gospel. We can plant and water the seed, but God is the one who brings about a harvest (1 Cor 3:6).

This confrontation may include:

- 1) Some form of the gospel
- 2) Showing the unbeliever the incoherence of his worldview
- 3) Removing genuine objections to submissive faith

The Purpose and Place of Evidence

Our faith is built on a solid foundation of historical accuracy and verifiable events. Some scholars believe that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the single most well-attested event in all of ancient history. So there is no lack of evidence to back up the claims of the Bible and of Christianity.

People often say they reject Christianity because it fails to offer enough evidence to support its claims. In response, Christian scholars have accumulated a great many reasons to believe.

However, we are on shaky ground when we base our faith solely on historical evidences. Historical studies can suggest that events actually happened, but they cannot prove it. They can persuade and remove doubt, but ultimately people do not convert to Christianity because they are intellectually moved by the proofs.

God may use such studies to convince people of the truth of His Word, but conversion is not simply intellectual agreement to a series of statements. Faith comes by hearing the Word of God (Rom 10:17). The Holy Spirit uses the Word to convince people of their need for salvation. A study of the evidences of Christianity may remove some of the obstacles that hinder belief, but evidences alone will never bring about conversion. After all, the devil believes what the Bible says (James 2:19).

Unbelievers often claim that one should not believe anything that doesn't have good evidence. The problem is that we believe countless things without good evidence or proof. If we eliminated all belief in things for which we don't have good evidence, we would get rid of a good many things indeed. It's clear that we do have the right to believe things even without solid proofs in many cases. Even the statement "You must have proof before you believe" is unprovable. Those who make such statements should be shown how absurd such a claim is. A person's beliefs may be perfectly rational even if he cannot prove them to others. This of course does not suggest that Christianity lacks good proofs, only that evidence or lack thereof neither establishes nor destroys Christianity.

What then is the place of proofs and evidences?

- 1) Proofs and evidences vindicate the faith of those who believe. Overwhelmingly, it is Christians who review the science, history, logic and experience that vindicates what they already know to be true.
- 2) Proofs and evidences may remove a genuine intellectual roadblock for an unbeliever who has a distorted view of some aspect of the faith. This is different from the unbeliever who claims he cannot believe until you have jumped over the high-jump bar of his intellectual conceits.
- 3) Proofs and evidences silence perverse objections and remove excuses so that we may proceed with the gospel.

As we have seen, apologetics is not flattering an unbeliever's intellectual pretensions. It is not treating him as a rational, neutral, objective individual. It is seeing his worldview as a proud pretentious insult to God, one rebellious to the lordship of Christ, and one that needs to be challenged. In fact, the unbeliever is a thief: he steals from the biblical worldview to maintain his own rebellious worldview.

One of the ways we do this is what is called the **transcendental argument**. This has nothing to do with "Transcendental Meditation". A transcendental is an ultimate reality or idea, such as truth, goodness, or beauty. These are not merely material phenomena, located in the neurons of our brains. If they exist, they exist as realities behind and beyond atoms and molecules. They are more than nature: they are supra-nature, or supernatural.

Transcendentals are usually the first principles we use to make sense of the world. They are the hidden presuppositions, the assumed basis for everything else. They are the axioms. So the transcendental argument could also be called the "presuppositional argument" or "the foundational argument" or "first principles argument" .

Think of the transcendental argument as simply looking for the ground the unbeliever is standing on. What is his foundation? What is his launching point? What is he assuming

about the world? Once we discover this, we can show them that their worldview cannot function without God. The argument follows these lines.

- 1) Everyone you meet assumes the reality of truth, goodness or beauty. They rely on these realities to make sense of the world. They want justice. They believe in logic, reason, "fact". They love beauty. If you removed these things, life would be meaningless, disorderly, without expectation, and impossible to navigate. They may sometimes deny truth ("that's just your truth") or goodness ("that might be right for you, but not for everyone") or beauty ("that's just your preference"). But whenever they make a claim, or a demand, or a value judgement, they are assuming that truth, goodness, or beauty are real for me than just themselves.
- 2) And yet, the unbeliever denies the very basis of these realities: God.
- 3) Consequently, we can demand where rationality, morality and beauty come from, since the unbeliever uses them all the time. He is either borrowing from Christianity, or accepts these transcendentals without a basis.
- 4) To borrow from Christianity while denying it is incoherent. To depend upon truth, goodness and beauty and yet have no basis for it is inconsistent and irrational. Either way, his worldview is in serious trouble.
- 5) The unbeliever cannot consistently live in his own worldview turning to utter despair (abandoning truth, goodness, and beauty), or submitting to the source of what he is borrowing from: God.

2) The Necessity of God

a) Logic demands the existence of God. There is no physical basis for logic. Logic does not come from atoms, molecules or even brain synapses. Logic simply is. Reason, like numbers, seems to have been discovered by us, not invented. Unless there is a rational God who is the basis of order, logic doesn't have a place. When someone reasons from premises to conclusions, or mathematically, he is expecting universal laws of logic to rule everyone. But then he is assuming that the universe is rational, though he has no physical, material reason to believe it is so.

Consider the three laws of logic:

Law of non-contradiction. Something cannot be true and false at the same time. Can you picture a universe where this is not the case? How could reality be otherwise? But why is it the case?

Law of excluded middle: Something is either true or false. Can $1+1=2$ be true for you, but false for another?

Law of identity. If something is true, then it is true. If Jesus is Lord, then He is Lord. Can He not be Lord for someone else and in some other place?

b) Morality demands the existence of God. Where does good and evil come from? Why do people have a sense of what *ought* to be, or what *should* be? Why do they condemn some behaviour, feel outraged about somethings? Why do they regard some things as unfair, unjust, wrong, inappropriate? Every culture, every individual feels some things should be, and something should not be? Where does this "law" come from? If evolutionists say it was a herd instinct to protect the herd, then we ask, why do we sometimes find competing obligations, e.g. save a child from a speeding truck, or save myself. The choice between instincts cannot be another instinct.

c) Science demands the existence of God. Science is the repetition of experiments to verify a hypothesis. But why should experiments have the same results under the same conditions? Why should the world be predictable, regular, and orderly? Why should we be able to conclude anything? Why shouldn't it be chaotic, random, and inscrutable? In fact, several religions regard the world in just that way – governed by fate, karma, capricious gods, whimsical ancestors, or meaningless chance. There is no point doing scientific experiments in such a place. If the answer is that “it just is”, the reply is, “It’s strange that what just is, has allowed us to observe the universe, understand it and shape it. It’s as if it was made to be understandable.”

d) Beauty demands the existence of God. When we perceive beauty in nature, in music, in poetry, in the human face, in mathematics, in architecture, we are perceiving something that our natures find lovely, pleasurable, attractive. What evolutionary advantage could there be for finding music beautiful?