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## **Can God's Existence and Natural Law Morality Be Proven by Human Reason Alone?: A Brief Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics**

By Eric V. Snow

"Racism is immoral in all places at all times." Skeptical liberals typically claim to be cultural and moral relativists who are certain of nothing. But can they deny that statement? Likewise, feminism is a system of moral absolutes: Chinese foot-binding, female genital mutilation, and India's suttee are immoral in all places at all times, regardless of the "rich heritage" or "long tradition" of any tribal culture or civilization to the contrary otherwise. This argument against moral relativism implicitly upholds natural law theory, which says certain basic moral absolutes can be discovered by human reason alone, without the use of revelation from God (i.e., the Bible). But does it

take a fundamentally mistaken approach to dealing with skeptics and unbelievers? Presuppositionalism, which is a theological school of Christian apologetics (defense of the Christian faith) that a number of Calvinist theologians uphold, maintains that human reason shouldn't be used to prove natural law morality or God's existence. This brief essay argues that God's existence and natural law can be proven by human reason alone and that presuppositionalist apologetics uses a fundamentally flawed approach to defending the Christian faith.

Now pointing out that even liberals believe in moral absolutes is easy: That is, at some level, everyone believes in basic minimum standards to human behavior. But now this is much more difficult: How can we derive "Thou shalt not murder" from matter in motion? C.S. Lewis, James Q. Wilson, and Ayn Rand all have different philosophical approaches to achieve this goal. So theoretically, could God have just arbitrarily inverted various moral commandments? Could God have made adultery moral and avoiding it immoral? Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274), the great Catholic theologian and philosopher, upheld belief in a natural law that ultimately goes back to God as the Creator of nature.

By contrast, presuppositionalist apologetics denies that human reason can discover moral absolutes while examining human society's operations, the relationships among people, and man's relationship to the natural world. It also denies that God's existence can be proven. In contrast, here an evidentialist approach to apologetics will be upheld. Despite the presently defective state of man's mind, certain basic laws can be derived to establish a common ground between believers and unbelievers in our presently pluralistic, general secular public square. We have to witness to them using arguments derived from nature that don't immediately reveal God as the Creator of nature. Then, later on, we can reason back to the Creator as the cause of it, if the unbelievers listen to and later (most unlikely) accept what we Christians know from revelation/the Bible. Hence, a Christian uses the arguments of intelligent design with intelligent, informed skeptics who believe in evolution. Then, if they are still granting the Christian a hearing, he or she moves on to the historical and archeological evidence favoring the inspiration of the Bible (such as fulfilled prophecy) as opposed to any other alleged holy book. Of course, the unbelievers' rejection of Christianity may

be for any number of emotional or psychological reasons instead, such as the desire to have a sex life without any moral rules beyond a prohibition on using force (i.e., "between consenting adults.") But it's still a way to leave them "without excuse," as per Romans 1:20.

## DID THE FALL DAMAGE MAN'S MIND?

How badly did the Fall damage man's mind? Classical Calvinist theory believes man's reason, and the general functioning of his mind, has become seriously and permanently disordered by what they call the noetic consequences of sin. But this teaching, as well as the doctrine of total moral depravity, are both mistaken. Otherwise people could start plausibly reasoning they aren't responsible for their moral decisions in life, much like someone judged insane or mentally incompetent when on trial. It's obvious from the world today and its past history that human nature is terribly corrupt and evil. But as corrupt as man's mind is, as witnessed by Romans 1:18-32; 3:9-18, we shouldn't infer total depravity or the complete destruction of the reliability of man's mind due to the noetic consequences of sin from these texts. There has to be some level of moral competence when reasoning on what witness nature and the relationships within human society give to thinking minds. An explicit Biblical witness for natural law theory appears in Romans 2:14-16: "When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them." Such a text shows the all-encompassing view concerning the noetic consequences of sin in damaging the human mind/heart and/or the doctrine of total depravity are not correct. People mired in a sinful lifestyle still can choose to do better or worse morally in the circumstances they are in, even when they are uncalled to salvation presently. For example, there are people who give up being alcoholics who aren't true Christians through the Alcoholics Anonymous program. Even the sense of "Enlightenment" that supposedly comes in a pantheistic religion's tradition, such as Buddha's relative to when he was of royalty and when he had been so stringently ascetic he was torturing his body, can involve a movement from greater error to lesser error, even though it doesn't save its adherents for eternal life spiritually.

## EVERYONE ULTIMATELY BELIEVES IN MORAL ABSOLUTES

Similarly, consider C.S. Lewis' at times witty comments that everyone in all cultures believes in a set of moral absolutes; they just disagree concerning their extent and application ("Mere Christianity," p. 19): "There have been differences between their moralities, but these have never amounted to anything like a total difference. If anyone will take the trouble to compare the moral teaching of, say, the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Hindus, Chinese, Greeks, and Romans, what will strike him will be how very like they are to each other and to our own. . . . for our present purpose I need only ask the reader to think what a totally different morality would mean. Think of a county where people were admired for running away in battle, or where a man felt proud of doublecrossing all the people who had been kindest to him. You might just as well try to imagine a country where two and two made five. Men have differed as regards what people you ought to be unselfish to--whether it was only your own family, or your fellow countrymen, or everyone. But they have always agreed that you ought not to put yourself first. Selfishness has never been admired. Men have differed as to whether you should have one wife or four. But they have always agreed that you must not simply have any woman you liked. But the most remarkable thing is this. Whenever you find a man who says he does not believe in a real Right and Wrong, you will find the same man going back on this a moment later. He may break his promise to you, but if you try breaking one to him he will be complaining "It's not fair" before you can say Jack Robinson."

So a Christian can initially build from this (effectively) irreducible primary, this moral sense everyone believes in when backed up against the wall and cross-examined, to erect a crude set of basic minimums for running a secular society. Then, if skeptical people are still open-minded, still listening to the gospel, a Christian can go on to make the rational case for believing that God exists and then that Creator has revealed Himself and His will for humanity's actions in a particular holy book, the Bible. If they won't listen, people at least have some moral basics to use as social glue for the time being for secular law-making purposes before Jesus returns. The utilitarian principle, "the greatest good for the great number," the German

philosopher Immanuel Kant's "categorical imperative," and the Golden Rule "Do unto others as you would wish them to do to you," which the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551-479 b.c.) also proclaimed separately long before Jesus (Matt. 7:12) did, are good examples of secular moral principles that can help hold a society together socially. In practical terms, a Christian builds upon the secular liberals' own set of self-admitted moral absolutes, such as "racism is immoral in all places and all times." A Christian could then ask: "Well, now that you've admitted that you think moral relativism is false, could it not be theoretically possible that adultery is immoral in all places and at all times? How do you know for certain otherwise?" This line of reasoning then leads to the Christian having to explain why nature's existence and complexity proves there is a Creator, and why it's reasonable to accept in faith that the Bible is His word rather than (say) the Quran.

## CAN A MORAL RELATIVIST CONDEMN GOD FOR ALLOWING EVIL?

Now when most atheists and agnostics complain about the problem of evil, a fundamental contradiction appears in their belief system: If you are a moral relativist, you can't complain about God's allowing bad things to happen to people, for you then you don't believe that "bad" even exists! You can't ask, "Why did God allow the Holocaust to occur?," thinking that line of reasoning successfully morally condemns God, if you don't believe genocide is immoral in all places at all times. So then, an atheist or agnostic has to believe in moral absolutes to morally condemn God. But one of the main, practical, psychological/emotional reasons for people becoming atheists and agnostics is so that no one can tell them what to do, especially concerning their sex lives. For example, Aldous Huxley, the British atheist intellectual who wrote the novel "Brave New World," once admitted the motives behind why he and others rationalized to a skeptical position: "I have motives for not wanting the world to have meaning; consequently assumed that it had none, and was able without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption . . . For myself, as, no doubt, for most of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation. The liberation we desired was simultaneously liberation from a certain political and economic

system and liberation from a certain system of morality. We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom." Atheists have emotions and self-interested reasons too, and thus will rationalize their own position as justified. Freud mistakenly believed this weakness was only a vice of religious believers when atheists and agnostics have lots of reasons to rationalize into their own positions as well.

Exception alert: The band of atheists sired by Ayn Rand, the strict Objectivists, apparently don't use the problem of evil against belief in God because they believe in a "benevolent universe" to which evil isn't fundamentally intrinsic and because they respect and value man's free will so much they won't complain about God's allowing man to have it. They are also, in their peculiar if limited way, passionate moral absolutists despite they reject the moral duty for self-sacrifice/altruism. But since most atheists/agnostics are moral relativists who frequently rail against God's allowance of evil, this fundamental contradiction in their intellectual position should be pointed out. (That is, unless and until they happen to reveal themselves to be fans of "The Fountainhead" and "Atlas Shrugged," then a Christian needs to use another approach!)

## AYN RAND'S PHILOSOPHICAL CASE FOR MORAL ABSOLUTES

Ayn Rand's arguments for natural law theory, for deriving an "ought" from an "is," are unusually interesting. Her basic argument consists of noting that only living entities need values to live, that inanimate objects (like rocks, "matter in motion") don't need values. So then, man, as the "rational animal" (as per the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle's definition), needs certain particular values to live a rational and successful life, not just merely survive physically. Let's briefly quote her own reasonings in this regard (all emphasis hers): "An *ultimate* value is that final goal or end to which all lesser goals are the means--and it sets the standard by which all lesser goals are *evaluated*. An organism's life is its *standard of value*: that which furthers its life is the *good*, that which threatens it is the *evil*. Without an ultimate goal or end, there can be no lesser goals or means: a series of means going off into an infinite progression toward a nonexistent end is a metaphysical and epistemological impossibility. [Ironically, a similar denial of an infinite regress is

fundamental to many classical arguments for God's existence!—  
EVS] It is only an ultimate goal, an *end in itself*, that makes the  
existence of values possible. Metaphysically, *life* is the only  
phenomenon that is an end in itself: a value gained and kept by a  
constant process of action. [Notice that here, from a Christian  
viewpoint, she starts to jump the tracks. For Christians believe this  
physical life is not an end in itself, but training for a spiritual afterlife,  
and that God created this life for His own purposes rather than our  
self-chosen ones--EVS] Epistemologically, the concept of 'value' is  
genetically dependent upon and derived from the antecedent concept  
of 'life.' To speak of 'value' as apart from 'life' is worse than a  
contradiction. 'It is only the concept of 'Life' that makes the concept  
of 'Value' possible.' In answer to those philosophers who claim that  
no relation can be established between ultimate ends or values and  
the facts of reality, let me stress that the fact that living entities exist  
and function necessitates the existence of values and of an ultimate  
value which for any given living entity is its own life. [Notice how she  
slips in, at the base of her system, the case for attacking self-  
sacrifice--EVS]. Thus the validation of value judgments is to be  
achieved by reference to the facts of reality. The fact that a living  
entity *is*, determines what it *ought* to do. [Despite all her flaws in her  
general philosophical position, this is a particularly brilliant  
observation--EVS] So much for the issue of the relation between '*is*'  
and '*ought*.'" ("The Virtue of Selfishness," p. 17) It's true she didn't  
solve as much as this problem as she thinks here, for one could  
come back and argue about "side constraints," that is, why shouldn't  
men be parasites or aggressors against other men to get the values  
they need to survive. Nevertheless, her general argument for natural  
law theory deserves careful examination and consideration before  
being arbitrarily rejected. Her brief essay, "The Cult of Moral  
Grayness," is particularly striking when one realizes a nearly fanatical  
atheist wrote it!

## IF PRESUPPOSITIONALISM IS TRUE, WHY DO A FEW ATHEISTS OCCASIONALLY CAPITULATE?

If presuppositionalism is true, why does an occasional atheist or  
agnostic defect? The most interesting case as of late was Sir  
Anthony Flew, a famous philosophical atheist who converted to some  
kind of theism at the tail end of his life. Sir Fred Hoyle, the

astronomer who conceived of the "Steady State" theory of the universe, the long-time rival view of its origins against the "Big Bang" theory, converted to some kind of pantheism based on his calculations about the unlikelihood that random chemical reactions would create life. The Intelligent Design theorists are making at least some agnostics and atheists in the academic world sweat: Perhaps these harshly anti-Christian, atheistic polemics by Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens are the secular intelligentsia's responses to this sense of unease, like "antibodies" sent in to attack the "virus" of theism. Examine carefully how the atheist or agnostic in question personally explains his own change of mind: Would he give an emotional or rational reason? If it's a rational one, would it be based upon an empirical argument for God's existence? So then, if we have an occasional atheist or agnostic who converts, what does that say about their presuppositions? Aren't then these people at least partially reachable, even when uncalled in this life? They don't automatically always rule out in advance empirical arguments for God's existence based on their own presuppositions or premises. So although they will be hostile against considering arguments for God's existence (re: Romans 8:7, perhaps the verse that Herbert W. Armstrong (HWA) cited the most often in his writings), the occasional one who breaks undermines the presuppositionalist position explained in this brief essay. Herbert W. Armstrong, in his "Autobiography," used the example of one Communist Party member who was successfully put on the defensive by him when using an interesting empirical argument for God's existence (that was like the English philosopher John Locke's I believe). One Communist, the local secretary of the Party, converted to the faith, based upon prophecies in Daniel being historically fulfilled, when he explained them during one evangelistic campaign in Oregon c. 1935.

When one looks at what men like Denton, Behe, and Johnson have written, one sees how they realized based on the scientific evidence and the philosophical reasoning on that evidence how shaky Darwinism is. None of them "called" (John 6:44) to accept God's full truth doctrinally, even if Behe was a complacent pro-evolutionist Roman Catholic, and Johnson a non-fundamentalist Christian as well, before the Intelligent Design movement began. True, if anyone is intent on disbelieving, he can continue to disbelieve. But the goal of (for example) intelligent design, and for that matter Christian



apologetics in general, is to put forth a reasonable case to the general public, and thereby remove intelligent barriers to faith. Consider, for example, how reluctant C.S. Lewis in embracing Christianity as being literally true, yet it was an evidentialist approach that finally broke the back of his unbelief. C.S. Lewis had been an atheist for many years, but his "faith" had begun to crumble after having read George MacDonald, G.K. Chesterton, and various romantics. Then a key nail in the coffin of his unbelief was delivered thus: As described in "Surprised by Joy," he wrote:

"But I hardly remember, for I had not long finished The Everlasting Man [by G.K. Chesterton which had made Christianity much more sensible to him] when something far more alarming happened to me. Early in 1926 the hardest boiled of all the atheists I ever knew sat in my room on the other side of the fire and remarked that the evidence for the historicity of the Gospels was really surprisingly good. 'Rum thing,' he went on. 'All that stuff of Frazer=s [author of The Golden Bough] about the Dying God. Rum thing. It almost looks as if it had really happened once.' To understand the shattering impact of it, you would need to know the man (who has certainly never since shown any interest in Christianity). If he, the cynic of cynics, the toughest of the toughs, were not--as I would still have put it--'safe, a where could I turn?"

Other examples of skeptics who were converted by evidence, not merely emotional arguments, exist. Many who became traditional Christians (who likely were never called by God based upon Acts 5:32 as applied to Sabbath-keeping) used to be atheists or agnostics. These traditional Christians were persuaded by the rational evidence for God's existence and/or the Bible's reliability before committing themselves to a Christian way of life personally. For example, Josh McDowell set out to refute Christianity based on history and philosophy--and came back a believer. Frank Morison, a journalist, set out to prove the resurrection of Jesus was a myth--but came back a believer after carefully investigating the actual historical facts concerning it in the New Testament. Sir William Ramsay, the famed archeologist, was an agnostic who totally distrusted the New Testament, including the writings of Luke. Due to actual field excavations he oversaw, such as the discovery of the city of Lystra mentioned in the book of Acts, he became a believer. Lew Wallace,

who wrote Ben Hur, had been an agnostic and intended to portray Jesus as only a man in this novel, but after his run-in with the famed unbeliever Robert Ingersoll and further research, became a believer, and so described Jesus as both God and man in this novel.

## PRESUPPOSITIONALISM CONFUSES MAN'S ULTIMATE METAPHYSICAL DEPENDENCE WITH HIS IMMEDIATE EPISTEMOLOGICAL EXPERIENCE

Presuppositionalism has a certain level of truth, since there's no way for atheists to escape metaphysically the reality that God caused and created everything around us. But proving this to them by a readily verifiable means epistemologically is quite another story. (Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that deals with how humans gain knowledge. It deals with the question, "How do you know that you know?" Metaphysics is the branch that deals with what fundamental types of beings and entities exist in the universe and how they relate to each other. For example it deals with such questions as: Is there just one kind of "stuff" in the universe, monism," or are there two kinds of "stuff," dualism? Does God exist? Is the universe fundamentally orderly or chaotic? Do human beings have free will?)

There is common ground, not just a point of contact, between Christians and unbelievers. Let's use this analogy: Our natural moral knowledge is like the seen part of an iceberg. About 10% of floats above water's surface, 90% below. The 90% would be the much greater, more certain moral knowledge we have from supernatural revelation, from the Bible and from the Holy Spirit. The Christian and skeptic (of whatever other faith, including atheism) can agree on a good amount of the 10%. For example, both sides could agree that genocide is immoral in all places at all times, as part of this crude minimum. This moral foundation is based on the limited knowledge available by human reason alone that both sides can agree on by consensus. Then the Christian can defend the faith by working from the truths both sides hold in common (based on human reason and sense experience alone) to show the folly of atheism.

It's necessary to make a distinction between what a believer knows is true about the world based on the Bible versus what the unbeliever thinks he knows about the world, based on his limited human reason and emotion alone. To the extent the unbeliever believes in a truth that the Bible also teaches, such as the reality of the material external world outside our consciousnesses, that's also God's truth. But the unbeliever doesn't recognize it as such until and until such time as he accepts the total package of the Christian worldview. Hence, natural theology is also part of Biblically-based truth (at least when done correctly, for believers certainly can push it too far), but an unbeliever who is (say) a Deist based on such arguments doesn't recognize or accept how such truths are based on the Christian worldview. Hence, the metaphysical dependence of the unbeliever on God and the Christian worldview need not be accepted mentally by the unbeliever for him to believe in various scattered truths that are part of the Christian worldview.

A Christian and an atheist can have a common meeting ground *epistemologically* at the starting point of a debate concerning the reliability of sense experience and inferences drawn from it, even though the atheist's foundation for the reliability of generalizations from his sense experience isn't fully sound *metaphysically*. That is, the atheist can have a weak or inadequate reason for believing in the rationality assumption that excludes God metaphysically (or ontologically) as the cause of that natural order he asserts to exist. Of course, if instead the atheist or agnostic is an all-out skeptic (ala Hume or Feyerabend) who strongly denies the rationality assumption, then he's just signed over human reason to the Christian! I don't consider it coincidence that the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) attacked both the traditional proofs for God's existence and undermined the reliability of human reason concerning sense experience in "The Critique of Pure Reason." This makes his worldview the exact opposite of Thomas Aquinas: Instead of having both faith and reason, Kant had neither faith nor reason! (Admittedly, this is somewhat unfair to Kant). It's not a coincidence that in the centuries since Kant's work intellectually terminated the Enlightenment that Western civilization has increasingly become more irrational and less Christian at the same time.

Now, it's true that the presuppositionalist position has a certain foundational truth to it concerning the implications of God's being the Creator. That is, all His handiwork, including humanity's innate mental and psychological nature, reflects inescapably at some level His character and His power (cf. Genesis 1:26-27), even in its present generally damaged and fallen state before its restoration (Romans 8:19-21): "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God." Therefore, ***if one reasons far enough back***, any attempt to deny God's existence ultimately boomerangs back at the denier, much like a metaphysical axiom. (An axiom is a philosophical statement that is so universally true that to deny it proves it. For example, the French philosopher Descartes' famous statement, "I think, therefore I am," is an axiom. Any total skeptic who doubts his own existence ironically proves it since he has to exist in order to have a mind that doubts!)

Nevertheless, perhaps the foundational mistake of presuppositionalism is its need to do so much reasoning beyond immediately verifiable statements, which undercuts its effectiveness to persuade unbelievers. It's indeed true that only the fool says there is no God (Ps. 14:1). But since we can't see God directly, like the sun during the daytime, proving that the atheist ultimately contradicts himself is a long, difficult, tedious process. Here presuppositionalism indeed ultimately becomes a giant version of begging the question, or reasoning in a circle: The atheist can evade being caught by that circle if we Christians choose to discard meeting him on commonly agreed epistemological ground (i.e., the basic reliability of human reason and sense experience, such as shown by the technological achievement that put men on the moon).

#### USING INITIALLY LIMITED KNOWLEDGE TO CATCH ATHEISTS IN AN ULTIMATE EPISTEMOLOGICAL TRAP

The atheist doesn't know in advance where the facts he knows may lead once the Christian points out their implications. For example, intelligent design theory does this by pitting the concept of

irreducible complexity up against the theory of evolution's claim (in the gradualistic neo-Darwinist version) that each small step of development gives a living creature a selective advantage in its struggle to survive as part of a species. The atheist, at his starting point, isn't aware of (for example) scientific statements that he would assent to ultimately prove God's existence. The Christian's job, when defending the faith, is to show by inference, demonstration (like geometry's theorems), and dialog that what the atheist knows or believes contradicts his own belief system once the ultimate implications of those facts are known. The philosophical goal also is to show to atheists and agnostics that they are loading the dice metaphysically: They assume a priori (before experience) when interpreting all biological and other scientific facts that God didn't create nature. Indeed, they arbitrarily define "science" in this manner that all its explanations must exclude any recourse to the miraculous or supernatural. Therefore, having ruled out God in advance in the premises of all their arguments, they shouldn't be surprised that He can't possibly come out as a conclusion. The GIGO principle rules: Garbage in, garbage out. Hence, they end up "explaining" everything natural came to be via evolution with "just-so" stories that are little better than Greek and Roman myths. The basic response to them here should always be, "Nature cannot always explain nature." Why should God be ruled out in advance a priori? Doesn't that rig the contest to benefit skeptics? "Science" shouldn't be defined in a way arbitrarily to exclude any possibility of the supernatural: When an evolutionist does this, he or she is engaged in philosophy, not science. Now, this version of evidentialist apologetics shouldn't be confused with getting any particular atheist or agnostic to believe in God and/or the Bible, for many will continue to reject God for emotional/psychological reasons. Furthermore, the spiritually uncalled are more likely to persist in unbelief than the called, for the Holy Spirit hasn't opened their minds to belief (John 6:44, 65). But the goal is to tear down at least the intellectual defenses that they erect to protect their unbelief, and put them on the defensive.

**PRESUPPOSITIONALISM CONFUSES MAN'S METAPHYSICAL  
AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL DEPENDENCE ON GOD**

It's necessary to make a distinction between the ultimate ontological dependence of all humanity on God and the immediate sense experience and rational processes of any individual's mind. God is the ground of being (the "ens realissimum" for Kant), the ultimate reality, since He's the Creator and caused the universe to be created out of nothing by an act of will. As a subset of the created universe, the human mind has its origins in God's creative act, thus allowing us to be able to think or reason at all. Therefore, any supposed "fact" that seems to conflict with that Truth (God as the Creator), such as the kinds of evidence cited to favor evolution, requires some human being to be misinterpreting his or her sense experience. All correct interpretations of our sense experience lead back to God ultimately, directly or indirectly.

But it's another matter when discussing the truth with any given individual. He may deny God's existence or some truth about Him without knowing immediately the contradiction involved. To adequately deal with such people, we have to start with the minimal sense data they will affirm, their limited "circle of knowledge," and then reason outwards from it towards God's truth step-by-step to show their errors. (True, at any step on the way, they can emotionally reject going along, but let's leave that issue to the side presently). In this limited circle of knowledge, they may believe in the rational knowability of the universe for inadequate reasons and/or ones that take for granted the cultural inheritance they got from centuries of believing Christian scientists and scholars. But that's good enough for a Christian's initial apologetic purposes. Even the minimal amount that an atheist will affirm as being true metaphysically, even if the atheist is a skeptic, will lead to contradictions that can undermine their faith in skepticism and atheism. A Christian then starts by showing that atheists' denials of certain axioms (philosophical statements about fundamental realities) boomerang against them. For example, anyone denying the reality of the material world outside of their own minds (solipsism) has to use some fact drawn from the outside world to argue his or her case, which is self-refuting. Hence, if someone argues that everything he experiences may be a dream, he has to appeal to the listener's belief in people falling asleep and having dreams to make his argument work. Ayn Rand called this the fallacy of the stolen concept: Someone argues against a position while covertly using

some fact drawn from it. This is how many philosophers ironically have used human reason (which they assume to be reliable when making these arguments) to undercut human reason's reliability!

The existence of God isn't as axiomatically provable in the way that (say) Objectivism proves the external real world to exist, by saying any rejection of it uses some kind of evidence taken from it to cast doubt on it. (This is what Ayn Rand called the fallacy of the stolen concept). For example, if the skeptic says, "Everything could be a dream," this statement assumes that people fall asleep and have dreams, which are facts about the eternal real world. Similarly axiomatic, there's Descartes' (or Augustine's) argument about a person can't deny his own existence: "I think, therefore, I am." The one who doubts has to exist in order to doubt. A denial of God's existence isn't clearly immediately absurd as the denier of such philosophical axioms are: They don't immediately boomerang back and hit the one denying them with the self-evident absurdity of his position.

## THE APOSTLE PAUL'S USE OF COMMON RELIGIOUS GROUND BETWEEN PAGANS AND CHRISTIANS

Because of this common ground, Paul could go up onto Mars Hill in Athens, mention the altar erected by pagans to the unknown God (Acts 17:23), and then say its God was the true God, the Creator. After citing the pagan poet who said (Acts 17:28-29), "For we are indeed his offspring," he then drew the conclusion, "Being God's offspring, we ought not to think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man." He couldn't do this without admitting implicitly that this pagan poet's religious reasoning was valid. Paul here was doing some natural theology, much like how he reasoned that the creation witnesses to God's existence and eternal power (Romans 1:19-20). But presuppositionalism and natural theology are in intrinsic opposition. Ultimately presuppositionalism amounts to a type of fideism (the belief that God's existence should not be proven by believers, but only accepted in faith). By contrast, unlike what Thomas Aquinas (and Herbert W. Armstrong) believed, natural

theology maintains God's existence (and some of His attributes) could be proven by human reason. The anthropic principle of intelligent design theory, for example, is a contemporary version of natural theology: If the physical universe's attributes and characteristics, as described by mathematical equations and variables, were every so slightly changed, humanity couldn't exist. Therefore, the world was designed specially for us, for we aren't the chance product of slime oozing over rocks for eons of time. The contemporary way atheists and agnostics often try to duck this reality is to assert that many universes exist. Of course, these are unverifiable and unprovable, which ironically puts them into the camp of fideist Christians. Instead of believing in a God that they can't prove to exist, they believe in many universes which they can't prove to exist. A good Christian response is that it's easier to believe in a personal almighty God than in multiple universes.

#### WHY SHOULD CHRISTIANS SAY THE BIBLE IS THE WORD OF GOD INSTEAD OF THE QURAN?

We have to say why we believe the Bible is the inspired word of God instead of (say) the Quran. Any reason given (other than, "just because") involves giving some opinion or reason that the skeptic or infidel might consider. As R.C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley say (their emphasis, "Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics," p. 139): "This first point--that we know the Bible is the Word of God because it says so--has a glaring weakness as an argument. The argument would seem to take two forms. First the *Bible* is the Word of God because it, the Bible, says that it is the Word of God. Not *any* book that says it is the Word of God is the Word of God, but only this particular book. Suppose we ask, 'Why is that true only of this *book*'? [Again, consider the claims Muslims would advance on behalf of the Quran in this context--EVS]. One cannot simply answer, 'Because.' There must be some reason. But whatever reason is given is fatal to the [presuppositionalist's] case, because then one is not believing the Bible is the Word of God because it says so; but for some *other* reason. Suppose, second, that the argument is the general formula that *any religious* book that claims to be the Word of God must be so. Even that would be fatal for the specific case of the Bible. Even then, we would not be



believing the Bible because *it* says it is the Word of God but because that is a characteristic of a certain class. That argument would be fatal for another reason. It would prove that there are many Words of God, all of them differing from, conflicting with, and contradicting one another. This would make God the author of confusion. So the notion that the Bible is the Word of God because it says so is simply not true. It would make no difference it is said so three million times--not merely three thousand--for such assertions do not prove what is asserted."

## DOES THE RATIONALITY ASSUMPTION ABOUT THE UNIVERSE HAVE AN EMPIRICAL FOUNDATION?

The rationality assumption about the universe has a certain empirical basis to start with. It isn't purely subjective, although it may be a matter of selective perception (i.e., is the glass half full or half empty?) Otherwise, even primitive peoples wouldn't have perceived the cyclical aspects of nature, such as for planting and harvest, birth and death, winter and summer, day and night, etc. Furthermore, educated ancient Greeks influenced by Aristotle and certain other Greek philosophers at some level had to believe the universe was scientifically knowable. Here, of course, it's being asserted that the scientific method of induction (or generalization from sense experience) has relevance even when doing metaphysics, for I don't perceive myself that the universe is merely chaotic, especially the non-animate part! I'm not a Humean skeptic concerning regularities not proving the law of cause and effect, since I believe making an inference from observation to an object's essence is a sound procedure. (David Hume, the skeptical 18th century Scottish philosopher, famously claimed that seeing two billiard balls hit each other doesn't prove one actually causes the other to move, since "cause" has to be inferred into the observed event). But here Ayn Rand has a better argument: The law of cause and effect is merely the law of identity ("A is A," a thing is always itself, the most basic law of logic) over time: What a thing DOES is based on what it IS. Hence, the different effects from dropping a bowling ball and a feather result because of the different essences, characteristics, and attributes of these two entities.

## WHY DESCARTES' DOUBTS ULTIMATELY LEAD TO GOD

Descartes, in his "Meditations" skeptically used doubt against his senses and belief in God, but then worked his way back out of this skeptical hole. From the viewpoint of the debate between presuppositionalism and evidentialism, it's an interesting example of how the human mind can't escape from God if human reason is used correctly. Ironically, Descartes used the ontological argument for God's existence to show the sense data that his mind received was reliable. (After all, he argued that theoretically a "malignant demon," which is really a stand-in for an all-powerful Satan, could be deceiving him about **all** he saw, heard, felt, tasted, and smelled, not just **some** of it). This argument for God's existence is ultimately flawed by confusing "existence" as an idea with existence as an actual reality. But it goes like this (in Descartes' version, which isn't as clever as Anselm's original version): 1. All perfections are found in God. 2. Existence is a perfection. 3. Therefore, God exists. He also assumed that the perfect God would then never deceive him or allow his mind when working correctly to produce error: "Since it is impossible that he should will to deceive me, it is likewise certain that he has not given me a faculty that will ever lead me into error, provided I use it aright." (Descartes, "Meditations" in "The Rationalists," p. 145). Notice that he's conscious of the problem of evil and rejecting it when drawing this conclusion. He believes God is good, so God isn't a trickster.

Descartes' reasoning in "The Meditations" that descends into skepticism and doubt and ascends back into faith and reason is still by no means fully flawed. To adequately deal with atheists and skeptics, a Christian has to start from their starting point in practical terms to lead them to see the contradictions in their worldview. To start from premises (or presuppositions) far outside their experience or purported knowledge immediately loses the battle to convert them rationally. Remember the old practical approach of effective public speaking when aiming to persuade people who are of a contrary viewpoint: The speaker tries to find some common starting point first before leading them to accept the speaker's beliefs. It's much like Paul's differing approaches for dealing with gentiles and Jews, and aiming to be all things to all men when initially sharing the gospel with them (1 Cor. 9:19-23). Presuppositionalism just tries to throw much too much at them all at once from outside their circle of knowledge,

which will nearly always result in total rejection. (This principle is also why Intelligent Design, as opposed to standard brand young earth model Scientific Creationism, is much more likely to get an initial hearing and some respectful consideration in academic circles). It's better to start out small, from the skeptical atheists' own more limited sense experience, and then move outwards towards God and the truth of the Bible that the Christian already knows is true, but the skeptical atheist denies. (True, anyone uncalled won't convert fully to true Christianity, but that's a largely separate issue).

Descartes' formula always had a key flaw in it, which is known as the "prior certainty of consciousness." The rival school, which Aristotle affirmed, maintained "the intentionality of consciousness." That is, to be conscious you automatically have to be aware of something outside of your own mind. Ayn Rand explained the philosophical reasoning behind this approach in "Atlas Shrugged" (p. 942): "If nothing exists, there can be no consciousness: a consciousness with nothing to be conscious of is a contradiction in terms. A consciousness conscious of nothing but itself is a contradiction in terms: before it could identify itself as consciousness, it had to be conscious of something. If that which you claim to perceive does not exist, what you possess is not consciousness." Hence, it's an axiom (a fundamental philosophical statement that when denied is proven) that consciousness can't have its awareness limited to just its own mind.

## DON'T TRY TO PROVE TOO MUCH AT ONCE OR REJECTION AUTOMATICALLY OCCURS

The problem here in raising immediately with unbelievers any values based explicitly on Christian values is that they will often automatically ignore that believer. One can say that's the wrong response all we wish, but that often doesn't open any of their minds even a crack. From the viewpoint of practical persuasive techniques, it better to operate like Paul did on Mars Hill in Athens, who cited a pagan poet, in order to find common ground with the audience he was preaching to. On the other hand, when he entered a synagogue, he could start right away in citing Old Testament Scripture before preaching about Christ as the Savior and Messiah. He could adapt the beginning of his message to his audience while still leading them

to the end point of full Biblical truth.

Hence, if someone attempts to discuss the six days of creation and the Flood, let alone the young earth model, when criticizing the theory of evolution, normally someone committed to the other side will totally discount the creationist. It's simply asking them to change their minds too much too quickly on subjects that are so fundamental to someone's worldview. However, when the intelligent design people leave the Bible out of their initial statements of criticism of the theory of evolution, they can get hearings from secular academics that someone starting out using Genesis could never get. Phillip Johnson, the author of "Darwin on Trial, has had personal success in this regard, so this isn't a theoretical discussion merely. We can agree that we have to lead skeptics to the truth, but we have to use Paul's technique of being all things to all men when we start out with unbelievers when trying to persuade them to believe. Hence, if we (Christians) can use secular logic with otherwise close-minded skeptics who are willing to listen to a non-religious presentation of arguments against abortion and against legalizing sex with pre-menstrual girls in order to influence government policy, why not? Later on, if they show themselves to be somewhat open-minded, we can come back, and chip away at their skepticism some more, and hope that God is calling them.

When Paul mentions adjusting the presentation of the Gospel for a Jew or gentile audience, that shows we Christians today should carefully present our faith as well to make it easier for called skeptics to repent. For it's surely possible, at least from an Arminian viewpoint, for a badly presented gospel message to keep some called people from accepting the truth. If we believe that people have free will, and aren't predestined to the lake of fire, then we should aim to use the best persuasive methods possible. For many are called, but not all are chosen (Matthew 20:16, KJV).

Christians should reject presuppositionalism today, much as Aquinas rejected fideism in the High Middle Ages. The existence of God isn't self-evident to people in today's world before the millennium. He cannot be directly observed presently, like the sun. So instead the existence of God is inferred from nature, much in the way that astronomers predicted and later discovered Neptune by perceiving

the effects that its gravitational pull on Uranus. Presuppositionalism is a kind of cosmic theological Catch-22: "Since you, the unbelievers, aren't persuaded, I the believer can ignore anything you say. Only we the believers can possibly know the truth since we're the only ones whose minds God has opened to receive it." Paul did not use this approach on Mars Hill, but referred to an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown God," and also to a poet's statement, "for we also are His offspring," as philosophical common ground with his gentile audience. (If this can be explained as "presuppositional," then the term is beginning to lose its meaning). But, of course, this is no way to deal with Muslims or agnostics/atheists and to expect them to take the Christian believer proclaiming his belief seriously. They will reply, such as with the Quran or the problem of evil, and say, "How do you explain this or that?" Thomas Woodward's book about the history of the intelligent design movement, "Doubts about Darwin," shows how those few scholars in the secular academic world have been quite successful in getting a hearing and working out rules of engagement with a number of their secular opponents. True, it's a minimalist position, since they deliberately put aside matters like the young earth issue and the worldwide flood, for to raise those issues involves going too far, too fast: One gets total rejection, when if one acts as Paul did in being all things to all men (i.e., stating one's position in words that the other side can agree with to degree), one can win a hearing.

Now a Calvinist, believing in predestination, may say that God will only let those who become converted be those He chose in advance to become converts, after He uses whatever persuasive process that He put into motion (John 6:44; 65; Romans 8:29-30; 10:14-18). And, well, it's just tough luck for the rest, since they remain uncalled and will end up in the lake of fire. The obvious text against universalism of any kind, which is sometimes used to escape this conclusion, is Matt. 25:46, the end of the parable of the sheep and goats: "And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." Just as long as eternal life lasts for the righteous, so too does eternal punishment (not eternal punishing) for the wicked.

Notice how such serious philosophy and theology has important practical consequences: For example, if man can't trust his senses, then any and all scientific and engineering work is folly from the get-

go. We Americans tend to be ruthlessly pragmatic, and to dismiss such thinking as a waste of time. However, true philosophy is practical, for it helps give you a paradigm or model for analyzing data correctly.

## CHRISTIANS SHOULD LEARN FROM NON-CHRISTIANS WHILE MAINTAINING THE TRUTH OF SCRIPTURE

There's also a difference between what an apologist like Thomas Aquinas generally advocated and what the modernist liberal Protestants that Machen debated did. The modernist liberals compromised and moved away from the historical Biblical beliefs of the Protestant church in order to look better to skeptical humanists, such as by denying the miracles of the Bible. But someone like Aquinas generally looked over pagan philosophy, especially Aristotle's, in order to find arguments favoring Catholic teachings and doctrines. A good example of this would be the impossibility of an infinite regress as proof of an uncaused cause, who is God. True, there might be a few areas in which Aquinas compromised excessively with pagan philosophy, but in this regard he did much better than the Islamic philosophers who were heavily influenced by Aristotle as well (such as ibn-Rushid, etc.) In this regard, Francis Shaeffer is mistaken, who made Aquinas a leading villain in his "Escape from Reason" and/or "The God Who Is There," by giving human reason some independence from revelation/Biblical faith. In this regard, I side with Aquinas. The problem with human reason mainly arises when it decides to contradict some clear truth of Scripture, such as by proclaiming the theory of evolution. Otherwise, philosophy can be a very useful if limited handmaiden to theology.

Above it has been shown that presuppositionalism and fideism are mistaken Christian teachings. Instead, we should accept the general approach of Thomas Aquinas and Herbert W. Armstrong, that God's existence and the Bible can be proven to be the Word of God, even though such evidence will never be so overwhelming in this age before Jesus' return to necessarily persuade the uncalled to salvation. Since man can't know immediately by his own sense experience and logic that God exists in his present fallen state, it's necessary to use reason as well as faith to persuade him to accept the Gospel. Christians need to start with the beliefs that they have in common with skeptics in order to persuade them of God's truth,

should they be called or at least willing to change their basic worldview. In this light, Christians should (I Peter 3:15) “always [be] ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you.”

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