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A Positive Case for the Primacy of an Evidential Apologetic Method

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A Positive Case for the Primacy of an Evidential Apologetic Method

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by

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Introduction

Since the days of the Apostles, there has been a call to provide a reason for the hope held by Christians. The call has yielded multiple methods by which one might provide such a reason for their hope, with the four primary methods including Presupposition, Classical, Cumulative Case, and Evidential. The point shall be conceded early that each of the four methods have value and each is capable of being employed more effectively in some situations, with the key factor being the needs of the hearer. However, such concession does not negate the thesis of this work. It is proffered that an evidential method has primacy over all other apologetic methods on the grounds that evidences are necessary for any apologetic method to function. This is not to say that an evidential method is the only apologetic method, or that an evidential method when used alone is always sufficient to make the case for Christianity, but it is an affirmation that evidences are necessary in establishing matters of truth.

Evidences are necessary for establishing matters of truth. What is important at this point is the recognition that while one may deny truth based on intellectual objections, it is equally plausible that one might reject a stated truth based on emotional reasons. In such cases it must be remembered that the individual does not need more proofs, rather they are more likely in need of pastoral care. This does not minimize the evidences, it is simply recognition of what approach would be more effective in that circumstance.

Three of the four primary methods listed above readily admit evidences as part of the approach by their constituents. Depending on who specifically is asked, those holding to a presuppositional view may or may not allow for the introduction of evidence. Because the focus on evidence is the key driver in this paper, it shall be beneficial to define exactly what is meant when using the term. Evidence shall be defined in this work as a condition or event, objective in

nature, knowable by those present, open to investigation by all others, whereby when rightly interpreted, corresponds to reality. Using this definition, evidence may be either a noun or a verb, is not limited to a single person, is not subjective, and requires interpretation for correct understanding.

Establishing the Argument

Evidence is Unavoidable

One cannot avoid the reality that there are what would be known as evidences for events that have happened in history, or conditions which exist. This arguably is the very basis upon which forensic science was established. There are, therefore, rules associated with what might be understood as evidence. Plantinga may be interpreted as saying a minimal facts approach is to be preferred when attempting to understand evidence. McGrath cites Plantinga as follows,

Criteria for proper basicity must be reached from below rather than above; they should not be presented as *ex cathedra*, but argued and tested by a relevant set of examples. But there is no reason to assume, in advance, that everyone will agree on the examples. The Christian will of course support that belief in God is entirely proper and rational. Followers of Bertrand Russell and Madelyn Murray O'Haire may disagree, but how is that relevant? Must my criteria, or those of the Christian community, conform to their examples? Surely not. The Christian community is responsible to its set of examples, not to theirs.¹

The issue as presented by Plantinga is not the individual points of data so much as the interpretive scheme used in understanding those points. Different examples will be used, which is to be expected given various worldviews, but that does not change the fact that data exists which must be both identified and interpreted. A significant benefit to the use of an evidential method is that it has the ability to be a positive apologetic that focuses on individual points, building from the data to the conclusion. One challenge that the presuppositional view must

¹ Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 100.

overcome is that one works from the desired conclusion backward to see what points of data may fit. This is not necessarily inappropriate, but does need to be watched carefully to ensure that inappropriate biases do not admit data that in actuality do not fit. A second pitfall generally avoided by the use of evidential over other methods is that it can avoid polemical arguments and instead focuses on establishing a positive apologetic for the data and subsequent conclusion.

Of the four primary apologetic methods listed in the introduction, three would admit evidences, while the presuppositional view, depending on the individual asked, would not allow the introduction of evidence. There is simply no way to address all of the possible challenges to an evidential method in the space allotted, so the following is admittedly selective in nature. The desire is to begin to demonstrate the thesis, namely that an apologetic method cannot function without first introducing evidence. Because the presupposition position has historically been the most condemning of introducing evidence, most of the focus shall be on this view.

Gordon Clark and Presuppositionalism

Suppose Jesus did rise from the grave. This only proves that his body resumed its activities for a while after his crucifixion; it does not prove that he died for our sins or that he was the Son of God. While this line of anti-Christian argument contains certain misstatements, none the less the inference in the last sentence is valid. The resurrection, viewed purely as an isolated historical event, does not prove that Christ died for our sins, not only because Lazarus also rose from the dead, but also because sin is a notion which requires a particular view about God and the universe, and on such questions archaeology and history are incompetent.²

Clark presents two related points that needs to be addressed. First, the lesser challenge is found in the middle of his claim. Clark would point to the resurrection as an isolated event in history, but it is not possible to isolate any event in history such that it stands alone. To isolate a single event in history such that it stands alone is akin to taking a single word of Clark and

² Gordon Haddon Clark, *The Works of Gordon Haddon Clark*, 3rd ed., vol. 10, *A Christian Philosophy of Education* (Unicoi, TN: Trinity Foundation, ©2000), 35.

examining it without the benefit of the others. In taking this approach one loses context, which leads to the loss of meaning. The second challenge is to be found in his claim that the resurrection does not prove the “why” behind Jesus’ death and resurrection. Restated, one cannot allegedly get from the event to the hand of God to demonstrate that the event was truly of God. Habermas disagrees, pointing to six contextual indicators that validate the orthodox Christian claim.³ When considering Jesus, one must examine the immediate context of an event, the resurrection, in conjunction with a broader context, namely his period of ministry, and finally within the context of what would have been understood to be Scripture in his day. Context provides the linkage between the isolated events, to use Clark’s term, and the right interpretation of those events.

Beyond Clark, the broader presuppositional position can be shown to need evidence in order to make its claim. In his introduction to presuppositional apologetics, John Frame initiates his position with an appeal to Scripture, claiming a strong view of Scripture, the biblical canon as God’s Word, infallibility, and inerrancy in the autographs.⁴ It is argued here that by making appeal to anyone or anything external to the individual, one has been affected by at least one stimulus. When Frame (or others) points to Scripture as authoritative, his presuppositions are arguably developed and defined based on the evidence. There is every reason to believe that everyone operates with presuppositions, and that those presuppositions are defined and developed based on the particular worldview brought to the discussion. Frame accepts Scripture

³ Gary Habermas, “Miracles” (lecture, Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA February 9, 2015). The six are: 1) Jesus is a miracle worker; 2) He predicted his resurrection; 3) He claimed deity; 4) He claimed to be the path to salvation; 5) He said he would give a sign of his resurrection; 6) All of this just happened to occur to the only man in the universe who seriously made the claim of who he was and that what you do with him determines what happens to you in eternity.

⁴ John M. Frame, “Presuppositional Apologetics” In *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry and Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 208-9.

as the Word of God, therefore he accepts a condition or event to have happened (the penning of Scripture). It is objectively true that the Bible exists today, Scripture is knowable to Christians today, it is open to investigation by non-Christians, and when rightly interpreted the resultant will correspond with reality. To be fair, Frame does not dismiss evidence as some others do with his presuppositional view, but his philosophical position sees evidences as being lesser in importance than the grace of God in changing the hearts of rebellious mankind.

The Epistemological and Rationalism Challenge

Frame, in responding to Habermas, makes a point of indicating that there is difficulty in using the evidential method in trying to reason with unbelievers, and points to Romans 1 for support that unbelievers suppress the truth and exchange the truth for a lie.⁵ What cannot be missed is that Frame's very argument supports both the thesis of this paper and the proffered definition for evidence. More specifically, if evidence, rightly interpreted, corresponds to reality, then to know and be able to suppress truth indicates that one has epistemic access to evidence. Geisler appears to have picked up on the same point. "This is the apologetics system of the late Gordon Clark and his noted disciple Carl F. H. Henry. Like other presuppositionalists, the rational presuppositionalist begins with the Trinity revealed in the written Word of God."⁶ Thus, one giving primacy to a presuppositional model must concede that the model first necessitates the existence of evidence, in this case the existence of God and then revelation from God, that affirms the stated presupposition. "The theology of revelation includes epistemic access to objective reality wherein the Logos in self-disclosure and self-interpretation manifests a Truth to

⁵ John M. Frame, "A Presuppositionalist's Response" In *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry and Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 135.

⁶ Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 607.

be acknowledged and a Word to be heard. The way by which man is to know God includes the divine gift of mental judgment.”⁷

A second challenge to the evidential method may rest in the concept of rationalism, where the intent is to express that reason is the epitome of authority when discussing religious matters. “More broadly, rationalism is any philosophical position affirming the ability of thinking, apart from sensory experience, to discover fundamental truths about the world or reality.”⁸ Clearly one is not capable of thinking in a vacuum. Even if one were truly able to reach a position whereby they could think without any external sensory experience (this is argued to be an impossible state to achieve), thinking that is done in the present is influenced by both experiences and knowledge gained in the past. One can think rationally, but one cannot think where that thinking is not in some way influenced by external stimuli.

A possible objection that might be brought against the one giving primacy to an evidential method, *a la* Evans, is associated with a lack of objectivity.⁹ The difficulty here is that this challenge cuts in more than one direction. First, it is not possible to come to the table as an unbiased or disinterested party. Jesus stated, in essence, that what one chooses to do with him determines what happens to that person in the next life, thus there are implications for all. Second, biases are driven to a large degree by an individual’s worldview, meaning that a person’s conclusions will likely be influenced by how they see the world. The bias challenge, however, fails to carry convincing weight as a challenge. Kuyper reportedly went so far as to

⁷ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vol. 3 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), 171.

⁸ Jörg Dierken and Robert F. Brown, “Rationalism,” ed. Erwin Fahlbusch et al., *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Leiden, Netherlands: Wm. B. Eerdmans; Brill, 2005), 484.

⁹ Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *Faith Has Its Reasons: Integrative Approaches to Defending the Christian Faith* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2005), 463.

state that evidence could not demonstrate the existence of God. Berkhof notes, “Dr. Kuyper speaks as follows of the attempt to do this: “The attempt to prove God’s existence is either useless or unsuccessful. It is useless if the searcher believes that God is a rewarder of those who seek Him. And it is unsuccessful if it is an attempt to force a person who does not have this *pistis* by means of argumentation to an acknowledgment in a logical sense.””¹⁰

If Berkhof’s translation is accurate, then it would appear Kuyper would have challenged the second part of the definition, that being objectivity. The difficulty with Kuyper’s position is that he has based his position less on Scripture and more on his interpretation of Scripture. In making this move, it is suggested that what Kuyper has done is nothing short of confusing the issues within the proffered definition. The mere fact that the universe exists is objective information that any rational person may recognize. The real difficulty is not the ability to objectively know that God exists, rather it is a challenge to how one interprets the objective data.

It has already been suggested that it is not possible to have a condition whereby one may think about anything without having any external influence. These stimuli influence past, present, and future decisions and ways of thinking. Because this is true, it is simply not possible for one to come to the table of discussion for anything without being guilty of bias. Kuyper’s position above was influenced heavily by Calvinistic teachings. A second, and stronger point is to be found in the way the term “evidence” has been defined in this paper. Because the proffered definition states explicitly that evidence is objective in nature, the term bifurcates, albeit artificially, the “this side” from the “other side” of life. When speaking of evidence, this method

¹⁰ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans publishing co., 1938), 21. It is important to note here that Berkhof points back to his own translation of *Dictaten Dogmatiek, de Deo I*, page 77 and his own translation of that text. Berkhof’s translation is accepted here since the original source was not able to be readily located, and the original appears to have been written in Dutch. Since this writer lacks training and knowledge necessary to interpret Dutch, further individual pursuit of the original text would not have added value at this point in the research.

is speaking to those objective points of data that are open to investigation and can be known widely. Such a move is not done to avoid difficulties and questions that remain regarding what will happen in the future, rather it is a deliberate move to look at what pieces of information may be known and are open to investigation by any interested party now. The Holy Spirit may indeed speak to a person internally and bear witness, but this is not open to investigation by others, therefore it is not considered as evidence with respect to an evidential method. Moving beyond this, a real key to properly understanding an evidential method is in the right interpretation of the data. When interpreted correctly, the conclusions drawn will correspond to reality.

Of importance here is to not claim future events as being evidential. John Hick proposed that eschatology could be used as part of an evidential argument. “The appeal to evidence as a means of verifying the truth of Christianity has been made to the past (history) as well as to present experience either internally (as in mysticism) or externally (in nature). But some have also appealed to the future as a source of evidence for the possible truth of Christianity. Such was the suggestion of John Hick in his eschatological verification.”¹¹ In denying the use of what may be in the future and appealing only to that which exists now or in the past, an evidential method avoids challenges that the structure is logically fallacious. When speaking of an evidential method,

Plantinga has criticized evidentialism in philosophy of religion by arguing that religious beliefs in some cases may be “properly basic.” This view is supported by an epistemology that sees knowledge as consisting of true beliefs that are the result of properly functioning faculties, operating according to their “design plan” in a way that is directed at truth, in the kind of environment in which they were intended to function.¹²

¹¹ Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), 92.

¹² C. Stephen Evans, *Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics & Philosophy of Religion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 93.

Based on the above, it is argued that the above challenges as brought by Kuyper and Evans specifically, and rationalism and Presuppositionalism in general, fail in their challenge with respect to an evidential method because they do not take into consideration properly functioning faculties or that these faculties simply do not operate in a vacuum. More specifically, man cannot think without the influence of external stimuli, and there would be no challenge to “properly functioning faculties” in a human for any other area of life – until one reaches the discussion of theology. Such a move appears to be a straw man at best.

Scripture

While various apologetic methods are used, one must be able to tie the work back to Scripture. More specifically, if an evidential method has primacy, such a claim should be able to be demonstrated from the pages of Scripture.

With respect to the New Testament, a considerable example is provided in Matthew 11. Clearly John the Baptist and his disciples believed in God, and they were anticipating the arrival of the Messiah based on this passage. When John’s disciples asked Jesus if he was the one, the response by Jesus was to point to the works that he had been doing as part of his ministry. Jesus pointed to the condition of people who were lame, sick, deaf, blind, and dead prior to an encounter with himself, and how those respective conditions were changed because of work he had done. Jesus pointed to the evidence that came from his ministry as the means for identifying who he was. The key was the right interpretation of the data. This is not wholly inconsistent with what one sees in the Old Testament with respect to the use of evidence.

In Genesis 1 and 2 the story of creation is presented. Here there is commonality between the Christian and the atheist, as both agree that the universe had a beginning. As argued earlier,

those whose faculties are functioning correctly perceive the universe; therefore it is evidence that something exists rather than nothing. The evidence is not in question – the interpretation is.

In 1 KI 18 the account of Elijah on Mt Carmel is told, and how he challenged the prophets of Baal. Of particular interest is verse 24 where Elijah claims that the test of which deity was truly stronger, or real, would be answered by a visible demonstration where fire would be the evidence for the existence of the true God. Admittedly this event is difficult to investigate short of the text, but it is still an ancient appeal to evidence. A broader category of information that is perhaps easier to confirm, or at least demonstrate to be ancient practice, is to be found in the judicial practices of the Jewish people.

Leviticus 5:1 states that a person with knowledge who fails to speak regarding something she knows to be true is guilty. Lindsey suggests that the guilt was based on having a knowledge that was necessary in reaching a right interpretation of the data, and by not speaking out and sharing the information known, one could be guilty by way of negligence.¹³ In Deuteronomy 17 standards for carrying out capital punishment were outlined, requiring testimony of at least two or three witnesses who provided information during the investigation.¹⁴ Here one not only finds evidence as being necessary and proper, but also the appeal to multiple attestation in determining whether or not the testimony received was in correspondence with reality. Many more examples could be provided from the Torah and wisdom literature, but what can be seen here is that an appeal to evidence was not rejected by the early Jewish community. It may be argued that the Jewish community did presuppose the existence of God, and that they presupposed the writings

¹³ F. Duane Lindsey, "Leviticus," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 182.

¹⁴ Jack S. Deere, "Deuteronomy," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 294.

now known as the Old Testament were communication from Him to humanity, but that did not prevent them from pursuing evidence in support of how they lived out what they believed.

Concluding Thoughts

This paper has sought to argue for the primacy of an evidential method of apologetics. Evidence was defined as a condition or event, objective in nature, knowable by those present, open to investigation, whereby when rightly interpreted, corresponds to reality. What has been demonstrated is the overall strength of evidence in building a Christian apologetic.

First, an evidential argument may easily be framed as a minimal facts argument in that it builds from the bottom up, or it works from individual points of data up to the conclusion. Rather than attempting to prove the reliability of a view from an overarching perspective, the work is an attempt to follow the clues to the most plausible conclusion that also corresponds with reality. Because history, unlike science, cannot be repeated, tools have been developed over time with which to investigate historical events and draw inferences and conclusions from those pieces of data. Such is the work and value of forensic science.

Next, an evidential apologetic method is to a very large degree a positive apologetic. It avoids the polemical positioning found in other methods that may claim no common ground exists between the sinner and the saint. Beyond this, by arguing from the data to the conclusion, the arguments are inductive in nature and require the investigation to deal with specifics rather than generalizations. With the identification of these data points, the investigation examines these points in the context in which they were observed. Because the data is in context, there is an objective mechanism that allows for the tracing of the data to see if its origin was truly the hand of God.

It was stated that both a Classical and a Cumulative Case method would allow for the introduction of evidence in making their respective cases, and that at least some who opt for a presuppositional starting point argue against introducing evidences. However, the very starting point for a presuppositional method is evidence that God exists and that the Bible is a communication from God to man. Any objection to objective, knowable data is misplaced. There is no challenge in any other sphere of investigation besides theology where people do not believe in the existence of objective, knowable data. The difficulty comes with the interpretation of the data, not the data itself. Such a view may be demonstrated as at least being highly plausible based on the fact that no individual can think in a vacuum, thus all thinking is influenced by external stimuli, either from the past or the present.

One might challenge the use of an evidential method as bearing a lack of objectivity. Such a challenge falls far short of being convincing and is but a straw man since the challenge may be used against any position held. If evidence is objective and knowable, then the challenge is against the interpretation of the data and not the data itself. Therefore, the challenge is against a particular worldview and how it communicates across the boundaries with other worldviews. How to communicate effectively across certain boundaries may be a valid concern, but is not capable of challenging the data itself. Even if one disagrees with the interpretation, the data still remains and needs interpreting.

It has been argued that the appeal to the future by scholars such as John Hick is inappropriate when using an evidential method. If the proffered definition is taken, then evidence has occurred in the past, for when the one investigating recognizes something as data, no matter how closely that recognition is to the actual occurrence, it is then history. One cannot appeal to future events as evidential if the definition for evidence is tied necessarily to the past.

Additionally, it is not clear how one could establish any objective criterion by which to judge future events that have yet to happen without employing a hard determinism.

To reiterate a point from the beginning of this work, it is not believed that one can appeal to “the” apologetic method. There is not a single evidential, classical, presuppositional, or cumulative case argument – there are multiple variations of each. This paper has not sought to argue for an evidential method as having supremacy over any other method, but that the evidential method is by necessity included in all other apologetic methods, and no apologetic method functions without the inclusion of evidence. Some in the line of Habermas have argued inductively from the data, while others have argued deductively to the evidence. No position has been found whereby an apologetic method has been used devoid of any evidence that is thought to support the claims being made. Because there is no way to eliminate all external stimuli such that none of the five senses are usable, and because there is no way to undo the impact external stimuli has had on an individual historically, there is no way conceivable whereby one could think without being affected by other, objectively knowable data. The evidence simply cannot be rationally denied or avoided.

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