

Reason and Belief in God

Jason Dulle

Why believe that God exists? What is the evidence? This is the first installment in a series of articles examining the evidence for God's existence. I will explore three cosmological arguments, the moral argument, the teleological argument, and the argument from personal experience. First, however, we need to know the relationship between reason/evidence and belief. That is the locus of this introductory article, and the question to which I now turn.

The Nature of Faith

Many unbelievers and believers alike see faith and reason as opposites. There is thought to be an inverse relationship between faith and reason, such that the more reasons/evidence you have to believe X, the less room there is for faith. Faith is understood to be a commitment of the will in the absence of reason/evidence; as that which is necessary when no evidence is available (confidence without evidence). Nothing could be further from the truth. This is a misunderstanding of the Biblical concept of faith.

Faith and reason are not opposites. The opposite of faith is unbelief. Faith and reason are not only compatible, but integrally related to one another. Reason and evidence are the means by which we come to know Christianity is true,¹ while faith is how we respond to that knowledge.

Faith is not a way of knowing; it's a way of trusting. In its essence, Biblical faith is trusting in what we know to be true. It's not the means by which we know what is true. Faith is how we respond to what we have reasons and evidence (either rational or experiential evidences) to believe is true. Biblical faith is the act of trusting in what (or whom) we know to be true based on the evidence. As D. Elton Trueblood noted, "Faith is not belief without proof, but trust without reservation." Reason and evidence lead to knowledge that Christianity is true. Faith is the act of entrusting our life to God, acting on what we know to be true. We trust that Christ alone can save us from our sins and raise us from the dead, and we entrust our lives to Him because we know that He is true. So faith is not a form of wishful thinking that is divorced from reason and evidence, but is a disposition of trust based on what we know to be true from the evidence.

The Relationship between Reason and Belief

While many debate the role of reason in the Christian faith, it should go without saying that reasons are required for belief in God in the sense that beliefs are necessarily caused by reasons. That is to say that beliefs develop automatically given sufficient epistemic conditions. If that were not so, we would not be able to control what we believe. Beliefs would just pop in and out of our minds inexplicably. You might be walking down the street enjoying the fresh air when suddenly you begin to believe that you are a bird, or cease believing that you are alive. In the absence of reasons, a belief cannot be formed.

¹The Biblical evidence for the view that evidence is not opposed to faith is presented in Jason Dulle, "Biblical Examples of Apologetics"; available from <http://www.onenesspentecostal.com/apologeticsexamples.htm>; Internet; accessed 23 October 2010, and Jason Dulle, "God is an Apologist"; available from <http://www.onenesspentecostal.com/godapologist.htm>; Internet; accessed 11 February 2011.

One cannot believe something out of sheer will power. For example, trying believing that you are sleeping right now as you are reading this article. Or, if you are a theist, believe that God does not exist. You can't do it because genuine beliefs require reasons (even if those reasons are weak or bad). When it comes to belief in God, one must have reasons to believe in God before they can ever form the belief that God exists.

There are two broad categories of reason that form our beliefs: experiential, rational. Many of our beliefs are formed by our experiences. Why do we believe that gravity is real? We believe it because we experience it on a daily basis. Why do we believe we have minds? Because we use them on a regular basis. Why do you believe your parents love you? Because you experienced their love directly.

The reason many people come to believe in God is based on some experience. Perhaps they felt His presence, saw a miracle, or have observed divine providence in their life. Belief in God also satisfies the deepest human needs: love, security, a better life beyond the grave, justice, meaning, forgiveness for our mistakes, and an object of worship, hope, relationship, and beauty. As C. S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity*: "Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction of those desires exists. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probably explanation is that I was made for another world."

The Bible also teaches us that there is a witness of God's Spirit directly to our spirit that we are His children (Jn 14:16-17, 20, 26; Rom 8:15-16; Gal 3:26; 4:6; 1 Jn 2:20, 27; 3:24; 4:13).² Alvin Plantinga has argued that this makes Christian faith a properly basic belief.³ We have direct attestation of the truth of Christianity directly from God Himself, and thus have warrant for our Christian beliefs without a need for additional evidence. While rational evidence is sufficient to demonstrate the truth of Christian truth claims, such evidence is not necessary for one's Christian beliefs to be justified.⁴

While one is entirely rational to believe in God based on personal experience alone, their experience may be impotent to persuade those who do not share their experience. As William Lane Craig has noted, there is a difference between how we *know* Christianity is true and how we *show* it to be true. We know it to be true by the witness of the Spirit in our hearts, but we show it to be true by rational evidence. While experience may be sufficient for personal knowledge, reasons are necessary for public persuasion. Rationality also informs and creates our beliefs.

Belief *that* always precedes belief *in*. That is to say, before one can believe in something they must first believe that the something is true. One cannot believe in Jesus unless they first have reasons to believe that Jesus is the resurrected Son of God. That's not to say that faith is a purely rational exercise. The Spirit must act on our hearts as well, but the Spirit's activity on our hearts does not negate the necessary activities in our minds. Reasons are a necessary – but not sufficient – condition for faith.

²How do we know our experience of the witness of the Spirit is not mistaken since others make competing claims? Counterfeit claims do nothing to undermine the veridicality of your own experience. Someone might say that they have experienced being married to my wife, but I know their experience cannot be veridical, whereas mine is.

³A properly basic belief is a belief that we are justified in believing without evidence. Other examples of properly basic beliefs include the belief that the world was not created five minutes ago with the appearance of age and memories, and belief in other minds. We cannot prove these truths, but we are rational to believe them.

⁴Kelly Clark, *Five Views on Apologetics*, Steven B. Cowan and Stanley Gundry, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 364.

The Role of Rational Evidence in Christianity

Rational evidence serves a number of roles as it relates to faith. Reason can:

1. Provide good reasons to believe God exists (which is particularly important to those who lack faith because they are unaware of the evidence).

The evidence will enlighten the mind, the Holy Spirit will enlighten the spirit, but conversion will only occur when the individual aligns his will with both his mind and spirit. W. H. Griffith-Thomas wrote, “[Faith] commences with the conviction of the mind based on adequate evidence; it continues in the confidence of the heart or emotions based on conviction, and it is crowned in the consent of the will, by means of which the conviction and confidence are expressed in conduct.”⁵

2. Remove intellectual barriers to faith, opening skeptics up to experiencing God and feeling the conviction of the Spirit.

Some people have been reasoned out of their belief in God due to false information. For example, they may have been fooled into believing that morality is created by culture (moral relativism) rather than an objective feature of the world. If true, then there is no such thing as sin, and thus there is no need for forgiveness offered through Jesus. Or, perhaps they were taught that Darwinian evolution has been proven scientifically, and thus there is no need for a divine creator. If so, then God is out of a job. While they may want to believe in God, they are not able to do so because they think the evidence has demonstrated the Christian worldview to be false.

This is where Christian apologetics comes in, using reason to demonstrate the intellectual and existential bankruptcy of moral relativism, and providing reasons to think the scientific evidence supports design rather than randomness (or show that evolutionary theory is not at odds with theism).

3. Deepen the faith/convictions of believers.

Greg Koukl writes, “The objective reasons are important to show that our subjective confidence has not been misplaced, that what we’ve believed with our hearts can be confirmed with our minds.”⁶ Reasons can increase our confidence that what we have believed in our heart is also defensible in the real world; i.e. our faith is intellectually credible and rationally justified.

4. Stabilize our faith.

Experience is subjective by nature, and is often prone to doubt. We can often question our experience, doubting whether or not it truly happened as we remember it, or doubting whether or not we are interpreting that experience correctly. Rational evidence is much more objective and can provide a stability to our faith. Indeed, I have times when thoughts of doubt entered my mind – doubting God’s existence and my experience of Him. In such times, I reflect on all of the rational evidences for God’s existence and my faith is restored.

5. Engender a greater confidence to evangelize.

⁵W. H. Griffith-Thomas, *Principles of Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005), xx.

⁶Stand to Reason’s February 2006 e-newsletter, *Moments of Truth*. No longer available at www.str.org.

While there are many reasons Christians fail to spread Jesus' message and tell others about His resurrection, one of the key reasons people are hesitant to share the Gospel is because they do not know how to prove their claims nor answer the questions and objections that unbelievers will raise against them. Knowing the rational evidence that justifies Christian truth claims can embolden Christians to evangelize and make them a more effective witness for Christ.

Empirical Evidence

In our scientific age, many have come to think that if something cannot be proven scientifically, then it is not worthy of belief. This view is called scientism. It's the idea that science alone is the arbiter and source of truth and knowledge. Scientific knowledge is gained through our five senses (sensory/empirical knowledge). To prove something scientifically, then, one must prove it empirically. Scientifically-minded people (particularly those who subscribe to scientism) often presuppose that any valid evidence for God's existence must be empirical (scientific) in nature, because they presuppose that empirical evidence is the only (valid) form of evidence. Why would one think this?

This presupposition is clearly mistaken. The very principle that "only empirical evidence is valid evidence" is a philosophical claim, not an empirical finding. There is no experiment one can perform to arrive at such a conclusion, and it cannot be verified empirically. Any reasons given for believing it would have to be philosophical in nature, undermining the point of view. Since it is not justified by empirical evidence, the principle is invalid according to its own criteria. It is self-contradictory. The fact of the matter is that one cannot avoid philosophical reasoning and evidence in the pursuit of truth. Empirical evidence alone is not enough.

If the only valid form of evidence is empirical evidence, then most of what we think we know we are not justified in claiming to know. For example, knowledge of history, moral values, logical laws, and mathematical principles are not known empirically. Few would be willing to discount such knowledge as *knowledge*. Indeed, science cannot even be done without assuming the truth of logic and mathematics.

If God exists, we should not expect to find empirical evidence of His existence for a very obvious reason: God is not a physical being, and thus is not subject to empirical investigation nor detectable empirically.⁷ To demand empirical evidence for God's existence is like asking for chemical evidence of your spouse's love. It's the wrong tool for the job. Likewise, science is the wrong tool to discover the existence of God. Science is a tool to investigate the physical world, not the spiritual world. As such, scientific evidence cannot prove or disprove God's existence. That's why the claim that science has demonstrated that God does not exist is so foolish. Science cannot, in principle, disprove God's existence. To say there's no God because science has not discovered him is like saying there can't be an invisible man in your house because I've never seen him. You can't use sight to verify the unseeable. To determine if God exists (or doesn't exist) we need philosophical evidence, not empirical evidence.⁸

⁷While there cannot be *direct* empirical evidence for an immaterial being, empirical evidence could warrant an abductive inference to God's existence. Abduction is the form of reasoning that seeks to find the best causal explanation for some effect based on the nature of the effect in question. An examination of certain features of the physical world could lead one to conclude that the best causal explanation for those features is God. Indeed, teleological arguments for God's existence argue in this manner. They argue that God is the best explanation for specified complexity, irreducible complexity, the fine-tuning of the physical constants, and the beginning of the universe.

⁸See Jason Dulle, "Is it rational to believe in something without verifiable, empirical evidence?"; available from <https://thinkingtobelong.com/2013/10/24/is-it-rational-to-believe-in-something-without-verifiable-empirical-evidence/>; Internet; accessed 24 October 2013; Jason Dulle, "Empirical Evidence and the Existence of God"; available from <https://thinkingtobelong.com/2011/06/27/empirical-evidence-and-the-existence-of-god/>; Internet; accessed 27 June 2011;

Can We Prove God's Existence?

Can one prove the existence of God? Yes and no, depending on what one means by “prove.” Yes, one can prove the existence of God in the philosophical sense of the word “prove.” A philosophical proof is a deductive argument in which the premises are true and the conclusion follows logically from the premises.⁹ Many such arguments have been offered for the existence of God. If even one of them is valid, then the existence of God will have been proven.¹⁰

On the other hand, no, one cannot prove the existence of God if by “prove” one means “know with certainty.” The problem with defining “prove” in this way is that it raises the epistemic bar too high. Knowledge does not require certainty.¹¹ Indeed, there is very little that we know with absolute certainty.¹² The standard of evidence typically required before we claim to *know* something is simply a preponderance of the evidence. If we have more reasons to think *X* is true than we do to think *X* is false, we conclude that we know *X* is true even if there are some reasonable doubts against the truth of *X*. We are justified in this claim to knowledge unless and until we have reason to reassess the evidence. The highest bar of evidence required before we can claim to know something is evidence beyond a reasonable doubt. This standard of evidence does not require certainty, but does require the absence of any reasonable doubts regarding the truth of *X* before one can claim to know *X* is true. Given these normal standards for knowledge, it would not be fair to raise the epistemic bar for spiritual claims beyond the level required for any other truth claims. We can't prove with certainty that God exists, but neither can we prove with certainty that Socrates existed. And yet, most would claim to know Socrates existed because the evidence for his existence is better than the evidence for his non-existence. If we can believe in Socrates' existence based on good evidence without certainty, there's no reason to think we need to prove God's existence with certainty before belief in God is justified. Just as you don't need to have all of the pieces of a puzzle to “see” the picture, you don't need to have certainty or have all of your objections/questions answered to see that the evidence is pointing to God's existence.

and Jason Dulle, “Demanding the Impossible: Empiricists Demand the Wrong Kind of Evidence for God's Existence”; available from <https://thinkingtobelieve.com/2012/01/30/demanding-the-impossible-empiricists-demand-the-wrong-kind-of-evidence-for-gods-existence/>; Internet; accessed 30 January 2012.

⁹William Lane Craig defines what constitutes a good argument: “Now keep in mind what I mean by a ‘good argument.’ I mean an argument which (i) is logically valid; (ii) has true premisses; and (iii) has premisses which are more plausible than their negations. In order to show that an argument is no good, it is not enough for the sceptic to show that it's possible that a premiss is false. Possibilities come cheap. I'm puzzled that so many laymen seem to think that merely stating another possibility is sufficient to defeat a premiss. This is mistaken, for the premisses of an argument need be neither necessary nor certain in order for that argument to be a good one. The detractor of the argument needs to show either that the premiss in question is false or that its negation is just as plausibly true as the premiss itself.” (William Lane Craig, “The Leibnizian Cosmological Argument”; available from <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=8533>; Internet; accessed 03 January 2011.)

¹⁰This is not to say that deductive proofs can provide one with certainty regarding the truth of the conclusion. The level of certainty one can have with regards to the conclusion is proportionate to the level of certainty that each premise in the argument is true. See Jason Dulle, “Certainty and Deductive Arguments”; available from <https://thinkingtobelieve.com/2010/08/13/certainty-and-deductive-arguments/>; Internet; accessed 13 August 2010; and Jason Dulle, “No Argument Provides Certainty”; available from <https://thinkingtobelieve.com/2008/07/21/no-argument-provides-certainty/>; Internet; accessed 21 July 2008.

¹¹See Jason Dulle, “Dawkins is an agnostic? Why certainty is irrelevant to defining atheism”; available from <https://thinkingtobelieve.com/2012/03/02/dawkins-is-an-agnostic-why-certainty-is-irrelevant-to-defining-atheism>; Internet; accessed 02 March 2012; Jason Dulle, “I Don't Think. I know.”; available from <https://thinkingtobelieve.com/2014/03/19/i-dont-think-i-know/>; Internet; 19 March 2014; and Jason Dulle, “Knowledge, Truth, and Christianity”; available from <https://thinkingtobelieve.com/2006/06/25/knowledge-truth-and-christianity/>; 25 June 2006.

¹²The only things we can know with absolute certainty is our own existence, the laws of logic, mathematical truths, and analytical truths (truths by definition such as “all bachelors are unmarried males).

While there are a number of strong, persuasive arguments for the existence of God,¹³ there are no arguments that give us certainty regarding God's existence, and no slam dunk arguments that will convince everyone upon pain of logical death! While they are persuasive, they are not rationally compelling. One can always challenge or deny the truth of one of the premises.¹⁴ The goal of a good argument, however, is to make the price for denying the premises as high as possible.

The fact of the matter is that some people will not believe in God regardless of the evidence for His existence. This is because people's beliefs are not determined by logic and reason alone. Our beliefs are also influenced by our emotions/experience as well as our will. We are epistemically conditioned, which affects how we assess the evidence. Kelly Clark writes, "Our believings are inextricably entwined with our passions, emotions, and will. Our fundamental commitments shape our assessment of the evidence. Sometimes our commitments and values help us to see the truth; sometimes they obscure the truth. ... What counts as evidence, the weight that should attach to it, and the inferences that follow from it are conditioned by our commitments."¹⁵

For example, many atheists became atheists after some tragedy had befallen them or their family (death, assault, etc.). They cannot believe that a good God would have allowed that to happen in their life, and in their anger against God, they deny His existence. Because of their emotional pain, however, they will not allow themselves to be persuaded by any arguments¹⁶ for God either because they don't want God to exist. Others deny the existence of God because they do not want to acknowledge His moral authority over their life.¹⁷ They want to be in charge of their own life, and determine for themselves what is wrong and right. If one denies God's existence primarily for emotional and/or volitional reasons, all the rational evidence in the world will not be enough to convince them otherwise. I am reminded of the metaphor of the man who believed he was dead. The doctors provided him with evidence that dead people do not bleed. The man agreed, but when the nurse pricked his finger and he began to bleed, he cried out, "Great scot! I guess dead people bleed too!" Some people simply do not want to believe in God, and will not be persuaded by any argument that He exists because they are

¹³The strong rationalist says the reasons to believe are so compelling that all rational persons *must* believe. The critical rationalist says the evidence for God is reasonable, but not conclusive proof. To respect our free will God has made the evidence for His existence convincing, but not compelling.

¹⁴In my experience, atheists' skepticism of premises in theistic arguments are often unnecessarily skeptical. The premises are so plausible, that if the conclusion to the argument did not entail the existence of God, it is doubtful they would challenge or deny them. They must do so, however, in order to avoid the conclusion. See my article, "Unwarranted Skepticism of Premises in Theistic Arguments"; available from <https://thinkingtobelieve.com/2010/12/08/unwarranted-skepticism-of-premises-in-theistic-arguments/>; Internet; accessed 08 December 2010.

¹⁵Kelly Clark, *Five Views on Apologetics*, Steven B. Cowan and Stanley Gundry, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 85.

¹⁶Arguments are not fights. An argument is simply the exercise of offering evidence that supports a particular point of view.

¹⁷According to Paul in Romans 1:18-32, people do not acknowledge the one true God because of their moral rebellion (volition) against God, not because of a lack of evidence for and knowledge of His existence. Unbelief is primarily an ethical and volitional problem, not an intellectual problem. The knowledge of God belongs to us already. Arguments for His existence are not the source of our knowledge, but responses to the objections that seek to suppress that knowledge.

unwilling to change their mind.¹⁸ God has provided enough evidence of His existence to convince the willing, but not so much as to compel the unwilling.¹⁹

How to Argue for God's Existence

Worldviews are like mental maps, helping us navigate reality. Every worldview – whether religious or secular – attempts to explain reality as we know and experience it.²⁰ A worldview attempts to explain origins (the existence of the universe, the origin of life, the origin of consciousness), morality (moral values, human evil, moral guilt), the purpose of life (who is man and what are we here for?), and the end of all things (life beyond the grave, the future of the universe). The worldview that best explains the full range of human knowledge and experience in the cosmos is most likely to be true. The best way to argue for the existence of God is to demonstrate that God explains reality as we know it and experience it better than all other alternatives.²¹ This abductive approach weighs competing hypotheses to determine which hypothesis best explains the world we live in, and concludes that God is the best explanation.

Evidences for God's Existence

What are some of the arguments for God's existence? What is it about the world that God explains best? Some of the best arguments for God's existence are the argument from personal experience, the origin of the universe, the fine-tuning of the physical constants of the universe for advanced life, irreducible complexity, specified complexity, the origin of life, the origin of consciousness, the reliability of our cognitive faculties, the origin of logic, the existence of free will, the existence of objective moral values, the existence of the soul, and the resurrection of Jesus.

Summary

Reason and evidence are not opposed to faith, but related. Faith not way of knowing, but a way of trusting in what the evidence has already demonstrated to be true.

Belief and reason cannot be divorced from each other because beliefs are caused by reasons. We believe what we do because of experiential reasons or rational reasons. While our experience may be enough to convince us, however, it is often not enough to convince others of our beliefs. Those who have not experienced our experience will often need rational reasons to believe what we believe before they'll be open to experience.

¹⁸Even for those whose wills are set against God and refuse to believe, theistic arguments are still of value because they can expose the fact that the person is hiding behind a pseudo-intellectual façade. They are abusing reason to come up with intellectual justifications for their unbelief. Theistic arguments can expose this façade, forcing them to stare the truth straight in the eye, namely that they do not believe in God because they do not want to believe in God.

¹⁹Another great example of unwarranted skepticism is the story of Scrooge. See William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd edition (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 268-9.

²⁰Atheists cannot assume they have nothing to prove, or that a lack of evidence for theism is evidence for atheism. They have a worldview and bear a burden of proof too. See Jason Dulle, "Atheists Have Some 'Splainin' to Do"; available from <https://thinkingtobelieve.com/2008/10/06/atheists-have-some-splainin-to-do/>; Internet; accessed 06 October 2008. See also Jason Dulle, "Not So Fast: There is No Presumption of Atheism"; available from <http://www.onenesspentecostal.com/presumptionatheism.htm>; Internet; accessed 30 October 2012.

²¹While this is an abductive approach, abductive reasoning may employ the use of inductive and deductive arguments as well.

Not only is reason important to convincing others of the truth of Christianity, but reason is also helpful for Christians because it deepens our confidence in Christ, stabilizes our faith, and emboldens us to evangelize.

The evidence for God's existence is primarily philosophical in nature, not scientific. We can offer good reasons to believe God exists, but none of them can (nor need to) provide certainty. The best way of arguing for God's existence is to show that God makes the best sense of what we know about the world and our experience. Some people, however, will not be convinced by the evidence no matter how good it is because the reason for their disbelief is not intellectual in nature, but emotional and volitional.

With this as a starting point, my next article will examine the first argument for God's existence: the argument from personal experience.