

APOLOGETICS 101

Proofs for God: Part 1

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In this series, the author lays out a common sense approach to understanding and defending the Catholic Faith.

(A short preamble to clarify our terms – the term apologetics does not mean an apology in the modern understanding of the word. I am not saying I am sorry for something. What I am doing is giving a defence for something – this is an original meaning of the word ‘apologetics’)

In our last article we examined the relationship between faith and reason, and concluded that faith and reason can and need to work together. It is necessary to give reasons for faith in our search for truth, which we saw earlier, does exist. In our search for the truth about God, we need to look for the evidence with an open mind. The right mindset to have at the beginning of this search for the truth of God — if one is truly open-minded — is not: “There is no God, prove to me there is”, nor “There is a God, prove to me there isn’t”, but rather: “I don’t know...show me the evidence!”

I find it effective to begin my theology courses by giving my students a ‘crash course’ in basic apologetics. When we get to proofs for God, the response is invariably: “Mr. B... no way... no way can you prove God... I mean, you can prove stuff about science and math, but not God!” After a few classes the response becomes: “This is so amazing... I never imagined my faith made so much sense... wait till my friends hear about this...” In looking at proofs for the existence of God, the best place to begin is back in the Medieval Ages.

Aquinas and “ways” to God

The great theologian St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) outlined five “ways” to know God. It is interesting to note that he did not refer to them as “proofs” but “ways” because although they do prove God’s existence, Thomas held that our knowledge of God is at best incomplete and limited, God being so far above us. Humility, St. Thomas realized, is a good thing here! His arguments, in essence, are based on a simple instinct of the mind that “everything needs an explanation.” In other words, there must be a cause for everything that is.

Aquinas argues that things in motion require a mover. A ball cannot, of its own power, throw itself through the air. It needs a thrower. A train cannot decide to roll along the tracks without an engine. Dominoes cannot choose to begin falling on their own — they need an outside mover to begin moving them. No matter how much time you give them, if there are no outside forces acting on them, they will never begin falling. If you see them falling, you know that something acted upon them. We look at the universe around us and see that it is in motion. Much like the ball, train, or dominoes, it cannot move itself and therefore must have a mover. According to simple logical reasoning the argument looks like this: *Premise:* Everything in motion requires a mover. *Premise:* The universe is in motion. *Conclusion:* Therefore the universe has a mover. (An ‘unmoved mover’ – who is furthermore a personal being with free will outside of the physical limitations of the universe – time, space and matter – who chooses to begin motion. Choice here implies free will, which implies that a personal being has made a conscious choice.)

If both premises are true, which they are, then the conclusion must necessarily follow. The only way to deny the conclusion is to deny one of the premises and no one in their right mind would do this! Another of Aquinas’s “ways” is based on existence: *Premise:* Everything that comes into existence requires a cause. *Premise:* The universe came into existence. *Conclusion:* Therefore the universe has a cause. (An

“uncaused cause” – a being who is without beginning or end – a being whom we call God). The universe is full of dependent beings, beings like you and me, that car or that tree, or our sun for that matter, that need causes since they all came into being at some moment. If there were no ultimate independent being (God) then there would be no dependent beings. But there are dependent beings – therefore there must be an independent being! Imagine asking someone what caused everything. If he replies: “The Big Bang”, you can legitimately ask: “What caused the Big Bang?” If there were no cause, it could not have happened. (Even science will acknowledge this, although science gives us little in the way of answers as to what caused the Big Bang.) You could then inquire as to what caused the cause of the Big Bang and on so on. Ultimately, if there is not a place where the “buck stops”, nothing is explained. The “buck stops” at God.

Does design imply intelligence?

Imagine walking along in a forest where somehow you know that no one has ever been before. You come upon a wristwatch and think to yourself, “Wow, how many billions of years of evolutionary processes must have occurred for this watch to exist... lightning strikes, erosion, geological activity and so on... and here it is!” Walking a little further, you find a cell phone and you think the same thing. Finally, you arrive at a house with smoke rising from the chimney, an open door and dinner on the table, and you think yourself the luckiest human being in existence to come across all this stuff that is the result of pure chance. The odds are perhaps one in a billion trillion yet here it is! A person in such a scenario would know how absurd it is to attribute it to a cosmic accident. Clearly, somebody had been there before him, because things like watches, cell phones and houses with dinner just do not happen by chance. They are objects with design and therefore need a designer.

Back to the logic books: *Premise:* Everything that has design needs a designer. *Premise:* The universe has design. *Conclusion:* Therefore the universe has a designer.

Again, if the premises are true then the conclusion must necessarily follow. There is no way around this other than by denying one of the premises, which in reality would be a denial of reality. Advocates for the Intelligent Design movement argue that if a watch or cell phone could not be the result of pure blind chance, no matter how much time is given, how much less so is the created order, which is infinitely more complicated than a simple watch. Scientists today have no idea how life began, and they tend to fall back on the excuse that if only you have enough time, life could happen by chance. But, as we have seen, this does not follow. The recent film “Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed” examines the battle against the teaching of Intelligent Design by atheists who hold to a strict godless form of evolution – which is their only argument for remaining atheists. Acknowledging that there could be a designer would demolish their own personal “faith” of atheism.

Let’s review the evidence so far. We know, using reason alone, that there is a God who is a mover, a personal being, the cause of all in the universe, and also an incredible artist — the designer of all designers. That we can do this, gives evidence of the powerful way that reason can back up faith. These arguments do not prove the Christian God directly, but they prove that there is a God, soundly refuting all forms of atheism. They are not to be confused with faith itself, which is a gift from God, but they can help clear away the obstacles that lead one to faith.

Many of my students, after having studied the ways in which we can know God through reason, are filled with an enthusiasm to go out and share what they have seen and heard. One of the great beauties of our Catholic Faith is that it is so eminently reasonable, and this can aid us in the task of evangelization. Let us, each in our own way, be inspired to learn our faith more and be filled with a measure of enthusiasm so that we can share the “good news” of our God with others.

Next issue: “Proofs for God Part 2”

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