
CHRISTIAN
APOLOGETICS

SECOND EDITION

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GEISLER

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Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

ISBN 978-0-8010-4854-8 (pbk.)

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To my beloved mentor
who both taught
and inspired me
in the apologetic task,
Dr. Evan Welsh

Contents

Preface to the Second Edition ix

Preface to the First Edition x

Abbreviations xi

Part 1 Methodology

1. Agnosticism 3
2. Rationalism 19
3. Fideism 35
4. Experientialism 56
5. Evidentialism 72
6. Pragmatism 90
7. Combinationalism 105
8. Formulating an Adequate Test for Truth 120

Part 2 Theistic Apologetics

9. Deism 139
10. Finite Godism 159
11. Pantheism 179
12. Panentheism 201
13. Polytheism 222
14. Atheism 240
15. Theism 265

Part 3 Christian Apologetics

- 16. Naturalism and the Supernatural 293
- 17. Objectivism and History 319
- 18. The Historical Reliability of the New Testament 342
- 19. The Claim for the Deity and Authority of Jesus Christ 374
- 20. The Evidence for the Deity and Authority of Jesus Christ 393
- 21. The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible 419

Bibliography 451

Index 462

Preface to the Second Edition

The defense never rests. We are in a new generation and a new century, but the apologetic task never ends. I count it a great privilege to revise and update this pioneer apologetic effort that has lasted more than a generation and is now bridging into a new century. I have updated all the chapters and added new ones to meet the needs of the twenty-first century. Looking back over the nearly four decades *Christian Apologetics* has been in print, I am particularly gratified to see the many great apologists, including people like Ravi Zacharias, who have been influenced by the previous edition and have carried the apologetic task to new heights and to broader widths. Trying to ponder the reasons for the durability of this text, as opposed to so many others that have been less durable, there seem to be several reasons for its longevity. First, it is a *systematic* attempt to defend the Christian faith. Second, it is *comprehensive*, covering all the basic areas of apologetics, including worldviews and tests for truth. Third, it is *logical*, treating the material step by step in its logical order. Fourth, it is *classical* in that it follows the order of many of the great apologists down through the centuries, including Augustine, Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, B. B. Warfield, Kenneth Kantzer, and many others. It is a pleasure to be part of this great tradition and bequeath this enduring apologetic model to another generation.

Preface to the First Edition

This work on Christian apologetics is in three parts. Part 1 surveys various tests for truth in order to lay the groundwork for testing the truth of various worldviews. Part 2 applies the test for truth to the various worldviews and concludes that theism is the only adequate worldview. Part 3 works within the context of a theistic worldview to verify the unique claims of historical Christianity as to the deity of Christ and the authority of the Bible.

The basic movement in this apologetic has its roots from the apostles in the New Testament, was developed by Augustine, and comes to fruition in later Christians such as Thomas Aquinas. It is in essence the approach used by the old Princetonian theologians such as Warfield and Hodge in the tradition of Calvin, and it has been more popularly represented in recent times in the writings of C. S. Lewis.

The heart of this apologetic approach is that the Christian is interested in defending the truths that Christ is the Son of God and the Bible is the Word of God. However, prior to establishing these two pillars on which the uniqueness of Christianity is built, one must establish the existence of God. It makes no sense to speak about an *act* of God (i.e., a miracle) confirming that Christ is the *Son* of God and that the Bible is the *Word* of God unless, of course, there is a *God* who can have a Son and who can speak a Word. Theism, then, is a logical prerequisite to Christianity. What is more, an adequate test for truth is a methodological prerequisite to establishing theism. For unless the Christian apologist has a test by which he can show other systems to be false and theism to be true, there is no way to adjudicate the conflicting claims of various religions and worldviews. In view of this important problem, we unapologetically commit part 1 to the prior question of truth tests before attempting to defend theism (part 2) and the uniqueness of Christianity (part 3).

Abbreviations

Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis
Exod.	Exodus
Lev.	Leviticus
Num.	Numbers
Deut.	Deuteronomy
Josh.	Joshua
Judg.	Judges
Ruth	Ruth
1–2 Sam.	1–2 Samuel
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kings
1–2 Chron.	1–2 Chronicles
Ezra	Ezra
Neh.	Nehemiah
Esther	Esther
Job	Job
Ps./Pss.	Psalms
Prov.	Proverbs
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes
Song	Song of Songs
Isa.	Isaiah
Jer.	Jeremiah
Lam.	Lamentations
Ezek.	Ezekiel
Dan.	Daniel
Hosea	Hosea
Joel	Joel

Amos	Amos
Obad.	Obadiah
Jon.	Jonah
Mic.	Micah
Nah.	Nahum
Hab.	Habakkuk
Zeph.	Zephaniah
Hag.	Haggai
Zech.	Zechariah
Mal.	Malachi

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	Acts
Rom.	Romans
1–2 Cor.	1–2 Corinthians
Gal.	Galatians
Eph.	Ephesians
Phil.	Philippians
Col.	Colossians
1–2 Thess.	1–2 Thessalonians
1–2 Tim.	1–2 Timothy
Titus	Titus

Philem.	Philemon
Heb.	Hebrews
James	James
1–2 Pet.	1–2 Peter
1–3 John	1–3 John
Jude	Jude
Rev.	Revelation

General

ASV	American Standard Version
ca.	circa
cf.	compare
chap.	chapter
col.	collected
e.g.	for example

ESV	English Standard Version
Gk.	Greek
Heb.	Hebrew
i.e.	that is
KJV	King James Version
Knox	Knox Version
Lat.	Latin
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NIV	New International Version
NKJV	New King James Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
pt.	part
RSV	Revised Standard Version
sec(s).	section(s)
vol.	volume

Part 1

METHODOLOGY

1

Agnosticism

There are various approaches to, or methods for, addressing the question of whether God exists—some positive and some negative. Perhaps the most widely used in the latter category is agnosticism. There are two basic kinds of agnostics: those who claim that the existence and nature of God are not known, and those who hold God to be unknowable. Since the first type does not eliminate all religious knowledge, attention here will center on the second.

The term *agnosticism* was coined by T. H. Huxley. It means literally “no-knowledge,” the negation of *gnōsis* (Gk. “knowledge”).¹ However, over a hundred years before Huxley the writings of David Hume and Immanuel Kant laid down the philosophical basis of agnosticism. Much of modern philosophy takes for granted the general validity of the types of arguments they set forth.

The Basic Arguments of Agnosticism

Immanuel Kant was a rationalist until he was “awakened from his dogmatic slumbers” by reading David Hume. Much of the rest of the modern world has had a similar experience.

The Skepticism of David Hume (1711–76)

Technically Hume’s views are skeptical, but they serve well the agnostic aim also. Hume set forth the basis of his position in the concluding lines of his famous

1. See T. H. Huxley, “Agnosticism and Christianity” (1889), in *Christianity and Agnosticism: A Controversy* (New York: Appleton, 1889), 194–240.

Enquiry concerning Human Understanding: “If we take in our hands any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.”² That is, any statement that is neither purely a relation of ideas (definitional or mathematical), on the one hand, nor a matter of fact (empirical), on the other hand, is meaningless. Of course, all statements about God fall outside these categories, and hence knowledge of God becomes impossible.

There Are Only Two Kinds of Propositions. At the basis of Hume’s conclusion that all meaningful propositions are reducible to two kinds is a radical empiricism that may be summarized as follows. All of our knowledge or ideas are derived either through sensation or by reflection on ideas (derived from sensation) in the mind. There is nothing in the mind that was not first in the senses. Furthermore, all sensations are experienced as “entirely loose and separate.”³ Causal connections are made by the mind only after one has observed a constant conjunction of things in experience. All one really experiences is a series of unconnected and separate sensations. Indeed, there is no direct knowledge even of one’s “self,” for all we know of ourselves is a disconnected bundle of sense impressions. It does make sense, of course, to speak of connections among ideas, even necessary connections. But these are connections made only in the mind a priori or independent of experience. A posteriori (i.e., from experience) there are no known and certainly no necessary connections. All matters of experience imply a possible contrary state of affairs. For anything we experience in one way could be otherwise.

Causality Is Based on Custom. Many who believe in God are willing to admit that they have no direct knowledge of God but claim nonetheless to have access to the existence and nature of God via God’s effects or the things God has made or said. Hume’s epistemology (theory of knowledge), if true, would seem to eliminate this possibility as well. For, according to Hume, “all reasoning concerning matters of fact seems to be founded on the relation of *cause and effect*. By means of that relation alone can we go beyond the evidence of our memory and senses?”⁴

And knowledge of the relation of cause and effect is not a priori but arises entirely from experience. And the idea of a causal relation appears in the mind only after there has been an observation of constant conjunction in experience. That is, only when we observe death to occur *after* holding another’s head under the water for five minutes do we assume a causal connection. Once one event is observed to happen *after* another repeatedly, we begin to form the idea that one event happens *because* of the other. In brief, the idea of causality is based on custom.

2. David Hume, *An Inquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. C. W. Hendel (1748; repr., New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955).

3. *Ibid.*, sec. 6, pt. 2.

4. *Ibid.*, sec. 4, pt. 2.

Customary conjunction of events leads one to believe in or posit a connection between them. Of course, this connection cannot be *known* but is simply *believed* because of the repetition of the conjunctions. There is always the possibility of the post hoc fallacy—namely, that things happen after other events (even regularly) but are not really caused by them. For example, the sun rises regularly *after* the rooster crows but certainly not *because* the rooster crows. One can never know causal connections. And without a knowledge of the Cause of this world, for example, one is left in agnosticism about such a supposed God.

Knowledge of God by Analogy Is Highly Problematic. Hume believed that even if one were to grant that every event has a cause, nevertheless one cannot build any knowledge of God upon this fact because the analogy is weak at best. In his famous *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*,⁵ he contended that on such an analogy, the cause of the universe may be (1) *different* from human intelligence, since human inventions differ from those of nature; (2) *finite*, since the effect is finite and one need only infer a cause adequate for the effect; (3) *imperfect*, since there are imperfections in nature; (4) *multiple*, for the creation of the world looks more like a long-range trial and error product of many cooperating deities; (5) *male and female*, since this is how humans generate; and (6) *anthropomorphic*, with hands, nose, eyes, and so forth, such as the creatures of this cause have. Since no theist will admit that analogy leads to these anthropomorphic deities, it leaves us in skepticism about the nature of any supposed Cause of the world.

The Agnosticism of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804)

The writings of Hume had a profound influence on the thinking of Kant. Before reading them, Kant held a form of rationalism in the tradition of Leibniz. Gottfried Leibniz and Charles Wolfe believed reality was rationally knowable and that theism was demonstrable. They followed a long line of Western thinkers from Plato through Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas, who held that there were proofs for the existence of God. It was the pen of Kant that put an abrupt end to much of this thinking in the philosophical world.

The Impossibility of Knowing Reality. On the one hand, Kant granted to the rational tradition of Leibniz that there was a rational, a priori dimension to knowledge—namely, that the *form* of all knowledge is independent of experience. On the other hand, Kant granted Hume and the empiricists their basic contention that the content of all knowledge came via the senses. The “stuff” of knowledge is provided by the senses, but the structure of knowledge is attained eventually in the mind. This creative synthesis solved the problem of rationalism and empiricism. However, the unhappy result of this synthesis is agnosticism, for if one cannot know anything until *after* it is structured by the a priori forms of sensation (time and space) and the categories of understanding (such as unity and causality), then

5. David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (1779; repr., Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962).

there is no way to know what it really was *before* it was so structured, because there is no way to get outside one's own being. That is, I can know what something is *to-me* but never what it is *in-itself*. Only appearance can be known, not reality. In Kant's words, we know the *phenomena* but not the *noumena*. There is a great, impassable gulf between the real world and our knowledge of it; we must remain agnostic about reality. We know only *that* it is there; we can never know *what* it is.⁶

The Antinomies of Human Reason. There is another argument for Kant's agnostic conclusion. Not only is there an unbridgeable gulf between knowing and being, between the categories of our understanding and the nature of reality, but there are also the inevitable contradictions that result once we begin to trespass the boundary line. In other words, when we take the necessary forms of sensation or categories of understanding, such as the principle of causality, and apply them to reality, we run headlong into unavoidable contradictions.⁷

There is, for instance, the antinomy of *time*. If we assume that the form of sensation known as time (the "when-ness" with which we time-bound creatures sense things) applies to reality, we must conclude the following contradictions. On the one hand, if the world had a beginning in time, then an infinity of moments must have elapsed before the world began. But this is impossible because an infinity of moments can never be completed. On the other hand, if the world did not have a beginning in time, then there must have been a time before time began—which is impossible. But either the world began in time or it did not, and both positions are impossible. Hence, by applying time to reality one eventuates necessarily in contradictions. And since contradictions do not yield knowledge, reality is unknowable.

Another antinomy concerns the category of *causality*. On the one hand, not every cause can have a cause, or else a series of causes would never begin to cause—which they, in fact, do. On the other hand, if everything had a cause, then there could not be a beginning cause, and the causal series must stretch back infinitely. But it is impossible that the series be both infinite and also have a beginning. Such is the impossible paradox resulting from the application of the category of causality to reality.

There is also the antinomy of *contingency*. We must posit that not everything is contingent; otherwise there would be no basis or condition for contingency. On the contrary, everything must be contingent, for necessity applies only to thought and not to things, since any state of affairs could be otherwise. But again, reality cannot be both contingent and necessary. The way to avoid such contradiction is to acknowledge that reason cannot know reality—namely, to be agnostic.

These arguments do not exhaust the agnostic's arsenal, but they do lie at the heart of the contention that God cannot be known. However, even some who are unwilling to admit to the validity of these arguments opt for a more subtle form

6. See Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (1781; repr., New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), especially 173–74.

7. *Ibid.*, 393–94.

of agnosticism. Such is the case with the school of thought to which we turn our attention next: logical positivism.

The “Acognosticism” of A. J. Ayer (1910–89)

Following up on Hume’s distinction between definitional and empirical statements, Ayer offered the principle of empirical verifiability. This affirmed that in order for statements to be meaningful they must be either analytic (Hume’s “relation of ideas”) or synthetic (Hume’s “matter of fact”)—that is, definitional or empirical.⁸ The former are devoid of content and say nothing about the world; the latter have content but tell us nothing about any alleged reality beyond the empirical world. Furthermore, the latter are only probable in nature and are never philosophically certain. They are useful in empirical and practical matters but not at all informative about reality in any metaphysical sense. This view we have labeled “acognosticism,” since it insists that all statements about reality are noncognitive.

All God-Talk Is Nonsense or Empty. The result of Ayer’s logical positivism is as devastating to theism as is traditional agnosticism. God is unknowable and inexpressible. It is even meaningless to use the term *God*. Hence, even traditional agnosticism is untenable, since the agnostic assumes that it is meaningful to ask the question whether God exists. For Ayer, the word *God*, or any transcendent equivalent, has no meaning. Hence, it is impossible to be an agnostic. The term *God* is neither analytic nor synthetic; that is, it is neither offered by theists as an empty, contentless definition corresponding to nothing in reality nor filled with empirical content, since “God” is allegedly a supra-empirical being. Hence, it is literally nonsense to talk about God.

It is true that Ayer later revised his principle of verifiability.⁹ But even in advancing this form (which admitted the possibility that some empirical experiences are certain, such as single sensory experiences, and that there is a third kind of statement—namely, some analytic or definitional statements that are not purely arbitrary, such as his own principle of verifiability), he did not allow for the meaningfulness of God-talk. This third class would be neither true nor false nor factual but meaningfully definitional. However, Ayer believed that it was “unlikely that any metaphysician would yield to a claim of this kind,” even though he acknowledged that for “an effective elimination of metaphysics, it needs to be supported by detailed analyses of particular metaphysical arguments.”¹⁰ In short, even a revised principle of empirical verifiability would make it impossible to utter meaningfully true statements about a transempirical reality such as God. There is no cognitive knowledge of God; we must remain “a-cog-nostic.”

“God” Is Inexpressible or Mystical. Following a tip from Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, Ayer held that while God might be *experienced*, such an experience could

8. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1946).

9. *Ibid.*, 1–2.

10. *Ibid.*, 16.

never be meaningfully *expressed*. Wittgenstein believed that “*how* things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself *in* the world.” For “there are indeed things that cannot be put in words. . . . They are what is mystical,” and “what we cannot speak about we must consign to silence.” If God could express himself in our words, it would indeed be “a book to explode all books,” but such is impossible.¹¹ Hence, not only is there no propositional revelation, but there are also no cognitively meaningful statements that can be made about any alleged or real transcendent being. Hence, whether one takes the more strict logical positivist’s principle of verifiability or even the broader Wittgensteinian linguistic limitations, God-talk is metaphysically meaningless.

To be sure, as Wittgenstein taught, language games are possible, even religious language games. God-talk can and does occur, but it is not metaphysical; it tells us nothing about the existence and nature of a being beyond this world. About this we must, because of the very necessary limitations of language, remain silent. In summary, for religious noncognitivists, such as Ayer and Wittgenstein, metaphysical acognosticism is the net result of language analysis.

It makes little difference to Christians or theists whether they cannot *know* God (as in Kant) or whether they cannot *speak* of God (as in Ayer). Both traditional agnosticism and contemporary acognosticism leave us in the same dilemma philosophically: there are no bases for making true statements about God.

Religious Beliefs Are Unfalsifiable. The other side of the principle of verifiability is that of falsifiability. Taking his cue from John Wisdom’s parable of the invisible gardener who is never seen or detected in any way, Antony Flew posed a challenge to believers as follows: “What would have to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or of the existence of, God?”¹² One cannot allow anything to count for a belief in God without being willing to allow something to count against it. Whatever is meaningful is also falsifiable. There is no difference between an invisible, undetectable gardener and no gardener at all. Likewise, a God who does not make a verifiable or falsifiable difference is no God at all. Unless the believer can indicate how the world would be different if there were no God at all, the believer cannot use conditions in the world as evidence that there is a God. In short, it would appear that a theist who cannot answer the challenge head-on must have what R. M. Hare called a “blik.”¹³ That is to say, such a theist has an unfalsifiable belief in God despite all facts or states of affairs. It matters little whether the believer calls the “blik” a parable, a myth, or whatever; the fact remains that the believer is acognostic, having no meaningful or verifiable knowledge of God, and this is little or no improvement on Kant’s traditional agnosticism.

11. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (1922; repr., London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961).

12. Antony Flew, “Theology and Falsification,” in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (London: SCM, 1955), 99.

13. *Ibid.*, 100.

*The Postmodernism of Jacques Derrida (1930–2004)
and Paul-Michel Foucault (1926–84)*

Postmodernism is often viewed as a reaction to modernism. Some see it as a form of extreme modernism. Basically, it is a radical kind of relativism that denies absolute truth, meaning, and interpretation.

Forerunners. The premodern world (before 1650) stressed metaphysics. The modern period (1650–1950) emphasized epistemology, and the postmodern (1950–present) is focused on hermeneutics. The differences have been expressed in terms of an umpire:

- Premodern umpire: “I call ’em like they are.”
- Modern umpire: “I call ’em like I see ’em.”
- Postmodern umpire: “They ain’t nothin’ till I call ’em.”

The forerunners of postmodernism include Hume’s radical empiricism, Kant’s agnosticism, Kierkegaard’s fideism, Nietzsche’s atheism, Frege’s conventionalism, Wittgenstein’s noncognitivism, Husserl’s phenomenologicalism, Heidegger’s existentialism, and William James’s pragmatism. The postmodernists Jacques Derrida and Paul-Michel Foucault added to this a form of deconstructionism, in which the reader deconstructs the meaning of the author and reconstructs his or her own meaning.

The Reaction to Modernism. Postmodernism can be seen as a reaction to modernism in the following ways:

Modernism	Postmodernism
Unity of thought	Diversity of thought
Rational	Social and psychological
Conceptual	Visual and poetical
Truth is absolute	Truth is relative
Exclusivism	Pluralism
Foundationalism	Antifoundationalism
Epistemology	Hermeneutics
Certainty	Uncertainty
Author’s meaning	Reader’s meaning
Structure of the text	Deconstructing the text
The goal of knowing	The journey of knowing

The Result of Postmodernism. Postmodernism is an outworking of Nietzschean atheism. If there is no Absolute Mind (God), then there is

1. no absolute (objective) truth (epistemological relativism),
2. no absolute meaning (semantical relativism),
3. no absolute history (reconstructionism).

And if there is no Absolute Author, then there is

4. no absolute writing (textual relativism),
5. no absolute interpretation (hermeneutical relativism).

And if there is no Absolute Thinker, then

6. there is no absolute thought (philosophical relativism),
7. there are no absolute laws of thought (antifoundationalism).

If there is no Absolute Purposer, then there is

8. no absolute purpose (teleological relativism).

If there is no Absolute Good, then there is

9. no absolute right or wrong (moral relativism).

In brief, postmodernism is a form of total relativism and subjectivism. At its base, it is a form of antifoundationalism. Foundationalism stressed

1. Law of Existence: “Being is” (i.e., something exists);
2. Law of Identity: “Being is being” (B is B);
3. Law of Noncontradiction: “Being is not nonbeing” (B is not non-B);
4. Law of Excluded Middle: “Either Being or nonbeing” (Either B or non-B);
5. Law of Causality: “Nonbeing cannot cause being” (Non-B \nrightarrow being),
6. Law of Analogy: “An effect is similar to its efficient cause” (B \rightarrow b).¹⁴

As antifoundationalist, postmodernism rejects these basic principles of thought. With them it also rejects the correspondence view of truth—that all true statements correspond to reality. Without this foundation and correspondence, one is left in complete agnosticism.

An Evaluation of Agnostic Arguments

As was indicated earlier, there are two forms of agnosticism. The weak form simply holds that God is unknown—that is, that we do not know God. This leaves the door open to the possibility that one may know God and indeed that some do know God. This kind of agnosticism therefore forms no threat to Christian theism. The second or strong form of agnosticism is mutually exclusive with Christianity. It claims that God is unknowable—that is, that God *cannot* be known. Even here

14. See chap. 8 for a discussion of these foundational principles.

one must make an important distinction before embarking on a critique. There is unlimited and limited agnosticism about God. The former claims that God and all reality is completely unknowable. The latter claims only that God is partially unknowable because of the limitations of humanity's finitude and sinfulness. We will take it that the latter form of agnosticism is both possible and desirable. Paul wrote, "For now we see in a mirror dimly. . . . Now I know in part" (1 Cor. 13:12 RSV).

This leaves us with three basic alternatives with respect to knowledge about God. First, we can know nothing about God; God is unknowable. Second, we can know everything about God; God is completely and exhaustively knowable. Third, we can know something about God but not everything; God is partially knowable. The first position we will call agnosticism; the second, dogmatism; and the last, realism. Now it is evident that the dogmatic position is untenable. One would have to be God in order to know God exhaustively. Finite humanity can have only a finite knowledge of the infinite, not an infinite knowledge. Few if any informed believers have seriously held this kind of dogmatism. However, theists sometimes argue against agnosticism as though *partial* agnosticism is wrong too. They argue that agnosticism is wrong simply because one cannot *know* something is unknowable about reality without thereby implying a knowledge about that something. But this is faulty reasoning. There is no contradiction in saying, "I know enough about reality to affirm that there are some things about reality that I cannot know." For example, we can know enough about observation and reporting techniques to say that it is impossible for us to know the exact population of the world at a given instant (unknowability in *practice*). Likewise, one may know enough about the nature of finitude to say that it is impossible for human beings to know exhaustively an infinite being (who could not be exhaustively knowable in *principle* for finite humanity as we know humanity). In the following critique, we will be concerned only with the *complete* agnostic, who rules out in theory and practice all knowledge of God. Such agnosticism is self-defeating.

Agnosticism Is Self-Defeating

Complete agnosticism is self-defeating; it reduces to the self-destructing assertion that "one knows enough about reality in order to affirm that nothing can be known about reality." This statement provides within itself all that is necessary to falsify itself, for one who knows *something* about reality surely cannot affirm in the same breath that *all* of reality is unknowable. And one who knows nothing whatsoever about reality has no basis whatsoever for making a statement about reality. It will not suffice to say that one's knowledge about reality is purely and completely negative—that is, a knowledge of what reality is not. Every negative presupposes a positive; a person totally devoid of a knowledge of the "that" cannot meaningfully affirm that something is *not*-that. It follows that total agnosticism is self-defeating because it assumes some knowledge about reality in order to deny any knowledge of reality.

Some have attempted to avoid the logic of the above critique by putting their skepticism in the form of a question: “What do I know about reality?” However, this does not avoid the dilemma but merely delays it. This question can and ought to be asked by both agnostic and Christian. But it is the *answer* that separates the agnostic from the realist. “I can know something about God” differs significantly from “I can know nothing about God.” Once the answer is given in the latter form, a self-defeating assertion is made.

Neither will it help to take the mutist alternative of saying nothing, for thoughts can be as self-stultifying as assertions. The mutist cannot even think he or she knows absolutely nothing about reality without implying in that very thought some knowledge about reality.

Of course, someone may be willing to grant that knowledge about finite reality may be possible but not willing to allow any knowledge about an alleged infinite reality, such as the God of Christian theism. If so, two things should be noted. First, the position is no longer complete agnosticism, for it holds that something can be known about reality. This leaves the door open to discuss whether this reality is finite or infinite, personal or impersonal. Second, the latter discussion takes us beyond the question of agnosticism to the debate between finite godism and theism (which will be discussed later). Before we take up some of the specific arguments of agnostics, it will be helpful to further illustrate how agnosticism involves a self-defeating assertion.

Reply to Hume’s Skepticism. We may reply to Hume on several levels. First, the overall skeptical attempt to suspend all judgment about reality is self-defeating, since it implies a judgment about reality. How else could one know that suspending all judgment about reality was the wisest course, unless one knew indeed that reality was unknowable? Skepticism implies agnosticism, and as was shown above, agnosticism implies some knowledge about reality. Unlimited skepticism, which commends the suspension of *all* judgments about reality, implies a most sweeping judgment about the knowability of reality. Why discourage all truth attempts, unless one knows in advance that they are futile? And how can one be in possession of this advance information without already knowing something about reality?

Second, Hume’s contention that all meaningful statements are either a relation of ideas or are about matters of fact is itself neither of these. Hence, on its own grounds it would be meaningless. It could not be purely a relation of ideas, for in that case it would not be informative about reality as it purports to be. And clearly it is not purely a matter-of-fact statement, since it claims to cover more than empirical matters. In short, Hume’s distinction is the basis for Ayer’s empirical verifiability principle, and the verifiability principle is itself not empirically verifiable.

Third, Hume’s radical empirical atomism, asserting that all events are “entirely loose and separate” and that even the self is only a bundle of sense impressions, is unfeasible. If everything were unconnected, there would be no way of making that particular statement, since some unity and connection are implied in the

affirmation that everything is disconnected. Further, to affirm “I am nothing but the impressions about myself” is self-defeating, for there is always the assumed unity of the “I (self)” making the assertion. But one cannot assume a unified self in order to deny the same.

Reply to Kant’s Agnosticism. Kant’s argument that the categories of thought (such as unity and causality) do not apply to reality is unsuccessful, for unless the categories of reality correspond to those of the mind, no statements can be made about reality, including that very statement Kant made. That is to say, unless the real world were intelligible, no statement about it would apply. A preformation of the mind to reality is necessary whether one is going to say something positive about it or something negative. We cannot even *think* of reality that it is unthinkable. Now if someone should press the argument that the agnostic need not be making any statement at all about reality but is simply defining the necessary limits of what we can know, it can be shown that even this is a self-defeating attempt. To say that one cannot know any more than the limits of the phenomena or appearance is to draw an unsurpassable line for those limits. But one cannot draw such firm limits without surpassing them. It is not possible to contend that appearance ends here and reality begins there unless one can see at least some distance on the other side. In other words, how can one know the difference between appearance and reality without already knowing both so as to make the comparison?

Another self-defeating dimension is implied within Kant’s admission that he knows *that* the noumena is there but not *what* it is. Is it possible to know that something is without knowing something about what it is? Can pure that-ness be known? Does not all knowledge imply some knowledge of characteristics? Even a strange creature one had never seen before could not be observed to exist unless it had some recognizable characteristics such as size, color, or movement. Even something invisible must leave some effect or trace in order to be observed. I need not know the origin or function of a brand-new I-know-not-what. However, I must observe something of what it is or I cannot know that it is. It is not possible to affirm *that* something is without simultaneously declaring something about *what* it is. Even to describe it as the “in-itself” or the “real” is to say something. Furthermore, Kant acknowledged it to be the unknowable “source” of the appearance we are receiving. All of this is informative about the real: namely, it is the real, in-itself source of impressions we have. Even this is something less than complete agnosticism.

Reply to Ayer’s Acognosticism. As has already been noted, the principle of empirical verifiability as set forth by Ayer is self-defeating, for it is neither purely definitional nor strictly factual. Hence, on its own grounds it would fall into the third category of nonsense statements. Ayer recognized this problem and engaged in recovery operations by way of a third category for which he claimed no truth value but only a useful function. Verifiability, he contended, is analytic and definitional but not arbitrary or true. It is metacognitive—that is, beyond verification as

true or false but simply useful as a guide to meaning. This is a classic but ill-fated move, for two reasons. First, it no longer eliminates the possibility of making metaphysical statements. Rather, it admits that one cannot *legislate* meaning but must *look* at meaning of alleged metaphysical statements. But if it is possible that some meaningful statements can be made about reality, then we are not left with complete agnosticism and acognosticism. Second, can cognitively restrictive metacognitive statements be made without self-stultification? It seems not, for to restrict the area of what is meaningful is to limit the area of what could be true, since only the meaningful can be true. Hence, the attempt to limit meaning to the definitional or to the verifiable is to make a truth claim that must itself be subject to some test. If it cannot be tested, then it becomes an unfalsifiable view, a “blik” of its own.

Reply to Wittgensteinian Mysticism. Wittgenstein engages in a self-stultifying acognosticism. He attempts to define the limits of language in such a way as to show that it is impossible to speak cognitively about God. God is literally inexpressible, and one should not attempt to speak of that whereof one cannot speak. But Wittgenstein can be no more successful in drawing the lines of linguistic limitation than Kant was in delimiting the realm of phenomena or appearance; how can one know that God is inexpressible without thereby revealing something expressible about God? The very attempt to deny all expressions about God is an expression about God. One cannot draw the limits of language and thought without first transcending those very limits. It is self-defeating to contend that the inexpressible cannot be expressed. In like manner even to think the thought that the unthinkable cannot be thought is self-destructive. Language (thought) and reality cannot be mutually exclusive, for every attempt to completely separate them implies some interaction or commerce between them. One cannot use the scaffold of language and thought about the limits of reality only to say the scaffold cannot be so used. If the ladder was used to get on top of the house, one cannot thereupon deny the ability of the ladder to get one there.

Reply to Flew’s Principle of Falsifiability. In the narrow sense of empirical falsifiability, Flew’s principle is too restrictive. Not everything need be *empirically* falsifiable. Indeed that very principle is not itself empirically falsifiable. But in the broader sense of “testable” or “arguable,” surely the principle is alive and helpful, for unless there are criteria for truth and falsity, no truth claims can be supported. Everything, including opposing views, could be true. But in this case nothing can be maintained to be true (as versus what is false), for no such distinction can be made.

Furthermore, not everything that is verifiable need be falsifiable in the same manner. As John Hick pointed out, there is an asymmetrical relation between verifiability and falsifiability. I can verify my own immortality, for example, if I consciously observe my own funeral. But I cannot falsify my immortality, for if I do not survive death then I am not there to disprove my own immortality. Nor could another person falsify my immortality unless that other person were

omniscient or God, for it is always possible that my existence could be somehow beyond the other person's limited knowledge. But if it is necessary to posit an omniscient mind or God, then it would be eminently self-defeating to use falsification to disprove God. So we may conclude that every truth claim must be testable or arguable but not all truth claims need be falsifiable or disconfirmable. A total state of nonexistence of anything would be unfalsifiable, for example, since there would be no one and no way to falsify it. However, the existence of something is testable by experience or inference.

Reply to Postmodernists. Some postmodernists claim not to be denying first principles, objective truth, and objective reality. They insist that they are simply ignoring them. In this case, our response is twofold.

First, if they are denying them, then they are engaged in self-defeating statements. Any attempt to deny the Law of Noncontradiction must use that law in the very denial. Likewise, any attempt to deny objective truth is itself an objective truth claim. Also, any denial of the correspondence view of truth makes the implicit claim that its view corresponds to reality—which is self-defeating.

Second, if postmodernists claim they are not denying logic or objective truth, but are just ignoring it, then two comments are relevant. One, if they are not denying knowledge of reality, then they have placed themselves outside the quest for truth. Like in a baseball game, they cannot even get on first base—let alone to home plate—unless they first get into the ballpark. But once they put themselves back in the ballpark of truth, then they cannot express their postmodern views without accepting the validity of the basic laws of thought.

Further, the claim not to be making any truth claims is bogus. As C. S. Lewis put it in another context but applicable here:

You can argue with a man who says, "Rice is unwholesome": but you neither can nor need argue with a man who says, "Rice is unwholesome, but I'm not saying this is true." I feel that this surrender of the claim to truth has all the air of an expedient adopted at the last moment. If [they] . . . do not claim to know any truths, ought they not to have warned us rather earlier of the fact? For really from all the books they have written . . . one would have got the idea that they were claiming to give a true account of things. The fact surely is that they nearly always are claiming to do so. The claim is surrendered only when the question discussed . . . is pressed; and when the crisis is over the claim is tacitly resumed.¹⁵

Reply to Some Specific Agnostic Claims

Hume denied the traditional use of both causality and analogy as means of knowing the theistic God. Causality is based on custom, he said, and analogy would lead to either finite male or female gods or to a totally different God from the alleged analogue. Let us examine each of these in turn.

15. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 24.

Causality Is Not Unjustifiable. First, Hume never denied the principle of causality. He admitted it would be absurd to maintain that things arise without a cause.¹⁶ What he did attempt to deny is that there is any philosophical way of *establishing* the principle of causality. If the causal principle is not a mere analytic relation of ideas but is a belief based on customary conjunction of matter-of-fact events, then there is no necessity in it and one cannot use it with philosophical justification. But we have already seen that dividing all contentful statements into these two classes is self-defeating. Hence, it is possible that the causal principle is both contentful and necessary. In point of fact, the very denial of causal necessity implies some kind of causal necessity in the denial, for unless there is a necessary ground (or cause) for the denial, the denial does not necessarily stand. And if there is a necessary ground or cause for the denial, then the denial is self-defeating, for in that event it is using a necessary causal connection to deny that there are necessary causal connections.

Some have attempted to avoid the logic of the above objection by limiting necessity to the reality of logic and propositions but denying that necessity applies to reality. This will not succeed because in order for this statement to accomplish what it intends to do—namely, to exclude necessity from the realm of reality—it must itself be a necessary statement about reality. That is, it must in effect be claiming that it is necessarily true about reality that no necessary statements can be made about reality. It must make a necessary statement about reality to the effect that necessary statements cannot be made of the real. This is clearly self-canceling, for it actually does what it claims cannot be done.

Analogy Is Not Unfoundable. Likewise, there is no way Hume can deny all similarity between the world and God, for this would imply that the creation must be totally dissimilar from the Creator. It violates an undeniable first principle of thought, the Law of Analogy (#6 above): “An effect is similar to its efficient cause” ($B \rightarrow b$). The cause cannot give what it has not got. It cannot share what it does not have to share. Hence, whatever actuality there is in an effect was given to it by its efficient cause. To deny all similarity between the world and God would be to affirm that effects must be entirely different from their cause. In actuality, this statement too is self-destructive; unless there were some knowledge of the cause there would be no basis for denying all similarity with its effect. Comparison, even a negative one, implies some positive knowledge of the terms being compared. Hence, either there is no basis for the affirmation that God must be totally dissimilar, or there can be some knowledge of God in terms of our experience, in which case God is not necessarily totally dissimilar to what we know in our experience.

One should be cautioned here about overdrawing the conclusion of these arguments. Once it has been shown that total agnosticism is self-defeating, it does

16. See David Hume, “A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh,” in *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. Ernest C. Mossner and John V. Price (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1967), 1:187.

not ipso facto follow that God exists or that one has knowledge of God. These arguments show only that if there is a God, one cannot maintain that he *cannot* be known. From this it follows only that God can be known, not that we do know anything about God. The disproof of agnosticism is not thereby the proof of realism or theism. In other words, agnosticism only destroys itself and makes it possible to build Christian theism. The positive case for Christian knowledge of God must be built later.

Kant's Antinomies Are Fallacious. In each of Kant's alleged antinomies there is a fallacy. One does not end in contradictions when one begins to speak about reality in terms of the necessary conditions of human thought. For instance, we need not speak of the world beginning in time, as though time were already there and there was a time before time. We may speak of the beginning of the world as the beginning of time. That is, time is a concomitant of a created world in process—in which case there would be no time before time. All that is prior to time is eternity.

It is likewise a mistake to view everything as needing a cause, for in this case there would be an infinity of causes and even God would need a cause. Only limited, changing, contingent things need causes. Once one arrives at an unlimited, unchanging, necessary Being, there no longer is a need for a cause. The finite must be caused, but the infinite being would be uncaused.

Finally, the so-called antinomy of contingency fails as well, for everything cannot be contingent. There must indeed be a ground for contingency that is beyond the contingent—namely, the necessary. And, as was previously noted, it is self-defeating to claim that necessity applies only to thought and propositions, not to being or reality; that claim itself necessarily entails an affirmation about reality. Thought and reality cannot be radically bifurcated without being irrevocably united; there is no way to affirm their separation unless they are joined. This is not to say that the rational is the real, but it is to affirm that the real is rationally knowable.

Summary and Conclusion

There are two kinds of agnosticism: limited and unlimited. The former is no threat to Christianity but is compatible with its claim of finite knowledge of an infinite God. Unlimited agnosticism, however, is self-destructive, for it implies knowledge about reality in order to deny the possibility of any knowledge of reality. Both skepticism and noncognitivism (acognosticism) are reducible to agnosticism, for unless it is impossible to know the real, it is unnecessary to disclaim the possibility of all cognitive knowledge of it or to dissuade humans from making any judgments about it. Skepticism and acognosticism imply agnosticism.

Finally, unlimited agnosticism is a subtle form of dogmatism. In completely disclaiming the possibility of all knowledge of the real, it stands at the opposite pole from the position that would claim all knowledge about reality. Each is equally

dogmatic. Both are *must* positions regarding knowledge as opposed to the position that we *may* or *do* know something about reality. And there is simply no way short of omniscience that one can make such sweeping and categorical statements about reality, whether they are positive or negative. Agnosticism is negative dogmatism, and every negative presupposes a positive. Hence, total agnosticism is not only self-defeating but self-deifying. Only an omniscient mind could be totally agnostic, and finite human beings confessedly do not possess omniscience. Hence, the door remains open for some knowledge of reality. Reality is not unknowable.

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