

The Beauty of Christian Theism

WHY GOD
MAKES SENSE
IN A WORLD THAT
DOESN'T

GAVIN ORTLUND

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Preface

This book comes from my heart, more than anything else I have ever written.

Don't get me wrong: It's an academic book. It seeks to be rigorous in argumentation and deep in the relevant secondary literature. Some passages get technical. At the same time, as it has overflowed from personal excitement, this book has also taken on a tone and quality that I hope will have a broader and more personal reach. I have labored to make it an accessible and enjoyable read, for any thoughtful and sincere reader, as much as possible. Down with boring books! Down with obligatory reading! The subject matter at hand is too enthralling. If we are not captivated and delighted along the way, something is amiss.

I tell you that I've given you my best effort as a writer so that I may invite you to give the book your best effort as a reader. We live in an age of distraction and sound bites. The careful reading of books is not our defining strength. But if you will give me your attention from cover to cover, I will do everything I can to make it worth your effort.

My passion for this book derives from my own experience. Over the last several years I have become utterly absorbed in philosophical literature pertaining to the question of God. I remember

the day in December 2018, browsing around at Barth's Books (a famous bookstore where I live in Ojai, California), when I first self-consciously resolved to give myself to this task as my next great intellectual effort. I'd been a bit depressed, having just completed several other book projects in historical theology (my area of formal training) and wondering where to turn my energies next. Philosophy had been my first intellectual love—it was in college, reading Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein and Camus, that I first understood how fun it could be to *think*. And for several years my interest in apologetics had been steadily brewing, though fueled more by YouTube debates than academic reading.

That day I came across several of the so-called new atheist books: Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, Christopher Hitchens's *God Is Not Great*, and Sam Harris's *The End of Faith*. I vividly remember the longing that came over me as I leafed through them. It felt like my feet finding the path again. I knew what my next adventure would be. I bought all three books and headed to the park.

Since that day, philosophical questions of a religious nature have become a central absorbing passion in my life, occupying my mind on bike rides, during swims and hikes, while playing soccer with kids in the backyard, and at various sleepless hours of the night. More than once since then I have prayed, *Lord, if you give me anything else to accomplish in my life, please let me write this book!*

In the process, I have come to feel that the needs of the times call for a slightly different approach to apologetics, which I explain in the introduction.

A couple of brief explanatory matters are in order, in the hope of avoiding misplaced expectations for your sake and one-star Amazon reviews for mine. First, as I explain in the introduction, this book is not a comprehensive treatment of all worldviews, but especially focuses on two options: Christianity and naturalism. My reason for restricting my focus to Christianity and naturalism

is twofold: (1) those are the options most people I know are considering; and (2) those are the options I am best equipped to write about. So if you're trying to decide between, say, theism and pantheism, this book will not likely help you much. Furthermore, I don't address *every* difference between naturalism and Christianity (there are other books that give more of a survey approach to "top objections" or "top issues"). Rather, I'm trying to get at the big picture of how each worldview functions. I'm interested in the questions, What kind of story does each tell about our world? and, Which story is more satisfying to both mind and heart?

By "naturalism" I mean the philosophy that only physical laws and forces exist, such that there is nothing beyond the realm of nature. As I note in the introduction, some of my arguments are merely against naturalism; others are for theism generally; and others are for Christian theism specifically, which is what the arguments cumulatively entail. Thus, the word "supernaturalism" comes up now and again, for convenience. By it I simply mean any worldview that posits some entity, whether personal or impersonal, beyond the natural order. For my purposes here, I classify the multiverse hypothesis as within the bounds of naturalism *if* all the other universes in the multiverse are understood to be reductively physicalist and bound by the same natural laws as our observable universe.

I wish to give sincere thanks to Andrew Wolgemuth, my literary agent, for his wonderful encouragement, friendship, and hard work; to all of the team at Baker Academic, who were a delight to work with and contributed to this project in numerous ways (especially Dave Nelson for overseeing the project and James Korsmo for his careful editorial work); to Tim Keller, whose approach to the topics addressed in this book I relate to so sincerely and intuitively, and whose various sermons and books I have absorbed so appreciatively, that I almost regard him as an old friend even though we have actually met on only one occasion and I have no reason to expect him to reciprocate such interest; to those who

read portions of the manuscript and gave feedback, especially Jeff Zweerink, Joel Chopp, and Eric Orlund; to my wife, Esther, for her tireless support, love, and encouragement, in my writing and everything else; and to my children, Isaiah, Naomi, Elijah, and Miriam, who fill my daily life with laughter and delight, and to whom I dedicate this book.

Introduction

Beauty, Story, and Probability in the Question of God

Suppose Hamlet is searching for Shakespeare. He cannot find him in the way he might find other characters in the play, like Ophelia or Claudius. So where should he look?

Hamlet's knowledge of Shakespeare will be different than anything else in his life. On the one hand, finding Shakespeare will be very difficult. Shakespeare is very far removed; Hamlet has never encountered him. On the other hand, the knowledge of Shakespeare might also prove unavoidable. For in a deeper sense, Shakespeare is very close; Hamlet has never done anything *but* encounter him. As Hamlet's creator, Shakespeare is at once beyond his every device and inside his every thought.

This book is about the knowledge of God, who, if he exists, is to us something like what Shakespeare is to Hamlet. For instance, if God is real, he will be both infinitely close and infinitely far. He is infinitely close because reality itself abides within him; each breath we breathe is a gift from him. As Augustine put it, God is closer to us than we are to ourselves.¹ He is infinitely far because

1. Augustine, *Confessions* 3.6, 2nd ed., ed. Michael P. Foley, trans. F. J. Sheed (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), 44: "You were more inward than the most inward place of my heart."

he is qualitatively different than anything we have ever known; he surpasses us constantly at every level; for all eternity we could search him out and still always have infinitely more to discover. As Job observed, “How faint the whisper we hear of him!” (Job 26:14 NIV).

The question of God is thus unparalleled in all of life, in several ways. It is, first, the most important and thrilling adventure of our lives. Nothing could be more urgent than whether he exists—and if so, what to do about it. For God is held to be the Supreme Good, who alone can fulfill the longings of the human soul. Therefore the stakes of finding him are literally infinite. Sex, achievement, food and drink, relationship—these are mere trifles to the human heart in comparison with God, the source of all things, the goal of all things, the ever-flowing fountain of all beauty and glory.

The question of God is, secondly, the most fascinating puzzle you will ever think about. Whether or not he is real, certainly a more interesting *idea* has never been conceived. The concept *God*—the infinite Person, the ground of being, the precondition of reality—is the most staggering, enthralling idea ever to confront the human mind. The mere idea of God outweighs the physical universe in grandeur and importance.

Finally, the question of God is the most difficult and humbling question we will face. Take the feeling of smallness you have when standing before the Grand Canyon, or approaching a king—then multiply that feeling many times over and you get the idea. That is what we are up against. It will take all our courage, all our hope, all our yearning.

This book is a journey into the question of God. It explores four classic arguments for the existence of God. We will approach these arguments, however, in three distinctive ways, and I want to explain these distinctives in advance.²

2. In each of the following three distinctives, but especially the first two, my book is situated within a larger movement of new approaches to apologetics, perhaps best represented and influenced by Tim Keller's *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to*

Appealing to Beauty

In his famous *Pensées*, Blaise Pascal proposed a threefold strategy for commending God, particularly the Christian God, to those who don't believe: "Men despise religion. They hate it and are afraid it might be true. The cure for this is first [1] to show that religion is not contrary to reason, but worthy of reverence and respect. Next [2] make it attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then [3] how that it is."³ This is an intriguing strategy. To summarize, Pascal proposes a threefold order of apologetics:

1. Show religion to be *respectable*.
2. Show religion to be *desirable*.
3. Show religion to be *true*.

Many efforts at Christian apologetics start with Pascal's third step, as though having powerful arguments were the main task at hand. Pascal's approach reflects a kind of practical wisdom in starting further back, at the psychological level. After all, few decisions are the result of strictly rational factors. We are not robots. This is especially the case with the question of God, the most inward and poignant question of all. For this reason, Pascal also taught that the truth of God is such that it will never be recognized apart from love, inwardness, and longing.⁴

My approach in this book is especially alert to the second stage of Pascal's apologetic strategy. I'm interested in the affective dimension of these classical arguments, in their appeal to the whole

the Skeptical (New York: Viking, 2016). For an overview of this turn in apologetics, see Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, "Ask and You Shall Evangelize," *The Gospel Coalition*, November 14, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/ask-shall-evangelize/>.

3. Peter Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal's Pensées Edited, Outlined, and Explained* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 28. In context here, by "religion" Pascal has in mind Christianity.

4. E.g., Pascal says, "Truth is so obscured nowadays and lies [are] so well established that unless we love the truth we shall never recognize it." Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans*, 216.

person, and in what they reveal about the beauty of Christianity. Whatever else you conclude about the Christian story, my goal is that you will at least feel something of its wonder and enchantment. Even where you may remain unpersuaded, I hope you might, in some way or another, *wish* it were true.⁵

My own experience is that when the gospel is truly understood and embraced, particularly in contrast to naturalistic worldviews, it feels like stepping through the wardrobe into Narnia. The empty tomb means supreme happiness, like the feeling of waking up as a little child on Christmas morning, or of learning that your true love actually loves you back. You know you have gotten a whiff of it when this thought arrives: *Can it really be that good?* This book tries to help you *feel* that—as well as, in the other direction, feel something of the confinement and barrenness of naturalism.⁶

Of course, beauty *in itself* is not a sufficient criterion for adjudicating truth. The fact that we desire something to be true does not make it true. At the same time, desire is not irrelevant to truth, either. Desire is itself a piece of data that must be taken into account and interpreted alongside other data. For example, hunger might not prove you have food, but it might suggest to you that there is such a thing as food out there, somewhere. Similarly, if we notice within our hearts deep-seated longings for things

5. I'm also less focused on Pascal's first step. Sceptics who don't find Christianity even worth the time to investigate (as well as Christians who have no curiosity or angst about their faith) may want to start with a different book. The two I'd recommend are Tim Keller's *Making Sense of God* and Rebecca McLaughlin's *Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019). These books start further back, explaining why the investigation is worth it in the first place. This book will have more traction for those who are already at least somewhat open to the possibility of faith, as well as for those who are somewhat sensitive to its difficulty.

6. As discussed in the preface, this book does not have a comprehensive scope: I am primarily interested in comparing two alternatives, Christianity and naturalism. Some of the arguments in this book go to support "supernaturalism" in general—i.e., the belief that there is something beyond nature (whether Plato's forms, God, gods, etc.). Other arguments are specifically aimed at theism, and others (esp. in chap. 4) specifically at *Christian* theism. The cumulative effort of them all is, of course, toward Christian theism.

like meaning, love, and lasting hope—longings so powerful that life seems unendurable without them—this very fact may prove relevant, alongside other considerations, to our overall assessment of the world that produces creatures with such longings.⁷

This interest in the interplay between beauty and truth is an ancient instinct. The Greek philosophers spoke of the three transcendentals: the good, the true, and the beautiful. Christians have historically put a great deal of reflection into how the gospel relates to each one of these three and why it is important to commend the gospel not only as true but as good and as beautiful. Hans Urs von Balthasar, who has perhaps more than anyone else developed a theology of aesthetics, argued that in the modern world, truth without beauty is powerless and ineffectual: “In a world that no longer has enough confidence in itself to affirm the beautiful, the proofs of the truth have lost their cogency. In other words, syllogisms may still dutifully clatter away like rotary presses or computers which infallibly spew out an exact number of answers by the minute. But the logic of these answers is itself a mechanism which no longer captivates anyone.”⁸ Similarly, von Balthasar claimed that goodness apart from beauty becomes unstable and

7. C. S. Lewis famously argued along these lines (though we are not in a position to assess this argument just yet): “Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud.” C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), 76. For a more recent and more academic defense that, under certain conditions, desires are a guide to possibility, see Todd Buras and Michael Cantrell, “C. S. Lewis’s Argument from Nostalgia: A New Argument from Desire,” in *Two Dozen (or So) Arguments for God: The Plantinga Project*, ed. Jerry L. Walls and Trent Dougherty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 356–71.

8. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, ed. Joseph Fessio, SJ, and John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982), 19. Readers who wish to pursue a robustly theological vision for beauty should give more attention to von Balthasar. A careful reading of von Balthasar’s *The Glory of the Lord* would encourage another of the

arbitrary.⁹ David Bentley Hart has likewise urged that the Christian gospel addresses the world not primarily as a series of arguments but as a story involving a unique interrelation of truth and beauty: “Making its appeal first to the eye and heart, as the only way it may ‘command’ assent, the church cannot separate truth from rhetoric, or from beauty.”¹⁰

This vision of the unity of the transcendentals is an ancient one, but it has fresh relevance in our current cultural moment, for at least three reasons. First, we live in a time of disillusionment and disenchantment (and, stemming from this, a time of apathy about truth). Accordingly, the greatest impediment to the hearing of the gospel is usually not opposition but indifference. Søren Kierkegaard famously used aesthetic writing to engage those not already interested in religious questions.¹¹ When people are under the illusion that they have no dire spiritual need, Kierkegaard considered it necessary to communicate indirectly, “because direct communication presupposes that the receiver’s ability to receive is undisturbed.”¹² Though Kierkegaard’s context (“Christendom”) differs from our own, the genius of his general strategy of communication is ever relevant.¹³

convictions undergirding this book: that apologetics is the task of theology (as has been the case throughout church history), not merely philosophy.

9. Von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, 1:19: “In a world without beauty . . . the good loses its attractiveness, the self-evidence of why it must be carried out. Man stands before the good and asks himself why it must be done and not rather its alternative, evil. For this, too, is a possibility, and even the more exciting one: Why not investigate Satan’s depths?”

10. David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 4.

11. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author: A Direct Communication, Report to History*, in *The Kierkegaard Reader*, ed. Jane Chamberlain and Jonathan Rée (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 306–7. He spoke of this as a “deception into the truth,” by which he meant a dialectical strategy of indirect communication. The word “aesthetic” should be understood here in the context of Kierkegaard’s famous three categories: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious.

12. Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, 307.

13. Kierkegaard, *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, 307: “There is an immense difference, a dialectical difference, between these two cases: the case of a man who is ignorant and is to have a piece of knowledge imparted to him, so that

Beauty is a powerful tool for cutting through disenchantment and apathy because it has a kind of persuasive power that reaches down to the heart. As Sarah Zylstra put it, “Even as our neighbors lose belief in the truth of the gospel, they’re still, on a gut level, looking for its goodness and beauty.”¹⁴ Beauty speaks at this “gut level.” It travels at a wavelength that even the disenchanted can hear.¹⁵ I have known many people, for example, who have come to Christ through reading *The Lord of the Rings* or C. S. Lewis’s fiction. I suspect that part of the reason is that there is a *beauty* in these stories that simply cannot be accounted for within the limits of a nihilistic worldview.

Second, we live in an age of distraction and diversion.¹⁶ Pascal famously wrote, “The sole cause of man’s unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room.”¹⁷ I used to think this was an interesting sentiment but something of an overstatement for effect. It was only recently, when I gave the *Pensées* a

he is like an empty vessel which is to be filled or a blank sheet of paper upon which something is to be written; and the case of a man who is under the illusion and must first be delivered from that. Likewise there is a difference between writing on a blank sheet of paper and bringing to light, by the application of a caustic fluid, a text which is hidden under another text.”

14. Zylstra, “Ask and You Shall Evangelize.”

15. I have often heard apologists speak about how the appeal to the heart, rather than a strictly logical case, can reduce defensiveness and gain a hearing. E.g., the apologist William Lane Craig shares this story: “I remember once, when I was delivering a series of talks at the University of Birmingham in England, that the audience the first night was very hostile and aggressive. The second night I spoke on the absurdity of life without God. This time the largely same audience was utterly subdued: the lions had turned to lambs, and now their questions were no longer attacking but sincere and searching. The remarkable transformation was due to the fact that the message had penetrated their intellectual façade and struck at the core of their existence.” *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 88.

16. Alan Noble, *Disruptive Witness: Speaking Truth in a Distracted Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2018), 24, notes that our distracted culture is not well equipped to wrestle with deep ideas, and therefore it is harder to leverage truth to call for a response. In fact, sometimes it is even difficult to get people to comprehend when you are making a truth claim, because the gospel can easily be co-opted by the surrounding cultural narratives to become simply one more option among others, as a matter of preference or image (see Noble, *Disruptive Witness*, 4, 25, 38, 59).

17. *Pensées* 136, in Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans*, 173.

thorough read in preparation for this book, that the genius and relevance of Pascal's comment fully dawned on me. In context, he is arguing that our inability to consider the one central, certain fact of life (death, and what lies beyond it) represents a kind of supernatural spell or torpor: "All I know is that I must soon die, but what I know least about is this very death which I cannot evade."¹⁸ The way we avoid facing the ultimate questions (meaning and death) is by filling our lives with distractions: "However sad a man may be, if you can persuade him to take up some diversion he will be happy while it lasts."¹⁹ This is Pascal's point: if we could stay quietly in our room, we'd be forced to slow down enough to attend to our true condition.

Beauty can help the distracted just as it can help the disenchanted. Beauty conveys a sense that there is something richer beneath the surface of our hurried lives and that it is worth slowing down to consider it. Peter Kreeft calls beauty "goodness's prophet."²⁰ Beauty has its own kind of testimonial power, helping us *feel the stakes* of religious questions, compelling us to stop and listen.

Third, we live in a time of outrage and polarization. Intriguingly, as our culture has grown more morally pluralistic, it has also grown more morally incensed. There is also a great deal of pessimism about the future and a deep longing for transcendent experience. Beauty is one way to engage people more effectively, because it enables us to appeal more comprehensively to the various questions and anxieties that people have. It might allow us to strike a more winsome, invitational tone than is usually present amid the entrenchment and rancor that often characterize public dialogue.

An appeal to beauty can better speak to the moral concerns of our polarized culture as well. A Christian apologist once remarked to me that on university campuses thirty years ago he was asked

18. *Pensées* 427, in Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans*, 192.

19. *Pensées* 136, in Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans*, 175–76.

20. Peter J. Kreeft, *The Philosophy of Tolkien: The Worldview behind "The Lord of the Rings"* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), 152.

more questions about Christianity's truth (Does God exist? Did Jesus rise from the dead? etc.); today he is asked more questions about Christianity's goodness (Is the church intolerant? Are Christians homophobic? etc.). I think this is broadly representative of our whole culture. Thus, if we commend only the truth of Christianity and neglect the appeal to beauty and goodness, we are actually not hitting the central, animating concerns of our culture. That is why, in the chapters that follow, we explore not only the strength of the arguments in view but also their beauty and relevance to human desire.

Seeking a Better Story

A second characteristic of this book is that I approach arguments in a narrative frame. That is, I treat them not as stand-alone proofs but rather as entry points into a larger, more cohesive question: What is the overall shape of reality? What kind of *story* best explains our world? This simultaneously entails more of a cumulative approach.

Alister McGrath defines “narrative apologetics” as “an approach to affirming, defending, and explaining the Christian faith by telling stories.”²¹ This is part of what I’m pursuing here, but I’m also after something more—I’m interested not only in how stories show truth but also in how truth presents itself to us as, ultimately, a story. (Hence the Shakespeare/Hamlet metaphor at the start of this book, to which we will return.)²²

I believe narrative has a unique power to convince in our current context, for a variety of reasons: (1) it appeals more naturally to the heart, will, and imagination; (2) it can be less confrontational and more inviting; (3) it is better able to furnish meaning and convey beauty; (4) it conveys truth more concretely; (5) it has greater ability

21. Alister E. McGrath, *Narrative Apologetics: Sharing the Relevance, Joy, and Wonder of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2019), 7.

22. For a helpful overview of the power of story in apologetics, see Josh Chatraw, *Telling a Better Story: How to Talk about God in a Skeptical Age* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020).

to break through cynicism and apathy; (6) it has greater explanatory reach; (7) it is better positioned to address the problem of evil.

Why are stories so powerful? Storytelling is one of the most fundamental human activities. Stories are part of how all cultures, ancient and modern, seek to make sense of the world (movies are probably our culture's dominant method of storytelling).²³ As Ursula Le Guin puts it, "There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories."²⁴ In other words, human beings have *always* made sense of the world through stories. For good or ill, this is how we tend to navigate ultimate questions.

Christians, in particular, have often interpreted our humanity in terms of our tendency to tell stories. Dorothy Sayers, for example, argued that storytelling is at the heart of what it means to be made in the image of God.²⁵ For J. R. R. Tolkien as well, storytelling is a function of being created in God's image: "We make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image of a Maker."²⁶ Tolkien developed the notion of "sub-creation" to describe this reality, suggesting that the human tendency is to tell stories that are unconsciously patterned after the great story, the true story, the story of Christ. (This point was significant in the famous conversation that he and Hugo Dyson had with C. S. Lewis in September 1931 that was instrumental in Lewis's conversion.)²⁷ We will return to Tolkien's idea of sub-creation later.

23. N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 123, discusses the power of narrative for worldview formation, suggesting that narrative "is the most characteristic expression of worldview." We will discuss the cultural significance of movies in chapter 3.

24. As quoted in Chatraw, *Telling a Better Story*, 34.

25. See Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1941), 22.

26. J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine, 1966), 75.

27. See the discussion in McGrath, *Narrative Apologetics*, 31, 45–47.

In line with this interest in story, the four arguments of this book are situated in a narrative form, as four of the essential aspects of any good story:

- Chapter 1 explores the possibility that our world has a *beginning*.
- Chapter 2 explores the possibility that our world has a *meaning*.
- Chapter 3 explores the possibility that our world has a *conflict* or *drama*.
- Chapter 4 explores the possibility that our world has an ultimate *hope* or *denouement*.

Each chapter thus gets progressively more ambitious. Chapter 1 proposes supernaturalism of some kind, favoring theism or possibly deism. Chapter 2 furthers the appeal for supernaturalism, this time more concretely a *personal* supernatural reality (again with theism as the lead candidate). Chapter 3 argues more definitively for theism, emphasizing that supernatural reality appears not only to be a personal entity but also a righteous, moral one. Chapter 4 hones in on the Christian deity specifically.

Thus, this book considers Christianity versus naturalism in relation to the basic elements that all stories have: origins, meaning, conflict, and hope. The constant question will be: Which is telling us a better story—a story that better accounts for the strangeness, the incompleteness, the brokenness, and the beauty of our world?

Using Abductive Arguments

A final characteristic of my approach to apologetics in this book is that I tend to use abductive arguments more than deductive and inductive arguments. In formal logic, abduction is a distinct form of inference from deduction and induction. Deductive arguments

start with premises and then reason toward a conclusion that is logically necessary. Inductive arguments work similarly, but yield only a probable conclusion.

Abductive reasoning, however, works *backward* from a present set of conditions to the most likely explanation. Sometimes it is called “inference to the best explanation.” So, for example, suppose you have a roommate who loves eating Wendy’s, and one morning you wake up and you see a half-eaten Baconator on the counter. No one else lives with you, and you are not aware of visitors. It is reasonable to abduce, *It’s probably from my roommate*. But it’s not logically guaranteed that that is the case. There could have been an unknown visitor, or even a burgler.

While abductive reasoning yields a less certain conclusion, it can still be persuasive, especially in the context of a cumulative case. Abduction should not be thought of as an untrustworthy method of inference—it plays a significant role in everyday life (for instance, trusting the speech of others), and it is regularly used by diagnosticians, juries, mechanics, detectives, and by those in many other professions. In some ways, abductive reasoning even has some advantages. For example, here it will help us not get bogged down chasing specialized knowledge that lies beyond the typical reader. So when I’m talking about the origins of the universe or the fine-tuning argument, an abductive approach allows us to ask: What is the *best* explanation? What is *most* likely? I think such arguments have plausibility value for most readers even if they fall short of pressing the issue as far as a more technical presentation could. In fact, I find that many people, especially younger people, find the modesty involved in abductive approaches actually *more* compelling.²⁸

28. Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 215, suggests, “Neither religion nor secularity can be demonstrably proven—they are systems of thinking and believing that need to be compared and contrasted to one another in order to determine which makes the most sense. That is, which makes the most sense of our experience, of things we know and need to explain?” This is similar to the approach I adopt here. (Keller is particularly good at asking what make sense *culturally*, as well as logically and

Another benefit of abductive arguments is that they allow us to consider a greater variety of data, including data from the realm of human experience. It is possible to suggest God, not as the conclusion of a thread of reasoning, but as the *premise* of human experience. This approach says, in effect, “If God doesn’t exist, so much of life—so much of what we *already assume* in the way we function—becomes more mysterious and inexplicable.” This kind of appeal does not necessarily prove God, but it can draw attention to what a powerful explanatory framework belief in God provides for understanding things like love, meaning, beauty, and so forth.

So you might think of the four chapters of this book each as a sort of Pascalian wager. Pascal famously emphasized the unavoidability of the question of God. Short of intellectual certitude, we must still live on the basis of some kind of decision (even if that decision is simply to not think about the question). In this book we are pursuing this kind of realistic approach to the deepest question we all face: What is, all things considered, the *best* choice regarding the God question?

Help from Puddleglum

Let me conclude this introduction on a personal note. The kind of apologetics I am proposing here is not a theoretical exercise. It has been to me like a life raft in stormy seas. I am a Christian, and I have never rejected faith. But during certain seasons of my life, I have agonized my way through various doubts and intrusive thoughts. I’ve had a number of friends who have been through similar seasons of doubt and deconstruction. If you’ve been there, or are there, you know how confusing and painful that experience can be.

emotionally—in this book I’m more interested in what makes *emotional* and *intuitive* sense.)

I think we can expect that, in our cultural context, such experiences will not be going away any time soon. The modern West is marked by a deep sense of the loss of transcendence and certainty—a feeling of disenchantment, as though life has been drained of its former glory and meaning. The general drift is away from stability and toward despair. I worry that many within the church, especially in younger generations, are ill-equipped to navigate these times. Frankly, it seems to me that Christians often fail to take the challenges seriously enough.

Sometimes in dark moments I have been gripped by the dreadful-ness of the naturalistic view that tugs at us from all around. In those moments, I have found enormous relief and comfort in the kind of beauty-oriented, narrative, abductive approach I'm taking here. As a summative expression of this approach, consider this passage from the character Puddleglum in C. S. Lewis's Narnia stories.

Puddleglum is a rather gloomy character based on Lewis's pessimistic gardener. In the book *The Silver Chair*, Puddleglum and his friends are held underground and tempted by an evil sorceress to doubt all that they believe is good about the world—the sun, the stars, and Aslan himself (the Christ figure). Puddleglum's reply sums up several of the intuitions involved in the approach in this book, especially my interest in the emotional factor of belief:

One word, Ma'am. . . . One word. All you've been saying is quite right, I shouldn't wonder. I'm a chap who always liked to know the worst and then put the best face I can on it. So I won't deny any of what you said. But there's one thing more to be said, even so. Suppose we *have* only dreamed, or made up, all those things—trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours *is* the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one. And that's a funny thing, when you come to think of it. We're just babies making up a game, if you're right. But four babies playing a game can make a play-world which licks

your real world hollow. That's why I'm going to stand by the play-world. I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it. I'm going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn't any Narnia. So, thanking you kindly for our supper, if these two gentlemen and the young lady are ready, we're leaving your court at once and setting out in the dark to spend our lives looking for Overland. Not that our lives will be very long, I should think; but that's small loss if the world's as dull a place as you say.²⁹

I have always found this passage to be a forceful statement against nihilistic worldviews. Some will dismiss its relevance, of course, since it comes in a children's book. But Lewis was a master of stating profound ideas in simple, clear language. Here Lewis is utilizing a particularly powerful and profound idea (the ontological argument, my favorite idea of all time) and applying it to modern despair.³⁰

Puddleglum is not advocating for a mere wishful thinking here; he is not saying, "It doesn't matter what is true; it only matters what is beautiful." Rather, Puddleglum is bringing considerations of beauty to bear *on* the question of truth. He is adopting the sorcerer's outlook as a hypothetical (note the repeated word "suppose") and noting its utter desolation even on its own terms. Taken in the best way, Puddleglum's appeal does not amount to "Your world is true, but I reject it anyway" but rather to "Supposing

29. C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (New York: Scholastic, 1953), 181–82 (italics original).

30. Some regard this passage as a sort of inversion of Plato's famous allegory of the cave, but Lewis himself correlated it with the ontological argument for God's existence. In a 1963 letter to Nancy Warner, responding to Warner's mentioning that her son noticed an "ontological argument" in *The Silver Chair*, Lewis wrote, "I suppose your philosopher son . . . means the chapter in which Puddleglum puts out the fire with his foot. He must thank Anselm and Descartes for it, not me. I have simply put the 'Ontological Proof' in a form suitable for children. And even that is not so remarkable a feat as you might think. You can get into children's heads a good deal which is quite beyond the Bishop of Woolwich." C. S. Lewis to Nancy Warner, October 26, 1963, in *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2007), 3:1472. Obviously Puddleglum's sentiments do not entail the ontological argument proper, in all its nuance. What is at play is the essential impulse of the argument—from the idea to the reality, on the principle of greatness.

your world were true, I would reject it anyway—and that may well suggest it might not be true.”

Puddleglum’s sentiments point to the sheer *oddity* of a nihilistic world. If all the really stable, happy doctrines of Christianity (say, God, or heaven, or the triumph of good over evil) are false, and in reality our lives are a meaningless blip in a vast and indifferent cosmos, then the ideas in our brain are in a very real sense more weighty than the reality that brought our brains into existence. That is not very easy to swallow, and it is even more difficult to live off of.

Puddleglum is also saying (and my eyes well up with tears as I write this): at the deepest existential level, a true faith perseveres in hope, even when it does so blindly and forlornly (“setting out in the dark,” as Puddleglum puts it). The mere possibility of God drives it on, in the blackest moments. It fights with all the strength it can muster.

For all of us, the question of God is likely to take on this poignant feel at some time or another. Honest believers will likely have foreboding moments of disquiet (*What if it’s all a sham?*); honest skeptics will likely have panicky moments of hesitation (*What if it’s true after all?*). Whether we are in one of these camps or somewhere in the confusing middle, we must admit that we care deeply about the truth of the matter at hand. It’s personal. There is no good in pretending that we are completely objective and rational about it. The thing to do is—with all the courage we can muster—acknowledge our biases, face our fears, and unendingly seek truth.

Whatever your personal angle of approach, my hope is that this book will help you feel, in perhaps some new way, the *beauty* of the gospel—that feeling of hope and goodness like when, at long last, the night is over and the sun starts to rise. This way, even if you are not yet convinced of its truth, you may at the very least be better positioned to feel the immensity of what is at stake in the question. For it is the question of all questions, the question that concerns the deepest places in our hearts, the question that will determine the fate of literally everything.