

Why Study Transcendental Arguments?

By [Dr. Greg Bahnsen](#)

*The following is from the first chapter of *The Objective Proof for Christianity*, by Dr. Greg Bahnsen (1948-1995)*

Why talk about transcendental arguments? In certain narrow areas of philosophical study there is discussion of transcendental arguments going on, but I would not expect a broad cross-section of the Christian Church to be interested just because some philosophers are talking about something arcane like transcendental arguments. I am going to take a few moments to try to explain why I think it is so important that we as Christians take a look at this subject. It's not just because there is a narrow interest in it in philosophy. In fact, to be honest, I am a little surprised that there is any interest in it at all among philosophers. To the degree that you get involved in transcendental reasoning you are going to be forced to worldview considerations – what our basic perspective on the nature of reality is, how we know what we know, how we should live our lives – that network of assumptions in terms of which we organize all of our experience, make sense out of our lives, guide our lives, and so forth.

Modern philosophy is almost allergic to worldview considerations; it is really out of touch and out of style today. Many philosophers would consider it amateurish or gush in some sense to even think about the big questions in philosophy anymore. Philosophy has taken such an analytical turn in the 20th Century (which is what I've specialized in) that you have philosophers who focus very narrowly not even on a broad field like epistemology, but some subsection of epistemology or metaphysics or ethics¹ or meta-ethics, philosophy of science, philosophy of language, etc. – they focus on these subsections because the analytical approach is to break down bigger problems into smaller ones.

So when you come along and start talking about what the broadest consideration is in terms of which (or what is the framework in which) all of that analysis makes sense, philosophers often chuckle or ridicule and think it's old fashioned, silly stuff. So again, it really is surprising that there is any philosophical interest in transcendental arguments at all.

Now, I am convinced that the existence of God is not only objectively *true* but is also objectively *provable*. This is politically incorrect. You have to understand that this is *not* what apologists say today. The existence of God might be shown to be

¹ Epistemology: The theory or study of knowledge; Metaphysics: The study of the nature of reality; Ethics: The study of human conduct. These three areas form the constituent parts of a worldview.

probable or preferable, but very few apologists today are going to say that the existence of God is objectively provable, and I do believe that it is objectively provable.

Proof and Persuasion

The question of the truth of God's existence has nothing to do with the psychology and/or character of those who are arguing one way or another about God. We have to be very careful of the genetic fallacy and ad hominem arguments; we do not want to say either in favor of God's existence or against God's existence things which really have nothing to do with the merits of the case but only have to do with the subjective origin of the opinion being discussed or the man himself who is doing the discussing. It is important to remember that an objective proof for the truth of something really has nothing to do with the man who is arguing for it. We want to make clear to the unbelieving world that we are not defending ourselves or the character of our compatriots; we are defending the objective truth of God's existence.

The fact that these are objective matters, however, does not take away from the fact that they are personal. The existence of God is obviously a very personal question, and it is personal because it touches us deeply, it touches our lives vitally. Indeed, even the most important aspects of human experience are affected by what you think regarding God (i.e., who are we?; the enigmas of suffering and evil; love and death). All of these things are affected by whether or not you believe in God.

Additionally, an argument need not be accepted by everyone for it to be conclusive and I'm tempted to make reference to the O.J. Simpson trial. Should we just say, "Well then why don't we just give up courtroom protocol – calling witnesses, garnering evidence, arguing with one another – because you know, you can't get everybody to agree one way or another so it's really just a crapshoot. So why don't we get together, throw the dice decide whether or not the guy is guilty and just get on with it?" In our whole way of life, even in our culture, we know there is a difference between proof and persuasion. Not everybody will be persuaded but we think proof is available, and as Christians that is a very important thing for us as well. *When we say we can objectively prove God's existence we are not saying we can universally persuade people.*

I am told that it was Plato who said it first, but I am not really sure: "A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still." That is true. If I can prove something (in the sense of being convincing) and yet the man does not have a heart to go along with it, he is not going to cry "Uncle!"; he is not going to give up and we have to recognize that. If you don't, then you are really going to be strung out working on your Christian apologetic because over and over again what you are going to do is use an argument and see that somebody does not just fall

immediately and say, “Oh, well I have to revise the argument.” Sometimes you just have to keep coming back and back until the coin drops for that person. But even when you have the greatest of arguments, if a man’s heart is not changed then he is not going to have the coin drop.² So when I say that the existence of God is objectively provable, remember:

1. I am talking about an objective matter, not just personal desires or ad hominem and genetic considerations.
2. I am talking about proof, not persuasion.

Metaphysics and Epistemology

Metaphysics deals with what exists, What is real, the nature of reality, relationships between the things that exist and so forth. Epistemology deals with how we know what we know, what the nature and limits of human knowledge are. There is a difference between metaphysics and epistemology in the sense that something can exist (something can be real) without us knowing it. For millennia DNA existed without us knowing it. So there is a difference between *existing* and something *being known* to exist. But there is also a difference between something existing and a person being able to prove it. You can believe it is possible that something exists which no one has proven. The planet Uranus existed and was suspected to exist before there was proof of it. So existence is different than “knowledge of,” existence is different than “proof of,” and something can exist even when someone offers reasons against it. Sometimes we have reasons that we think show that something doesn’t exist. I think I can give good arguments against the idea that I have diabetes. My doctor thought it was interesting that I felt that I had good arguments against having diabetes when he was giving me the lab reports that show that I do, so here I am arguing doctor-to-doctor about this matter. Do you think that had anything to do with whether or not I had diabetes? Of course not.

When I say that the existence of God is objectively true and objectively provable, I am not at all suggesting that I can persuade everybody, I am not talking about psychological considerations, and I realize that there are people who think they can offer arguments against God’s existence. But I would like to show you how you can prove the existence of God (that is, a metaphysical truth) and you can epistemologically in an objective, provable fashion demonstrate this conclusion even though not everyone is convinced and people may argue against it.

² Especially from a Reformed perspective where it is God alone who changes the heart of the unbeliever, it would be all the more inconsistent for the Calvinist to revise his or her argument on the grounds of alleged impotence of persuasiveness. One might as well accuse God of not doing a good enough job of performing miracles since some still doubted when they saw the resurrected Christ (Matt. 28:17).

Faith and Reason

If we can get worked out this notion of an objective proof for God's existence along the lines of transcendental reasoning, I think that it will really open things up and enlighten your minds with regard to the relationship of faith and reason.

I think it is mistaken and misleading to think that Christian faith takes over where reason leaves off. Many people have the idea that we can reason about things such as science, medicine, industry, economics, history, etc., and reasoning will take you really far, but at some point reasoning stops and then faith begins, so that we as Christians agree with everyone else when it comes to natural matters, but then what we do is add another story to the house of knowledge, and that is the story of faith. I think this is misleading and mistaken. Faith is not without reason, faith is not above reason, and faith is not contrary to reason. To put it simply, I do not in any sense endorse *fideism* (lit. faith-ism).³ I do not believe that. I not only believe that Christian faith is reasonable, but I maintain that Christian faith is demanded by reason.

Reason can be affirmed without endorsing what is known as rationalism.⁴ In the broad sense rationalism says that man's mind is the highest authority, or that man's mind is at least autonomous. It never bows to any outside authority. The autonomous man (that is, the man who says he is intellectually self-sufficient and the final authority) might grant that there is a god. Usually he doesn't, to be sure, but you need to recognize that in order to understand the *character* of autonomy, he could grant there is a god. But it could never be the Christian God. Why is that? Because the Christian God doesn't bow to the authority of the servant; the servant is to bow to the authority of the Lord.

Now, there are people who want to promote autonomous reasoning to get people to believe in the Christian God, and I think that is just so fundamentally wrongheaded to *try to say to somebody that they need to have faith in this God and that you will prove to them, to their own satisfaction as being the ultimate authority, that God is the ultimate authority*. You can't do that. I have been in university training in the past and I continue to pay attention to higher education in our culture as well, and it just boggles my mind that anybody could believe in the autonomy or the self-sufficiency and independence of man's mind. If that were true, why is there still such massive disagreement in the universities? What's wrong with man's mind? How does man's self-sufficient mind not get things worked out? And it's not just that psychologists differ from political scientists. Political scientists can't agree among themselves, and psychologists can't agree among themselves either. There are even huge disagreements in

³ Meaning that Christian faith is independent of considerations of reason; that Christian faith is a personal choice – a blind, voluntaristic leap which has nothing to do with reasoning and argumentation.

⁴ Bahnsen delves into the etymology of the term 'rationalism,' rightfully point out that the term has been subject to a number of different definitions. Here, he is referring to it symbolizing the primacy of human reasoning in all matters.

issues which seem incontrovertible such as math or logic or the laws of physics. There are huge disagreements in schools of philosophy, mathematics, science and so forth. So, the self-sufficiency of man's mind, just on the face of it, is a silly doctrine.⁵

Rationalism, as we have talked about it, is different than rationality. I affirm with all my heart and soul rationality, and I affirm it because God made us to think. He expects us to think. Indeed, since we are made in the image of God, and He is supremely rational and coherent (He is the Truth Itself as Jesus said), then we ought to be concerned about the truth and about reasoning and using our minds to glorify God Paul put it this way: we are to bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.⁶

We're supposed to be using our minds and using them in a subservient way as a tool to glorify God. While some people use their mind as a tool to argue against God, we use our minds to argue for God. But we certainly affirm rationality. *We are not fideists*. We affirm reason, we do not affirm rationalism. In fact, this entire work is an attempt to show that the Christian use of rationality refutes rationalism. If we're going to use our minds in the best way, you cannot be a rationalist.

Against autonomy I argue that all reasoning rests upon faith. My first consideration was that faith does not go beyond reason. Now I'm going to turn the tables and say to the unbelieving rationalist that as a matter of fact, his rationality rests upon faith. You can't justify reason or rationality without a worldview, without a broader consideration of the knowledge that you have, and the only worldview that will allow for rationality or make intelligible the use of rational procedures is Christianity. This is pretty heavy stuff. We are arguing that if anybody reasons at all, ultimately, they are borrowing from, or working in terms of, the Christian outlook life – that faith is foundational to all rationality, to all reasoning.

⁵ One may be tempted to rebut this point and appeal to universally accepted and accomplished feats such as the moon landing, the efficacy of particular medicines, etc. (philosophically-put, inductive and pragmatic ends). However, such a viewpoint and rebuttal is too myopic, for these very feats themselves rest on philosophical assumptions, and, as Bahnsen pointed out, considering the huge disagreements within philosophical schools of thought, the rational autonomy of a *subjective* being attempting to cogitate and predicate truths of the universe *objectively* is futile. There may be objective truth, to be sure, but the autonomous man could never know with certainty if he obtains it. Thus, so far as fallible, finite, subjective, and autonomous man is concerned, these feats were (and are) only possible given the truth of the Christian worldview, not his autonomous and artificial system relegated to the relativistic level of pragmatism – truth is just what works for their particular, relativistic ends.

⁶ 2 Corinthians 10:5

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