
Apologetic Methods Overview

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Apologetics is a multi-faceted discipline. There are several approaches that may be used; and there are disagreements among apologists as to what methods are the best. Some are quite critical of other approaches for a variety of reasons. Here I will give a brief overview of some of the major approaches, using the classification system of *Five Views on Apologetics*, edited by Steven B. Cowan. I recommend a reading of this book for a good overview of various methods. (I disagree with the authors about some specific matters, but the book presents a broad perspective on apologetic method.)

In a general sense, three of the methods can fall under a classification of evidentialism. This means that they are focused more upon the use of evidences to make the case, and they generally agree on the relationship between faith and reason. You might notice that these methods are often eclectic; they cross-over. These are given simply as a starting point for understanding the issues involved.

The Classical Method starts with natural theology in order to establish theism as the proper worldview. Only after theism is established through natural theology do they move to historical evidences to show the truth of Jesus. In other words, they first want to show that theism is true, then demonstrate that the biblical view is the best view of theism (a two-step approach). Examples of arguments from natural theology include the *Kalam Cosmological Argument* (i.e., first cause). Sometimes it is argued that this two-step approach is necessary as a foundation for arguing historical evidences. The idea is that, without a theistic base, one could not show historically that miracles occurred.

The Evidentialist Method. If the classical method is seen as a two-step approach, this method is a one-step approach. Those who hold to this would disagree with the classical approach in the area of historical evidences. They do not think that one must begin with natural theology. They see miracles as historical, which, in turn are demonstrative of God and His activity in the world. In other words, miracles can be used as one sort of evidence for the existence of God. By this method, they believe that they can demonstrate both the existence of God and the truth of biblical theism all in one step. If, for example, the resurrection of Jesus is historically valid, then it would show that there is a God, and that Jesus is true, all in one step. Those who hold to this would not necessarily deny the value of natural theology; they just don't see it as the necessary first step that classical apologists do.

The Cumulative Case Method argues that the case for Christianity is not a strict formal argument (such as in natural theology or historical evidences), but is, instead, informal, like a lawyer would present a brief. The biblical view is the best explanation of all of the data taken together. In other words, it does not seek to rely upon one or two major arguments, but instead takes all of the evidence as a whole unit, and says that biblical theism best explains it all. The strength of this would be that even if one or two particulars can be explained away by skeptics (e.g., the problem of evil), they must explain all of the evidence taken together. All the elements of the argument stand or fall together, so that one need not rely on one strict argument. This approach will utilize the arguments from natural theology and historical evidences, but is more concerned with everything taken

together.

The Presuppositional Method. Presuppositionalism parts with the evidentialist methods above, generally rejecting traditional proofs for God's existence. In this view, believers and unbelievers do not have enough common ground between each other to allow the evidentialists to accomplish their goals. Due to sin, minds have become so corrupt that believers and unbelievers will not agree on the fundamentals needed for evidentialists to establish their position. Thus, one must presuppose Christianity as the beginning point in apologetics. All meaning and thought presupposes the existence of the God of Scripture. Presuppositionalists try to demonstrate that unbelievers cannot argue, think, or live properly without first presupposing the biblical God. Only biblical theism can make sense of the world. Proof for this position is not seen as necessary. It is simply presupposed. My problem with this is two-fold: 1) it inherently begs the question (assumes what needs proof), and 2) it contains some other assumptions which I reject. However, there is truth to the fact that we all have presuppositions from which we argue. I hope to go into this more later.

These are the four major methods that have fought for supremacy. Another "method" is now on the track, known as **reformed epistemology**. This holds that it is perfectly reasonable to believe many things without evidence. Belief in God does not require the support of evidence or argument in order for it to be rational. Advocates would argue that God has given us an awareness of Himself that can be awakened in many ways (e.g., a sense of awe at nature). In this way, people can be taken with belief in God, not argued into belief.

Personal remarks. A short overview such as this can hardly do justice to the positions described. This is meant as introductory, and interested readers are encouraged to read the more detailed explanations and defenses of these positions from their own proponents. The book mentioned at the beginning is a good starting point. I find myself agreeing with all of them at some points, and disagreeing with them (sometimes strongly) at other points. I do not think that one must be pigeonholed into a particular classification to be an effective apologist. I lean toward the evidentialist positions. I make use of natural theology, but do not think it is a necessary first step in all cases. I utilize the historical evidences (e.g., for the resurrection), and do think that the miraculous can be established on historical grounds, which, in turn, argues for God. But I also find a cumulative case helpful; and in one sense every evidentialist makes such a case. I believe that these methods are all useful depending on the circumstances. I try to start where people are (e.g., Paul in Acts 17 at Athens), and I will try to use valid arguments that address a person where he/she needs to be addressed.