

Why I am not Impressed by Bertrand Russell's "Why I am not a Christian"
from a talk given to the ODFR at Carnegie-Mellon University

by David Snoke

In the spirit of this forum, let me start by saying a few remarks about myself and my personal journey to faith. I was not raised in a Christian home, except in Russell's "geographical" sense. I remember mocking people who were "Jesus freaks" or "religious fanatics." For two years in high school, I was an Ayn Rand devotee (an "objectivist".) My journey to faith was entirely intellectual, starting with Ayn Rand's high view of truth and wanting to believe what is really true about the real world. I devoured Christian books on theology and read the original masters such as Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Edwards. Modern Christian authors who had a big influence on me were C.S. Lewis and R.C. Sproul. Here in Pittsburgh, I went to R.C.'s weekly public lectures at the Ligonier Study Center for many summers.

This all relates to Russell's essay because at an early stage in my Christian walk, I was very upset by essays like Russell's, or by various arguments I had with people of other religions. When someone would make an argument I couldn't refute, I would have a crisis of faith. For me, this meant intense study of the issue until I had satisfied myself that I had an adequate answer. Over the years, I am much less bothered by such issues because I have a track record of seeing that when I really study an issue, it comes out in favor of Christianity. Since there is only so much time in the day, I can't say that I have studied and answered every question I have encountered. But after much study, one finds that often the same questions come up, and so there are simply less questions that bother me.

What I didn't do was take an irrational approach and say that Christianity is self-contradictory but I will believe it anyway. I could never do that. Perhaps some people can live with that, but I literally couldn't sleep at night if I thought that Christianity was self-contradictory or irrational.

Let me now turn to Russell's essay. None of his arguments are new to me; but many of them would have bothered me greatly at one time in my life. In general, however, Russell's essay plays less well at the end of this century than at the beginning; his view of science as the solver of all human problems looks a lot different after the Nazis, Communists, the environmental crisis, the nuclear bomb, etc. When he gave this talk, there was a triumphalist view propagated by many people in Europe and the U.S., including Mencken and Russell, that we should discard past morality and use science as our only guide; we should be "ubermensch" who don't bother about the old moral rules made for weak people. The Nazis and the Communists adopted just this mentality (think of the "scientific experiments" of the Nazis), as did the originators of the sexual revolution here (think of the impact of broken homes on our society), and I think that based on the history of the past century most of us just don't share this view any more, that science is the solver of all problems.

Russell's arguments fall into five basic categories. (1) He attacks the argument from the First Cause. (2) He attacks the argument from Design. (3) He attacks the argument from Morality. (4) He attacks the Bible, and specifically Jesus, as a false prophet. (5) He states a number of pure prejudices and biases without rational argument.

1. The Argument of the First Cause.

On this one, I have to say that Russell should have known better. He sets up a straw man, presenting an argument that no theologian worth his salt would ever make. This is Anselm's argument of the First Cause, used also by Aquinas and promoted more recently in the book by

John Gerstner, R.C. Sproul, and A. Lindsley, Classical Apologetics. Nobody says that “everything has to have a cause.” That is just a gross error on Russell’s part.

The argument of the First Cause says that every effect has to have a cause. This is simply by definition, that an effect is defined as something with a cause. From this one argues that all things must fall into one of two categories, either things with causes, or things without a cause. There is nothing illogical about having an uncaused thing, i.e. an uncaused cause.

So far this is just definitions. The question now arises whether one can have a universe with no uncaused causes. Can we have a universe in which everything falls into the first category, of effects? At first, one might think so. One can imagine an infinite chain of cause and effect, in which each thing is caused by something else. But in that case, the chain itself is eternal and uncaused. There must be a rule which determines how the causes and effects relate, and that rule is not an effect of anything else. Therefore there must be at least one uncaused thing in the universe.

This does not get us to a personal, Judeo-Christian God. But it does change the terms of the debate. It says that we all must (if we want to be logical) believe in something which is absolute and uncaused, a so-called “ground of the universe.” The debate between the atheist and the theist is over the nature of that absolute. The Christian argues that the Absolute is personal and purposive; that is to say, the best analogy to it, since we can only think by analogy about something so vast, is a Person. The atheist argues that the Absolute is impersonal, i.e. the best analogy is machinery, gears and wheels etc., which spin on without purpose or intent, so-called “blind laws.” (This was especially appealing to Europeans enamored with the Industrial Revolution.) One can ask, “Why should the machinery analogy be a priori a better analogy?”

2. The Argument of Design

Russell separates this into two arguments, the argument from Natural Law and the argument from Design, but I think they are really part of the same argument. In this case Russell’s argument is very seriously dated. The argument for Design at the end of the 20th century is stronger than ever before. Russell’s argument came before developments in cosmology, microbiology, etc. that make things look much different. I don’t have time to summarize this here, but I will give some references:

J.D. Barrow and F. Tipler, The Anthropic Cosmological Principle, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1987), especially chapter 4.

R. Shapiro, Origins-- A Skeptic's Guide to the Creation of Life on Earth, (Summit Books, New Jersey, 1986).

M.J. Behe, Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution, (Free Press, New York, 1996).

J. Horgan, Scientific American, p. 100 (February 1991).

P.C.W. Davies, The Accidental Universe, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982).

H. Ross, The Fingerprint of God, 2nd ed., (Promise, Orange, California, 1991).

Philip Johnson, Darwin on Trial (IVP, Downer’s Grove, 1994).

Mere Creation, W.A. Dembski, ed. (IVP, Downer’s Grove, 1998).

David Snoke, "The Apologetic Argument," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* **50**, 108 (June 1998).

About half these references are written by non-Christians. Michael Behe's book, in particular, gives a good discussion of an argument which Russell used, which is still used today sometimes, which can be called the argument of Imperfection or the Panda's Thumb argument. This essentially says that if something isn't designed the way I would do it, then it must not be designed. So, for instance, if I look at a Mercedes-Benz and decide that the hubcabs are not aerodynamic enough, then the Mercedes-Benz must not be designed.

The best argument I can make briefly about the overwhelming evidence for design is the fact that the Anthropic Principle is now being taken very seriously by atheist philosophers. This argument admits that life is extremely improbable and that everything looks designed, but argues that in an infinity of universes, even the extremely improbable becomes probable and we just happen to be the lucky ones who live in the right universe. The only problem with this argument is that we do not have any evidence at all for even one other universe, much less an infinity of them. It seems to be an infinite violation of Occam's razor.

Again, even if one concedes that the universe looks designed, this does not get us to the Judeo-Christian God. But it does at least say that the supposition that the Absolute of the universe is personal and not impersonal is at least plausible. As I argue in the apologetic essay referenced above, the argument for Design is primarily a response to the atheist who claims that everything can be explained simply by probability arguments. In fact it can not; the atheist is simply holding out on bare faith for a scientific explanation for life. Russell's mockery here was much too overconfident.

3. The Moral Argument

I don't want to sound too triumphalist myself, but Russell slaughters this argument too. He does not state the argument correctly, and he tries to make a logical argument against it which just doesn't stand up. He says that God can not be the originator of the definition of good, because if God creates good by fiat, then it is not good, and if God is good by satisfying a prior definition of good, then that good is anterior to God and therefore God is not the ground of all being. But where in the world does Russell get the notion that if God defines good by fiat, then it is not good? He seems to be saying that if someone creates something, then it is not really real. That is illogical. It is perfectly consistent to say that God created something and defined it as good by fiat, and it is really good.

The real argument from morality, which Russell butchers, goes as follows (it was made by Kant but it also can be attributed to the book of Job in the Bible.) One starts with a simple desire that many of us have, which is that there should be such a thing as universal justice. I want to believe that good actions get good consequences and bad actions get bad consequences. (One could try to define morality without relation to consequences, but in that case "goodness" becomes an empty descriptive term, which Mach and the Positivists rightly argued is completely irrelevant.) If one wants to believe in universal justice, then one must believe in a Final Judgment. Why? Because it is manifest that there is no justice in this world. The Bible, in particular, the books of Job, Ecclesiastes, and the Psalms, are very clear about this; it is not something that Christians try to deny. So if there is going to be universal justice, then there has to be a final reckoning outside of this world. This points out something which is often neglected in the popular discussion of the Problem of Evil (why do bad things happen to good people?)-- the doctrine of Heaven and Hell and the Final Judgment is essential in the discussion of the Problem of Evil, not peripheral. If you reject the idea of a final judgment, you really have no answer to the Problem of Evil.

But one can go on. If there is a final judgment, then there must be a judge (by definition). What attributes must that judge have? First, the judge must be omniscient, since if he were not, then it would be possible that he could make a wrong judgment due to lack of knowing some detail, and justice would be thwarted. Second, the judge must be perfectly good, otherwise the possibility exists that he could render a bad judgment. Third, the judge must be omnipotent, since if not, it would be possible that he could make a judgment but be unable to carry out the verdict. In particular he must be able to raise people from the dead; otherwise they would simply escape his justice by ceasing to exist. This obviously sounds a lot like the Judeo-Christian God.

All of this presumes that one wants to believe in universal justice. If a person says that he doesn't want to believe in universal justice, then this is no argument for him. But C.S. Lewis had two arguments that show that it is not so easy to say that you don't believe in universal justice. First, many people who say this act otherwise. If you listen to them in their cars when they get cut off, or when someone infringes on their rights, they are railing that the other person is evil. Perhaps they don't use the word "evil," but use other words such as "sick" or "idiot" or "right-wing fundamentalist Nazi" or whatever, but the sense is the same. They don't feel at the time that the other person is merely "bad according to my definition but good by someone else's." No, they feel deep down that the other person is "really" bad in an absolute sense, and deserves to be punished.

This brings us to the question of how valid our feelings are. Suppose it could be proved that all people everywhere want there to be universal justice. So what? Does the fact that we want it prove that it exists? C.S. Lewis made another argument, called the argument from Desire, that the fact that we want something is at least an inductive argument that it exists. Our experience is that the things that we desire tend to actually exist, even if they are nowhere near to us at the time. So a person may be starving, desiring food, and no food is available, but the desire for food is correlated with the fact that food is a real thing which exists. We have many other desires which may go unsatisfied, e.g. for water, air, sex, sleep, etc. and in each case the thing we desire actually exists somewhere. So inductively this is evidence that justice actually exists even if it is nowhere to be found near me.

I think that the argument from Morality is a good inductive argument. A similar argument is made in the desire that seems to be universal to want to "worship" something. In general, I think that only inductive arguments are good arguments for the existence of God. Any argument that ends "Q.E.D. God" is suspect, likely to be mere wordplay.

4. Bible Difficulties

I used to be set often by apparent contradictions in the Bible, but after much study I find that most of these come simply from our looking at the Bible through 20th century eyes, not understanding the culture and language of the ancient Near East. We can't all be Hebrew scholars, but there are excellent resources out there by scholars who have looked into the supposed contradictions. One good reference is the Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties by Gleason Archer. Other resources are commentary series on the whole Bible by John MacArthur and other authors. John Calvin's commentaries are still useful, too.

The specific example that Russell uses has gotten a lot of attention-- did Jesus predict that He would come back within 40 years (one "generation" in Scriptural terminology)? Without doing a whole lot of Bible study here, I can say honestly that I have studied the issue and I don't think that is at all what Jesus meant. Part of the confusion is about the word "coming" ("parousia" in Greek) which is used all through Scripture to refer to the judgments of God not only in the Final Judgment but also in this world. I believe that Jesus was referring to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. The judgment about to fall on Jerusalem is a constant theme in the Gospels (e.g. Luke 21:20-24, Matthew 10:5,23, 21:33-43, 23:37-39, cf. Malachi 4:5-6). In the passage in question,

Jesus in threatening people with judgment, and says not only that He will judge the world in the Final judgment in the future, but that judgment was also coming very soon for that generation of Jews. It did, in exactly the amount of time defined by the Bible (Numbers 14:32-33) as the time for one generation to die off.

This is one example of a Bible difficulty, and I have dealt with many others that are similar, in which someone tries to set up a contradiction and I find that further study resolves it (at least to my satisfaction if not to theirs.) Often I have learned a lot about the Bible in studying the issues, and I recommend that people really try to study these things instead of just giving up.

5. Russell's Pure Biases

The last part of Russell's essay I call his "pure biases" because he really gives no logical argument, he just says that certain things are below us or not worthy of modern people. He basically says that he doesn't like the idea of wrath, he doesn't like the idea of fear, he doesn't like the idea of guilt, and he doesn't like the idea of dependence, and therefore they must not be real. I can relate to the appeal of this argument. As I said, I was an Ayn Rand devotee for several years, and I found it very appealing to think of myself as independent, in control, and guiltless. But after some time I reached a crisis because I kept feeling guilt-feelings and failure-feelings, and I had to ask "What if it is true that I am guilty? What if it is true that I will be called into judgment?" My just not wanting it to be true doesn't mean that it isn't true.

Russell's arguments here make me think of a person who is being told "A hurricane is coming. You should evacuate." He responds "You are using an argument based on fear. Fear is for the weak. I am a modern man and I don't respond to arguments based on fear." Doesn't it make a difference whether it is really true that a hurricane is coming? Fear can be a perfectly rational thing if the thing to be feared is real; it is irrational not to fear in some cases. (For more on the denial of guilt and fear in atheism, see R.C. Sproul's excellent book, If There is a God, Why are There Atheists?, or The Psychology of Atheism.)

At the same time, no Christian can deny that many evils and manipulations have occurred in the name of Christianity. As I said before, this century has shown that Christians do not have a corner on the market of evil-- we have seen Nazi Germany, Stalin's purges, Mao's Great Leap Forward, Pol Pot, Rwanda, all genocides done by non-Christians, so that far more people have been killed by non-Christians in this century than by all Christians in all previous centuries. Christians have an explanation for such things whether done both by people calling themselves Christians or people who are non-Christians-- there is such a thing as evil. Such things are problematic for people who believe in the innate goodness of man, that if we simply free people from the shackles of Christianity they will become better and better.

The fact that people are so easily manipulated by religion can actually be used as an inductive argument for the existence of God. The following quote is "Calvin's response to Marx" (since people in Calvin's day also used the "opiate of the masses" argument):

"It is utterly in vain for some men to say that religion was invented by the subtlety and craft of a few to hold the simple folk in thrall by this device and that those very persons who originated the worship of God for others did not in the least believe that any God existed. I confess, indeed, that in order to hold men's minds in subjection, clever men have devised very many things in religion by which to inspire the common folk with reverence and to strike them with terror. But they would never have achieved this if men's minds had not already been imbued with a firm conviction toward God, from which the inclination of religion springs as a seed."

This takes us back to the argument from Desire made by C.S. Lewis. Why is it so easy to manipulate people using religion? Suppose I have a room full of starving people and dangle a pork chop in front of them. I could easily manipulate them to do what I wanted. Does this prove that food does not exist? Or the opposite, that the desire for food is so great because food is a real essential? If people have such a hunger for removing their guilt that they will do just about anything to get it, could it not be that guilt is real, even if used for evil purposes by evil people?

The Jesus of the Bible does not fit our cultural picture of the “wimpy Jesus”-- He would not fit in the polite society of Russell and his friends. For myself, I admire the moral authority shown by Jesus who was willing to stand in public and say “you hypocrites.” May God save us from “niceness”, our cultural predisposition to want to pretend that everybody is nice and good and never say anything confrontational.

This survey has been as quick and superficial as Russell’s, and it is likely many people won’t find it satisfying. I hope that it serves to stimulate people to look into these issues further.