

William Lane Craig, a Classic Apologist

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ABSTRACT: This paper presents William Lane Craig as a proponent of classical apologetics and explores his influence on the content and structure of contemporary discussions. These dialogues encompass a wide spectrum, ranging from historical studies of Jesus and His resurrection to cosmological and moral evidence of God's existence, as well as the coherence of Christian theism. In the last part of this paper, we will highlight Craig's notable contribution to the contemporary field of apologetics.

KEYWORDS: classical apologetics, Christian faith, evidence, truth, kalām cosmological argument

Classical apologetics, as the name suggests, is the apologetic approach that has its deepest roots in the history of Christian apologetics and, in its modern explicit form, remains a powerful force today. Several strengths account for the perennial success of this approach. One of the great strengths of classical apologetics is its emphasis on the inevitability of logic or reason (Rotaru 2005, 36). As Geisler observes, "Unless the law of non-contradiction is valid, then there is not the slightest possibility of meaning and no hope of establishing truth" (Geisler 1993, 37).

There can be no meaningful discourse without the fundamental laws of logic. The most important of these is the law of non-contradiction (also known as the law of contradiction), according to which something cannot be both true and false at the same time and in the same respect (Boa and Bowman 2001, 377). Although Christian apologists learned this along with other principles of deductive logic from Greek philosophy (especially Aristotle), classical apologists rightly point out that observance of these laws does not oblige them to an uncritical acceptance of Aristotelian philosophy. Aristotle defined but did not invent logic. R. C. Sproul notes that several thinkers of the 20th century have rejected the law of contradiction at the theoretical level. Despite this intellectual denial, "everyone lives their daily lives in tacit assumption of the validity of the law... Man cannot survive or function without assuming the validity of the law of contradiction (Sproul 1974, 28-29)."

The importance and value of this emphasis on deductive logic is great. Logic is an extremely useful tool for understanding and evaluating arguments and proves its usefulness to the apologist in three ways. First, it is an indispensable tool for checking the apologist's arguments to ensure that they are constructed correctly. Those we seek to persuade reject our illogical arguments, even if the conclusions are true. It happens that way because other kinds of arguments could be used to support falsehoods. Illogical arguments cannot be trusted and the function of logic is to identify where arguments are unreasonable. We have a responsibility to present non-Christians with arguments that they cannot reject as misleading or unreliable. Logic is the formal discipline that gives us the intellectual tools that can make our arguments as reliable and truth-based as possible.

Second, logic is a powerful tool for exposing the problems in the arguments used against the Christian faith. Classical apologists are confident that every argument raised against the Christian faith is, in principle, devoid of sound logical argument; many of these are problematic simply because they are logically invalid. Since most non-Christians are capable of understanding at least some basic elements of the principles of logic, exposing logical fallacies in their arguments can help show them that the reasons for rejecting Christianity are misplaced, wrong.

The value of reason in this sense is enhanced because reason, unlike technical information in the sciences or personal religious experiences, is a universal principle accessible to all people. If they are open, non-Christians of any culture and level of education can be helped to admit that their objections to Christianity contain logical fallacies.

Third, the emphasis on logic is helpful to support the rationality of Christ's commands before unbelievers. Too often unbelievers have the impression that we are advocating an irrational faith that requires people to suspend their critical reasoning faculties. Classical apologists work to dispel this stereotypical thinking of educated and intellectual non-Christians by demonstrating that the God in whom we believe is the God of reason and truth.

Classical apologists point out that every man has a certain worldview when he relates to the world around him, to historical facts or human experiences. "The refusal to adopt an explicit worldview will itself turn out to be a worldview or at least a philosophical position"(Geisler 1993, 38). It has been suggested, on good grounds, that William Lane Craig (1949 -) may be Oxford's most important Christian apologist after C. S. Lewis. Craig has two earned doctorates, an evangelist's heart and an apologetic work that enjoys international recognition. According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Craig is "Christian philosophy's boldest apostle," and most influential educational circles have named Craig one of "the 50 most influential philosophers alive" (Forrest, Chatraw, and McGrath 2020, 750).

Craig's influence on the substance and shape of contemporary discussions is evident, from historical studies of Jesus and his resurrection, to cosmological and moral evidence for the existence of God, and the coherence of Christian theism. Beyond his scholarly contributions, Craig is also a regular Sunday school teacher and the author of a series of children's books (Forrest, Chatraw, and McGrath 2020, 752). William Lane Craig is an evangelist par excellence. Craig believes it is possible and appropriate to offer rigorous, positive intellectual arguments for Christian theism. He explains:

As we read Acts, it is evident that the standard procedure of the apostles was to argue the truth of the Christian worldview with both Jews and Gentiles (e.g., Acts 17:2-3, 17; 19:8; 28:23-24). In dealing with Jewish audiences, the apostles appealed to fulfilled prophecies, the miracles of Jesus, and especially Jesus' resurrection as proof that he was the Messiah (Acts 2: 22-32). When confronted with Gentile audiences, the apostles appealed to God's work in nature as proof of the Creator's existence (Acts 14:17). Then they appealed to the eyewitness testimony of Jesus' resurrection to show specifically that God had revealed himself in Jesus Christ (Acts 17: 30-31; 1 Corinthians 15: 3-8) (Craig 2008, 23)

In this sense, Craig's apologetic methodology gives primacy to the establishment of God's existence and God's self-revelation in Jesus (especially as evidenced in Jesus' resurrection) as two pillars of the Christian faith, an approach known as classical apologetics. Craig's apologetic approach is grounded in a certain religious epistemology. While rejecting theological rationalism, i.e., the claim that arguments and evidence are necessary to ground faith, Craig argues that the truth of Christianity is rational.

The inward witness of the Holy Spirit that is in believers "provides an immediate and truthful assurance of the truth" of Christianity, so that one's belief that the truth of Christianity is authentic is a basic belief. "God is not," Craig points out, "the conclusion of a syllogism; he is the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who dwells in us"(Craig 2010, 34). Therefore, the inner witness of the Spirit provides perfectly rational reasons for faith. Craig is speaking here only about the experience of assuring a believer that the Christian view is true, not about how an unbeliever comes to faith. There is, then, a sense in which a believer's "knowledge" of Christianity is distinct from the apologetic task.

To show that the Christian view is authentic in disputes with those who reject it, Craig sees this as the real task of apologetics. Here, again, the role of the Holy Spirit is essential, now in "opening the unbeliever's heart to be convinced by the argument." Thus, "when a person refuses to come to Christ, it is because he willingly ignores and rejects the voice of the

Spirit of God. But anyone who responds to the call of God's Spirit with an open mind and an open heart can know with certainty that Christianity is true, because God's Spirit will convince him that it is" (Craig 2010, 34).

Craig affirms the essential role of the Holy Spirit in apologetic circumstances alongside the prominent role of arguments and evidence, which are ultimately the means the Spirit uses through believers to show the truthfulness of Christianity. The presentation of arguments or evidence, in Craig's view, should not be seen as a competition or an alternative to the Spirit's work. Remembering that Craig's own conversion to Christianity did not involve apologetics, it is not surprising that he readily acknowledges the contingency of apologetics for conversion. Of course, God sees fit to use various means to draw people to himself. However, there is great value for apologetics, in Craig's view, beyond personal evangelism: strengthening the faith of believers, for example, as well as helping "to create and sustain a cultural environment in which the gospel can be heard as a viable intellectual option for men's and women's thinking" (Forrest, Chatraw, and McGrath 2020, 755).

It is clear that Craig takes a high view of natural theology, which he defines as "that branch of theology which attempts to provide a warrant for belief in the existence of God apart from the resources of authoritative, propositional revelation." Natural theology is not understood to be identical with general revelation; the former develops out of people's contemplation of the latter. In building his positive case for Christianity, Craig appeals extensively to the general revelation of God, taking this as the locus (or perhaps inspiration) for his arguments. Craig's Birmingham PhD thesis, for example, developed and defended the kalām version of the cosmological argument.

The cosmological argument kalām (derived from the Arabic word for "speech") can be stated as a simple syllogism:

- (1) Everything that begins to exist has a cause for its existence.
- (2) The universe began to exist.
- (3) Therefore, the universe has a cause of its existence (Craig 2008, 103).

Given the truth of the first two premises, the conclusion follows with necessity. It follows from the very nature of things that, being the cause of space and time, this supernatural cause must be an uncaused, unchanging, timeless and immaterial being who created the universe. The being must be uncaused because there cannot be an infinite regress of causes. It must be timeless and therefore unchanging because it created time. Since it created space, it must be transcendent in relation to space and therefore immaterial, not physical in nature (Meister and Swies 2012, 153).

Moreover, argues apologist William Lane Craig, it must be personal, for how else could a timeless cause produce a temporal effect like the universe? If this cause were a set of necessary and sufficient conditions with mechanical action, the cause could not exist at all without an effect. For example, water freezes because the temperature (cause) is below 0°C. If the temperature were below 0°C from eternity past, then any existing water would be frozen from eternity past. It would be impossible for water to have only started freezing a finite time ago. So if the cause is eternally present, then the effect should be eternally present. The only way to have a timeless cause and effect that begins in time is for the role of cause to be played by a personal agent who freely chooses to create a time effect without prior deterministic conditions. For example, a man standing from eternity could freely stand up. Thus, we are brought not only to a transcendent cause of the universe, but to its personal Creator. Without launching into a full evaluation of this argument, it is worth noting that beyond philosophical support, Craig also appeals to Big Bang cosmology in support of his argument. The central idea of the kalām is that if the universe began to exist a finite time ago and everything that begins to exist must have a cause for its existence, then there must be a cause for the existence of the universe. Everything that begins to exist has a cause seems indisputably true - at least to a greater extent than its denial. And yet a number of atheists, to avoid the conclusion of the

argument, deny the first premise. Some claim that subatomic physics provides an exception to premise 1, since at the subatomic level, they say, events are uncaused. Likewise, certain cosmic origin theories are interpreted as hints in favour of the hypothesis that the entire universe came into being from the subatomic vacuum (Boa and Bowman 2001, 355).

However, this objection is based on a misinterpretation. First, not all scientists agree that subatomic events are uncaused. A number of physicists today are totally dissatisfied with this view of subatomic physics (the so-called Copenhagen Interpretation) and investigate deterministic theories such as that of David Bohm. Thus, subatomic physics is not a proven exception to premise 1. Secondly, even according to the traditional, non-deterministic interpretation, particles cannot be said to come into being from nothing. They arise as spontaneous fluctuations of the energy contained in the subatomic vacuum, they cannot be said to come from nothing. Thirdly, the same can be shown for theories about the origin of the universe from a primordial vacuum. The well-known journals which advertise a theory that something is obtained from nothing simply do not understand that the vacuum is not identified with nothing; the vacuum is a sea of fluctuating energy endowed with a rich structure and subject to physical laws. Epistemologist Robert Deltete sums it up accurately:

There is no basis in normal quantum theory for the claim that the universe itself is uncaused, much less for the claim that the universe came into being uncaused, literally out of nothing (Craig 2010, 29).

Other atheists have argued that premise 1 is true of things in the universe, but not true of the universe itself. But this objection misinterprets the nature of the premise. Premise 1 does not simply state a physical law such as the law of gravity or the laws of thermodynamics, which have applicability to things in the universe. Premise 1 is not a physical principle. Rather, argues classical apologist William Lane Craig, premise 1 is a metaphysical principle, a principle about the very nature of reality: being cannot come from non-being; something cannot come into being from nothing, uncaused. The principle therefore applies to all of reality. From a metaphysical point of view, it is absurd that the universe should suddenly come into being out of nothing. Even J.L. Mackie, one of today's leading atheists, admits that he finds such an idea impossible to believe, remarking:

I, for one, find it hard to accept the idea of self-creation out of nothing, even considering the unfettered action of chance. And how can there be such a given if there is actually nothing? According to the atheistic view, the potentiality of the existence of the universe did not even exist before the Big Bang, since nothing is prior to the Big Bang. But then how could the universe actually actualize itself, if there is not even the potentiality of its existence? It is far more rational to assert that the potentiality of the universe lies in God's power to create it (Craig 2008, 103).

To establish premise 2, Craig must show that the past series of time events must be finite; there must be the beginning of the universe in time. One way Craig does this is by arguing that an infinite temporal regress of events would be a proper infinity. Now, history (the collection of past events) is a determinate collection, i.e. a set of discrete events stretching back into the past. As members of the set of past events, these temporal events are or were actual; they occurred in reality. This means that if history comprises an infinite collection of temporal events (e.g., days or years), then that collection will be an actual infinite. But, Craig continues, attempts to translate or position the notion of an actual infinite in the real world only leads to absurdity. This is evident, Craig argues, when one attempts to perform inverse operations on transfinite numbers (for example, subtracting infinity from infinity produces contradictory answers: zero and infinity):

The typical objection raised against the philosophical argument for a beginning of the universe is that modern mathematical set theory proves that an infinite number of things can exist and be actualized. For example, there are an infinite number of members in the set $\{0, 1, 2, 3, \dots\}$. As such, there is no problem with an infinite number of events. But this objection is not justified,

not all mathematicians agree on the existence of actual infinities in the mathematical domain. They believe that series of 0, 1, 2, 3, are only potentially infinite; that is, they approach infinity as a limit, but never actually get there. To say that there are infinite sets is nothing more than to postulate a domain of discourse, governed by certain axioms and rules that are only assumed, in which one cannot speak of such multitudes ((Craig 2020, 86).

Given axioms and rules, one can compose a coherent discourse about infinite sets. But this provides no guarantee that the axioms and rules are true or that there can be an infinite number of things in the real world. The existence of an infinite number of things would violate the rules of infinite set theory. Trying to subtract infinite quantities leads to contradictions, so infinite set theory simply prevents such operations from maintaining consistency. In the real world there is nothing to prevent us from breaking this arbitrary rule. If I had an infinite number of balls, I could subtract and divide their number as I wish.

It follows, then, that the notion of history as an infinite collection of past events is logically absurd. In other words, the past collection of temporal events cannot be infinite; the universe must have had a beginning at some point in the finite past, and we are therefore obliged to contemplate the cause of the universe's beginning. The best explanation, Craig argues, is that God exists as a personal agent who chose to bring the universe into existence (Forrest, Chatraw, and McGrath 2020, 760).

Craig's apologetic contributions, both unwritten and written, are considerable. Craig's success in using the internet for his ministry is extraordinary. Functioning as both a virtual office and a clearinghouse for his ministry materials, Craig's website features many of his writings, answers his "Question of the Week," and includes videos of interviews, lectures, and debates, as well as links to his regular podcast ("Reasonable Faith" (<https://www.reasonablefaith.org/>), also on iTunes) and to the weekly "Defenders" Sunday class he teaches. With about 83,300 monthly visitors, this platform makes Craig's work available to people around the world (Forrest, Chatraw, and McGrath 2020, 766).

Perhaps Craig's most recognizable contribution to apologetics is his participation in professional debates. In the spring of 1982, Campus Crusade-Canada asked Craig to travel to the University of Calgary to debate atheist Kai Nielsen. After eight years of competitive debating during his school years, this was Craig's first professional debate. The electrifying atmosphere and sizable audience drawn to the debate impressed Craig. Indeed, "it became very clear to him that debate was the forum for evangelism on today's college campus" (Craig 2020, 45). Since then Craig has participated in over 150 professional debates. Notable among these was the debate on February 18, 1998, with the then atheist philosopher Antony Flew. After this debate, contemplating Craig's defense of the design argument, Flew "found reason to believe that the design argument has substantial force" and ultimately rejected atheism. On February 1, 2013, at Purdue University, Craig debated Alex Rosenberg, professor of philosophy at Duke University. Most of Craig's debates, like the debates with Flew and Rosenberg, concern the question of the existence of God. But on April 11, 2011, Craig debated neuroscientist and prominent new atheist Sam Harris at the University of Notre Dame on the question "Is the foundation of morality natural or supernatural?" During his keynote address, Harris said that Craig is "the only Christian apologist who seems to have put the fear of God into my fellow atheists!" (Craig and Harris 2011).

What is compelling from these debates is Craig's consistency in appealing to the cosmological argument, the teleological argument, and the moral argument in establishing theism and then moving to a defense of the historicity of Jesus' resurrection to establish Christian theism. Put together, Craig's debates have amassed several million views on YouTube.

Despite the large number of people his unwritten work has reached, Craig's most enduring contribution to apologetics is his written work. Craig has written or edited approximately fifty books (not counting his contributions of over eighty chapters) and

published over 125 journal articles. His renowned works are read by countless laypeople, and Craig's scholarly publications are essential reading in many classrooms and continue to demand engagement at the highest levels of academia. The extensive work of William Lane Craig in Christian apologetics has left an indelible mark in the field, playing a vital role in creating an environment where the Christian worldview is considered a viable intellectual option.

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