

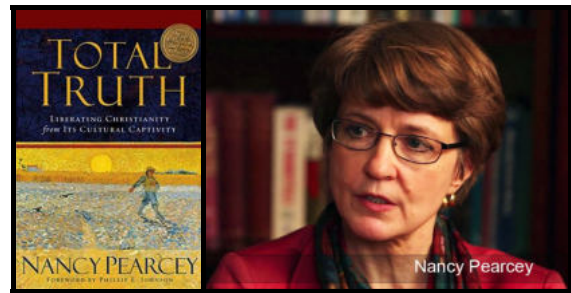
Isms on the Run: Practical Apologetics at L'Abri

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When I first arrived at L'Abri, trudging through the early spring snow to the tiny alpine village nestled in the Alps, I had developed a motley set of “isms” – from determinism to subjectivism to moral relativism. But as I settled into a round of study and discussions, I was shocked to find those beliefs under constant and vigorous assault. Looking back, I realize that what finally persuaded me of the truth of Christianity was Schaeffer's apologetic method, which was a unique hybrid of Common Sense realism and Dutch neo-Calvinism (see chapter 11).

How did this method play out in actual apologetics with a skeptic-me, for example? In a nutshell, Schaeffer would argue that one way to test truth claims is to measure them against the standard of what we all know by direct experience or as he put it, universal human experience (Common Sense realism). Then he would endeavor to show that Christianity alone gives an adequate theoretical



account of what we know by pre-theoretical experience (Dutch neo-Calvinism). To borrow a phrase from a contemporary philosopher of science, the truths known by experience are “conclusions in search of a premise.” [1] To make sense of them, we have to find a “premise” or systematic worldview that accounts for them.

Survival Machines?

To get a better grasp of this line of argument, walk with me through a few examples. How might we respond to the reductionism and determinism so widespread today, especially in the field of cognitive science? Just recently an article in *Nature* recited the current orthodoxy, insisting that the mind is “a survival machine with predetermined choices” and that free will is a subjective illusion.[2]

“The real causal story behind human behavior is deterministic,” agrees another recent article. Free will is self-deception, for “we are experts at deluding ourselves that we are ideal agents.... We confabulate stories that keep the self in the driver's seat.”[3]

Daniel Dennett, whom we met in earlier chapters, does not flinch at dismissing consciousness itself as an illusion. Since our brains are nothing but complicated computers, he reasons, we are merely robots – and like any robot, we can function perfectly well without subjective awareness (what we call mind, soul, or consciousness). Thus he concludes that humans are essentially zombies – not the movie monsters but “philosopher's zombies,” creatures that exhibit all the behavior of a human being but without any consciousness.

When I arrived at L'Abri, these were some of the ideas I had come to accept. What changed my mind? The counterargument is that determinism contradicts the data of experience. We all have an immediate awareness of being in situations where we must deliberate on alternative courses of action, and then select one of them. It is often exhilarating, and just as often agonizing, but in practice no one can really deny the direct awareness that we make choices,

"We find it impossible *not* to believe that we are radically free and responsible in our choices and actions," says philosopher Galen Strawson. In ordinary life, we find ourselves forced to believe that we have "ultimate, buck-stopping responsibility for what we do, of a kind that can make blame and punishment and praise and reward truly just and fair." [5] Moreover, we find testimony to this belief in the literature of all ages and cultures throughout history. It is part of universal human experience.

To be consistent, the determinist is forced to deny the testimony of experience. But that is not a valid move in the worldview game: The point of offering a worldview is to explain the data of experience, not to deny it. Anything less is ducking the issue. Thus we can be confident that any philosophy that leads to determinism is simply false. It fails to account for the reality of human nature as we experience it.

Another way to frame the argument is to say that no one can live consistently on the basis of a deterministic worldview. In everyday life, we are forced to operate on the assumption that freedom and choice are real, no matter what we believe theoretically. This creates a point of tension for the nonbeliever "The conviction of freedom is built into our experiences; we can't just give it up," said philosopher John Searle in an interview. "If we tried to, we couldn't live with it. We can say, OK, I believe in determinism; but then when we go into a restaurant we have to make up our mind what we're going to order, and that's a free choice." In his professional writings, Searle reduces all reality to particles moving by blind physical forces – yet when he leaves his laboratory and tries to function in the real world, he cannot live on that basis. His experience provides a practical contradiction of his philosophy.

By contrast, Christianity is completely consonant with human experience: It offers a rationally consistent explanation of human freedom as one aspect of the image of God. If ultimate reality, is a personal God who wills and chooses, then the human person is no longer a misfit in a deterministic world. Christianity explains not only freedom but also the other dimensions of human personality that derive from freedom: creativity, originality, moral responsibility, and even love. The whole range of human personality is accounted for only by the Christian worldview, because it begins with a personal God. We don't need to make an irrational leap to the upper story in order to affirm the highest ideals of human nature; they are utterly logically consistent with the Christian worldview.

Bumping Up Against Reality

What about subjectivism: During my second visit to L'Abri, I had the privilege of staying in the home of Udo and Debby Middelmann. One of Udo's frequent themes during dinner conversations was the objectivity of truth. It's a lesson we find ourselves learning, like it or not, from the time we are born, Udo would say. When a baby crawls to the edge of the crib and bumps his head against the wooden bars, he learns in a painful way that reality is objective. When a toddler tilts his high chair back until it falls to the floor, he learns that there is an

objective structure to the universe. Reality does not bend itself to our subjective desires – a lesson that can be painful to learn even for adults. Thus we can confidently reject any philosophical position that leads to subjectivism. Why? Because it fails to account for what ordinary experience teaches us day by day. It is in tension with the data of experience.

Christianity, by contrast, treats truth as objective and explains why – because the world is the creation of God; not of my own mind. The doctrine of creation gives logical grounds for our belief that an objective, external world exists, with its own inherent structure and design. What's more, the Creator is not silent. He has spoken, giving us divine revelation in Scripture. Since God sees and knows everything as it truly is, what He communicates in His Word is an objective, trustworthy basis for knowledge

This is a revolutionary claim in today's postmodern world, with its pervasive subjectivism and relativism. We are not locked into the "prison house of language," as postmodernists put it. By language they mean belief systems, which are expressed in language, and which they regard as nothing more than products of history and cultural evolution. Over against this radical form of historicism, Christianity claims that we have access to transhistorical truth, because God Himself has spoken.

It's Not Fair

If there is one prevailing characteristic of modern culture, it is moral relativism. Yet this is one of the "isms" that is easiest to shoot down. Why? Because, despite what a person says he believes, no one faced with genuine cruelty remains a moral relativist.

After World War II, when the atrocities of the Nazi concentration camps came to light, it created a crisis among many educated people. Steeped in the cynicism and relativism typical of their class, they perceived for the first time in a visceral way that evil is real. Yet their own secular philosophies gave them no basis for making objective, universal moral judgments – because those philosophies reduced moral judgments to merely personal preferences or cultural conventions. Thus they found themselves trapped in a practical contradiction, which created tremendous inner tension.

The dilemma is that humans irresistibly and unavoidably make moral judgments, and yet non-biblical worldviews give no basis for them. When non-believers act according to their intrinsic moral nature by pronouncing something truly right or wrong, they are being inconsistent with their own philosophy and thus condemn it by their own actions. "Whenever you find a man who says he does not believe in a real Right and Wrong, you will find the same man going back on this in a moment later," writes C. S. Lewis. "He may break his promise to you, but if you try breaking one to him he will be complaining 'It's not fair' before you can say Jack Robinson."

"It seems, then, we are forced to believe in a real Right and Wrong," Lewis concludes. "People may be sometimes mistaken about them, just as people sometimes get their sums wrong; but they are not a matter of mere taste and opinion any more than the multiplication table."^[7] Yet what is the logical ground for this unavoidable belief in right and wrong? The only basis for an objective morality is the existence of a holy God, whose character provides the ultimate foundation for moral standards. Christianity explains why we are moral creatures, and establishes the validity of our moral sense.

These were some of the issues that I had to wrestle with personally in my studies at L'Abri before becoming a Christian. The form of apologetics I encountered there treated common human experience as the touchstone. The purpose of a *worldview* is to explain our experience of the *world* – and any philosophy can be judged by how well it succeeds in doing so. When Christianity is tested, we discover that it alone explains and makes sense of the most basic and universal human experiences. This is the confidence that should sustain us when we bring our faith perspective into the public arena, whether in personal evangelism or in our professional work.

FOOTNOTES

1. N. R. Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery* (Cambridge University Press, 1958), 90,
2. Melvin Kouner, "The Buck Stops Here," *Nature* 423 (May 8, 2003): 17-18.
3. Thomas W. Clark, review of *The Illusion of Conscious Will*, by Daniel Wegner, in *Science and Consciousness Review* (May 2002), at <http://psych.pomona.edu/scr/reviews/20020508.html>
4. This is the theme of Dennett's *Consciousness Explained* (MIT Press, 1992). For a critique from a Christian perspective, see Angus Menuge, *Agents Under Fire: Materialism and the Rationality of Science* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).
5. Galen Strawson, "Freedom Evolves: Evolution Explains It All for You: A Review of "Freedom Evolves," by Daniel C. Dennett, *The New York Times*, March 2, 2003.
6. John Searle, interview by Jeffrey Mishlove, *Thinking Allowed: Conversations on the Leading Edge of Knowledge and Discovery*, PBS, at <http://www.williamjames.com/transcripts/searle.htm>.
7. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Macmillan, 1952), 20.