



## The Argument from History

This argument is both stronger and weaker than the other arguments for the existence of God. It is stronger because its data (its evidence) are some facts of history, things that have happened on this planet, rather than principles or ideas. People are more convinced by facts than by principles. But it is weaker because the historical data amount only to strong clues, not to deductive proofs.

The argument from history is the strongest psychologically with most people, but it is not the logically strongest argument. It is like footprints in the sands of time, footprints made by someone great enough to be God.

There are at least eight different arguments from history, not just one.

**First**, we could argue from the meaningfulness of history itself. History, both human and prehuman, has a storyline. It is not just random. The atheist Jean-Paul Sartre has his alter ego Roquentin say something like this about history in the novel *Nausea*: "I have never had adventures. Things have happened to me, that's all." If atheism is true, there are no adventures, nothing has intrinsic significance, life is "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing". But life is not that. Life is a story. Stories are not told by idiots. In J. R. R. Tolkien's great epic *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo and Sam are crawling through the slag heaps of Mordor desperately attempting to fulfill their perilous quest when Sam stops to ask, "I wonder what kind of story we're in, Mr. Frodo?" It is a great question, a concrete way of asking the abstract question, "What is the meaning of life?" That the question is asked at all shows that we are in a story, not a jumble, and a story points to a storyteller. Thus the general argument from history is a version of the argument from design.

A **second** argument concentrates more specifically on the moral design in history. Thus it can be seen as similar to the argument from conscience in that it uses the same evidence, morality. But in this case the premise is the justice revealed in history rather than the obligation imposed by individual conscience. The historical books of the Old Testament constitute an extended argument for the existence of God based on the history of the Jewish people. The argument is implicit, not explicit, of course; the Bible is not a book of philosophical arguments. It is not so much an argument as an invitation to look and see the hand of God in history. Whenever God's laws are followed, the people prosper. When they are violated, the people perish. History shows that moral laws are as inescapable as physical laws. Just as you can flout gravity only temporarily before you fall, so you can flout the moral laws of God only temporarily before you fall. Great tyrants like Adolf Hitler flourish for a day, like the mayfly, and perish. Great saints experience apparent failure, and emerge into triumph and joy. The same is true of nations as well as individuals. The lesson is scorned not because it is unknown or obscure but because it is so well known; it is what our mothers and nurses told us as children. And however "square" it may be, it is true. History proves you can't cut the corners of the moral square. In geometry, you can't square the circle, and in history you can't circle the square. Now is this moral design (which the East calls karma) mere chance or the product of a wise moral will, a lawgiver? But no human lawgiver invented history itself. The only adequate cause for such an effect is God.

A **third** argument from history looks at providential "coincidences", like the Red Sea's parting (moved by an east wind, according to Exodus) at just the right time for the Jews to escape Pharaoh. Our own individual histories usually have some similar bits of incredible timing. Insightful and unprejudiced examination of these "coincidences" will bring us at least to the suspicion, if not to the conviction, that an unseen divine hand is at work here. The writers of the

Bible often shortcut the argument and simply ascribe such natural events to God. Indeed, another passage in Exodus says simply that God parted the sea. This may not be miracle; God may have worked here, as he continues to work, through the second causes of natural agents. But it is God who works, and the hand of the Worker is visible through the work, if we only look. The argument is not a logical compulsion but an invitation to look, like Christ's "come and see."

A **fourth** argument from history, the strongest one of all, is the argument from miracles. Miracles directly and inescapably show the presence of God, for a miracle, in the ordinary sense of the word, is a deed done by supernatural, not natural, power. Neither nature nor chance nor human power can perform a miracle. If miracles happen, they show God's existence as clearly as reproduction shows the existence of organic life or rational speech shows the existence of thought.

If I were an atheist, I think I would save my money to buy a plane ticket to Italy to see whether the blood of Saint Januarius really did liquefy and congeal miraculously, as it is supposed to do annually. I would go to Medjugorje. I would study all published interviews of any of the seventy thousand who saw the miracle of the sun at Fatima. I would ransack hospital records for documented "impossible", miraculous cures. Yet, strangely, almost all atheists argue against miracles philosophically rather than historically. They are convinced a priori, by argument, that miracles can't happen. So they don't waste their time or money on such an empirical investigation. Those who do soon cease to be atheists—like the sceptical scientists who investigated the Shroud of Turin, or like Frank Morrison, who investigated the evidence for the "myth" of Christ's Resurrection with the careful scientific eye of the historian—and became a believer. (His book *Who Moved the Stone?* is still a classic and still in print after more than sixty years.)

The evidence is there for those who have eyes to see or, rather, the will to look. God provided just enough evidence of himself: enough for any honest and open-minded seeker whose heart really cares about the truth of the matter but not so much that dull and hardened hearts are convinced by force. Even Christ did not convince everyone by his miracles. He could have remained on earth, offered to walk into any scientific laboratory of the twentieth century, and invited scientists to perform experiments on him. He could have come down from the Cross, and then the doubters would have believed. But he did not. Even the Resurrection was kept semiprivate. The New Testament speaks of five hundred who saw him. Why did he not reveal himself to all?

He will, on the last day, when it will be too late to change sides. His mercy gives us time to choose and freedom to choose. The evidence for him, especially his miracles, is clear enough throughout history so that anyone with an honest, trusting, and seeking heart will find him: "All who seek end." But those who do not seek will not find. He leaves us free. He is like a lover with a marriage proposal, not like a soldier with a gun or a policeman with a warrant.

A **fifth** argument from history is Christ himself. Here is a man who lived among us and claimed to be God. If Christ was God, then, of course, there is a God. But if Christ was not God, he was a madman or a devil—a madman if he really thought he was God but was not, and a devil if he knew he was not God and yet tempted men to worship him as God. Which is he—Lord, lunatic, or liar?

Part of the data of history are the Gospel records of his life and his character. Reading the Gospels is like reading Plato's accounts of Socrates, or Boswell's account of Dr. Johnson: an absolutely unforgettable character emerges, on a human level. His personality is distinctive and compelling to every reader of the Gospels, even unbelievers, even his enemies, like Nietzsche.

And the character revealed there is utterly unlike that of a lunatic or a liar. If it is impossible that a lunatic could be that wise or a liar that loving, then he must be the Lord; he must be the one he claims to be.

This is the progress of the argument in Scripture: you meet God through Christ, and (as the next argument will show) you meet Christ through Christians, through the Church. The logical order is: first prove the existence of God, then prove the divinity of Christ, then prove the authority of Christ's Church. But the actual order in which an individual confronts these things is the reverse: he meets Christ through Christians (first, the apostles and writers of the Gospels; then the saints, past and present) and God through Christ. Once again, the "argument" is more like an invitation to "come and see."

A **sixth** argument is the saints, especially their joy. G. K. Chesterton once said that the only unanswerable argument against Christianity was Christians. (He meant bad and sad Christians.) Similarly, the only unanswerable argument for Christianity is Christians—saintly Christians. You can argue against Mother Teresa's theology if you are sceptical of mind, but you cannot argue against Mother Teresa unless you are hopelessly hard of heart. If there is no God, how can life's most fundamental illusion cause life's greatest joy? If God didn't do it, who put smiles on the lips of martyrs? "By their fruits you shall know them." Illusions do not have the staying power that the Faith has.

And that brings us to our **seventh** argument from history: the conversion of the world. How explain the success of the Faith in winning the hearts of men? Hard-hearted Romans give up worldly pleasures and ambitions, and often life itself. Worldly men pin their hopes on otherworldly goals and do it consistently, en masse, century after century. If Christianity is not true and there are no miracles, then the conversion of the world is an even greater miracle. Greek philosophy won converts through rational proofs, and Mohammed through force of arms in the jihad, or holy war, but Christ won the hearts of men by the miracle of "amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me." (I almost believe it is our high and holy duty to sing loudly the original "wretch" line that our liturgical experts have bowdlerized out of that great old song whenever the congregation sings the bland version instead. God in his wisdom saw that the American Church lacked persecutions and so sent her liturgists.)

The **eighth** and last argument from history is from our own individual history and life's experiences. The Christian faith is verifiable in a laboratory, but it is a subtle and complex laboratory: the laboratory of one's life. If God exists, he wants to get in touch with us and reveal himself to us, and he has promised that all who seek him will find him. Well, then, all the agnostic has to do is to seek, sincerely, honestly, and with an open mind, and he will find, in God's way and in God's time. That is part of the hypothesis, part of the promise.

How to seek? Not just by arguing but by praying, not just by talking about God, as Job's three friends did and did not find him, but by talking to God, as Job did, and found him. I always tell a sceptic to pray the prayer of the sceptic if he really wants to know whether God exists. This is the scientific thing to do, to test a hypothesis by performing the relevant experiment. I tell him to go out into his backyard some night when no one can see and hear him and make him feel foolish, and say to the empty universe above him, "God, I don't know whether you exist or not. Maybe I'm praying to nobody, but maybe I'm praying to you. So if you are really there, please let me know somehow, because I do want to know. I want only the Truth, whatever it is. If you are the Truth, here I am, ready and willing to follow you wherever you lead." If our faith is not a pack of lies, then whoever sincerely prays that prayer will find God in his own life, no matter how hard,

how long, or how complex the road, as Augustine's was in the *Confessions*. "All roads lead to Rome" if only we follow them.