

# The Holy Trinity of Apologetics

Apologetics is an infinitely large field for the Christian, so no one can know everything there is to know about it. Still, humans are creatures of habit, and it seems like most questions and debates center around a few dozen themes. Furthermore, several key concepts are flexible enough to be useful in multiple situations. I have found three such concepts that seem to come up again and again in explaining the faith. They are relatively simple in themselves, yet are extremely powerful in application.

The first concept I want to talk about, and easily the longest one presented here, is the Seven Virtues. These are more commonly expressed as the three Theological Virtues and the four Cardinal Virtues (cardinal meaning "of greatest importance" or "fundamental"). Each and every time one faces a moral choice, one should analyze it through these virtues. I would propose that, without exception, every evil act failed to give at least one of the virtues the proper respect it deserved. Not every virtue needs to have equal weight in each matter, but a conscious and rational attempt to see how each is applied to the situation should be performed, whether it's a college student deciding if he can go to a party instead of studying for a class, or a head of state contemplating war. And because we all typically have dozens, if not hundreds, of moral decisions to make every day, it is beyond my ability to think of any Christian teaching that could be more useful.

The Cardinal Virtues are based on human reason. As such, man does not "need" God to specify what to think about them. Indeed, while specifics and details vary from culture to culture, there is an amazing level of compatibility with what is virtuous worldwide and throughout history (at least until the advent of socialism and other Hegelian-based ideologies). There is even a name for this phenomenon: "universal morality." But as this is a Christian paper, I will explain it from the Christian point of view.

The four Cardinal Virtues are prudence, temperance, justice and fortitude. Prudence is the ability to identify all courses of action and their likely outcomes. At worst, prudence is often ignored in favor of short-term gain. At best, prudence is hindered by an inability to grasp the full extent of what options are available and their outcomes. Furthermore, what Christians call the sin of pride can hinder one's ability to accept what is actually known. But, when used properly, this is the most important of all virtues because the other six virtues (including the Theological Virtues) come together with prudence. One often begins with using prudence to come up with options, addressing each option in light of the other six virtues, and then coming back to prudence for the final decision.

Temperance is applying the right amount of effort to a moral action. Too much or too little effort can ruin even the best moral decision. Parents struggle with this all the time, especially when the child reaches upper middle school and high school ages. They should always be there to help the child, but too much participation in the child's life can retard the ability of the child to take care of himself, and too little participation can leave the child unable to cope with adult life properly.

Justice is recognizing that all people are equal in dignity. This virtue is most often abused by placing some people higher than others, or excluding a group (including oneself) from having "rights." Another common error is to assume "justice" and "revenge" are the same thing -- justice looks forward, revenge looks backward. Finally, justice is also abused by confusing "equal dignity" with "interchangeability." Equal dignity means all children should have a right to the minimum education necessary to function in society, but interchangeability says all should graduate at the same level of

competence. Equal dignity respects the unique talents and abilities of each person; interchangeability denies anyone has unique talents or abilities.

We finish the Cardinal Virtues with fortitude, the strength to do what is right. Most often when one sins, it is not because one does not know what to do, but because one does not act on this knowledge. But feeling a false sense of guilt when a moral act benefits one undermines fortitude just as much as avoiding an act when it brings personal disadvantage. If one is obedient at work and does the best job one can at it, then there is no justifiable guilt in any awards, recognition, or promotion one receives for it. Yet many people shy away from justified reward for fear of what their companions might think. There are those who would take advantage of this fear and attempt to shame those who do receive just awards.

The Theological Virtues are often ignored by Christians, and easily discarded by skeptics, because their impact on moral decisions is much more subtle. Yet they ultimately make all the difference between how a Christian and non-Christian interpret the Cardinal Virtues. I will admit that, in normal day to day matters, it can be hard to tell the difference between using them or not, especially when one is brought up in a culture founded by Christianity. And the answer is largely tied to what I already said about fortitude. While fortitude tells one to do what one decided to be right, the Theological Virtues give us the motivation to do so. But the Theological Virtues bring clarification to the Cardinal Virtues as well.

Aristotle's answer to why one should seek moral solutions to life's problems was "eudaimonia," which can be translated as "good spirit." A contemporary equivalent to eudaimonia is "Don't forget to be awesome." In both cases, however, one should seek moral solutions because that is how one becomes a good person. In both cases, the question is not really answered, only pushed back one step. Why should one care to be a good person? For the rich and/or famous, leaving by which a legacy to be remembered might provide this motivation. But for the overwhelming rest of the world, there is none. Theological virtues answer this question, because there are consequences for one otherwise. In cultures that deny the existence of God (i.e., socialist countries), the Theological Virtues are replaced with laws that seek to govern the way one thinks. But while even atheist cultures have accepted the bankruptcy of suggesting people will be good if only they are allowed to be good, there are still problems. Those with the talent, resources, and will to do so can still avoid the consequences of law.

In contrast, one cannot avoid consequences when one believes in God, and there is no "gaming the system" either. There is no "angle" to be played. One cannot rationalize away an inconvenient ethic by looking for a loophole. If one knows God's will, one ought to do it regardless of any argument to the contrary. But Theological Virtues are not only negative motivations. If one has faith that God will keep his promise, and the hope of eternal reward for being truly virtuous, then there is plenty of reason to strive to be a good person. And this is rounded out with charity, which says that to be a truly good person means being good to those who cannot return kindness. So, rather than push the question back one step like eudaimonia did, one finds the question going back to the skeptic as to how they can call themselves "good" without a theistic grounding. And with that, I will move on to the second concept in my "Holy Trinity of Apologetics."

The second concept is "the four loves," as described by C.S. Lewis in his powerful book by the same name. I define "love" as a unifying force. While I prefer the "ideal" interpretation of love, I do not shy away from the corrupted version of love either. Indeed, I believe that people are so eager to find "love" that they don't look to see if what they have is ideal or corrupted. By calling it a unifying force, and by accepting that it can be corrupted, I am sure what I say next will sound far removed from

what people commonly think about these four loves. But I also believe it allows a much more complete philosophy, one that can stand up to tough scrutiny.

The first love I want to discuss is *storge*, or affection. The unifying force of *storge* is familiarity. The lover feels comfortable with the beloved, be it a book, blanket, stuffed animal, building, outdoor location, etc. This is an enduring force, as it may very well last a lifetime. While sometimes strong, it is usually weak and easily replaceable. It is also a love that is often taken for granted, as one oftentimes doesn't know how strong that unity is until the beloved is gone. Finally, it is also a one-way love. Even if the beloved feels the same for the lover, it is a separate connection unique to them. *Storge* is why it feels good to have the beloved around even if not doing something together, and why one feels a loss when the beloved is gone. In the corrupted form, *storge* can be quite possessive and stifling. I believe many abusers do feel this corrupted form of love with those they abuse.

Next I will discuss *eros*, or passion. The unifying force is strong emotions. The lover feels alive when with the beloved. This is an intensely powerful force, but often short-lived. Furthermore, *eros* is very often directed at an idea instead of reality. When one experiences *eros*, it often ignores the flaws of the beloved and frequently assigns virtues to the beloved that don't exist or are at least greatly exaggerated. It is like *storge* in that it is a one-way love, even if the beloved has *eros* for the lover as well. And while the passion most associated with *eros* is sexual desire, it can easily be or become hate, resentment, jealousy, and other "negative" feelings. Unlike sexual desire, these corrupted passions may very well last a lifetime, and a twisted view of reality feeds it.

The third love is *philia*, or friendship. The unifying force is common interests, especially interests that each have a certain passion (*eros*) for. Unlike the previous two loves, the beloved must be a person, and not an object or idea. The strength of this love depends on how many interests are shared, and how important the shared interests are for each of them. This love can last as long as the interests remain common. It is the only love that is two-ways, as the interests they have in common are what unify them. One cannot have *philia* for another without the intended beloved willingly loving this same way back. As long as both are acting in good faith, it is hard to corrupt this love, although it can end if common interests are removed (such as children growing up and leaving home). Corruption is possible if at least one of the lovers is being deceitful in their true interests. Many abusive relationships have the abuser as the main, or even only, "common interest" between them.

The last love is *agape*, or charity (as the Theological Virtue above). It is the force that unites the lover to the beloved by performing an act that gives no benefit to the lover (other than the love itself). From a purely secular perspective, this love is an instantaneous act so one cannot describe it in terms of "strength" or "durability." In the Christian perspective, *agape* can last as long as both are alive, and even beyond death for those who believe in Purgatory. Not only is this a one-way love, but the beloved cannot have a simultaneous *agape* for the lover. At best, the beloved could respond with *eros* of joy or gratitude. *Agape*, because it is a giving love, cannot be maintained indefinitely by the lover (at least not by earthly means). In a close relationship, *agape* can be corrupted by being used too much or too little. The lover will eventually need time to recover, and occasionally need to have the roles reversed. This is why it is important to discuss marital problems with members of the *same* sex, as the needs of an exhausted *agape* can easily lead to temptation with someone who seems to care about them. On the other hand, without *agape*, then true forgiveness is not possible, and resentment and other corrupted forms of *eros* will enter the relationship.

While it is overkill to suggest one analyze every relationship one is in, I think it a worthwhile

effort to at least inventory the important ones. What is it that is keeping the family together? Are those one calls "friends" (*philia*) really acquaintances (*storge*)? What are the interests one shares with one's "friends?" Is one really passionate about *someone* else, or is it just a *fantasy* of the other? Is charity draining one's energy by being with someone who takes more than gives? Is one spending corrupted eros on people who don't deserve one's time? Is the only common interest one has with their significant other, the significant other? So much can be realized about one's relationships by looking at life this way. So much of the Christian guidelines on relationships, especially marriage, can be discussed and explained through the four loves.

The final member of the Holy Trinity of Apologetics is perhaps the hardest to understand, and that is the concept of nonexistence. Skeptics have many questions on how an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God can allow evil, tragedy and other horrible things. In fact, most theologians admit that the question of evil is the single greatest argument against God. In fact, an entire branch of philosophy is dedicated to this problem: theodicy. And yet the secret to answering this question can be found in the actions of a child.

A child knows to turn *on* a light switch when he enters a room to play, and to turn *off* the light switch when he wishes to sleep. The child may not think much about what he does, but he knows it is absurd to turn "on" a dark switch before going to sleep. He knows one cannot add darkness to a room, one must eliminate the light. But as we grow older, this simple truth of darkness having nonexistence becomes corrupted in our education. We are told it has a color, although black is likewise not really a color but a lack of color. We read poets who talk of how darkness envelops a town, how it clothes a room or how it hugs a person. As such, we begin to associate darkness with things that really do have existence. Of course, I don't want the poetry to go away, but it is important to differentiate between darkness as a literary technique and as a non-entity.

Now, just as darkness is the absence of light and black the absence of color, so too is unreal the absence of real, untruth the absence of truth, and evil the absence of good. So many challenges to the Christian faith can be answered using the concept of nonexistence as a foundation. However, this explanation has its own dangers, as I hope can be seen in this example:

Q: How could God create evil/death? A: God did not; evil/death is the result of man and angels refusing the good/life God did create.

Q: What exists outside the boundaries of Heaven? A: Nothing.

Q: So, is Earth part of Heaven or Hell? A: Earth was meant to be a part of Heaven, but the sin of angels and man has caused a break from Heaven. Its continued, but temporary, existence is due to a grace of God, and this grace of God is indicative of His charity for us.

Q: If nothing exists outside of Heaven, then where is Hell? A: Hell is the non-existence that one finds when one refuses Heaven.

Q: Does that mean no one is in Hell? A: Those in Hell have refused the existence God offered them.

At this point, the interlocutor usually recoils in disgust, as well he should. He is coming to realize the true horror of denying God. Patience is important here, as this realization can also drive them away due to it being too much to bear. Indeed, it is best to bring the potential convert around to

accept the God theory as a credible and believable theory on other matters before dealing with this. Unfortunately, the interlocutor may not be of a mind to wait and demand answers to this now.

A less radical understanding of nonexistence can be explained with "disordered appetites." Our appetites (which include, but are not limited to, aesthetic appreciation and sexual desires) are made by God, and therefore good. But, unlike other animals, we have the power to deliberately overindulge in them. When we overindulge in our appetites, we are not making the clean break from reality as described above (at least not at first), but rather a slow corruption of something good. Good remains, but not as pure as it was before. Man's appetites begin to control man instead of man controlling the appetite. The consequences are both obvious and inevitable: pleasure becomes harder and harder to find while also becoming less and less intense when found. In the end, the corrupted appetite finally breaks and is no longer a corrupted good, but evil. One is no longer capable of enjoying the appetite, but must give in to avoid the tormenting "hunger." C.S. Lewis called disordered appetites an addiction for this very reason. Christianity recognizes that mankind, through original sin, has a proclivity for disordered appetites. The rules and guidelines of the Church are not there to stop one from having fun, but to allow one to continually enjoy them without corruption. And if the sexual guidelines are especially strict and harsh, just remember that the consequences are worse than for any other disordered appetite.

Of course, there is so much more to apologetics than this, but I have found that most questions can be answered with these three concepts, at least in an important way. There are also other issues where, if these three don't play a key part, they still play a supporting role at one point or another. I hope what I have presented here can help one to defend the faith.

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