

Schaeffer Lecture 11

April 17, 2023

11A: Gordon Lewis (“Schaeffer’s Apologetic Method”)

- Lewis (1926-2016) was professor of systematic theology at Denver Seminary; he was a “verificationist” after the school of E.J. Carnell
- 1976 as a “baffling” year—three different books with three different conclusions about Schaeffer’s apologetic method:
 - Morris: he’s a presuppositionalist
 - Reymond: he’s an empiricist
 - Lewis: he’s a verificationist
- “Schaeffer did not help his interpreters” by making his methods clear
- discovering Schaeffer’s apologetic becomes a matter for the detective—looking for evidence of a pattern/plan
- three methods of reasoning: inductive, deductive, abductive
 - inductive: start with particulars and formulate principles (specific to general); also called evidential or phenomenal
 - deductive: start with principles and formulate particulars (general to specific); also called presuppositional
 - abductive: start with hypothesis, examine particulars, confirm/deny hypothesis; also called verificationist; this corresponds to the methodology of scientific investigation
- in practice, the scientific process begins with data that we try to explain according to a pattern (hypothesis); further investigation is designed to search for data that would *falsify* the hypothesis (burden of proof: proving guilt vs proving innocence; the latter requires essentially infinite knowledge, hence no hypothesis is ever really “proved”—and we don’t use that kind of language in the world of statistical analysis)
- for a valid hypothesis, it must be falsifiable with a minimum amount of data—a non-falsifiable hypothesis is religion, not science (e.g., “manmade” climate change cannot be falsified and is not a *theory*—it’s a dogma)
- science is based on ASSUMPTIONS not ASSERTIONS; assertions in science are articles of faith; the prevailing paradigm is little more than a convenient summary of the available evidence (subject to a few anomalies)
- when a theory is “in crisis” it means the anomalies are piling up and they can’t be explained by making adjustments to the model (overfitting); for your amusement try searching for “crisis in cosmology JWST”; new data (based on new measurements) have the potential to turn any field on its head
- there is a recognition among “verificationists” that God is never proved—he only represents the most *likely* explanation in relation to the alternatives; for your teacher, this is the Achilles’ heel of this apologetic method; like science, it only disproves by a slow (stepwise) process of elimination

- the five major elements of an apologetic method include:
 - 1. the logical starting point
 - 2. common ground
 - 3. criteria for truth
 - 4. the role of reason
 - 5. the basis of faith
- the three schools of apologetics are represented by the following exponents:
 - inductivism: Buswell
 - presuppositionalism: Van Til
 - verificationism: Carnell
- Lewis provides a helpful comparison of methods in relation to the major elements (pp. 73-74; see also **Figure 3.2** p. 87)
- regarding verificationism, there is a big difference between “confirmed” and “disconfirmed”—but they are mentioned together as if they are about the same thing
- Schaeffer in his cultural context: confronting the thought form of existentialism both inside and outside the church
- “He sought to confirm the truth of the Christian message and to demonstrate its relevance for live lived to the fullest.”
- his purpose was evangelistic (to those outside the church) and pastoral (to those inside the church)
- “he was not a specialist in logic . . . but a general practitioner in pre-evangelism”
- FAS: “evangelism . . . is two things . . . giving honest answers to honest questions . . . [and] showing them what Christianity means across the whole spectrum of life”
- Lewis laments that Schaeffer leaves little evidence of his influences; his books were based on lectures and did not contain footnotes; (not a good excuse in your teacher’s opinion—he would have known his sources and could have documented them easily enough—like the difference between preaching a sermon and publishing a commentary on the same text; was it careless or intentional?)
- FAS himself uses the term “verification”—he was always trying to show that the truth of scripture “corresponds” to the world we all live in
- he uses the word “presupposition” to refer to one’s default worldview
- Lewis argues that Schaeffer should have called his “presuppositions” by the term “hypotheses”
- by contrast, Van Til’s presuppositions must be assumed—they are not subject to verification
- the verificationist is always vulnerable to having his presuppositions disproved; here we recall Schaeffer’s spiritual crisis in 1951 when he went back to agnosticism in order to prove the truth of Christianity to his own satisfaction; this also introduces the question (raised by Morris) about the influence of one’s own conversion on the development of an apologetic method
- Schaeffer’s “logical starting point” (element #1) was the existence of the infinite-personal God of the Bible—trinitarian theism with love and communication between the persons of the Godhead

- other starting elements would include: revelation in scripture, the fallenness of man, Jesus as God-man, Savior, risen Lord
- Schaeffer’s view of “common ground” (element #2) begins with personal man as the starting point; we share commonalities with both fallen and redeemed men (there remains in the fallen man qualities like love, beauty, and rationality)
- fallen man can still “feel the tension between the real world and his assumptions”
- the divine image makes it possible even for fallen man to “reason consistently”
- Schaeffer finds this common ground even though fallen man does not have a basis for explaining these things
- “Schaeffer’s understanding and use of the elements of common ground as a point of contact with unbelievers fits most coherently with a verificational method.”
- Schaeffer’s “criteria for truth” (element #3) include two aspects: truth as non-contradictory and having the ability to explain the phenomena
- Geisler sees Schaeffer as utilizing pragmatic element but Lewis argues for coherence
- his “test of truth” seems to fit verificationalism better than inductive, deductive, or pragmatic methods
- the “role of reason” (element #4)
- rationalism is rejected (man starting from himself); semantic mysticism is also rejected
- reason precedes faith: we first understand what we are to believe, and why
- reason is the tool for testing truth claims
- the “basis of faith” (element #5) “is the coherent and viable biblical account supported by visible, verifiable evidences”
- the “object” of faith is the God of the Bible
- Christian faith means “bowing twice”: first in the realm of being, second in the realm of morals
- faith involves knowledge (*notitia*), assent (*assensus*), and trust (*fiducia*)
- Lewis: concludes with “strong probability” that Schaeffer’s apologetic a nontechnical version of verificationalism
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- a few alternative interpretations of Schaeffer:
- Thomas Morris (1976): presuppositionalist (but Morris apparently does not check to make sure the student is using his teacher’s terminology in the same manner)
- Morris *seems* to understand that Schaeffer is using a verificational method
- Lewis: “Morris’ criticisms of Schaeffer may apply to presuppositional methods, but do not apply to the verificational or confirmational interpretation of Schaeffer”; he would have done well to understand Schaeffer’s method before critiquing it
- Morris fails to objectively explain Schaeffer’s methods
- Lewis: “The only major book on Schaeffer’s apologetics has not increased the probability of the interpretive hypothesis that Schaeffer was a presuppositionalist.”

- Kenneth Harper (1976): Schaeffer best described as an inconsistent presuppositionalist
- Robert Reymond (1976): Schaeffer's books are hard to understand; he is in the evidential school of Carnell and others including Aquinas, Warfield, and Buswell
- Reymond's critique (like CVT) is regarding the ability of apostate man to have true knowledge
- the origins of the verificational method go back at least as far as Trueblood (1939) and include Carnell (1948) and Lewis (1976)
- "Unfortunately, Francis Schaeffer has not documented his sources."
- E.R. Geehan (1972) refers to Schaeffer as a (quote) "presuppositionalist"; he recognizes that Schaeffer's presupposition of God is not a theistic proof
- he goes on to critique Schaeffer's logical argument, which Lewis defends not on the basis of deductive certainty but on the basis of "a highly probable practical necessity"
- David Wolfe (1982): "critical method" of epistemology; inductive inference is not capable of taking us from the known to the unknown; to gain knowledge we must boldly go to conclusions that are beyond the data
 - critical method: (1) propose an interpretation of experience; (2) test it by some criteria; (3) draw conclusions about the interpretation
 - Wolfe's criteria include: (1) internal consistency; (2) coherence of statements; (3) comprehensiveness for all experience; (4) congruency;
- Lewis: Wolfe "defends a critical method uncritically"
- hypothesis are true for Wolfe provided that they withstand continual criticism: terminology includes: confirmed hypothesis; corroborated; plausible; probable; conclusions become more probable as they are "progressively verified"
- there is a necessary reliance on absolutes but these do not make people autonomous; "They come from the Creator and make people responsible" . . . they are the basis for the non-Christian in his accountability before God
- Lewis concludes with four weaknesses in Schaeffer's apologetics:
 - (1) inconsistent use of key terms like "presuppositional"
 - (2) failure to cite influential sources
 - (3) failure to examine all possible hypotheses
 - (4) overstates his conclusive case for Christianity as the answer
- Lewis admits that "confirmation cannot rise above probability"—which leads your teacher to conclude that verificationalism verifies nothing in the end
- for Schaeffer, the antithesis is atheism vs theism—the alternative hypothesis cannot specify that theism refers to the God of the Bible; like classical arguments, all you can do is reject atheism and then spend the rest of your time arguing for your favorite god