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On Existential Reasons for Belief in God

An Interview between Joseph E. Gorra and Clifford Williams

How did you come to write your 2011 book, *Existential Reasons for Belief in God* (IVP Academic)?

I was giving talks at Cornerstone Music Festival in 2004, and after one of them—on Nietzsche or Kierkegaard, I think—Rod Taylor, who was then a Ph.D. student in literature at Indiana University, asked me to have lunch with him. So I took my sandwich and apple to his camper and we talked about apologetics. The contemporary brand of apologetics, which seems to assume that faith is entirely evidence based, comes up short, he said. Logic can take us only so far. He thought there should be an apologetics that appealed to the heart as well as to the mind. And, he said, perhaps I could work on it. I asked, “Existential apologetics in addition to evidential apologetics?” He replied with an emphatic “Yes.” And that is what the book consists of.

What exactly do you mean by “existential apologetics”?

I mean the attempt to show that believing in God is justified because doing so satisfies certain needs. Evidential apologetics says, “I believe in God because there is good evidence for doing so,” but existential apologetics says, “I believe in God because I need to.”

What counts as an ‘existential need’?

It is not, of course, just any need that believing in God satisfies. There are a number of what I call “existential needs”—the need for cosmic security, the need for meaning, the need to feel loved and the need to love, plus others. On the basis of these needs, we can construct an argument, which I call the existential argument for believing in God. The first premise mentions all of our existential needs, but I am going to mention only a few.

- (1) We need cosmic security. We need meaning, and we need to love and be loved.
- (2) Faith in God satisfies these needs.
- (3) Therefore, we are justified in believing in God.

This is not an argument purporting to explain why we have certain needs and desires. That would be an evidential argument. The existential argument for

believing in God does not appeal to evidence; nor does it offer an explanation of why we have the existential needs. It gives a different kind of justification for believing in God than evidence-based justification—a need-based justification. The question the book deals with is, Is this different kind of justification legitimate?

So, would you characterize your approach as ‘non-evidential’?

Although I contrast existential apologetics with evidential apologetics, I don’t think of the developed version of existential apologetics as non-evidential. It uses reason in an evidential way. And that use involves a number of components, so that there is something like a cumulative case in a developed version of the existential argument for believing in God. Given the number of existential needs, given the connections among them, given the successful outcome of the application of the “need criteria,” the “value test,” and the “satisfaction test,” one is justified in believing in God. All of this is a fusion of need and reason in a cumulative way.

Your opening sentence in the Introduction begins like this: “Christians have differing viewpoints about the role that the satisfaction of needs should play in acquiring and sustaining faith.” What significantly accounts for some of these differing viewpoints?

There are several explanations for these differing viewpoints. Perhaps the most prominent is that the advocates of reason and evidence believe that the only way to justify the truth of theism and Christianity is through reason and evidence. How could you be sure you believe what is true unless you have what you take to be good evidence? This is a rhetorical question for the partisans of reason. On the other hand, the advocates of emotion and need regard believing in God as explicitly and essentially involving emotion and the satisfaction of needs. How could you connect to the living God unless you felt God and found that your faith in God was satisfying? This, too, is a rhetorical question for the partisans of emotion and need.

There are also, probably, personality differences that account for the differing viewpoints. Some people find themselves reasoning their way through life and others find themselves feeling their way. This is an elliptical way of saying that in some people logic and reason are dominant and in others emotion and satisfaction of needs are dominant. So different people would have differing viewpoints about the roles that the satisfaction of needs should play in acquiring faith because of what feels natural to them, or as Nietzsche would

put it, because of their differing instincts.

You offer various accounts of personal journeys of faith in the book. What stands out to you about what these vivid journeys demonstrate?

They show several things—first, that different people acquire faith in God in different ways, some more through reason and some more through satisfaction of needs; second, that it is difficult to disentangle reason and satisfaction of needs in the acquisition of faith; and, third, even so, both reason and the satisfaction of needs probably play a part in the process by which all, or at least most, people acquire faith.

The accounts also show, I think, that we cannot be precise about how reason and the satisfaction of needs should operate in the acquisition of faith. We cannot say that reason should come first and then the satisfaction of needs, or the other way around. The two are often so inextricably combined that the most that we can say is that the best way to secure faith, to establish it in the recesses of our personalities, is simply to employ them both.

When I interviewed people, I did not tell them about the distinction between acquiring faith through reason or through the satisfaction of needs. I simply asked, “What got you started on your faith journey?” and then, “What happened next?” Their answers, though, employed the distinction in various ways. I might add that because I guaranteed anonymity I got accounts that the persons might not otherwise have given, and in some cases, accounts that they had not revealed to anyone else.

For the purposes of your overall argument, would you draw a distinction between affectivity, desires, and emotions? If so, how might this look?

Affectivity, I take it, is a general term referring to what has “feeling tone,” which includes desires and emotions. Emotions typically contain desires, but not all desires are contained in emotions. Although the existential argument for believing in God takes off from felt needs, it could also be put in terms of desires.

How does your book seek to contribute to other historical and contemporary work on ‘existential needs’ and ‘arguments from desire’?

One thing I do is to expand what counts as an “existential need” by giving a short description of thirteen such needs, including, in addition to the ones I

mentioned above, the need for awe, the need to delight in goodness, the need to live beyond the grave without the anxieties that currently affect us, and the need to be forgiven.

Two features of these needs stand out. The first is that there are more of them than just the need for cosmic security that Freud focuses on. And what is relevant to believing in God is not simply the “need for God” that other writers sometimes mention. When I hear that phrase, I wonder what exactly our need for God amounts to. The thirteen existential needs unpack the idea. Our need for God is a complex matter, because we are complex creatures, and a great deal of who we are connects to faith in God.

The second feature of the existential needs, as I describe them, is that not all of them are self-directed. Some are other-directed. This fact undercuts the critique that faith in God is simply a result of a self-satisfying need. If it were, faith would seem to be nothing more than something I want. But some of the existential needs are not self-serving at all. The need for awe isn’t, nor is the need for justice and fairness or the need to love. We are, of course, satisfied when these needs are met, but not in a self-serving way, just as we are not satisfied in a self-serving way when we act compassionately even though we are indeed satisfied when we do so.

As for arguments from desire, they come in two forms: existential and evidential. The existential ones are essentially equivalent to the existential argument for believing in God, as desires and needs are the same for purposes of the argument. Evidential arguments from desire take various forms. C. S. Lewis’s well-known argument from desire in *Mere Christianity* seeks to explain a certain fact: “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.” This is an evidential argument because Lewis is giving evidence for the claim that we were made for another world, namely, the fact that we possess desires that no experience in this world can satisfy. The claim that we were made for another world is the most probable explanation of the fact, according to Lewis. The ways in which my existential argument for believing in God can be supplemented with reason can also be used to support Lewis-type evidential arguments from desire.

The existential argument for believing in God is a special form of a pragmatic argument. What I say in its defense, when it is supplemented with reason, is in the tradition of William James’s pragmatism. James’s pragmatism, I might add, is not so non-evidential as seems commonly to be thought. My contribution to

that tradition is to systematize both the existential argument for believing in God and the objections to it.

In addition, I draw on accounts of emotion in the work of Robert C. Roberts (*Emotions: An Essay in Aid of Moral Psychology* and *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues*), Robert Solomon (*True to Our Feelings: What Our Emotions Are Really Telling Us*), and Martha Nussbaum (*Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*). Their robust conception of emotions is what I have in mind when I say that the satisfaction of the existential needs consists of emotions and that believing in God consists in part of emotions.

When I think of your project, I also think of several recent projects mostly in epistemology from Paul Moser, Stephen Evans, Jamie Smith, Eleonore Stump, and Esther Meek, that would seem to contribute to your overall thesis and objectives for existential apologetics. So, I am wondering whether you have some comments here as it relates to the positioning of your project in light of the work of others.

I like their focus on affectivity, as it corrects the focus on reason that is sometimes prominent in philosophical and theological writing. It fits well with the existential argument for believing in God and with my conception of faith as consisting, in part, of an emotion, but so far as I know, none of these authors espouse either of these.

Can you say a little more about faith consisting of an emotion?

If faith is a result of the satisfaction of existential needs, and if the satisfaction of these needs is an emotion, as it is for most of the needs, then faith consists of emotion, at least in part. I say, “in part,” because if faith is a result of reason and evidence in addition to the satisfaction of needs, then it would consist of assent as well. Because most people come to faith through some combination of reason and the satisfaction of needs, for most people faith is a fusion of assent and emotion.

By “reason” I mean not just having evidence, but more broadly “making sense.” It is also important to have the robust conception of emotions I referred to earlier. Emotions have had a bad reputation among many Christians, but with the right conception of emotions one can say that they are part of faith.

Now, as far as objections go, what about the Freudian charge—that satisfaction of need does not justify belief? What is the difference between the existential argument for believing in God and the assertion that someone is justified in believing that a friend of theirs is innocent of a crime because they have a need to believe in their friend’s innocence?

I have two replies. The first is that humans are both reason and need creatures, especially when it comes to believing in God. We need to have both our reason and needs satisfied. My assumption here is that the way in which we come to have a belief affects that belief in some way. So if someone comes to believe in God solely through reason, that is, solely because of evidence, then that belief will reflect that process. It will be largely “intellectual.” This, I think, is the point Rod Taylor was making. Believing in God should not be just intellectual, because God is a person to whom we can connect in emotional ways. God is someone who satisfies our existential needs. So if my assumption is correct, the way in which we come to believe in God should involve needs and emotions as well as evidence. This means that the way apologetics has often been practiced is deficient because it appeals to only one aspect of human nature.

My second reply is to admit that the existential argument for believing in God is just as one-sided as evidential arguments. It needs to be supplemented with reason. And that is the main burden of the book, showing how this can be done. The twist I offer is that reason can be applied to the needs themselves. It is not just evidence used independently of the satisfaction of needs that is required to buttress the existential argument for believing in God, but reason operating on the needs mentioned in the argument.

I need to make it perfectly clear that I side with evidential apologists’ claim that evidence is needed in order to be justified in believing something. A purely existential apologetics is deficient, as the Freudian charge claims. But so also is a purely evidential apologetics. I offer a way to fuse them.

Your book not only provides a framework for thinking about the value of “the drawing power of need and the certifying ability of reason” for ‘doing apologetics’ but also for seeing this enacted in individual lives. But I want to ask you about congregations or small groups of fellowships. How might our gatherings better embody an atmosphere and a culture that recognizes that “need without reason is blind, but reason without need is sterile” (12)?

One of the aims of congregations and small groups is to deepen faith, and I think this can be done to some extent by making faith reasonable, to some

extent by cultivating the right emotions, to some extent by simply being with other people of faith, and to some extent in other ways. If faith makes sense to me (this falls under reason), then I am going to be more convinced of Christianity and thus more moved to live according to it. If I cultivate certain emotions, then I am going to possess more of the abundant life Christ offers. So congregations and small groups could spend some time working on each of these, though I have no good ideas of how they could do it.

Given the role of desires and emotions for acquiring and sustaining faith, how might this thesis affect our (formal) educational environments, including how we teach as followers of Jesus?

Hmmm. I am afraid I don't have a good answer to this, either, though I like what the authors in David Smith's and Jamie Smith's *Teaching and Christian Practices: Reshaping Faith and Learning* say. In one of the chapters Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung describes some of the practical things she has students in her classes on the seven capital vices do, such as not talking about oneself for several days in order to get at what is involved in vainglory. "New insights about ourselves," she writes, "came through immersion in the practice" (33). These insights probably are connected to our desires and emotions more than a conceptual analysis is.

At the same time, I have found in my classes on virtues and the seven deadly sins that there is something about a conceptual analysis of virtues and sins that draws one to become virtuous. A student of mine once told me that she harbored resentment toward someone who had hurt her and felt that she could not forgive the person. After sitting through a class on forgiveness, she was prompted to forgive. There was no preaching, no exhortation, just straightforward dispassionate analysis.

There must be ways in which we professors can tweak the content of our courses so as to promote good emotions, but I have little idea how it can be done.

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