

# INFORMAL LOGIC AND THE EVANGELIZATION OF THE MODERN MIND

by Paul M. Cox, Ph.D.

**Preview:** *Christians need not give up on an intelligent defense of their faith, but as in the Gulf War, the best defense is a overwhelm - ing offensive. Paul instructs us to use informal logic to identify and refute the unsupportable claims made by those with which we dialogue.*

## Part I

### *Chronological Superiority and Relativization*

In a previous monograph, I asserted that the modern mind is characterized by the idea of choice. I also asserted that this inherent sense of multiple options is linked to the external effect of technology, for the nature of technology is to create options and change. The emergence of this modern consciousness has created at least two problems for the Christian position: the assumption of chronological superiority and the challenge of relativization.

Chronological superiority is, quite simply, that modern people tend to think of themselves and their thoughts as the epitome of evolution to date. Whether consciously or unconsciously, these individuals assert that the current way of thinking is superior because it is latest chronologically. Thus, anything that disagrees with a modern way of looking at things is inferior and outdated. For example, modern people find it extremely difficult to believe that the universe is subject to any divine or otherwise metahuman interventions. The interventions of divine or “beyond the human” entities in human life are excluded possibilities because these entities are not part of the modern person’s reality, a reality propagated by the modern individual’s socialization and education and by the major institutions that surround the modern individual every day.

A good illustration of what I mean by the assumption of chronological superiority can be seen in the following quote from the theology of Rudolf Bultmann:

*All our thinking today is shaped, irrevocably, by modern science. Blind acceptance of the New Testament mythology would be arbitrary. To press for its acceptance as an article of faith would be to reduce faith to works. Man’s knowledge and mastery of the world have advanced to such an extent through science and technology, that it is no longer possible for anyone seriously to hold the New Testament view of the world. In fact, there is no one who does. The miracles of the New Testament have ceased to be miraculous, and to defend their historicity by recourse to nervous disorders or hypnotic effects only serves to underline the fact. It is impossible to use electric light and the radio, to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles. We may think that we can manage it in our own lives, but to expect others to do it is to make the Christian faith unintelligible and unacceptable in the modern world.<sup>1</sup>*

Thinkers like Bultmann have been so influenced by the modern consciousness that they have come to believe, in an intractable manner, that what the modern mind accepts as knowledge is the apex of understanding for humankind. This kind of thinking seems to find its roots in the intellectual achievements of science, technology, and medicine. Thus, whatever the modern mind defines as acceptable knowledge becomes the “plumb line” for all the ages. Any form of knowledge that is deemed unacceptable to the modern consciousness is not only suspect, but scandalous.

The second problem that the modern consciousness creates for Christianity is the concept of relativization. To a large extent, the history of Western thought over the past two centuries has been a protracted exercise in coping with the vertigo of relativity induced by modernization.

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Pascal encapsulated this idea of relativization in his statement that what is truth on one side of the Pyrenees is error on the other. As Pascal’s insight became more widespread and more profound, the question as to who is right attained a particular urgency. This urgency about truth became one of the foremost characteristics of recent Western thought.

However, further empirical investigation of the situation proved only to increase the vertigo of relativity. As more and more ways to view the world were advanced, and as travel and interaction with other cultures made it apparent that various people did look at reality differently, this sensation of dizziness increased. Thus, an increased empirical understanding of the situation did not prove able to exorcise the demon confounding people’s minds.

This relativizing phenomenon has permeated our society, as can be seen in recent research by the Barna Research Group. Barna researched the “percentage who say there is no such thing as absolute truth, by place of worship.” The results were alarming. Of those attending various churches, a high percentage thought that there was no such thing as absolute truth: in evangelical churches, 53%; in Catholic churches, 68%; in mainline Protestant churches, 74%. In comparison, of those not attending church, 81% thought that there was no such thing as absolute truth.<sup>2</sup> In light of these statistics, we could massage Pascal’s earlier comment of “what is truth on one side of the Pyrenees is error on the other” into “what the possibility of truth is for the church inside their sanctuaries is almost the same as what it is for the non-Christian world outside.”

As the title of this article is “Informal Logic and the Evangelization of the Modern Mind,” you may be asking yourself, “What does all of this have to do with informal logic?” It seems to me that we need a tool that will help us cut through the jungle of confusion created by this modern consciousness, a tool that can assist us in penetrating the fortresses of incorrect systems of thought so that we can be more effective in our evangelism. Informal logic can be the instrument we are looking for because informal logic attempts to make explicit the principles or standards that are involved in the everyday activities of establishing and evaluating claims.

By its very nature, informal logic is an extremely practical enterprise. Informal logic is willing to go out into the street and into the workplace, to attend church, and to show up at parties. Informal logic is willing to climb down out of the ivory tower because this logic is directly concerned with such ordinary activities as defending positions,

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attacking unsupported claims, and detecting misleading examples and poor analogies. The phrase that encapsulates the concern of informal logic is “critical thinking.” By critical thinking, I mean reasoning well. Some years ago, a report funded by the Rockefeller Foundation urged that critical thinking be viewed as a basic skill and be so defined by the United States Department of Education.<sup>3</sup> The Foundation asserted that learning how to reason properly should be given the same emphasis and importance as English, mathematics, and science in our educational curriculum.

Informal logic has a long history. To the extent that informal logic can be identified with the process of criticizing arguments and detecting misleading uses of language, informal logic could be said to be as old as rational discourse itself. However, as the attempt to make explicit the standards of rational discourse, informal logic goes back at least to the time of Aristotle in the fourth century B.C. Aristotle wrote down definite rules for judging arguments and for avoiding errors in reasoning. In the time after Aristotle, innumerable others in the Western tradition devoted themselves to trying to formulate what was, in effect, good advice to follow when you want to avoid reaching unjustifiable conclusions and when you want to communicate clearly and exactly with others.

These standards of rational discourse have not been arrived at in an arbitrary way. Rather, these standards are ones that we already recognize in our interactions and that we already observe in our everyday practices. We see these standards in action when we characterize an argument as a bad one or when we say that an analogy is misleading. These standards are ones that are implicit

in our everyday practices. John Locke said, “God was not so sparing of man that He only made him a two-legged animal and left it to Aristotle to make him rational.” The point of John Locke’s quip is that people could spot bad arguments and recognize good ones long before Aristotle wrote down the rules of formal logic. Locke’s point should not be forgotten, for it applies to everything we say about informal logic and arguments.

## Part II

### *Listening for Arguments*

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When people disagree with each other, the most important and satisfactory way of resolving their disagreements is by presenting an argument that others find persuasive. The general aim is to secure agreement by persuading the other person to accept a new point of view and renounce their own. Christians, in particular, are not interested in getting people to agree with their position by any means, fair or foul. They want others to be convinced and to accept the Christian view voluntarily because it makes sense to them. Persuading someone to accept the claims of Jesus by using deceit, trickery, or emotionalism will not further Christ’s cause. Therefore, we are only interested in rational persuasion. But this must apply to both sides. Therefore, we want to question the arguments of those we dialogue with to determine whether they are rational. For this reason, we need to understand the nature of arguments.

Arguments are the most important weapons in the arsenal of rational persuasion. Arguments are used not only in contexts in which there is disagreement, but in situations in which someone wishes to convince us to accept a claim, to win us to their position, or to avoid disagreement.

As far as we are concerned, an argument consists in making a claim or advancing a thesis and offering reasons or evidence for its acceptance. Thus, an argument is the written or spoken assertion of a sentence on the basis of some other sentences. An argument, as a group of sentences, can be divided into two parts: a conclusion and its premises.<sup>4</sup> The sentence that asserts the claim or thesis is called the conclusion of the argument; the other sentences that provide evidence for accepting the conclusion are known as the premises of the argument. When an argument is offered, the premises are understood as being put forward to provide justification or support for the conclusion. That is, the premises are supposed to provide some sort of grounds for asserting the conclusion, although it seems many people have forgotten this.

Too often Christians are subdued by some outrageous, unsupported conclusion. The one I hear all the time is that the Bible is full of contradictions. In return, I always ask, “What is a contradiction?” Usually, they cannot even define what they mean by the term, much less give me any examples. We all recognize that if their claim cannot be supported it cannot be accepted. As Tweedledum and Twiddledee said, “That’s logic.” The following is an example of an argument from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*. As I break it down, think in terms of how you could be doing this when you dialogue with others.

“Goodbye, till we meet again,” [Alice] said as cheerfully as she could.

“I shouldn’t know you again if we *did* meet,” Humpty Dumpty replied in a discontented tone, giving her one of his fingers to shake: “You’re so exactly like other people.”

“The face is what one goes by, generally,” Alice remarked in a thoughtful tone.

“That’s just what I complain of,” said Humpty Dumpty. “Your face is the same as everybody has the two eyes,so – (marking their places in the air with his thumb) “nose in the middle, mouth under. It’s always the same. Now if you had the two eyes on the same side of the nose, for instance – or the mouth on the top – that would be some help.”

Alice leaves confused. Humpty Dumpty remains on his wall, confident in his ridiculous argument. But Alice could have relied on informal logic to turn the tables. While Humpty Dumpty was talking she should have summarized his remarks into premises and a conclusion.A short form of Humpty Dumpty’s argument is the following:

**Premise:** Your face is the same as everyone else’s face.

**Premise:** It is impossible to recognize a person whose face is the same as everybody else’s.

**Conclusion:** I would not recognize you if we met again.

Although Humpty Dumpty’s statements are in the form of an argument, his argument is not a very good one. When we talk about faces being the same, we mean that they resemble one another in specific detail not that they have those characteristics that are common to all faces (“two eyes,” etc.). Humpty Dumpty’s argument gets what little plausibility it has from his word play with the term “same,” Alice should have begun her line of questioning there.

### *The fallacy of Chronological Superiority*

Using what has been developed up to this point,let’s view one of the problems created by modernity-chronological superiority-in terms of arguments by examining their claims and their justifying premises. The basis of chronological superiority seems to be linked to the scientific method. Our age is an age marked by scientism.<sup>5</sup> Scientism can be understood as an uncritical worship of the empirical scientific method. Scientism makes “science” a sacred word and the phrase “science has proved” an inviolable truth. Because the scientific method is only interested in studying that which is concrete, empirical, and tangible, the unseen, spiritual, metaphysical world is not only avoided as a topic of discussion but is not a reality at all. Thus, over a period of time, scientism has decimated the existence of metaphysical realities-like the mind, values, morality, beauty, and God.<sup>6</sup> This is because scientism reduces all of reality to the mere empirical world. By utilizing this technique of reduction and simplification,the scientist is able to understand and control the physical environment to an amazing degree. Unfortunately, people who were overly enthralled with the practical success of the scientific method assumed that the scientific method’s abstraction from reality was reality itself. In other words, the great error of scientism was to identify the world of

empirical science with ultimate reality or all of reality. Thus, any age that had not availed itself of the scientific methodology was an ignorant, superstitious age.

The inherent claim of the argument is patently obvious: the scientific method is the only method by which to know reality. The total argument of cultural superiority is the following:

**Premise:** The scientific method is the only method by which reality can be known.

**Premise:** The modern age is the age of the scientific method.

**Conclusion:** The modern age is the only age that truly understands reality.

The above argument is a good example of a deductive argument, an argument where the premises are supposed to supply conclusive grounds or an irrevocable guarantee for the conclusion. This means that if the premises are accepted,then the conclusion must be accepted as well. Such an argument can seem quite compelling. However, there is something extremely revealing when a claim and its justification are written out in a syllogistic form such as the one above. Clearly, the issue we want to address is the one located in premise one: Is the scientific method the only method by which to know reality?

There have been numerous and vigorous attacks on empiricism in general and the scientific methodology in particular showing that it alone is not the only methodology for discovering reality. 7 Thus, I would like to take a different kind of approach at showing the deficiency of scientism. My approach is less sophisticated yet highly practical and readily communicable. My refutation will be found in a story:

It seems that there was a certain fisherman who concluded from his fishing experiments with a special net that “no creature of the sea is less than two inches long.” This generalization disturbed some of his colleagues, so they objected, arguing that many sea creatures were certainly less than two inches long-these small sea creatures just slipped through the holes in the special net. But the fisherman was unmoved. “What my net can’t catch ain’t fish,” he pontificated,and then he scornfully accused his detractors of having pre-scientific, medieval, metaphysical prejudices.

The scientist who refuses to believe in something he or she cannot catch with their empirical senses is like this fisherman. Spiritual things such as the mind, freedom, morality, beauty, and God just slip through their net. The first and great commandment of scientism is “Thou shalt not postulate unseen entities.” Of course, this rigs the game so that metaphysical players are unable to compete,argue their position, or give input.

In conclusion, my point in this article is really a rather simple one. As we dialogue with people and as we encounter different ideas, it will be most helpful if we begin to place what people say and write within the context of an argument. What claims are they making and what evidence are they bringing forward to support their contention about reality? This will not only help us to understand what they are saying and how we should answer them, but it will also help the people to whom we are talking to see what they are saying for themselves. In review, then, (1) sort out the claim being advanced; (2) identify the evidence being used to support

the claim;(3) make sure that the person you are talking with clearly understands what he or she is saying-both the claim and the supporting evidence. As the apostle Paul would say, “Therefore knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men...” (II Corinthians 5:11 NASB).

In the next monograph, I will apply informal logic to the relativization of world views. This idea of relativization was alluded to in this article, but we have yet to address this topic. I find the words of the apostle to be my own: “For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are of sound mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ controls us...” (II Corinthians 5:13,14 NASB). ❖

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. H.W. Bartsch (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup>Barna Research Group, Ltd., “Truth by Church Affiliation,” *Ministry Currents: Perspectives on Ministry in an Era of Change*, Volume 1, Number 2 (August, 1991), p. 4.

<sup>3</sup>The Humanities in American Life, (Berkeley: University of California, 1980), *passim*.

<sup>4</sup>I am fully aware that there is more to say about the nature of arguments. One could, at the very least, discuss the difference between deductive arguments and inductive arguments. However, in view of our limited agenda and space, a general understanding of how claims are put forward and then justified is the most that we want to accomplish in this short essay. To meet the needs of those who would like more information on arguments and logic, there will be a short but adequate bibliography at the conclusion.

<sup>5</sup>I realize that our age is also an age where there has been a resurgence of interest in the metaphysical, the supernatural, and the supersensible. This can be seen in the recent interest in life after death by such movies as *Ghost* or *Flatliners*. However, Christianity’s claims still seem to be attacked on the basis of lacking empirical verifiability. See Malcolm L. Diamond and Thomas V. Litzenburg, Jr. eds. *The Logic of God* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1975).

<sup>6</sup>The following three books are extremely helpful as an introduction to the topic of metaphysics: Richard Taylor, *Metaphysics*, 2d. ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974); W. H. Walsh, *Metaphysics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963); William Hasker, *Metaphysics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983).

<sup>7</sup>For instance, see William Pepperell Montague, *The Ways of Knowing* (New York: Humanities Press, 1978) for a classic refutation of empiricism as the sole way of knowing and understanding reality.

### Bibliography

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### Study Questions

1. Analyze a recent evangelistic interaction. Who asked the questions? Who was defending their position? Can you describe what the other person believes and why? What is their view of reality?
2. What is the primary claim of your gospel presentation? What is your supporting evidence?
3. Is chronological superiority a problem in Christian circles? For example, many people make no connection between their secular work and their spiritual lives.
4. What is the goal of every evangelistic situation? What is the best way to accomplish that goal?

### Addendum:

#### The Error of Scientism

In the early part of the twentieth century, Jacques Maritain distinguished between empiriometric science (for which the only reality is that which can be measured and for which the measurements made can be fed into powerful mathematical equations) and metaphysical knowledge (for which there are aspects of reality that exist that are beyond the possibility of measurement).<sup>1</sup> Maritain pointed out that scientists could have made the following statement: “What is not measurable by a physicist has no reality for a physicist.” This would have been a true assertion. However, scientists went one step further and made the following false statement: “What is not measurable has no existence in reality.”

It seems to me that Plato and Aristotle had it right: objects that we apprehend divide into groups: those that are sensible and those that are intelligible.<sup>2</sup> Objects of the first class we apprehend by sense perception; objects of the second class we apprehend by intellect because they are purely intelligible objects. Those entities of the second class would include such things as the objects of mathematical thought or metaphysical realities such as God, souls, etc. This second group would also include such abstract concepts such as liberty, justice, virtue, knowledge, the infinite, and the mind itself. Those items of the second group can never be perceived directly by the senses because they are not sensible particulars. However, because these things cannot be perceived by the senses, this in no way denies their reality or existence.

This idea of the existence of non-sensible realities come as no

surprise to most scientists, psychology affirms a psyche that is unobservable as a sensible particular, and physics affirms the existence of a subatomic particle. A subatomic particle, especially one such as a neutrino (which has no charge and no mass when at rest), cannot be directly observed. Although unobservable, the scientist postulates its existence based on the effect it has on other observable things. Therefore, if one can admit indirect arguments for the existence of neutrinos from the behavior of observable material objects, then the scientist should be able to admit arguments for the possibility God's existence or for the soul based on the behavior of observable objects.

<sup>1</sup>Jacques Maritain, *Scholasticism anti Politics* (1940), chapter 11, on science and philosophy. See also his *Degrees of Knowledge* (1938).

<sup>2</sup>For a good, simple discussion of this see Mortimer J. Adler, *Intellect* (New York: Macmillan, 1990) and his *Ten Philosophical Mistakes* (New York: Macmillan, 1985).

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