

CHAPTER NINE

SIBLING
RIVALRY AND
INFANTICIDE

ARGUMENTS or points of view can self-destruct for a variety of different reasons. We have already talked about two: Formal Suicide and Practical Suicide. Now I would like to introduce you to a couple more that are not internally contradictory, but are self-defeating in their own unique ways.

Sometimes a conflict arises when a person raises two objections that are at odds with each other. This "Sibling Rivalry" is easy to spot if you look for it. At other times, someone's view is built on a prior concept that turns out to disqualify the view itself. I call this "Infanticide." Think of it like a deranged creature from a sci-fi movie that devours its own offspring. This kind of Suicide is more difficult to spot, but it is a powerful defeater nonetheless. In either case, the hard work is already done for you.

SIBLING RIVALRY

Occasionally in conversations you will notice something odd. You will hear a pair of objections voiced by the same person, but the complaints are logically inconsistent with each other. They are like children fighting between themselves, siblings in rivalry.

Since both objections cannot be simultaneously legitimate, your task is cut in half. A fair-minded person will surrender at least

one when you identify the problem. Graciously point out the conflict, then ask which is the real concern. Sometimes this move effectively silences both objections because the person you are talking with realizes she has been unreasonable.

Is Gandhi in Heaven?

When I was in India, Christian apologist Prakesh Yesudian told me of a conversation he had with a Hindu about Gandhi, who is much revered there. Notice how Prakesh coupled Columbo with the Sibling Rivalry tactic.

"Is Gandhi in Heaven?" the Hindu asked. "Heaven would be a very poor place without Gandhi in it."

"Well, sir," Prakesh answered, "you must at least believe in Heaven then. And apparently you have done some thinking about what would qualify someone for Heaven. Tell me, what kind of people go to Heaven?"

"Good people go to Heaven," he responded.

"But this idea of what is a good person is very unclear to me. What is good?"

In typical Hindu fashion he replied, "Good and bad are relative. There is no clear definition."

"If that is true, sir, that goodness is relative and can't be defined, how is it you assume Gandhi is good and should be in Heaven?"

Either Gandhi fulfills some external standard of goodness, thus qualifying for Heaven, or goodness is relative and therefore a meaningless term when applied to anyone, including Gandhi. Both cannot be true at the same time.

Kavita

During that same trip, I had a discussion with a Hindu college student named Kavita. As I talked about Christianity, she raised the standard objection. "If God is as you say, how could he allow such suffering, especially for the children?" She gestured with a sweep of her hand as if to take in the collective anguish of Madras, which was great.

The first thing I pointed out was that God hadn't done this to India. Hinduism had. Ideas have consequences, and the suffering in Madras was a direct result of things Hindus believe.

I then explained that it wouldn't always be this way. A day would come when all evil would be destroyed, and Jesus himself would wipe away every bitter tear.

"How could that be?" she objected. "Evil and good exist as dual poles. If you have no evil, it is impossible to have good. Each must balance the other out."

I noticed immediately that Kavita's response was at odds with her first question. "Let me repeat this reasoning back to you," I said, "and you tell me what you think of it." She nodded.

"You ask 'Why are innocent children starving in the streets?' I answer, 'Good and evil exist as dual poles. Children starve in Madras so kids in other parts of the world may be happy and well. The one balances the other out.' What do you think?"

When the point sunk in, she was forced to smile. "Touché!" she replied.

"The Quarrel"

I encountered a clear example of Sibling Rivalry after an airing of *The Quarrel*, a film that explored the problem of God and the Holocaust. Director David Brandes had asked me to help moderate a discussion with an audience about the moral issues raised by the film.

From one side of the auditorium a Jewish woman offered that maybe God allowed the Holocaust as a punishment for Israel's wayward drift into secularism. Some Jewish thinkers have raised this possibility in light of the promised curses of Deuteronomy 28. The reflection prompted a sarcastic, "Well, that's a real loving God," from the other side of the theater.

I called attention to the conflict suggested by the second comment. Those who are quick to object that God isn't doing enough about evil in the world ("A good God wouldn't let that happen") are often equally quick to complain when God puts his foot down ("A loving God would never send anyone to Hell").

If God appears indifferent to wickedness, his goodness is challenged. Yet if he acts to punish sin, his love is in question. These objections compete with each other in most cases. They are sblings in rivalry. One or the other needs to be surrendered. Both can't be held simultaneously.¹

Who Are You to Say?

Sibling Rivalry is the type of Suicide moral relativists commit when they object to the problem of evil. This happened at a restaurant during a conversation with a waitress (I seem to get in a lot of discussions with waitresses).

At first the young lady talked like a relativist: Everyone has his own morality. Right and wrong is a private affair. Who's to judge? As our conversation ranged over other topics, though, the problem of evil came up. How could God exist when there is so much evil in the world?

I want you to notice something about the problem of evil. The entire objection hinges on the observation that evil exists "out there" as an objective feature of the world. That is a serious problem for relativists, though.

According to relativism, when someone uses the word "evil," he is expressing a personal preference. The sentence "Premarital sex is wrong" means nothing more than "I don't prefer sex outside of marriage," or "Extramarital sex is wrong for me." Strictly speaking, the person is not talking about sex at all. The relativist is talking about himself.

In that light, imagine how silly this conversation would sound:

"I can't believe in God."

"Why not?"

"Brussels sprouts."

"Brussels sprouts? What do Brussels sprouts have to do with anything?"

"Did you ever taste those things? They're awful."

"I agree with you about Brussels sprouts, but some people do like them. What does the fact that you don't like Brussels sprouts have to do with God's existence?"

"I can't believe in a God who would create something that tastes so awful to me."

This kind of objection is trivial. If relativism were true, talk of evil as an objection to God's existence would be nonsense. The complaint would mean nothing more than, "if God were really good, he wouldn't allow things that I don't like."

C. S. Lewis summed it up this way:

Of course, I could have given up my idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own [relativism]. But if I did that, then my argument against God collapsed too — for the argument depended on saying that the world was really unjust, not simply that it did not happen to please my private fancies.²

To say that something is evil is to say it is not the way it is supposed to be. This makes no sense unless things are *supposed to be* different. Yet this is precisely what the relativist denies.

This waitress promoted two rival concepts at the same time — *subjective* morality and *objective* evil. The objections compete with each other. They were siblings in rivalry. G. K. Chesterton saw the problem over half a century ago:

[The modernist] goes first to a political meeting where he complains that savages are treated as if they were beasts. Then he takes his hat and umbrella and goes on to a scientific meeting where he proves that they practically are beasts. . . . In his book on politics he attacks men for trampling on morality, and in his book on ethics he attacks morality for trampling on men.³

The belief that objective good and evil do not exist (relativism) is in conflict (rivalry) with a rejection of God based on the existence of objective evil.

Just Doin' What Comes Naturally

If homosexuality is morally neutral because it's natural, then adoption by same-sex couples must be wrong because for homosexuals, parenthood would be unnatural. The same principle governs both issues. If nature dictates morality,⁴ and the natural consequence for homosexuals is to be childless, then it's unnatural — and therefore immoral — for homosexuals to raise children.

Artificial insemination of lesbians or adoptions by same-sex couples would be wrong by the logic of their own argument. This is a Sibling Rivalry suicide.

INFANTICIDE

I have saved Infanticide suicide for last because it is the most difficult to understand. Let me start with an example. Think for a moment about how this simpleminded father closed a letter to his son in college: "Son, if you didn't get this letter, please let me know, and I'll send another. I made a copy."

This makes us chuckle for a reason. The son would have to receive the letter in order to ask for a copy, but then he wouldn't need it. If he never got the original, he wouldn't know to ask for a replacement. There is a certain dependency relationship in play here that is at the heart of Infanticide.

Sometimes an objection (the "child") is dependent on a prior notion (the "parent") that must be in place for the challenge to be offered. For example, saying, "Vocal chords do not exist" is not internally contradictory. But since it requires vocal chords to *say* it, making the statement results in contradiction. The parent concept (vocal chords) devours the child (the claim there are no vocal chords). That's why I call this variation "Infanticide" suicide.

If a claim cannot be made unless the parent concept on which it depends is true, yet the claim denies the parent concept, then the argument commits Infanticide. The child is destroyed by the parent it relies on.

Bowling and Badness

The most powerful example of Infanticide that I know of has to do with the problem of evil. We looked at one complaint by *relativists* related to evil that was compromised due to Sibling Rivalry. When *objectivists* argue that God cannot exist because of evil, however, their view fails in a different way. It commits Infanticide.

Surprisingly, instead of evil being a good argument against God, I am convinced it is one of the best evidences for God.

The first question the atheist must answer is, "What do you mean by 'evil'?" His impulse will be to give *examples* of evil (murder, torture, oppression, etc.). But that misses the point. Why call those things evil to begin with? One must first know *what* evil is before one can point to *examples* of it.

I want you to think about the concepts of "good" and "bad" for a moment. How do you know the difference between, for example, a good bowler and a bad one? Only one thing matters in bowling. The person who knocks down the most pins wins. It's the score that counts.

Knowing the difference between mediocre and masterful in anything requires a way of keeping score. There must be some standard of perfection by which to measure a performance. In bowling that standard is 300—every pin down in every frame (some people have done this). If you are a golfer, one stroke per hole—a hole-in-one with every swing—is golfing perfection (no one has ever done this).

Notice that even when perfection is not attainable (a golf score of 18 on an 18-hole course), a scoring system is still necessary to differentiate between excellence, mediocrity, and abject failure. In the same way, moral judgments require a way of keeping score to distinguish virtue from vice.

Earlier in the chapter I observed that we use the word "evil" when we see things that are not the way they are supposed to

be. We have a standard in mind—a moral scoring system of sorts—that allows us to recognize moral shortfalls. The reason we say some things are evil is we realize that they score low on the goodness scale. If there were no standard, there could be no error. C. S. Lewis notes:

My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I gotten this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call something crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line.⁵

This is precisely the problem for the atheist. He must answer the question: Where does the moral scoring system come from that allows one to identify evil in the first place? Where is the transcendent standard of objective good that makes the whole notion of evil intelligible? Are moral laws the product of chance? If so, why obey them? What—or who—establishes how things are supposed to be?

A moral rule is a command. Commands are features of minds. Ethicist Richard Taylor explains: "A duty is something that is owed ... but something can be owed only to some person or persons. There can be no such thing as a duty in isolation.... The concept of moral obligation [is] unintelligible apart from the idea of God. The words remain, but their meaning is gone."⁶

There seems to be no good way to account for a transcendent standard of objective good—the moral rules that are violated by people who commit the evil in question—without the existence of a transcendent moral rule maker. In the movie *The Quaref*, Rabbi Hersh challenges the secularist Chaim on this very point:

If there's nothing in the universe that's higher than human beings, then what's morality? Well, it's a matter of opinion. I like milk; you like meat. Hitler likes to kill people; I like to save them. Who's to say which is better? Do you begin to see the horror of this? If there is no Master of the universe, then who's to say that

Hitler did anything wrong? If there is no God, then the people that murdered your wife and kids did nothing wrong.⁷

A morally perfect God is the only adequate standard for the system of scoring that makes sense of the existence of evil to begin with. Since God must exist to make evil intelligible, evil cannot be evidence against God. The complaint commits Infanticide.⁸

Ironically, evil does not prove atheism. It proves just the opposite. There can only be a problem of evil if God exists. It is a problem only a **theist** can raise, not an **atheist**. When an atheist voices the concern, he gets caught in a suicidal dilemma.⁹

Notice that this difficulty is a little different from the Sibling Rivalry problem with evil mentioned earlier. In that case, two incompatible contentions rested *side by side*: The first is that true evil *does* not exist because morality is relative; the second is that evil *does* exist, so God's existence is in question. When someone simultaneously holds that evil does and does not exist, there is an irreconcilable conflict—a sibling rivalry. One or the other has to go.

With Infanticide, however, the notion of morality (with its corresponding concept of evil) rests upon the prior foundation of God's existence. God's existence seems to be necessary in order for any conversation about evil to be coherent. Thus, it can never be used to refute God, because without God the objection would have no meaning.

Moral Atheists?

Christians who grasp that God is necessary for morality sometimes make a blunder. They mistakenly conclude that atheists cannot be moral. Michael Shermer, atheist editor of *Skeptical* magazine, fires back, "Look, I'm an atheist, and I'm moral."

Both the criticism and the response miss the point. The question is not whether an atheist can be moral, but whether he can

make sense of morality in a universe without God. Gravity still works even when people have no explanation for why it works.

The "why it works" question is what philosophers call the grounding problem. What grounds morality? What does it stand on, so to speak? What explanation best accounts for a moral universe? What worldview makes the most sense out of the existence of evil or good?

Atheism is a physicalist system that does not have the resources to explain a universe thick with nonphysical things like moral obligations. Neither can Eastern religion, by the way. If reality is an illusion, as classical Hinduism holds, then the distinction between good and evil is meaningless.

Someone like the Judeo-Christian God must exist in order to adequately account for moral laws. Theism solves the grounding problem for morality. This explains how even an atheist like Michael Shermer is capable of noble conduct: He still lives in God's world.

More Scientific Suicide

I want to revisit a problem that came up earlier. In chapter 7 I showed how the idea that science is the only source of reliable truth committed what I called Formal Suicide. However, this notion is doubly dead because it commits Infanticide, too.

The term "scientism" describes the view that science is the only reliable method of knowing truth about the world. Accordingly, "Everything outside of science is a matter of mere belief and subjective opinion," says J. P. Moreland, "of which rational assessment is impossible."¹⁰

Here is how scientism self-destructs. Imagine you wanted to collect all knowledge in a box. Let's call it the "Truth Box." Before any alleged truth could go into the box, it must first pass the scientific truth test (the claim of scientism).

The problem is that your knowledge project could never get started because some truths need to be in the Truth Box first before science itself could begin its analysis. The truths of logic and

mathematics must be in the box, for example, along with the truth of the basic reliability of our senses. Certain moral truths — like “Report all data honestly” — must be in the box. In fact, the entire scientific method must be in the box before the method itself can be used to test the truthfulness of anything else.

None of these truths can be established by the methods of science, because science cannot operate in a knowledge vacuum. Certain truths — known through means other than science — must be in place before science can begin testing for other truths. Since the notion of scientism (the child) is inconsistent with the presuppositions that make science possible (the parent), scientism as a comprehensive view of knowledge commits Infanticide.

THE TACTICAL GOAL OF SUICIDE

When I use any form of the Suicide tactic, I have a specific goal in mind. I want to show the person that there is a fatal inconsistency in his beliefs. This is a problem I think he would correct if he really understood it. Furthermore, the contradiction suggests that deep down he does not really believe everything he has said.

For example, when he says “There is no truth,” he actually believes there are some truths, but is doubtful about others (probably the one you are talking with him about). When he says, “it’s wrong for you to push your morality on others,” it’s clear he doesn’t think this is always wrong, only sometimes (probably in your case).

I think you can see how the Suicide tactic is not an end in itself, but can be used as a bridge to further questions. What kind of evidence is adequate to give us confidence that something is true? Under what circumstances might we legitimately impose our morality on someone else? Do those circumstances apply here?

WHAT WE LEARNED IN THIS CHAPTER

We finished our look at the Suicide tactic by considering two final ways that views self-destruct: Sibling Rivalry and Infanticide.

Sometimes objections come in pairs that are logically inconsistent with each other. Like children fighting, they are in opposition, siblings in rivalry. Since they contradict each other, both objections could not be legitimate complaints. At least one can be eliminated by pointing out the conflict.

Infanticide is a little more difficult to grasp. Sometimes an objection (the “child”) is dependent on a prior notion (the “parent”) that must be in place for the challenge to be offered. If a claim cannot be made unless the parent concept on which it depends is true, yet the claim denies the parent concept, then the parent kills the child, and the argument commits Infanticide.

We saw how this type of Suicide applied to the problem of evil. Since God’s existence is necessary to make the notion of evil intelligible, the existence of evil cannot be used as a proof that God does not exist. It proves just the opposite. Simply put, if evil exists, then good exists. If good exists, then God exists. Ironically, the existence of evil is powerful evidence for God, not *against* him.

Keep this illustration in mind as we explore our next tactic. It is a method that helps you determine the accuracy of someone's map of reality — their worldview — by noting where the route on the map leads them.

If you help someone see in advance that the route his map recommends will actually lead him off a cliff, he might consider changing his course. He might even discover he is using the wrong worldview map altogether and exchange it for one that is more reliable.

TAKING A TEST DRIVE

I first learned the tactic of Taking the Roof Off from Francis Schaeffer. The tactic itself is simple. First, adopt the other person's viewpoint for the sake of argument. Next, give his idea a test drive. Try to determine where you will end up if you follow his instructions faithfully. If you arrive at an odd destination, point it out and invite the person to reconsider his starting point.

Sometimes when you press an idea to its logical consequences, the result is counterintuitive or absurd. If you take a view seriously and apply it consistently and it leads to disaster, you are on the wrong route. Something must be wrong with where you started if this is the place you end up.

This tactic makes it clear that certain arguments prove too much. It forces people to ask if they can really live with the kind of world they are affirming. Those who are intellectually honest will think twice about embracing a view that ultimately leads to irrationality, incoherence, and absurdity. That is too high a price to pay.

Taking the Roof Off is also known as *reductio ad absurdum* (or simply *reductio*). This is a Latin phrase that means to reduce a point to its absurd conclusion or consequence.

CHAPTER 10

TAKING THE ROOF OFF

SOME points of view, if taken seriously, don't actually commit suicide, but they work against themselves in a different way. When played out consistently, they lead to unusual — even absurd — conclusions.

To understand how this works, you might think of maps and highways. If you were visiting Los Angeles and wanted to go to Santa Barbara up the coast, someone might draw a map to guide you to your destination. If, however, you followed the instructions very carefully and took the highway they suggested, but found yourself in Riverside on your way to the desert, you would know something was wrong with the route you were given.

In a similar fashion, worldviews are like maps. They are someone's idea of what the world is like. The individual ideas making up a worldview are like highways leading to different destinations. If you use the map but arrive at a strange destination, either part of the map is inaccurate (the part about the highway you were driving on), or the map itself is the wrong one for the region.

I realize that this last option is not likely when you are talking about real maps. I doubt if you would try to find your way around New York using a map of Chicago. But this kind of thing happens all the time with worldviews. Sometimes the roads are wrong on otherwise good worldview maps. At other times, worldview maps are completely inadequate for the actual terrain.

WHY REDUCTIOS WORK

When I was a young Christian, I read Francis Schaeffer's *The God Who Is There*. Schaeffer argues that Christians have a powerful ally in the war of ideas: reality. Whenever someone tries to deny the truth, reality ultimately betrays him. As Schaeffer points out, "Regardless of a man's system, he has to live in God's world."¹

The fact is, mankind is made in the image of God and must live in the world God created. Although culture shifts, human nature remains the same. Ideas change, but ultimate reality does not.

Every person who rejects the truth of "the God who is there" is caught between the way he says the world is and the way the world actually is.

This dissonance, what Schaeffer called the "point of tension," is what makes Taking the Roof Off so effective. Any person who denies the truth of God's world lives in contradiction. On the surface he claims one thing, yet deep inside he believes something else because he knows the truth. To protect himself from considering the consequences of this conflict, he subconsciously erects a defense, a deceptive cover, a "roof." Simply put, he's in denial. Our job is to remove that roof, expose the fraud, and deprive him of his false sense of security. In Schaeffer's words:

Every man has built a roof over his head to shield himself at the point of tension.... The Christian, lovingly, must remove the shelter [the roof] and allow the truth of the external world and of what man is to beat upon him. When the roof is off, each man must stand naked and wounded before the truth of what is.... He must come to know that his roof is a false protection from the storm of what is.²

Regardless of our ideological impulses, deep inside each of us is a commonsense realist. Those who are not realists are either

dead, in an institution, or sleeping in cardboard boxes under the freeway.

Knowing this gives us a tremendous advantage. The key to dealing with moral relativism, for example, is realizing that for all the adamant affirmations, no one really believes it, and for a good reason: If you start with relativism, reality does not make sense.

It is significant that those who want to practice relativism never want relativism practiced *toward them*. For example, Schaeffer tells of an encounter with a Hindu student at Cambridge who had been vigorously condemning Christianity.

"Am I not correct in saying," Schaeffer asked, "that on the basis of your system, cruelty and noncruelty are ultimately equal, that there is no intrinsic difference between them?" The Hindu nodded. To his alarm, a student who understood the implications of this view took a kettle of boiling water and held it above the Hindu's head repeating, "There is no difference between cruelty and noncruelty."³ The Hindu turned on his heel and walked out.

When I lectured on relativism at UC Berkeley, I asked a question I pose frequently at secular universities: Why do we all feel guilty?

"Maybe guilt is just a cultural construction," I offered. "I guess that's possible. But there's another possibility. Maybe you *feel* guilty... because you *are* guilty."

I have asked this question countless times on campuses. No one has ever stopped me afterward and said I was wrong — that they did *not* feel guilty. They could not. They knew better. Which makes my closing statement to the audience all the more powerful. "The answer to guilt is not denial," I say. "The answer to guilt is forgiveness. And this is where Jesus comes in."

My question at Berkeley was a direct application of Schaeffer's insight. We start with the truth of the world as each person already knows it to be. Then we offer an explanation that resonates with her deepest intuitions and makes sense of the reality she encounters every day.

We start with guilt, then reason back to morality and a moral lawgiver. We start with evidence for design, then reason back to

a designer. We start with personal worth and significance, then reason backward to the source of all meaning. We start with reality, then reason backward to a cause that makes the best sense of what people already know to be true.

In a very real sense, every person who denies God is living on borrowed capital. He enjoys living as if the world is filled with morality, meaning, order, and beauty, yet he denies the God whose existence makes such things possible.

When you start with theism — “In the beginning, God” — these destinations make complete sense.

When you start with materialism, though — “In the beginning, the particles” — that route takes you over a cliff of absurdity and despair.

ROOF REMOVAL, STEP BY STEP

Taking the Roof Off is not complicated if you follow these three steps. First, reduce the person’s point of view to its basic argument, assertion, principle, or moral rule. This might take a moment of reflection. Ask yourself what the person’s *specific* claim is. The first step of Columbo is handy at this point. State the idea clearly (write it out if you need to). If this is part of a conversation, check with the person to make sure you got it right. You might say, “Let me see if I understand you correctly,” then repeat the point as clearly as you can.

Second, mentally give the idea a “test drive” to see where it leads. Ask: “If I follow this principle consistently, what implications will it have for other issues? Will it produce a ‘truth’ that seems wrong or counterintuitive? Will any absurd consequences result?” The answer to these questions sometimes occurs later, after you have given the issue more thought.

Third, if you find a problem, point it out. Invite the other person to consider the implications of her view and the absurd end that follows from it. Show her that if she applies her view consistently, it

will take her to a destination that seems unreasonable. Therefore, something about her original view needs to be modified.

For example, Mother Theresa once appealed to the governor of California to stay the execution of double murderer Robert Alton Harris. Her reasoning: Since “Jesus would forgive,” the governor should forgive.

This argument proves too much, as our tactic demonstrates. When applied consistently, it becomes a reason to forgo any punishment for any crime because one could always argue, “Jesus would forgive.” Emptying every prison does not seem to be what Jesus had in mind because great evil would result. Capital punishment might be faulted on other grounds, but not on this one. Here is the analysis:

Claim: If Jesus would forgive capital criminals, then it is wrong to execute them.

Taking the Roof Off: On this reasoning, it would be wrong for government to punish *any* criminals because one could always say, “Jesus would forgive.” This seems absurd, especially when Scripture states that the purpose of government is to punish evildoers, not forgive them.⁴

Therefore: Even though *Jesus* might forgive murderers, that does not mean it is wrong for the *government* to punish them.

Here’s another example. Typically, social conservatives in this country think it is wrong for the government to endorse same-sex relationships by granting them marriage licenses. A common rejoinder is, “That’s the same thing people said about interracial marriages.” The assumption with this remark is that since people were wrong then, they must be wrong now.

To Take the Roof Off, first ask what the core argument is. In this case, it’s a little tricky, but I think this sums it up: We were wrong in the *past* on *one* issue (interracial marriage). Therefore, we are wrong in the *present* on a *different* issue (same-sex marriage). The following dialogue demonstrates how absurd this logic is:

"I don't think same-sex unions should be endorsed by the government."

"You know, people said the very same thing about interracial marriages. They were wrong then, and you are wrong now. Same-sex marriage is right."

"So you think the government should *approve* of homosexual unions?"

"Of course."

"But people said the government should approve *slavery*, too. They were wrong then, and you are wrong now. Same-sex marriage is wrong."

Here's the breakdown:

Claim: Argument: Because people were wrong in the past on one issue, they are wrong in the present on a different issue.

Taking the Roof Off: Since the government was wrong endorsing slavery in the past, it would be wrong for them to endorse same-sex marriage in the present. This is absurd because the same kind of reasoning produces contradictory results: Same-sex marriage is wrong, *and* same-sex marriage is right (see above).

Therefore: It is not sound to argue that just because people were wrong in the past about interracial marriage, they are now wrong about same-sex marriage.

The only way out of this problem is to show a similarity between interracial marriage and same-sex marriage that is relevant to the issue of government endorsement. There is none.

Jesus used the Taking the Roof Off tactic in an argument with the Pharisees. Notice how He reduced the Pharisees' reasoning to its logical and absurd conclusion:

But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons." And knowing their thoughts He said to them, "Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and any city or house divided against itself shall not stand. And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how then shall his kingdom stand? ... But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matthew 12:24 - 26, 28).

Here's how the tactic played out:

Claim: Jesus casts out demons by the power of Satan.

Taking the Roof Off: If Satan is the source of Jesus' power, then Satan is casting out Satan, destroying his own kingdom. This is absurd.

Therefore: Jesus' power must not come from Satan, but from God who opposes Satan. Those who oppose Jesus, then, are not opposing Satan, but God.

Each vignette below tackles a common challenge using Taking the Roof Off. Notice how many ways this technique can be used. It is flexible because people frequently hold beliefs that lead to absurd consequences.

BORN BAD?

It's common of late to justify one's sexual "orientation" by an appeal to nature. Some people think the claim "I was born this way" is all that's needed to stem moral criticism of homosexuality. But why settle for this approach? Why think the state of nature is an appropriate guide to morality?

The basic argument can be summed up this way: Anything that is natural is also moral. Homosexuality is natural (the claim goes). Therefore, homosexuality is moral. What happens when we go down that road?

I once asked a radio caller who used this reasoning if the same rationale would justify gay-bashing. If scientists isolated a gay-bashing gene, would violence toward homosexuals be acceptable? Hardly. If there really were a gay-bashing gene, the correct response would be to fight its influence, not to surrender to it.

Seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes noted famously that life in an unregulated state of nature is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Morality protects us from the brutality of living in a world where people act out their impulses. *Animals* always do what comes naturally.

Since living according to nature would result in all kinds of barbarism, how does it make sense to invoke the natural state of things to justify anything? The difference between doing what comes naturally and principled self-restraint is called civilization. Morality that counters one's natural inclinations rather than approves them is our only refuge from a life that is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

Here's how the *reductio* looks:

Claim: Any "natural" tendency or behavior is morally acceptable.

Taking the Roof Off: If gay-bashing comes naturally for someone, it must be okay. This is obviously wrong.

Therefore: Just because an impulse is natural does not mean it's moral. Homosexuality cannot be justified this way.

CHALK ONE UP FOR GOD

The story is told of an atheist philosophy professor who performed a parlor trick each term to convince his students that there is no God.⁵ "Anyone who believes in God is a fool," he said. "If God existed, he could stop this piece of chalk from hitting the ground and breaking. Such a simple task to prove he is God, and yet he can't do it." The professor then dropped the chalk and watched it shatter dramatically on the classroom floor.

If you meet anyone who tries this silly trick, take the roof off. Apply the professor's logic in a test of *your own* existence. Tell the onlookers you will prove *you* don't exist.

Have someone take a piece of chalk and hold it above your outstretched palm. Explain that if you really exist, you would be able to accomplish the simple task of catching the chalk. When he drops the chalk, let it to fall the ground and shatter. Then announce, "I guess this proves I do not exist. If you believe in me, you're a fool!"

Clearly, this chalk trick tells you nothing about God. The only thing it is capable of showing is that if God does exist, he is not a circus animal who can be teased into jumping through hoops to appease the whim of foolish people.

TROTTING OUT THE TODDLER

Virtually every argument in favor of abortion could equally justify killing newborns if pressed to its logical conclusion. If it's acceptable to take the life of an innocent human being on one side of the birth canal, why forbid it on the other? A 7-inch journey cannot miraculously transform a "nonhuman tissue mass" into a valuable human being.⁶

When someone justifies abortion by saying, "Women have the right to choose," use a version of Taking the Roof Off called "Trotting Out the Toddler." Ask if a woman should have the right to kill her one-year-old for the same reason.⁷ Since both are human beings, the same moral rule should apply to each. The logic of choice, privacy, and personal bodily rights endangers newborns, not just the unborn.

At the University of New Mexico, a student said we should abort children to save them from future child abuse. Stand to Reason speaker Steve Wagner "trotted out the toddler" in response. "Should we also kill two-year-olds to save them from future child abuse?"

"I hadn't thought about that," the student said. And that's the point. People don't think about the logical implication of their ideas. It's our job to help them see their mistakes.

CLIMATE CONTROL

A chorus of voices charge that Christians, through their moralizing about homosexuality, are promoting a climate of hate. The phrase of choice is “less than.” By claiming that homosexuality is wrong, Christians demote homosexuals to a “less than” status, making them the object of scorn, hatred, and physical abuse.

The flaw of this logic becomes obvious when you take the roof off. In Los Angeles, KABC talk show host Al Rantel — himself a homosexual — noted that this kind of thinking would make Alcoholics Anonymous responsible every time a drunk gets beat up in an alley. It simply does not follow that moral condemnation of homosexuality encourages gay-bashing.

Such a tactic is equally dangerous to those who use it. If moralizing causes hate, and hate leads to violence, are those who demonize Christians for condemning homosexuality also guilty of hate-mongering? Taking the Roof Off clearly demonstrates that this kind of attack is really about politics, not principles.

“FAITH” VS. FACTS

Some people think that facts and knowledge make faith impossible.

The reasoning goes like this. Hebrews 11:6 says that without faith, it is impossible to please God. Faith is believing things we cannot know. Faith and knowledge, then, are at opposite ends of the spectrum. The more facts we have, the less room there is for faith. God is most pleased, then, when we cling faithfully to our convictions in spite of the evidence against them.

If this is your view of faith, following this route will lead you into a spiritual ditch. First, apologetics — giving evidence in defense of the truth — would be misguided. This is scripturally absurd. Peter says we should always be ready to make an *apologia*, a defense, for our hope (1 Peter 3:15), and Jesus and the apostles gave evidence regularly.

Second, if knowledge and faith are inversely proportional (i.e., as knowledge decreases, faith increases), the more evidence we find *against* Christianity the better. Our knowledge would shrink to nothing, providing ample opportunity for an abundance of blind faith. Indeed, affirming something you knew to be false would be the greatest virtue, if you took this view. God would be most pleased with those who had every reason to know the resurrection never happened, for example, yet still believed.

The apostle Paul, however, called such a person pitiful:

If Christ has not been raised . . . your faith also is vain. . . . You are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied. (1 Corinthians 15:14, 17 – 19)

According to Paul, if we believe contrary to fact, we believe in vain. We are not heroes to be praised, but fools to be pitied.

What has gone wrong here? The problem is with the premise, “Faith is believing things we cannot know.” This is not a biblical understanding of faith. Faith and knowledge are not opposites in Scripture. They are companions. The opposite of faith is not fact, but unbelief. The opposite of knowledge is ignorance. Neither is a virtue in Christianity.

EARTH DAY FOR EVOLUTIONISTS?

Has anyone else noticed a contradiction implicit in the annual Earth Day celebrations? The vast majority of devotees at such fetes are Darwinists who believe humans have an obligation to protect the environment. Starting with a naturalistic worldview, though, why should anyone care?

For millions of years, Mother Nature has spewed noxious fumes and poisonous gasses into Earth’s atmosphere and littered the landscape with ash and lava. Indeed, the most “natural” condition

in the universe is death. As far as we know, the Earth is completely unique. Death reigns everywhere else.

Species have passed into extinction at a steady rate from the beginning of time, the strong supplanting the weak. Why shouldn't they? Each is in a struggle for survival, a dance of destruction fueling the evolutionary process. May the best beast win. That's the logic of naturalism. Yet the sense of obligation to steward the Earth is strong. Why?

The moral motivation for Earth Day simply does not follow from Darwinism. It makes perfect sense, though, if God entrusted man with stewardship over the Earth. Taking the Roof Off—following an idea to its logical conclusion—shows that Earth Day makes sense for theists, but not Darwinists.

Here's a variation of the same idea. If there is no God and we evolved by chance, there is no fundamental difference between animals and humans. However, we permit a farmer to divide the weak from the strong in his pack of cows, yet we're appalled when Hitler does the same to Jews. Why is the first right, but the second wrong, given a Darwinian starting point?

“MODIFIED PRO-CHOICE”

The modified pro-choice position is a politician's favorite abortion doubletalk: “I'm personally against abortion, but I don't believe in forcing my view on others.”

I once had a discussion with a man who offered this nonsense to me at a conference. I asked him the question I always pose when I encounter such a notion: “Why are you personally against abortion?”

He responded with the answer I always get. “I believe abortion kills a baby,” he said, “but that's just my own personal view.”

“Let me see if I understand you,” I said. “You are convinced that abortion kills an innocent child, yet you think the law should allow women to do that to their own babies. Did I get that right?”

He objected to my wording, but when I asked him what part of his view I misunderstood, he was silent. I hadn't misunderstood it. That was his view.

The logic of the modified pro-choice position reduces to, “I think it's wrong to kill my own children, but I don't think we should stop other people from killing theirs.”

JUST YOUR INTERPRETATION

The “that's just your interpretation” parry when you make a biblical point is usually vulnerable to Taking the Roof Off. Use the first Columbo question (“What do you mean by that?”) to find out if the person thinks all interpretations are equally valid and yours is just another in an infinite line of alternatives.

If you suspect that this is his view, Take the Roof Off. Treat his own words as infinitely malleable. Tell him, for example, that you are sorry to hear that he believes all Jews and homosexuals should be executed. When his jaw drops, tell him that's *your* interpretation of what he said. Does he have a problem with that?

Don't leave him hanging, though. Clarify your point: Some interpretations are better than others. If the person you are talking with thinks you have distorted the Scripture, then invite him to show you the error, not dismiss you with this weak response.

WHAT WE LEARNED IN THIS CHAPTER

Taking the Roof Off is a technique designed to show that some views prove too much. If taken seriously, they lead to counterintuitive or even absurd results. Another name for this tactic is *reductio ad absurdum*.

This tactic has three steps. First, we reduce the point of view to its basic argument, assertion, principle, or premise. Second, we

give the idea a “test drive” to see if any absurd consequences result when we consistently apply the logic of the view. Third, we invite the person to consider the unusual implications of her view and the truth that follows from the reductio.

Taking the Roof Off works because humans are made in the image of God and must live in the world God created. Any person who denies this fact lives in tension between the way he *says* the world is and the way the world *actually* is. To protect himself from this contradiction, mankind has erected a self-deception — or a “roof” — to shield himself from the logical implications of his beliefs. With our tactic, we try to remove that roof to deprive him of his false sense of security, then show him the truth.

CHAPTER 11

STEAMROLLER

VERY few people quickly admit that their beliefs are wrong. Some put up a real fight even when your points are reasonable and your manner is gracious. Did you ever wonder why people do that? Why do people ignore good arguments?

I think there are four different reasons for resistance, and I would like to explain what those are. Then I will give you a step-by-step plan to deal with that overconfident, overbearing, and often overwhelming interrupter I call a “steamroller.”

WHEN ARGUMENTS DON'T WORK

In chapter 2 I talked about the importance of arguments — not angry squabbles or silly quarrels, but points of view buttressed with reasons. Jesus used them. Paul used them. Peter used them. We should use them, too.

When arguments are done well, they honor God. But arguments have limits; they don't always work. When that happens, some people are tempted to think that arguments themselves are useless.

This is a mistake. If you're searching for that perfect line of logic capable of subduing any objection, you're wasting your time. There is no magic, no silver bullet, no clever turn of thought or phrase that's guaranteed to compel belief.

Yes, *rational reasons* can be a barrier to belief. The Christian message simply doesn't make sense to everyone, or it raises

unborn? As I have argued elsewhere (e.g., in *Precious Unborn Human Persons*), if the unborn is not a human being, no justification for abortion is necessary. However, if the unborn is a human being, no justification for elective abortion is adequate, because we do not take the lives of valuable human beings for the reasons people give to justify their abortions. My theoretical question to the actor's wife trades on that strategy.

CHAPTER 7: SUICIDE: VIEWS THAT SELF-DESTRUCT

1. I heard this line from my friend, philosopher David Horner.
2. More precisely, "A" cannot be "non-A" at the same time, in the same way or, in Aristotle's words, "One cannot say of something that it is and that it is not in the same respect and at the same time."
3. This quip came from my clever friend Frank Beckwith.
4. These last three are memorable malaprops of Yogi Berra.
5. The argument fails, though, as many have shown. There is no inherent contradiction between God's goodness and power and the existence of evil.
6. This is not a meaningful limitation on the Divine, however. God's omnipotence ensures that he can do anything power is capable of doing. Yet no amount of power can make a square circle. It would be a limit, though, if God's rational nature were compromised by contradiction.
7. According to postmodern thinking, truth does not exist in the sense most of us use the word. There are no claims about the way the world really is that we can know to be accurate. Instead, there are many socially constructed accounts of reality, and each one is literally "true" for those who believe it.
8. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 272.
9. Empiricism, the claim that knowledge is restricted to that which can be perceived by the senses, self-destructs in the same way. The truth of empiricism itself cannot be perceived with the senses.

CHAPTER 8: PRACTICAL SUICIDE

1. For the full transcript, see "A Conversation with Lee" at www.str.org. It's a delightful lesson in the use of the Suicide Tactic.
2. Alvin Plantinga, "Pluralism," in *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, ed. Philip Quinn and Kevin Meeker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 177.
3. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 5.

4. Gregory Koukl and Francis Beckwith, *Relativism — Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 143.
5. Jeffery L. Sheeler, "Unwelcome Prayers," *U.S. News & World Report*, 20 September 1999.

CHAPTER 9: SIBLING RIVALRY AND INFANTICIDE

1. Incidentally, in the Christian view the conflict is resolved because God's love is not sentimental, but sacrificial. He can execute justice while also making provision for mercy and forgiveness.
2. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 31.
3. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 41, as quoted in Ravi Zacharias, *Deliver Us from Evil* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1996), 95–96.
4. I don't think this is a sound way of reasoning because it commits the is/ought fallacy. I am only adopting this claim for the sake of argument (see chapter 10, "Taking the Roof Off").
5. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 31.
6. Richard Taylor, *Ethics, Faith, and Reason* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985), 83–84.
7. *The Quarrel*, directed by Eli Cohen, distributed by Honey and Apple Film Corporation, Canada, 1991.
8. This problem could also be stated as a Sibling Rivalry: (1) God does not exist as moral lawmaker. Therefore, there are no moral laws to break. Therefore, evil does not exist. (2) Evil exists. Therefore, transcendent moral laws exist. Therefore, a transcendent moral lawmaker exists. Therefore, God exists. Either there is no God and no evil, or evil exists and so does God. The option that does not seem possible is that evil exists, but God does not. These notions are in conflict, victims of Sibling Rivalry.
9. If the atheist does not affirm the existence of objective evil, but is merely pointing out what appears to be a contradiction in the theist's worldview, he escapes this particular dilemma. Usually, however, the atheist raising this objection actually believes in genuine evil.
10. J. P. Moreland, *Christianity and the Nature of Science* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 104.

CHAPTER 10: TAKING THE ROOF OFF

1. Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, in *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1982), 1:138.

2. *Ibid.*, 140–141.
3. *Ibid.*, 110.
4. Romans 13:3–4, 1 Peter 2:14.
5. This tale is almost certainly an urban legend. I include it for two reasons. First, even if apocryphal, it still illustrates this tactic well. Second, this story has circulated so widely that you might encounter this “proof” of atheism and need a response.
6. I owe this insight to Scott Klusendorf.
7. This was the very approach I took with the witch from Wisconsin in chapter 1. It is possible that the person would counter that a fetus is not a human being in the same sense that a one-year-old is. My response is, “I suppose you could also say that a fourteen-year-old is not a human being in the same sense that a one-year-old is — as in growth and maturity — but that person is still a human being in every way.”

CHAPTER 11: STEAMROLLER

1. You might be wondering how being in the hot seat (mentioned in chapter 4) is different from getting steamrolled. In the former, you are merely *overmatched*. With steamrollers, you are *overwhelmed*. You may be up to the task of answering the objection, but you are never really given the opportunity.
2. William Dembski, ed., *Darwin's Nemesis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 102.

CHAPTER 12: RHODES SCHOLAR

1. Norman Geisler and Ronald Brooks, *Come Let us Reason Together* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 99.
2. Douglas Geivett, “A Particularist View,” in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Dennis Okholm and Timothy Phillips (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 266–67.
3. Douglas Futuyma, *Science on Trial: The Case for Evolution* (Sunderland, MA: Sinauer Associates, Inc., 1983), 12; emphasis added.
4. Richard Lewontin, “Billions and Billions of Demons,” *New York Review of Books*, January 4, 1997; emphasis in the original.
5. Robert Funk, Roy Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 5; quoted in J. P. Moreland and Michael Wilkins, *Jesus Under Fire* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 4; emphasis added.
6. I owe this insight to J. P. Moreland.

CHAPTER 13: JUST THE FACTS, MA'AM

1. Dennis Prager, *Ultimate Issues*, July – September, 1989.
2. Donald McFarlan, ed., *Guinness Book of World Records 1992* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1991), 92.
3. John Eidsmoe, *Christianity and the Constitution* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 43.
4. Find a detailed response in “The Da Vinci Code Cracks” at www.str.org.
5. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 231–34.
6. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. III (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 623, 629.
7. Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, 125.
8. Find a video clip of this conversation at <http://www.leestrobels.com/video/server/video.php?clip=strobelt1123>.
9. Matthew 18:15–20, Galatians 6:1.
10. John 3:17; 12:47; 5:22, 27; Acts 10:42; 17:31.

CHAPTER 14: MORE SWEAT, LESS BLOOD

1. Charles Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict* (Zondervan: 1987), 255.
2. An irrefutable biblical argument for the deity of Christ based on John 1:3 is featured in the article “The Deity of Christ: Case Closed,” found at www.str.org.
3. Os Guinness and John Seel, *No God But God* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 91.