

# ARGUING BY INTUITION

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Gregory E. Ganssle recently published a book entitled *Thinking about God*.<sup>1</sup> In one chapter, he explains freedom and determinism, and concludes by stating that he favors "libertarian free will." Note how he argues:

Now, why should you agree with me about the nature of human freedom? Let me give you two reasons. First, it *seems strange* to hold someone morally responsible for an action if that action is not up to him. If determinism is true, then no action is up to the one who does it. At least no action is up to the one who does it to a high enough degree to make it reasonable to hold the person responsible. Yet we do hold each other morally responsible. The best explanation is that some actions are up to us and we are responsible for them.

Second, libertarian free will makes the most sense of our deliberation. We often find ourselves deliberating between alternatives, and *we are convinced* that our deliberation has a real effect on the outcome. The decision we come to, upon deliberating, *seems to be* up to us. If freedom is not of the libertarian kind, then deliberation does not make as much sense. Thus, libertarian freedom is the better concept of freedom, and compatibilist freedom is no freedom at all.<sup>2</sup>

This is terrible, terrible! I feel dirty just for typing it. There are numerous falsehoods and fallacies in these two paragraphs,<sup>3</sup> but I will first focus on only those words that are relevant to our topic, which is intuition.

Note the words that I have put in italics above. If we were to debate the issue of human freedom, or Calvinism vs. Arminianism, is Ganssle going to come at me with "seems strange," "we are convinced," and "seems to be"? I can just as readily say it "seems right," "I am *not* convinced, and "seems *not* to be"! Well, *he* is convinced of the premises that *seems to him* as true, but I can be just as convinced of the opposite.

Once you mix "seems like" as an essential part of your argument (instead of a non-essential part of your presentation, such as in a mere illustration), you have departed from the realm of strict rational argumentation. Also, you have just lost the right to forbid your opponent from using exactly the type of same arguments, and to him it "seems like" that you are wrong.

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory E. Ganssle, *Thinking About God* (InterVarsity Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 136-137, emphasis added.

<sup>3</sup> I have already addressed all of them in my books and articles. The relevant works include, *Systematic Theology*, *Ultimate Questions*, *Presuppositional Confrontations*, *Apologetics in Conversation*, *Commentary on Ephesians*, *The Sermon on the Mount*, "The Problem of Evil," and "Professional Morons."

When it comes to Calvinism vs. Arminianism, you may have heard something like, "If God is absolutely sovereign, then he controls even our decisions, and in this sense we do not have freedom or free will, but we sense (we are convinced, we feel, we think, it seems like, etc.) that we do have freedom or free will in our daily activities; therefore, Calvinism must be wrong." My response is that I sense or intuit, or it seems to me, that this person is an idiot; therefore, he is an idiot.<sup>4</sup>

If he disagrees with my intuition, then why do I have to agree with his? If he tells me that I do not really sense or intuit that he is an idiot, then I can just as readily tell him that he does not really sense or intuit freedom. That is, if he can claim to know what is really going on in my mind, then I can just as readily claim to know what is really going on in his mind.

Ganssle is claiming to know what we all intuit. Among other things, he asserts:

1. I intuitively affirm a standard of ethics such that "it *seems strange* to hold someone morally responsible for an action if that action is not up to him."
2. I am "*convinced* that our deliberation has a real effect on the outcome."
3. The decision that I come to, upon deliberating, "*seems* [to me] *to be*" up to me.

However, unless he constructs his claims upon an objective and infallible foundation, then if he can claim to know what I intuitively affirm in my own mind, why can't I also claim to know what he intuitively affirms in his mind? In fact, I deny that I intuit any of the three items above. Thus I affirm that "we are convinced" that he is wrong, and that he "seems to be" quite confused and arbitrary. Unless he stops arguing by intuition as he does, he cannot with consistency reject my claims.

So the whole thing amounts to purely subjective nonsense.

When debating Arminians, or when reading their literature, you will notice that many of them base many of their crucial premises on intuition, and often on intuition alone. Ganssle's pattern of argument is very common with them – they just assume that their needed premises are true because *to them* they *seem to be* true. They say that they are *convinced* that these premises are true (often they say that we are *all* convinced), and then they proceed on that basis. One of these premises is that we all *seem* to have free will; another is that it would *seem* unjust to hold someone morally accountable who does not have free will. At least in these instances, their ultimate standard of truth and morality is not God's revelation but their own intuition. Their "seems like" *seems* unquestionable to them.

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<sup>4</sup> Why am I being hard toward this kind of thinking? It is because it is an irrational kind of thinking, and one that is often used to assert heretical positions, such as libertarian free will.

However, all the "seems like" could be wrong. To paraphrase Clark, it might be that we think we have free will not because we *know* something (that we have free will), but because we *don't know* something (that we really don't have free will).<sup>5</sup> It might be that some people intuitively think certain things are true because they are ignorant. Luther puts it stronger, saying that we think we have free will because we have been deceived by Satan.<sup>6</sup> In any case, the debate cannot be settled by intuition alone.

Many atheists also argue this way. For example, since they reject revelation, they cannot appeal to it as a foundation for ethics. Then, when they turn to sensation, those who are less stupid realize that they cannot derive anything from sensation. Thus some of them turn to intuition, and claim that by it they know certain ethical principles. But other than the problems already mentioned (that intuition is subjective, non-universal, fallible, etc.), why must we obey intuition?

It is most unfortunate that many Reformed/Calvinistic writers also appeal to intuition to construct their arguments and their systems. When they do this, it is often because they are trying to assert some of the very same ideas and premises that the Arminians and the atheists affirm, such as unbiblical concepts of freedom and justice. But since these false premises cannot really be derived from biblical revelation, and since we can derive nothing at all from sensation, they take refuge in intuition. However, as we have shown, this is to banish themselves to subjectivism and irrelevance, and when Reformed/Calvinistic writers do this, they are being inconsistent with their otherwise biblical and rational theology.

One example is William G. T. Shedd. Although he is to be highly commended for being one of the least empirical among theologians, he fails to depend solely on divine revelation. Rather, appeals to intuition pervade his *Dogmatic Theology*, and he does this to establish premises and principles that in fact only Arminians should affirm, and that only Arminians need, such as a version of free will and an unbiblical basis for moral accountability.

As Reformed/Calvinistic Christians – as Christians whose views on God, man, and salvation are truly biblical – we must not and need not appeal to sensation or intuition, which can only lead to irrationalism and self-contradictory skepticism. Rather, we must cling to God's written revelation, which alone comes from *Logos*, the Reason of God, and which alone can save us and those who hear us.

I originally planned to address only the problems with basing one's arguments on intuition. The quote from Ganssle has provided us with a good example. However, in it he also brings up several points that are not directly connected with intuition, but are nevertheless problematic. It would be instructive to discuss them also.

We will first turn our attention to the following statements, already quoted at the beginning:

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<sup>5</sup> See Gordon Clark, *Predestination*.

<sup>6</sup> See Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*.

If determinism is true, then no action is up to the one who does it. At least no action is up to the one who does it to a high enough degree to make it reasonable to hold the person responsible. Yet we do hold each other morally responsible. The best explanation is that some actions are up to us and we are responsible for them.<sup>7</sup>

First, let us acknowledge that Ganssle is not trying to construct a detailed case for his position in this portion of his book; it represents only a summary of his reasons for his position on freedom. However, this does not prevent us from criticizing what he has written, since he provides enough information here to tell us what kind of arguments he considers as valid rational support for his position.

Unless he completely changes the direction of his whole presentation, then even if given the time and space to elaborate, he would still argue his case using the same type of arguments. That is, even if given the time and space, he could give us only a more detailed version of the same fallacious thinking.<sup>8</sup>

In order to treat his points in some detail, we will deal with each of these statements individually.

*"If determinism is true, then no action is up to the one who does it."*

This statement is so ambiguous that it is hard to know what to do with it. In particular, the crucial expression, "up to" is undefined.<sup>9</sup> Depending on what he means, the expression can refer to anything from a volitional freedom relative to other creatures or a volitional freedom relative to God himself, which is absolute freedom.

It appears that the language and context demand the latter interpretation. For one's action to be "up to" himself is contrasted with "determinism." The context of the book suggests that the "determinism" here is inclusive of, if not restricted to, divine determinism, or the idea that it is God who determines all things, including all human decisions. That is, if one's action is "up to" himself, then it is not determined by God.

But if any action is not determined by God, then Ganssle is no longer talking about the God of the Bible. At this point, I must refer you to my previous works for detailed

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<sup>7</sup> Ganssle, p. 137.

<sup>8</sup> Just before I put the following criticisms into writing, I carefully checked his book again, and paid special attention to the chapter in which these statements appear. Ganssle does try to provide more details and arguments in the prior pages. However, nothing that he says can serve to fend off the criticisms below. Readers who wish to verify this can check p. 129-137 of his book.

<sup>9</sup> I am aware that he tries to define (or rather illustrate) it on page 135, but his explanation fails to clarify the concept. On the same page, he admits, "Now, *up-to-me-ness* is not a very precise concept."

explanations on divine sovereignty.<sup>10</sup> In any case, the expression "up to" remains ambiguous.

*"At least no action is up to the one who does it to a high enough degree to make it reasonable to hold the person responsible."*

Now things really get strange.

He says that the "up to"-ness must be high enough before it is "reasonable" to hold someone "responsible." Of course, my first reaction is, WHY? Even if we could understand his statement, we have no reason to believe it. But as we will see, it is not that easy to understand the statement.

Before we even know what he means by "up to," he now suggests that there are degrees of "up to"-ness. So, according to him, an action can be "up to" a person to a greater or lesser degree, but how he knows that, he does not explain.

Then, he indicates that the "up to"-ness must reach a certain degree before it is "high enough" to make it *reasonable* to hold the person *responsible*." But even if we swallow the suggestion that there are degrees of "up to"-ness, how high is "high enough," and how does he know?

Also, if the "up to"-ness must be high enough to be "reasonable," what does he mean by "reasonable"? By *reason-able*," does he mean something that is validly deducible from true premises, or does he mean something like "morally acceptable"? If he means something like the latter, then what would he mean by "acceptable"? "Acceptable" to whom? How does he know?

Or would we be completely unjustified in suspecting that by "reasonable," he is once again appealing to some intuitive standard that he cannot objectively project and support outside of his own mind, and in which case his intuition would once again take the place of God?

So why must the "up to"-ness reach a certain degree before it is "high enough" to be considered "reasonable" to hold someone responsible? This point remains unanswered.

Also, what does he mean by "responsible"? I will not even try to guess.

Now, since he contrasts the "up to"-ness of one's action against "determinism,"<sup>11</sup> and since the "up to"-ness can be of a greater or lesser degree, it follows that the "determinism" must also be in degrees – that is, it is not absolute, but relative.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See *Systematic Theology, Ultimate Questions, Commentary on Ephesians*, and "The Problem of Evil." Also see, *Predestination and God and Evil* by Gordon Clark.

<sup>11</sup> That is, if something is "up to" God, then it is not "up to" us.

<sup>12</sup> That is, if something is "up to" us, then it is not "up to" God. And since Ganssle contends that some or many things are "up to" us, it follows that some or many things are not "up to" God. Therefore, unless

But this puts the God who is the subject of "determinism" in a similar position with the creatures who are the objects of "determinism." That is, some things are "up to" (determined by) him, but some things are not. He might be more powerful than we, so that more things are "up to" him than "up to" us, but it remains that when it comes to "up to"-ness and determinism, he differs from us only in degree and not in kind.

So again, we have lost the God of the Bible.

In contrast, the biblical position is that we are "morally responsible" in the sense that we are morally accountable to God; that is, God will judge us. Our beliefs and actions will have consequences because God will *cause* these consequences.

Moreover, it is "reasonable" for God to hold us morally responsible in the sense that it is both logically valid and morally acceptable for him to do so. It is logically valid because this is a conclusion deducible from his own will and decree, and it is morally acceptable because God is the sole and ultimate moral standard, and he accepts his own decision to hold his creatures morally responsible.

In this explanation, the issue of human freedom does not even enter into the discussion.<sup>13</sup> It is thoroughly consistent with absolute divine determinism, in which God controls all things, including every human thought and decision.

*"Yet we do hold each other morally responsible."*

To understand this statement, and to perceive what is so wrong about it, we need read it in the context of the paragraph. So here it is again:

If determinism is true, then no action is up to the one who does it. At least no action is up to the one who does it to a high enough degree to make it reasonable to hold the person responsible. Yet we do hold each other morally responsible. The best explanation is that some actions are up to us and we are responsible for them.

To simplify the argument, we may paraphrase it as follows: "If determinism is true, then we are not morally responsible. But we do hold each other morally responsible. Therefore, determinism is false." Even assuming we agree that "we do hold each other morally responsible," Ganssle says nothing to establish that this is in fact the right thing to do. Just because we do something does not mean that it is necessarily the right thing to do. Maybe we are wrong in holding each other morally responsible.

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"determinism" is absolute and comprehensive, it is just another word for an "up to"-ness similar to ours, even if it is greater in degree or more frequent in instances.

<sup>13</sup> There is no logical place for human freedom to enter the discussion; it has to be arbitrarily introduced by force.

Note that the argument is supposed to show that determinism is false, and not to merely make sense of holding each other morally responsible. That is, the function of the argument is not just to explain something that we do, but that might be either right or wrong. Rather, the argument intends to *refute* determinism, and to do that, it *depends* on the premise "we do hold each other morally responsible," and on the assumption that this is the right thing to do (or that this premise should be held constant).

As it stands, the best that this argument can do is to *explain* why Ganssle would *want* determinism to be false! He wants determinism to be false because he wants to explain why we hold each other morally responsible. In other words, according to this argument, in order to justify what we do (whether what we do is right or not), we must reject determinism (whether determinism is in fact true or not). The argument is purely pragmatic, not rational.

Besides failing to establish that we *should* hold each other morally responsible in the first place, we have already pointed out that Ganssle also fails to establish the previous premises, especially the one claiming that if an action is not "up to" us, then we are not morally responsible for it. Thus what he intends to be a rational explanation for affirming "libertarian free will" turns out to be incomprehensible chaos.

In contrast, the biblical position is that *God* has revealed his moral laws to us, and he has declared that he will hold us accountable according to those laws. Then, he has also established human relationships and institutions by which we hold each other accountable in a relative and temporal way, to maintain a level of peace, order, and justice in human society, until absolute and perfect accountability may be rendered by God when he judges humanity. Rather than basing our arguments on intuition or even common practice (as Ganssle does), our foundation for moral responsibility is divine revelation.

*"The best explanation is that some actions are up to us and we are responsible for them."*

What I have said above already covers this last statement. Here I will approach the argument from a slightly different angle.

Now, the argument amounts to saying:

1. If determinism is true, then we are not morally responsible.<sup>14</sup>
2. But we do hold each other morally responsible.
3. Therefore, *determinism is false*.

The problem is that the conclusion is *not* a necessary inference from the premises. Even if we were to use the same premises, we could come to a very different conclusion:

1. If determinism is true, then we are not morally responsible.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Remember that Ganssle fails to justify this statement, and we do not accept it. But this is what he asserts.

<sup>15</sup> Again, we deny this, but this is what Ganssle asserts without justification.



2. But we do hold each other morally responsible.
3. Therefore, *we are wrong in holding each other morally responsible.*

Ganssle's version of the argument refuses to compromise the practice of holding each other morally responsible, whereas second version of the argument refuses to compromise determinism. Both versions of the argument are fallacious, since the conclusions are not derived from the premises by necessary inference. Moreover, Ganssle provides no justification for the first premise, and it is a premise that I reject.

We have finished examining the paragraph, but we are not yet done with Ganssle, since he goes on to say:

Second, libertarian free will makes the most sense of our deliberation. We often find ourselves deliberating between alternatives, and *we are convinced* that our deliberation has a real effect on the outcome. The decision we come to, upon deliberating, *seems to be* up to us. If freedom is not of the libertarian kind, then deliberation does not make as much sense. Thus, libertarian freedom is the better concept of freedom, and compatibilist freedom is no freedom at all.<sup>16</sup>

We have so thoroughly dissected his way of thinking that by now you should be able to see what's wrong with the above statements without much help. So we will briefly summarize the problems without going into the details.

We note that the whole paragraph again tries to merely make sense of what we supposedly do, without justifying that we should do it in the first place.

He says, "*We are convinced* that our deliberation has a real effect on the outcome." But who is he to speak for all of us? In fact, I am not convinced of this statement at all. In any case, *even if* we are all convinced of this statement, the question remains, "But is it true?" As it is, the foundation of his premise is mere subjective intuition, or even mere popular opinion. Adding to this that the term "real effect" is ambiguous, the whole statement is unintelligible.

Then, he says, "The decision we come to, upon deliberating, *seems to be* up to us." Again, he is resting this premise upon intuition alone. Just because something *seems* a certain way to us does not mean that it is really true. But we have already discussed the fallacy of appealing to intuition, so we will move on.

His conclusion is that, "If freedom is not of the libertarian kind, then deliberation does not make as much sense." Well, then, so much the worse for deliberation! The argument intends to establish libertarian free will, and to do that he claims that only libertarian free will can make sense of deliberation. But the argument fails because, first, he fails to

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<sup>16</sup> Ganssle, p. 137.

establish that only libertarian free will can make sense of deliberation; second, he fails to establish that we should make sense of deliberation; and third, he fails to establish that deliberation makes sense at all.

He claims that "libertarian freedom is the better concept of freedom," but whether this is true or not is irrelevant at this point, since he fails to establish libertarian freedom, or for that matter, any kind of freedom.

Nevertheless, I might agree with him on something after all, for he ends the paragraph by saying, "compatibilist freedom is no freedom at all." Now, as he explains earlier in the chapter, by "compatibilist freedom" he means "determined but free."<sup>17</sup> He states that this is a popular concept of freedom, but one that he opposes. Here he adds that it is "no freedom at all."<sup>18</sup>

But it appears to him that the only remaining option is to accept libertarian freedom; however, this is not true. What if we deny *both* libertarian and compatibilist freedom, and affirm an absolute and comprehensive divine determinism?

I understand that even many Reformed/Calvinistic writers would object to this; instead, they feel compelled to affirm compatibilist freedom. This is at least partly because they assume that man must have some kind of freedom in order to be justly held accountable. But this is just an assumption, impossible to prove, and contradicted by Scripture.

Of course, we must be careful to define "freedom" in an accurate and relevant way. We must at least answer the question, "Free from what?" Now, when we are speaking of divine determinism, the "determiner" is God. So in this context, the only relevant thing to be free from is God, and whether we are free from any other thing is irrelevant. Thus the question becomes, "Is man free from God in *any* sense?" Once you assert that man is free from God in some sense, you have lost the God of the Bible.

A consistent Reformed/Calvinistic/Scriptural position would be as follows. Absolute divine determinism is true; therefore, man has no freedom *at all* relative to God – he is not free from God in any sense. However, he is still morally responsible and accountable because God holds him morally responsible and accountable. There is no logical reason to bring in the issue of freedom at all. The premise, "responsibility presupposes freedom," is completely arbitrary, unbiblical, and impossible to prove. Rather, Scripture teaches that responsibility presupposes divine *judgment*, and divine judgment presupposes God's decision to judge. It has *nothing* to do with whether or not man is free.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>18</sup> I agree with him in the sense that, I affirm that if an action is completely determined by God, then the person who performs the action is in no sense free from God. Thus divine determinism and human freedom are mutually exclusive. Those who assert that these two are in fact compatible invariably define determinism in a manner that God in fact does not determine *everything*, in which case it is not the determinism that I am talking about; or, they would forget that we are considering a kind of freedom that is relative to God (being free *from God*), in which case the freedom being considered is irrelevant.

In fact, since human responsibility presupposes divine judgment, and since divine judgment presupposes divine sovereignty (God's right and power to judge), it follows that human responsibility presupposes divine sovereignty, and not human freedom. We are morally responsible precisely because God is sovereign and we are *not* free.

The question then becomes whether or not this is just – that is, whether it is just to hold someone accountable who is not free. However, this is just the same question rephrased. The issue of justice appears to be relevant only because one has already illegitimately and arbitrarily brought freedom into the discussion. But we answer that this is just because it is what God has decided to do, and he is the sole and ultimate standard of justice; therefore, this is just by definition.

This position is biblical and coherent, and there is nothing inherently contradictory or impossible about it. Many people might not like it because it contradicts their intuition of freedom, responsibility, and justice; however, theirs is a *sinful* intuition. In appealing to their intuition, they have ignored the noetic effects of sin. In chiding them for placing their trust in their own intuition, I do not then turn to assert my own intuition as true; rather, I appeal to divine revelation alone, and if we are going to speak of intuition at all, we must look to revelation to judge our intuition.

We have contended that intuition cannot provide a reliable foundation for our arguments, citing Ganssle's book as an example. Although we have concluded the main part of our discussion on the subject, there is still a related topic that we need to address in order to further our understanding and to avoid confusion. I have in mind our innate knowledge of God and its relationship to intuition and revelation.

Scripture teaches that every person has an innate knowledge of God in the sense that he knows about God and his attributes by instinct, or by intuition, apart from observation and experience. This knowledge resides in man's mind because God has directly imparted it to him as a creature made in the divine image.

Presuppositional apologists often mention this fact; however, when they do so, are they not appealing to intuition? We need to think about this with care. We did *not* say that even the bare *mention* of intuition renders one's case fallacious; rather, we said only that it is fallacious to appeal to intuition as the *foundation* of one's arguments, or to appeal to intuition to derive the premises of our arguments. There might still be a place for our innate knowledge of God in a biblical and coherent system of theology.

In the case of presuppositionalism, biblically and rationally formulated, our innate knowledge of God is not established by intuition itself, but by revelation. We do *not* say, "I have an intuitive knowledge of God; therefore, I indeed have an intuitive knowledge of God," and then leap from that to saying, "Therefore, my intuitive knowledge of God is true."

Instead, we say, "God's revelation tells me that I have an intuitive knowledge of God; therefore, I indeed have an intuitive knowledge of God." And, "God's revelation tells me

that my intuitive knowledge of God is true in itself, or as far as it goes; therefore, my intuitive knowledge of God is true in itself, or as far as it goes."

Then, we must also add, "God's revelation tells me that our intuitive knowledge of God has been suppressed and distorted by sin; therefore, although it is true that I have an intuitive knowledge of God, and although this intuitive knowledge of God is true in itself, this intuition is nevertheless unreliable as a source of knowledge or justification for my premises in reasoning, because I cannot clearly perceive and accurately represent the information contained in this intuition. Rather, if I am to know anything about it at all, I need God's revelation to tell me what this intuitive knowledge contains."

So when we talk about our intuitive knowledge of God, we are talking about a claim made by revelation *about* intuition. It is not a claim by intuition about intuition, and still less a claim made by intuition about revelation. In other words, when we mention our innate knowledge of God, we are not trying to prove God's revelation by our intuition; rather, we are just stating what God's revelation tells us that we know by intuition. Again, this knowledge has been suppressed and distorted by sin, but we know even this only by revelation. Therefore, when we talk about intuition, and specifically our intuitive knowledge of God, it is for an entirely different purpose than the one that we have been opposing. In no instance do we make intuition the foundation of our arguments; instead, we depend solely on divine revelation.

As biblical presuppositionalists, we begin by revelation, and from it we deduce all the necessary propositions within our worldview; there is never any dependence on intuition. When we mention intuition, we do so in the context of saying that God's revelation tells us that every person knows God by intuition, and this explains why they cannot logically or morally excuse themselves. We do not *begin* by saying that everyone knows God by intuition, and therefore there is no excuse for unbelief; rather, we begin by revelation, and then on the basis of revelation say that everyone knows God by intuition, and therefore on the authority of God's revelation (not intuition), there is no excuse for unbelief.

Moreover, our claim is stronger than just saying that the knowledge of God is intuitively inescapable; instead, our claim is that, positively, the knowledge of God is clear and overwhelming, and negatively, it is logically unavoidable and undeniable.

Thus the criticisms against intuitive arguments do not apply to consistent biblical/presuppositional apologetics. The opponents of Christianity must therefore directly attack revelation. Also, since our criticisms against intuition remain in force, those who would appeal to intuition to support their arguments when attacking Christianity must first prove the reliability of intuition; otherwise, they will have to avoid it altogether. In other words, not only must they directly attack revelation, but they must have something with which to attack it.