

The Transcendental Canon argument by Tanji

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Source: https://open.substack.com/pub/tanjivi/p/the-transcendental-canon-argument?utm_campaign=post-expanded-share&utm_medium=post%20viewer

Introduction

As a short introduction, I want to make the goal of this essay clear. I will present a transcendental-style argument against the possibility of Sola Scriptura, and by extension, against the possibility of Protestantism itself. The essay will proceed in three sections: (1) why refuting Sola Scriptura undermines the entirety of Protestantism, (2) the argument itself, and (3) possible responses and why they fail. That is all.

1. Why Sola scriptura is essential.

Protestantism is founded on five basic principles: Sola Scriptura (Scripture alone), Solus Christus (Christ alone), Sola Gratia (grace alone), Sola Fide (faith alone), and Soli Deo Gloria (for God's glory alone). The order is generally unimportant, except for the first principle, Sola Scriptura. The reason is simple: Sola Scriptura asserts that Scripture alone is infallible, making it the epistemic foundation upon which all the other Protestant principles rest.

Everyone has some foundation on which their beliefs are built. For some it is empirical data, for others pragmatism, and so on. Once you identify that foundation, it becomes possible to challenge an entire worldview at once. Think of it like a tree: the trunk grows from the ground, and branches grow from the trunk. Cutting off a branch leaves the tree intact, but cutting down the trunk brings down every branch with it. In the same way, refuting a worldview's epistemic foundation (the trunk) collapses all of its dependent beliefs (the branches).

2. Formulation of the Argument Using the Transcendental Style

This argument is structured to mirror the Transcendental Argument for God's existence (TAG). It shows that an infallible canon of Scripture presupposes an infallible authority, much like TAG shows that certain aspects of reality presuppose God.

Definitions: X = an infallible authority capable of identifying and preserving the canon. Y = an infallible canon of Scripture.

Argument (Transcendental Form):

1. X is the necessary precondition of Y. In other words, an infallible canon cannot exist without an infallible authority. Without such an authority, there is no way to guarantee with certainty which books belong in Scripture. A fallible process cannot produce an infallible result.
2. Y exists (or is affirmed). Protestants claim that the canon of Scripture is infallible and authoritative.
3. Therefore, X exists. If the canon exists as infallible, there must be an infallible authority behind it.

The problem for Protestantism is that they affirm Y while denying X. They claim the Bible alone is the ultimate infallible authority, which necessarily rejects X. Because this argument uses modus ponens, the conclusion is necessarily true if the premises hold.

Clarifying the Premises with an Analogy:

To illustrate, consider the Quran versus the Bible. The Quran is a single book allegedly revealed through one person, Muhammad. Muslims appeal to this single book as their infallible source, so this critique does not apply. The Bible, by contrast, is a collection of many books, all deemed Scripture. Determining which books belong in the canon requires some authority or process, unlike the single-author Quran.

Set-Theoretic Formulation:

Definitions: S = the set of all books that make up Scripture. I = the property of infallibility.

Premises:

1. Every element in S has property I. Formally: $\forall X \in S, X \in I$. That is, every book in the canon is infallible.
2. To construct S, someone must determine which elements belong in the set. Formally: there must exist an authority A such that A defines S.
3. A fallible authority cannot guarantee that all elements of S have property I.

Using the previous definitions: X = an infallible authority capable of determining membership in S. Y = a canon S whose elements are all infallible (I).

Steps:

1. X is a necessary precondition of Y. Without an infallible authority deciding which books belong in S, you cannot guarantee that all books in S are infallible.
2. Y exists (or is affirmed). Protestants claim that the canon of Scripture is infallible.
3. Therefore, X exists. If an infallible canon exists, there must be an infallible authority that determined its membership.

Implication: Protestants affirm Y (an infallible canon) but deny X (an infallible authority). In set-theoretic terms, they claim $S \subset I$ exists without acknowledging the function or agent that ensures $\forall X \in S, X \in I$. This is a logical contradiction: the set's defining condition is denied while its property is affirmed. Sola Scriptura, therefore, relies on what it explicitly rejects and is epistemically incoherent.

3. Possible responses from Protestants.

"The Spirit testifies internally to each believer which books are inspired. We don't need an external authority because God ensures that the canon is recognized in the hearts of believers."

To be blunt, this argument fails completely. Let's examine what it relies on to work:

1. An understanding of the Spirit and how it dwells within humans, which is itself derived from Scripture.

2. An understanding of what qualifies someone as a believer, also found within Scripture.
3. The assumption that the internal revelation is complete, which again usually presupposes the canon it is meant to justify.

In other words, this defense is circular. It presupposes the very canon it is trying to establish. Without an already defined canon, there is no reliable way to determine which internal “testimonies” are truly from the Spirit.

“The Bible functions like a self-validating document. If the content demonstrates divine authority, then believers can recognize the canon’s authenticity without appealing to an external Church.”

Again, this argument collapses under scrutiny. Rather than breaking down the circularity in three separate points, it is simpler to note that Protestants have not yet established which books to examine for claims of divine authority, they must presuppose their specific canon. Without first assuming which books are Scripture, any argument about “internal marks of divinity” is meaningless.

Another critique involves the claims of internal consistency and accurate prophecy. Many books outside the Bible have claimed divine inspiration, yet Protestants would not recognize them as Scripture. One might respond that “internal consistency and accurate prophecy is only found in the Bible,” but this again presupposes a specific canon. Regarding internal consistency, someone could assemble a collection of books that do not contradict each other without them being infallible.

The more interesting point is the claim of accurate prophecy. This can be illustrated with a modern example: the Library of Babel website, which generates books containing every possible combination of letters. Within this library, one can find a huge number of specific “predictions” of real-world events. For instance, in 2016, one could find a “prediction” of a pandemic in 2020 called COVID that would uproot the world. Yet obviously, such a book is not considered divinely inspired.

The point is clear: the individual is required to pick and choose which predictions are legitimate and which are just coincidental. Accuracy alone does not confer divine authority; the recognition of prophecy is entirely subjective without an independent, infallible standard to determine what counts as genuine. This reinforces the earlier point: claiming that internal marks of divinity are sufficient to establish the canon is epistemically incoherent.

“The Church didn’t create Scripture; it merely recognized what was already inspired. The canon existed objectively as God’s word; human recognition is fallible but doesn’t affect the books’ inherent authority.”

I answer that, the claim is not that the Church “created Scripture,” in the sense of writing the books or making them infallible by Her own power. Rather, the Church’s role was to recognize the books that God had already made infallible. The recognition was infallibly guided by God, so that the Church’s decisions accurately reflect God’s canon. In this sense, God created an infallible canon and revealed it through the Church, making the Church’s recognition infallible, using the same mechanism by which God inspired the individual books and their authors.

“Even if human processes are imperfect, God’s providence guarantees that the canon we have is exactly what He intended. The argument for an infallible Church misreads the source of certainty. It comes from God, not from human authority.”

As mentioned previously, this argument assumes the existence of a single, established canon, which is circular. If a different canon were proposed (as it is), Protestants would be forced to fall back on some other justification for why their specific canon is authoritative. Any such fallback would inevitably rely on one of the other arguments addressed here, which have already been shown to be problematic.

All of the previous defenses were attempts to reject premise 1 (that X, an infallible authority, is the necessary precondition for Y, an infallible canon.) If these attempts fail, the only remaining option for a Protestant would be to reject premise 2 (the claim that there exists an infallible canon.) In other words, they could argue that while individual books of Scripture may be infallible, the canon as a whole is fallible or uncertain.

Finally, to address this:

Definitions:

Let B = individual books of Scripture, each infallible.

Let C = the canon, i.e., the collection of books recognized as Scripture.

Let F(C) = the canon is fallible (uncertain or not guaranteed infallible).

Let I(B) = each book is infallible.

Premises:

Knowledge or authoritative use of Scripture requires certainty about which books belong in the canon. Formally: $\forall x \in C$, to treat x as infallible, we must know it belongs in C.

A fallible canon cannot provide certainty about which books belong. Formally: $F(C) \rightarrow \neg \text{certainty}(C)$.

Protestants claim I(B) (books are infallible) and use C as authoritative.

Step 1 (Transcendental Insight):

To claim authoritative, infallible Scripture, one must have a canon that is infallibly determined. X = an infallible authority defining C.

Step 2 (Fallible Canon Problem):

If the canon is fallible (F(C)), then X does not exist or is denied.

Step 3 (Contradiction):

They are simultaneously claiming infallible books and using a canon to ground them without acknowledging the infallible authority needed to establish the canon.

Formally: $I(B) \wedge \neg X \rightarrow \text{epistemic incoherence}$.

Conclusion:

A “fallible canon of infallible books” is epistemically incoherent. The canon cannot serve as a foundation for infallible knowledge if its recognition is fallible.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Sola Scriptura is epistemically absurd. The principle relies on the existence of an infallible canon of Scripture, which in turn requires an infallible authority to identify and preserve it. Attempts to reject premise 1, whether by appealing to the internal witness of the Spirit, self authentication of Scripture, historical recognition, etc. either collapse into circularity or fail to provide genuine epistemic justification. Rejecting premise 2, on the other hand, undermines the possibility of an infallible Bible altogether. Examining these defenses makes it clear that denying the role of an infallible authority while affirming an infallible canon is incoherent. Therefore, the Protestant principle of Sola Scriptura is untenable, and the worldview built upon it collapses. If one accepts the infallible authority of the Church in recognizing the canon, they cease to be Protestant.