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Answering Dustin Segers' Presuppositionalism, Part I: Intro and the Nature of Truth

Christian apologist Dustin Segers ([remember him?](#)) recently posted an [entry on his blog](#) in which he tells about his experiences at something called the "Reason Rally." Segers used the words 'sophisticated' and 'blasphemous' to describe what he witnessed at the event, which he calls "an opportunity to trash religion in general and Christianity specifically." I'm guessing any non-religious assembly must by its very nature be guilty of this particularly nefarious misdeed. Believers gather on a weekly basis to condemn non-believers and fancy themselves as numbering among "the chosen," but when non-believers gather at an annual meet open to all comers, it's specifically intended to "trash" Christianity.

After voicing complaints about the festival's "trashing" of religion and its "rant against the God of the Bible," and then humbly calling attention to his own valiant efforts to endure persecution and turn the gathering into an occasion to evangelize its participants, Segers illustrates his apologetic by posing four questions:

1. **Truth** - I asked, "What is truth in your worldview? What's your definition of 'truth?'"
2. **Logic** - I asked, "If you believe that only matter exists, (a) how do you account for the immaterial, universal, propositional, immaterial laws of logic given your philosophical materialism apart from an appeal to God and (b) how to you make sense out of our obligation to be rational?"
3. **Science** - "How do you answer the problem of induction from a secular perspective?"
4. **Morality** - "How do you account for objective morality without God?"

Segers seems to think that these questions are sure to bring a non-believer to his knees. And no doubt, I wouldn't be surprised if many non-Christians hit with these questions will be caught off-guard and stumble in their attempts to address them. When this happens, apologists will gleefully count such unpreparedness and groping as evidence of the truth they claim on behalf of their worldview. In this very manner, Christianity feeds in delight on the ignorance of men. This is why the content of Christian apologetics is more often than not a load of questions thrust at non-Christians in rapid-fire succession. One could be forgiven for having the impression that the apologist is really after a moment when the non-believer throws up his hands and exclaims, "[Duh, I donno! Must be God did it!](#)" And though such a turnabout is very unlikely, apologists thirst and hunger for such spectacles as this, for in their delusions they are most desperate for any kind of validation.

Presuming that Christianity actually has something of substance to say on each of the matters raised in Segers' line of inquiry, such inclined believers are not likely to attribute uninformative responses to their questions to possibilities such as that those providing them: (a) are simply not philosophers; (b) haven't given the issues they involve much thought; (c) see no relevance where apologists imagine a connection to their god-belief; or (d) are in fact merely borrowing from the Christian worldview, as presuppositionalists so often charge non-believers of doing. These alternatives to the theist's desired conclusion are either not entertained entirely, or are brushed away with the greatest of ease on behalf a more expedient inference, namely that the non-believer, given his non-belief, simply cannot produce viable answers to such questions.

In this series, I am going to examine Segers' four apologetic questions, and offer answers to them from the perspective of Objectivism as I have come to understand it. Since Objectivism is atheistic in nature, my responses to Segers' questions will constitute an atheistic answer to his apologetic, but should not be taken as representative of all atheistic worldviews (since there are many, and Objectivism is only one of them).

In addition to providing answers to Segers' questions from the Objectivist position, I would like to contrast the Objectivist position against the Christian position in the process. Presuppositionalists should in no way object to this, since Greg Bahnsen himself [has emphasized](#) that "[w]e need to set the Christian worldview, the theistic world view side by side with the atheist world view" in order to determine not only which worldview is

true, but also which one handles the issues which come under dispute in a rational manner. Indeed, as will be seen throughout my analyses of the issues which Segers' questions raise, my concern here will be to light a light where theists would prefer a darkness to condemn. Let Segers pose his questions, and let's see some rational answers for a refreshing change.

Since my the first concern in honoring Bahnsen's proposal above is to determine which of the two worldviews (if either) is *true*, Segers' first question is indeed the best place to start.

Segers' first question is as follows:

1. Truth - I asked, "What is truth in your worldview? What's your definition of 'truth?'"

The answer to this question is not mysterious, and it shouldn't be. But it can get complicated as analysis into the process of forming truth claims is explored.

Very simply, truth is *the non-contradictory, objective identification of fact*. Truth obtains when an objectively formed, logically assembled *conceptual* structure (e.g., a proposition) conforms to the facts which it is intended to denote in accordance with the relevant content of those facts.

On this view, given the emphasis of such identification being *objective* in nature, the *facts* which one *discovers* in reality provide the *content* which informs truth. On this view, truth does not hinge on personal preferences, likes, dislikes, wishes, imaginations, insistence, temper tantrums, or other emotional outbursts. Nor are facts "creations" of consciousness: the mind does not *supply* the facts which serve as the content of truth, but rather *discovers* them by an objective process.

We discover facts which are external to and which exist independent of our consciousness. We discover them by means of a consciousness process (beginning with sense perception), and formulate conceptual structures by means of conscious activity to *identify* these facts. These conceptual structures are either true or false.

(A third category, *arbitrary claims*, arises when there is no rational connection between the content of a claim and the realm of facts. An arbitrary claim is neither true nor false, since it is a claim

for which there is no evidence, either perceptual or conceptual. It is a brazen assertion, based neither on direct observation nor on any attempted logical inference therefrom... An arbitrary statement has no relation to man's means of knowledge. Since the statement is detached from the realm of evidence, no process of logic can assess it. Since it is affirmed in a void, cut off from any context, no integration to the rest of man's knowledge is applicable; previous knowledge is irrelevant to it. Since it has no place in a hierarchy, no reduction [i.e., to some factual basis] is possible, and thus no observations are relevant... If an idea is cut loose from any means of cognition, there is no way of bringing it into relationship with reality. (Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, p. 164))

These conceptual structures, whether we call them propositions, statements, or complex conceptual integrations, are true when they (a) conform to the facts in a manner which takes their full (known or observable) context into account *and* (b) can be integrated into the sum of one's previously validated knowledge (i.e., a sum of knowledge which is itself *non-contradictory*) without contradicting it at any point. In any truth claim, at issue are the facts which inform it, the conceptual process by which the truth claim has been formed, and the relationship between the two (including the cognitive process by which one acquires awareness of those facts). This is just one reason why a good theory of concepts is so important to knowledge.

Important distinctions which are relevant to the nature of truth need to be acknowledged and understood. Facts are metaphysical; they are not creations of consciousness. Facts obtain independent of consciousness. Truth is an aspect of a specific type of operation of consciousness (without being subjective *inventions*), namely one which acknowledges the extra-mental independence of facts from its very inception and which seeks to conform its identificatory efforts to the nature of the facts which it discovers in reality independent of its own activity. This is distinctive of truth; it is fundamental to its nature.

No, you will not find such a conception of truth in the bible. On the contrary, if one were to seek a definition of

the concept 'truth' in the bible, one might find that truth is thought to be a *person* (cf. John 14:6), embodied in a piece of meat whose primary purpose was to be nailed to a cross and die for the transgressions of others. Indeed, in my interactions with Christian apologists, I have posed Segers' very own question to them, and quite often I have gotten the unexplained response to the effect that "Jesus is truth." Christians are persons who subscribe to this [storybook view](#) of truth. By contrast, I'll go with the *objective* analysis of truth, and Segers will likely condemn me for this.

But make no mistake, my analysis of truth and the antithesis between Objectivism and the subjectivism of mystical worldviews is not askew. Greg Bahnsen clarifies for us the *subjective* nature of truth as *Christianity conceives of it* when he writes:

The Christian's approach to the notion of truth is both more basic than those usually considered and also less formal (more substantial, more personal). The believer understands that truth fundamentally is whatever conforms to the mind of God (cf. Ps. 111:7-8; John 14:6; 16:13). Thus, the Bible applies the term not only to the facts (e.g., Deut. 17:4; Eph. 4:25) - since they are all predetermined by the mind of God (Eph. 1:11; Isa. 46:9-11; Matt. 10:29-30) - but also to what is eternal and absolute (e.g., John 6:32, 35; 15:1; Heb. 8:2), as well as to what is ethically right (e.g., Ps. 26:3; John 3:21; 2 John 4). (*Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 163)

On this view, truth is "whatever conforms to" someone's *mind*; i.e., to the *content* of some *subject* of awareness. According to Christianity, truth is *not* something which conforms to the *objects* of the subject's awareness. In other words, in assessing what is truth as Christianity informs it, the *subject* of awareness holds metaphysical primacy over the *objects* of awareness.

Now Bahnsen does try to have it both ways here by saying that the term 'truth' "applies" to facts as well. And of course, truth does apply to facts, but only when facts serve as truth's basis and standard. But saying that truth "applies to facts" is not the same as saying that truth *conforms* to the content of some *mind*. For the Christian, as Bahnsen makes clear, truth is something that conforms to the mind of a supernatural being. On this view, facts are merely incidental to truth; truth and fact only happen to coincide, *because the ruling consciousness wills it*. Beyond that the term 'truth' is a mere token of nominalism: it's just a word whose referential content ultimately hinges on some subject's preferences, commandments, mood swings, even "unsearchable purpose."

Moreover, if facts themselves "are all predetermined by the mind of God," as Bahnsen holds, then facts do not ultimately underwrite truth as its informative basis. Indeed, the *whims of the ruling consciousness* do, since they - rather than facts - are what ultimately determines what both truth and facts might turn out to be. On the Christian view, facts are manipulable, like putty in a child's hands, like clay on the potter's wheel, and therefore so is truth. For Christianity, truth is thus essentially dependent on whim. Bahnsen's mentor Cornelius Van Til makes this crystal clear as part and parcel of the Christian philosophy of fact:

God may at any time take one *fact* and set it into a new relation to created law. That is, there is no inherent reason in the facts or laws why this should not be done. It is this sort of conception of the relation of facts and laws, of the temporal one and many, embedded as it is in the idea of God in which we profess to believe, that we need in order to make room for miracles. And miracles are at the heart of the Christian position. (*The Defense of the Faith*, p. 27)

(For additional pointers on the Christian conception of fact, see my blog [Rival Philosophies of Fact](#).)

Quite simply, if facts are not absolute (e.g., if they can be revised by some conscious subject's *will*), then any truths which are intended to correspond to those facts will likewise not be absolute. Since facts on the Christian worldview are subject to some ruling consciousness's intentions (commandments, decrees, whims, wishes, purposes, or what have you), then it's hard to see how the Christian worldview can accommodate any absolute rendering of the concept of truth. It seems that the Christian worldview, given its commitment to the primacy of a subject's intentions in metaphysics, condemns truth to a most unreliable and elusive category.

Consequently, merely by raising the question, "What is truth in your worldview?" Segers draws our attention to two completely antithetically, mutually opposed conceptions of what truth is: the *objective* view of truth (represented in intact form by Objectivism), and the *subjective* view of truth (which is characteristic of any

irrational worldview, including but not limited to Christianity). The issue here is essentially the relationship between what we call 'truth' and the facts which we discover in reality by an objective methodology. In an objective worldview, facts are recognized to be absolute; in a mystical worldview, facts are ultimately creations of some cosmic subject that are revisable at will.

Is this really where Segers wants to go in his apologetic? Is this really the antithesis to which he wants to draw attention when deploying his apologetic talk points? I'm guessing Segers will not respond to such questions, even though they are crucially pertinent.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Dustin Segers](#), [Facts](#), [Objectivism](#), [Truth](#)