

Thursday, April 12, 2012

## Answering Dustin Segers' Presuppositionalism, Part IIIa: The Uniformity of Nature

I now continue with my series of responses to [several questions Christian apologist and "church-planter" Dustin Segers poses to atheists](#). This will be the third installment in this series. The first two included my responses to Segers' first two questions, which can be found here:

[Answering Dustin Segers' Presuppositionalism, Part I: Intro and the Nature of Truth](#)

[Answering Dustin Segers' Presuppositionalism, Part II: The Nature of Logic](#)

Let us now consider his third question:

3. Science - "How do you answer the problem of induction from a secular perspective?"

Ah, now this one's juicy!

Typically presuppositionalists bundle the problem of induction with questions about the uniformity of nature, and often give the impression of believing that satisfying those questions will be sufficient in answering the problem of induction. Of course, this is not the case. The uniformity of nature is a metaphysical concern (since nature exists independent of consciousness), while the problem of induction is primarily an epistemological matter (since induction is a form of cognitive activity). But I'm happy to explore all of these issues, probably well beyond Segers' own comfort level.

Because Segers' question raises issues in two distinct general categories - namely metaphysics and epistemology - I will break up my response to this question into two separate blog entries, the first devoted to the uniformity of nature, the second to the problem of induction as the Scottish philosopher David Hume informed it.

### The Uniformity of Nature

In regard to the uniformity of nature, presuppositionalists usually like to challenge non-believers to "account for" the uniformity of nature in a manner that is consistent with their non-Christian worldview, implying that such a feat is impossible. Regardless of specifically how we might articulate a definition of uniformity as it applies in this question (on this, see below), the first point to make note of in response to this line of inquiry is the fact that the uniformity we observe in nature *is not a product of conscious activity*, but is an *inherent* fact of existence which obtains independent of any conscious activity. The uniformity of nature is something we *discover*, first implicitly merely by perceiving, and then formally by means of conceptualizing what we perceive. It is not something we *impose* on nature by an act of will or wishing, nor is it something that results from our cognition, our believing, our denials, our wishing, our imagining, etc. Nature is thus *inherently* uniform.

This means that the uniformity we discover in nature is not a *product* of some prior activity of any kind, whether conscious or otherwise. To suppose that the uniformity of nature is an *effect* of some prior *cause* would commit the fallacy of the stolen concept, for it would need to presume the uniformity of the nature of the agent allegedly responsible for causing uniformity in nature. It would need to assume that causality as such is uniform prior to nature being uniform, when causality itself is part of nature. Recognizing nature is inherently uniform avoids this fallacy and commits no others. For instance, it does not beg the question, as presuppositionalists will likely contend in rehearsed fashion, since it is not an attempt to *prove* a conclusion by means of an inference which assumes the truth of that conclusion. We will shortly see that "uniformity" denotes facts about existence which are available to us as a comprehensive, inescapable integration of the Objectivist axioms, whose truths are perceptually self-evident and thus do not rest on inferences from prior facts. Indeed, there could be nothing more fundamental than existence.

So what do we mean by the phrase, "the uniformity of nature"? I have explored this matter already in my blog entry [The Uniformity of Nature](#), where I examine several presuppositionalist conceptions of what this means, and contrast them with the objective view on the matter. I quote from my discussion of what it means to say nature is

uniform:

Peikoff explains what is meant by the concept 'nature' as follows:

What is nature? Nature is existence—the sum of that which is. It is usually called “nature” when we think of it as a system of interconnected, interacting entities governed by law. So “nature” really means the universe of entities acting and interacting in accordance with their identities. ([The Philosophy of Objectivism, \(1976\) Lecture 2](#))

“Nature is existence,” says Peikoff. And he is right to say this. The *uniformity* of nature, then, is existence being itself. As Rand succinctly put it, “Existence is Identity” (*Atlas Shrugged*, [Galt’s Speech](#)). Nature is uniform with itself, since to exist is for something to be itself. If A exists, it must be A.

The uniformity of nature, then, is essentially the applicability of the axiom of existence to all of reality *and* the absolute (i.e., exceptionless) concurrence of identity with existence. Both of these aspects of the uniformity of nature are undeniable - that is, they cannot be denied without contradicting oneself. Since reality *is* the realm of existence, the axiom of existence necessarily applies to *all* of reality. Since reality is the realm of *existence*, existence and reality are concurrent *absolutely* - i.e., without exception.

Since to exist is to be something, if something exists, it is itself, it has identity, it has a nature. There’s nothing to gain by appealing to non-existence to “explain” the uniformity of nature, since there is no “non-existence” to appeal to in the first place. As Objectivism puts it, “existence exists - and only existence exists” (Leonard Peikoff, “The Analytic-Synthetic Dichotomy,” *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, p. 109).

Contrast this view with that espoused by the Christian worldview. Christianity, to the extent that it can be said to affirm the uniformity of nature, makes the uniformity of nature out to be a *product of conscious activity*. Some act of consciousness is said to be responsible for putting the uniformity we observe into nature; without that conscious activity, nature would be an unpredictable realm of random chaos.

Dustin Segers’ own fellow apologist, Sye Ten Bruggencate, has affirmed this view explicitly, namely that the uniformity of nature is a product of conscious activity. On the blog [An Atheist Viewpoint](#), I had asked Bruggencate the following question:

Do you think the uniformity of nature is caused by some form of conscious activity? Yes or no?

In response to this question, Bruggencate offered a terse, affirming answer:

Yes

When apologists raise the uniformity of nature as a debating point, it is important to get them to clarify from the outset whether or not they think the uniformity we observe in nature is a product of conscious action. It’s quite possible that apologists have not considered the matter from this explicit perspective before, so they may be reluctant to give an answer without hesitation or equivocation, especially if they sense the obvious subjectivism of such a position. (Indeed, Bruggencate resisted answering this question for quite a while before giving his syllable-deficient response.)

The difference between the Objectivist view and the Christian view on the uniformity of nature, then, is the difference between objectivity and subjectivism. Objectivism affirms an explicitly objective view of the uniformity of nature, making it unequivocally clear that the uniformity we observe in nature is not a product of conscious activity, but in fact is an inherent aspect of reality which obtains independent of any action of consciousness. Opposed to this view is that represented by Christianity, which explicitly bases the uniformity of nature on the conscious activity of some knowing subject, albeit one which is accessible only by the imagination. In other words, some *subject* of awareness is thought to hold metaphysical primacy over nature such that nature will be uniform so long as the subject wills it. Hence the Christian view of the uniformity of nature is a form of *subjectivism*.

It is hard to see how presuppositionalists could think that they might make apologetic gains by raising the uniformity of nature as a debating point, unless they either never thought about their position explicitly, or they hope their non-believing opponents would not raise the question of whether or not nature’s uniformity obtains independent of conscious activity. Curiously, while it is indisputable that the assumption that nature’s uniformity

is a product of some act of will is indeed lurking amongst the underlying presuppositions of the apologist's overall worldview, defenders of the Christian worldview present no arguments to validate this assumption. But we should not doubt for a second that this assumption is present in their position, and that this view is expressed in the Christian bible.

In *Pushing the Antithesis* (p. 195), Greg Bahnsen cites three verses from the New Testament to document the biblical view of the uniformity of nature. They are: Ephesians 1:11, Colossians 1:16-17, and Hebrews 1:3. "These verses," says Bahnsen, "account for the uniformity of nature" (thus giving us an example of what passes for an "account" among presuppositionalists).

Here they are in their full glory:

Ephesians 1:11: "in whom also we were made a heritage, having been foreordained according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his will;"

Colossians 1:16-17: "[16] for in him were all things created, in the heavens and upon the earth, things visible and things invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things have been created through him, and unto him; [17] and he is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

Hebrews 1:3: "who being the effulgence of his glory, and the very image of his substance, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had made purification of sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high;"

Bahnsen focuses on certain elements embedded within these verses (while the verses from both Ephesians and Colossians are themselves embedded in massive run-on sentences that would make the most laidback writing teacher blush with embarrassment). These elements are basically phrases stated in passing which assert the Christian god's guiding hand behind the workings of the universe, characterizing the Christian god as a micromanager busily toiling over every detail of every aspect of the "created realm," making sure all outcomes conform to its ultimate desires. Thus the Christian god is likened to [a cartoonist](#) creating a zany world of appearances and bizarre happenings, or a voyeuristic computer programmer controlling enormously complex simulation software a la *The Matrix* movie franchise.

The passages' dependence on the reader's imagination is thick throughout, since of course no one can actually witness the Christian god "upholding" or "sustaining" the uniformity which we do witness in nature. We have to imagine it in order to think it, and so this imagining would have to come before one could try to believe it. But either this does not bother Christians, or they simply do not realize that their faith is seated firmly in the fantasies of an active imagination.

The authors of these passages want to cover all bases, and therefore make sure their god's relationship to what believers confessionally call "the created realm" is characterized in terms of a variety of orientations, including temporal, proximal, purposive and internal relations. For instance, according to the passage which Bahnsen quotes from Colossians, the believer is to imagine that "all things have been created through" the Christian god, "in" the Christian god, and also "unto" it; that the Christian god's "Son" is "before all things" and that "all things hold together" in this being. Bahnsen likewise puts great stock in the Ephesians passage, which holds that the Christian god (as "Christ") "worketh all things after the counsel of his will." The Hebrews verse makes similarly explicit overture to the primacy of the will of the Christian god over the realm of facts, stating that its abilities include "upholding all things by the word of his power."

So there is biblical evidence after all that the Christian worldview characterizes the uniformity of nature as, at the very least, a product of the Christian god's conscious activity.

It is at times unclear whether or not presuppositionalists think we can discover their god's "sustaining" activity in imposing uniformity on nature through observing nature itself (so-called "general revelation") or specifically by appeal to "Scripture." Brian Knapp, for instance, in his paper titled "Induction and the Unbeliever," makes the following point for presuppositional apologetics:

...consider the case where we accept the Bible's teaching on God as creator and sustainer, but choose to leave out God's desire to reveal himself to us through his creation. In this case, although the universe has

been created and sustained in a uniform manner, there would be no reason to think that we could ever know this fact. It is only by presupposing all that the Bible has to say about God, ourselves, the universe around us, and how they all interrelate that we have a meaningful answer to the problem at hand. (*The Portable Presuppositionalist*, p. 133)

This proposal leaves the matter rather ambiguous whether or not the author thinks we can discover facts in the universe, apart from the influence of “Scripture,” which point to its observed uniformity originating in the activity of a supernatural consciousness. On the one hand, Knapp refers to his god’s “desire to reveal himself to us through his creation” - which implies he believes that we might be able to make such discoveries about the uniformity of nature being a product of conscious activity by looking at nature apart from the influence of biblical texts (since “his creation” presumably refers to nature itself). On the other hand, what Knapp’s scenario involves “leaving out” is this alleged “desire” on the part of his god “to reveal” itself to human beings, and yet it is out of “the Bible’s teaching on God as creator and sustainer” that Knapp’s proposal for consideration has us “leave” that alleged desire “out.” In other words, where would one learn about this “desire” allegedly belonging to the Christian god to reveal itself to human thinkers, if not in the bible (“Scripture”) itself? Although ambiguous statements like this are not uncommon, it does after mulling them around indeed seem that even presuppositionalists themselves would concede that it would not be possible to infer the existence of a supernatural agent “sustaining” the uniformity of nature through some mental process apart from the suggestions and influence of the Christian storybook.

In any case, since on the Christian view, nature is not *inherently* uniform, it leaves us with the only possible supposition on the matter: *according to Christianity, nature is not actually uniform to begin with*. On the Christian view, the natural realm is essentially formless, identity-less, nature-less, and consequently it requires some magic consciousness to come along and give it form, identity, nature, essentially by [wishing](#). This conscious being is imagined as having the power to make its wishes automatically become fact, and believers will not allow any supposition which suggests that its wishful powers are constrained in any manner against this by some external factor which limits its activity. The size, shape and nature of the universe are the result of unbridled supernatural whim let loose on it.

But let’s step back a bit and widen our lens here. Note that Christians who raise the question of the uniformity of nature imply that they believe nature really is uniform, and go on to assert that “only” the Christian worldview can “account for” this, namely by assuming that nature is not inherently uniform and by asserting that their god consciously imposes uniformity on nature by some mysterious power of will. When [asked whether or not he thinks the universe is “truly uniform,”](#) for instance, Sye Ten Bruggencate answered with an unqualified “Yes.” Of course, by affirming that the universe is “truly uniform,” Bruggencate implies that it is *absolutely* uniform, unless of course he rejects the view that truth is absolute. I’m glad this isn’t my problem!

At any rate, that nature is initially presumed by the general populace to be uniform in the first place, is vital to the presuppositionalist approach of challenging the non-believer to account for the presuppositions of science, since non-believers frequently appeal to science in defense of their atheism. The presuppositionalist seeks to execute a controlled demolition of the very ground upon which non-believers build their worldview and from which they criticize the religious view of the world. In this way they are essentially out to destroy the non-believer’s foundations of thought, regardless of what they may be (whether or not those foundations are *true* is not a concern for the apologist; they are assumed to be false by virtue of the non-believer’s rejection of Christianity, or if their truth is granted, they are said to point to Christianity and are only being “borrowed” by the non-Christian) in order to create a vacuum in the non-believer’s cognition into which the apologist can insert his god-belief as the element that’s been missing all along.

And indeed, presuppositionalists acknowledge the dependence of science on the uniformity of nature. Greg Bahnsen, for instance, tells us:

Science is absolutely dependent upon this uniformity because without it we could not infer from past events what we can expect under like circumstances in the future. Physical science absolutely requires the ability to predict the future action of material entities. Scientific experimentation, theorizing, and prediction would be impossible were nature non-uniform. Scientific investigation is only possible in an orderly, rational, coherent, unified system. (*Pushing the Antithesis*, p. 187)

Similarly, presuppositionalist Brian Knapp writes:

Ask yourself this question: what must be true in order for inductive reasoning to be a meaningful process? What is it that is foundational to the ability to make generalizations about particular observations, and then proceed as if those generalizations have any applicability to that which is yet to be experienced?

There is at least one necessary precondition: nature must be uniform. Nature must proceed to operate according to the same laws it has operated according to in the past - laws which determine the effects which arise from a given cause or set of causes. After all, if there are no laws according to which the universe operates, then it is not reasonable to expect that any cause/effect relationship I have observed in the past will repeat itself in the future[5] since these relationship are contingent upon these very laws. (“ Induction and the Unbeliever,” *The Portable Presuppositionalist*, pp. 121-122)

Presuppositionalists essentially argue that the uniformity which we observe in nature is evidence of the Christian god. As Bahnsen goes on to explain:

The uniformity of nature is perfectly compatible... with the Christian worldview. The absolute, all-creating, sovereignly-governing God reveals to us in Scripture that we can count on regularities in the world. The Bible teaches us that the sun will continue to measure time for us on the earth (Gen. 1:14-19; Eccl. 1:5; Jer. 33:20), that seasons will come and go uniformly (Gen. 8:22; Ps. 74:17), that planting and harvest cycles may be expected (Jer. 5:24; Mark 4:26-29), and so forth. Because of this God-governed regularity in nature, the scientific enterprise is possible and even fruitful. (Op. cit., pp. 194-195)

These sources plainly tell us that Christians subscribe to the uniformity of nature, that science necessarily depends on nature being uniform, and that only Christianity can “account for” this. They seem to offer no word on whether or not they will allow the view that the uniformity of nature to be discoverable simply by looking at nature, or if they think one needs to consult the bible to know this in the first place.

Ironically, there seems to be little uniformity among Christians on a more fundamental matter, namely whether or not nature is uniform to begin with. The sources cited in the foregoing have consistently affirmed that nature is in fact uniform. One source affirmed that nature is *truly* uniform (implying that it is therefore *absolutely* uniform; another emphasized science’s “absolute dependence” on the uniformity of nature; another affirms that nature being uniform is a “necessary precondition” for any inductive generalization; and yet another baldly states that “the uniformity of nature is perfectly compatible... with the Christian worldview.”

But internet apologist Steve Hays seems to disagree with the view that Christianity holds that nature is uniform. By contrast, Hays states (referring to Christians as a whole):

We don’t subscribe to the uniformity of nature. ([The problem of induction](#))

Hays contrasts the uniformity of nature with “ordinary providence,” which, he says, “allows for miracles.” For Hays, it’s not enough merely to *observe* “natural regularities.” No, the Christian needs a supernatural authority to guarantee them (allowing for the exception of miracles, of course), for “that’s the kind of world which God made for us to inhabit” - an allegation whose truth itself cannot be discovered by observing reality. Of course, without the uniformity of nature, where does that leave science? As we saw above, presuppositionalist guru Greg Bahnsen himself affirmed that “[s]cience is absolutely dependent upon this uniformity because without it we could not infer from past events what we can expect under like circumstances in the future” (*Pushing the Antithesis*, p. 187). So the more Christianity’s explicitly subjective conception of the universe and what is commonly taken as uniformity in nature is endorsed, the more science is shown the proverbial door.

Since the uniformity of nature is pushed aside in favor of “ordinary providence” in order to “allow for miracles,” it should be noted that the Christian doctrine of miracles only causes havoc with the view that nature is uniform. Greg Bahnsen tell us that

Miracles, by definition, are *rare* divine, particular interventions in nature that are appropriately called in Scripture “signs” or “wonders” due to their overriding natural law. (Op. cit., p. 187n.1)

On the Christian view, then, since miracles are a distinctive aspect of the Christian worldview (“miracles are at the heart of the Christian position” - Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 27; quoted in full [here](#)), natural law can be “overridden,” namely by some act of consciousness (e.g., wishing, imagining, commanding, wanting, etc.). Some, like Hays, I suspect, would probably even reject this characterization, since it implies that



uniformity is the norm, while they would maintain that “ordinary providence” is the norm. But either way, on the Christian view, not only is nature not *inherently* uniform, but any uniformity that we believe we observe can be turned on and off at will by the ruling consciousness. This can only mean that nature is not *reliably* uniform, it is not *absolutely* uniform, it is not *truly* uniform. Indeed, if the regularities we seem to observe obtain over a period of time, it’s really just by *chance* - from the human perspective anyway - that the ruling consciousness has chosen not to intervene miraculously and interrupt those regularities from persisting.

Of course, some would argue that miracles do not “by definition” involve “overriding” or violating natural law (see for example Steve Hays’ blog [Breaking the laws of nature](#)). So I admit that it’s hard to find consistency within the Christian position. It seems that, because of various stubborn ambiguities within the bible itself and in formalized playbooks, not to mention the underlying contradictory nature of the Christian worldview itself, Christian apologists have a hard time squaring the positions they affirm with one another. It seems this would not be the case if in fact they were all being guided by some supernatural “spirit” which, in the words of internet apologist Joshua Whipps (of the [Choosing Hats](#) crowd), is

the equivalent of having the author of the book standing over your shoulder, and correcting your faulty understandings, and continually adjusting your noetic “issues” as He also works to sanctify you in obedience to that revealed Word. ([Debate Transcript](#))

Perhaps Whipps, who posts under the moniker “RazorsKiss,” is right when he tells us that

Inconsistency is the sign of a failed argument. (See his 30 Mar ’12 comment on [this blog entry](#).)

There is a point, however, at which both the Christian understanding of the uniformity of nature and the doctrine of miracles do find agreement, and that is in their presupposition of the primacy of consciousness. Any uniformity which we observe in nature, even if it is only “generally” uniform, and the miracles which the Christian storybook affirm as actual historical events, are all the result of an act of consciousness which has the power to conform existence to its whims. In this sense, Hays’ affirmed view above seems the most internally consistent so far. This is consistent with [the cartoon universe premise of theism](#): any regularity we see in a cartoon is just as much a result of the cartoonist’s whims as are the absurdities which contrast against those regularities.

Of course, just in saying that any of this is *true*, the Christian presuppositionally contradicts himself, for the very concept of truth necessarily presupposes the primacy of existence, which automatically refutes any expression of the primacy of consciousness. When one says that something is true, he is typically saying that what he says is true is not true simply because he *wishes* or *wants* it to be the case, but rather because what he says presumably corresponds in an objective matter to the facts he aims to identify. I have already demonstrated that [Christian theism violates the primacy of existence](#) and have successfully argued that [god-belief is inherently subjective](#), given its dependence on the primacy of consciousness.

Meanwhile, Christians offer no rational justification for their assumption that the uniformity which we observe in nature is the product of conscious activity, even though their worldview clearly requires this to be the case. Indeed, they do not seem to recognize the [stolen concept](#) inherent in supposing that the uniformity of nature is the product of some prior *cause*.

So the concept of the uniformity of nature will only cause problems for the Christian if it is examined *objectively*. Moreover, he will be unable to find any inconsistency in the view that nature is *inherently* uniform (as can be seen [here](#)). So the Objectivist is on safe ground when it comes to the uniformity of nature, while the Christian position is layered with internal inconsistencies, contradictions to known facts, and outright absurdities. Thus the presuppositionalist’s aim to steer the debate to this matter is welcomed.

by Dawson Bethrick