

Friday, May 20, 2005

Arbitrary Presupposition vs. Reasoned Conclusion

Christian apologists have come to use the term "presupposition" so loosely that it is not always clear what precisely they mean by it. But the intended approximate meaning is evidently some very basic assumption or "belief" that governs all or most all other positions in one's worldview. Apologist John Frame defines 'presupposition' as "the belief that governs all other beliefs, or the most fundamental commitment of the heart" ([A Van Til Glossary](#)), which clearly suggests a belief or position held at the foundational level of one's thinking. Apologist Greg Bahnsen wants to equate "presuppositions" with "elementary assumptions." (*Always Ready*, p. 13.) Both authorities on presuppositional apologetics thus agree that the term 'presupposition' as they use it refers to some very basic affirmation that serves as a foundation in one's thinking.

In [his Aug. 3, 2004 online radio discussion](#) with non-Christian scientist Zachary Moore, [Unchained Radio](#) host and Christian pastor Gene Cook of 'The Narrow Mind' insisted on speaking for Moore's position, a common apologetic practice. "See," said Cook, "we both have presuppositions. Yours is now that the Bible is not true." As a presuppositional apologist, Cook has a motive for making such a charge: he wants to debate with Moore's position as a non-believer on the assumption that non-belief in the Christian worldview is no less arbitrary than the Christian's own position. The effect is to put both positions, the Christian and the non-Christian, on the same level for the purpose of taking control of the issue, when in fact they do not enjoy the same level in the hierarchy of ideas.

In this blog I will show that the judgment that the bible is not true is not a presupposition in the sense that it is 1) a starting point, 2) an unargued conclusion, 3) an emotional prejudice or 4) an "ultimate commitment." In a following blog I will show why Gene Cook's presupposition that the bible is true, is arbitrary and rationally untenable.

1) Why "the Bible is not true" is not a presupposition in the sense of a starting point:

My starting point is not the statement "the Bible is not true." On the contrary, I start with the axioms - existence, identity, consciousness, and their logical corollaries and implications. I would agree that these axioms, taken in their full context, do in fact imply that Christian theism is false, but they also imply that Islam, Hinduism and virtually any other form of mysticism are false as well, since they imply the falsity of all forms of mysticism as such. (This would most likely irk Gene Cook since he'd probably rather not view Christianity as just one more variant of mysticism, while I see them, philosophically speaking, as kissing cousins to one another.) Also, the statement "the Bible is not true" could not in any way qualify as a conceptual starting point, for its terms assume prior concepts. We know this because certain terms in that statement can (and must - in order to have meaning) be defined in terms of prior concepts. We have the concept of a bible which refers not just to a stack of papers bound together on one side, but to an enormous sum of claims ranging a broad spectrum of topics, from history to morality to genealogies to predictions to cosmology, etc. Those claims do not make statements that are verified by direct perception, so each one of them would have to be argued for if one were to accept them as truth. So the concept of 'bible' is certainly not irreducible. Nor is the concept 'true' irreducible; it too must be defined in terms of prior concepts for it to be meaningful. Furthermore, the human mind starts by affirming - namely what it is directly and immediately aware of - not by negating. We don't start by saying "Not X," but by affirming what we directly perceive in the form of a general statement, such as "there is a reality" or as Rand put it "existence exists." Where religion obscures this foundation, Objectivism makes it explicit and unmistakable. So the statement "the Bible is not true" is not a "presupposition" if by "presupposition" one means a starting point.

2) Why "the Bible is not true" is not a presupposition in the sense of an unargued conclusion:

It is not difficult to assemble arguments which are wholly consistent with the axioms mentioned above and the system they imply, and which also show why the bible is not true. Those arguments can be against the philosophical content of religions based on the bible's teachings, or they can be against the historical claims that are found in the pages of the bible. Many persons who conclude that the bible is not true base that conclusion on such arguments. For instance, one can argue against the bible on the basis that its philosophy assumes a false metaphysics, namely the primacy of consciousness. This is a particularly effective way to argue against the bible since one would have to assume the truth of its opposite - the primacy of existence - in order to assemble and deploy any defensive arguments on behalf of a bible-based worldview. Also, one can argue that much of the content which is found in the bible is legendary in nature by exposing the progressive steps its authors took as their stories

grew wider and wider in legend, thus showing why one should not accept its historical claims as truth. Moreover, the claim that the bible is true assumes that the bible is internally uniform, and this is untenable (see these essays by [G.A. Wells](#)). So the claim "the Bible is not true" is not a presupposition in the sense of an unargued conclusion. In fact, it is a conclusion that can be soundly defended on a philosophical basis which even Christians have to assume and make use of in order to think at all.

3) Why "the Bible is not true" is not a presupposition in the sense of an emotional prejudice:

In my worldview, emotions are not the arbiter of truth. On the contrary, reason is our only guide to knowledge and truth. In fact, people believe the bible either because they find some of its claims comforting for some reason, or because they're afraid its threats might be true. Consequently, if any worldview can be said to be based on an appeal to emotion, it is the one that takes the bible seriously for such reasons.

Contrary to the supposition that all atheists are atheists on account of their emotions, many atheists themselves are in fact former believers whose deconversion was a very painful emotional process. Many persons who were nurtured on the idea that there is a cosmic father figure watching over them and caring for their needs and directing their future course, experienced deep personal trauma when they discovered that there is no such thing and had to face the fact that they have to look out for themselves. Indeed, those who once thought that they could count on prayers to overcome obstacles or cure diseases or other ailments, are often left intensely disappointed when they realize that prayer not only fails, but that recourse to prayer can only imply intellectual surrender in life (which is essentially what presuppositionalism encourages when it speaks against so-called "autonomous reasoning").

Many theists argue that individuals turn atheist because are put off by religion's strict prohibitions on certain kinds of actions, particularly those which result in personal pleasure, sexual or otherwise (even though Psalms 115:3 makes it clear that pleasure is the Christian god's sole guide to action). This not only ignores the fact that the church is full of hypocrites - people who claim to be believers but who also thwart religious behavior codes as a matter of habit, it also suggests that theists who make such arguments consider a life without the threat of dreadful god-beliefs looming overhead to be a life of sheer indulgence, irresponsibility and hedonism. In actuality, however, quite the opposite is normally the case. Leading one's own life apart from pre-packaged behavioral imperatives issued on pretended authority typically means taking responsibility for one's own choices and actions. The overall effect of religious moral codes essentially reduces man to a sheepish robot, mindlessly obeying commandments out of fear of punishment and concerned primarily with pleasing an insatiable, unchanging deity whose attributes can only be imagined and never perceived. The threat of eternal damnation can be extremely powerful, emotionally speaking, to those who take it seriously. The bible even admits that its epistemological basis is emotional in nature when it tells us that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7). And fear of course is an emotion. And we should not forget that, for those who seek the unearned, the idea that forgiveness of wrongdoings and moral shortcomings can be had just for the asking (cf. I John 1:9) may in fact be too enticing to resist; and for those who feel guilty simply because they exist, may in fact be suckers for the promise of unearned forgiveness. Unsurprisingly, since theists have to assume the truth of at least the basic core of the rational atheist's worldview (e.g., the axioms, the primacy of reason in goal-oriented action, etc.), theistic apologists in fact have a hard time contending that non-believing worldviews are false on the basis of anything more than that they find any alternative to their own worldview depressing. For instance, in [his response to a quote by a non-Christian thinker](#), Christian apologist Paul Manata finds that he can only say "oh, what a sad and pathetic worldview." Apparently he cannot assemble any serious argument against the views he disdains so furiously.

4) Why "the Bible is not true" is not a presupposition in the sense of an "ultimate commitment":

Many presuppositionalists want to understand the term 'presupposition' to refer to an ultimate commitment, as Frame puts it, "the most fundamental commitment of the heart." This characterization strongly resembles what a rational thinker would mean by starting point, which would make it susceptible to the same objections noted above. Does the conclusion that "the Bible is not true" constitute "the most fundamental commitment of the heart"? Not if it is a conclusion to prior argument. Nevertheless, apologists who insist that the statement "the Bible is not true" constitutes the atheist's "most fundamental commitment of the heart" would have to explain why the statement "the Quran is not true" would not be one as well. Christians tend to give their own particular religion's views a biased preference over other religious views, sometimes acting as if theirs were the only religious worldview available, even though those views share many essentials in common with other religions, such as belief in the supernatural beings, miracles, life beyond the grave, commandment-driven morality, endorsement of self-sacrifice and self-immolation, etc. While Christian believers tend to view worldview conflicts in terms of Christian vs. non-Christian, rational persons view worldview conflicts in terms of rational vs. irrational. Accordingly, Christians tend to view fundamental commitments in terms of pro-Jesus vs. anti-Jesus (cf. Mt. 12:30) and pro-doctrine vs. anti-doctrine, while rational persons view fundamental commitments in terms of pro-reason vs. anti-reason and pro-value vs. anti-value. Intellectually, man has a fundamental choice: to think or to evade thinking. If he chooses to think, by what ultimate standard will he guide his thinking:

by reason, or by anti-reason? And what principle will guide his actions: one that is pro-value, or one that is anti-value? The religious believer has made his ultimate choice: he has chosen to go with anti-reason and anti-value. He has made this choice by virtue of his commitment to a faith-based worldview which logically leads to self-sacrifice. And although an atheist's non-belief does not guarantee that he will guide his thinking by reason, an atheist does not need to embrace a faith-based worldview. On the contrary, he is free to choose a rational worldview. Rationality is one's commitment to reason as his only means of knowledge and his only guide to action. So for those atheists who embrace a rational worldview, their "ultimate commitment," intellectually speaking, is to reason, for their "ultimate commitment," metaphysically speaking, is to life as an end in itself.

The only rational conclusion to draw, then, is that there are strong grounds on which to contest Gene Cook's charge that the atheist's judgment "the Bible is not true" is a "presupposition" in the senses considered here. The only sense that this judgment could be considered to be "presuppositional" in nature, is as part of a much broader context on which subsequent conclusions are drawn. But such cases do not entail that this judgment is baseless, untenable or acceptable only on faith. For instance, one can establish the fact that "the Bible is not true" as a conclusion stemming from prior facts (such as those to which I alluded above), and then incorporate this truth as a premise in drawing the subsequent conclusion that it would be wrong to teach biblical ideas as truth to young, impressionable children. Only in this restricted sense, one could call such a truth a "presupposition" in the functional sense of a logically relevant antecedent fact. For instance, consider the following argument, noting the embedded sub-argument and its conclusion's presuppositional function in supporting the conclusion of the larger argument:

- 1) If a particular viewpoint or set of claims is not true, it would be wrong to teach philosophically defenseless children that that viewpoint or set of claims is true.
 - 2) The bible is not true.
 - a) Any set of teachings that assumes the truth of the primacy of consciousness metaphysics is not true.
 - b) The bible is a set of teachings that assumes the truth of the primacy of consciousness metaphysics.
- Subconclusion: Therefore, the bible is not true.

Conclusion: Therefore, it is wrong to teach philosophically defenseless children that the bible is true.

In this argument, we see that the truth that the bible is not true is presuppositional to the conclusion that it is wrong to teach philosophically defenseless children that the bible is true. But since this truth is supported by inference from more fundamental truths, it is clearly not a presupposition in the sense of a starting point, an unargued conclusion, an emotional prejudice, or an "ultimate commitment." But this is unsettling to apologists, for they want their religious teachings to be true, and they want others to take them seriously, even though they cannot show them to be true. Thus they are motivated to cast the atheist's judgments in a bad light and ridicule them with the pejorative notion that they are borne on untenable prejudice, which in fact appropriately describes the apologist's own commitment to theism, which I will show in my next blog.

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [7:45 PM](#)

1 Comments:

[Zachary Moore](#) said...

Dawson-

A well-written entry. Wish you could have called in to that show!

[May 21, 2005 2:50 AM](#)