

## Bahnsen's Poof Revisited

BJ of [Men of Athens](#) recently sent the following comment in response to one of my earliest blogs, [Bahnsen's Poof](#):

Hi, I just read your blog and I think you are misreading or not hearing the argument that Bahnsen is making...so let me help you...the thrust of the argument (TAG) says that without the truth of the christian God being presupposed nothing can be proven at all. Now how should an atheist understand this? Easy. Given the most fundamental assumptions about reality that the atheist "HAS" he now should reflect on those basic presuppositions and he will realize that given his presuppositions science, logic, and morality would be "impossible". In the correspondence that followed the debate between Stein and Bahnsen, Bahnsen again showed Stein that his atheistic worldview could not even allow him to make sense out of balancing his checkbook. As in the debate Stein kept appealing to the notion that atheists do have morality, science, and logic. Bahnsen rightly would point out to Stein that he could not use such tools for human experience to be intelligible if his worldview were "true". POOF....Christianity is true because of the impossibility of the contrary. In its technical form it is an "reductio ad absurdum" argument. If P then Q, P therefore Q or If morality, science, and logic are the case (P) then Q (Christianity) has to be affirmed as logically necessary "because" ("because" clause is vital here)Q is the precondition of P. That is the indirect argument. Now, how is that bold assertion proved? Assume not Q (in this case non-christianity)and then look for internal contradictions within a particular worldview for it to refute itself. If you do not understand Kant then the odds are you will not understand what Van Til was up to. Basically atheism can not provide the preconditions for logic, science, or morality to have any "meaning" to our human experience. [sic]

In this blog entry I will interact with BJ's statements.

BJ: "Hi, I just read your blog and I think you are misreading or not hearing the argument that Bahnsen is making...so let me help you..."

BJ apparently wants to say that the conclusion of my analysis of Bahnsen's opening statement in his debate with Stein is wrong. My conclusion was that Bahnsen failed to present an argument in his opening statement. This conclusion was established as the result of a line-by-line analysis of the last paragraphs of Bahnsen's statement, for which - as an opening statement in a debate on the existence of the Christian god - Bahnsen should have been most prepared to present. In fact, since he begins these last few paragraphs with the statement "And so I come thirdly then to the transcendental proof of God's existence," we would naturally expect Bahnsen to use this opportunity to present any argument he might have. But instead of presenting an argument for his claim that his god exists, Bahnsen launches right into accusing Stein of two fallacies, even though Stein hasn't even had a chance to speak yet! (Did Bahnsen feel a need to poison the well at this early point in the debate?) He then tells us that his god-belief "is not tested in any ordinary way like other factual claims." So there are all these reasons why we should not expect to validate Bahnsen's theistic claims in ways that other claims can be validated. And yet in spite of such limitations he still wants to say it's a fact that his god exists. Does Bahnsen explain how his theistic claims can be confirmed and verified? No, he doesn't do this - he just tells us how they can't be verified. He then tells us that "we can prove the existence of God from the impossibility of the contrary," which he nowhere establishes, and which conflicts with teachings which are explicitly laid out in the New Testament (see below). Bahnsen asserts that "without Him, it is impossible to prove anything." But upon what this statement is based is never explained. It sounds like a conclusion, but no argument is given to support it. In fact, the statement assumes that Bahnsen's god exists, which is precisely what Bahnsen is called to prove. Does he offer a proof? No, he doesn't. Rather, he goes on to charge "the atheist world-view" with all kinds of failings, as if this served as a proof of the Christian god's existence.

Given that the conclusion of my analysis is that Bahnsen did not present an actual argument for the existence of his god in his opening statement, to show that my conclusion is wrong BJ would have to identify an argument present in Bahnsen's opening statement. Does BJ do this? No, he does not. Instead of identifying any traceable argument in Bahnsen's opening statement, BJ says that he thinks I am "misreading or not hearing the argument that Bahnsen is making." (So it's my fault!) But if there's no argument presented, then obviously I cannot "misread" or "hear" something that's not there. What specifically am I "misreading or not hearing"? I reviewed Bahnsen's own comments from his opening statement - the statement for which he would have been most prepared to present. In my analysis, I showed that there is no argument since the apparent conclusion (which, in the case of an argument for the existence of a god should be something along the lines of "therefore god exists") has no inferential support to be

found in Bahnsen's opening statement. Nothing in BJ's comment to me overcomes this. One cannot insert an inference into Bahnsen's statement when there's no inference there as that would simply constitute tampering with the evidence.

BJ: "the thrust of the argument (TAG) says that without the truth of the christian God being presupposed nothing can be proven at all."

That's the "thrust of the argument"? Exactly what is meant by the term "thrust" here? My concern is not to find out how Bahnsen blasted himself into orbit, but to uncover any inferential support that Bahnsen might have given for the claim that the Christian god exists in the first place. The "thrust" of his non-argument may consist of the *claim* that the Christian god exists. But a claim is not an argument. What I'm looking for is the *argument* which Bahnsen might have presented. His conclusion is clear enough, but what were his premises? For instance, what premises support the claim that "without the truth of the christian God being presupposed nothing can be proven at all"? Since this claim itself assumes what Bahnsen is called to prove, all that such claims accomplish is to multiply the apologist's burden of proof while failing to meet any burdens already sitting in his cart.

BJ: "Now how should an atheist understand this? Easy. Given the most fundamental assumptions about reality that the atheist 'HAS' he now should reflect on those basic presuppositions and he will realize that given his presuppositions science, logic, and morality would be 'impossible'."

Before addressing the points here, it should be pointed out that, had Bahnsen presented a clear argument for his god's existence, BJ's statements here would not be necessary. Also, it should be pointed out that BJ's statement here does nothing to rescue Bahnsen from the verdicts of my analysis. All that BJ succeeds in doing here is to give his own interpretation of TAG. But this does not get Bahnsen off the hook. Moreover, any problems which any particular atheist's "presuppositions" might have, whether actual or hypothetical, are irrelevant to the matter, for it does not follow from an instance of error in a non-believer's view of the world that the Christian god therefore exists. This would make said god's existence contingent on someone's intellectual error, and typically theists claim that their god's existence is absolute rather than contingent. So we have here already an instance in which the presuppositional apologetic is incompatible with the theism which it purports to defend (since presuppositionalism depends on the discovery of errors in rival worldviews). In spite of this, the typical habit of presuppositional apologists is to dwell on their resentment of what they call "the atheist world-view" rather than identify in clear terms why they believe what they claim to believe.

Turning now to BJ's own points, I offer the following points in return.

BJ seems to think that, as an atheist, I should consider my "most fundamental assumptions about reality" and subject them to scrutiny. I have no objection to this recommendation. In fact, it is a challenge which my "most fundamental assumptions about reality" are quite prepared to satisfy fully. That is because my "most fundamental assumptions about reality" are made explicit by the axioms as opposed to hiding in some dark cave of mysticism. (I respond to criticism of my worldview's axioms in my blog post [Probing Mr. Manata's Poor Understanding of the Axioms.](#))

Specifically, my axioms are:

- 1) that existence exists (i.e., there is a reality),
- 2) that to exist is to be something (A is A, the law of identity), and
- 3) that consciousness is consciousness of something (the axiom of consciousness).

These axioms would have to be true even to deny them. In order to deny these axioms, there would have to be a reality which serves as a point of reference, the axioms would have to have identity (so that there is something that is being denied), and there would have to be someone who is conscious to do the denying (since denial is a conscious activity). Together these axioms imply a general, inescapable principle known as the primacy of existence - that is, that existence exists independent of consciousness, which means: the object(s) of consciousness holds metaphysical primacy over the subject of consciousness. This is the objective orientation of the subject-object relationship. The only alternative to this is the opposite view - that the subject of consciousness holds metaphysical primacy over its objects (such as when the Christian god creates the universe ex nihilo by an act of will, or causes an entity to behave in a manner that is contradictory to its nature by an act of will - cf. the doctrine of miracles).

Now, let's do as BJ recommends, namely "reflect on those basic presuppositions," and see if "given [these] presuppositions science, logic, and morality would be 'impossible'." First let's look at science. (By science I generally

mean the systematic application of reason to specific areas of study based on controlled observations.) Does science presuppose that existence exists, i.e., that there is a reality? Sure it does. Without something that exists, there would be nothing for science to study. Does science presuppose that a thing has identity? Sure it does. If things existed but did not have identity, scientific study would be futile for it could yield no reliable conclusions. If the things that exist had no identity, then there would be nothing specific to observe. Does science presuppose that consciousness is consciousness of something? Sure it does. If consciousness were consciousness of nothing, then what faculty would make scientific inquiry possible? Non-consciousness? And if there were no consciousness at all, what would do the observing? Clearly scientific inquiry requires consciousness of things that exist, for science inherently involves observation of objects. So science requires the truth of the axioms.

Now let's look at logic. (By logic I generally mean a set of principles that guide the mind in forming non-contradictory identifications.) Does logic presuppose that existence exists, that there is a reality? Sure it does. If nothing exists, then logic doesn't exist, either. And if nothing existed, there'd be nothing to be logical about, and there'd be no one to think logically. So logic undeniably presupposes the first axiom. Does logic presuppose that things have identity? Sure it does. The very foundation of logic is the law of identity, that things are what they are, that to exist is to be something specific, that a thing is itself, that A is A. It is because things are what they are that the principles of logic can be applied in the first place. Does logic presuppose that consciousness is consciousness of something? Sure it does. It would be illogical to say that consciousness can be consciousness of nothing. The alternative to consciousness of something is consciousness of nothing. This would mean that there is no object to consider. But without an object to consider, what would be considered? Obviously nothing. And if nothing were considered, there would be nothing to think about logically. Thus there would be nothing to which logical principles could be applied. So like science, logic clearly requires the truth of the axioms.

Now let's look at morality. (By morality I generally mean a code of values which guides one's choices and actions.) Does morality presuppose that existence exists, that there is a reality? Sure it does. If nothing exists, then man does not exist, and consequently the fundamental alternative between life and death which he faces and which makes morality a necessity for him does not exist. This would mean that there would be no basis or need for morality. Does morality presuppose that a thing has identity? Sure it does. Specifically it presupposes that man and his environment have identity, and with this that man's identity is such that he faces a fundamental alternative, namely between life and death. If man did not face this alternative, he would not need a code of values which guides his choices and actions. Does morality presuppose consciousness? Sure it does. Since man's moral actions are chosen, he could not make choices if he did not have a conscious faculty which could identify alternatives and make selections among them in the first place. Clearly, morality presupposes the truth of the axioms.

So in the case of science, logic and morality, it should be clear: my "most fundamental assumptions about reality" would have to be true for these endeavors to be possible in the first place. By retortion (presumably a technique championed by presuppositionalists), let's deny these fundamentals and see if science, logic and morality can survive. Let's deny the first fundamental, the axiom of existence. Let's say there's no existence. Well, just by saying "there's no existence," we've already contradicted ourselves, for we would have to exist in order to say this. Since science does not stand on contradictions, this could not be true. Thus the axiom of existence would have to be true in order for science to be possible. The same outcome would be the case for logic as well: logic does not rest on self-contradiction. Nor does morality. Indeed, if existence did not exist, there would be no science, no logic and no morality. So by retortion the axiom of existence must be true for science, logic and morality to be legitimate human concerns.

Let's try denying the second fundamental, the axiom of identity. Let's say that to exist is not to be something. If this were the case, then what would do science? We could not say that man will do science, for this presupposes that man is man, that a thing that exists is something specific and has specific attributes (such as a conscious faculty). And what would be observed and studied, if to exist is not to be something? We could not say that we would observe and study things that exist, for this presupposes that things are what they are, that they have a nature. What would do any logical thinking if things that exist had no identity? We could not say that man does the logical thinking, for this assumes that man is something specific, namely an entity capable of performing logical thought. And what use would morality serve? Morality is only useful to man because of his specific nature: he faces a fundamental alternative and his life is not automatically guaranteed to him - he must act in accordance with his nature in order to live because of his nature. So by retortion the axiom of identity must be true for science, logic and morality to be legitimate human concerns.

Now let's try denying the third fundamental, the axiom of consciousness. Let's say that consciousness is consciousness of nothing. That would mean that consciousness is irrelevant. (For to say that consciousness is consciousness of nothing is to assert consciousness without a relationship to any object to perceive and/or

consider.) If consciousness were irrelevant, what would do the observing and studying that science requires? Obviously nothing, for on this view consciousness has been denied. So science presupposes consciousness of objects. What about logic? Could there be any use for logic if consciousness had no objects? This would mean that there is nothing for a consciousness to be logical about. Since logic requires objects to provide content to our identifications, inferences, deductions, etc., logic presupposes consciousness of objects. What about morality? Could there be any morality if we were not conscious of objects? If it were the case that we were not conscious of objects, we would not be able to identify either values or potential threats. Thus we would not be able to identify the kinds of actions we need to take in order to obtain and protect our values and avoid destructive threats. Consequently morality, too, presupposes consciousness of objects. So by retortion the axiom of consciousness must be true for science, logic and morality to be legitimate human concerns.

So by the presuppositionalist's own standard, the argument by retortion, the axioms obtain, and their denial would constitute their very validation at the same time (which means: denial of the axioms results in absurdity). Contrary to what the presuppositionalist would like to see, "the most fundamental assumptions about reality" made by my worldview are validated by the presuppositionalist's own preferred form of testing.

BJ: "In the correspondence that followed the debate between Stein and Bahnsen, Bahnsen again showed Stein that his atheistic worldview could not even allow him to make sense out of balancing his checkbook."

This point is not relevant to my post, since my post was concerned with whether or not Bahnsen presented a proof for his god's existence in his opening statement, or if he simply offered a poof - i.e., a series of assertions which are presented on the pretense that they offer an argument when in fact the speaker offers no argument whatsoever. As for the claim that "Bahnsen again showed Stein that his atheistic worldview could not even allow him to make [sense] out of balancing his checkbook," yes, Bahnsen did make claims like this throughout the debate, but simply claiming this to be the case does not constitute a demonstration of the truth of that claim, nor does it constitute a proof of the existence of Bahnsen's god. Keep in mind that Stein was not a philosopher; rather, he was an expert in the special sciences, specifically biology if I'm not mistaken. So I would not expect Stein to have been prepared to give a play-by-play analysis of how the mind works (e.g., on how concepts are formed on the basis of perception and integrated into statements of recognition, inductive generalizations, deductive conclusions, etc.) since this was not the area of his specialty. At best, all Bahnsen may have shown is that Stein specifically did not have detailed knowledge of these things. It would be embarrassingly fallacious to try to draw from Stein's ignorance the conclusion that a god must therefore exist. But this is principally what Bahnsen seemed eager to do, which is simply an admission that his god-belief ultimately stands on ignorance as such. In this way TAG is just another tired god-of-the-gaps strategy (notice I did not say 'argument' here, since Bahnsen did not present an argument). The apologist is supposed to be able to ask vague and open-ended questions like "How do you account for logic?" and the non-believer is apparently supposed to throw up his hands and say "Duh, I donno! Must be God did it!" What else does the apologist offer?

BJ: "As in the debate Stein kept appealing to the notion that atheist do have morality, science, and logic. Bahnsen rightly would point out to Stein that he could not use such tools for human experience to be intelligible if his worldview were 'true'. POOF...."

Yes, Bahnsen did claim this. But that's not the same as proving this to be the case. And we already know that he didn't offer an argument in his opening statement, the very statement which he would have been able to prepare in advance. Furthermore, I just showed how the axioms of my worldview are necessary "for human experience to be intelligible" since they identify the preconditions of experience to begin with.

BJ: "Christianity is true because of the impossibility of the contrary." [sic]

While Bahnsen does make a similar claim in his opening statement, he nowhere substantiated it. At any rate, I answer this mindlessly repeated slogan in my blog article [Is the Contrary to Christianity Truly Impossible?](#)

In that post I show how the presuppositionalist's claim that "Christianity is true because of the [impossibility] of the contrary" violates one of presuppositionalism's own feigned standards, namely that of internal consistency. Since the bible is clear in explicitly affirming that "all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26), a defense strategy which contradicts this (by affirming that there is something that is impossible) is unfit for what it's intended to defend, namely a worldview which clearly and explicitly affirms that "all things are possible." I've yet to see a good response to my point. Additionally, my worldview is clearly contrary to what Christianity teaches, and yet it is a reality. So on this point the claim that the contrary to Christianity is impossible is clearly false.

BJ: "In its technical form it is an 'reductio ad absurdum' argument."

To the extent that TAG is a reductio ad absurdum, it is unsuitable as a defense of Christianity, for the reason I just gave above. Moreover, since Christianity assumes the primacy of consciousness view of reality (I prove this [here](#)), the very claim that Christianity is true contradicts itself, since the concept 'truth' assumes the opposite principle, the primacy of existence.

BJ: "If P then Q, P therefore Q"

If only Bahnsen could have developed his opening statement in such a logical fashion. Then (and only then) would there be an argument to dissect in that statement. Of course, he would have to validate the inputs plugged in for the variables here, had he presented an argument in the first place. However, not only did he not present an argument, he nowhere validated the inputs he plugged into any of his assertions. Essentially, he showed up DOA - *defeated on arrival*. No matter what faults can be found in what Stein presented, Bahnsen failed to prove that his god exists.

BJ: "or If morality, science, and logic are the case (P) then Q (Christianity) has to be affirmed as logically necessary 'because' ('because' clause is vital here) Q is the precondition of P."

On the contrary, since Christianity assumes the primacy of consciousness view of reality, it necessarily disqualifies itself as a viable precondition for any fundamental anchoring morality, science and logic since morality, science and logic, as I showed above, require the axioms and the primacy of existence principle. In fact, my analysis of the axioms and their relationship to science, logic and morality above demonstrate an opposite conclusion, to wit: If science, logic and morality are the case (P), then O (Objectivism) has to be affirmed as logically necessary because the truth of Objectivism is the precondition to P. Christianity falls as one casualty among a whole host of mystical worldviews which stand on the primacy of consciousness view of the world, which is anathema to science, logic and morality (since the primacy of consciousness violates the axioms while science, logic and morality would not be possible without the axioms).

BJ: "That is the indirect argument."

And as such, it shows that its defenders are not very aware of the nature of the fundamentals of either science, logic or morality. These areas of concern simply offer apologists an occasion for bamboozling unprepared non-believers. What is telling is that presuppositionalism fails to make any relationship between either science, logic or morality and the teachings of Christianity clear and traceable. All in all, presuppositionalism essentially consists of nothing more than a claim to magic (which is a consequence of enshrining ignorance).

BJ: "Now, how is that bold assertion proved? Assume not Q (in this case non-christianity)and then look for internal contradictions within a particular worldview for it to refute itself." [sic]

Okay, I offer my non-Christian worldview. Where are the contradictions within it? Please, show me. Don't forget that the concept 'contradiction' assumes the primacy of existence principle, for only if the objects of awareness hold metaphysical primacy over the subject of awareness would contradictions be objectionable. To say that contradictions are objectionable, then, the theist must borrow from my worldview which is the only proper philosophical custodian of the concept of objectivity.

BJ: "If you do not understand Kant then the odds are you will not understand what Van Til was up to."

Even though Van Til sought to replace Kant's categories and antinomies with Christian theism and "apparent contradictions," both thinkers erred in granting validity to the primacy of consciousness view of reality, which is self-defeating.

BJ: "Basically atheism can not provide the preconditions for logic, science, or morality to have any 'meaning' to our human experience."

It is not the task of atheism to "provide the preconditions for logic, science, or morality" any more than the task of music theory is to provide men with the aural nerves they need for listening music. If music theory could do this, Beethoven would not have died such a frustrated man. Atheism is simply the absence of god-belief. As such, it tells us only what someone does not believe, not what one does believe. Therefore it constitutes a fundamental misunderstanding to hold atheism accountable for failing to "provide the preconditions for logic, science, or

morality." Besides, I do not think it is at all accurate to say that a worldview "provides" these things; these preconditions are metaphysical and exist in nature, and they are competently identified by the axioms. To say that a worldview must "provide the preconditions for logic, science, [and] morality" is incoherent; those preconditions would need to be in place for the worldview in question to be possible in the first place. What a worldview enables one to do is to identify those preconditions in explicit terms (here's where the axioms come in) and integrate them into a coherent whole in accordance with those preconditions which in turn enables him to identify the values his life requires and the actions he needs to take in order to achieve those values. Writes Ayn Rand:

The task of philosophy is to provide man with a comprehensive view of life. This view serves as a base, a frame of reference, for all his actions, mental or physical, psychological or existential. This view tells him the nature of the universe with which he has to deal (metaphysics); the means by which he is to deal with it, i.e., the means of acquiring knowledge (epistemology); the standards by which he is to choose his goals and values, in regard to his own life and character (ethics) - and in regard to society (politics); the means of concretizing this view is given to him by esthetics. ("The Chickens' Homecoming," *The New Left*, p. 107.)

As for bickering over how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, the theologians are free to waste their time with such arbitrary and worthless matters.

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [5:14 PM](#)

## 2 Comments:

[Francois Tremblay](#) said...

An awfully long post just to deal with a pipsqueak. I'm sure all of this went over his head.

[December 01, 2005 6:12 AM](#)

[Aaron Kinney](#) said...

But a very well written post nonetheless. I enjoyed reading it for one. Keep 'em coming!

[December 05, 2005 2:16 PM](#)