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Can a *Worldview* "Provide" the "Preconditions of Intelligibility"? - Part I

One of the more commonly met elements of presuppositionalism is the assumption that a *worldview* can “provide the necessary preconditions of intelligibility.” From what I have seen, this assumption in itself is never defended. Presuppositionalists typically do not present arguments for why one should expect that a *worldview* as such (regardless of the particulars of that worldview) “provides the necessary preconditions of intelligibility.” The assumption that “the necessary preconditions of intelligibility” are “provided” by a worldview is generally taken completely for granted by presuppositionalists, and I’ve never seen an argument which establishes this premise.

Rather, it is typically embedded into the presuppositionalist characterization of the antithesis between Christian theism and any acknowledged contenders, as though it required no substantiation whatsoever. This in itself is noteworthy since presuppositional apologists commonly seek to make a worldview’s ability to “provide the preconditions of intelligibility” the fulcrum upon which the debate between Christianity and any non-Christian position hinges.

In this series, I will argue that at least *some* (indeed, the most fundamental) preconditions of intelligibility are actually *not* provided by *any* worldview. The position which I will defend is the view that those preconditions in question would already need to be in place for any worldview to exist in the first place. Moreover, I will argue that in the case of those preconditions for intelligibility which a worldview should supply, Christianity as a worldview comes up far too short to be seriously considered as their source.

To help make my case clear, let’s understand what presuppositionalism means by “worldview.” According to presuppositionalist spokesman-in-chief Greg Bahnsen, a worldview is:

a network of presuppositions, which are not tested by natural science, and in terms of which all of experience is related and interpreted. Once again: a worldview is a network of presuppositions, not tested by natural science, in terms of which all experience is related and interpreted. A person’s worldview is a network first of all. It’s not just one belief. It’s a whole system of beliefs. But the kind of beliefs we’re dealing with when we’re talking about a worldview, are that special variety of belief called presuppositions. We’ll say more about what a presupposition is later, but for now suffice it to say that a presupposition is not just any assumption a person has. It’s a very fundamental, or logically basic, assumption. It is in fact the precondition of that person’s thinking. Because a person’s presuppositions about the nature of reality, the nature of knowledge, and the nature of human conduct and value, a person’s presuppositions provide the precondition for choosing the problems that you consider genuinely problematic, giving you a method for discovering and resolving, providing for you the standards of interpretation. (quoted from Bahnsen’s lecture [Introduction to Worldviews \(part 1\)](#), beginning at minute mark 00:33)

So a worldview is at minimum “a network of presuppositions,” and a “presupposition” is a “special variety of *belief*.” So essentially a worldview is “a network of... a special variety of *belief[s]*.” This is important, so keep it in mind as we go forward.

To say that a *worldview* “provides the necessary preconditions” for intelligible experience, knowledge, sense-making, or what have you, is to say that “a network of... *beliefs*” is what “provides” those necessary preconditions. Presumably, on the presuppositionalist view, when a person has beliefs X, Y and Z, and these beliefs are (presumably) *Christian* beliefs, those *beliefs* are what “provide the necessary preconditions” for intelligibility et al. If one does not have these particular beliefs, then there are no preconditions for intelligibility.

Presuppositionalist blogger Chris Bolt confirms this analysis when he states that “beliefs are *preconditions*

for intelligible experience” (see Bolt’s paper [An Informal Introduction to Covenantal Apologetics: Part 12 - Transcendental argumentation](#)).

So presuppositionalists hold that *beliefs* “are” or “provide” the “preconditions for intelligible experience.” Whether or not there are any preconditions for intelligible experience, all depends on what a person happens to *believe*.

With me so far?

In addition to Bahnsen’s statement above, several quotes from some of presuppositionalism’s lesser defenders should suffice to show that the assumption that a worldview *as such* can “*provide* the preconditions of intelligibility” is common to presuppositionalism in general.

For instance, [Chris Bolt writes](#):

When we speak of the problem at hand, we are speaking of the ability of a worldview to provide the *preconditions of intelligibility*. This may be expressed in the context of several different subjects, but chiefly, it must be said that it is only being expressed in terms of *entire* worldviews. When, for example, we speak of the preconditions for the intelligibility of knowledge..., we are speaking of *epistemology*.

See that? Presuppositionalists “are speaking of the ability of a *worldview* to provide the *preconditions of intelligibility*. It is just *assumed* that a *worldview* has such an ability. On the view implied here, the worldview comes first, and as a result of that worldview *providing* “the necessary preconditions of intelligibility,” those preconditions are subsequently put into place. Why? Because a *worldview* is needed to *provide* them in the first place.

Apologist Michael Butler points out that the presuppositional apologist

maintains that it is the entire Christian worldview that provides the necessary conditions of human experience, not just a portion of it. The Christian worldview as a complete and organic system is necessary. ([The Transcendental Argument for God’s Existence](#), *The Standard Bearer*, p. 87)

So according to Butler, the “*entire Christian worldview*” is what “provides the necessary preconditions of human experience.” Got it? On the view which Butler expresses here, a human being cannot have experience without “the entire Christian worldview.” If a person doesn’t accept the Christian worldview, he apparently can’t have any experience to begin with. Why? Because “the Christian worldview as a complete and organic system is necessary.”

Apologist Keith Devens describes the presuppositionalist venture as follows:

The goal of a presuppositional apologetic is to show that Christianity is the only system of thought, or *worldview*, that can provide the necessary preconditions to allow us to make sense of reality, and to show that no other system can. ([Presuppositionalism](#))

Devens confirms the implications given above: a “system of thought” is the only thing that “can provide the necessary preconditions which allow us to make sense of reality.” One cannot “make sense of reality” without this “system of thought,” which implies that one must accept this “system of thought” in the absence of the ability “to make sense of reality.” This may not be what the author intended to say, but it’s clear enough: it must be a Freudian give-away that something fundamental is turned seriously backwards.

But wait, there’s more. By way of contrast, apologist Greg Bahnsen asserts in his opening statement in his [debate with atheist Dr. Gordon Stein](#), that

The atheist world view is irrational and cannot consistently provide the preconditions of intelligible experience, science, logic, or morality.

So it should be clear that the assumption that a worldview can “provide the preconditions of intelligibility” (or “intelligible experience”) plays a central role in the presuppositionalist playbook.

Unfortunately for presuppositionalism, however, the idea that a worldview can “provide the preconditions for intelligibility” - at least with respect to the most fundamental of those preconditions - is itself incoherent. That is because those preconditions would already have to be present in order for a worldview to exist in the first place. The most fundamental preconditions of intelligibility are *metaphysical* in nature; they are not man-made, so they cannot be the product of conscious activity, whether that activity is characterized as believing, affirming, confessing, thinking, wishing, commanding, imagining, fantasizing, or any other cognitive operation. A worldview - i.e., a set of “beliefs” (as presuppositionalism informs this all-important keyword) - does not put into being *its own* preconditions any more than a man’s thinking makes his own existence a reality. The preconditions for “believing” would have to be in place before any believing actually takes place, just as a man would have to exist before he could think.

This appears to be a simple case of reversing one’s basic priorities, of not understanding what comes first. One’s worldview does not come first, and subsequently from this the preconditions of intelligibility are “provided.” Rather, the preconditions are in place already, and these make the assembly of a worldview possible to begin with. A worldview has the task of *identifying* these preconditions, but it does not “provide” them as if the worldview itself were their *precondition*. Indeed, in order for the worldview to identify these preconditions, the preconditions in question would already have to exist. So presuppositionalism, as it’s been described, appears to have it all backwards, and this basic blunder is systematically built into the “presuppositionalist challenge” to non-Christian worldviews. Such a tactic can only backfire on the apologist if one probes what the apologist takes for granted.

Notice how presuppositionalists themselves seem totally unaware of this most obvious blunder. Bahnsen explains what he means by ‘worldview’ as follows:

Everybody has what can be called a “worldview,” a perspective in terms of which they see everything and understand their perceptions and feelings. A worldview is a network of related presuppositions in terms of which every aspect of man’s knowledge and awareness is interpreted. ([The Heart of the Matter](#), *Always Ready*, pp. 119-120)

Consider: How can one have an intelligible “perspective in terms of which they see everything and understand their perceptions and feelings” *before* the preconditions of intelligibility are in place? If presuppositionalists are claiming that a *worldview* (i.e., a “set of beliefs”) is needed to “provide” the preconditions of intelligibility, then they are essentially saying that the worldview itself needs to exist before the preconditions of its very intelligibility can exist, for that worldview is allegedly needed to “provide” them in the first place. It is then said that the worldview which does this is itself intelligible, even though the clear implication here is that the worldview is available before the preconditions of intelligibility are. Then it is claimed that any worldview that “fails” to “provide the preconditions of intelligibility” cannot itself be intelligible. This is a clear case of cognitive schizophrenia.

To be continued...

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