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

What is "Intelligibility"?

In my initial post in this series, we saw that it is common for presuppositionalists to assume that a *worldview* is what "provides the necessary preconditions for intelligibility." By 'worldview' presuppositionalists explicitly mean "a network... of *beliefs*," and it has even been stated that "beliefs are *preconditions* for intelligible experience" (see here).

This is not an isolated example. Indeed, I gave several other examples in my previous entry on this topic, and here are yet two more:

> TAG [i.e., the "transcendental argument for the existence of God"] asserts that *only the Christian worldview provides the necessary preconditions for the intelligibility of human experience*. (Michael Butler, TAG vs. TANG)

> Van Til contended that the Christian worldview supplies the preconditions of intelligibility. (Steve Hays, Theonomy under fire-2)

Logically this all means that "a network.. of beliefs" – i.e., a *worldview* - is the *source* of the necessary preconditions of intelligibility.

In reaction to this, I noted that not only do these apologists fail to produce any arguments to validate this assumption, but also that the assumption itself rests on a logical reversal which seems to have eluded the apologists' notice. The obvious implication of the presuppositionalist view is that the worldview alleged as the one which "provides the necessary preconditions for intelligibility" could not itself be premised on those preconditions (since they don't exist independent of the worldview in question), which could only undermine the claim that the would-be source of those preconditions is itself intelligible. After all, if intelligibility has preconditions, and those preconditions are thought to be some set of *beliefs*, it would be an embarrassing misnomer to say that this set of beliefs is also intelligible, for they would have to have been formed in the absence of the necessary preconditions for intelligibility.

Given the way presuppositionalists have historically stated their terms, this damning inference seems inescapable.

But this is not the end of the story. On the contrary, we're just beginning. The hint of truth lurking somewhere in the presuppositionalist confusion is the fact that intelligibility does indeed have preconditions, and identifying their nature and their relationship to intelligibility is of great philosophical importance.

In the present entry on this topic, I want to explore the notion of intelligibility itself. My thinking is that, in order to discover what the necessary preconditions for intelligibility are or must be, we should have a good understanding of what intelligibility is.

So what is intelligibility?

This is a term which presuppositionalists employ with wild abandon, so much so that one could be forgiven for having the impression that presuppositionalists thought of themselves as both the owners and the originators of the concept. Unfortunately, I have not found a definition of 'intelligibility' in the literature of presuppositionalism's leading masters. We can only hope that apologetic theorists who stipulate that their worldview "provides the necessary preconditions for intelligibility," actually know what they're talking about.

Since I know of no point in the presuppositionalist literature where a definition of 'intelligibility' is provided, I decided to see what I could find in the bible itself. I searched five different versions simultaneously, using

the keyword "intelligib" (which should fetch results with both "intelligible" and "intelligibility"), and was excited to get one result. It was I Corinthians 14:9, which the English Standard Version renders as follows:

> So with yourselves, if with your tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is said? For you will be speaking into the air.

Unfortunately, this passage does not shed any further light on the meaning or definition of 'intelligibility'. I then began to wonder if Christians even know what it means!

According to one online dictionary, 'intelligibility' is defined as "capability of being understood" while defining 'intelligible' as "capable of being apprehended by the mind or intellect alone." (It's unclear why the modifier "alone" is included in this definition; what is it intended to exclude, and why?)

I did not find a specific entry for either 'intelligible' or 'intelligibility' in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, and while a search for keyword 'intelligibility' turned up 123 results, I confess that I did not examine all of them.

As a last resort, I tried one of Chris Bolt's favorite online resources: Wikipedia. And indeed I did find that there is a separate entry for 'intelligibility' in Wikipedia (suggesting that this compendium has more to offer on the topic than either the bible or presuppositionalism's celebrated primers). But I found the definition given there troubling. It reads:

> In philosophy, intelligibility is what can be comprehended by the human mind.

It seems to me that this is rather clumsy. I don't think *what we comprehend* and *intelligibility* are identical. I can comprehend the movement of the minute and hour hands on my clock, but the minute and hour hands on my clock are not "intelligibility" as such. I can, on occasion, comprehend the traffic on Phetgasem Road in Bangkok (a corridor of sheer misery!), but when I do, what I'm comprehending is not intelligibility itself (far from it!), but all the vehicles on the road as they speed past each other. When I watch a bird in flight, I can comprehend what it is doing, but the bird in flight is not intelligibility – it's intelligible (an adjective), but it's not *intelligibility* (an abstraction).

That left me a bit weary. So I decided that I should try to isolate a more useful and accurate definition myself. This is what I came up with:

> Intelligibility is the ability of some thing to be an object of awareness *and* be identified and integrated into the sum of one's knowledge without contradiction.

Be it the hands of a clock, vehicles traveling down a busy city street, or a bird flying in the sky, these things can be objects of awareness *and* they can be identified and integrated into the sum of one's knowledge without contradiction. In other words, these things can be apprehended and understood.

Of course, attentive readers of my blog will recall that by 'object' I essentially mean anything one perceives and/or considers. So the definition of intelligibility that I am proposing applies to the realm of abstractions as well as the realm of concretes. A statement one utters, a recipe for fried rice, a piano sonata, and the Declaration of Independence all have the ability to be objects and identified and integrated into the sum of one's knowledge without contradiction (though some piano sonatas are arguably unintelligible).

Notice that my proposed definition mirrors the subject-object relationship and is wholly consistent with the metaphysical primacy of existence (see for instance here and here). Intelligibility as I am defining it involves some object and a conscious subject's cognitive interaction with it. It can only imply that the object(s) of awareness is what it is independent of cognitive activity, and that the activity which the subject performs is in the interest of identifying the object(s) and integrating it (them) into the sum of one's knowledge.

It is important that we make allowance for context when we apply such heady abstractions. My definition should not be taken to imply that intelligibility is some property of objects apart from the involvement of a knowing subject. After all, concretes simply exist, and as they exist in the universe, their intelligibility or lack thereof is simply not an issue. The question of intelligibility only enters the picture when a concrete is

involved in a relationship with a knowing subject. And in fact, the intelligibility of an object depends in part on the knowledge of the knowing subject. Since I know the English language, the speech of a man speaking English is intelligible *to me*. But I do not know Hindi. So the speech of a person speaking Hindi is *not* intelligible to me. And yet his speech *is* intelligible to millions of Hindi-speakers.

Similarly with a wall clock. When my daughter was two years old, the wall clock was just one concrete that she perceived among many others. As a timepiece, it was functionally unintelligible to her, since at her age she had not yet grasped the concept time and the idea that time can be measured. But now, as she is starting to grasp the concept of time-keeping and understands that a wall clock is a device designed for this endeavor, it is slowly becoming intelligible to her. And yet it's been intelligible to me since well before she was born.

All this is not to say that intelligibility is *subjective*, but rather *contextual* in nature: the concept of intelligibility necessarily presumes the participation of a subject in some cognitive relationship to an object, and the subject brings to his consciousness's relationship with that object a sum of knowledge which bears on his ability to identify and integrate that object into that sum of knowledge.

Now, I'm not expecting presuppositionalists to accept my proposed definition of intelligibility with enthusiastic glee. After all, they may find elements of it objectionable. For instance, they may not like references to awareness or identification, recoil at the thought of integration, and sneer at its proscription against contradiction. And of course they will naturally be turned off by anything that smacks of complying with the primacy of existence.

In that case, presuppositionalists need to inform their own conception of 'intelligibility', give it a proper definition, and contend for its virtues. In fact, I was compelled to supply my own definition because I do not know of one in the presuppositionalist corpus. It's quite possible that Bahnsen did elaborate on what " intelligibility" means in one of his books. Unfortunately, I currently have access to one of his books - *Pushing the Antithesis* (which I understand was assembled posthumously from several of his lectures and recordings) – while my copies of *Always Ready* and *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis* are, I'm sorry to say, still in storage. So it's very possible that I've overlooked something, and would be pleased if anyone who has access to any of Bahnsen's books (or Van Til's or Frame's for that matter) know of any passage where a specifically Christian definition of 'intelligibility' is provided.

Now that we have a clearer understanding of what intelligibility is, we are in a better position to start identifying the *preconditions* of intelligibility. I will take this task up in my next entry on this topic.

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