

Monday, November 21, 2011

Cognitive Reliability vs. Supernatural Deception

Today we join presuppositional apologist Sye Ten Bruggencate in mid-session with the [Goodness Over God](#) crew, Ben Wallis and Michael, Long, on their [recent podcast featuring both Sye and Dustin Segers](#), who also practices presuppositional apologetics (and has [his own blog](#)). The TAG team are at it again, battling non-believers and doing what they can to shut the mouths of atheist spoilsports.

Make no mistake about it: Christians are eager to increase their numbers. They desire to “plant” more churches and lure more gullible fish into their nets. And given some statistical reporting, the pews in many American churches are growing cold, so to speak. So heat is on apologists to turn things around, to “vindicate” the Christian worldview in the public light. What better way to do this than to make critics of their worldview look like dimwits in front of audiences composed of their peers as well as other Christians? Presuppositionalists are predatory by nature, continually seeking out new object lessons in humiliation to hold up as trophies before throngs of admiring comrades.

In the discussion with the folks at [Goodness Over God](#), the presuppositionalists can be found pushing the same old chicanery, with no positive information whatsoever to offer on behalf of their own worldview. The impression I often get while listening to presuppositionalists dialogue with non-believers on the notion that there is a god, is that they’re continually trying to find ways to get into someone’s mind in order to locate some vulnerability that can be exploited for the sake of taking control of it. This disintegrate-and-conquer motif is ever-present throughout presuppositionalism. Its “vigor” is thought by its enthusiasts to be found in the skill with which apologetic “debaters” seek basically to demolish other minds, reducing them if at all possible to mere rubble, and hoping to re-image them according to the template of their religious program if their apologetic efforts ever make it this far.

Much of their apologetic methodology almost seems to regard any instance of ignorance in the human mind as evidence for the existence of their god. One element which virtually all deployments of the presuppositional apologetic that I have observed have in common is the asking of a series of “How do you know...?” questions, often asked in unending succession in order to keep the critic continually on the defensive. It appears that presuppositional apologists are after any instance of “I donno” in order to fill it in with “God did it.” To the extent that this accurately characterizes their apologetic methodology (and after examining literally hundreds of examples of presuppositional methodology in action, I think it does), presuppositionalists genuinely seem to think this is a legitimate means of vindicating their worldview.

Among their ranks, some apologist apparently believe that they have been “called” by their god to drop their fishing nets as it were, and take up absurd arguments intended just for this purpose. It may seem most ironic to hear Christians preaching how their worldview “accounts for” human dignity, when their worldview in fact regards human beings as an inherently depraved blemish worthy of the eternal trash bin that needs to be bathed in someone’s blood.

Both the view that human beings are inherently depraved and the view that human beings were created in their god’s image, allow apologists to presume that they have some special right to other individuals’ minds. They are in essence would-be body-snatchers who seek to score their successes by invading individuals’ minds and destroying all confidence in their ability to think for themselves. A broken spirit is a mind that more easily releases itself to the control of others and offers no prevailing resistance to subjugating suggestion. They belch forth a load of pretentious filibuster in the hopes of absorbing new victims into the Christian matrix and setting them back out into the field to belch forth the same load of pretentious filibuster.

With these observations about the general character of the presuppositional method in mind, let’s take a look at a brief snippet from Sye Ten Bruggencate’s latest verbal spew. We start at the minute marker 30:59 where our swashbuckling hero STB launches into yet another interrogation of the presumably defenseless Michael Long:

[Start: 30:59]

Sye: "So you're saying that there are some things you cannot be wrong about."

Michael: "Yeah, there are some things where it's meaningless to suggest that I could be wrong about it."

Sye: "Okay, so that follows then, I'd like to ask the question: What do you know for certain and how are you able to know it? And if you appeal to your senses, memory and reasoning, I'd like to know how you know they are valid."

Presuppositionalists are conspicuously concerned about any expression of *certainty* on the part of a non-Christian. If a non-Christian claims to be certain about something, the presuppositionalist acts as though there were a fire that needs to be put out, and that he's the only one able to extinguish it. So off he goes in his little red fire truck, sirens a-whirrin'. When he shows up to the conflagration, he whips out his hose and starts spraying the entire scene with a barrage of "How do you know?" questions that are intended to keep the fire from spreading.

But if we step back and observe the apologist's own behavior, we just might find that it is *he* who is reluctant to address on behalf of his own worldview the very questions he so casually fires off in rapid succession to representatives of other worldviews. He enjoys posing questions which ask, "How do you know?" but tends to resist answering those very questions with respect to the knowledge claims he makes.

Now there is no *tu quoque* fallacy in pointing this out. For one thing, I am happy to address such questions. (And I would if I thought Mr. Bruggencate were sincere in his inquiries.) But second, I am not affirming my worldview on the claim that it is sourced in divine revelation, that its originator is both omniscient and infallible, that the collective truth of all its claims is itself the necessary precondition to sense-making, or that failure to subscribe to my worldview will result in eternal torment. Christians make very tall claims on behalf of the importance of believing their worldview, so they should be more than prepared to address questions about its epistemology. Unfortunately, it is precisely here where presuppositionalists hold things closest to their chest, as though they were afraid to have their cards seen while placing their bets. Such behavior is not indicative of someone in possession of unchallengeable truths.

Now in response to Sye's questions to Michael here, I could go on and point to certain facts that are themselves preconditions to the points he lists as objects to which one might appeal in answering his questions (such as the fact that there is a reality, the primacy of existence, that man is biological in nature, and so is his consciousness, etc.), thus heading off his quiver of objections at the pass. Sye's own line of questioning itself presumes that both he and his interlocutors are conscious, and thus he assumes the validity of his own consciousness. But how does he validate it without begging the question? If he says his god validates it somehow (which he can be predicted to say), he would be begging the question, for he would be using his consciousness - and thus assuming its validity - in the answer he gives. But since he's apparently willing to grant validity to consciousness as such in his line of interrogation, then we must ask: What's the problem?

But here's the rub: If I believed that there are invisible magic beings running around the universe "back of" everything I see, touch, smell, etc., beings which I believed to be in possession of the ability to manipulate anything that exists, including the things that I perceive, then clearly I couldn't reliably appeal to my senses, memory and reasoning to establish anything resembling what we know as 'knowledge', for they could, for all I know, be subject to such manipulation.

The Christian at this point will probably say that his god does not lie and therefore would not deceive, and therefore this is not a worry. But even if one accepts the premise that the Christian god itself does not lie and therefore would not deceive, it would not follow from this that this worry is thereby dissolved. For Christianity teaches that there are other invisible magic beings which possess supernatural powers as well, such as Satan, devils, demons, fallen angels, and perhaps other nefarious beings whose existence has not been revealed by the Christian god. And these beings are explicitly characterized by the Christian bible as deceitful beings which do have powers beyond human understanding and, importantly, detection.

This bears emphasizing. Christianity affirms the reality of “the supernatural.” We have to keep in mind the fact that, for the Christian, the category ‘supernatural’ is broader than just his god. It includes a whole pantheon of other beings, all or many of which are imagined to have powers beyond human estimation, control, and awareness as such. And since the Christian worldview affirms the existence of such beings, its epistemology must take their supposed existence into consideration, and from the looks of things, it doesn’t.

So while the Christian might maintain that his god does not lie and therefore would not deceive man, his worldview does in fact teach that there are other beings which can and do deceive man. So *on Christianity’s own premises*, man’s senses, memory and reasoning are hopelessly vulnerable to supernatural manipulation, including deception. This can only mean that one who accepts all of Christianity’s teachings and takes those teachings seriously, would have to concede precisely what the presuppositionalist playbook seeks to compel non-believers to admit: that man’s senses, memory and reasoning cannot, on Christianity’s premises, be presumed to be either valid or reliable, regardless of how certain they want to think they are in their belief that their god guarantees them, since they are subject to manipulation which lies beyond one’s ability to detect, which means: they are open to deception.

The apologist might respond to this by claiming that his god would not allow lesser supernatural beings to fiddle with reality or cause mischief in man’s mind which results in deception, misunderstanding or misinformation about the world or his own spiritual plight. But how would he know this with certainty? Claiming that his god has the ability to reveal things “such that” one can be certain of them, does not overcome this problem. Indeed, it seems to be a manifest attempt to simply wish it away by positing hypothetical possibilities. Indeed, appealing to supernatural revelation is really nothing more than an admission that one does *not* know, and in fact begs the question by assuming precisely what’s being challenged, namely the reliability of his own cognitive faculties and the assumption that some supernatural being whose existence Christianity affirms or at least allows (e.g., devils, demons, and the like) has not already deceived him.

Once supernaturalism is granted validity in the mechanics of one’s worldview, all bets are off on the reliability of human cognition. The unknown and the unknowable will always hold epistemological primacy in the worldview of the true believer.

So the problem which the presuppositionalist is trying to raise against the non-believer, is actually an inescapable problem for the believer himself.

By contrast, the non-believer can simply say that his senses, memory and reasoning are valid because there’s no supernatural being that can mess with it. And that’s all one needs to say to the presuppositionalist. Any attempt on the presuppositionalist to inquire, rebut or challenge this response, would require the presuppositionalist to make use of his senses, memory and reasoning, and as we’ve already seen, on his worldview’s premises, they are unreliable.

So the presuppositionalist is beaten at his own game, and without recourse. It is in such a manner that we see the presuppositionalist’s own gimmicks get the best of him, and choke him where he stands.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [cognitive reliability](#), [Knowledge](#), [Presuppositional Gimmickry](#), [Supernatural Deception](#)

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