

Common Ground Part 1: What Do Believers and Non-Believers Have in Common?

Introduction

Presuppositionalists often debate amongst themselves about the issue of "common ground," an issue which they invest with tiresome ambiguities and question-begging assumptions. As such, the issue of "common ground" is a tightrope that presuppositionalists are compelled to navigate as a result of various contradictions within the Christian religion's view of man and the antithesis it employs to divide men against each other.

Apologists who assume the presuppositionalist approach often seem to think that non-believers will automatically assume that believers and non-believers share nothing in common. But it is not true that believers and non-believers do not share anything in common. What they *do* share, however, is not what Reformed Christianity would have us believe. Since both believers and non-believers are human beings, they share many attributes in common, and far from confirming the mysticism of the bible, the characteristics which believers and non-believers have common point to a rational (and therefore *non*-theistic) worldview which we all need in order to live as human beings.

In this 7-post series, I want to address some questions about 'common ground' posed by a presuppositional apologist on the [All-Bahnsen list](#) in February 2005. But instead of answering these questions as a presuppositionalist would, or addressing what presuppositionalists would offer in response to them, I am going to respond to them based on my own philosophical outlook. We will find that there are many aspects that believers and non-believers share in common, in spite of the differences which believers want to highlight over and against these shared characteristics. In fact, I will cite many points which believers and non-believers share in common, and I will show how these points confirm a rational and therefore necessarily non-theistic worldview.

The Questions

The author of the post wrote the following:

A conversation I had with a professor today motivated me to try and get a thread going on the issue of how the common ground between believers and unbelievers is to be articulated. I am not ignorant of the good bit of literature available on this subject c/o the Van Tils and Bahnsens of the world. But I think we would all benefit from the clarity brought by a rehashing/dialogue on the subject. So I'll begin:

1. **What do believers and unbelievers, if they share anything at all, have in common?**
2. How is this common ground to be evaluated?
3. What is shared/unshared metaphysically?
4. What is shared/unshared epistemologically?
5. What is shared/unshared ethically?
6. In what ways can believers and unbelievers cooperate with one another intellectually/socially/politically?
7. What consequences do those matters that divide Christian and non-Christian have for how Christians are to do philosophy?

In the present installment, I will focus on the first question. I will devote individual blogs to each of the following blogs in due course.

Question 1: What do believers and unbelievers have in common?

Answer: Believers and non-believers have a lot more in common than many on either side might be ready to admit.

For instance, both exist. Both are biological organisms. Both face a fundamental alternative: to live or die. Both have a faculty of awareness (consciousness). Both must act in order to continue existing, and both have the capacity for goal-oriented action. Both have the capacity to identify and integrate the objects they perceive through a process of concept-formation. Both have the choice to think, or to evade thinking. Both have the choice to guide their thinking by reason, or to abandon reason in preference for some other alleged means of knowledge. Both must obey nature in order to achieve their goals. Both have the choice to apply their effort to productive work which results in those values which their life requires (such as food and shelter, due to their nature as a biological organism), or to avoid effort and waste their lives away. Etc. These are general characteristics which both believers and non-believers undoubtedly share, since both are human beings.

I would say that believers and non-believers have a lot more in common with *each other* than either would have in common with the Christian god, were it to be real. While the existence of both believers and non-believers is self-evident, the existence of the Christian's god is clearly debatable (though there are of course those who seek even to deny this). Unlike believers and non-believers, the Christian god, according to its spokesmen, is not a biological organism. According to those same spokesmen, the Christian god is immortal, eternal and indestructible. So unlike both believers and non-believers, the Christian god does not face the same fundamental alternative that both believers and non-believers face. The Christian god's spokesmen typically assume that it is a conscious being, yet unlike believers and non-believers, it does not have a brain or nervous system which makes this possible. Unlike believers and non-believers, the Christian god is without need or want, and thus would not have to act in order to continue existing. For instance, man needs a constant source of nutrition or consumable energy, but the Christian god apparently does not. Thus the Christian god could do nothing for all eternity, and it would still continue to exist as it has allegedly always been. Spokesmen for the Christian god seem to assume that it is capable of conceptual knowledge, but since they also say it is omniscient and infallible, its knowledge could not be thought of as having been assembled by means of a process of concept-formation, which is a discovery-based process of conceptualization. (Since an omniscient being by definition would know everything that could possibly be known, it would not be able to discover new knowledge; that man can do this simply means that man can do something that the Christian god cannot do.) It's unclear whether the spokesmen for the Christian god would say that their god, like believers and non-believers, faces a choice between thinking and evading thought. If they say that their god *necessarily* thinks, then it seems they're denying their god this choice, a choice man clearly has.

Also, since the Christian god is claimed to be omniscient, it wouldn't need reason as a means of discovering and validating new knowledge (unlike believers and non-believers); and since it would not need to act in order to achieve goals that make its existence possible (as believers and non-believers need to do), it would not require reason to guide its actions. Moreover, since Christians claim that nature is a product of their god's creative activity, they certainly would not affirm that their god has to obey nature in order to achieve any goal it puts before itself; unlike believers and non-believers, the Christian god would be able to conform nature to its will, for its will holds primacy over its creations (cf. "divine sovereignty," "miracles," etc.). As for applying effort to productive work which results in values, the Christian god certainly would not need to produce values in the first place (since it is said to be indestructible and has no needs). And, unlike believers and non-believers, if it wanted to produce something, it would not need to put out any physical effort (since it apparently could just [wish](#) things into existence).

So while believers and non-believers share a lot of fundamental characteristics with each other, the Christian god which believers describe is quite opposite to both believers and non-believers on each fundamental. All these fundamental points serve as a pretext for answering more specific questions about common ground between believers and non-believers.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Common Ground](#)