

Common Ground Part 4: Epistemology

In this installment of my series on "common ground," I focus on the question of what believers and non-believers share in terms of epistemology. This is a response to the fourth of seven questions posed by an apologist to the [All-Bahnsen list](#) in 2005, which were:

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?

I have already devoted individual blogs to the prior three questions (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#) respectively). The three remaining questions will be addressed in future installments on [Incinerating Presuppositionalism](#).

Question 4: What do believers and non-believer share in regard to epistemology?

Answer: Commonality in nature implies commonality in epistemology. As we saw [earlier](#), men are biological organisms, and what we believe will not alter this fact. So long as an individual has certain needs that he must identify and satisfy in order to live, he will need a means of knowledge by which to identify the values he needs and the actions he needs to take in order to achieve them. Man's knowledge is not automatically given to him, nor is he born with the knowledge he needs for living already in his mind. If this were the case, there would be no need for any discussion about epistemology - i.e., about the *method* by which knowledge is acquired and validated. We are born *tabula rasa*, completely ignorant, without any knowledge to begin with. The knowledge we need must be discovered and validated. It must be earned. Not only are we not omniscient, we are also not infallible (unlike the Christian god is claimed to be).

So long as truth does not conform to personal wishing or social consensus, man's epistemology, regardless of what he wants to say about what lies "beyond" the universe or "beyond" his death, will have to take this fact into account consistently if it is going to serve his needs in life. This of course implies, as we saw above, that believing a claim does not make it true, that the proper orientation which man's means of knowledge need to adopt is the recognition that truth depends on facts and an objective method of cognition, not on wishing, feelings, ancient stories or rituals, self-sacrifice or imagination.

While all men have these meta-epistemological fundamentals in common, not all men recognize them explicitly, and most systems of thought dismiss them as irrelevant or "uninteresting," or at any rate fatally compromise them even while posing as defenders of truth and reason. They do this primarily by ignoring the fundamental distinction between the subject of cognition and its objects, sometimes even reversing the polarity between them such that the objects of cognition are thought to depend in some way on the subject of cognition. This naturally leads to the view that truth conforms either to one's own preferences and/or wishes, or to social conventions, or to some variation on this theme, e.g., a cosmic consciousness which "controls whatsoever comes to pass" as Van Til puts it (*The Defense of the Faith*, p. 160). (See [Theism and Subjective Metaphysics](#) for more on the different aspects of the primacy of consciousness.)

But in the case of the knowledge that both believers and non-believers need in order to function in the world (specifically, knowledge which enables and guides life-sustaining goal-oriented action), both believers and non-believers generally operate on the same epistemology, which is reason. They have to if they want to achieve anything in reality. There's no alternative to reason if a human being chooses to live. Regardless of what he might

believe about the origins of the universe, for instance, a man will nevertheless have guide his actions according to what he discovers about himself (e.g., his requirements for survival) and his environment (e.g., where and how to acquire those values that his life requires) if he wants to achieve certain ends as the result of his actions. This is in keeping with the principle of final causation: the end *determines* the means. Even the believer secretly recognizes that prayer will not fill his belly with food or start his car for him; he will have to rely on reason in order to find edible food to eat and twist the ignition key to get his car going, just as non-believers do.

Like non-believers, the believer knows that, if he wants to talk to someone who lives in another state, he will have to use a telephone or other technological device, or travel there personally. He knows that others cannot read his mind, just as he cannot read anyone else's mind. The believer knows implicitly, as do non-believers, that if he wants to achieve any goal in the natural world, he will have to guide his actions according to nature's own constraints, including the nature of his own mind. The same is the case with acquiring and validating knowledge of the world. Wishing, imagining and outright denying will not "transcend" nature's constraints. Whether he believes in Jehovah, Elohim, Allah, Horus, Geusha or none of the above, one would have to open his refrigerator and look at the date stamped on his carton of milk if he wants to know if it has expired yet. If he wanted to learn calculus, he will have to learn basic math skills first and progress from there. If he wanted to run a business successfully, he would have to learn some basic economic principles. All these endeavors require reason, and in each case there is no substitute for reason. Imagining, wishing and reading the mind of an invisible magic being will not give man the knowledge he needs to function in the world.

The question at this point becomes: Does a thinker embrace reason *consistently*, or is he willing to compromise reason for the sake of confessional investments or other non-values? Reason is the faculty by which man discovers and identifies the nature of reality and guides his actions, the faculty by which he perceives and integrates what he identifies into the sum of his knowledge. It is when men abandon reason that they invite problems, not only with others, but also in terms of their own ability to operate effectively in the world. Reason has been downplayed, maligned, vilified, denounced and ridiculed by religious leaders throughout history. They have done this because they are threatened by the human mind, because their teachings are opposed to human reason (cf. "believe or suffer"), and because their livelihood subsists on deceiving other minds into a position of subservience. Only they don't call it 'reason' when they denounce it. Instead, they prefer to hide behind euphemisms like "the wisdom of this world" (cf. I Cor. 1:19, 2:6) or "autonomous thinking." But it is reason all the same that they despise, for it is the faculty which allows one to live independently of others that the witch doctors seek to censure. They say that reason is "vain," "incompetent," or "futile" if it is not "held captive" to the dictates of a universe-creating, reality-controlling supernatural being whose existence we can only "know" by means of imagination. They seek to subordinate reason to their fantasies just as they seek to subordinate human beings to their whims.

So believers, in order to "explain" the "knowledge" they claim to have received from "beyond," make up notions such as "revelation" and various other expressions of "just knowing," such as "grace," having "the mind of Christ," the "image of God," the "sensus divinitatus," internal messaging from "the Holy Spirit," etc. Revelation is the claim to possess mystical knowledge transmitted from a supernatural source to a human mind. Allegedly revelation is infallible, and so is the believer's reception and understanding of it. It can be invoked any time a position is called into question in order to halt the questioning. After all, who wants to find himself questioning an omniscient supernatural source? But although religious thinkers often speak of epistemology, the claim to have knowledge on the basis of divine revelation simply indicates that discussion of epistemology is a red herring. If knowledge were beamed into man's mind already validated by an infallible and omniscient source, there would be no need for a method of acquiring and validating knowledge on one's own, let alone an understanding of how that method works. The claim to possess "revealed knowledge" allows the believer to say "I don't need to know why it's true, I just know that it is true," leave it at that, and act accordingly, whether he is expected to pay his tithe to the church or take over a crowded jumbo jet at gunpoint. The believer doesn't want people to argue with what he claims to know on the basis of revelation, not only because he has no argument to support it (if he did, this would annul his claim to know it on the basis of revelation), but also because he doesn't want to question it himself.

So when it comes to the believer's religious affirmations, reason no longer applies, for the *content* of these affirmations is not derived from what he perceives, but ultimately from what he *imagines*. The believer's religious beliefs are certainly not based on his own firsthand accounts or on the basis of stories which he has personally verified, for these beliefs are based on faith in ancient texts purporting to describe actual events in history. The believer in such things who then acts on the basis of reason in the real world in order to identify and achieve his goals, is essentially operating on [two opposite worldviews](#): one which is suited for a reality which does not conform to consciousness (which is reason, whose basis is the [primacy of existence principle](#)), and some other "faculty" which stems from a fantasy world in which reality does conform to consciousness (mysticism, which rejects the primacy of existence). While his actions in the world show that he has no choice but to deal with reality on its own

terms, his religious beliefs describe a world which readily reshapes itself to accommodate someone's [wishing](#). The world informed by his religious beliefs is run by invisible magic beings who can assume the shape of animals (such as the devil masquerading as a snake in the Garden of Eden), manifest themselves in spectacular ways (such as the burning bush that Moses encounters on the summit of Mt. Sinai), and cause other reality-defying acts ("miracles") to happen (such as the turning water into wine, feeding of 4,000, walking on water, quieting storms, raising the dead, etc.).

Now, these meta-epistemological preconditions will not prevent a thinker from abusing his own mind and pretending it has abilities or content that he does not actually possess. In the fake environment projected by religious belief, some minds have the power to foretell future events. And even though making predictions wildly general and even vague, or setting them down after the fact, can make them seem legitimate to the uncritical eye, believers today typically do not govern their lives as if their own attempts to predict even the weather carry any legitimate weight.

The believer did not look at the world about him and conclude from perceptual evidence that it was created by a cosmic being's act of will. Observing a natural, material, finite and corruptible world will not uncover evidence of a supernatural, immaterial, infinite and incorruptible being beyond it. Reason does not tell us that any invisible magic beings exist. As Christian apologist Michael Butler confides,

The only way we know that God is a Trinity is that He revealed it to us - mere speculation or empirical investigation would never lead us to this conclusion. ("The Transcendental Argument for God's Existence," *The Standard Bearer*, p. 118.)

Contrast this admission with the statement found in Romans 1:20, which declares

For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.

Of course, if something is "clearly seen," one would be wrong to call it "invisible." There is, in Christianity, a tendency toward cognitive schizophrenia as its adherents seek to make sense of its nebulous doctrines and defend the varying stands they are expected to assume. If "the invisible things" of the Christian god includes its supposed "trinitarian" nature, how could it be that this is "clearly seen" when it is also admitted that we could not "know" this feature of the Christian god unless it were "revealed" to us? And just how clearly was this "revealed" to us anyway? None of my bibles make any mention of a "Trinity." What precisely about Christianity's supposed truths are we supposed to be able to "clearly see" in the world such that we "are without excuse"? When I look out at the world around me, nothing I see tells me that it was all created by an act of consciousness. But this is something that I am supposed to "clearly see" in the world, according to Romans 1:20. That the believer would have to resort to quoting the bible in order to show that the natural world itself bears striking evidence of a creator defeats its own purpose. If this evidence were so apparent in the natural world, one would not need to rest on the authority of primitive storybooks. He did not go to the zoo and conclude from a survey of the animals residing therein that at one time some four thousand or so years ago, two (or seven?) of each were herded onto an ark and rescued from a worldwide flood. He did not look at other human beings and conclude from their nature or actions that a god-man was born of a virgin, baptized by John, assembled a group of 12 followers, preached a message and taught in parables, performed miracles and cured the lame, the infirm, the blind, that this god-man was tried by a regional principal who did not find him guilty, but released him to be put to death anyway, and that after being put to death this god-man was resurrected three days later and ascended to a place called heaven. None of these things were learned by looking at reality. Belief in these teachings was learned from a set of documents collected in a single tome and said to be true on the basis of divine revelation, not on the basis of rational proof. This is not really a question of epistemology, since the contents of the documents are accepted as truth independent of an objective process of validation. Bible-belief constitutes an abandonment of any method of validating knowledge claims, and thus constitutes an abandonment of man's need for epistemology. The bible does not even develop its own theory of knowledge, let alone a theory of concepts which would be needed to support it. Indeed, these beliefs are affirmed as truth with even more fervor than if they were conclusions to sound arguments, which in itself is a dead give-away that one has no firsthand knowledge of these accounts, that they are being promoted ultimately on the basis of feelings, not reason. Believers become so confessionally invested in the supposed truth of their bible, that it is no longer even a matter of simply believing, but of wanting it to be true. Faithfulness is the hallmark of acting on these "beliefs" and thus constitutes the ultimate in subjectivism.

All of this simply means that if Christianity's claims were in fact rational and provable, its defenders would not need to appeal to "divine revelation." It is because there is no rational validation for their claims that they need to discredit so-called "autonomous reasoning."

Does any of this imply that we cannot learn history from a book? No, it does not. And it is not the case that the bible does not record history; indeed, it documents what some ancient people believed and taught. But what's noteworthy is not only does the believer claim as unquestionable truth what he cannot verify firsthand (in fact, many apologists resort to skepticism with regard to what they can know firsthand), but also that the views expressed in these early sources assume an orientation between consciousness and its objects that is contrary to the one which the believer himself operates on. The believer thus discounts what can be verified firsthand while endorsing what he could never verify firsthand.

by Dawson Bethrick

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