

Thursday, April 14, 2005

Do I Borrow My Morality from the Christian Worldview?

A common tactic in the presuppositionalist's quiver of attacks is to assert that non-Christians (particularly atheists) "borrow" from the Christian worldview. Apologist Greg Bahnsen makes the assertion that

the non-Christian makes use of 'intellectual capital', which is 'stolen' from the Christian worldview. That is, the unbeliever secretly rests his case upon Christian presuppositions, even while outwardly denying that he holds to them (and sometimes even putting up a show of opposition to them). (*Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 297n.83.)

For those who have ever engaged more than one presuppositionalist apologist, such accusations are to be expected. Though it can be applied in a variety of contexts, the charge of "borrowing" from Christianity is the presuppositionalist's most common (and perhaps only) response to those who confront him with the problem of evil. The reasoning driving this charge seems to be that any time a person says some chosen action is wrong, he can only do so by assuming standards that only Christianity can provide and defend. In fact, Bahnsen tells us that he is "encouraged" when he sees "unbelievers getting very indignant with some evil action as a matter of principle." Why? Because "such indignation requires recourse to the absolute, unchanging, and good character of God in order to make philosophical sense." (*Always Ready*, p. 170.)

And apologists dutifully take their cue from Bahnsen on such matters. For instance, if someone says that murder is wrong, the presuppositionalist will say this is an indication that the ten commandments are being assumed as a standard. But this reasoning implies that the ten commandments say that murder is wrong. But that's not at all what the bible says. It just says "don't do it." It nowhere evaluates the action being prohibited, it just prohibits it. Apologists might want to argue that the prohibition is sufficient to infer that the action being prohibited is wrong, but this is demonstrably not the case. To say something is wrong, one needs to present a reason why it's wrong, a supporting context which explains *why* it is wrong. But in the case of divine commandments, we don't find this supporting context. Instead, they're backed up with *threats*: if you disobey the bible's commandments, you'll be damned. This in turn glosses over the New Testament teaching that forgiveness is available just for the asking per 1 John 1:9, which states "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Such teaching as this simply gives the believer *carte blanche* to do whatever he wants, which only means that Christianity's stance on morality is a façade masking a deep schizophrenia that pervades Christianity's orientation to man's welfare.

So already the Christian is off to a bad start if he wants to defend this charge against non-believers. Indeed, the claim that I "borrow" my moral premises from the teachings of Christianity is utterly baseless, for I do not accept the Christian worldview's premise that I have an obligation to "deny myself" (cf. Lk. 9:23) or sacrifice myself (cf. Rom. 12:1) to anyone, either real (like other human beings) or imaginary (like someone's god). Since these are staples of Christian morality, presuppositionalists imply that they don't even know their own doctrine when they accuse non-Christians of "borrowing" from their worldview.

But to be sure, there are many fundamental differences between my morality and the morality taught in the bible that need brief mentioning:

Metaphysically, my morality is based on my nature as a biological being. There's nothing I can do to change my basic nature. By contrast, the Christian's morality is based on someone's commandments. That is, my morality is premised squarely on the primacy of existence while Christianity's moral notions are based on a rejection of [the metaphysical primacy of existence](#). In objective reality, wishing doesn't make it so, precisely because existence holds metaphysical primacy over consciousness. But in [the theist's cartoon universe](#), wishing has the final say so on everything. Essentially, the Christian imagines that there exists a ruling consciousness whose wishes are his commands, and the believer thinks he has an obligation to obey those commands. But as I pointed out in [Christianity vs. Objective Morality](#), "Commands are suitable for dogs and robots."

Epistemologically, my morality is based on reason, which is man's only means of knowledge. Rationality is the *commitment* to reason as one's only means of knowledge and his only guide to action. A commitment to life therefore requires a commitment to reason, because man must act and he needs a code of values which guides his choices and action, i.e., he needs morality to live. Contrast this with the Christian's morality, which is based on faith in revelations, i.e., on the hope that his god-belief claims are true, even though they contradict reality and the very basis of reason itself, which is the primacy of existence.

The nature and structure of my morality is determined by the application of the law of causality to my nature as a living organism, i.e., an entity which faces a fundamental alternative (life vs. death) and which must act in order to continue living. My moral principles, then, take the form of *hypothetical imperatives* which are based on the goal-oriented nature of human action: For instance, if X is my goal, course of action Y is what I should do if I choose to achieve X. In application: If I choose to live, I must take those actions that make my life possible. If I want to satisfy my hunger (something I need to do if I choose to live), then I must eat. If I do not have food, I must take those actions necessary to procure it. Etc.

Contrast this with the Christian's morality, which is determined by the application of unargued commands to the believer's nature as a being created for the sake of serving its creator, while that creator has no needs and the believer does (yet he is commanded to "deny himself"). This is not a formula for identifying and making possible life-based values.

The fundamental antithesis should be clear: my morality is a morality of values (i.e., those things that make life possible and worth living), while the Christian's morality is a morality of duties (i.e., arbitrarily decreed prescriptions and proscriptions which have no grounding reference to reality or man's nature).

My morality teaches me how I can live for my own sake, that my life is an end in itself, and that I can enjoy my life without guilt, without relying on the sacrifice of others, and without sacrificing it to others. By contrast, the Christian's morality teaches him to "deny himself" (cf. Mk. 8:34, Mt. 16:24, Lk. 9:23) and to hope for personal gain at someone else's sacrifice (namely Jesus' sacrifice on the cross) while treating his life as a means to someone else's ends (while that someone else has no needs).

Additionally, my worldview teaches that love must be earned, since reality cannot be cheated and genuine values do not find their basis in dishonesty. In my worldview, love is profoundly selfish since it is one's commitment to his own chosen values, and this is only possible if someone makes the choice to be honest about reality and do away with foolish pretenses. I cannot say I love my neighbor, for instance, if I know he cheats on his wife and beats his children, because I don't love such individuals and I won't deny this by repeating empty platitudes that I know are not true.

Contrast this with what Christianity teaches. It teaches that love is subject to commands, and this is essential to Christian morality. For, according to the author of the gospel of Matthew, Jesus allegedly made this the cornerstone of Jesus' moral teaching:

Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Mt. 22:36-40)

I am mature enough to know that love is *not* subject to commands. Imagine what the world would be like if one could command another person's love just by making a demand. Of course, those who cannot earn the love they want from others may easily be seduced by a worldview that teaches that others can be commanded to love them. But they can't. Whatever it is they think they have for others when they call it 'love', it is not love. The Christian notion that love can be commanded seeks to bypass the fact that the love of others must be earned, and thus constitutes yet another instance of Christianity's lust for the unearned. So much for Christianity's claim to be a worldview based on love!

So who is borrowing from whom? It should be clear now that I am in no way borrowing from the Christian worldview. Rather, to the extent that Christians act for the sake of their own benefit, they are not denying themselves as Jesus commanded, and are acting on the basis of a worldview that affirms that values must be earned by reasoned action. Thus it's clear that they are borrowing from my worldview to the extent that they live.

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [8:00 AM](#)

2 Comments:

[Francois Tremblay](#) said...

Ground-breaking commentary, as usual. But I must insist that comparing Christians to dogs and robots is very unfair to dogs and robots.

[April 14, 2005 7:35 PM](#)

[Zachary Moore](#) said...

Great post.

[April 18, 2005 8:48 AM](#)