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### Natural Revelation: Direct Apprehension or Inference?

It is always fascinating to observe when presuppositionalists, who claim to be guided by a “sense of deity” within them, end up affirming contradictory views on a topic.

Consider the topic of “natural revelation.”

Presuppositionalists of the Vantillian school affirm what they call “natural revelation” (sometimes also called “general revelation”), and distinguish this notion from “natural theology.” Van Til explains this distinction as follows:

It is of basic importance that... God’s revelation in the world of nature and of man be not confused with what is called natural theology. Natural theology is the result of the interpretive reaction that sinful man has given to the revelation of God to him in the created world. When we speak of revelation in nature we speak of an act of God directed manward. When we speak of natural theology we speak of a reaction on the part of man directed Godward. This distinction is all important for a proper exegesis of Romans one. (*The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture*, p. 56; quoted in Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 185)

Examples of “natural theology” include the so-called “traditional proofs” for the existence of the Christian god, such as the cosmological and teleological arguments, the argument from religious experience, etc. These arguments constitute attempts to infer the existence of the Christian god from natural phenomena discovered by man and “interpreted” apart from explicit reference to the biblical text. Such arguments are considered by Van Til to be “a reaction on the part of man directed Godward,” and such mental ventures presumably cannot escape the infectious activity of “sin,” a stain which is, according to Christianity, inherent to the human condition and from which no man can escape save by means of divine absolution. As such, any form of apologetics relying on “natural theology” is to be rejected by presuppositionalists for its anti-biblical implications. As Bahnsen puts it in his follow-up remark:

Careful reading of Romans 1-2 does not teach that men can develop a “natural theology” from the uninterpreted raw data of the natural realm... Rather, Van Til maintained that Romans 1 teaches a “natural revelation” whereby the created order is a medium of constant, inescapable, clear, preinterpreted information about God, with the effect that all men, at the outset of their reasoning, possess an actual knowledge of God and his character. (*Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 185)

Apologists sometimes characterize “natural revelation” as “God’s signature” which is said to be “found in every fact of the external world and in man’s personality” (*Ibid.*, p. 262). Apparently it is supposed to be understood that one’s recognition of the Christian god as the creator of everything in the universe, including man and the environment in which he finds himself, is not dependent upon anything man himself does cognitively. As Bahnsen puts it:

It should be plain to see that when God reveals Himself - whether in nature, Scripture, or His very Son - the identification of His word (or Word) must be authoritative, not resting on relativistic human opinion or unreliable endorsement. (*Ibid.*, p. 201)

It should be clear from these statements that presuppositionalists cite the initial chapters of the apostle Paul’s epistle to the Romans for the authority of their doctrine of “natural revelation.” Perhaps the most important passage in these chapters with respect to this doctrine is Romans 1:18-20, which reads as follows:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. 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.

Now I have already pointed out (for instance, see [here](#)) that this passage, specifically the last sentence (Romans

1:20), contains a contradiction. If things are “clearly seen,” then they’re obviously not “invisible things.” But this is not the only time when the presence of contradiction fails to raise the concern of presuppositional apologists (see for instance [here](#) and [here](#)).

But the contradictions don’t stop with Romans 1:20. Indeed, in spite of the claim that “the invisible things” of the Christian god “are clearly seen,” presuppositionalists themselves find it necessary to interpret what this means. And in so doing, they are sometimes found in conflict with one another.

Bahnsen, for instance, in keeping with what his mentor Van Til taught, insists that the revelation of the Christian god in nature (sometimes referred to as “the created order”) is “directly apprehended” by man.

Van Til maintained, following the teaching of Paul in Romans 1-2, that all men have knowledge of God that is justified by direct apprehension of His handiwork in the world and within themselves. Even without a discursive argument or a chain of inferences from elementary observations about experience, all men see and recognize the signature of their Creator in the world that He created and controls, as well as in themselves as His created image. (Op. cit., p. 184)

This interpretation of Romans 1-2 seems motivated, not only by the claim that “the invisible things” of the Christian god are “clearly seen” (which seems impossible to reconcile with itself), but also to support the belief that *all human individuals* (including those who have never heard of Christianity before) are “accountable” to the Christian god (“so that they are without excuse”). As Bahnsen puts it:

God has revealed himself to all men, providing evidence that justifies belief in His existence and character; his revelation is “mediated” through the evidence of the created order and man’s personality. However, this evidence or justification for belief is not inferential or discursive. Rather, the evidence for God is immediately perceived - indeed, it is inescapable and undeniable (even though men in their perversity attempt to deny it). (Ibid.)

Even though this doctrine requires that one “clearly see” things which are “invisible,” the intention behind it is itself clear enough: knowledge of the Christian god (including its alleged existence) is supposed to be directly apprehended merely by having any awareness of “the created order.” Bahnsen is explicit: this is not knowledge which is *inferred*. Were that the case, those who did not for whatever reason make the inference that the world was created by the Christian god would not be “without excuse.” Without a doctrine conceived as Bahnsen informs it here, Christians would have a hard time holding developmentally impaired individuals accountable to the god which they enshrine in their imaginations.

However, although it seems that Van Til’s doctrine of “natural revelation” is basic to presuppositionalism, not all presuppositionalists seem to be aware of its particulars. For instance, when [Mitch LeBlanc interrogates presuppositionalist RazorsKiss](#) (“RK”) on the sources from which he derives knowledge of the Christian god, RK answers by affirming that knowledge of the Christian god from “the created order” is *inferential* in nature. Observe:

**ML:** And from your aforementioned sources, you derive the goodness, power, coherency, knowingness, etc of God?

**RK:** Yes, Scripture states that God is good, that He is Almighty, that He is a God of order, not confusion, and that He knows even the thoughts of men (as well as the entirety of His creation) when He “knows all things”. The Created order attests to these things as well, in a lesser, and more inferential way - but as I said, that is sufficient merely to condemn. (*underlining added*)

Where Bahnsen insists that the knowledge which men acquire of the Christian god from “the created order” is *not* inferential, but rather “is justified by direct apprehension,” RK characterizes his god as attesting to its nature in “the created order... in a... more inferential way.”

Which is it?

Is the “signature” of the Christian god “directly apprehended,” or is it “inferred”?

Presuppositionalists give us mixed messages here.

This is not the first time, however.

As [we saw earlier](#), RK affirmed in [his debate with Mitch LeBlanc](#) that:

I am going to argue that God is not only the ordainer, but creator of the logical laws we use.

But if we consult Greg Bahnsen, we find a completely different position:

We are not saying God created the laws of logic by His volitional self-determination. Were this so, then He could alter or discard them as well... (*Pushing the Antithesis: The Apologetic Methodology of Greg L. Bahnsen*, p. 210)

Again, which is it?

Is the Christian god the “creator of the logical laws we use” as RK claims, or it did not create the laws of logic, for otherwise “He could alter or discard them as well”?

If presuppositionalists were mere human beings left to their own intellects and their own fallible devices to figure these things out based on their own imperfect attempts to interpret what the bible says and conjecture their way to informing the doctrines they eventually come to endorse, I can understand such internal discrepancies.

But presuppositionalists tell us that they are guided by an “internal sense,” a “sense of deity,” a “sensus divinitatus,” which [RK himself](#) describes as

the equivalent of having the author of the book standing over your shoulder, and correcting your faulty understandings, and continually adjusting your noetic “issues” as He also works to sanctify you in obedience to that revealed Word.

What are we to believe here? Are we to believe that RK’s statements have been vouchsafed by “the sensus divinitatus” and Bahnsen’s views are misguided and sin-laden? Or is it the opposite, that Bahnsen was divinely led in what he wrote in his book, while RK has been deceived by Satan into contradicting the credentialed presuppositionalist master? Is “natural revelation” inferential in nature, as RK claims, or is it “direct apprehension” as Bahnsen claims? Is the Christian god the “creator of the logical laws” as RK claims, or are presuppositionalists “not saying God created the laws of logic” as Bahnsen says?

It is simply not credible to say that these disparate positions on such issues have been communicated to “the chosen” by an omniscient and infallible being which does not contradict itself or which [“cannot lie.”](#)

Be assured that I am not trying to be petty in bringing out these discrepancies. On the contrary, I am simply trying to be a responsible thinker, and a responsible thinker calls out contradictions such as these when he encounters them. Perhaps I’m just too stupid to understand these things, and don’t know when contradictions can and should be accepted as knowledge (even though I’m supposed to “directly apprehend” the Christian god through “the created order” and am “without excuse”). If that is the Christian view, then I gladly stand corrected. But even this seems to contradict itself, and if the law of non-contradiction is one of the incontestable and absolute measures for validating what one accepts as knowledge, then these violations need to be called out. And until they are dealt with, the conclusion that there’s something rotten in presuppositionalism is unavoidable.

by Dawson Bethrick

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