

Thursday, April 21, 2005

Paul's Argument from Desperation

Often Christian apologists present statements, some more elaborate than others, which do not bear refuting simply because no discernable argument has been presented. Rather, what is often presented is a series of confessional affirmations which themselves say very little that is philosophically important while providing a glimpse into the superficial conceptions assumed by the believer. Such is the case with the statement that I will be examining in what follows.

In his blog [Reformed Theology And Man's Coherence in Experience](#), presuppositional apologist Paul Manata presents what some might think is an argument, either one defending his Christian theism, or one against non-Christian philosophies. Exactly which he intends, is not clear. All the same, however, he opens his blog with the claim that "Reformed theology alone provides coherence to man's experience." This is an explicit claim to exclusivity on behalf of a particular branch of Christian theology called "reformed" theology, a set of teachings which has its basis or is at any rate strongly associated with the teachings of John Calvin. As a system of apologetics, presuppositionalism is most typically associated with the reformed school of theology. And just as common as claims to exclusivity like the one Paul gives here, is the neglected onus to prove a negative when it comes to defending such claims. For in essence he is claiming that no other position accomplishes what he says his position accomplishes. How does he prove this? Or should we ask, *does he prove it?*

The Notion of "Providing" Coherence

It is also common for presuppositional apologists to speak of their worldview "providing" something that other worldviews *allegedly* do not or cannot *provide*. The question at this point is, What does it mean to say that a worldview "provides coherence to man's experience"? What does it mean to "provide" coherence to anything? (Such expressions suggest the image of a waitress wandering from table to table, dishing out helpings of "coherence" - however conceived - wherever needed, perhaps for a small fee.) The statement that reformed theology "provides coherence to man's experience" suggests that coherence is not *inherent* in experience as such (or at least an integral part of experience), and that coherence therefore must be *imported* into experience, perhaps by the adoption of a certain outlook or acceptance of certain confessional affirmations. But it's not clear why one would assume this. Where is it proven that coherence is *not inherent* in one's experience (thus doing away with the need for a source that "provides" it)? Who decides what those confessional affirmations are sufficient to "provide coherence" if coherence is *not* inherent in experience, and on what basis is this decided? If the apologist says that his *god* is the agent that decides these things, wouldn't that be begging the question? (Or does he excuse himself from proving such claims?) As stated, the presuppositionalist's claim that his worldview "alone provides coherence to man's experience" suggests the belief that one's experience is somehow endowed with "coherence" (however that is conceived or defined) at the mere assent to the tenets of that worldview. By declaring this to others, however, the presuppositionalist seems to be granting that his readers already have coherence in experience insofar as he expects them to understand what he's saying. So on this count such claims seem rather self-defeating if the intended readership is expected to be composed of *non*-believers. If the readership is expected to be other *like-minded* believers, then the apologist is simply preaching to the choir and his point is merely academic at best. (This would, however, explain the lack of argumentation for his overall position).

Paul then tells us that

Only reformed theology rightly teaches about the doctrines of: total depravity (Rom. 5:12), the Sovereignty of God (Dan. 4:35), the distinction between Creator and creature (Isa. 55:8), and the all-controlling providence of God which governs all events in history (Eph. 1:11).

And while non-reformed Christians would certainly take issue with such statements, it's unclear what these issues have to do with "man's coherence in experience." Nonetheless, Paul wants to explain how denying these four points somehow implies that one's "worldview is chaos."

He begins by declaring that "the unbeliever presupposes that he can interpret reality and himself without the need of revelation." Is this true? As a Christian, Paul no doubt means revelation from the Christian god (i.e., the bible) as opposed to revelations from any non-Christian gods. If in fact I, as an atheist, "presuppose" that I "can interpret reality and [myself] without the need of [the Christian

god's] revelation," I don't do this any more than I "presuppose" that I can do these very things "without the need" of, say, the Muslim god's "revelation" in the Koran or Geusha's "revelation" in the Tritsat-lak. If in fact I do actively presuppose that I can think and reason without these sources of revelation, why does Paul only have a problem when I don't presuppose his god's revelation? In fact, Paul's statement is just as arbitrary as saying "You presuppose that you don't have to be a fish in order to drink water" or "You presuppose that you can get yourself to work without needing a pterodactyl to carry you there." For indeed I don't think I need to be a fish to drink water, and I don't think I need a pterodactyl to carry me to my workplace. But can it accurately be said that I actively *presuppose* such contraries? If Paul thinks his statement is any less arbitrary than these other charges, he needs to argue for it.

Also, I've always wondered what presuppositionalists specifically mean by the expression "interpret reality." This expression occurs in numerous places in books like Van Til's *The Defense of the Faith* (cf. pp. 15, 38, 114, 201, et al.) and Bahnsen's *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis* (cf. pp. 52, 201, 467, 640-641, et al.). I don't see where these authors explain what they mean by this phrase. Is this another loaded expression? Or is it just another term borrowed from academia? Perhaps this term is more accurate than presuppositionalists would like to admit, for it is a hallmark of the religious mindset to *interpret* everything according to the dogmatic template of a primitive, illusory paradigm that needs to be constantly maintained through active reinforcement and repetition (learning bible quotes is very handy for this).

Also, Paul talks of "the need of revelation." By this he presumably means all human beings need the revelation of Paul's god. But where does he show that man qua man needs any revelation to begin with? Is this an objective need, such as man's need for food? Or is this a comfort need, something that makes the believer feel better or safe in some way, and thus projected on this basis onto all men without proof or factual support? This strikes me as just more presumption to exclusivity without proper warrant. Again, do I "presuppose" that I can reason "without the need" for Allah's "revelation"? To even consider such questions, would the Koran have to be true as a precondition? A Muslim could easily say yes. But Christians would likely answer such questions negatively (indeed, do Christians "presuppose" that they can "interpret" reality and themselves without the "need" of the Koranic revelation?), and yet they say these very same things replacing Islam's Koran with Christianity's biblical revelation. Again, if Paul thinks there is a significant objective difference which favors the one as against the other, he needs to do more than merely assume it if he wants his apologetic to be persuasive.

So if the apologist wants to accuse non-Christians of any kind of wrongdoing here, namely presuming that he can thwart "the need of revelation," he has two primary burdens:

- 1) prove that man has any "need of revelation" in the first place
- 2) prove that this need is for the Christian revelation as opposed to some other revelation

I don't see that Paul has met either of these burdens in the space of his short blog, and yet he assumes the truth of both points in his assertions.

Of the non-Christian, Paul writes that "He takes himself as the standard and judge." Standard of what? It's not clear since Paul does not specify. Do I take myself to be the standard of mathematical principles? No, I certainly do not. Do I take myself to be the standard of planetary motion? No, I do not. Do I take myself to be the standard of temporal measurement? No, I don't. I could list many such counter-examples. So Paul needs to be more specific here instead of just reciting what he's read in some nifty apologetics book. Perhaps he means standard of judgment. Do I take myself as a judge? Well, what is judgment? Paul does not specify, so I must fill in the blank here. By judgment I mean evaluation of a given concrete by reference to an abstract principle or standard. A judge is someone who does this. And yes, I do judge the things I am confronted with all the time. If I didn't do this, how could I live? Every time I need to eat, I need to judge the food set before me as suitable for my consumption. Every time I select someone to be my friend or business associate, I have to judge that person worthy of my friendship or business. Is Paul saying that one should not do this? If not, what is he saying? Is he saying one should suspend judgment on these things and wait for an invisible magic being to come down and do his thinking for him? Sorry, I can't wait for that, I need to eat.

Paul complains that the non-Christian "assumes that he is perfectly capable of judging matters of reason and morality by looking to himself as the final reference point." Well, I am a non-Christian, so it appears that Paul is trying to speak for me, even though he has not consulted me on this matter. But it is true that I do think with my *own* mind, and perhaps this is what the Christian ultimately objects to: since the Christian has rejected his own mind in preference for a pretended surrogate (cf. "the mind of Christ" - I Cor. 2:16), he resents those who do not do likewise (perhaps this is the source of his jealousy that he shares with his god). Also, contrary to the Christian, "the final reference point" of my thought are the objects of my awareness (objectivity), not my feelings or wishes or whims (subjectivism) as Christianity models. Where my thoughts are governed by the nature of those things which I consider (such as my biological needs and the actions I need to take in order to achieve my values), the Christian's thoughts are governed by imaginary notions which have no basis in reality whatsoever, such as invisible magic beings which float through the nethersphere issuing commandments and dictating the nature of reality according to its subjective whims. And here he is saying that I have no basis for rational judgment?

Paul worries that my "view denies total depravity." But I do not deny the fact that Christianity is a totally depraved worldview. What I reject is Christianity's doctrine of unearned guilt - the view that all men are guilty from birth due to the actions of one man (cf. Rom. 5:12), that guilt is something inherited, like skin color or certain diseases (as John Frame puts it, "We today bear the guilt of Adam's first sin," *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, p. 53). In my worldview, guilt is a consequence of the immoral action chosen by the acting agent. But Christianity discards morality by making guilt a metaphysical condition of man's nature (since they think it can be passed on from generation to generation). It should be no wonder that Jesus did not teach a morality of values but instead taught men to obey commands as if they were mindless sheep rather than men who can think on their own. Thinking for oneself (what presuppositionalism refers to as "autonomous reasoning") is anathema to the Christian worldview, since the human mind is to be considered dangerous and in need of submission. History shows that any dictator has the same fear of other minds that Christians have. A non-believer's rationality then is rightly considered by the Christian to be a dire threat to his well-coddled primitive beliefs.

According to Paul, the rejection of Christianity's doctrine of total depravity "leads to man denying his createdness and setting himself, as it were, up as God." But even if one accepted the unargued claim that man were "created" by an invisible magic being, wouldn't he wonder how it could be the case that he as a "creation" is "totally depraved" when his "creator" is allegedly perfect and totally good? How can depravity have its source in non-depravity? Such questions are ultimately unanswerable on Christianity's own premises. Their usual response of course is to blame the creation for the creation's faults, even though those creations, on Christianity's own premises, did not create themselves. Go figure.

Paul continues: "On his view" - that is, on the non-Christian's view - "facts are random and not sovereignly determined by God." Clearly Paul is assuming a false dichotomy here: either facts are "sovereignly determined by God," or they are simply "random." But it doesn't follow from the rejection of belief in invisible magic beings that one therefore thinks that "facts are random." The error Paul makes here is one that is repeatedly modeled in the presuppositionalist literature, namely treating the concept 'random' as if it had a metaphysical application, when in fact its proper application is in epistemology. To be sure, many non-Christians make this mistake as well, but it is simple to correct. When we say something is random, we are not saying something about the nature of reality as such (such as that the law of causality does not or cannot apply), but about our own lack of understanding or knowledge of an action's causes. To "randomly" pick a card from a full deck does not imply that there was no causality to the action of selecting a card and withdrawing it from the rest. Rather, it simply means that we don't expect to know the face of the card we are pulling until we turn it over and look at it. But this is not what presuppositionalists tend to mean. Presuppositionalists tend to mean by 'random' the same thing they mean by 'chance'. According to presuppositionalism, 'chance' refers to "events that occur without cause or reason" (see John Frame's [A Van Til Glossary](#)). But this is certainly not at all what rational thinkers would mean when they say that something happens "by chance," for even if something is said to happen by chance, one is not denying that certain causes brought it about, but that those causes were either not choreographed or that they're just not fully known or understood in detail at the time. In a non-cartoon universe, there is nothing wrong with this. If for instance during my lunch hour I'm walking through the city and bump into an old co-worker whom I haven't seen in over ten years, I might say I came upon her "by chance." But in characterizing our meeting in this way, I am in no way denying that various causes lead up to it. So it is important for those who might debate presuppositionalists to be on the lookout for their superficial handling of concepts such as we find in Paul's blog.

Contrary to Paul's claim, I hold that facts are absolute in the sense that they do not depend on someone's wishing (either man's or a deity's). For instance, it is a fact that Greenland is larger in area than Oahu, and no one's wishing can change this. Contrast this with what Christianity teaches: it teaches that all facts are subject to its god's will, which means it could wish that Oahu was larger in area than Greenland (after all, the bible says that one can cast a mountain into the sea if he wishes hard enough). And how could anyone know if and when the Christian god is going to decide to make Oahu larger in area than Greenland? Unless the apologist himself is omniscient, he would not know what his god's future plans have in store for either Greenland or Oahu. For all he knows, his god could relocate Manhattan to the northernmost point of Greenland and then turn around and relocate Greenland to the South Pacific. Is the Christian presupposing that his god won't do these things? Would those attending the wedding at Cana (cf. John 2:1-11) be wrong for presupposing that the substance in the pots was water and not wine? For the Christian, everything is random, since he does not have knowledge of his god's plan (if he says he does know his god's plan, ask him where the Dow Jones index will finish next week). So we have here another ironic situation in which the presuppositionalist accuses non-believing philosophies of the very problem that Christianity itself is saddled with. That problem is: In a [cartoon universe](#), there is no certainty whatsoever. Even all bets are off. For any claim to certainty about anything in the world, then, the apologist must borrow from the objective worldview of the atheist.

In spite of all these subtle problems that presuppositionalism glosses over, Paul holds that seeing facts as something other than "being related by God's plan" somehow "destroys unity in man's experience." Contrary to his earlier implication that "coherence" must be "provided" to experience, presumably from without, Paul's statement here suggests that "unity" is inherent in experience already but is somehow "destroyed" when one sees facts as something other than "being related by God's plan." Indeed, what in the world could be meant by the notion that facts are "related by God's plan" anyway? And if one does not know the fullness of "God's plan," how could he see facts as they are allegedly "related" in that alleged "plan"? Surely Paul Manata is not saying he's omniscient, is he? Instead of addressing such questions, Paul focuses his scrutiny on the would-be non-believer that he invents for purposes of demonstrating his

dismantling skills while neglecting to attend the fire that's ravaging throughout his house.

To show that any view of facts which does not see them as "being related by God's plan" amounts to a position that "destroys unity in man's experience," Paul asks "If the facts are random and not determined by God's plan then what ties together one experience to the next?" Apparently he thinks there's nothing apart from his god that "ties together one experience to the next." Thus Paul seems to be setting up an argument from ignorance which basically goes as follows: Since I don't know what could tie one experience to another besides God, it must be the case that those who disbelieve in God have nothing that "ties together one experience to the next." Meanwhile, it's not clear what Paul means by "experience" or what he means by "tying" one experience to another. In fact, since it's obvious that consciousness is continuous awareness of objects over time (this is obvious because we perceive objects in action and time is a measurement of motion), it seems he's setting up yet another presuppositionalist non-problem if by 'experience' Paul means *conscious* experience. So far his presumption that non-believers must assume that "facts are random" has been shown to be wrong, and an answer can easily be supplied to his question about what "ties together one experience to the next."

Then, as if on schedule, Paul appeals to David Hume: "David Hume showed that we could never have epistemological justification for a necessary causal connection between events based on empiricist dogma." It's not clear why Paul gives any worthy consideration to Hume, but it's probably because Van Til and Bahnsen did before him, and he's simply trying to emulate their techniques (he might even believe those techniques are effective!). To be sure, Hume was misguided on many things, and the assumption, habitually parroted in the presuppositionalist literature, that Hume speaks for all non-believing philosophies, shows a profound lack of familiarity with philosophical trends since the eighteenth century. Sure, Hume has been influential, and so has Bertrand Russell, but neither speak for all atheists, no matter how inconvenient this fact is for Christian apologists. Regarding causality, Hume's error was his working model, namely that causality is a relationship between one event and another, and it was in part this faulty basis that lead him to his skeptical conclusions. Since Hume saw causality as a relationship between events, nothing could stop him from concluding that causality had no necessary relationships (indeed, on this basis, what would suggest that causality had any necessity?). But this view of causality is wrong. Causality is a relationship between an entity and its own actions, and this is a relationship of necessary dependence. This correction, along with the objective theory of concepts, is sufficient to avoid the hazards of Hume's fatalistic skepticism.

Paul then argues that "because autonomy necessarily involves one in an ego-centric predicament there would no intelligible basis to say that there is anything objectively in common between one experience and the next." By autonomy I take presuppositionalists to mean thinking with one's own mind (I make this point in my blog [Christianity vs. Objective Morality](#)). But it's not clear what Paul means by "an ego-centric predicament" or how thinking with one's own mind "necessarily involves one" in such a predicament. Though it's not at all clear (and Paul doesn't explain it), he might mean a predicament of pure self-reference. But it's not the case that thinking with one's own mind would lead one into a predicament of pure self-reference, since the thinking in question could very well (and typically does) include reference to objects other than oneself; and even if those thoughts are about oneself, they are not void of a context which includes reference to objects other than oneself. Indeed, it appears that Paul is trying to assemble yet another argument from ignorance whose intention is to denigrate those who don't believe in Paul's god. He says that "objective commonality presupposes order (e.g., laws, universals, sameness)." But this is a given in the very fact of existence: to exist is to be something. That's the law of identity. Because existence exists, we don't need to posit a supernatural source for the law of identity. Thus Objectivism's axioms answer Paul's next question: "if man does not take God's revelation of laws as being an expression of His universal and unchanging mind then how can the unbeliever account for them?" One merely needs to point to the axioms to identify the foundation for what we call laws of nature and logic. It appears Paul is not aware of this, or he's hoping that his readers don't have such understanding. It is in this manner that presuppositionalism depends on compound ignorance. The presuppositionalist commonly relies on the tactic of asking questions which are implied to have no answer except one pointing to the presuppositionalist's god. This was a common rhetorical device used by the apostle Paul in his letters. But a question is not an argument, and Paul is in desperate need of an argument.

Typical to the presuppositionalist tactic, Paul follows up his question with another: "He could say that they exist and are objective. But then how would he know this based on his limited experience?" In a footnote he refers to A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* "for non-Christian approval of this point." What point? Paul asked a question; he didn't make a point. Also, Paul risks making the very dangerous error of assuming that any one non-Christian speaks for all non-Christians. And though this would be convenient, it would commit the fallacy of guilt by association. Non-believers tend to be freely thinking individuals, and thus it is an error to presume they speak with uniformity on any matter, as we should expect from those who confess allegiance to a religion. But to answer Paul's question, we must ask what could possibly serve as a contrast to "limited experience." Does Paul really think that there's such a thing as "unlimited experience"? Indeed, it seems that experience would be limited to itself to the extent that it is real (since A is A just as a thing is not both itself and more than itself). And does Paul think one can only know something based on something other than one's own experience?

Paul then throws out a proposal that some non-believers might offer in response to his line of questioning: "He could say that say that man's mind creates the universals, but then we have subjectivism and an arbitrary imposition of laws on a lawless universe." Apparently the problem has moved from "coherence in man's experience" to the problem of universals. It would have been more fruitful if Paul had

made this clear up front, for until this point he was treating "coherence in man's experience" as a separate matter. At any rate, if in fact "coherence in man's experience" were a genuine philosophical problem, wouldn't it have to be resolved prior to examining the problem of universals? Or, does Paul think that there is really only one problem at issue here, and that the answer to the one is also the answer to the other? It's not clear from what Paul does say. But his criticism of the proposal he throws out there seems, ironically, to target Christian theism insofar as it targets any position. For all the bible says, it might be the Christian view that the Christian god creates the universals. But as Paul points out, this amounts to subjectivism, and the Christian god's sovereign ordination of order on the universe sure would be difficult to distinguish from "an arbitrary imposition of laws on a lawless universe." For what laws would constrain a god like the Christian god, except those it personally creates and/or sanctions? Thankfully, however, we need not be held hostage to such a dismal and hopeless worldview, as we have available to us a truly objective worldview, one that embraces reason instead of faith, rational principles instead of fear, and life instead of unlife, that answers all these questions.

In his last paragraph, Paul affirms that "by saying that there is coherence in experience there must be order." What precisely he means by "order" here is not explained, but given his theistic commitments, it's most likely taken as an indicator of some supernatural source. If that's the case, he needs to argue for such a connection. Nevertheless, implicit in all this is the position that the non-Christian cannot "account for" the order allegedly presupposed by the affirmation of coherence in one's experience, for he wants it to be the case that this order must have a supernatural source that "transcends" the natural order. Of course, if this is the position that Paul set out to defend, he didn't do a very good job of it. Rather, what we have here is a long string of arguments from ignorance: Since Paul can't think of any way that one could "justify" the presumption of "order" on the basis of a worldview committed to a metaphysic of "chance," it must be the case that Christian theism is true. This is just the kind of "reasoning" one can expect from a presuppositionalist apologist: superficial, misrepresentative, uninformed. As can be readily seen, this argument from ignorance gives way to a non sequitur: even if some non-Christians did adhere to what the presuppositionalist calls a metaphysics of "chance," it wouldn't follow from this that Christian theism is true. Not by a long shot! Yet in the final analysis this is about the best presuppositionalism has to offer.

Paul concludes by quoting what appears to be an unserious argument from Van Til (one that is borne on overstated metaphor and slippery slope reasoning), but just in case Paul thinks anyone should take it seriously, it appears to take this form:

- 1) If you have a bottomless sea of chance (and)
- 2) If you, as an individual, are but a bit of chance (and)
- 3) By chance distinguished by other bits of chance, and
- 4) the law of contradiction has grown within you,
- 5) (Then) the imposition of this law on your environment is, granted it could take place, a perfectly futile activity.

It's not clear that this is even a valid inference, and it's certainly not an argument for Christian theism. But notice how it trades on using the concept 'chance' as if it referred to some kind of metaphysical property or force, a view which I obliterated above. At any rate, in response to Van Til, I would point out the following:

- 1) I don't have "a bottomless sea of chance"
- 2) I am a biological organism, not "but a bit of chance"
- 3) I am not "distinguished by other bits of chance."
- 4) The law of contradiction is not a plant that has "grown within" me.
- 5) Therefore, applying this law "on [my] environment" is not "a perfectly futile activity."

So there you have it. Even though no argument was presented, many commonly advanced presuppositionalist errors and misconceptions have been firmly answered and corrected. Thus we can safely conclude that, if all presuppositionalism can present is more of the same, it's completely and irrecoverably bankrupt. So if Paul thinks he's presented a genuine argument for Christian theism, it must be an argument from desperation.

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by [Bahnsen Burner](#) at [9:00 PM](#)

2 Comments:

[Not Reformed](#) said...

Dawson,

I just want to say, this was an incredible post. The detailed 'step by step' approach you took was awesome. Great work!

[April 21, 2005 6:06 PM](#)

[mrtruth](#) said...

bahnsen_burner,

Excellent post Dawson. I'd love to see Paul's response to this, as its obvious you put some time and thought into it. Can't wait to see what you've got next!

mrtruth

[April 29, 2005 9:16 AM](#)