

Friday, February 01, 2008

## Presuppositionalism and the Evasion of the Burden of Proof, Part 1

Internet apologists are constantly trying to buck their burden of proof, whining that, if they have a burden to prove that their god exists, then atheists have a burden to prove that the theist's god doesn't exist, or something along these lines. Some time ago, Peter over at [Atheism Presupposes Theism](#) rolled out a three-part series on just this issue. I will examine each installment in this series one by one. In the present post, I will review Peter's initial post in that series, [Christianity vs. atheism and the burden of proof, part 1](#), which attempts to tackle the age-old dispute between theists and atheists as to who bears the burden of proof. Frequently, I've seen apologists try to evade the burden of attempting to prove their god-belief claims by arguing that believing in some invisible magic being is vastly more popular than not believing in one, which makes the atheist the odd man out, as it were. To his credit, Peter does not seem to take this naïve approach to the issue, but instead prefers a presuppositionalist treatment. So this is right up my alley.

Peter opens the topic as follows:

In the debate over the existence of God the claim is often made by atheists and agnostics that since the burden of proof is on the one making the positive claim that therefore the burden of proof rests upon the Christian.

It's both strange and telling that a Christian would have a problem accepting the burden of proof if he wanted others to accept his claim that his god is anything more than imaginary. How much confidence does the believer have in his god-belief? How much confidence does he have in his reasons for believing what he claims?

Peter continues:

The unbeliever reasons that because he is not the one positing the claim of someone's existence (in this case, God) that he bears no burden to disprove God's existence since the claim isn't true or can't be known unless it is first proven.

No, that's not why the atheist does not have the burden of proof. The atheist has no burden of proof because no one needs to prove that the non-existent does not exist. If the Christian god does not exist, no one needs to prove that it does not exist; in that case it simply doesn't exist, and people either accept this or live in denial, hoping that it does exist. Again, the theist is asserting the existence of an entity, an entity which he says exists beyond our ability to perceive (so we have no means by which we can have direct awareness of it), beyond our ability to measure (so we could never know how to integrate it conceptually into the sum of our knowledge), beyond our ability to prove (for proof requires evidence, and legitimate evidence is finite while the Christian god is said to be infinite). We are expected to accept as knowledge something that we could never know, given the characteristics Christians use to describe their god. At best, we can only use our imaginations to "know" such a being, and yet it needs to be borne in mind that the imaginary is not real. So not only does the theist bear the burden of proof, he also boobytraps any attempt at proof given the nature of his god-belief claims. This accounts for why so many theists resent the burden of proof being put on their shoulders: deep down they know it's a hopeless task, because deep down they know their claims are simply not true.

Peter writes:

But such reasoning by the unbeliever betrays that he is either unaware of or dishonest about the nature of the debate between the Christian and the atheist.

Not at all. The atheological reasoning I present simply rests on the acknowledgement that a) the non-existent does not exist, b) there is no obligation to prove that the non-existent does not exist, and c) if someone claims that the Christian god exists, either he presents his proof (if he has one), or doesn't. Also, who wants to persuade whom? Atheists tend to be very live and let live, and typically don't care if other people fill their heads with tales about invisible magic beings and suppose those tales are true. Remember that it's the Christian who is on a mission to seek converts and fill the church pews; his religion demands this. Atheism does not require atheists to go out and turn theists into atheists. So with atheism there is no prima facie obligation to convince theists that they're wrong. Indeed, if there were no more theists, atheists would lose a major supply of

entertainment. As for the believer, if he shirks his burden of proof, fails to present a proof, or the proof he does attempt to present is unpersuasive or found to be defective in some way, too bad for him and his god-belief.

Peter writes:

There's alot that can be said regarding the issue of the burden of proof, so maybe I'll have to divide this up into a few posts.

There is no reason to complicate the matter like this. In fact, it is really quite simple: Does the Christian acknowledge that he has a burden to prove his claims, or not? If he does, then he should get down to business and present his proof. If he does not acknowledge that he has a burden to prove his claims, then he should state his denial explicitly and be prepared to live with the results. He should realize that he has no basis to protest non-believers who do not accept his god-belief claims and remain in their non-belief. They certainly aren't going to "believe" on the theist's say so, and theists who renounce their burden to prove their claims need to learn how to get over this.

Peter writes:

But let me start by saying that if an unbeliever and a Christian do engage in debate over the question of God's existence then it's necessary to do just that: to debate.

Actually, there really is no need for a debate. All the non-believer needs to do is say: I don't believe it. Now what is there to debate over? Does the Christian deny the non-believer's testimony that he does not believe it? If so, that's tantamount to calling the non-believer a liar. Why, then, would someone want to engage in a debate he considers a liar? Meanwhile, don't be surprised if the non-believer says that just by showing up for the debate, the believer performatively concedes that his god-belief is false.

Peter writes:

That involves offering evidence, proofs, reasons, arguments.

Let's not forget [poofs!](#)

Peter writes:

If the unbeliever shows up to the debate and says that he's not going offer any proof that God does not exist then he concedes the debate to the Christian.

How so? What exactly is the atheists conceding? As I pointed out, there is no burden to prove that the non-existent does not exist. By not proving that Geusha does not exist, am I conceding that Geusha does exist? That's utterly nonsensical. Claims about supernatural beings do not enjoy such default status. The believer needs to acknowledge the nature of the kind of claim he is making when he claims that a supernatural being exists. But this is usually what believers are trying to evade.

Peter seems so desperate to "win" a debate that he'll take anything - even the atheist's silence - as a sign of victory. Meanwhile, the atheist will pose a handful of basic questions, questions which the believer will ignore. And yet the theist is so anxious to think he's "winning" debates. It is no wonder that the gospels have Jesus tell us that one must become as a little child to number among his "chosen" (cf. Mk. 10:15; Mt. 18:3-4; see also my blog [With Minds of Children](#)).

Peter writes:

It's like saying, "I want to debate but I'm not actually going to debate."

Actually, it's more like: "You claim that your god exists? Okay, what's your proof?" Then, when the theist presents his case (if he has one), there's something for both parties to examine. I don't know why any Christian apologist would resent such a stance. At least such an atheist is willing to give the apologist a chance to present his case. But if the theist announces at the very beginning of their conversation that he doesn't acknowledge any burden to substantiate his god-belief claims, he should be willing to live with the consequences: the non-believer goes his merry way, and the believer is left to his own frustrations.

Peter writes:

If the unbeliever does try to offer proofs for his position then he assumes that he does have a burden of proof, otherwise it wouldn't make any sense for him to debate, and yet atheists do debate.

Choosing to offer counter-proofs (or simply raising objections to arguments presented by believers, or pointing out flaws in their apologetic case) does not constitute an acknowledgement of a burden to do so. The non-believer does this as a *gratuity*, not to meet some imaginary obligation. This often stirs up the believer's pangs of insecurity though. Are atheists willing to debate? Some are. Many simply enjoy the entertainment that theists provide. Others enjoy sharpening their anti-apologetic chisels.

Peter writes:

In summary, to put it crassly, either put up or shut up.

Incidentally, this is what the non-believer can rightfully say to the apologist: if you don't want to present any proofs for your god's existence, fine. Move on, then, and stop wasting our time. After all, as I mentioned above, virtually every non-believer I've ever met is more or less live and let live, and has no gripe if a person wants to believe in a personal god. It's sort of like letting a child have his [imaginary friend](#). At any rate, I don't see how anyone could reasonably accuse little ol' me of failing to "put up," if by "put up" Peter means presenting a defense for one's stated verdicts. Those who are interested in reviewing what I have to say are free to rummage through my [blog archives](#) or through the material I've posted on my [personal website](#).

Peter writes:

Neither the Christian nor the atheist want to hold to their respective positions arbitrarily, assuming they want to be rational. I think that even an atheist can follow and agree with this reasoning.

The non-believer is not obligated to accept obligations which Christians put on him. If the non-believer points out the fact that he has no obligation to prove that the non-existent does not exist, the believer can either whine about this, or move on. If he wants, he can politely ask the non-believer to entertain his case for the existence of his god, but this will likely expose the apologist to further criticism, and this is typically what he's trying to avoid (which is why he's trying to shift the burden of proof in the first place).

Peter writes:

However, the atheist may still want to reply that even though he's not 100% certain whether God exists he still knows that Christianity is wrong or false.

Yes, he may state something along these lines. Of course, apologists find encouragement in uncertainty. Where they tend to interpret a non-believer's certainty as a sign of arrogance, they tend to see in any instance of uncertainty a glimmer of hope, hope that they might have a chance to "win" a debating point, hope that they might be able to exploit any instance of uncertainty as an occasion to bamboozle the non-believer, hope that he might catch a fish of his own, just as the believer himself was caught in someone else's fishing net.

Now if the non-believer announces that he is 100% certain that god-belief is *irrational* (a positive claim the burden of proving which a non-believer is certainly capable), then there's something to debate. But this moves the debate into the non-believer's court, and naturally this will irritate the Christian. But that's when the entertainment begins.

Peter writes:

Thus, the unbeliever may want to show up to the debate in an attempt to disprove the claims and arguments of the Christian theist while at the same time admitting that he himself hasn't necessarily proven that God does not exist (the problem of the universal negative, which by the way is not a problem for the Christian, but I'll save that for another time).

He may do this. Or, he may "show up to the debate" by pointing to the homework he's already done on the matter, and in addition to this mention that he has not seen the apologist's rebuttal to the points he's raised against god-belief in that body of work. The non-believer, for instance, may ask the Christian how he deals with the issue of metaphysical primacy. Or, does he? If he doesn't, then the Christian is in big trouble with this non-believer. Or, the non-believer might ask the believer to identify the theory of concepts his religious worldview endorses, and what its source might be. As for "the problem of the universal negative," this isn't the non-believer's problem either. After all, it's already been pointed out that there is no burden to prove that the

non-existent does not exist. What the believer needs to do is explain how outsiders to the faith can reliably distinguish between the believer's god and what the believer may merely be imagining. This poses a clear and present danger for the theist because one can always imagine that a non-existent thing is real. For instance, if someone says Geusha exists, but in fact Geusha is non-existent, the Geusha-believer is called to *demonstrate* that Geusha is not imaginary. If he doesn't meet this challenge, don't blame the non-believer for this - it's not his fault that the believer can't distinguish between his deity and his imagination.

Peter writes:

But it is still irrational for the unbeliever to conduct himself in this way. Why? Because when the unbeliever denies the existence of God or claims that there is a lack of compelling evidence to believe in Him the unbeliever presupposes a whole host of positive claims for which, by his own admission, there'd be a burden of proof.

Why is this a problem? What exactly is being debated when the theist wants to debate whether or not his god exists: the theist's claim that a god exists, or the non-theist's positive claims about reality? If the former is the case, then the non-believer's own positive claims are not the issue of the debate. If the Christian wants to challenge the non-believer's positive claims, he needs to identify which claims he wants to challenge and make his objections to those claims clear. A prepared non-believer would relish such an opportunity, for it may be the case that the believer himself unknowingly assumes the truth of those very claims which he wants to discredit. We can start with basic positive assumptions like, "there is a reality." Does the Christian deny this? Well, if he does, then so much for his claim that his god is real. If the Christian doesn't deny the non-believer's claim that there is a reality, then what's the problem? Since the theist knows he cannot substantiate his god-belief claims, he's going to continue looking for a way to manufacture objections against spoilsport atheists. That's when the fun really begins. Bring it on, I says!

Peter:

The atheist is not at all neutral in the debate over the existence of God.

Of course he isn't. Indeed, theists are the only ones who accuse non-believers of claiming to be neutral, but who actually does claim this? An atheist may very well be like myself, being wholly committed to an integrated rational worldview. This is certainly not neutral. And if the believer rejects the integrated rational worldview of the non-believer, why should the non-believer try to prove it to him? After all, a rejection of rationality would entail the rejection of the efficacy of proof. And seriously, if the non-believer does prove that Christianity is irrational (a simple feat, mind you), what Christian is going to accept that proof? His denial of such a proof is itself proof that he rejects the efficacy of proof. So the Christian's lipservice to the rationality of a position is just that - lipservice. Besides, if belief in invisible magic beings can be construed as "rational," anything can be construed as "rational" at that point, for by this point it has lost its meaning as a legitimate concept thanks to theism's destruction of concepts.

Peter:

The key to resolving the disagreement between the Christian and the unbeliever over the issue of the burden of proof lies in understanding the nature of the debate between the two over the question of God's existence.

Actually, the key to determine who has what burden of proof, lies not only in what either party happens to be asserting, but also in what the asserting party expects of the other party. The Christian claims that his god exists, and he wants others to accept this claim as knowledge. This bestows a burden of proof upon him, especially if he wants others to accept his claims as truth. I have no god-belief. The Christian should be happy to accept my word on this. After all, he thinks personal testimony is reliable: he does in the case of authors who lived some 1900 years ago - authors whom he cannot interview, so why wouldn't he do so in the case of someone he can interact with firsthand?

Peter:

The debate is not merely about one isolated claim, i.e., God exists. Rather, both the Christian and the unbeliever bring to that debate a whole host of presuppositions about the nature of reality, possibility, about ethics, about epistemology, truth, teleology, and so on (Bahnsen often spoke of the "big three": metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology).

Notice how Peter not only wants to shift the burden of proof, he also wants to make the debate over more than just whether or not his god exists. Either his god exists, or it doesn't. But, as is typical with theists (there's always something more), he wants to make his god's alleged existence *relevant* to everything else in life. Why make it so complicated? That bestows upon the believer yet another set of burdens. Indeed, suppose his god does exist. So what? Why suppose it is any more relevant to our life than a rock that exists on one of Jupiter's moons? The believer wants you to think his god's alleged existence is more relevant than some rock sitting idly somewhere out there in the solar system; he wants you to think that his invisible magic being deserves a central place in your life. This simply means he has some more unmet burdens. This is certainly no burden of mine.

Here's a better way to go about it: Why not simply name your ultimate starting point, and identify the process by which you know it is true? After all, given the litany of issues that Peter wants to drag into the debate, this question is inevitable. But now it becomes a debate on starting points. Again, don't be surprised if the non-believer points out that the Christian's starting point assumes the truth of his non-believing starting point.

Peter:

Both have what Reformed Christians often call a 'worldview', a philosophy of life/reality by which they reason and interpret their experiences.

Yes, I certainly do have a worldview. Mine is a worldview founded on the primacy of existence, one which supplies me with the conceptual equipment needed to distinguish between the actual and the imaginary, the reasonable and the irrational, the truth and the fiction. Without a worldview grounded in the primacy of existence, one lacks the cognitive tools needed to recognize such distinctions.

The Christian worldview assumes the primacy of consciousness metaphysics. This is why Christians confuse fiction for reality, as they do when they insist that the stories they read in the New Testament are true. Since the very foundations of their worldview reverse the proper orientation between subject and object - giving the subject of awareness causal primacy over its objects - believers forfeit any claim to rationality on account of the fact that they have surrendered the objective basis needed to distinguish between fact and imagination.

Contrary to Christianity, the rational worldview recognizes the primacy of existence metaphysics. By pointing out that the primacy of consciousness metaphysics is invalid, self-contradictory and irrational, the non-believer will have toppled Christianity at its roots. There is no recovery available to the Christian once this has been done.

Peter:

Both the atheist and the Christian theist have assumptions about what is acceptable evidence, how much evidence is needed, what is compelling, what can be known by the evidence, and so on.

An adherent to the rational worldview (i.e., one premised on the primacy of existence, whose epistemology is characterized by an uncompromising commitment to reason as man's only means of knowledge and his only guide to action, etc.) has what he needs to determine and validate the criteriological qualifications of legitimate evidence, namely *reason*. He does not need to rest his verdicts on faith in invisible magic beings and their supposed "revelations." He recognizes that those who rest their verdicts on faith concede that reason is on the side of their adversaries.

The Christian claims that a non-physical, supernatural, infinite and incorruptible being created the universe. But what evidence does he offer on behalf of this claim? If he points to evidence that is physical, natural, finite and corruptible, then he's asking that we accept as evidence that which contradicts the nature of what he has claimed. (This approach is not uncommon in apologetics - see my blog [Is Human Experience Evidence of the Christian God?](#)) The fact that the Christian worldview assumes a metaphysical basis which in fact contradicts reality (because it grants metaphysical primacy to the subject in the subject-object relationship, a philosophical malady known as *subjectivism*), is sufficient indication that we should expect further contradictions like this from the believer when he tries to present his case for his god-belief.

Peter:

Thus, when the dispute arises over who has the burden of proof, both the Christian and the unbeliever can be found reasoning about that issue in light of their presuppositions, in accordance with their worldview.

The atheist's position on this matter should not be so difficult for the theist to understand. The theist asserts

the existence of an entity which, by the characteristics he attributes to it, the non-believer could not perceive. So its existence is simply not perceptually self-evident. That is why the theist needs to resort to proof in order to validate his claims. There is nothing illicit or fallacious about this. Indeed, the Christian himself would likely take the same approach if a Lahu tribesman comes up to him and says that Geusha is the supreme being of all reality. The Christian could easily say, "Well, where's your proof?" Does the Christian sit down and start developing proofs that Geusha does not exist? Perhaps, but that would be a waste of time (but Christians are known for wasting their time anyway - look how they squander their Sundays).

Moreover, Peter's comments raise the question: who is going to be able to reason consistently with his worldview's most basic "presuppositions"? The Christian will of course say that he does (or that *only* he does), but does he really? Where does his worldview deal with the issue of metaphysical primacy? Or, does it? This is the most fundamental relationship in all philosophy, and it is an inescapable issue, since philosophy is essentially the software by which we operate our consciousness, and consciousness always involves an object. So the nature of the relationship between a subject and its objects will always be a concern throughout one's philosophy, even if he is ignorant of it, even if he attempts to evade it. And yet, far from presenting any intelligent treatment of this issue, no biblical author even suggests that he is even aware of this relationship, let alone its all-encompassing importance to philosophy.

The adherent to the rational worldview certainly will be able to reason consistently with his worldview's most basic fundamentals, for he alone can remain consistent with the primacy of existence metaphysics. But the Christian, whose worldview assumes the primacy of consciousness metaphysics, will be exposed for borrowing from the rational worldview by his implicit assumption of the primacy of existence metaphysics at key points (such as whenever he claims that something is *true*), even though this foundation is incompatible with the god-belief he wants to defend. The test for this is whether or not the Christian thinks that his position is true because he *wishes* it to be true. If he is consistent with his worldview's "ultimate presuppositions," he would have to admit that he thinks wishing makes it so. If he acknowledges with the non-believer that wishing is irrelevant to what is true, then he is clearly shirking his professed worldview's fundamentals. At best, the believer will show that his worldview compartmentalizes itself by adopting duplicitous metaphysics, one which obtains in the actual world in which he lives (the primacy of existence, which he borrows from the non-believer), and another which obtains in the [cartoon universe](#) of his theism (the primacy of consciousness, which is the metaphysical basis of the assumption that wishing makes it so). He does grant that his god's wishes make it so, does he not? Or, does he suppose his god's wishes are impotent?

Peter:

Therefore, if the Christian and the atheist reason about the question of the burden of proof in a way that is consistent with their worldview they will necessarily end up disagreeing on this matter (logically speaking, that is, though not necessarily psychologically, but I won't go down that rabbit trail).

I have no problem disagreeing with Christians on philosophical matters. Indeed, there is no agreement between the primacy of existence and the primacy of consciousness, just as there is no agreement between the position that wishing doesn't make it so and the position that wishing does make it so, and for the same reason. But don't be surprised to find the Christian agreeing - if asked - with the position that wishing doesn't make it so. The problem for him, however, is that his professed worldview fundamentally contradicts that position (for it grants metaphysical primacy to consciousness). To cull this out, ask if his god's wishing can make it so. Then watch him squirm.

Peter:

Neither one is neutral on this issue.

Of course. There is no neutrality between truth and falsehood, just as there can be no compromise between objectivity (the rational worldview) and subjectivism (e.g., the Christian worldview). Curiously, this is typically not the reason presuppositionalists give for designating "neutrality" as a pretense; they like to see matters in terms of commitment to their invisible magic being as if it were *fundamental*: either you are devoted to the Christian god, or you reject it. On the presuppositionalist view, orientations to truth, rationality, objectivity, etc., only come later, and are determined by one's commitment to or rejection of the Christian god. However, even by the Christian's own premises, awareness of the Christian god (assuming it were real), let alone commitment to or rejection of it, could not be fundamental. As is so common with presuppositionalists, they have a most confused sense of cognitive hierarchy.



Peter writes:

In fact, if both rightly understood their opponent's position then they ought to know even before they debate that they're going to disagree on the question of the burden of proof.

Sure we're going to disagree. The non-believer will rightly point out that he has no obligation to prove that the non-existent does not exist, and the believer will continue to evade his burden of proof by trying to shift it onto the non-believer.

Peter writes:

In my next post (or perhaps two or three posts) I'm going to try and clarify the Christian position on the matter of the burden of proof, offer a way to resolve the dispute with the atheist, and finally to actually resolve the matter by demonstrating that the unbeliever's position, if he is consistent with himself, is irrational, and that to the extent the unbeliever does attempt to shift the burden of proof to the Christian that he actually has to rely upon the truth of Christian worldview, thus proving Christianity from the impossibility of the contrary.

Oh, I've got to see this! For one thing, I'd really like to know what a Christian might mean by the word "irrational," or for that matter, what he means by "rational." It's not a word that I find in any of my bibles, and on my understanding of rationality (the commitment to reason as one's only means of knowledge and as his only guide to action), Christianity is anything but rational. So obviously the Christian must have a different understanding of what constitutes a rational position. If he has understanding of what "rational" means, what does he think it means, and what is so irrational about non-belief in invisible magic beings? I will review Peter's next installment on his series on the burden of proof and see whether or not he comes through on this point.

Peter writes:

In the end I hope that readers will see that the the question of the burden of proof in the debate over God's existence is actually a great way to prove God's existence and the truth of Christianity.

"Hope" is the operative word. After all, that's what faith is all about: it is substantiated by hope. Reason and proof have nothing to do with it. Indeed, according to Christianity, it's not a matter of being intellectually convinced of some rationally demonstrable truth. It's about accepting an enormous sum of assertions on the basis of threats and fantasy. The "arguments" intended to rationalize that sum of assertions only comes later, well after major downpayments on the confessional investment have been made.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Burden of Proof](#), [Presuppositional Gimmickry](#)

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