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Presuppositionalism vs. Objectivism: How Objectivism Prevails

In the [final episode of his commentary](#) on the exchange between presuppositionalist Sye Ten Bruggencate and atheist Justin Schieber, internet apologist Chris Bolt summarizes the presuppositionalist strategy as follows:

You demonstrate the impossibility of the contrary by an internal critique... This is where the real meat of the transcendental argument comes in... This is where we ask the unbeliever things like how do you account for logic, science, and morality in your worldview. The big three. And there are lots of other things of course that you might ask. This is where we demonstrate the inconsistencies in the unbeliever's worldview. And when we do that, we are demonstrating the impossibility of the contrary. [8:48-9:20]

Did you get that?

The “real meat of the transcendental argument” is *demonstrating* what presuppositionalists call “the impossibility of the contrary” by means of an *internal critique*, specifically one which supposedly uncovers “the inconsistencies” within a non-Christian's worldview. Bolt suggests a few areas of philosophical inquiry where this method can be applied, namely: how does the non-Christian “account for” logic, science, and morality? He also indicates that this method can be applied to numerous other areas of thought.

I have always understood that the “transcendental argument” which presuppositionalists champion is supposed to prove that the Christian god exists. After all, it's typically referred to as “the transcendental argument for the existence of God,” or TAG for short. But “the real meat of the transcendental argument” as Bolt conceives of it is geared towards exposing inconsistencies in non-Christian worldviews. Even if this is successful in one particular case or another, it's puzzling how one might think that the conclusion “Therefore, God exists” might follow from such findings. In fact, it strikes me as a wildly overdrawn non sequitur. Perhaps there are some “potatoes” to go along with “the meat” of the argument, and maybe even some gravy and peas, and therein lies the part that proves the existence of the Christian god.

Even more puzzling, the strategy which Bolt describes seems geared toward eliciting a wholesale concession on the part of the non-Christian. It is almost as if questions like “How do you account for logic?” or “How do you account for morality?” are supposed to pester the non-Christian into throwing up his arms in defeat and replying, [Duh, I donno. Must be God did it!](#) If the presuppositionalist case of the existence of the Christian god or the alleged truth of the Christian worldview did not depend so inherently on people's philosophical ignorance, why is it so focused on finding it?

Of course, it may be the case that presuppositionalists are simply *presupposing* that all non-Christian worldviews have fatal inconsistencies plaguing their inner structure, truth sets, inferences, etc., and therefore bent on finding anything that might confirm this assumption, even if it must be manufactured on the basis of caricature or simply putting words into their opponents' mouths. It's hard not to suspect that this is the case when examining a presuppositionalist critique of a non-Christian position, for far too often such critiques tend to be little more than express fault-finding expeditions bent on construing anything the non-Christian position affirms into a most obvious error that astute thinkers would naturally avoid.

Presuppositionalists present themselves as rather foolish oddities in this respect. For one, they posture themselves as though they were truly concerned about the philosophical coherence and logical integrity of a worldview, while relying on an apologetic method which often consists of little more than canned, one-size-fits-all objections cast in the form of catchy sound bites and shallow slogans. But even worse, underlying this charade is the unself-conscious cockiness of apparently finding satisfaction in theistic confessions as actual solutions to the philosophical problems they raise in their criticisms of non-Christian positions.

For instance, presuppositionalists would on the one hand denounce as logically inconsistent, self-defeating or

philosophically incoherent any worldview which looks at the world around us, identifies certain general facts which are available in any perception of the world as fundamental starting points, and builds its theory of knowledge and moral doctrines on the basis of general, indubitable facts about man's nature that pertain to these issues, and treats man's requirements for living on earth as relevant factors in developing a view of man's purpose in life, all the while resting on the claim that an invisible magic being which we can only access by means of our imaginations, somehow addresses these issues without the need for further illumination. If credibility is something that thinkers must earn, presuppositionalists must be lobbying for raising the agitprop minimum wage.

But when it comes to putting the braggadocio of presuppositional apologetics to the test, it remains stubbornly unclear what internal problem they think they can find in Objectivism. Objectivism does not affirm belief in the supernatural, and in fact rejects supernaturalism as mere fantasy. Of course, this by itself is enough to put the presuppositionalist on alert. But in contrast to Christianity, which espouses a metaphysics of supernaturalism, faith in revelations from supernatural sources, the ethics of self-sacrifice and ultimately a collectivistic rendition of political theory (as the implications of its moral premises are taken to their logical conclusion), Objectivism affirms an objective metaphysics, reason in epistemology, rational self-interest in ethics, and individual rights in politics. It seems that anyone who elects to oppose Objectivism tells us a lot about himself by this choice.

Specifically in regard to the kinds of questions which Bolt raises in the section of his podcast quoted above, Objectivism has an integrated, non-contradictory and logically incontrovertible approach to each of the issues which presuppositionalists seek to challenge non-believers on. And depending on what "account for" may mean (a vague expression which presuppositionalists typically do not explain, and when it is defined, it is not uniform among various practitioners of presuppositionalism), Objectivism offers answers to the presuppositionalist challenge which will withstand anything they might throw at them.

Observe:

Question: How does Objectivism account for logic?

Answer: Objectivism accounts for logic by the axioms, the primacy of existence, and the objective theory of concepts.

Question: How does Objectivism account for science?

Answer: Objectivism accounts for science by the axioms, the primacy of existence, and the objective theory of concepts.

Question: How does Objectivism account for morality?

Answer: Objectivism accounts for morality by the axioms, the primacy of existence, and the objective theory of concepts.

For some insights on how the axioms, the primacy of existence and the objective theory of concepts work together to provide an account for logic, science, and the Objectivist view of morality, see the following:

[Does Logic Presuppose the Christian God?](#)

[Resources on the Problem of Induction](#)

[Do I Borrow My Morality from the Christian Worldview?](#)

Etc.

So the questions for presuppositionalists at this point are: What inconsistencies are lurking in Objectivism's accounts for these issues? Where's the inconsistency? Where does the presuppositionalist show that there are inconsistencies here? How can anyone, including the presuppositionalist, even reason without assuming the truth of the axioms, assuming the primacy of existence, and making use of concepts?

Recently a Christian visitor to my website announced "I reject everything rand says" [sic], referring of course

to the philosopher Ayn Rand (see r_c321's 18 July comment to [this blog](#)). Such sweeping dismissals, which are by no means unusual among zealous apologists for theism, strike me as utterly irresponsible. But so be it. Let the theist identify who he is. But how far is he prepared to go with such hyper-generalized renunciation?

Let's take a look specifically at the Objectivist axioms, and consider how the presuppositionalist commitment to disprove non-Christian worldviews would play out when deployed against Objectivism.

Does the presuppositionalist contend that the axiom of existence is false? To do so would be to say that there is no reality. But this would not only deny the apologist's own existence, but also the existence of his listeners, and even the god he expects others to worship. So this does not seem like a very fruitful stance for the apologist to take.

Is the presuppositionalist prepared to argue that existence is not fundamental? What could be more fundamental than existence? If the theist proposes something else as fundamental, is he saying that it does not exist? Can he identify what he thinks is fundamental, and explain why existence is not a factor? Can he point to something that is fundamental that is other than something that exists? What comes before existence, and how does the theist distinguish what he proposes as coming prior to existence from something he's simply imagining? How do the rest of us make that distinction?

Does the presuppositionalist contend that the axiom of identity is false? To do so would be to deny that a thing is itself, that to exist is to have nature, that A is A. Is the presuppositionalist prepared to argue that existence has no identity? If so, then he would be saying that everything that exists has no identity and that anything which does exist is not distinct from anything else that exists. How would his own god-beliefs sustain such a self-defeating commitment?

Does the presuppositionalist contend that the axiom of consciousness is false? To do so would be to deny the reality of consciousness, the very faculty that the apologist would be using in proposing such a contention. As we saw with the axioms of existence and identity, to deny the axiom of consciousness is blatantly self-defeating. And yet, apologists for the Christian worldview seem to have no qualms with making statements like "I reject everything rand says." This can only be translated as a rejection of, among other fundamental truths, the axiom of consciousness, as well as the previous two axioms discussed above.

Perhaps the theist is willing to backpedal a bit and grant the truth of the Objectivist axioms (indeed, after grasping the fact that they would need to be true even to question them, he should reconsider his blanket rejection), but instead contend that the primacy of existence is untrue. The primacy of existence is the recognition of the fact that the objects of consciousness exist independent of the conscious activity by which one is aware of those objects, and has system-wide implications and applications for one's worldview (such as the recognition that wishing or wanting something to be the case does not make it so).

The alternative to the primacy of existence is the primacy of consciousness, which is the view that the subject of consciousness holds metaphysical primacy over its objects. This assumption can be expressed in the view that existence (either some or all) finds its source in conscious activity (such as creating things by willing them into existence), that the identity of objects depends on some activity of consciousness (such as the belief that a thing is what the subject wants or determines it to be), that wishing or wanting makes it so, etc.

So is the presuppositionalist willing to argue that wishing makes it so? If not, why not? And how can his worldview as a whole maintain consistent fidelity to the position he takes in responding to this question? If he holds that wishing doesn't make it so, how does he account for this without granting the primacy of existence? How does he know that wishing doesn't make it so? What implications do his answers to these questions have for his god-belief? Doesn't he think that reality conforms to his god's wishes? Or, does he want to bog down the discussion with a debate as to whether or not his god has wishes in the first place, in order to evade the issue? (See for instance [Wishing and the Christian Deity](#).) If he doesn't like the use of the word "wish" here, let's replace it with a related word which Christians apply to their god all the time: *want*. Ask: Does *wanting* something to be the case, make it a reality? If I *want* a million dollars in my wallet, will a million dollars suddenly fill my wallet? If not, why not, unless of course the primacy of existence is true? And if the primacy of existence is true, why would the apologist dispute it? When the apologist says that his god

exists, is he rejecting the primacy of existence and telling us that his god exists simply because he wants it to? It's likely that this is not the case. On the contrary, the theist likely wants us to accept his claim as though his god exists independent of any psychological activity which his mind performs, i.e., that his god exists independent of consciousness. Thus he's making use of the primacy of existence right there, and if he is contending that Objectivism is false, he's assuming the truth of what Objectivism teaches just in affirming his god-beliefs.

What's important to note in the conflict between presuppositionalism and Objectivism, is the fact that the presuppositionalist has to assume the truth of the Objectivist axioms and the primacy of existence in any account he or she may propose for these areas of inquiry, even though the worldview which presuppositionalism is intended to defend - namely Christianity - is expressly antithetical to them. (I've demonstrated this in numerous entries on my blog, but for starters newcomers can read more on this issue [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).)

The situation facing presuppositional apologists is just as bad when it comes to the issue of concepts, for their worldview has no theory of concepts to begin with, and any understanding of concepts that they may have or think they have of concepts, would have to come from outside their worldview. In essence, as presuppositionalists themselves like to put it, they must "borrow" from a non-Christian worldview to the extent that they might propose any understanding of concepts.

This fact puts them in an even more insurmountable predicament when it comes to mounting an internal critique on the Objectivist worldview. For how are they going to uncover internal conflicts within the Objectivist worldview when they not only must assume the truth of the Objectivist axioms and the primacy of existence, but have no Christian-specific understanding of concepts which can help them navigate this uncharted region of their own worldview?

Naturally, for the presuppositionalist even to consider embarking on an internal critique of the objective theory of knowledge, he would need to know something about it. Of course, he's not going to learn about the objective theory of concepts by reading the bible. I mean, let's be serious. What does the bible have to say about concepts in the first place? Apologists eager to learn more about the objective theory of concepts should study (not just read, but *study*) Ayn Rand's *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*. If they do not have a copy of this invaluable text, they might want to start with Allan Gotthelf's paper [Ayn Rand on Concepts](#).

In the meantime, presuppositionalists are invited to explain how their worldview can have anything of value to contribute to the area of epistemology when in fact their worldview has no theory of concepts in the first place. This I would like to see, along with an informed example of an internal critique by an able presuppositionalist seeking to uncover inconsistencies in the Objectivist account for logic, science and morality.

I shan't be holding my breath.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Objectivism](#), [Presuppositional Gimmickry](#)

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