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RazorsKiss on the Christian God as the Basis of Knowledge - Part 3: RK's "No Brute Facts" Claim

In the section of his [opening statement](#) titled "Proper Epistemology," RK basically just *describes* his position as opposed to presenting a reasoned defense for it. After reviewing his positional statement numerous times, I found no attempt to validate his overall position with argument. Instead of presenting an argument for the view that the Christian god is the basis of knowledge, RK preferred simply to assert it as a component of two heavily laden confessional affirmations which he characterized as "axiomatic, interrelated foundations" which, [upon examination](#), turn out not to be axiomatic in the least.

The failure to provide an argument for various assertions he makes in his opening statement, is a trait common to much of what RK affirms. For instance, he makes the following statements about "facts":

there are no brute facts. Facts are not neutral entities, and they cannot be interpreted in a neutral fashion. This is because facts can only exist in relation to other facts; further, without exception these are interpreted with reference to still other facts.

Here is a series of claims about facts which RK makes but does not seek to establish by means of argument. Each statement which RK makes here is in need of support, and neither statement seems to follow necessarily from any of the others.

RK makes the universally negative claim that "there are no brute facts." How does he support this? He does so by asserting that "facts can only exist in relation to other facts." How does RK know this? He does not explain. This is logically equivalent to saying that there is no fact anywhere which does not exist in relation to other facts. While universally negative claims are notoriously difficult to establish with certainty, even if we accept this to be the case (and RK does not demonstrate this, he only asserts it), how does it follow from this that "there are no brute facts"? RK does not explain this either. Why can it not be the case that "facts can only exist in relation to other facts," but some of those facts are "brute" in nature? The issue here seems to be one of definitions, but RK does not state his definitions. What exactly is a "brute fact" as RK understands it? It may be the case that "there are no brute facts," but the reason which RK offers in support of this seems insufficient to rule out their existence. It may even be the case that I would agree that "there are no brute facts," but only on premises integral to my worldview, and RK has already made it clear in no uncertain terms that he would reject my worldview. Given RK's claims to exclusivity of Christianity and the lines he has drawn in the sand against any non-Christian position, I would expect that my own reasoning for rejecting the notion of "brute facts" would fail to muster with RK's position.

To understand RK's position, we must know what he means by "brute fact." For a specifically presuppositionalist understanding of what a "brute fact" is, I consulted John Frame's [A Van Til Glossary](#), which, curiously, offers two definitions for this expression:

(1) (in VT) fact that is uninterpreted (by God, man, or both) and therefore the basis of all interpretation; (2) objective fact: fact not dependent on what man thinks about it.

Since RK himself seems to be a presuppositionalist, I'm willing to suppose that he would endorse the definitions of "brute fact" which Frame offers here. The question becomes then, since Frame offers two definitions for this term: which definition does RK have in mind?

If by "brute fact" RK means the second of these two definitions ("objective fact"), then I'd say RK is in big trouble here. This would essentially be affirming that *all* facts are *subjective*. Indeed, since Christianity holds that all facts are *created* by an act of supernatural consciousness (cf. Van Til, who claims that "God is the creator of every fact" [*Christian Theistic Evidences*, p. 88; quoted in Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 378]), then I would agree that this would accurately describe the Christian (and thus RK's) view of facts. According to such a view, facts are dependent upon a knowing *subject* and conform to its will. In other words, on this view, facts are *subjective*. This would mean that any "fact" which RK cites on behalf of defending his worldview would be subjective in nature, and thus as unstable as a straw hut in a Category 5 hurricane. Moreover, if RK holds it to be a fact that "there are no brute facts," then this "fact" itself would be subjective. So why should anyone accept it as an objectively reliable

statement about reality? Blank out.

On the other hand, if by “brute fact” RK means the first of these definitions (i.e., “uninterpreted” fact which serves as “the basis of all interpretation”), then we need to understand what is meant by the term “interpretation,” since it is used here in a rather idiosyncratic manner (e.g., we interpret statements, symbols, language, bodily gestures, etc. rather than facts per se). Here John Frame has something noteworthy to add:

To my knowledge, Van Til never defines “interpretation,” but I gather he uses the term fairly broadly to describe all of a person’s activity in his attempts to understand the world. (*Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*, p. 193)

Van Til used the term “interpretation” with very high frequency in his writings. It seems inexplicable if what Frame says here is true, that “Van Til never defines ‘interpretation,’” given not only his frequent use of the term, but also given Van Til’s own rhetorical question:

Is not the important thing that Christian meanings be contrasted with non-Christian meanings? (*The Defense of the Faith*, p. 23n.1)

At any rate, if “interpretation” denotes “all of a person’s activity in his attempts to understand the world,” and “brute facts” are facts which are “uninterpreted,” then “brute facts” would be facts which have not (yet) been processed by “all of a person’s activity in his attempts to understand the world.” Thus RK’s denial of the existence of “brute facts” so conceived would also be problematic, for it essentially denies that facts could exist *independent* of “a person’s activity in his attempts to understand the world.” This assessment is consistent with Frame’s first definition of “brute fact,” which he attributes to Van Til, and which posits “brute fact” as “the basis of all interpretation.” Thus RK’s denial of the existence of “brute facts” again denies the objectivity of facts, and essentially rules out any *factual* “basis of all interpretation.” If facts are not the basis of one’s interpretation, what is? Feelings? Wishes? Likes or dislikes?

The problem is even deeper for RK, for not only does he fail to follow through with anything approaching a solid defense of his claim that “there are no brute facts,” this claim, on either definition of “brute fact,” essentially amounts to claiming that there is no factual objectivity whatsoever. Either the claim “there are no brute facts” outright denies the existence of objective facts (Frame’s definition (2)), or it denies the existence of facts which exist independent of cognitive activity (which is just another way of denying the existence of objective facts).

On the presuppositionalist view, facts are, in the final analysis, presumably “interpreted” for all eternity, not things which are *discovered* by consciousness. This basically entails the general view that any facts which *man* discovers, were already known (“interpreted”) by a supernatural consciousness. So RK’s “no brute facts” claim essentially follows from the claim that the Christian god is omniscient (i.e., the Christian god’s omniscience *necessitates* the view that “there are no brute facts”), as opposed to a conclusion reached through an inductive investigation into the nature of facts themselves. So this is not a validation of the claim, but rather an indication of how it follows as a consequence of more fundamental religious commitments, in spite of the philosophical problems it generates for the Christian position. What is fundamental in such a case is a religious confession of faith rather than a *factual basis*, which is denied by the “no brute facts” claim itself.

It is not clear why RK felt the need to affirm such a self-discrediting position, for it is unclear how it ties to any positive argument he may be trying to make on behalf of the claim that “the Triune God of the Scriptures” is “the basis for knowledge.” Then again, as indicated above, I did not find any positive argument on behalf of this claim, which he elected to defend by taking the affirmative in the debate.

RK did say that “knowledge is interrelated” and that “facts cannot be interpreted outside of your epistemology,” but he nowhere explains why it must be the case that “there are no brute facts” for these points to be true. Certainly, *rational* knowledge is interrelated, since on the standard of rationality (where “rationality” is the commitment to reason as one’s only means of knowledge and only guide to action), new knowledge must be integrated without contradiction into the total sum of one’s knowledge. Also, one needs an epistemology (namely *reason*, as opposed to faith in revelations from invisible magic beings) according to which he can perform such an activity. But this does not in any way require that facts be subjective in nature, as RK’s denial of the existence of “brute facts” seems to entail. Facts can certainly be objective (i.e., have the identity they have independent of the cognitive activity of a knowing subject), and still be identified and integrated by a rational process into the sum of one’s knowledge without

contradiction, so long as one employs an objective method. But if there are no objective facts, as RK's position requires, then all bets are off.

RK continues, saying that "as philosophers, we have to consider the meaning of the facts - or the concepts - we examine." RK seems confused here. Meaning is a property of concepts, not of independently existing concretes. For instance, one does not pick up a rock and say it has "meaning" of its own. Only in the *context* of other facts can we begin to speak of meaning with reference to a specific concrete. For instance, if a certain kind of igneous rock were discovered under several strata of sandstone, an inference could be made about a period of volcanic activity. But strictly speaking, meaning is the domain of concepts. So while I agree that "meanings are inseparable from our epistemological foundation," since a *rational* epistemology is *conceptual* in nature and meaning is a property of concepts, RK fails to show how this requires the existence of his god, or how it relates to such a demonstration, which he had pledged to deliver in his debate. As I indicated in [my previous posting](#), the primacy of existence and the objective theory of concepts are the fundamentals needed for such cognitive operations.

RK states that "we judge all facts *through* the 'prism of our epistemology'," which is true if we have a unified, unfragmented epistemology and we guide our thinking consistently according to that epistemology. The question at this point, however, is: does this "prism of epistemology" have an *objective* or *subjective* basis? An epistemology which is subordinated to theistic affirmations is going to be subjective in nature. This is because theism entails enshrinement of an imaginary consciousness on which everything in the universe depends and to whose will everything conforms. As we saw above, Christianity teaches that all facts are created by a deity by means of conscious intentions, which means: the subject in the subject-object relationship holds primacy over its objects. This is the very essence of subjectivism, and it lies at the heart of theism as such. Moreover, since no one can consistently employ a subjective epistemology and survive very long, a theist is not going to operate on the basis of a unified, unfragmented epistemology. Rather, he's going to have a *mixed* epistemology, which ultimately means that he will not be able to defend any position consistently. It also means that, in order to live in this world, the theist has no alternative but to borrow from the this-worldly epistemology of a rational (and therefore non-theistic) worldview which he has verbally rejected.

By contrast, an epistemology which is founded explicitly on the primacy of existence (i.e., the view that the objects of consciousness exist and are what they are independent of the conscious activity of the subject) and which benefits from the objective theory of concepts (as explained in Ayn Rand's *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*), then he has the makings of a truly objective epistemology, one which allows him to recognize the objective nature of facts and enables him to identify and integrate them into the sum of his knowledge in an objective manner to produce a non-contradictory whole, which he can confidently and legitimately call "knowledge." Any compromise of either of these two components - the primacy of existence and the objective theory of concepts - will result in a system which invites the arbitrary and inclines its users to confuse what they imagine with what is real.

For further discussion of the inherent antithesis between theism and Objectivism on the nature of facts, see my blog [Rival Philosophies of Fact](#).

by Dawson Bethrick

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