

Tuesday, August 25, 2009

## RazorsKiss on the Christian God as the Basis of Knowledge - Part 7: Rival Epistemologies

In his [debate with Mitch LeBlanc](#), Christian apologist “RazorsKiss” (“RK”) assumes that Christianity is true and that its god somehow constitutes the basis of knowledge when he refers to the [”axioms”](#) he presented in his opening statement. He then asks:

Can someone without the axioms that Christians hold “know” anything?

This question strikes me as rather disingenuous, for there is nothing to stop RK from simply asserting that anyone who knows anything is secretly assuming the “axioms that Christians hold,” even if he isn’t. I say this because so far RK has demonstrated a profound reliance on arbitrary claims, and essentially zero ability to substantiate his assumption that those claims have any truth value. Similarly, if a scientist affirms that water is composed of hydrogen and oxygen atoms, there is nothing to stop me from claiming that the scientist could make this statement only if he secretly believed that Blarko is the Wonderbeing and recognizes deep down that Blarko sets the terms for the scientist’s discovery of such facts. I could even say that the scientist’s affirmation that water is composed of hydrogen and oxygen atoms is itself evidence that the scientist is drawing from his “sensus Blarkus,” an “internal ‘sense’” by which Blarko transmits His unimpeachable wisdom to the scientist’s mind. I would expect that RK would agree that such claims are arbitrary. But if these claims about Blarko and the “sensus Blarkus” are arbitrary, why isn’t [RK’s Christian version of the same](#) not also arbitrary? RK does not anticipate such objections anywhere in his debate.

RK’s answer to his own question above is not surprising:

As defined, no. They can’t [know anything]. They do not have a justification for their beliefs. However, they themselves do have true beliefs - which do, in many cases, result in success. In a sense, they do have knowledge. Not because of their epistemology - but despite it. In these cases, they are simply creatures forced to admit that despite the incoherence of their epistemology, they do, in fact, know things anyway.

Again, we find no argument here. Rather, RK is simply preaching to the converted, which is quite unproductive in the context of a debate on the topic in question. By now we can say that the tendency to rely on unsupported assertions instead of defending his view with arguments supporting it, is habitual for RK. It is for most presuppositionalists, in spite of Bahnsen’s claim to the very opposite:

In apologetics our task is to analyze the arguments which are advanced by unbelievers against the truth of Christianity and to produce sound arguments in favor of it. (*Always Ready*, p. 130).

The problem is, RK has not produced any “sound arguments in favor of... the truth of Christianity.” All he’s done is affirm various elements of it by repeating presuppositionalist assertions.

Additionally, RK not using his opportunity to answer any legitimate questions which one might pose against his proclamations, for his statement neither anticipates them nor provides any content which would effectively address such questions. How, for instance, does RK conclude that people who do not assume the truth of what RK had earlier called “axiomatic... foundations” have no “justification for their beliefs”? Seriously, how does he know this? He can assert this to be the case, but this does not tell us how he knows this (unless he thinks truth conforms to whatever he asserts), nor does it tell us why we should accept it. It is only by assuming the truth of his own position that he can avoid considering such questions, which of course begs the question in the context of a debate over the matter. The only way that RK seems to be able to “defend” his position is by affirming tail-chasing circularities. “I’m right, and everyone else is wrong,” seems to be the underlying theme of RK’s epistemology.

But why should anyone believe any of this?

This is the unanswered question. When it comes to defending Christianity, all that presuppositionalism seems to offer is recitation of positional statements internal to the Christian faith paradigm. They do not provide reasons for why we should accept the overall paradigm in the first place. If we accept the paradigm as a whole (which their defenses presuppose - “Christian theism as a unit” - Van Til, *Apologetics*, p. 73), then we could accept its elements and wouldn’t need any persuasion. But reciting these elements do nothing to validate the paradigm as a whole, which is what the

apologist has been called to prove.

Like other presuppositionalists, RK recognizes that it would be absurd to deny the “success” of non-Christians’ efforts to discover and validate knowledge, since clearly non-Christians do acquire and vindicate knowledge on a daily basis. But the success of non-believers in this area makes presuppositionalists anxious. They naturally feel a need to explain it in terms of their professed beliefs. To do this, they do not pay any mind to the particular epistemological process by which such individuals go about collecting knowledge and validating the knowledge which they discover. Such details are dismissed without a hearing, for a hearing on such matters would not be apologetically expedient. Awareness of those details would of course compel apologists to take on more homework than they could handle. A quick and easy dismissal is to be preferred over a rigorous investigation of how scientists come to such truths (or “beliefs”). So the route of the “naked assertion” (an expression which RK himself uses to dismiss Mitch LeBlanc’s endorsement of a position argued by George H. Smith) is the preferred mode du jour, and tomorrow never comes.

So let the presuppositionalist wave away with the flick of the wrist the epistemological methodology by which the scientist came to the conclusion that water is composed of hydrogen and oxygen atoms. The scientist just got lucky is all. His methodology, since it does not kowtow to “Christ,” in whom all the “treasures” of knowledge are supposedly “hidden,” cannot possibly arrive at the truth. So let’s not use the scientist’s profane and sin-laden methodology. Instead, let’s see how the believer’s epistemological methodology leads us to the discovery that water is composed of both hydrogen and oxygen atoms. How does this work? RK pointed to “the Scriptures” as an authoritative source, but unfortunately I could find no passage in the bible which explains how we can discover that water is composed of oxygen and hydrogen. In fact, the bible seems to think that water can be transformed into wine by means of conscious intentions - i.e., without for instance a fruit concoction, yeast, sugars, a period of fermentation, etc. Clearly the scientist’s epistemological methodology is insufficient, for he has not discovered how this can be the case. But this does not answer the question before us, which is:

*What is the specifically Christian epistemological process by which one discovers the elemental make-up of water?*

And we can be sure that whatever epistemological process Christianity recommends for discovering the composition of water might be, it cannot be the epistemological process which the non-believing scientist employs (namely reason) to do the same. Bahnsen makes this clear when he makes statements like the following:

...all unbelieving philosophy destroys the possibility of knowledge. (*Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 241)

When it comes to knowing things, then, the unbeliever is an “epistemological” failure; he has no adequate theory, or philosophy, or worldview that makes his knowing intelligible. (*Ibid.*, p. 407)

The unbeliever should not be left with false pretensions: such as, that his problem is merely a lack of information, or that he simply needs to correct some of his syllogisms, or that his experience and thinking are all right as far as they go. In actuality, the unbeliever’s espoused principles of thought, reason, and reality would lead to utter intellectual foolishness and destruction (1 Cor. 1:20; Matt. 7:26-27). (*Always Ready*, p. 75)

The testimony of Scripture is clear in the teaching that man cannot come to an understanding of God (and thereby of God’s world) by means of his independently exercised reason. (*Ibid.*, p. 87)

It cannot be ignored that repentance and faith are necessary for a knowledge of the truth. (*Ibid.*, pp. 100-101)

The very possibility of knowledge outside of God’s revelation (savingly presented in Christ) must be undermined. (*Ibid.*, p. 105)

Etc.

Clearly the presuppositionalist position is that there is a fundamental and system-wide difference between Christian epistemology and any non-Christian epistemology. They are contrary to each other. Moreover, it holds that Christian epistemology is the only one capable of producing knowledge, while all non-Christian epistemologies “lead to utter intellectual foolishness and destruction.” As RK puts it, “Christianity’s epistemology is the only epistemology possible.” This is why one of the steps in the presuppositionalist defense of the Christian faith, is that “the unbeliever’s espoused

presuppositions should be forcefully attacked” and “the unbeliever’s claims should be reduced to impotence and impossibility” (*Always Ready*, p. 79).

As with presuppositionalists like Bahnsen, RK acknowledges that non-Christians do in fact have knowledge, however “not because of their epistemology - but despite it.” Since he is talking about *all* non-Christian systems, he is including my epistemology in his characterization by implication. However, I found no indication in his portion of the debate that RK has any familiarity with my epistemology, let alone an analysis of it exposing its alleged faults. It is one thing to assert that everyone else is wrong, but another to actually make good on such claims.

I am very curious how this “Christian epistemology” which RK and other presuppositionalists mention, works in discovering and validating knowledge. Since presuppositionalists are emphatic that their epistemological approach to knowledge is fundamentally different from and opposed to any non-Christian epistemology, it must operate differently.

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The epistemology of my worldview, Objectivism, is known as *reason*. It is the faculty by which one identifies and integrates what he perceives. He does this by forming concepts from his awareness of objects which he perceives (as well as subsequent or “higher-level” concepts from previously concepts so formed), and applying the method of logic to the data he gathers in forming those concepts to generate inferences and establish conclusions, both inductively and deductively. This epistemology is explicitly non-Christian, since it rests on the primacy of existence, while the Christian worldview indisputably rests on the primacy of consciousness. So “Christianity’s epistemology” cannot be identical to the epistemology of reason, nor can it be essentially similar, for the epistemology of reason is a non-Christian epistemology (belonging to and stemming from a worldview which is consistently non-theistic in nature), while (as RK claims) the Christian position holds that “the Triune God of Scripture is not only the proper grounds for all knowledge - but the only possible grounds for all knowledge,” that “every possible foundation for every way of thinking not in accordance with His perfect ordinance is utter, absolute folly,” and that “any claimant contrary to Christian epistemology is therefore denied by definition.”

Given these fundamental and profound differences between “Christianity’s epistemology” and the epistemology of reason, it would be helpful if Christians could articulate in detail just what their epistemology would recommend in the case of discovering the atomic composition of water. The scientist uses the epistemology of reason to discover the atomic composition of water and validate his conclusion that it is composed of hydrogen and oxygen. But presuppositional apologist Richard Pratt tells us that “reason is not the judge of truth” (*Every Thought Captive*, p. 74). Bahnsen confirms that the use of reason works against truth when he writes:

Man uses his reason, not to glorify god and advance His kingdom, but to rise up in arrogant opposition to the knowledge of God (2 Cor. 10:5). (*Always Ready*, p. 46)

So when the scientist uses reason discover the atomic composition of water and concludes that it consists of hydrogen and oxygen atoms, he is “ris[ing] up in arrogant opposition to the knowledge of God.”

What is Christianity’s alternative that the scientist should be using in place of reason? It cannot recommend reason, and this is clearly understandable when Bahnsen exclaims:

In *principle*, and according to what they *profess*, the basic worldviews - the fundamental presuppositions - of the Christian and non-Christian conflict with each other at every point. (*Always Ready*, p. 120)

So “Christianity’s epistemology” and the epistemology of reason must “conflict with each other at every point.” Again, here are the points belonging to the epistemology of reason with which “Christianity’s epistemology” must “conflict”:

- beginning with perception (our means of acquiring awareness of the world)
- Integrating objects perceived into concepts (basic concept-formation)
- Integrating lower-level concepts into higher-level concepts (abstraction from abstractions)
- Application of logic to the data we gather from what we perceive and integrate into concepts

- Generating inferences from the application of logic to data gathered from the world
- Establishing conclusions by validating all the steps from perception through the inferential process

Generally speaking, this is how the scientist discovered that water was composed of hydrogen and oxygen atoms. He applied the scientific method, which is the application of the epistemology of reason to specific inquiries about objects he discovers in the world. It is a *human* method, since its principles are suited to the nature of *human* consciousness. There is no deference to “divine revelation” involved here, so it must be opposed to “Christianity’s epistemology.”

Since the scientist who concludes that water is composed of hydrogen and oxygen atoms is relying on a *human* method which is not governed by divine revelation, it may be the case that his conclusion that water is composed of oxygen and hydrogen is completely wrong. In fact, this is what we should expect if his epistemology is faulty, which RK is claiming. A faulty epistemology will not produce reliable results, right? But how can one fault a divinely inspired epistemology? Since RK denies the validity of the scientist’s epistemology, he should identify and explain the steps which Christian epistemology would recommend us to take in order to discover the atomic make-up of water. I for one would like to see this, for I’ve always relied on the epistemology of reason, which does not draw from the source of “divine revelation.” Since the scientist’s methodology is supposedly faulty, we should expect that whatever methodology RK proposes in place of it to be fundamentally dissimilar to the scientist’s epistemology. But until he divulges it, we are left in the dark. And isn’t that ironic? Christ supposedly brought light to the world (cf. John 12:46), and yet when we ask Christ’s representatives to shine this light, we only get darkness. Why is that? It cannot be because we do not see, for clearly we see, and we know the difference between light and darkness (if we didn’t, these concepts would be meaningless, and yet Christianity expects us to understand them). Indeed, I’m asking to see the “light” of “Christian epistemology”! Yet contrary to the promises we read in “the Scriptures” (cf. John 16:24), we do not receive. The believer comes back void, empty-handed and unprepared to assist in such inquiries. This is not the scientist’s fault. Nor is it the non-Christian’s problem.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Knowledge](#), [Presuppositional Gimmickry](#), [Primacy of Existence](#)

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [10:00 AM](#)

#### 4 Comments:

[madmax](#) said...

Dawson,

This was an excellent discussion of the epistemological grounding of knowledge. I don't know if you have read it but Andrew Bernstein dealt with something similar in his criticism of Rodney Stark's deceptively titled book 'The Victory of Reason' which is dedicated to the argument that Christianity is the source of the West's greatness. The section entitled "Philosophy" gives a comparison of Christianity's fundamental premises and the rational premises which are needed for science to exist. Stark was making similar arguments to the ones made by RK.

<http://www.theobjectivestandard.com/issues/2006-winter/tragedy-of-theology.asp>

[August 25, 2009 3:57 PM](#)

[madmax](#) said...

Faith in reason - comment 1

Also, I have follow up information on the question I posed to you a few posts back. I asked you if you have ever written on the religious claim that a person must have "faith in reason." I have encountered this claim a few times in the past from either Christian apologists (Rodney Stark is one) or from religious conservatives but I could not find any one commenter that made a well reasoned argument.

So I went to a popular conservative blogger that often blogs on the failure of "materialists" to account for "spiritual

realities" and properly account for a "rational approach to faith." Sure enough, there is very recent blog post which deals exactly with this subject. I'm not going to hot link to it because these PaleoCons are nuts and I want to spare you the headaches so I will break up the link:

[http://www.amnation\(dot\)com/vfr/archives/014054\(dot\)html](http://www.amnation(dot)com/vfr/archives/014054(dot)html)

Remove the "dots" and replace them with actual dots (.).

The questioner asks Auster to give a definition of faith. Auster goes on to say that "belief in the absence of evidence" is a "materialist" and "rationalist" answer. He gives his answer which seems to argue from the Thomistic perspective that rational inference leads to the logical conclusion that a transcendent realm exists. Here is a portion of his answer:

"So if faith has a good definition, it can't just be "belief in the absence of evidence." There has to have been something real there that made us believe in the first place. The problem is that spiritual things are not simply "there," like a physical object. We apprehend things about them, each moment we apprehend something different, or we stop apprehending anything. But the point is that there is or has been an apprehension of a reality, and we don't see it all, yet we've seen enough of it that we believe in its truth and we stay loyal to that truth. Faith is a committed relationship with something we partly see, but don't completely see. Having seen enough of it to believe that it is true, we maintain that relationship, the orientation of our selves toward that thing."

End of post 1

[August 25, 2009 4:20 PM](#)

[madmax](#) said...

If you have time I would read the other comments posted by his readers. One of them bases his argument that reason is incomplete on the all too frequent claim that induction is logically unsound:

"Ultimately, to believe almost anything beyond "I am", you must rely on some belief in something unprovable, i.e., that the universe has laws which hold over all space and all time. This may seem obvious (as with any common sense), but can you prove that, say, the law of gravity will hold tomorrow? You cannot. You can merely state that the law of gravity has always held in all the cases we have observed in the past."

Another reader posts this:

"The rational part of my faith is an inference from a combination of material evidence and nonmaterial experiential evidence. Though materialists rule nonmaterial experiential evidence out of bounds, I rule it as fully in bounds, and I condemn them for their arrogance and willful ignorance in refusing to admit into evidence such universally acknowledged experiential facts as the existence of human consciousness."

When these theists use the expression "non-material experiential evidence" they are referring to consciousness I believe. They view consciousness as non-material and thus as supernatural. So to them, it seems, that consciousness is partly a faith based process.

Auster further says:

"the very premises on which science is based are not themselves provable by science, and that science depends on non-falsifiable assumptions. Therefore the attempt some have made to exclude from knowledge all non-falsifiable assertions is false."

In one sense, I think Auster is right here in that science is based on non-falsifiable assumptions - namely the Objectivist axioms. Now that I think about it, it seems that Auster is in agreement with RK that the axioms are supernatural in origin.

Anyway, the argument "faith in reason" is a dangerous one and I bring it to your attention so that if you chose to blog on it you can dissect it with you skilled epistemological scalpel. Auster's post will give you a good sense of more Thomistic Apologetic arguments offered for faith.

end of post 2

Regards,

MM

[August 25, 2009 4:22 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hi MM,

Thanks so much for sharing the link to Bernstein's review of R. Stark's book. I haven't had a chance to read it all, but it looks fantastic from what I saw. I have some of Bernstein's lectures and have enjoyed them very much. It's good to see something in print!

Also, thanks for posting the 'faith in reason' argument. I will burrow into these soon hopefully.

Regards,

Dawson

[August 26, 2009 8:35 AM](#)

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