

Wednesday, August 26, 2009

RazorsKiss on the Christian God as the Basis of Knowledge - Part 8: The “Impossibility of the Contrary”

In the final section of his opening statement in his [debate with Mitch LeBlanc](#) over the proper basis of knowledge, presuppositional apologist RazorsKiss (“RK”) attempted to seal his case for the Christian god as the proper basis of knowledge by affirming what presuppositionalism touts as “the impossibility of the contrary.” The “contrary” in this case is presumably anything different from or contrary to what Christianity teaches, and the slogan that Christianity is true “by the impossibility of the contrary” is intended to dismiss all contenders to the Christian position summarily, with the wave of the hand. Naturally, Christian apologists who invoke this stance tend to be quite proud of it, apparently thinking of it as a kind of “nuclear option” which obliterates their debating opponents in a single blast.

Unfortunately, however, the “impossibility of the contrary” tactic used by presuppositional apologists typically consists merely of asserting that the Christian position is true and that all others are false, and involves nothing interesting by way of legitimate argument. RK’s deployment of “the impossibility of the contrary” in his debate with LeBlanc is, sadly, no different from this.

RK begins the final section of his opening statement as follows:

So, now we get to where the rubber meets the road. If I claim that non-Christians can have knowledge at all, even if it is faulty knowledge - doesn’t my argument fall apart? I don’t think this is necessitated. What the Christian position alone can guarantee is any contribution to knowledge whatsoever.

Clearly RK thinks he’s presented an argument somewhere in the foregoing sections of his opening statement, presumably for the claim that the Christian god is the proper basis for knowledge or something along these lines. I could not find this argument anywhere in his statements. The final sentence in the above quote - where he makes the bare assertion that “the Christian position alone can guarantee... any contribution to knowledge whatsoever” - is typical of what we find elsewhere in RK’s side of the debate. I’m confident that if you comb through RK’s opening statement as I have, looking specifically for anything resembling an argument supporting his position, you’ll come up empty. RK has given no reason whatsoever to suppose that only Christianity alone “can guarantee... any contribution to knowledge whatsoever.”

At this point, RK quoted Greg Bahnsen:

However, the presuppositionalist maintains that the unbeliever can come to know certain things (despite his espoused rejection of God’s truth) for the simple reason that he does have revealed presuppositions - and cannot but have them as a creature made in God’s image and living in God’s created world. Although he outwardly and vehemently denies the truth of God, no unbeliever is inwardly and sincerely devoid of the knowledge of God. It is not a saving knowledge of God to be sure, but even as condemning knowledge natural revelation still provides a knowledge of God. Thus, according to Biblical epistemology, while men deny their Creator they nevertheless possess an inescapable knowledge of Him; and because they know God (even though they know Him in curse and reprobation) they are able to attain a limited understanding of the world. (*Always Ready*, p. 38)

This passage from Greg Bahnsen’s book is unhelpful to RK’s task, if that task is to validate the claim that the Christian worldview is solely capable of grounding knowledge. All this passage does is describe an internal position within the presuppositionalist tradition which is intended expressly to reconcile what appears to be a contradiction. As such, it does not bring RK any closer to identifying reasons why anyone should suppose that knowledge finds its basis in the Christian god. Indeed, everything Bahnsen states in this quotation assumes the very point in question, thus begging it outright, if in fact it is intended as a supporting argument for position which RK has chosen to defend in his debate with LeBlanc. Begging the question on behalf of the position you’re called to support, is not the recommended course to take in such a debate.

Moreover, if we look at what Bahnsen states in the excerpted quote, we will find that what he says is completely arbitrary. If Bahnsen’s god in fact does not exist, what would keep him from making statements about it in this

manner? Bahnsen claims that the “unbeliever... outwardly and vehemently denies the truth of God,” but also that he “knows” this god nonetheless. How does he “know” this? Because, Bahnsen claims, he has “revealed presuppositions,” and that’s because he is “a creature made in God’s image.” Thus, “while men deny their Creator they nevertheless possess an inescapable knowledge of Him,” and this in turn allows them “to attain a limited understanding of the world.” Of course, Bahnsen had to learn all this by reading the bible, rather than through “revealed presuppositions” non-believers allegedly enjoy, which simply undermines the credibility of the very point he’s trying to make here. It is disingenuous to learn something by reading a storybook and then claim to have known it directly from a supernatural source by virtue of having been “created” in the image of a divine being.

The notion of “natural revelation,” to which Bahnsen appeals, finds its biblical basis in Romans 1:20-21, which states:

For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse, because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.

Presuppositionalists make reference to this passage from Paul’s epistle to the Romans quite frequently. But drawing our attention to it does not strike me as very wise, for it affirms a contradiction. It says that “invisible things... are clearly seen.” But if the things in question are “clearly seen,” then logically they could not be “invisible things.” If something is seen, it is visible, not invisible. Moreover, if the “things” in question are in fact “invisible,” by what means does someone know that they are there, that they are in fact real, and not imaginary? As the old saying goes, the invisible and the non-existent look very much alike, and the non-existent and the imaginary behave very much alike.

The idea here is that the natural world (as opposed to things which are man-made) somehow “reveals” the Christian god as their creator. As Van Til explains:

All men know God. Every fact of the universe has God’s stamp of ownership indelibly and with large letters engraved upon it... All men know not merely that a God exists, but they know that God, the *true* God, the *only* God, exists. They cannot be conscious of themselves, says Calvin, except they be at the same time conscious of God as their creator. This general revelation of God stays with man whatever his attitude toward God may be. When he sins against God, he must sin against this God whom he knows. Otherwise sin would be sin in a vacuum. Even in the hereafter, the lost and the evil angels still know God. (*Common Grace*, p. 130)

Presumably we’re supposed to be able to look at anything in nature, whether it is a flower, a piece of granite, a shooting star or an approaching hurricane, and see “God’s stamp of ownership” on it, since it is “indelibly and with large letters engraved upon it.” We would simply have to be utterly blind and stupid not to see this “stamp of ownership” on these things. Of course, when I look at a flower or a rock, or gaze at the nighttime sky or observe weather activity, I see no “large letters engraved upon it.” Van Til might reply by saying that his wording is simply metaphorical. But this gives away the game: if the indicator of this alleged “stamp of ownership” which he says is “indelibly and with large letters engraved upon” everything we encounter in the world is merely “metaphorical,” then why suppose it’s really there in the first place? Appealing to “natural revelation” simply begs the question, for this appeal itself rests on assumptions whose alleged truth is not “clearly seen” in the world, but which are derived elsewhere. Van Til’s final appeal to undesirable consequences - “otherwise sin would be sin in a vacuum” - only broadcasts the dubiousness of this doctrine.

But its dubious nature does not stop there. Speaking of “natural revelation,” RK stated the following when Mitch LeBlanc questioned him about how he derives knowledge of his god:

The Created order attests to these things as well, in a lesser, and more inferential way - but as I said, that is sufficient merely to condemn.

The admission that “natural revelation” in fact depends on an individual’s *inferences* is significant. It tells us that, contrary to what we read in Romans 1:20-21, that these “invisible things” of the Christian god which are supposedly stamped “indelibly and with large letters,” are in fact *not* “clearly seen” - i.e., not directly perceived - but in fact *projected* onto them by the believer attempting to take his religious teachings seriously. They’re not really there,

but he imagines that they are there, and expects everyone else to “see” them there, just as he *imagines* that they are there. This is essentially a concession that Christian god exists only in the eye of the beholder.

Even presuppositionalists should recognize that *inference* is not a “presupposition-less” mental operation, that it builds upon assumptions which have been accepted prior to working one’s way to the conclusion of said inference. A truth which is inferred is not a truth which is directly perceived, just as “invisible things” are not things which can be “clearly seen.” So the notion of “natural revelation” provides no legitimate support here. Van Til makes a critical admission in this regard when he states:

Men must be told that the revelation of God round about them and the revelation of God within their own constitution is clear and plain, rendering them without excuse. (Op. cit.)

If “men must be told” that what they are seeing and experiencing “round about them” and “within their own constitution” is “the revelation of God,” and this “revelation of God” is “clear and plain,” then what confidence do we have that any of this is true? Typically presuppositionalists appeal to “natural revelation” to support what they call “special revelation,” which is “supernatural verbal revelation” (*Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 195) from the Christian god, i.e., the bible itself. Essentially, you’re supposed to read the bible first, then take what it says and project it onto the reality you perceive and interact with through your own firsthand experience.

Bahnsen affirms this very point:

Natural revelation was never intended to operate on its own without God’s verbal communication as a supplemental and necessary context for understanding... In that case, man was never - and is not now - expected simply to observe the natural world or consider his own rational, moral personality and figure out for himself how they are to be interpreted and how their truths are to be verbally expressed. (Ibid.)

But even though what Bahnsen says here does not comport with what the apostle Paul writes in Romans 1:20-21 (Paul tells us that “the invisible things” of the Christian god are “clearly seen,” and wants this “natural revelation” to condemn everyone so that “they are without excuse”), Van Til curiously admits as much himself when he writes:

Man was never left to the study of natural revelation alone. Natural revelation was from the outset of history accompanied and supplemented by supernatural revelation. The two were involved in one another; they were supplemental to one another. They are unintelligible the one without the other. (*The Intellectual Challenge of the Gospel*, p. 20)

So much for “the invisible things” of the Christian god being “clearly seen.” Not only does this claim contradict itself (since things which are “clearly seen” are not, by virtue of being “clearly seen,” nonetheless “invisible”), but its reliance on the believer’s biblically inspired imagination is undeniable.

Moreover, one could claim just about anything using this kind of “reasoning” which Bahnsen models here. The Blarko-believer, for instance, could easily apply the same casuistry which Bahnsen gives as a template for rationalizing his own arbitrary beliefs:

the Blarkositionalist maintains that the unblarkist can come to know certain things (despite his espoused rejection of Blarko’s truth) for the simple reason that he does have revealed presuppositions - and cannot but have them as a creature made in Blarko’s image and living in Blarko’s created world. Although he outwardly and vehemently denies the truth of Blarko, no unbeliever is inwardly and sincerely devoid of the knowledge of Blarko. It is not a saving knowledge of Blarko to be sure, but even as condemning knowledge natural revelation still provides a knowledge of Blarko. Thus, according to Blarkist epistemology, while men deny Blarko they nevertheless possess an inescapable knowledge of Him; and because they know Blarko (even though they know Him in curse and reprobation) they are able to attain a limited understanding of the world.

If Bahnsen can make these kinds of statements about his god, something which is accessible to the human mind only by means of imagining it, I see no reason why the Blarko-believer cannot make similar statements on behalf of his view in like kind. And apologists like Greg Bahnsen and RK give no objective reason why we should believe one over the other. Blarko belief is certainly not the same as Christian belief. Christians worship Christ, not Blarko. But the apologist is claiming that his position is true because of “the impossibility of the contrary.” If we grant that the Christian position is possible, what compels us to suppose that the Blarkist position is not also possible? Blank out.

That the Christian defense must appeal to imaginative scenarios in order to make its points, is evident in what RK says next:

What my claim really entails is that an unbeliever, trying to start from a position of epistemic autonomy, is like a child who sits on his father's lap - and uses that position for the purpose of slapping his father in the face.

Now we can all imagine the scenario which RK describes here (he takes it from Van Til), but our ability to imagine this scenario does not validate the claim that it is analogous to the non-Christian's supposed epistemic plight. Again, RK is simply assuming the truth of what he is called to prove, that knowledge presupposes the Christian god. In the [second installment](#) of my analysis of RK's debate with LeBlanc, I identified the following facts as the proper basis of man's knowledge:

- 1) **The fact that existence exists:** This identifies the realm of objects which inform our knowledge, answering the question: knowledge *of what?*
- 2) **The fact that consciousness is consciousness of objects:** This identifies the faculty of awareness possessed by the knower, providing the meta-answer to the question: How do you know? The *subject* knows, and *what* he knows are the objects of his knowledge. Consciousness gives the knowing subject cognitive access to what he can know.
- 3) **The fact existence is identity:** This is the baseline recognition by a consciousness that an object is *itself*, that A is A, not something other than itself.
- 4) **The fact that existence has metaphysical primacy:** This is a baseline recognition that an object of consciousness exists as itself *independent* of conscious activity.
- 5) **The fact that knowledge depends on concept-formation:** This is the ability to form concepts on the basis of objects perceived by the subject. The method of how the mind forms concepts is explained by a theory of concepts.

To make his condemnation of non-Christian epistemology stick, RK would have to show how these points are analogous to "a child who sits on his father's lap - and uses that position for the purpose of slapping his father in the face." Simply asserting that it is so analogous, is not showing how it is analogous. And when it is realized that this charge must make use of the very facts to which I have pointed in my proposed alternative to "Christian epistemology," it's quite dubious, to say the least, that we should expect such scenarios to have any legitimate descriptive merit.

RK then made a statement which can only be taken as autobiographical in that it tells us about him rather than about the position he deplors so much:

The fundamental disconnect I see in secular epistemology (and Christians who use that same epistemology) is the universal lack of a solution from unbelieving philosophy for problems like that of induction, the one and the many, whether the will is free, and the like.

RK needs to start visiting the library more often, or do some online shopping. There's a lot of literature on the topics he expresses concern for from a non-Christian standpoint. I do not see where he has dealt with it all, even though he complains of a "universal lack of solution from unbelieving philosophy" for the problems he mentions. Of course, I recommend the Objectivist solutions to these problems:

On the problem of induction, see David Kelley's [Universals and Induction](#).

On the problem of universals ("the one and the many"), see Ayn Rand's [Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology](#)

On the topic of free will, see Harry Binswanger's [Volition as Cognitive Self-Regulation](#)

So much for RK's naked assertion of a "universal lack of a solution from unbelieving philosophy for problems like

that of induction, the one and the many, whether the will is free..." If RK would like to discuss these sources once he has studied them, I'd be more than happy to make myself available for this. But it's time that he put away childish things, and close the ancient storybook, for it has nothing intelligent to offer on these matters.

But RK insists that the Christian worldview does have something intelligent to offer on the philosophical problems he cited:

Christianity has an answer for these - provided the Christian answers them from Scriptural revelation, and does not adopt the same principles that unbelieving philosophy does.

It should not be surprising that RK fails to point to passages in the bible which present solutions to the problems of induction, the one and the many, whether the will is free, and the like." That's because the bible actually does not address these issues at all, certainly not in any philosophically valuable manner. The bible was written by philosophical primitives - an early literate culture trying to survive without the benefit of rational philosophy, science, and a political worldview recognizing the rights of the individual. Their concern was not to explore how the human mind works, but rather to indoctrinate a community of subservience to witch doctors and priests hiding behind the scarecrow of an imaginary deity known for its expressions of wrath and destruction. RK is simply deluding himself if he buys into the notion that the bible addresses these matters.

What makes his position all the more dubious is his stipulation that the "answers" to the problems he listed are available to the Christian believer so long as he relies on the content of the bible and "does not adopt the same principles that unbelieving philosophy does." Thus the five facts which I listed above - the axioms of existence, consciousness and identity, the primacy of existence and a theory of concepts - cannot at all figure in any biblical solutions to the problems of induction, universals and free will. To make use of any of these facts would constitute "borrowing" from a non-Christian worldview. So any solution to these problems which RK could possibly get behind must deny the fact that existence exists, that consciousness exists, that identity exists, that existence has metaphysical primacy, and that knowledge is conceptual in nature. I don't suppose he's going to get very far without any of these facts. But it is true that faith can achieve in a man great feats of foolishness, so let him try.

RK draws his lines in the sand even deeper:

It is even more so a problem for the unbeliever - because he doesn't even have (not always asserted, but always present to some degree) the epistemological foundation of the Christian.

If "the epistemological foundation of the Christian" involves a rejection of the facts that existence exists, that consciousness exists, that identity exists, that existence has metaphysical primacy, and that knowledge is conceptual in nature, then all the better for the non-Christian - precisely because he does not have this reality-denying worldview.

By the way, has RK given any indication how the problems of induction, universals and free will can be solved without using these facts? Again, his "impossibility of the contrary" depends on such solutions not only being possible, but impossibly untrue, and yet we've not seen anything but hot air in regard to the specifics here.

RK baldly asserts:

An unbelieving man has no justification for his predication.

If the "unbelieving man" acknowledges the five facts which I specified above, he sure does have "justification for his predication." If RK is interested in discussing this, let him come forward, and address the objections I've raised so far in my examination of his debate against LeBlanc.

RK baldly asserts again:

He has no basis for his use of logical laws.

Again, if the "unbelieving man" in question acknowledges the five facts which I specified above, he has all the basis he needs for his use of logical laws. Those five facts *are* the basis of logic. See also my points in [this portion](#) of my response to RK.

RK asks:

After all, wherefore and whence do these laws get their justification?

From existence, one of the facts which RK's position is committed to denying, given his line-in-the-sand drawing above.

RK offers more faith-based universal negatives about the "unbelieving man":

There is no area in which his thoughts, ideas or concepts can be said to be properly grounded. With feet planted firmly in midair, he asserts his autonomy over his own thinking, and his self-sufficiency for the use of that thinking!

If you get the impression that RK is simply trying to convince himself of the claims he's been asserting and failing to defend with argument, you're not alone. But that is the real "meat" of presuppositionalism's appeal to "the impossibility of the contrary." The "feet planted firmly in midair" assertion is an example of the theistic apologist's crass habit of projection. He does not need any details about his rival's position in order to make sweeping generalizations about it like this, which means he's essentially proffering a faith commitment at this point. The concern here is not to learn and understand what his opponent's position may be, but to discredit it regardless of what it is by characterizing it as simply baseless. But what surer base could there be than the axioms, the primacy of existence and the objective theory of concepts? And whose position is better characterized as "feet planted in midair" (whether "firmly" or not)? Does not the one who endorses utterly baseless axioms about invisible magic beings residing in an imaginary realm "back of" everything we perceive and the enshrinement of an ancient storybook full of supernatural characters and men you'd never hope to have as your neighbors, bear the telltale markings of a fantasy which preys on an individual's failure to distinguish the real from the imaginary? RK accuses non-believers of the very guilt which proliferates throughout his own worldview.

Speaking of the non-believer's independence of thought, RK tells us that:

This thinking is dangerous - to the unbeliever, and to everyone else.

But curiously, RK does not explain how it is at all dangerous, what threat it poses, and to which values it poses a threat. He says that

It is little more than, as many assert, self-worship.

Even if we suppose this is the case, what could RK possibly have against it? Does his god not worship itself? Or does it lack entirely an object of worship? If that is the case, then man's alleged "religious nature" (which Christians typically assume of man) is not itself a reflection of his being "created in the image of God."

Of course, as an Objectivist, I am an unflinching advocate for the morality of selfishness. This bothers many people, not because they truly think that selfishness is wrong, but because they want others to accept the notion that they have a duty to sacrifice themselves to their desired ends. The Christian believer wants others to worship his god and be willing to sacrifice themselves to that god, even though it could have no need for their sacrifices in the first place (it's said to be "perfect" and "lacking nothing," "absolutely necessary" and not "contingent" in any way).

At any rate, accusing people of "self-worship" does not constitute an argument, nor does "self-worship" - by itself - seem to pose the danger which RK warns us about. Perhaps he needs to elaborate on this a little more, and fill in the gaping blanks.

RK confesses that:

If the unbeliever thinks he is the ultimate, not simply the immediate basis for epistemology - I see no possible way for that assertion to be justified.

Of course, this is not an argument either. I'm sure that someone who "thinks he is the ultimate... basis for epistemology" could come up with some way to make this view seem "justified." There are many very inventive minds in the world, and I'm confident that RK hasn't reviewed all the possible explanations someone might give for

such a view.

But RK would be in error if he assumes that non-belief in his god logically entails that one “thinks he is the ultimate ... basis for epistemology.” While it is not clear what this is precisely supposed to mean, presuppositionalists (RK included) offer no reason why someone cannot reject Christianity and yet hold something other than himself as “the ultimate basis... for epistemology.”

Again, no argument is offered here.

RK then quotes Greg Bahnsen again:

[The unbeliever] thinks that his thinking process is normal. He thinks that his mind is the final court of appeal in all matters of knowledge. He takes himself to be the reference point for all interpretation of the facts. That is, he has epistemologically become a law unto himself: autonomous. (*Always Ready*, p. 46)

Let's parse this statement point by point.

First of all, suppose that a non-believer “thinks that his thinking process is normal.” Does Bahnsen think that people should generally adopt a thinking process that they do not think is normal? Does it bother Bahnsen if a given non-Christian “thinks that his thinking process is normal”? Speaking for myself (if Bahnsen will allow it), I think my “thinking process is normal,” since I govern my thinking process according to objective norms, namely reason and its method, known as logic. These are not only normal in the sense that they provide a standard to which my thinking conforms, but also because they are suited to the kind of consciousness which I possess. Naturally I did not create my own consciousness or choose what kind I possess. I have it due to causal conditions that were beyond my control, namely the biological causality which made my existence a reality and the genetic basis of my nature as a biological organism. I perceive and have the ability to form concepts on the basis of perceptual input. These are facts, and my epistemology takes these facts, which are wholly relevant to the purpose of epistemology and my need for it, into account from its foundations on up. So yes, if Bahnsen considers my thinking of my own thought process as normal is a “sin,” I'm happy to confess my “guilt” on this. Don't expect it to change.

Bahnsen's next characterization of the non-believer of course does follow from the previous one. To suppose that my “thinking process is normal” in no way necessitates that I think that my mind “is the final court of appeal in all matters of knowledge.” On the contrary, objective facts are the final court of appeal. I'm adult enough to know that I am neither omniscient nor infallible, that I can and sometimes do make mistakes, and that my mistakes do not alter reality or revise the nature of the objects they involve. Moreover, since knowledge is knowledge of reality, I defer to reality in my mental activity, since it would do me no good to substitute what I imagine for what is real. Rational epistemology equips thinkers for making this fundamental distinction by its adherence to the primacy of existence. So I suspect that Bahnsen is projecting here. Since Bahnsen's worldview is premised on the primacy of consciousness, he does not have the objective principles by which the distinction between imagination and reality can be made at his disposal. While Bahnsen would call his god's mind as “the final court of appeal in all matters of knowledge,” since his god is merely imaginary, he is in fact placing his own mind in the seat of the court judge, telling us what his god can and cannot do, will and will not do. Pretty easy to make these kinds of statements about something that is only imaginary. But Bahnsen cannot maintain this kind of pretense consistently, which is why it only works in the case of his theological claims. When he's working with reality and trying to achieve any kind of goal, he has no choice but to abandon his mystical epistemology and deal with reality on its own terms. In this way the Christian operates on a mixed epistemology, proclaiming a specifically Christian epistemology while clandestinely borrowing from a non-Christian, this-worldly reality in order to get anything of value done.

Bahnsen then takes a page right out of Van Til when he says that the non-believer

takes himself to be the reference point for all interpretation of the facts. That is, he has epistemologically become a law unto himself: autonomous.

Does Bahnsen produce an argument for this claim? Not surprisingly, of course not. I have found no argument in any of Van Til's writings for this claim either. It's simply a blanket charge, apparently allowing no exceptions, without citing any evidence to support it. The only thing which he has to support it is his religious prejudice, as this is simply an expression of the same.

In fact, what Bahnsen is expressing here is a very narrow understanding of how the mind works which has resulted from his acceptance of the primacy of consciousness. This causes him to operate on a false dichotomy, both horns of which assume a *subjective* orientation to “all interpretation of the facts”: either a divine mind is “the reference point for all interpretation of the facts,” or a human being’s own mind is. Either way, some “mind” must be the final “law unto itself.” This could only make sense if the mind operates in a vacuum, denied of awareness of any independently existing objects which could serve as the ultimate reference point in “interpretation of the facts.” This imaginary condition, which theism in fact takes seriously, represents the original state of the mind of its god, as I point out in my blog [Before the Beginning: The Problem of Divine Lonesomeness](#). Since it is part of theism that any objects independent of the divine mind were *created* by the divine mind in the first place, we need to ask: of what was the divine mind aware prior to creating any objects independent of itself? Logically, there would have been no independent objects for it to be aware of at all. The original state of the “ultimate mind” was a subject in complete isolation from any independently existing objects, which means: the ultimate condition of divine reality is pure subjectivism. Hence, we can attribute the false dichotomy implicit in Bahnsen’s declaration here to the [subjectivism inherent in his god-belief](#).

Why cannot the facts themselves be “the reference point for all interpretation of the facts”? Bahnsen does not say. His insistence on the view which he has presented suggests that he has not even considered such a possibility. This would be understandable if he were prone to swallow pretty much everything his teacher, Cornelius Van Til, asserted, and in the area of apologetics this was the general rule for Bahnsen for the most part. (If you examine his massive *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, in which Bahnsen comments on very lengthy excerpts from Van Til’s writings, you’ll find that in many places Bahnsen prefers to explain statements by Van Til which were obviously faulty in order to make them seem reasonable, rather than admit their inherent faultiness. Van Til’s “floorboards” analogy is one example here.)

Is the non-believer then truly “a law unto himself” in epistemological matters? Not if this means he makes up the laws which govern his thinking process, as an omnipotent, sovereign deity would presumably be capable of doing. If the non-believer is one who has adopted an epistemology based on the primacy of existence, then he conforms his thinking to the facts he discovers existing independent of his conscious activity. These facts, rather than, say, his own [wishes](#), provide the standard to which his cognition must conform. So Bahnsen is wrong to level this blanket charge against non-believers in toto, and by doing so he only announces his own ignorance of rival epistemologies and his unchecked bias towards the primacy of consciousness.

Then again, isn’t the subjective paradigm of the divine mind described here understood as perfection by the Christian, and the Christian himself commanded to “be perfect” like his god (Mt. 5:48)? Perhaps it’s acceptable for the Christian to be “a law unto himself” in matters of epistemology (for many believers in fact act like they are), while for some reason this is wrong for non-believers.

Again, so much for “the impossibility of the contrary.”

To further solidify his point, RK then resorted to a scenario which is only accessible to us if we indulge our imagination without adhering to the constraints of reality:

It is like the famous (and farcical) story of the scientists who discover how to create life from common dirt! Excited, they suddenly stop - A voice challenges them - “I doubt you can.” “All right, then” (say the scientists) - “we will!” As they pick up shovels, they stop again, as the voice says “No, no. Get your own dirt.”

Now, I can imagine along with RK a group of scientists imagining that they’ve heard a voice from out of nowhere. I can even imagine an invisible magic being which produced the voice along with the dirt which RK says his god created. But to suppose such imagining is representative of fact is to play a game of “let’s pretend.” Of course, the Christian’s god is a peculiar one. It is said to have created the universe. But look what it created the universe with: dirt! Does he really expect me to believe that an omniscient, omnipotent and all-wise supernatural being rationally chose dirt as the substance to form the earth?

But RK thinks this story, which he himself admits is “farcical,” is illustrative of the non-Christian’s epistemological situation:

This is what reasoning is like without the foundation of God’s self-existence, known through His

self-revelation. It is a man trying to justify his “own” knowledge - when everything he encounters - including himself, belongs to God. The very idea is utterly absurd.

Note again that RK has not presented any argument for any of his condemning generalizations about non-Christian epistemology. This is typical of presuppositionalism. In place of argumentation, the presuppositional apologist relies on degrading characterizations of rival positions in order to discredit them. He tends not present an analysis of actual non-Christian epistemologies as stated by their proponents (and when he does, he focuses on select quotations which serve as easy prey for his denigrating intentions), but prefers to issue sweeping opinions consisting, not of informed assessments of his opponents’ actual stated positions, but of faith-borne animosity stipulated as sacred truth.

RK calls “reasoning... without the foundation of God’s self-existence, known through His self-revelation” - i.e., any form of non-Christian reasoning - “absurd.” But what he misses is the fact that the story he presents as an illustration of what he calls the absurdity of non-Christian thought, is itself absurd, because of its assumption of the primacy of consciousness. Nowhere in his discussion of epistemology does RK ever come close to addressing the issue of metaphysical primacy (i.e., the question of what is the proper relationship between the subject of consciousness and its objects), so this point would likely be lost on him. What RK also misses is the fact that, it is only by accepting Christianity’s premises in the first place that we could agree with RK’s opinion that “the very idea” of non-Christian reasoning is “utterly absurd.” But RK has provided no reasons why one should accept Christianity’s premises in the first place!

On the other hand, if one does lower his intellect enough to accept Christianity’s premises, on what basis could he deem anything “absurd”? With stories about talking serpents, virgin births, walking on unfrozen water, casting out demons, curing blindness with spittle, and raising the dead from their graves, what could the Christian possibly take to be “absurd”? And why? On what basis? To assess an idea as an absurdity, presupposes a constellation of prior worldview presuppositions, specifically those which have a grounding in the objectivity of reality, which means: a worldview which adheres to the metaphysical primacy of existence. It is most ironic when “presuppositionalists” fail to take into account the presuppositional context of concepts like “absurd,” which they tend to throw around as if they made sense in the context of their theistic worldview. But if notions like angels, demons, and other supernatural beings, the virgin birth, the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus, and other miraculous elements of the Christian worldview are *not* absurd, why suppose the concept has any objective meaning in the first place? Blank out.

On a rational worldview, i.e., one which is dedicated to adhering to the metaphysical primacy of existence, theistic ideas are absurd, just as these tales of miracles and supernatural interventions are absurd. In fact, for RK to affirm theism on the one hand, and on the other condemn non-Christian reasoning as “absurd” while using utterly unrealistic scenarios (which RK himself calls “farcical”) about scientists who, in their efforts to discover how life formed, hear voices from the beyond commanding them to “Get your own dirt,” to inform his point, is itself absurd. That RK is not careful to anticipate this in the defense of his position, seems inexplicable to me, especially if I am to suppose that he is being guided by the revelations of an omniscient and infallible supernatural mind.

On the other hand, in the context of a worldview which enshrines the idea of miracles, what could possibly substantiate the assessment that a mere *idea* is “absurd”? Theism is a worldview which insists that the miraculous has actually occurred in reality, not merely in the imaginations of believers. The theistic worldview requires men to believe that all kinds of miraculous events have actually occurred, that the supernatural characters which are portrayed in its defining stories are real, that there really are angels and demons behind the objects we perceive moving and interacting in a battle between “good” and “evil,” etc., etc., etc. If these supposed “realities” are not themselves “absurd,” how can a mere “idea” be absurd? RK does not explain this. On theism’s premise of the metaphysical primacy of consciousness, which denies all objectivity (since it makes *everything* dependent upon the intentions of a ruling subject), RK must in fact *borrow* from a non-Christian worldview even to invoke the concept ‘absurd’ in any meaningful way.

None of these points occurs to RK as he concludes his section on “the impossibility of the contrary”:

Since it is impossible to have knowledge on any other basis, save that of God’s intrinsic nature and self-communication of the properties of that nature - it is impossible for any human system of reasoning to have justification at all. In short, Christianity’s epistemology is the only epistemology possible - because it’

s impossible to have any other coherent, true, and justified basis for thought, perception, knowledge, or understanding of ourselves, or the creation in which we dwell.

RK has produced no argument to support any of the contentions he voices here. He has not shown how man's knowledge depends on the Christian god; he has not even proven that the Christian god exists. If RK concedes (as he seems to elsewhere in his debate with Mitch LeBlanc) that proving his god's existence was not his intention (RK states explicitly in his rebuttal to LeBlanc, "I'm not arguing for the existence of God. That is not the point of the debate."), then he simply opened a gaping hole in his defense of theistic epistemology which LeBlanc effectively covered up in his own opening statement when he effectually demonstrated the irrationality of supposing that a god exists in the first place. If RK cannot demonstrate the existence of his god in the first place, then any effort he undertakes to show that his god is the only basis for human knowledge will inherently suffer from a fatal weakness internal to his own position. RK is thus exposed as a would-be philosophical hijacker, someone who has attempted to take over an entire branch of philosophy through illicit means, but who has failed in that attempt due to his negligence in sufficiently equipping himself. Indeed, given his aim, it would not be possible to equip himself sufficiently, so long as rational philosophy is around to stand guard.

RK's claim that "it is impossible for any human system of reasoning to have justification at all," represents a faith assertion, a claim which he hopes to convince himself by repeating it. From what he has presented (and from what can be garnered from the presuppositionalist literature of Cornelius Van Til, Greg Bahnsen, John Frame, Richard Pratt, and others), it does not represent the conclusion of an intensive, comprehensive survey of "human system[s] of reasoning" by any means, but rather a view which the believer hopes is true, but whose alleged truth he cannot demonstrate. If RK had something solid to present in favor of such assertions, bare and unsupported as they are, no doubt he would have at least alluded to it in his opening statement.

Instead of positive argument on behalf of his claims, RK prefers to go with self-service circularities: "Christianity's epistemology is the only epistemology possible - because it's impossible to have any other coherent, true, and justified basis for thought, perception, knowledge, or understanding of ourselves," etc. His "support" for his position consists solely and exclusively of repeating that position using different wording. RK provides no analysis of "thought, perception, knowledge, or understanding of ourselves" which *objectively* demonstrates their alleged dependence on the existence and character of an invisible magic being. He provides no substantiation for the universally negative generalization that "it is impossible for a *human* system of reasoning to have justification at all." For him even to embark on proving such a contention, he would at minimum need to conduct a thorough analysis of the Objectivist epistemology, including its metaphysical basis, its theory of concepts, its adherence to objectivity and reason, its recognition of the nature of man's need for knowledge and an objective process by which he discovers and validates it, in order to have any hope at all in the faith-assertions he announces here. Since RK has not done any of this, it can safely be said that his "impossibility of the contrary" is simply an expression of his own ignorance on the matters which he discusses, and such ignorance is not a worthy basis on which to premise one's condemnations.

In answer to RK's position, all that needs to be pointed out is the fact that knowledge is impossible without the ability to form concepts, and that a comprehensive epistemology needs to account for this ability. There is no rational basis to contend that human beings do not have this ability, for any human being attempting to dispute this ability would himself need to possess it in order to formulate his contentions against it. But in all his discussion of knowledge, RK never provides his worldview's definition of knowledge (does he even have one?) or its understanding of concepts (including an explanation of their nature, their formation, and their purpose). It may be that R's worldview has nothing to say on these matters (if it did, his failure to indicate what his worldview does have to say on these matters is inexplicable), in which case his worldview is simply insufficient to have anything worthy to consider on these matters. This can only mean: the claim that the Christian god is the basis of knowledge because of "the impossibility of the contrary" is simply false, and should be rejected without further consideration.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: ["Impossibility of the Contrary"](#), ["Natural Revelation"](#), [Presuppositional Gimmickry](#)

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

2 Comments:

[Dr Funkenstein](#) said...

I've never been able to fathom (since the first time I came across presuppositionalism) why presuppers consider 'the impossibility of the contrary' to constitute some kind of knock down proof - it seems to rarely (if ever) occur to them to apply the same method of argument to something they don't believe is true.

Stephen Law gave 2 good examples with:

P1: If crop circles exist, then aliens caused them

P2: Crop circles exist

C: Therefore, aliens are the cause of crop circles

further proof: the impossibility of the contrary

Yet I've never spoken to an apologist who accepts that as proof that aliens are the cause (and only possible cause) of crop circles.

Stephen's other example was:

Apologists are unable to reason properly, as I presuppose their faculties have been damaged by a blow to the head with a rock. Therefore, any attempt they use to utilise reason will fail because I have a reason they can't (due to aforementioned knock on the head). the proof of this is the impossibility of the contrary.

Totally ludicrous of course, but no different from the apologetic approach you've critiqued on your blog. That said, at least some of them seem to be aware TAG doesn't make the grade, eg here:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2006/10/coming-out-of-closet.html>

and here

http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2007/04/more-on-tag-and-certainty_05.html

where Paul Manata admits:

---I might as well say it now, I've rejected the strong modal version of TAG for some time now (or, at least admitted that the case has not been made).---

---"I actually find zero psychological or emotional problems admitting this. Ultimately, at the end of the day, I trust in the word of Christ. The mere logically [sic] possibility that another worldview also can provide for preconditions of knowledge does not bother me. I don't see anywhere where God promises that I'll have this kind of certainty. I am called to trust in His word. I don't question it."---

Give that Greg Bahnsen managed to get a PhD in philosophy from USC, which is a pretty decent university, you have to assume he'd be aware all he was doing was peddling arguments from ignorance coupled to grandiose but baseless assertions. Like most nonsense that comes with religion, it does seem to have been fairly effective at convincing quite a lot of people for some reason though.

[August 27, 2009 12:22 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hello Dr. F,

Thanks for your comment. You make some really great points, with quotes from Paul Manata too! Very nice.

Yes, it seems that the basic presuppositional method a la "the impossibility of the contrary" could be used to defend any whacky idea, as the two examples you cite from Stephen Law demonstrate. It's bewildering when presuppositionalists don't recognize this. But they try to come up with all kinds of distinctions and nuances to dismiss rival positions and make theirs prevail.

As for Manata, it is interesting how he drifted away from presuppositionalism. When I first encountered Manata on the All-Bahnsen forum back in 2004, he was gung-ho presuppositionalist, and characteristically thick-headed about it. So it would be interesting to know what specifically caused him to reconsider his views on it. I remember reading at least one of the quotes you cited here some time ago, but I don't recall what else he might have said on the matter.

In the case of Bahnsen, he did have academic credentials as you point out, but degrees and certificates do not guarantee the quality of one's reasoning. I'd think that with all this education Bahnsen would see through a lot of the smoke and mirrors of presuppositionalism. But we have to keep in mind an important fact: he was not working from a rational philosophy to begin with, which is why you can have all 10 doctorates in various fields, and still embrace intellectually bankrupt positions.

I know that with Van Til, he tells us straight out in his [Why I Believe in God](#), that he was raised in the Christian tradition from his earliest years, and the educational institutions of his day reinforced this to a large degree. By the time he got to Princeton, he was already waist-deep in the idealist tradition, which only sealed his fate as a mystic.

Bahnsen's son David reports that his father, Greg, was attending an orthodox Presbyterian church since he was in the fourth grade (a perilously vulnerable period in one's development), and "had the rare blessing to spend his entire time as a believer in the Reformed faith" ("The Life of Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen," *The Standard Bearer*, p. 10).

The indoctrination took root at an early age with these folks. That got the ball rolling, and no doubt cultivated in their minds the rationalizing habits that a believer needs to practice in order to remain in "the faith."

Regards,
Dawson

[August 27, 2009 5:08 PM](#)

[Post a Comment](#)