Some Thoughts on Presuppositionalism and the Problem of Evil

Christian apologist Dan of [Debunking Atheists](#) agreeably affirms Greg Bahnsen's solution to the problem of evil, which reads as follows:

> God has a morally sufficient reason for the evil which exists. (*Always Ready*, p. 172)

Bahnsen offers this statement (for which he cites no biblical citation specifically supporting it) as an overlooked premise which satisfies the problem of evil:

1. God is all-good.

2. God is all-powerful.

3. Evil exists. (Ibid., p. 171)

Bahnsen adds to this formulation of the problem of evil the claim that his god "has a morally sufficient reason" for evil. Bahnsen does not tell us what that alleged reason is. He does not even suggest possible candidates for what it could or might be. Bahnsen's concern is to claim that his god does have a reason for allowing and/or committing evil, and that reason is "morally sufficient." In essence, Bahnsen is passing judgment on something he has not seen; he is pre-judging as "morally sufficient" something which he cannot even show actually exists, and whose identity is unknown. Bahnsen nowhere explains how we can morally evaluate something that is unknown, and yet attempts to solve the problem of evil by affirming a premise which does exactly this. Such prejudice is rash and baseless, and the opposite of morally responsible.

All this is to say that Bahnsen offers a defense against the problem of evil, but fails to validate a crucial component integral to that defense, namely the notion of a "morally sufficient reason" for evil. As we examine Bahnsen's own statements around his proposed defense against the problem of evil, and Dan's additional comments on the matter, consider what kind of mind is required to take the view that there is such a thing as a "morally sufficient reason" for evil. Bahnsen himself shows no indication that he winces at the idea; in fact, he seems gleeful in affirming it.

Bahnsen clues us in on the psychological process by which the Christian mind comes to the evaluation of reasons which are unknown, as "morally sufficient" when he states the following:

> If the Christian *presupposes* that God is perfectly and completely good -- as Scripture requires us to do -- then he is committed to evaluating everything within his experience in the light of that presupposition. Accordingly, when the Christian observes evil events or things in the world, he can and should retain consistency with his presupposition about God's goodness by now *inferring* that God has a *morally good reason* for the evil that exists. God certainly must be all-powerful in order to be God; He is not to be thought of as overwhelmed or stymied by evil in the universe. And God is surely good, the Christian will profess -- so any evil we find must be compatible with God's goodness. This is just to say that God has planned evil events for reasons which are morally commendable and good. (*Always Ready*, pp. 171-172)

Observe Bahnsen's procedure here, and notice how its entire weight is borne on faith-based assumptions:

Step 1: Assume on faith (i.e., on the basis of hope and desire) that there is a god.

Step 2: Assume in advance of anything else, that this god "is perfectly and completely good."

Step 3: Commit yourself "to evaluating everything within [your] experience in light of [these assumptions]" – i.e., deliberately allow them to predetermine the outcome of any evaluation, inference, supposition, judgment, conclusion you may make about said god.

Step 4: When you observe evil in the world, "retain consistency with [these assumptions] about God's goodness by now *inferring* that God has a *morally good reason* for the evil that exists."

Step 5: Don't worry about *what* specifically that reason might be; you might never know what it is (in fact, it's preferable that you don't know what it is). Bahnsen himself concedes that he has no idea what this "morally sufficient reason" could possibly be when he writes:

> the Bible calls upon us to trust that God has a morally sufficient reason for the evil which can be found in this world, but it does not tell us what that sufficient reason is.

The apologist finds delight in such ignorance, pretending that it indicates some "higher knowledge" to which man has no access. The purpose here is not to establish the claim that the Christian god has a "morally sufficient reason" for evil. Rather, it is simply to assume, on the basis of prior assumptions accepted on faith, that whatever reason said god supposedly has is, sight unseen, a "morally good reason" for evil. Don't even worry about knowing what such a reason *could* be; don't try to hypothesize examples; don't think critically about what you are expected to accept as knowledge. The important thing is not to evaluate specific instances, but to settle in your mind at any cost that whatever reason this god might have for allowing or committing evil, it's a "morally good reason."

Step 6: Rationalize Steps 4 and 5. For example, remind yourself that "God certainly must be all-powerful in order to be God; He is not to be thought of [i.e., imagined] as overwhelmed or stymied by evil in the universe. And God is surely good." Given these assumptions which are affirmed in advance of contemplating anything that might be called evil in the world, pretend to have drawn the conclusion "[therefore] any evil we find must be compatible with God's goodness."

Step 7: Put out of your mind the fact that the very notion of evil being "compatible with God's goodness" is indistinguishable from evil being compatible with the nature of an *evil* god. I.e., suppress genuine moral judgment in order to replace it with morally bankrupt prejudices resting on faith-based assumptions which are to be accepted in advance of any judgment for no good reason whatsoever (for to evaluate a reason as "good" would defy the very procedure under consideration).

Step 8: Having gone through Steps 1 through 7, pretend that you've established as a conclusion to prior reasoning that "God has planned evil events for reasons which are morally commendable and good." Again, do not inquire as to what these reasons might be; what is important is that you *presuppose* that they are "morally commendable and good."

If those reasons are in fact "morally commendable and good," then, by deeming them as such, the apologist is essentially saying everyone should go and do likewise, for they are "morally commendable and good." But what if everyone went around, like the Christian god, allowing and/or committing evil and claiming to have a "morally sufficient reason" for doing so? If this would not be a suitable formula for man's choices and actions, then how can one call the Christian god's supposed "reason" for allowing evil "morally commendable and good"?

In attempting to turn the problem of evil into merely an emotional difficulty as opposed to an actual contradiction, Bahnsen openly admits that he does not know what reason his god might have for allowing or using evil to achieve its ends:

> The problem which men have with God when they come face to face with evil in the world is not a logical or philosophical one, but more a psychological one. We can find it emotionally very hard to have faith in God and trust His goodness and power *when we are not given the reason* why bad things happen to us and others. We instinctively think to ourselves, "why did such a terrible thing occur?" Unbelievers internally cry out for an answer to such a question also. But God does not always (indeed, rarely) provide an explanation to human beings for the evil which they experience or observe. "The secret things belong to the Lord our God" (Deuteronomy 29:29). We might not be able to understand God's wise and mysterious ways, even if He told us (cf. Isaiah 55:9). Nevertheless, the fact remains that He has not told us why misery and suffering and injustice are part of His plan for history and for our individual lives. (*Always Ready*, p. 173)

I have already written on a broader problem in Christianity, what I call *the problem of imperfection*, in my blog [Was Adam Created Perfect?](#) Bahnsen avoids addressing, even acknowledging, that Christianity is unable to resolve the inherent contradiction in affirming the view that the universe was created by a perfect creator, while imperfections exist in that creation. The problem of evil is essentially a more isolated aspect, or manifestation, of this broader problem, which few apologists ever consider.

In trying to downplay the logical conundrum raised by the problem of evil, Bahnsen proposes a solution which affirms the notion that evil is justifiable if one has a "morally sufficient reason" for it, and, apparently pleased with himself, proceeds to call the persistence of the problem of evil a "psychological" problem rather than a philosophical problem. Bahnsen thus announces that he sees no philosophical problem in affirming the notion that evil is justifiable if one has a supposedly "morally sufficient reason" for it.

He says that the psychological problem of evil arises as a result of not knowing what that reason might be, for not having a suitable answer to the question, "why did such a terrible thing occur?" Bahnsen's claim that whatever reason his god has for allowing or using evil to achieve its ends, it is a "morally sufficient reason," is intended to calm the believer's mind by appeasing the wrong end of the contradiction: by camouflaging evil with the guise of goodness to make it seem acceptable.

Bahnsen complains that "Unbelievers internally cry out for an answer to such a question also," but "unbelievers" are not the ones whose worldview brews such a philosophical quandary in the first place, nor is it the "unbeliever's" worldview which posits the notion of a "morally sufficient reason" for allowing or using evil as the solution to the problem of evil.

In spite of the raging nature of this question, given its mystical premises, Bahnsen reports that "God does not always (indeed, rarely) provide an explanation to human beings for the evil which they experience or observe," that "He has not told us why misery and suffering and injustice are part of His plan for history and for our individual lives." Bahnsen even suggests that believers "might not be able to understand God's wise and mysterious ways, even if He told us." So Bahnsen acknowledges that he does not know what reason his god might have for using evil to achieve its purposes, and says that he probably wouldn't understand it even if he were to learn of it, and yet he still calls it "morally sufficient." For Bahnsen, the moral is not the understood, but the obeyed. Understanding plays no central role in the Christian conception of morality.

The bottom line for Bahnsen and his worldview, then, is that evil is morally justifiable *so long as one does not disclose his reasons for adopting its use*. Something does not need to be known or understood in order to call it "morally sufficient," and Bahnsen was the type of individual who found this "solution" to the problem of evil satisfying.

Bahnsen does affirm that evil is a serious issue. He writes:

> It is important for the Christian to realize –indeed, to insist upon – the reality and serious nature of evil. The subject of evil is not simply an intellectual parlor game, a cavalier matter, a whimsical or relativistic choice of looking a things a certain way. Evil is real. Evil is ugly. ([Ibid.](#), p. 164)

But if Bahnsen takes evil so seriously, why then does he offer as his solution to the problem of evil the claim that his god has a "morally sufficient reason" for evil? In giving this as his solution to the problem of evil, Bahnsen is essentially conceding that his god is ultimately responsible for the reality of evil in the world; we have already seen that Bahnsen thinks that "misery and suffering and injustice are part of His plan for history and for our individual lives" (p. 173). And, presumably, since this god is supposedly both omnipotent as well as free, it should be able to achieve its ends and create a universe without evil ever coming into the picture. So the conclusion that the existence of any evil anywhere is ultimately the responsibility of the omnipotent creator which is supposed to have created everything in the first place, seems unavoidable. Indeed, if Bahnsen didn't think his god were responsible for the reality of evil, he wouldn't need to claim that his god has a "morally sufficient reason" for evil. As I pointed out above, Bahnsen does not tell us what "morally sufficient reason" his god supposedly has for the evil that exists in the world; he doesn't even give an example of a reason which he considers "morally sufficient" for allowing or committing evil. Indeed, to do so, Bahnsen would simply be giving us a glimpse into his own views, which he prefers to keep private for obvious reasons. So it comes as no surprise that Bahnsen does not elaborate on this point.

Dan writes:

> This can't be a discussion as to "God is going to clear up the mess." He will, but that is not an adequately sufficient answer for the non-believers here. The question the Atheists here have is not whether God will 'take care of it' but, why did God allow it? Why is there a mess to begin with? Is God sadistic or impotent?

Actually, the question is more like:

> How could a *good* god, which is characterized as a "loving father," *choose* to allow it?

Or, consider the following:

> How is a god which allows evil, and/or makes use of evil to achieve its goals, any different from a god that is evil?

If the Christian god is supposed to be "all-good," then presumably any action it chooses to do must originate from good intentions, since all its intentions would supposedly be good. Also, bear in mind that this god is supposedly in control of everything. Presuppositionalists in particular are eager to affirm such a view. Observe:

> God controls whatsoever comes to pass. (Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 160)

> God's thoughts make the world what it is and determine what happens – which is why all facts are revelatory of God... (Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 243)

> God controls all events and outcomes (even those that come about by human choice and activity) and is far more capable and powerful than modern machines. (*Van Til's Apologetic*, p. 489n.43)

So how does the Christian square events and outcomes which are *not* good in nature, with the view that the Christian god, which is supposed to be "all-good" and only "all-good," is in control of everything? Bahnsen's own proposal, that his god has "a morally sufficient reason for the evil which exists," does not reconcile the matter. On the contrary, all it accomplishes is portraying the Christian god on cozy terms with evil. So the problem persists.

Predictably, Dan writes:

> The Atheist are [is] in a real quandary when he tries to argue for the problem of evil, he has to first make a moral judgment that is objectively correct. Objective moral judgments can only be grounded in the transcendent God of Christianity.

Several points here:

First, Dan misses the internal nature of the critique launched by the problem of evil. The problem of evil points to a state of affairs which is inconsistent with what the Christian worldview would have us believe. Christianity affirms both horns of the conflict, namely that an all-good, omnipotent and omniscient creator created the entire universe and all its contents, even "control[ing] whatsoever comes to pass" within it, and that evil exists in the world. The conflict is thus confined within the Christian worldview.

Contrary to what presuppositionalists typically say, the conflict to which the problem of evil draws our attention is not the non-believer's (alleged) failure to ground moral judgment without reference to the Christian god. On the contrary, since both sides of this conflict are affirmed by Christianity, so the problem obtains regardless of what the non-believer can or cannot do.

This conflict not only destroys the Christian worldview from within, it also has profoundly damning implications for the moral character of those who actively seek to defend it, especially in a manner like Greg Bahnsen. By definition and by virtue of its nature, an all-good being would not willfully use evil to achieve its ends: its all-good nature would preclude any willingness complicit with evil. Consequently, a being which does make use of evil to achieve its ends cannot rightly be called "all-good." But this is what Christianity

essentially teaches in this respect: that its god is all-good, but also that its creation contains evil, and the "all-good" god is ultimately responsible for the evil. The task of the apologist is to reconcile these teachings without contradiction. But the contradiction cannot be reconciled without compromising either side of the conflict, even if the believer wants to say that his god has a "morally sufficient reason" for the evil it uses to accomplish its ends. Indeed, the very notion of a "morally sufficient reason" to allow or make use of evil is a contradiction in terms: that which is morally sufficient abstains absolutely from evil. Is there such a reason as a "morally sufficient reason" to commit murder? Is there such a thing as a "morally sufficient reason" to rape children? Is there such a thing as a "morally sufficient reason" to burglarize a house? Is there such a thing as a "morally sufficient reason" to evade relevant facts in one's reasoning? These are questions for the Christian who affirms the notion of a "morally sufficient reason" for allowing or committing evil to consider.

Second, Dan incorrectly assumes (most likely because he *wants* it to be the case) that "objective moral judgments can only be grounded in the transcendent God of Christianity." He does not establish this claim; no apologist really does. Apologists love to repeat this kind of claim, but it is typically accepted by believers on faith: they *want* it to be true, and on the basis of this desire, they affirm it as if it were true. A dead give-away here is the use of the concept 'objective' in qualifying "moral judgments," a concept that is anathema to the Christian worldview (see [here](#)).

We've already seen that the Christian worldview is opposed to moral judgment as such. Actions which are *chosen* by a volitional agent are always subject to moral evaluation. But Christians have imperatively insisted that no one has the right to judge their god's chosen actions. Even this insistence, however, is at odds with what Christians like Greg Bahnsen urge us to swallow: they tell us that their god and all its actions are *good*, which is a moral evaluation. And yet we've been denied the right to make any moral evaluations. In fact, we're told that we have no basis to make moral evaluations to begin with.

Now the apologist speaks of "*objective* moral judgments." But does he understand what objectivity is? His claim that "objective moral judgments can only be grounded in the transcendent God of Christianity." In other words, in the apologist's view, objective moral judgments are not grounded in *reason*. The presuppositionalist literature in fact confirms this analysis. Bahnsen explains the presuppositionalist understanding of objectivity as follows:

> For Van Til, objectivity in the Christian worldview is not a matter of having *no* presuppositions (and letting a pretended neutral reason find the pretended external truth, which is actually organized by the subjective mind of man), but a matter of having the *right* presuppositions – that is, having the divine point of view gained through revelation. (*Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 286)

So clearly, for the presuppositionalist, reason has nothing to do with objectivity. If it did, why wouldn't Bahnsen make mention of this when he gives the Christian "understanding" of objectivity?

Moreover, the presuppositionalist conception of objectivity does not rule out the view that wishing makes it so. On the basis of the Christian worldview, wishing does make it so, especially if the wisher is the Christian god (see [here](#)). Think of it: a conception of objectivity which allows wishing to make it so!

This is how the Christian worldview divorces "objectivity" from reason: by underwriting its conception of objectivity with the primacy of consciousness, and doing away with reason in epistemology. It manifests itself by accepting an enormous sum of mystical premises as "truth" which are said to be "divinely revealed" and are consulted as the ultimate guide to understanding the world. It should be obvious that one can easily claim to "know" anything by an appeal to "revelation," especially when it comes to "knowledge" of "the supernatural" and "duties" which men are supposed to adopt and follow. So the appeal to divine revelation offers absolutely zero safeguards for ensuring genuine objectivity in one's identifications and conclusions.

Of course, apologist Dan does not anticipate this objection, for not only does he take it for granted that reason has nothing to do with moral judgment (he voices no concern over the absence of reason's mention in the presuppositionalist script), he expects his claim that moral judgments need the Christian god in order to be objective, to be accepted on faith (i.e., on the *wish* that it be true), essentially on his own say so. He gives no argument, so he does not even present this claim as a conclusion to prior reasoning. It's a stipulation, not a conclusion, not a discovery one makes by applying reason to the world.

But perhaps I'm hasty in assuming that Dan means the same thing as Van Til does with the word "objective." In that case, what could he possibly mean by "objective"? He uses this term as if its meaning were self-apparent. But going by what I understand by the concept 'objective', his claim that objective moral judgments need to be grounded in the Christian god is clearly false. This is because objectivity is essentially the methodical application of the primacy of existence to knowledge, while Christianity is fundamentally opposed to the primacy of existence (see here). Consequently, the apologist is using a concept (the concept 'objectivity') while ignoring its genetic roots (the primacy of existence) by underwriting it with a worldview which explicitly denies its roots (i.e., Christianity). In other words, we have here an instance of the fallacy of the stolen concept.

Dan writes:

> The Atheist cannot logically generate the problem of evil.

What Dan means here is that, by virtue of his atheism, an atheist has no rational basis for moral concepts (like 'good' and 'evil') that is consistent with his non-belief in the Christian god. Of course this overlooks the internal nature of the problem of evil. As I pointed out above, the problem of evil is a problem within Christianity regardless of what any particular atheist can or cannot do.

Additionally, notice that Dan nowhere establishes this claim by means of *proof*. He simply asserts it, apparently expecting everyone to accept it on faith. After all, that's how he accepted it. Accepting a claim on faith essentially means supposing it is true because you *want* it to be true. Dan *wants* this claim to be true, so he pretends that it is true. In this very sense, faith is a *pretense*.

Dan write:

> Its not a problem for the believer

What Dan is really saying (without the courage to come out and say it plainly), is that the believer doesn't have a problem *with* evil. He's already conceded that, according to Christianity, his god has a cozy relationship with evil since it uses evil to achieve its purposes. Dan does not explain how this can be morally good, and apparently doesn't see any need to. Indeed, he doesn't see any need to explain this because he ultimately doesn't care.

Like any believer, Dan's concern is to be an obedient worshiper who disallows himself the freedom to judge his god as anything other than a "good" god. But by doing so, he destroys the meaning of the very concept 'good'. Since his god is on friendly terms with evil, it is a god which deliberately chooses *not* to take an uncompromising stance against evil. So just by worshiping such a god and calling it "good," the believer concedes by his own actions that he has no problem *with* evil. Just as the god he worships, the believer is ultimately *indifferent* to evil, because he's ultimately indifferent to values, and this is because he is ultimately indifferent to life on earth. So logically, while the believer has no problem with *evil*, he has an insurmountable problem with *good*.

What should be noted here, however, is that even the believer himself is not consistent with the logical implications of his worldview's stated position on its god and evil in the world. On the contrary, the believer routinely acts as if his own values were important. In other words, his own actions defy the moral ambivalence inherent in his theism.

Dan writes:

> but it is, ironically, the problem for the unbeliever.

Not the *Christian* problem of evil. The atheist does not posit an "all-good," "all-knowing" and "all-powerful" god which uses evil to achieve its own ends. That's the problem of evil. This is a problem for the Christian worldview. As we have seen, the Christian's "solution" to this is essentially to wipe out all rational meaning from the concept 'good' in order to justify his belief in a god which deliberately uses evil to achieve its ends. Notice that even when Dan repeats Bahnsen's claim that the Christian god "has a morally sufficient reason"

for evil, he does not (just as Bahnsen did not) identify what this supposedly "morally sufficient reason" might be. This only indicates that the apologist is not looking for a way to resolve the *logical* conflict highlighted by the problem of evil, but rather to prop up a *psychological* means of *rationalizing* belief in such a thing. He's essentially trying to have his cake, and eat it, too. Most non-Christians should see right through this farcical distortion of morality.

Dan writes:

> The Atheist need to make good on the statement that its evil first.

Again Dan ignores the internal nature of the problem of evil. It is Christianity which affirms the existence of evil in the world, regardless of what specifically the atheist's worldview might happen to teach. Presuppositionalists guarantee us that they will continue in their failure to address the problem of evil so long as they ignore the internal nature of its critique of Christianity.

But presuppositionalists do have an incentive to ignore the internal nature of the problem of evil, namely the fact that it cannot be defeated. Christianity says that the world was created by an all-good, all-knowing, all-controlling and omnipotent god, and it also says that evil exists in the world. As an example of evil in the world, Dan himself cited the torture of children (he quoted Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* at length to give an example of this). If one accepts the premise that an all-knowing, all-controlling and omnipotent god created the world, he cannot logically escape the implication that any evil that exists in the world is ultimately there because that god put it there. Essentially, the apologist needs to explain how evil finds its source in something that is supposedly "all-good." Bahnsen fails at this task. So does apologist Dan.

by Dawson Bethrick

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posted by Bahnsen Burner at 12:00 AM