Tape-Loop Apologetics

If you find yourself confronted with an apologist - especially one steeped in the mystical casuistry of presuppositional apologetics - it won't be long before he brandishes one or more of his shiny terms of endearing negation before you and challenges you to "account for" some philosophical issue covered in some apologetics handbook. One such term is the word 'immaterial', an elusive notion which is integral to modern apologetic discourse, but which apologists typically do not define in positive terms. As Rand so poignantly noted, "their definitions are not acts of defining, but of wiping out." (*Atlas Shrugged*, p. 951) The concept 'immaterial' supposedly refers to something (which presumably exists) that is "not material." Of course, this only tells us what it is *not*, not what it *is*, so whatever it is remains unidentified. This is most ironic of course, since Christian apologists tend to make "meaning" an important element in how they characterize the antithesis between believers and non-believers, frequently intimating that "meaning" is only possible if there's a god, and yet here they are often hard-pressed to provide meaning to their key terms.

As an example of what they mean by 'immaterial', apologists often like to point to "the laws of logic," just as Greg Bahnsen did in his debate with Gordon Stein. Yes, that's right, it is strange to see people who enshrine invisible magic beings and other religious notions carry on as if they were concerned for logic. And it's not surprising that a religionist would seize on the laws of logic as an example of what they mean by "immaterial" since religionists in general typically have little or no understanding of concepts. Indeed, I've never found any book in the bible that teaches a theory of concepts. And how exactly does one prove that the laws of logic are in fact "immaterial"?

The presuppositional playbook stipulates that the apologist keep control of the conversation (which he quickly wants to characterize as a debate) by focusing the discussion on the non-believer's view of the world while the apologist hides his own faith-based worldview behind his back, keeping its nonsensical teachings conveniently out of sight. This is the real purpose behind the apologist's attempt to challenge the non-believer to "account for" some item that is usually topical to the mind and its operation, such as the assumption that nature is uniform, logical inference, scientific inquiry, moral judgment, etc., as if his religion had anything important to say on these matters whatsoever. The apologist doesn't really care about the issues that he challenges the non-believer on; if he did, he'd have already adopted an honest-to-reality philosophy. On the contrary, the apologist hopes to keep the non-believer busy explaining his own non-believing position while hoping to spring his Christian dogmas on the non-believer to "clean up" after the non-believer's worldview has been "destroyed" by the apologist's shallow grasp of philosophical matters.

Again the apologist exhibits a most pungent irony here, for in spite of all the feigned importance that the he places on being able to "account for" such things, we should not be surprised when the apologist shows himself unable to "account for" the totems of his worldview. The following brief dialogue shows how the apologist loses at his own game:

> **Presupposer:** "How can your chance-bound, relative-only materialistic worldview account for immaterial entities?"
>
> **Non-Believer:** "I'm not sure what you're asking. But please, tell me, how does your Christian worldview account for the 'immaterial'?"
>
> **Presupposer:** "By the self-attesting sovereignty of the Triune God of Christian theism."
>
> **Non-Beleiver:** "Is this god material or immaterial?"
>
> **Presupposer:** "God is wholly immaterial."
>
> **Non-Believer:** "So let me get this straight: you 'account for' that which is 'immaterial' by appealing to that which you say is 'immaterial'? How does that explain anything?"
>
> **Presupposer:** [blank out]

Notice how the apologist's challenge is so easily shown to loop around and bite him in his nether regions. For if he appeals to the very thing that's being called to be explained, then he simply makes no progress in providing an explanation, for in the end he simply winds up with what he's called to explain. And indeed, if the apologist is challenged to "account for" the "immaterial," what options does he have? If he points to something material to "account for" that which he calls "immaterial," then he's basically admitting that matter is "ultimate" (a favorite

presuperstitionalist term). But if he points to something allegedly "immaterial" to "account for" that which he characterizes as "immaterial," has he really explained anything?

The same kind of problem arises when apologists claim pretend that pointing to their god will somehow explain the origin of life. But their god is said to be alive already, so pointing to somethat that's alive does not help explain the origin of life. They're just pointing to what needs to be explained. In the final analysis, it is shown that the apologist is guilty of the very charge he levels against non-believers: the failure to "account for" something important in his own worldview.

Such muddlemindedness is what we can expect to find when we examine the tape-loop antics of presuppositional apologetics. Like a dog chasing its tail, presuppositionalists simply make no progress except in digging their own intellectual graves.

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by Bahnsen Burner at 1:45 PM

3 Comments:

VanTilsGhost said...

Excellent work! I've missed your blog entires!

You really nailed the presupper approach...especially giggled at your mentioning how every 'conversation' is a 'debate.'

again...great job.

November 02, 2005 3:39 PM

Zachary Moore said...

Great post, Dawson.

November 11, 2005 12:32 PM

Aaron Kinney said...

I would love to see a presupper come in here and try to tackle this.

Side question: in my future conversations with presupers, would it be appropriate for me to demand that they only argue using information found in the Bible?

November 15, 2005 2:39 PM