

## The Presuppositionalist View of Man's Consciousness

The presuppositionalist literature says little of any substance about the nature of consciousness. But even the little that is found in this corpus of longwinded apologetic text is more than you will find in the bible itself. So when a mid-rank apologist makes explicit reference to the nature of man's consciousness, I'm always ready to lend an ear.

Gregg Strawbridge describes the conditions of man's consciousness in his so-called "unregenerate state":

Van Til makes these implications concerning this state of man's consciousness: (1) man sets himself to be judge (2) man denies God's control of the universe (3) man's thoughts and ideas are not "thinking God's thoughts after Him," but are claiming pure originality and truth in their interpretation of the external world (4) man views the external factual world as brute facts without their interpretation in God and thus, the universe is controlled by chance. The unregenerate consciousness is viewed as the abnormal state, biblically. All unregenerate reasoning reflects these implications. ([Defending the Lion: Presuppositionalism or a Classical Approach, Must We Choose?](#))

The most noteworthy thing I notice when reviewing statements like this is not in what it *says*, but in what it *doesn't* say. Strawbridge makes no reference - either in this passage or in the essay from which it is excerpted - about the nature of the relationship consciousness has to its objects. This is not surprising, for as I have already demonstrated in numerous papers (from my blog alone, see for instance [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)), the religious view of the world stands on the primacy of the subject in metaphysics, that is: on a basis of metaphysical subjectivism. And yet, no philosophical discussion of the nature of consciousness will be complete without some attention to the issue of metaphysical primacy.

Now let's look at what Strawbridge does say, point by point.

Strawbridge's first point is:

(1) man sets himself to be judge

A judge is someone capable of passing critical judgment. By "sets himself to be judge," I understand this to refer to man's *firsthand exercise of his own faculty of critical judgment*. The fact that judgment is an essential function of man's mind is inescapable. If man wants to live, he has no choice about his need to exercise his own judgment: he has to judge the things and people he encounters in life for himself, for his life depends on this. He needs to judge for himself his situation, his own decisions, the character of others, the claims of truth that others make, and the outcomes that affect his values. He needs to judge according to what he knows and according to his own hierarchy of values. There are no substitutes here, and no imaginary being can fulfill this need on behalf of those who are willing to sacrifice their own judgment. On a rational view of man, man's exercise of his own judgment is not only a good thing, it is one man's highest virtues. But according to the religious view of man, it is a symptom of his depravity and evidence of his inherent contemptuousness. But this kind of assessment of what rational philosophy considers to be one of man's crowning virtues is itself an implication of religion's internal incoherence. Indeed, it seems most illogical to create man with the ability to judge, and yet consider him defective for exercising that ability. According to Van Til's brand of presuppositional apologists, it is "abnormal" for man to judge things for himself. Why should we trust their judgment, when even according to their own terms it is self-negating?

Man's reliance on his own judgment bothers religionists because they want man to replace his judgment with theirs. They want man to sacrifice their judgment along with his spirit, his love for his own life, his desire to live and enjoy his existence on his own terms. Religionists do not approve of man's uncoerced exercise of his own faculty of judgment; they want man to seek their permission before doing so, and permission will be granted only so long as the religionists have a say on what inputs are factored into his judgments and what conclusions it will produce. This is all part of the desire that all men submit themselves to an alleged "higher authority" which the religionist concocts in his imagination and refers to by some name (Christians call it "God," Muslims call it "Alah," the Lahu tribesmen call it "Geusha," etc.).

Critical judgment is thus anathema to the religious mindset, and religious leaders know this and their fear is that it will spread if it is not suppressed. This is why they seek every opportunity they can get to undermine man's cognition; they want to pull the rug out from underneath all his judgments. They intend to dynamite all of a thinker's "presuppositions" - no matter what they might be, no matter what the cost, because the desired outcome is not

“the Truth” or “righteousness” or any other feigned piety, but simply more fish in the nets. An uncritical fish is always going to be easier to catch.

The religionists do not want any man to think that he can live his life according to his own terms, for this in and of itself poses a formidable threat to the authority they claim on behalf of their imaginary deity. Because of this, a thinking, judging mind is taken by the apologist as an affront to his religious program, so it comes as no surprise that apologists would want to cite man's use of his mind to judge things as a point of guilt against him. Man's "sin" - on the religious view that Strawbridge recites here - is that he thinks and judges on his own terms. The “ideal” which Christianity would have man adopt is that he become like an unthinking fish who, as believers were themselves, can be easily netted by their predatory techniques. A thinking, judging man is less likely to be bamboozled by schemes that are meant for unthinking fish, and preponderance of thinking, judging individuals in society would skew the intellectual marketplace against the religionists' program.

Strawbridge's second point is:

(2) man denies God's control of the universe

This is simply the believer's own point of view being projected as if it had significance beyond the constructs of Christian imagination. It doesn't, but it shows how narrow that point of view really is. For it could just as easily be said that man (at least some men, anyway) denies Allah's control of the universe, Osiris' control of the universe, Geusha's control of the universe, Blarko's control of the universe, etc., etc., etc. All of this can be said of the atheist to the very same degree that the Christian can say he denies the Christian god's control of the universe. A more accurate (and less impassioned) way of stating the point is to say that the atheist simply does not assume that any invisible magic being controls the universe. Whether the atheist recognizes it or not, this position is in keeping with the primacy of existence metaphysics, for it essentially holds that the universe exists independent of consciousness. This is the fundamental premise which Christianity denies; and denial of this fundamental premise is what is common to the varieties of religious belief that Christians would prefer to ignore, as we saw above.

The thesis that “man denies God's control of the universe” of course suggests that the assumption that some invisible supernatural being *does* control the universe is self-evident in some way, or at least unmistakable. It takes the god premise totally for granted without explaining why. But from the perspective of rational philosophy, that is the question which the theist will never be able to answer: Why would an honest man affirm that an invisible supernatural being does "control... the universe" in the first place? Why would an honest man assume the [cartoon universe premise](#) when it's obvious that the universe is not analogous to a cartoon?

Strawbridge's third point is:

(3) man's thoughts and ideas are not "thinking God's thoughts after Him," but are claiming pure originality and truth in their interpretation of the external world.

Like the prior two points, this point is essentially a misdirected complaint. If the believer truly believes that there is a god and that this god created the universe and every man within it, then logically all deficiencies trace back to this creator. It does no good to tell man that he was created by an omnipotent, all-knowing deity according to an “eternal plan,” and then rail against him for not conforming to the believer's conception of that plan.

As the believer seeks to manufacture guilt on the part of outsiders in order to deaden his conscience to the pangs resulting from adopting such a deeply contorted worldview, he now construes the outsider's very use of his own mind as a symptom of antithesis to the god he imagines. And in an ironic sense that he does not anticipate, the believer is right: the rational man does think with his own mind. In actuality, man has no choice about the facts that the thoughts he thinks are his own - for cognition is a firsthand faculty of the self, and that he lacks the ability to read other minds - as if he could magically access their contents. Christianity thus holds man guilty for adhering to facts which he cannot change.

But it is not the case - and the theologians routinely fail to produce any argument in support of their distortions - that the thinking man claims that his every thought is originally his. A rational man is happy to accept those ideas which he determines to be true and relevant to his overall self-interest from others. This is most obvious in the case of learning directly from another individual, such as from a co-worker at a new job.

It's silly for the apologist to assert that a thinker claims “pure originality” on behalf of his thoughts, simply because he does not believe in some invisible magic being. It is silly accusations such as this which apologists cling to in order to make their task of discrediting non-believers all the easier. But convenience is no standard when it comes

to discerning what is true.

Strawbridge's final point is:

(4) man views the external factual world as brute facts without their interpretation in God and thus, the universe is controlled by chance.

A rational worldview affirms the *objective theory of facts*, which teaches that facts are data belonging to the reality which obtain independent of conscious actions. This theory is in direct compliance with the metaphysical primacy of existence, which holds that the objects of consciousness exist and are what they are independent of consciousness. Facts are something which consciousness discovers, not creates or dictates. The alternative to this view is some form of subjectivism (see for instance [Theism and Subjective Metaphysics](#)), which essentially reverses the relationship between consciousness and its objects that the objective theory of facts assumes. It is by nature necessarily invalid by any objective measure.

The objectivity of facts is so consistently attested by our every experience that it could only be a form of wishful thinking to suppose that facts conform to anyone's conscious actions. It is something that is so obviously true that we take it for granted, and many philosophers seem to find it degrading when it is pointed out to them. And yet it is not only true, but also fundamental. Who walks along a road and expects its course to change according to his shifting preferences? Should one truly believe that reality will rearrange itself and conform its particulars to what he believes, wishes, yearns for, fears or imagines?

So why even suppose that the universe is controlled by some central force (e.g., "chance," Geusha, the Christian god, *Star Wars*' "the Force," etc.) in the first place? Christians naturally assume this as part of their worldview's teachings, because their worldview assumes the primacy of consciousness metaphysics as its most fundamental premise. Apologists do not validate this premise, for they cannot. In fact, defenders of theism seem conspicuously unaware of the issue of metaphysical primacy, until of course it is brought to their attention. But even then, they have no uniform response to it, which is precisely what we would expect from those who adopt a worldview premised on the primacy of consciousness.

But notice the false dichotomy implicit in point (4): either the universe is controlled by the Christian god, or by "chance." To understand this dichotomy better, we need to know what the presuppositionalists mean by "chance." John Frame defines 'chance' as

events that occur without cause or reason. ([A Van Til Glossary](#))

How does the absence of the assumption that the Christian god is controlling everything imply adherence to the view that "events... occur without cause or reason"? This is never explained. In fact, the presuppositional apologist seems completely unable to give any reason why the only alternative to the presumption of divine supervision of the universe's "internal affairs" must be that "events... occur without cause or reason." Snow melting on a mountainside is not something that "occur[s] without cause or reason" - it occurs because the sun warms the snow to its melting point; and yet the theist gives no reason why we should suppose that an invisible supernatural being brings this about. Such false dichotomies themselves are not arguments, but they are often used in place of arguments in order to pummel non-believers into submission. After all, who would want to take the position that the events which occur in the universe, "occur without cause or reason"? The false dichotomy is asserted by the apologist in the hopes that its insidious premises will be accepted without question. Fortunately, the objective theory of facts means we can dismiss such false dichotomies without further ado. (See my blog [Presuppositionalism vs. Causality](#))

If man is not supposed to exercise his own faculty of judgment, assume the non-cartoon universe of atheism, use his own mind, and apply the objective theory of facts, what's the ideal? Strawbridge describes Christianity's preferred alternative as follows:

Regenerate Consciousness--This is the renewed state of believers in which the mind, will, and emotions seek submission under their Creator. The intellect no longer assumes the ultimate place, but seeks revelation that it might be brought to total submission.

That explains a lot, for I do not know Christians for their intellect. Rather, I know them for their lust for sacrifice, specifically for impaling their intellect on the dull points of their dogma.

by Dawson Bethrick

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