

Text used for a talk given to the AAFSA on September 26, 2006  
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## **Atheism, Reason, and Morality: Responding to Some Popular Christian Apologetics**

### 0. Introductory remarks

At a talk last year to the Undergraduate Philosophy Society I was asked a question about responding to "presuppositionalist" advocates; this threw me for a loop, as I didn't know who these people were. After some investigation, it became clear that there is a position quite popular online but mostly invisible in the academy, one that is quite vocal and confident. What is distinctive about the position is both the combination of great confidence and a distinctive claim to the effect that any position other than Christianity somehow undermines itself and is entirely irrational.

For example: Paul Manata (a Christian apparently of this group) and Dan Barker (an atheist) held a live debate this last summer on the question: "Which is more rational, Christianity or atheism?"<sup>1</sup> Manata started off by saying not only that Christian belief is more rational, but that it is the *only* rational view -- that it is not possible to be rational and an atheist.

To my disappointment, Barker did a terrible job defending atheism; indeed, I couldn't bear to listen to the entire thing, quitting perhaps  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the way through. The debate made it clear that presuppositionalists can be effective in throwing advocates of atheism off balance, leaving them disoriented and at apparently a terrible disadvantage in responding. Perhaps Barker's generally not too good at debate; I don't know. But it's worth looking at the presuppositionalist arguments and trying to offer some advice on dealing with their challenges.

I don't mean to suggest by this that I think any of their arguments are good or persuasive, but I do think that they can be confusing, and if one is not cognizant of their general strategies and positions, it could be very difficult to know how to handle oneself. There are three things I want to do in this talk. First, I want to get a fair characterization of the presuppositionalist position on the table; second, I want to consider what appropriate atheistic responses there are; and third, I want to make some practical suggestions about dealing with such advocates.

### THE PRESUPPOSITIONALIST POSITION

Caution: While I think my attempted characterization here is relatively accurate, I've hardly devoted enormous time to making a study of the presuppositionalist position. There are some differences in positions held by Christians associated with the presuppositionalist label, and some of these might be interesting or important. So what I offer is surely oversimplified in various respects, but I expect it is still true to what most of these advocates hold and how they want to argue.

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<sup>1</sup> The debate was held on July 6, 2006, and you can find the audio file at [podcast.unchainedradio.com](http://podcast.unchainedradio.com).

## 1. Two key psychological claims

Key to the presuppositionalist position are two psychological claims about believers and unbelievers. I'll use "unbeliever" here as a blanket term for anyone who fails to believe that God exists, including those who believe that there is no God and those who simply don't believe either way.

The first claim: So-called unbelievers in fact already know that God exists. Their declarations to the contrary simply manifest a kind of willful self-deception and sin.

The second claim: This knowledge manifests itself in various things the unbeliever does and says. So, for instance, when the unbeliever reasons or makes moral judgments, he betrays this implicit knowledge. He in fact constantly, without acknowledgement, "presupposes" this knowledge. Hence the name "Presuppositionalism."

## 2. How the presuppositionalist sees his task in engaging with us

By "us" I mean unbelievers in general.

The first psychological claim is important as it makes a big difference in how presuppositionalists approach unbelievers. Suppose you think that someone already knows that P and refuses to admit it; in that case you're certainly more likely to treat him with disrespect or anger. Indeed, the temptation to treat him with scorn or abuse will be greater yet if you think the refusal to admit that P is due to some kind of immoral motivation. (Imagine how angry you might get at the corporate driven scientists who insists that, say, nicotine is not really addictive.)

On the presuppositionalist view, we already know that God exists; as a result, as they see their job, it is not so much as to offer an argument. After all, if we already know this claim to be true, we don't need an argument. Rather, they see their job as getting us to admit what we already know. Their goal is more akin to using torture to extract a confession than it is to offer a rationally persuasive argument.

This encourages very obnoxious sorts of exchanges, even name-calling. One extraordinarily confident presuppositionalist online, Vincent Cheung (of "Reformation Ministries International"), manifests this tendency quite plainly. He even has a document entitled "Professional Morons" that starts off as follows:

According to Scripture, all non-Christians are morons. Even some professing Christians resent such a blunt and negative characterization of God's enemies, and so they disown and criticize me for speaking this way. However, as hard as they try to portray this as something that I have taken upon myself to assert, I am merely repeating what Scripture teaches.<sup>2</sup>

Now, in pointing out how this psychological claim can motivate this sort of stance I don't mean to excuse Cheung for being so uncivil. I expect, frankly, that he like the presuppositionalist position to a large degree because it helps him rationalize such name calling, that he enjoys being in a position where he

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<sup>2</sup> You can find this article at the Reformed Ministries International website at [www.rmiweb.org](http://www.rmiweb.org).

feels he has a justification for saying such things. My point is just that the background theology in fact encourages this sort of attitude and makes civil and productive conversations more unlikely. I also expect that this fact -- that the position encourages seeing others as willful "morons" -- helps explain the popularity of presuppositionalism online. After all, in the online world, relative anonymity encourages a lack of inhibition, and if one gets to berate others as morons and feel superior online, that makes for a very attractive package.

In any case, it's important to understand how your opponents see you; if you don't, you can hardly hope to say something persuasive to them.

It's worth noting, too, that the presuppositionalist view of unbelievers helps explain why the actual arguments they do offer are in fact as bad as they are. They don't really see argumentation as the main point, as they're just trying to get you to agree to what you already know.

### 3. Standards and the analogy with the paranoid

In the presuppositionalist view of unbelievers, our problem is that we insist on employing our own "human criteria" or standards in reasoning, which criteria are not adequate to the truth. So we can't trust our own reasoning. They're very keen on emphasizing how far apart a believer and unbeliever are in terms of global commitments or background supposition. This view is supposed to fit with their view that we (unbelievers) still, nonetheless, presuppose the truth (about God, at least) in our reasoning. How do these two views fit together? How can we both be constantly employing nothing but our depraved human standards and yet still constantly presuppose the truth about God? I suppose that the idea is this: we *can't help* but presuppose the truth about God, but what we *consciously* employ in our reasoning are mere human standards, the bad or corrupt ways of interpreting the world.

John Frame, who seems to be one of the more civil and temperate defenders of presuppositionalism, offers the following analogy:

Imagine a student so blindly paranoid that he thinks all his professors are out to kill him. He resists evidence to the contrary, twisting it so that it reinforces his presupposition. You remind him of Professor A who treated the student kindly. The student replies, "Professor A was only trying to gain my confidence so that it would be easier for him to murder me. In fact, why would Professor A have been so kind, if he did not have such a nefarious motive? Professor A's kindness proves his murderous intent!" Imagine that the student consistently employs such reasoning.

Obviously, the student has an erroneous world view which has deeply affected his powers of reason. His very criteria of truth and rationality are distorted. He will not believe anything that disagrees with his presupposition that the professors are out to kill him. Thus his reasoning is circular in the sense defined earlier. He has a distinctive concept of rationality, by which he tests all arguments, all evidence. Since most of us do not accept this system, we are outside of his circle and he is outside of ours. How, then, do we communicate? What kind of argument can we bring against him?

Well, what do we normally do in such situations? Surely we do not accept *his* system, *his* criterion of truth, and argue on the basis of that! To do

so would simply reinforce his conclusion. Nor do we try to find some "neutral ground," some criterion which is favorable neither to his presupposition nor to ours; for there is no such neutral ground. One must either presuppose that all professors are trying to kill the student, or one must reject that presupposition. What we do, and what we should do, is simply to argue on the basis of *our own* standard of truth. How can that be persuasive to the paranoid? Well, perhaps it won't be. But we argue in the hope that at some level of his consciousness he is still in touch with reality. And we hope, indeed pray, that if we press that reality upon him sharply enough, that reality might penetrate his system, rebuking his distortions, redirecting his perverted mind. That hope may be slender, but it is the only hope we have. And sometimes that hope is rewarded. For indeed, paranoids do sometimes emerge from their paranoia. Sometimes they are persuaded. In such cases the argument is circular, but persuasive nonetheless.<sup>3</sup>

This is how the presuppositionalist sees us: as using completely out-of-whack background ideas about the world and sticking to them resolutely. On the one hand, the presuppositionalist thinks that the unbeliever indeed uses standards of reasoning that presuppose God's existence, but they also think that there is no common ground between the believer and unbeliever. This apparent conflict can only be reconciled, I take it, by holding that so far as our *consciously* used standards go, there is no common ground between believer and unbeliever, but that there is common ground when we focus on the allegedly used unconscious standards. So we unconsciously presuppose God's existence and certain standards, and that is a kind of common ground; but if we don't consciously acknowledge those standards, they can't appeal to those in dialogue with us.

So the picture is this: The standards of reasoning and morality that are unconsciously used are common ground, but those consciously used are not. What Frame advises is that Christians not try to appeal to consciously used standards - except in a *negative* way. The negative way is crucial: use the consciously accepted standards to show that the unbeliever's view is incoherent or self-defeating somehow. Then the hope is that by a non-rational process the unconsciously accepted standards will become conscious, via God's grace or the like.

The presuppositionalist picture, then, has an internal logic to it; it should not be dismissed as simply crazy. If we understand that logic, we are better placed to deal with it.

#### 4. What allegedly depends on God: logic, induction, morality

The negative arguments that the presuppositionalist wants to give focus on logic, induction and morality: their claim is that if the unbeliever uses any of those, he or she is relying on something that presupposes God's existence.

Incidentally, I divide these into three, not two. Sometimes the first two are run together as both being "logic" - but I distinguish the question about knowing that certain a priori truths (tautologies, mathematical truths) are true from believing that it's reasonable to use induction.

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<sup>3</sup> See his "Presuppositional Apologetics: An Introduction," at [www.thirdmill.org/files/english/html/pt/PT.h.Frame.Presupp.Apol.1.html](http://www.thirdmill.org/files/english/html/pt/PT.h.Frame.Presupp.Apol.1.html).

What is the relevant sense of "depend" here? Beware one path the presuppositionalist might take. Suppose that theism is true. In that case, it might be that everything depends on God in the way the presuppositionalist says they do, just because God has power to do anything (I ignore here questions about any limits on God's power). If this is the sort of "depend" in question, however, it's of no use in an argument for thinking God exists. That's rather a sense of dependence that follows *if* God exists, but it's not a sense that helps us get "Logic exists; hence God exists" or the like.

What the presuppositionalist wants to say is, rather, that these things depend on God in the sense that they cannot exist unless God exists, or that they cannot be "made sense of" or understood in some appropriate way if God doesn't exist. So let's turn to these claims.

#### RESPONDING TO PRESUPPOSITIONALISM 1: GENERAL POINTS

##### 5. An argument from incoherence and elimination

Insofar as there is a presuppositionalist argument for Christian belief, it can be understood this way. First, for every set of beliefs contrary to Christian belief, that set is incoherent or otherwise problematic. Second, the only remaining belief system must be correct.

One obvious difficulty with this style of argument is that it requires that *all* the options be eliminated, and given how many there are, this seems quite difficult. It is not enough to sum up the opposition as one simplistic kind of atheism and argue that *that* can't be right; all varieties thereof must be dealt with.

Another difficulty to bear in mind: this sort of argument only succeeds if the same kind of alleged incoherence does not threaten Christian belief as well. Suppose we eliminate the opposition, but the tools we used eliminate our own position; we then need to go back and rethink the techniques used. So, for instance, if the presuppositionalist argues that atheistic treatments of morality fail because of such and such an implication, he needs to ask himself whether or not his own treatment of morality has the same problematic implication.

##### 6. General points about presuppositions, circularity and standards

One point that comes up frequently in these exchanges with presuppositionalists is the status of assumptions or presuppositions. There really are two ways in which talk of presuppositions shows up in these exchanges that I can see. First: it's said that the atheist's use of logic, morality, &c presupposes theism. Here, the idea is that these things can only be understood if God exists. Second, and quite differently, it's said that the presuppositionalist theist presupposes such things as that the Bible is God's word, that God exists, that his experience of God is not illusory, and so on, and that this is okay.

The first point is relevant for the negative part of the presuppositionalist argument: trying to show that the competing positions are incoherent. The second point seems to cause some trouble in exchanges I've looked at; some opponents read the presuppositionalist person as saying that they can know things just *by* presupposing them. In fact, however, the presuppositionalist theists have a good point regarding foundational beliefs.

The point is just this: It seems that some beliefs are reasonable even without being supported by argument. We all, in fact, take beliefs formed by perceptual processes to be true, where we do this without having an argument for doing so. If you say that you have an argument for thinking that perception can be trusted, this argument will itself rely on premises; the question you face, then, is whether these premises are themselves you can defend by argument, or whether they are just taken for granted. Eventually you must, it seems, end up with some premises or ways of forming beliefs that you just take for granted.

If this is indeed inevitable -- taking some beliefs for granted without argument -- then a very nice question here is just: why some beliefs and not others? The presuppositionalist might claim that he takes for granted the belief that God exists, is the author of scripture, and so on; and he can say, quite reasonably, that he is merely doing what all the rest of us do when we take for granted that our senses are mostly accurate detectors of the external world and so on. So this is a fair point they make, and it's important not to try to respond to the presuppositionalist by insisting that you, in fact, never take anything for granted. If you make such a bold and unqualified claim, you're setting yourself up for a fall.

#### 7. Internal criticisms vs. external criticisms

The presuppositionalists in effect treat debates between believers and unbelievers the way a "coherentist" would. A "coherentist" is someone who thinks that the only way to evaluate a belief for its being reasonable is to see if it fits into an overall coherent framework of beliefs. This indeed seems the only option if we cannot agree on which beliefs ought to be taken for granted. If we did agree that certain beliefs are to be taken for granted, then we could evaluate a given belief by reference to whether or not it is appropriately supported by those beliefs that we can legitimately take for granted. But if there is no such agreement, all we can do is try to assess a particular system of beliefs on its own terms. If person A has a set of beliefs, where A thinks that such and such beliefs are to be taken for granted, we can ask whether A's overall set of beliefs is consistent with what A thinks should be taken for granted. (Perhaps A is wrong about what should be taken for granted, but it's very hard to argue about exactly what beliefs deserve such treatment.)

An "internal" criticism of someone's position is that which tries to base its criticisms on premises or standards already used by that person elsewhere in his overall system. So if we criticize A's beliefs we might criticize it by showing that what A already takes for granted as certain standards, A is not living up to his own standards. That would be an internal criticism. An "external" criticism is one that doesn't try to make any such contact with elements already in the system. The negative part of the presuppositionalist argument is in effect to show that every alternative belief system is subject to devastating internal criticisms.

An important point needs to be highlighted here. One can try to *foist* upon one's opponent certain commitments that they don't actually have, or that they can easily avoid, anyway. A nice example of this is found in the Manata/Barker debate I mentioned earlier. Manata pointed out that Barker makes this claim:

The only way to know anything is through scientific methods.

Manata points out that if this is true, then we can ask how it applies to itself. Do we know *this* claim? If so, then we must know it through scientific

methods. Yet it's hard to see how that can be right. If we don't know it, then it seems that by his own lights, his view is incoherent. This is a good criticism. What should Barker do in response? Simple: He should drop that sweeping claim about how we can know things. It's naive and implausible besides leading to such internal incoherence.

So this is one general bit of advice: Be very careful about grand, sweeping claims about how it is possible to know anything; they tend to be overly simple and subject to self-refutation.

Note how dropping this claim gets rid of the incoherence. I stress this because it seems that the presuppositionalist will be very likely to do this to you: They ask if you believe in laws of logic, in the reasonableness of induction, or in moral obligations, and they then ask you to give an account of these things. I can imagine them saying: "You have to have an account! Your account is presumably thus and such..." and then, after imputing this to you, pointing out some self-refutation.

If they demand that you offer an account, or a basis, don't just take the bait and start offering one. Instead, be very cautious in two ways. First, be cautious about what "basis" or "account" is supposed to mean. These terms tend to get people confused. (See below for more on this.) Second, be cautious in what positive declarations you make. You can always, of course, say that you are not committed to any particular "account" or "basis."

Indeed, you can always say that it's part of your view that no account or basis is needed. If they say that this is not fair, that of course you *have* to have an account, then you can say that this is an external criticism, not an internal one, and they are begging the question: they are relying on *their* presuppositions about what is needed. If they can demand that you give an account or basis or whatnot, then you can demand that they meet some demand of yours -- say, a demand that their claims about God be testable by empirical investigation. They won't like that.

#### 8. "Basis/account": justification vs. explanation

There are two importantly different senses of the terms "basis" and "account". If I ask you for a basis for your belief that (for example)  $15+16=31$ , one thing I might be asking for is a justification or argument for that belief. Why believe it's true? In response to this I might present to you the process by which I calculated the sum. The other thing I might be asking for is an explanation of its truth: why is it true? In response to this I might say that numbers have their relational properties essentially, perhaps; this question is harder to answer in the case in question.

In any case, the important point is that asking for a reason one ought to believe that something is true is not the same as asking for an explanation of why it is true. One could have good reason to believe something is true while still finding it mysterious *why* it's true. So, for instance, suppose my doctor calls me up one day and tells me, "Listen, I'm in a rush and I can't explain, but your student So-and-so is going to have a fit this afternoon, probably during your class, and when this happens you need to react immediately and call the paramedics." And then he hangs up. Now I have a good reason to believe this student will have a fit, but I have no idea why he will have a fit.

One could also have a good explanation for something's being true without having any good reason to believe it is true in the first place. So, for instance, suppose that I speculate that someone I know (but haven't seen in years) has just been murdered by her husband; I have no reason to believe this, it's just an idle speculation. Even so, I might be able to suggest a good explanation for it. If she's been murdered, one thing that could explain this is her husband's tendency to alcoholism and extreme jealousy.

So we have an important distinction here, and it's important, if you are asked "what is your basis for/account of X?" that you force the questioner to explain which of these he is asking for.

Notice that our discussion earlier of beliefs that we take for granted indicates that some beliefs might be reasonable without argument. So if my belief that my senses are mostly trustworthy is to be taken for granted, then, if someone insists on a basis for this, I can of course say, "there is no basis; this is one of the things I take for granted." (Again, there's a good question as to why some things should be taken for granted and others can't; that's a deep question that I don't want to try to tackle here.) In the same way there are truths that don't have any deeper explanation. So, perhaps the right answer to "why is it that  $15+16=31$ ?" is just "That's just the way it is; there's no further explanation." Just as it's hard to see how one could avoid taking some beliefs for granted, it's hard to see how one could avoid allowing that some facts are just primitive or unexplained in this fashion. The presuppositionalist has his own primitive fact, too, of course: the existence and nature of God. Nothing further explains why God exists or why he is the way he is, on their view. Maybe he can explain everything else, according to them; but nothing else explains him. So by their own lights they will accept that some things can be primitive in this way.

I stress this because it is in fact always open to you, if you are defending yourself against this negative strategy whereby they aim to show that all belief systems contrary to theirs are self-undermining or incoherent, you can take advantage of this option. If they say, "But what is your basis for logic?" (and if they mean "what explains why these things are true?"), you can always say, "They just are, and that's the end of the story. They can hardly complain that this move is never allowed, as they need to make it themselves, albeit with a different (alleged) truth.

## RESPONDING TO PRESUPPOSITIONALISM 2: LOGIC AND INDUCTION

### 9. The claim about logic: abstract entities and atheism

Here is a law of logic: any argument of the *modus ponens* form is valid. That is, any argument of this form

1. If P then Q.
  2. P.
- Hence, Q

is valid, that is, it is impossible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false. The presuppositionalist asks the atheist: How can you account for this?

If the atheist says that this is just a matter of *convention*, he is in for a rough ride. Or if he says that laws of logic are just things "in our minds," he



is also in for a rough ride. These are bad answers, and it is no wonder the presuppositionalist can attack them.

Here is an example of one presuppositionalist argument for thinking logic requires God.

Can the atheistic world view present a logical reason why its worldview can account for the abstract laws of logic? I think not. But, the Christian worldview can. The Christian worldview states that God is the author of truth, logic, physical laws, etc. Atheism maintains that physical laws are properties of matter, and that truth and logic are relative conventions (agreed upon principles). Is this logically defensible?<sup>4</sup>

Here it is assumed that the atheist must be a conventionalist. The person who wrote this actually does goes on to consider one other option. He or she writes:

If the atheist states that the laws of logic are derived through observing natural principles found in nature, then he is confusing the mind with the universe. We discover laws of physics by observing and analyzing the behavior of things around us. The laws of logic are not the result of observable behavior of object or actions.

Here, the author correctly notes that we seem to know logical laws *a priori*, just by thinking, as opposed to observing them with our senses. This is indeed an interesting fact. However, the fact that these two options don't look too good hardly constitutes an exhaustive examination of atheist alternatives.

Sometimes it seems that the main argument offered here is that logic requires the existence of abstract objects -- that is, things that exist but not in space or time. Suppose it does. That is still not theism, of course. An atheist could believe in the existence of things outside of space and time.

#### 10. What's wrong with Platonist atheism?

One thing that atheist can do is simply say that the laws of logic are unexplained, primitive facts in the world. They don't need any further explanation; they just are. What we might call "Platonist atheism" is just this sort of atheistic view.

This may be thought inconsistent with atheism if you think atheism requires a certain kind of materialism according to which everything that exists is in space and time. But there is no reason to insist an atheist be a materialist in this sense.

Of course, you might not like Platonist atheism. Maybe you'd like something more satisfying. But it's certainly available as an option. One could explore other explanations but hold out *this one is always what you can revert to if the other explanations fail*.

The presuppositionalist cannot complain that this is unacceptable, of course, since he has his own unexplained thing in his system, namely, God and his nature.

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<sup>4</sup> This is from [www.carm.org/atheism/logic.htm](http://www.carm.org/atheism/logic.htm).

## 11. The theistic "explanation" of logic

What is the theistic explanation of logic? If we look again at the document quoted above, that author writes:

The Christian theistic worldview **can** account for the laws of logic by stating that they come from God. God is transcendent; that is, He is beyond the material universe being its creator. God has originated the laws of logic because they are a reflection of His nature. Therefore, the laws of logic are absolute. They are absolute because there is an absolute God.

Note, incidentally, the constant use of "absolute." This is one of those terms philosophically naive people love to throw around. It's very, very unclear what it means. Sometimes it is used just for emphasis "Is this a table? Yes. Yes, absolutely!" Sometimes it is used to mean "unqualified", as in "absolutely no exceptions!" But neither of these fit the way it's used here, and I venture to say that it really doesn't mean anything clear at all.

In any case, note too what is said about God's originating logic. He did so "because they are a reflection of his nature." So his nature *includes the laws of logic*. This is hardly an explanation of the laws of logic; it's just putting them, so to speak, inside God. I'm reminded of a famous parody from Moliere ("The Imaginative Illness") in which a pill's ability to cause sleep is said to be explained by its dormitive virtue -- i.e., its sleep-causing power. In the same way, the explanation is merely pushed back: Logic is explained by God's nature, his, you know, logic-causing nature.

The presuppositionalist might say that the laws of logic can't be left unexplained, as there is only one thing that is suited to be left unexplained, namely, God. But this is, one might say, *their* presupposition, not ours. If they are trying for an internal critique, they can hardly insist on this claim.

## 12. The claim about induction: guarantees vs. rationality

"Induction" is, roughly, the process of generalizing from an observed sample of particulars. If we have observed many particular cases in which an F is followed by a G, and no cases in which it has not, we may conclude that all Fs are followed by Gs. The presuppositionalists sometimes argue (though not as often, from what I can gather) that it can only be reasonable to use induction if God exists. How on earth is this argument supposed to work?

One way it might be supposed to work is as follows. If God exists, he might have arranged things so that using induction will never lead us to false beliefs. If so, then using induction is perfectly safe. Right. Now, does that mean that it can only be reasonable to use induction if God exists? One worry here is that it's not clear that there couldn't be any other way to guarantee that using induction is perfectly safe. But suppose there isn't any other way to guarantee that using induction is perfectly safe. How is that a problem?

The implicit argument seems to be this: It's only reasonable to use induction if we have a guarantee that using induction will never, or almost never, lead to false conclusions. Further, the only way to have such a guarantee is to have God in the picture. Hence, it's only reasonable to use induction if you have God in the picture.

Even if the second premise -- that the only way to have such a guarantee is to have God in the picture -- is correct, the argument is not persuasive, as the first premise is not at all plausible. Why should we need a guarantee that induction will lead us to the truth all the time? Nobody thinks it really is guaranteed; it's widely recognized that using induction can indeed lead us to false beliefs if we are unlucky. But does the possibility of error mean using the procedure is unreasonable? Surely not.

Now, sometimes the presuppositionalist will argue that induction is problematic because there is no "basis" for it -- where he plainly means that there is no justification for it, no reason to believe using it will get us the truth, even most of the time. There is indeed a traditional philosophical question about how the use of induction can be justified. That traditional question can be seen as follows.

Why should we believe using induction will lead to the truth? It's not logically guaranteed. Do we have any justification at all? If we say "it's worked in the past," we are *presupposing* induction in justifying it. So that's supposed to be a problem.

It is, of course, an interesting fact if we cannot argue for the claim that induction will lead to the truth without presupposing that very claim. But it is, frankly, absurd for the presuppositionalist to complain about this presupposition when he, of course, admits doing the very same thing with his beliefs about God. If it's okay to take some beliefs for granted, then, of course, this belief -- that using induction is likely to get us to the truth -- may well be one we can take for granted. It is in any case hardly clear why that belief should be thought any less worthy of being taken for granted than, say, the belief that God exists!

This sort of argument -- from demanding a "basis" for induction -- should not be confused with a different, related argument for theism that is sometimes advanced. This related argument goes something like this: It is a striking fact that humans seem to be able to investigate the world and make progress in learning about it. How likely is it that we'd be able to do such a thing if there were no designer arranging things so we'd be successful in this way? It's an interesting argument. But notice that it is not a presuppositionalist argument in the form we're addressing, which says that it is simply impossible for induction to be rational if God does not exist. The present argument is of a piece with traditional theistic arguments that aim to make it *likely* that God exists, not to show that atheism is utterly irrational. (I'm not here addressing those arguments at all; some of those are quite intriguing and worth careful study -- in contrast to the presuppositionalist arguments.)

RESPONDING TO PRESUPPOSITIONALISM 3: MORALITY AND ATHEISM

### 13. Clearing the ground: crucial distinctions

The issues here are quite commonly brought up in discussions of theism; the idea is that morality is impossible without God. Here is how Paul Copan sets out his argument:

It is not unusual to hear, "Atheists can be good without God." Atheist Michael Martin argues that theists give the same reasons as atheists for condemning rape: it violates the victim's rights, damages society. What

Martin really means is that atheists can be good without believing in God, but they would not be good (have intrinsic worth, moral responsibility, etc.) without God. (Indeed, nothing would exist without him.) That is, because humans are made in God's image, they can know what is good even if they do not believe in God. Atheists and theists can affirm the same values, but theists can ground belief in human rights and dignity because we are all made in the image of a supremely valuable being.

Just think about it: *Intrinsically-valuable, thinking persons do not come from impersonal, non-conscious, unguided, valueless processes over time. A personal, self-aware, purposeful, good God provides the natural and necessary context for the existence of valuable, rights-bearing, morally-responsible human persons.* That is, personhood and morality are necessarily connected; moral values are rooted in personhood. Without God (a personal Being), no persons - and thus no moral values - would exist at all: *no personhood, no moral values.* Only if God exists can moral properties be realized.<sup>5</sup>

It's quite astonishing, frankly, that the above passes for his demonstration that morality requires theism. Before tackling this, let's clear some ground. For various reasons, discussion of ethics tends to get people very, very confused.

Let's start by drawing some distinctions:

- (1) What someone *in fact morally ought to do*
- (2) What someone *believes* he morally ought to do
- (3) What someone is *motivated to do*
- (4) What someone *actually does*

Talk of "relative morality" often confuses these four in a very bad way.

When a theist says that morality requires theism, which of these might he have in mind? Most likely he has either of two claims in mind. One concerns motivation; the other concerns moral facts:

- (a) If there is no God, there is no reason or motivation to be moral.
- (b) If there is no God, then there are no moral facts; that is, no one is ever actually morally obligated to do anything.

Unfortunately, many atheists -- at least of the layman sort -- tend to agree with (b), although this is often put in very confusing terms by talking about "relativism" and the lack of "absolutes." I think (b) is clearly false, but we'll have to talk about all of these. Before doing so, a few words more about "relativism" are in order.

#### 14. Avoiding confusion about "relativism"

If one keeps clear in one's mind the four categories above (beliefs, facts, behavior, motivation), that will help avoid confusion about these matters. If someone says that "morality differs from culture to culture," which one do they mean? Probably a combination of beliefs and behaviors. But when people start to theorize about morality, they tend to focus on the facts about what people

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<sup>5</sup> This is from his short article "The Moral Argument for God's Existence" that can be found at [www.4truth.net/site/apps/nl/content3.asp?c=hiKXLbPNLrF&b=778665&ct=1264233](http://www.4truth.net/site/apps/nl/content3.asp?c=hiKXLbPNLrF&b=778665&ct=1264233).

really ought to do and get that mixed up with facts about how people behave or what they believe.

A key source of confusion here is the way the word "for" gets used, as when someone says that something is right "for X" but not "for Y", and so on. Sometimes "for" just means "according to." Sometimes it means "applies to." Perhaps this example will help make the distinction easier to remember. Consider legal rules. We might say it is illegal *for Joe* to run a red light, but not illegal *for a policeman* in pursuit of a criminal. This is the "for" of "applies to." The law has an exception for those kinds of cases. The other use of "for" wouldn't make any sense here, as it would mean that Joe *thinks* that it's illegal, while the cop *thinks* it's legal. That is not at all what was meant earlier when we said it was illegal for Joe but legal for the cop.

Very often, the big problem in talk about "relative morality" is that people go from the latter (using "for" to indicate what someone believes) to the former (using it to indicate the application of the rule). So, they might think: "According to A, doing X is morally okay; so, for A, doing X is morally okay; so, it's okay for A to do X; that is, there's nothing wrong if A does X." This is very confused, of course. The fact that someone thinks that something is morally okay does not imply that it is okay for anyone, including them, to do that thing.

The confusion here is made worse -- aided and abetted! -- by the fact that if someone really does believe it's morally okay to do X, and does it, we may say that since A was following his conscience, A was "doing the right thing." But that's a bad expression of what we're trying to get at. A better way to put it is to say that A was sincerely trying to do the right thing, even though he didn't; we then might say that he is not as much to blame, perhaps, but he still in fact did the thing he ought not to have done.

#### 15. Morality and motivation

With that out of the way, let's turn to the claims about theism and morality. The claim about motivation seems to depend on the claim that nobody has any reason to behave morally unless they can be rewarded for it. Perhaps the presuppositionalist who advances this argument thinks that no one can be motivated to be moral unless they believe God exists and will reward those who do good. But it is just false to say that nobody has any reason to behave morally unless they can expect a reward for it. Doing good can be its own reward. Now, of course, you might be suspicious of any particular claim that someone did something just to do the right thing, without any expectation of a reward. But while there are suspicious cases, I think it's just overwhelmingly plausible that people do, at least sometimes, in fact try to do the right thing for no other reason than that they want to do the right thing.

Now the presuppositionalist might assume that an atheist is bound to believe that all people are pure egoists, only interested in themselves. But of course it's not part of atheism itself to make that claim. If the presuppositionalist is trying for an internal critique, he can't foist this claim on us. And we shouldn't make it anyway, as it seems implausible. Yes, people are often self-interested and don't behave very morally; but that's hardly the same as saying that people are only ever self-interested and have no motivation at all to do the right thing.

It might be thought that atheism requires an evolutionary story, which in turn requires that only selfishness is selected for. But this is obviously not mandatory. Evolution doesn't require that every state be selected for; and it's clear that it could be adaptive to develop altruistic tendencies. (Notice I am *not* saying that evolution provides a "basis for morality" in the sense that it explains why certain things are in fact morally obligatory or wrong or the like, only that it could explain why people have certain desires or inclinations.)

#### 16. Atheism and the specialness of humans

Let's go back to what Copan says in the text quoted above. He writes that "personhood and morality are necessarily connected" and declares emphatically that "*Intrinsically-valuable, thinking persons do not come from impersonal, non-conscious, unguided, valueless processes over time.*"

If he's right, then of course there is a problem in combining the claims that people are intrinsically valuable and that they originated from non-conscious, unguided processes. But why on earth should we believe this claim? It is tempting just to reply to Copan by saying, Well, sorry -- thinking persons do in fact come from impersonal processes of these sorts. Where we came from doesn't affect how valuable we are, after all. If a living, breathing baby with sensations and fears and hungers and all the rest happened to coalesce by amazing coincidence by pure chance out of a chemical swamp, would we say that it is not morally valuable because of its origin? I hope not. That's about as morally plausible as saying that someone who was born from a working class family is not as valuable as someone born from royalty.

Copan could, of course, insist that we are wrong about this, that it's impossible for something valuable to arise in this way; but remember again the difference between internal and external critiques. The presuppositionalist is claiming to offer an internal critique of all competing views. If our view does not acknowledge the claim that we can't get something valuable out of such a process, then the internal critique has no bite. He can offer external critiques as vocally as he wishes, but then we can reject those claims quite reasonably and not worry about them.

Perhaps the idea behind Copan's comments is that if atheism is true then, it seems, humans do not have these special things called "souls". And that, perhaps, is the source of the thought. If humans don't have *souls*, they aren't sufficiently special for there to be moral principles applying to them.

In the Manata/Barker debate cited earlier, Manata at one point claims that Barker cannot explain why it is immoral to eat people but moral to eat broccoli, since both people and broccoli are part of nature, and no one part of nature is more special than any other part. This is the sort of thought that can lead one to think we need theism if people are to be special in a way that is needed for there to be moral facts about what they ought to do.

The response here is quite simple. If we say that there are no souls, that is not, of course, saying that there is nothing at all distinctive about humans. There are, of course, various features that differentiate humans from other things in the world, and some of those features may be quite significant. Being self-aware is one such feature. The implication of atheism, however, is that one cannot cite "having a soul" -- understood in the theological sense as a nonphysical substance created by God to be the bearer of personality and moral significance -- as the thing that makes for specialness. One can still point to

special features, but the point is that one cannot use the "soul" as a shortcut to specialness.

To illustrate: suppose we say that being self-aware is indeed a very special and morally significant feature. Now, this leaves open the possibility that we might discover that some humans entirely lack such self-awareness, or that some non-human animals have such self-awareness. Then we have to allow that some humans lack such specialness and some non-humans have such specialness. A theist may want to resist by saying that there's still a difference in that humans have *souls* while no animal does. That's the move that's blocked for the atheist, of course. The atheist can still hold that there is much that is special about typical human beings and so on. (I don't endorse the view that being self-aware is the thing that is so special; I'm using it just for illustration purposes here.)

Of course there are various differences and they matter in various ways. What the atheist loses is the quick fix, the quick assurance of specialness; he loses the sense of unconditional specialness -- a human is special *no matter what* is true of him in other terms. A "soul" is designed to do exactly that -- to be the thing that makes X special regardless of what else is true of X -- whether X be mindless, unreflective, lacking phenomenal experience, or whatnot.

In short, saying that humans don't have souls is not the same as saying that there is no difference whatsoever between humans and other things. Those other differences can still be relevant to morality.

#### 17. Atheism, materialism, and "reductionism"

One common line of thought is that if atheism is true, then we have to take a "reductive" view of humans, holding that a person is nothing but a collection of atoms in formation, and this, allegedly, causes some sort of trouble for seeing humans as morally significant. "If you're just a bunch of matter," we are asked, "why should you have rights while a pile of dirt here doesn't?"

This of course is again insisting that if there isn't a difference of *one* sort, there's no difference that's relevant at all, and that's just a confused line of argument. I differ from the pile of dirt in many ways! The only difference I can't point to, as an atheist, is to say that I have a divinely-created soul and the dirt doesn't.

Further, there is no requirement on an atheist to be a materialist in this "made entirely of matter" sense. An atheist *can* be a dualist; that is, he can hold that there are nonphysical minds, or at least special mental features that arise when conditions are right, as a result of the laws of nature. I myself think that minds are ultimately physical, but if I were faced with the choice of giving up either that view or my atheism, I think it's obvious that my disbelief in God is better grounded than my belief in materialism.

#### 18. The problem of evil and moral facts

One particular way in which the issue about morality comes into play here is this: the problem of evil is a popular argument for atheism. Presuppositionalist theists tend to say that this can't be a good argument, since the existence of evil itself requires God to exist, since there are no moral facts without God. I've just argued that this is false. But suppose that they are actually right about this. Suppose, that is, that if God doesn't exist

there are no facts about what is morally right or wrong to do. One can *still* use the problem of evil argument.

The argument can be formulated *conditionally*, like so:

1. Either there are moral facts, or there aren't.
  2. If there are moral facts, then evil exists.
  3. If evil exists, then God doesn't exist.
  4. Hence, if there are moral facts, then God doesn't exist.
  5. If there *aren't* moral facts, then God doesn't exist.
- Hence, either there are moral facts, in which case God doesn't exist; or there aren't moral facts, in which case God doesn't exist. Either way, God doesn't exist.

I hasten to add that premise 3 above abbreviates the usual argument from the problem of evil, which argument needs much more careful handling than I can give it here. But my point is that you don't even have to accept that there really are moral facts to run the argument. I do think there are moral facts, but even if you don't, you could give this sort of argument for atheism.

Premise 5 I take to be plausible for the following reason. If there are no moral facts, then it can't be that God is morally good -- because there are no facts about what is morally good. But if God is not morally good, then, I daresay, he isn't "God" after all. No theist wants to believe in a "God" that can't even be said to be morally good.

#### 19. Morality and the Euthyphro challenge

A related issue here is the famous Euthyphro challenge: Is it morally wrong to do X because God forbids doing X, or vice versa? If God explains it, then it seems that it's variable, depending on God's whims.

Note what was said about logic before and the unhelpful explanation, that is, when the theist says that God created logic "because they are a reflection of His nature." The presuppositionalist will likely give a similar response to the Euthyphro dilemma. He may say, "Look, God doesn't command or forbid things arbitrarily. He commands us not to do certain things out of his nature -- his, you know, moral nature." Again, we have no real explanation; it is like the "dormitive virtue" explanation.

Think of the conception of God as having things built into it: God is understood as having a certain nature, where this is itself made out of other things -- certain laws of logic and morality, for instance. But then we're just appealing to those as basic anyway. We're just, so to speak, building God out of logic and morality, not having an independent idea of God out of which we can explain in some interesting way logic and morality.

Note how Copan describes what the theist can say about morality. He writes:

Atheists and theists can affirm the same values, but theists can ground belief in human rights and dignity because we are all made in the image of a supremely valuable being.

He appeals here to the idea of a *supremely valuable being* -- God. So it's part of the explanatory fact that it is *already* a valuable thing, a morally valuable thing. So we're explaining why one thing has moral value by appealing to



*another thing that has moral value.* How is this progress? It's not. It is not explaining morality in terms of something else. It's in effect treating morality as primitive. Well, that's fine; treat it as primitive, as without needing explanation. That can be done without bringing God into the picture at all.

## PRACTICAL STRATEGIES

### 20. Modesty and tactics

Keep in mind that the presuppositionalist wants to trip you up in the sense of showing that you contradict yourself or are committed to things that are incoherent. It's not surprising that he can enjoy some success in the online world, because, frankly, he asks questions of a philosophical sort that are hard to answer; and if you feel forced to answer and venture to say something, you can easily become tripped up. Suggestion: don't be too *ambitious*. Instead of setting out ambitious but exploratory theses about the nature of logic and morality, simply be modest and refuse to overcommit yourself.

Think in terms of tactics. That is, keep in mind that the presuppositionalist is not approaching you with an eye towards reasoning together to get to the truth. He's admitted as much by saying that he sees you as deranged and in need of some kind of personal confrontation. He is not entering the discussion in good faith, as a co-investigator. (Van Til has an essay on this that is quite enjoyable, featuring Mr. White, Mr. Black and Mr. Gray, which makes it quite plain how they see such attempts. It's one of the few things I've read by the presuppositionalists that I found enjoyable.<sup>6</sup>) In an ordinary intellectual discussion among friends, it's fine to speculate on things, refining one's ideas as one goes along; but in this sort of encounter they will try to commit you to as much as they can, to force you off balance. So when I say "think in terms of tactics" I mean: keep focused on how your words will be used by the presuppositionalist. In effect, think of those famous Miranda warning words: "Anything you say can and will be used against you." Don't commit yourself to more than you need to in order to make your points.

Another way in which modesty is in order: It's tempting to invoke grand sounding concepts (e.g. "social construction" or "absolute laws" or whatever) without having any very good grasp of them. If your opponent's goal is to make you look foolish and confused, the last thing you want to do is to start employing terminology you're not entirely comfortable with.

### 21. Forced slowness

Regarding terminology, I recommend being aggressive in forcing your opponent to slow down and explain his questions as you go along. The presuppositionalist has little patience, I gather from what I've read. He sees himself as dealing with a fool, so he tries to rush in and "fix" him with a quick shock of amazing argument. Don't be afraid to say such things as:

"I'm afraid I don't even understand your claim here. Maybe it makes sense, maybe it doesn't, but I'm not going to try to argue about something where I can't even figure out the language you're using."

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<sup>6</sup> You can find it at [www.the-highway.com/defense\\_VanTil.html](http://www.the-highway.com/defense_VanTil.html).

If they mock you for this, you can always deflect it by saying:

"Well, you may think I'm stupid for not understanding what you're saying. I suspect that *you* may not understand what you're saying either, however. At least I'm trying to make sure that we're clear about certain terms of the debate. It seems rather foolish to charge ahead when things are so foggy. Slow down!"

You don't need to insist that every term be defined; but if there's a term that feels especially like technical jargon or dangerously obscure, be careful. Asking for examples is a good idea.

## 22. Drawing parallels: accepting certain things as primitive

If the presuppositionalist position is as I've described it, where they think it's okay to take certain things for granted, then you should keep in mind that you can make the very same move. Indeed, I think this is right; we all *do* take certain things for granted. So if they say they take God for granted and insist you give a "basis" for logic, you can say that you take logic for granted and insist that they give you a "basis" for God.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that you yourself *don't* take anything for granted, as this is almost surely false, and it leaves you very vulnerable. Admit that there are things you don't have settled or figured out or the like. Pretending to have all the answers will lead you to being too easily caught out in a difficulty, and then the presuppositionalist might think, "Aha, I have snared him in the inevitable incoherence of atheism!" when really he's merely caught you being incautious.

Keep in mind that while you might want to have more interesting and ambitious theories about, say, the nature of logic and morality, you can always say things like "While I'm inclined to think that the laws of logic can be explained by linguistic facts, I recognize there are problems here. If it turns out that the laws of logic are primitive and unexplained by anything else, then, *so be it.*"

They will strenuously resist you imposing certain demands on them (e.g. that they provide a certain kind of evidence for accepting the Bible as the Word of God, &c); they will insist that you're imposing views on them, about what is required, that they don't hold; and if you find that those views lead to trouble, that is no worry for them -- they just don't accept those views about what is required in the first place. Realize that you can resist things in just the same way. You don't have to accept that atheism leads to relativism, or that atheism implies that broccoli is exactly as valuable as humans, or that atheism requires that logic be conventional, &c. "Not in my system!" you can say.

Above all: remember that insofar as they have an argument, it is purely negative in character: trying to show that the atheist is committed to some incoherent view. This gives you *enormous* resources for responding. All you have to do is point out that you can be minimal in your commitments and not be incoherent. You can say that lots of things are primitive and unexplained and that they've hardly shown that you can't consistently say such things.

AFTERWORD: DEFENSE VS. OFFENSE

A final thought on these matters. What I've discussed above is all about playing defense against the negative argument the presuppositionalist is likely to try to use against you. I've not said anything about how you could try to persuade the presuppositionalist theist that he is wrong, only about how you could try to show them they have no case for saying that you are irrational.

But what about that other project -- going on the offense? With many believers, I think this can be a fruitful pursuit, since many believers will in fact accept many claims that we also accept, and we can work from there. My impression of several of the presuppositionalist theists online, however, is that it is very unlikely to be fruitful to try to do this. If they take for granted not just the beliefs that God exists and is the author of scripture and so on, but nothing else, then we have nothing in common to work with by way of argument. So, for instance, if we say, "Well, you'll agree that pain in general is a bad thing," as a hoped for starting point of common agreement, we may get in response, "No, that's not found in the Bible." So it's not just that they include as taken-for-granted beliefs many things we don't, but they also (many, anyway) refuse to take anything else for granted. This may make it hard to persuade them, but that should not leave us worried. Just as the fact that there is no guarantee that induction will lead to the truth doesn't imply that induction can't be reasonable, the fact that there is no guaranteed way of persuading your opponents hardly implies that you're not reasonable in disbelieving their positions. In general, it's only sensible to engage in such debate if some common ground can indeed be found. I wouldn't recommend trying to browbeat them into acknowledging what they already know, that God doesn't exist, the way that they aim to do that with us. This is because, first, I don't believe they already know this; I don't think they are just being willfully self-deceptive. And second, even if they are in some cases deceiving themselves in such a way, I don't have any reason to believe that personal confrontation would have any positive effect. I have, after all, no faith that a God might in his grace enable them to see the truth.