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Wrangling worldviews

By Jared Berg
TECHNEWS WRITER

I applaud the authors of both of last week’s Opinion pieces for bringing up the important topic of differing worldviews and how these affect one’s approach to life. However, I disagree strongly with their analyses and conclusions and believe that the issue needs to be addressed further. As the articles are closely linked conceptually, and the Christian sentiments contained within virtually identical, I will treat them together as one thesis.

The authors’ definitions of “worldview” are fairly clear. A worldview is a set of beliefs that allows us to understand reality and guides our interactions with the external environment. With this definition they explain that a worldview is an interpretation of the real world, which objectively exists separate from what people may believe about it. This assumption is important to identify, as it implies that certain worldviews could be superior to others at capturing truth about reality. In contrast, postmodernist thought says that truth itself is relative and all worldviews are equally valid.

Why is this important? It is insightful to understand the philosophical context in which the previous articles stand. They both draw heavily on the tradition of Christian “presuppositional” apologetical technique. Instead of focusing on evidence for the claimed historicity of Biblical events or traditional arguments for the existence of a particular god, the presuppositional approach employs some of the language of postmodernism to aim directly at the foundations of knowledge. When asked to justify their religious beliefs, the Christian presuppositionalist usually describes how their worldview neatly integrates their theology with all other knowledge and answers the fundamental questions of life and existence. They then will challenge the ability of other worldviews to “account” for various things, including reason, science, morality, or nature. This move was made explicitly in one of the articles to which I am responding.

It was claimed that non-Christian worldviews are unable to explain why science is so successful at describing and understanding the natural world. Further, the Judeo-Christian conception of god was said to be central to the logic of science. These claims falter on both historical and philosophical grounds. Science, broadly defined, was invented by the ancient Greeks, who were pagans. The Scientific Revolution that followed centuries later, while certainly centered in Christian Europe and carried out largely by religious people, erupted during a revival of humanism and a rejection of traditional medieval thought. The success

of this revolution is found where it proposed natural laws and causes, not supernatural ones.

Declaring that other worldviews cannot account for the success of science is quite an extraordinary statement. While even a rudimentary discussion of alternative, secular theories of epistemology, ontology, and metaphysics is far beyond this article, suffice it to say that only certain Christians believe that Christianity is the lone “rational explanation.” Even if there were no competing systems, counting the failure of other worldviews to account for any particular fact as a point in favor of Christianity is logically fallacious. To quote one of the preceding articles, “If we are truly here as a result of random evolutionary processes, why is the law of gravity universally true?” The non sequitur contained in this question should be obvious to any attentive reader.

Additionally, it is not that clear to me ex-

“ Science, broadly defined, was invented by the ancient Greeks, who were pagans. ”

actly what characteristics of Christianity are specifically conducive to doing science. The Christian god has been described as an orderly lawgiver, but the purported behavior of this entity contradicts this portrait. The god of the Bible supernaturally intervenes in nature and history in ways inscrutable to scientific methods. The central event of Christianity, the resurrection of Jesus, is a miracle and therefore contrary to all scientific understanding. Simple deism, with a non-interventionist god who set the universe in motion, seems to provide the same foundation for scientific induction as Christianity. Why, at a minimum, is deism not just as rationally adequate as the Judeo-Christian worldview?

The strategy of presuppositionalism, whether intentional in this case or not, is to shift the burden of proof from the one making a specific religious faith claim to anyone who may challenge this claim. It also makes an end run around arguments or evidence that may be seen to conflict with certain religious beliefs. If a worldview is claimed to be all encompassing, than any apparent incongruities can be explained away in terms of the worldview itself. Simply put, this conception of a worldview makes it unfalsifiable, because any contrary fact can be dismissed as merely the artifact of observing from the vantage point of an opposing worldview.

Rejecting the existence of a neutral viewpoint or any objective common ground would be standard postmodernism, but Christian presuppositionalists hold other beliefs that seem to be in conflict with this relativism. At a minimum, a Christian usually believes that God exists, the Bible was inspired by Him, and that Jesus was the son of God and died for the sins of humanity. They believe these things both as part of their worldview and as objective facts. However, if a set of objective facts exists apart from worldviews, then some things are independent of subjective interpretation. These separate facts could serve as a common ground from which to evaluate how well a worldview corresponds to reality.

Here is a direct conflict between the idea of a worldview as a self-contained explanatory “bubble” and the logical structure of Christian presuppositionalism. If some objective facts exist, then these should be the basis for critiquing different worldviews. Therefore, Christianity is subject to criticism from people of opposing worldviews, and must justify its claims from the common ground of agreed factual information. Whether or not Christianity is an internally consistent worldview is irrelevant, what matters is how well it corresponds to objective facts about reality.

Determining just what these facts are returns us to the realms of philosophy and science, in which all can share. One is not justified in making “Christianity is true” a foundational, unassailable assumption of their worldview. It is also improper to equivocate and label all unproven statements as “faith” and “religiously held beliefs.” Induction, or even the existence of an external reality outside of our own minds, have not been logically proven. However, they are basic ideas that are pragmatically necessary to start understanding reality. They are not comparable to a complicated theological claim like “God is a Trinity” or other Christian doctrines. Such attempts at inverting reason by starting with conclusions and making them initial assumptions should be abandoned.

I propose that those with different worldviews continue in rational, evidence-based dialogue. They should find the common logical ground which they share and start from there. It is pointless and counterproductive to simply chalk up differences in belief exclusively to the existence of worldviews or subjectivity. Everyone should critically examine their own worldview and see how it corresponds to reality. Does it allow for new knowledge, evidence, and argument to alter beliefs, or is it dogmatic and inflexible? A worldview is not better than any other merely by containing true beliefs, but also by its ability to acquire additional true beliefs and expunge false ones.



Cartoon by Rob Bou-Saab (<http://rbousaab.blogspot.com/>)