

Removing the Rose-Colored Glass from Presuppositions¹

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When people walk into a traditionally designed church, their eyes are immediately drawn to the brightly colored rays from the ornate stained glass windows. Yet a person rarely thinks, “Look at the beauty of the silica and sodium carbonate.” Broken down into its components, these windows may be the result of a chemical reaction, but put together in an intricate design, they represent the beauty of the God of the Christian faith. By taking the individual pieces of glass and studying them, one cannot comprehend the beauty of the entire work of art. Only when the pieces are in their proper arrangement do people recognize the designer and reflect on the message of the art.

The stained glass window is an example of how religion and science can work together to glorify God, the designer of all life. Just as it would be erroneous to try to examine the parts without appreciating the stained glass designer or, perhaps worse, brush off the work of art with a bland comment of “It looks nice” and not appreciate the designer’s knowledge of the intricacies of his materials, humans can make the same errors with God and his creation. God has endowed humans with human reasoning and the ability to use science to grasp the intricacies of his nature as well as the faith to understand the purpose beyond the individual parts. It has only been a recent presupposition that science and religion are in conflict. Presuppositions have not only defined science but also the way that people view the church’s role in science. If these presuppositions are recognized by both scientists and theologians, they can see each other once again without the biases and

misunderstandings that have defined their relationship since the Enlightenment.

Christianity and science were thought to be completely compatible for some 300 years after the scientific revolution. Nancy Pearcey (2004, 156), a Francis A. Schaefer scholar, tells her readers in *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from its Cultural Captivity* that it was not until Charles Darwin published his theory of evolution that the idea of war, with religion and science as archenemies, came into modern thought. Previously, although secular trends were increasing, theologians had seen science as a way to appreciate God’s wisdom and complexity. Two thousand years ago, Paul told his fellow believers to rely on what they knew to be true from past experience and human reason. He wrote to the Thessalonians to “test everything” (1 Thess. 5:21). Even hundreds of years before Paul, the psalmist told his readers that the works of the Lord are pondered by all who delight in him (Ps. 111:2).

Accordingly, until the Enlightenment, people had a holistic view of the world. From the time when David wrote the psalms to the Greek philosophers of Paul’s day to medieval scholars, people held to the paradigm that studying nature was a way to understand the supernatural. Their presuppositions held that nature and God are real. God created an orderly nature whose laws could be directly understood by man. Man was able to use analogy, mathematics, cause and effect, and natural laws to understand the unknown and worship God. Interestingly, they believed that nature is intrinsically beautiful because the

Creator designed it, and that the simplest explanation is more likely to be true because perfection in the Creation would use fewer means rather than many in its operation (Occam's razor). However, despite beginning as a perfect Creation, the earth suffers and has flaws as a result of original sin.²

These assumptions summarized above would often be part of the mindset of early 16-century European scholars whether a particular individual was a Christian or not. They were held well into the 18 century, imbedded in the very woodwork of European scholarly endeavor.

Do failed presuppositions lead to a failed God?

Not many know that the Lutheran astronomer Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) spent much of his life trying to figure out how God had designed the solar system. He accepted the Copernican Sun-centered system on the basis of simplicity and beauty: the old epicycles in the Earth-centered system worked but were clumsy. Now Sun-centered, he was fascinated by a possible divine design in the spacing of the planets. Kepler wrote, "But if God allotted motions to the spheres to correspond with their distances [from the Sun], similarly He made the distances themselves correspond with something" (p. 63). So it was rational to Kepler that the "something" used to space out the planets would be the revered "perfect solids" of mathematics. He assigned one to each orbit complete with commentary on why God would use a particular one in each place. He was, in his words, "thinking God's thoughts after Him" as he built his invisible framework for the solar system.

In the process he thickened the spheres to allow for the elliptical shapes of the orbits. Ironically, he is remembered today for this passing discovery of the elliptical orbit and not for his model of the planetary spacing. He would be surprised, for his model had successfully explained why exactly six planets existed and how their spacing was determined.

Kepler's theory was convincing until more planets were discovered after his death. Only five perfect solids existed, so to extend Kepler's model was impossible. For Kepler, it was a convincing fit for the data, and it is easy to see why he believed that the observational evidence supported his theory. Most importantly, his reasoning gives us insight into the powerful effects of presuppositions.

For example, Kepler's worldview included the presuppositions that God would use mathematical relationships and that the structure would be aesthetically pleasing. He trusted that God's basic style repeats itself. Kepler stated, "The mathematical things are the causes of the physical because God from the beginning of time carried within Himself in simple and divine abstraction the mathematical objects as prototypes for the materially planned quantities" (Livio 2002, 147).

As another example, Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778), a devout Lutheran, spent much of his career attempting to determine the original biblical "kinds" created by God. He proceeded to classify the plants and animals inventing a system that grouped creatures called binomial nomenclature. Initially, Linnaeus wanted each species he identified to represent a biblical "kind." Like Kepler, he tried to discern the patterns in the mind of God during Creation. He also stated that he wished to undo the confusion of tongues that occurred at Babel and create a universal language for classification. While he produced a universal system of classification that has lasted to this day, he realized that he had failed to find the "kinds" (Koerner 1999, 24-25).

In contrast to Kepler and Linnaeus, Isaac Newton (1642-1727) did not connect the usual spiritual presuppositions to his experimentation. By doing this, he set a major precedent on how to keep invariable religion in union with variable science. Newton used analogy to explain the behavior of light by using waves, and connected observed gravitational force on Earth to orbits of the moon and planets, but he refused to mix in

any religious thoughts about God's design. He stated, "I make no hypotheses," meaning that he had explained the laws, but that he would not make metaphysical speculations like Kepler, Linnaeus, and others had done. In the *Optics*, he declared that natural philosophy is the study of Earth's phenomena without hypotheses, and to deduce cause from effect. He did add, however, that philosophers will eventually "come to the very first Cause, which certainly is not mechanical."

With the last part of the statement, Newton indicated a belief in divine design, but he may not have been optimistic about science's ability to discover immaterial substances. The question of what gravity actually is seemed unapproachable to him and was left in mystery by virtue of its acting in the void of empty space and being non-mechanical (Hall 1992, 222-223).³ Although Newton placed God outside of science, he still used analogy about repetition in design and explanation, one of the religious presuppositions mentioned earlier. Hall (376) suggests that Newton bifurcated his scientific work and his search for God because he could not proceed with both simultaneously. Bronowski (1966, 35) calls this a "massive achievement" in the nature of doing science.

Were Kepler and Linnaeus wrong to base their presuppositions of science on their faith in God? They were operating with most of the presuppositions mentioned above. When Kepler's model was disproven and Linnaeus' system failed, it gradually became clearer to the scientific community that "thinking God's thoughts after Him" was speculative. People began to question presuppositions about God's role in science, and as they always do under pressure, the presuppositions began to shift. Like all sinful humans, Kepler and Linnaeus were unable to fully comprehend God, but they still tried to interpret God's mind with their incomplete scientific knowledge. They made hypotheses based on human reason to fit God into their theories. Because their hypotheses were based on failed reason, this led them and others to wonder if God had failed as well.

However, was Newton's solution to completely remove God from science—the Creator-God—what Christians should advocate? Of course not. "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings" (Prov. 25:2). Science is not God's enemy; He gives us science and the human reasoning to interpret it. Christians do not need to be afraid of facts, for God is not a deceiver. According to Kreeft and Tacelli in *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*: "Reason is the friend of Divine Authority which can neither deceive nor be deceived, but not necessarily of human authority, fads and fashions" (1994, 17). While they continue on to say that reason should not supersede the grace and love of God, they conclude, "We also agree with the classical position's contention that many of the things God has revealed to us to be believed, such as His own existence and some of His attributes, can also be proved by human reason, properly used" (1994, 15-16). Although science should not usurp faith, science can supplement it. God has made his creation known so His people may understand it and glorify Him. By not giving Him credit, He is stripped of His honor.

However, Newton was right to indicate that people cannot tie their faith in God to scientific evidence, for facts are subject to human interpretation, which is affected by sin. People do not answer questions simply by experience or by experiment. We sort the data, choose some, value some, and ignore others. Hence, science becomes a framework of thought and empiricism. Presuppositions do play powerfully into the entire thought framework and therefore not even science can claim to be purely objective; it is a human activity. For example, a jury presented with evidence still has to make the interpretation of guilt or innocence. Man's sin affects his interpretation just as a jury's bias can affect the verdict.

Due to the fact that human reasoning is flawed, one cannot base scientific hypotheses on an understanding of God's will. Newton was correct to hold to this concept, for he recognized that making such hypotheses

based on faith diminishes God when these hypotheses fail. Recent proofs for or against God can turn out to be like Kepler's solids or Linnaeus' classifications.

Modern Interpretation: The Removal of God

Gradually, for good or ill, the scientific community did move away from all of the presuppositions that directly involved God. As science moved on, presuppositions that were kept were modified, such as analogy and the use of mathematics (Campbell, 94ff, 153) but without reference to the original justifications. A more modern presupposition summary now includes that nature is simply the interaction of matter (from Newton). All natural interactions have natural causes that can be understood by understanding the parts (naturalism and reductionism).

Interestingly, some original presuppositions remain, though slightly modified. For example, beauty and simplicity (Occam's razor) are still marks of truth, and physical or mathematical analogies are still valid ways of understanding. James Watson revealed that he felt that his DNA model, constructed with Francis Crick, was correct *because it was beautiful*. On the verge of discovering the manner of how the four different bases would fit inside the two helical strands, Watson wrote to Max Delbruck that he "had just devised a beautiful DNA structure which was completely different from [Linus] Pauling's" (Watson, 190). Again, he states, "...although our idea was aesthetically elegant, the shape of the sugar-phosphate backbone might not permit its existence. Happily, now we knew that this was not true, and so we had lunch, telling each other that a structure this pretty just had to exist" (205). By their own statements, Watson and Crick claimed to have no religious faith, yet this presupposition was still in their worldview. For many in science, beauty is still a mark of truth.

Naturalism in Science

Newton's choice directed science toward naturalism. In our century it seems to be

practiced along a continuum (see Figure 1). At one extreme, an individual will be open to seeing the Divine acting in every event. This leaves oneself open to logical fallacies and the denial of human reason. Another person might only allow naturalism in scientific work but be able to acknowledge a wider view of reality that allows for an alliance between the transcendent and observable matter. At the other extreme, the individual can maintain that the interactions of matter and energy have only natural causes. Richard Dawkins, a paleontologist, is well known for this position. He maintains that if the God hypothesis is truly meaningful, it should be subject to a test. (Johnson, 2005). Yet God is neither defined by time nor matter, therefore He cannot be subject to human tests.

Furthermore, the sister of natural cause is reductionism. If one takes a mechanism apart, and understands the functions of the pieces, then one might claim to know the object. Geneticist Richard Lewontin (1993, 11-12) objects and suggests that when society elevated the importance of the individual, science also changed its view of the value of the parts and pieces of organisms. One cannot live like that. It is possible to examine the parts of the stained glass window, but without sensing the whole, one cannot see the true purpose of the work. If people are simply composed of molecules, then free will, dignity, and respect for life are denied. Some argue that love is merely a chemical reaction; however, this does not mean that the scientist who studies this reaction in the lab believes that the love he feels for his family is nothing more than hormonal interactions.

In the same vein, Lewontin, although not a Christian, has strongly expressed that our increased focus on reductionism has caused many to think that we are merely products of parts of our bodies: merely our genes (1993, 14). He is concerned that such thinking can lead us to incomplete answers that miss essentials such as the important effects of the environment that can interact with genes. While Lewontin is concerned about scientific explanations and social effects, we need to

consider that such thinking also has strong theological implications.

Despite Lewontin's and others' concerns, Francis Crick (1994, 3), in the spirit of materialism and reductionism, proposed the "Astonishing Hypothesis." The hypothesis is "that 'You,' your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules." No soul, no being, just neurons firing. Crick (257) adds, "Only scientific certainty (with all its limitations) can in the long run rid us of the superstitions of our ancestors. A critic could argue that, whatever scientists may say, they really do believe in the Astonishing Hypothesis. There is a restricted sense in which this is true. You cannot successfully pursue a difficult program of scientific research without some *preconceived ideas* to guide you" (our italics). Clearly, one of the preconceived ideas is that nothing supernatural exists.

Recognition Equals Reconciliation

Michael Behe (1996) has called attention to several complex mechanisms that Darwinism cannot presently explain by its use of natural selection and gradualism. Behe asks how an organism can build a complete mechanism part by part if the mechanism cannot operate until it is complete. Truly, an incomplete mechanism with unused parts would be detrimental to the fitness of the organism. One example of such a mechanism involves the evolution of all of the interacting chemicals required for blood clotting. Behe and several others believe that this calls for recognition of an Intelligent Designer who has used special means to put the mechanisms into existence.

One would think that each of Behe's examples would be analyzed and a detailed evolutionary defense probably involving co-option (other productive uses for the parts until the mechanism is complete) would be put forth. Instead we find that most quickly reject Behe on a more fundamental level. At

least three factors cause that rejection. One is the presupposition that all natural events *must* have natural causes. The Intelligent Designer is clearly supernatural. Hence, critics often say, "Intelligent Design is just not science," or suggest that it is a Trojan horse with Creationism inside (Biever). Another factor is the perception that adding God to the explanation is not as simple as saying nature evolved. The medieval mind would be more open to seeing God in, with, and under everything, but reductionism sees separate parts. So it follows in some modern minds that another part is being added and Occam's razor is applied. Presuppositions can close minds subconsciously or throw up caution flags.⁴

However, if the presuppositions of the two fields are in conflict or exceed their limits, results will not agree. Nature and revelation should come together if God is author of both. Erroneous presuppositions, however, blind us to facts about the connection between religion and science. Scientists who boldly assert that reality consists exclusively of the interactions of matter and energy need to examine the roots of that claim and need to recognize it as a basic assumption that is only useful within narrow limits. Their presuppositions are not proven, and such an extreme use of naturalism without question cannot be justified. Naturalism rules out the transcendent and the supernatural. That may be a practical and temporary suspension of thought to make in the lab, but it ought to be recognized as such. Tension will remain if some push the application of naturalism to all forms of knowledge and experience. Only if presuppositions are recognized and articulated can scientists and theologians see that they are not looking at each other through the stained glass, outside and inside the church; but that they can look at it from the same side, just from different angles.⁵

⁴This essay is adapted from a longer article, "Putting Presuppositions on the Table: Why Foundations Matter" by the same authors, which has been submitted to *Zygon: The Journal of Religion and Science*.

²Harold K. Schilling at the University of Iowa composed lists of current presuppositions operating in science and religion. Schilling noted that any error in the assumptions or presuppositions, with which the reasoning begins, is a source of greater error than other factors in scientific method. Boehlke developed a list of presuppositions that were shared by science and theology in medieval times to indicate changes over time.

³Newton recognized that God could do whatever He wished. Therefore, gravity might well be a result of God “wishing” that things would hold together and be outside of science. In that way, his theology affected his science (Ashworth 2003, 83). While Newton is known as the father of Deism, he did have many religious reflections; he wrote on the book of Revelation but kept his writings private (Bronowski, 1973, 234).

⁴Interestingly, the proponents of Intelligent Design are also being sensitive to the naturalism presuppositions when they refuse to say who the Designer might be.

⁵“For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1Corinthians 13:12 [KJV]).

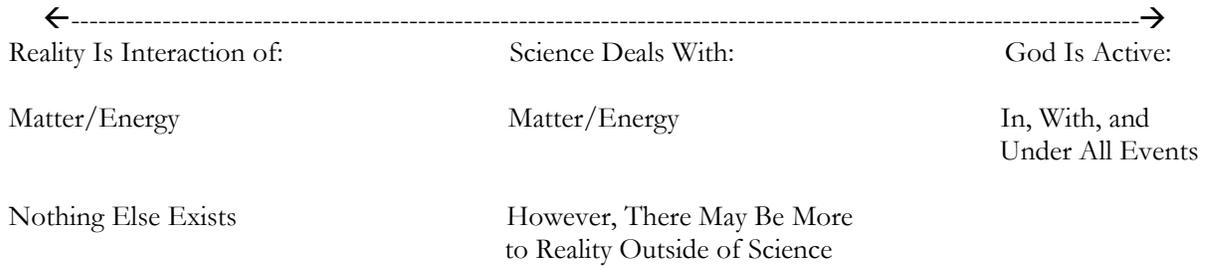
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Presuppositions

Figure 1: A Continuum of Worldviews Based on Presuppositions



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