



The Power of Presuppositions

by Dr. Chris Swanson

People presuppose. We can't help it. But is this good or bad?

Sometimes it's bad. Presuppositions lead to stereotypes, dogmatism, bias, intolerance, and a host of other negative attitudes. Presuppositions create colored lenses that filter our view. They skew the data. Presuppositions prevent dialog.

Our best bet, some say, is to promote tolerance so that we can all get along. Trying to overcome those pesky presuppositions seems impossible. Trying to convince others to change their presuppositions appears to verge on the immoral. We have them; they are here to stay; we have to deal with them.

But is it ever good to presuppose? Do presuppositions serve some useful purpose? I would argue that not only is it good to make presuppositions, but that they are central to all thought and action. Without them, we would be reduced to beasts enslaved to our physical appetites. Presuppositions, given we understand them correctly, make thinking possible. Understanding how we use them also has implications for our understanding the nature of truth and communication.

Presuppositions are tacitly held beliefs accepted prior to an argument or action. They are assumed in advance. Normally, the word 'presupposition' refers to worldview assumptions, such as politics, religion, human nature, and similar ideas. These are indeed presuppositions; but in an important sense, they are a small subset of the presuppositions we hold. Presuppositions span a much broader set of beliefs. We use them on a day-to-day

basis to live our lives without even realizing we are doing so. Examining the nature and use of our day-to-day presuppositions helps to clarify both the benefits and the limitations of all presuppositions, in particular those related to worldview.

Presuppositional beliefs come in two types: concepts and claims. A concept is a definition that I assume, and a claim is a proposition or statement that I assume is true. I will discuss these two types of beliefs, emphasizing their formation and use as presuppositions.

Concepts

Concepts can best be understood through a variety of examples. There are concepts related to biological groupings, such as *mankind*, *horse*, or *tree*; categories of man-made things, such as *car*, *stapler*, or *computer program*; ideas, such as *justice*, *law of inertia*, *green*, or the number *four*; concepts meant to represent specific objects or places, such as *Napoleon*, *Bill the horse*, or *Madison Avenue*; and not to be forgotten, fanciful or imaginary concepts, such as a *swiftly flying*, *phone-stealing giraffe*. These many different examples indicate the wide variety of concepts we have, and this list only scratches the surface. Because it is hard to start by defining what a concept *is*, let us first examine what a concept is *not*.

Concepts are not objects. By objects I mean material things, things we can touch. *Bill the horse* is a concept, an idea, whereas the physical animal, horse, that his owner can ride is an object. The owner of Bill the horse may have a very expansive concept of Bill the



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horse that takes into account a great number of Bill's characteristics: Bill is an animal, a friend, a male; he has hoofs, a mane, lungs, heart, liver, and so forth; he is brown, gentle, curious, and likes carrots. The owner may implicitly know how Bill will behave in certain circumstances. Nevertheless, the owner's concept of Bill can never capture everything that makes up Bill. The owner does not share Bill's instincts or thoughts, such as they are. Nor does the owner understand or experience the ongoing activity within Bill's enormous number of cells. The horse named Bill is an amazingly complex object, well beyond the ability of any concept to encapsulate. From this example, we see that concepts tend to encompass a vast and rich set of associated characteristics and connections.

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Concepts are also different than words. To see the difference between them, consider different languages. ‘*Casa*’ (Spanish) and ‘house’ (English) are the same concept but different words. Words represent concepts and communicate those concepts. They are *signs* of concepts. Words can be analyzed into syllables, letters, and parts of speech; they are read, written, and spoken; and if someone closes a book, the words remain. Concepts, however, do not reside in books, nor are they analyzed into letters. You cannot write a concept on a piece of paper.

Finally, concepts are not mental images or pictures in our heads. A picture in my mind of Bill the horse is not the same as my concept of Bill the horse. A concept typically is more detailed than a picture. For example, I cannot have a mental picture of Bill’s sweet and gentle personality. In the same way, I may have an image of the numeral ‘4’ in my head, but this is not the concept of four, since the same concept can apply to Bill’s legs whether or not I bring to mind the picture of the numeral ‘4’.

Based on these examples and distinctions, a concept can be viewed as an *intellectual organization or grouping superinduced upon experience to make sense of that experience*. In other words, a concept is an idea that we assign to a set of similar experiences or thoughts that brings out their unity.

Concepts organize particular experiences. Consider the concept “car,” for instance. Every day we have visual experiences of large objects with four wheels driving around on roads. Those objects are all different, but they share similar features (windshield, hood, seats, wheels, general size, etc.) and a common function to provide transportation. We experience being inside and driving and hearing the sounds these objects make. Each and every car differs from the others in significant ways, but there are enough similarities that having a concept “car” makes sense. All of the many concepts that we form serve as presuppositions to our thinking.

Claims

A claim is a statement that can be true or false. It proposes or posits something. Declaratory sentences are all claims; for instance, “It

is raining” or “I am hungry.” Statements of opinion are just as much claims as are statements of fact; “The painting is beautiful” is just as much a claim as “George Washington was a president of the United States.”

However, a number of statements we make are not claims. Questions or exclamations are not claims. If I ask “Where are you?” or shriek “Ouch!”, I am not making a claim; I am not proposing something as true. In the first example, I am asking; and in the second, I am simply responding.

Similarly, concepts are not claims. For example, *the galloping horse*, is a concept, not a claim. But if one were to take the phrase “the galloping horse” and construe it to mean “the horse *is* galloping,” then it would be a claim. On its own, *the galloping horse* is not a claim since nothing is being proposed about the said horse. Concepts are sometimes confused with claims since some concepts imply a claim like existence. Talking about *the galloping horse* may imply that I am claiming that a galloping horse exists. That implication, however, is from context, not the concept itself. A concept like *a swiftly flying, phone-stealing giraffe* clearly does not imply existence. Like concepts, claims we believe form the set of presuppositions each of us has.

Forming Concepts and Beliefs

All of us have formed innumerable concepts and believe untold numbers of claims. All of these concepts and claims are part of our mental machinery. They work behind the scenes in our thought life; we presuppose them in everything we think, say, or do. One of our most natural intellectual activities is to form these concepts and claims.

Consider how children are amazingly talented at acquiring words and concepts. When a child is acquiring language and is taught the word ‘tree’, the child does not typically require multiple examples. Parents do not point to twenty different objects and say the word ‘tree’. It suffices for the parent to say the word once or twice in the proper context. The child is able to apply the word with reasonable accuracy to other trees. The further use of the word ‘tree’ confirms with the parent the field of meaning or perhaps just shows prowess. At some level, the child

has already preformed a concept of tree, and the word simply clarifies and solidifies the concept.

Forming the concept *tree* is not something that “happens” to the child. It requires mental activity. The child does not receive retinal “impressions” of a tree that are immediately turned into a concept, but instead the child takes a variety of complex images and separates and organizes the information into a meaningful concept.

Forming a concept, then, is an organizing act that takes existing objects or ideas and collects them into a unity. This organizing act *adds* sense and meaning to otherwise disparate things while it also *reduces* the complexity and richness of the individual things into something simple that can be easily grasped and remembered. What is lost in forming the concept is the complexity of the individual thing, but what is gained is an absolutely essential ordering of experience.

Clearly, given the nature of a concept, forming and using concepts is a process in which we all participate all the time. We cannot help it. To live without concepts would be to live without coherent thoughts or meaning. Forming concepts is a fundamental part of who we are as human beings; it is instinctual.

Forming belief in a claim follows the same pattern as forming a concept. We combine, connect, analyze, and judge a wide variety of factors that leads us to a belief in some proposition. A very basic belief such as $2+2=4$ provides an instructive example. When children are learning arithmetic, they are forming many concepts and trying to find the proper relationships. They must understand number, counting, addition, and equality. In most teaching contexts, they look at graphical images, like apples and oranges, in particular groupings. Lastly, they trust the teacher and the authority of the workbook they are studying. We give the children clues that they must put together. They see that the combination of apples results in a count of four apples; they see the numbers and signs; they hear the teacher tell them; the proposition is reinforced by flash cards and parents. Ultimately, they form a belief that $2+2=4$.

Forming this simple arithmetical belief is like forming all other beliefs. We begin with a set of presupposed concepts and claims

we already believe. We organize and judge those presuppositions in the context of new information. We come to believe a new claim based on a confluence of supporting or confirming evidence. Once we have formed this belief and mastered it, it becomes part of an ever growing set of beliefs and concepts that we take for granted. It becomes part of our presuppositions.

Presuppositions in Action

How then do we use the presupposed beliefs and concepts that we form? Is it possible, for instance, to avoid all of the negative aspects associated with presuppositions that I mentioned earlier? If all of our thinking is based on presuppositions, how can we be sure we are right? How can I communicate if my presuppositions differ from those of another?

The key to understanding our use of presuppositions comes from an insight of polymath Michael Polanyi (1891–1976) that he refers to as “subsidiary awareness.” Subsidiary awareness is a fancy way of describing the presuppositions of which we are not explicitly aware. We internalize our concepts and beliefs so that they are available to our minds to use without the least effort; they are submerged in our minds but easily accessible. Speaking is an example: for the most part, words come to us without any effort on our part. Beliefs are like words. We do not consider or question beliefs; we use them like tools to accomplish a task. As I encounter some new idea or experience, I unconsciously use pertinent beliefs to help me process the idea or experience. If I stopped to bring those beliefs to my conscious mind, then I would get hopelessly bogged down; I could not function.

For example, consider a conversation with a friend. I ask my friend Jim, “Have you seen my phone?” He responds, “I saw it in your car.” Alternatively, he could have responded, “It was stolen by a swiftly flying giraffe.” In response to his first answer, I will immediately bring to bear a number of beliefs: I was recently in my car; Jim was also in my car; Jim would have been able to see my phone; I was preoccupied when I got out of the car; Jim is trustworthy. These beliefs will allow me to reason nearly instantaneously to the conclusion that Jim is correct: my phone is in

my car. The beliefs about my activities never surface to my consciousness to be examined; they are presupposed. They work behind the scenes in my subsidiary awareness.

In response to the second answer that my phone was stolen by a swiftly flying giraffe, I will bring to bear a completely different but equally available set of beliefs: giraffes don’t fly swiftly; giraffes don’t steal phones; no giraffes are anywhere in town; a swiftly flying, phone-stealing giraffe would have been the talk of the town; Jim is a joker. Putting all of these beliefs together, I could respond immediately with a chuckle. Again, my response is nearly instantaneous, and it is the result of a number of subsidiary beliefs and concepts.

This second case is particularly interesting since I had never, prior to Jim’s statement, considered the concept of swiftly flying, phone-stealing giraffes. And yet his statement created no obstacle to my coming to a swift and accurate conclusion. Clearly, we all carry an enormous number of concepts and beliefs that we can filter, apply, compound, and use to come to conclusions. We do not stop to analyze or question these concepts and beliefs. All my knowledge of giraffes, phones, and news stories slips into the background and works as a hidden tool. To consider why I believe that a flying, phone-stealing giraffe would be the talk of the town may be interesting, and probably I could defend that belief as reasonable, but no one does that. On an everyday basis, at least, doing other things is more important. Even if we did decide to examine all of our beliefs, such a task would be impossible since we would have to use other beliefs to examine whichever belief was up for examination.

The sorts of beliefs I have been describing are not only *necessary* for us to function, they make it possible to function *efficiently*. They are knitted together in such a way as to form the structure through which we process new information. Only when I have developed this complex structure of concepts and beliefs am I able to think. This structure forms my personal set of presuppositions.

How Should We Think About Presuppositions?

I have argued that presuppositions are indispensable. But if that is the case, are we not

stuck with unwanted bias? If we presuppose certain beliefs, then by definition we are not aware of them, making it difficult to examine or correct them. But should we not be open to examining our presuppositions? Since our presuppositions are an interconnected web of self-reinforcing beliefs, how are we to correct mistakes or prejudices?

The reality is that the biases of our presuppositions make it extremely hard—though not impossible—to notice misjudgments in our interconnected web of beliefs. But that is not horrible. That is how God made us. And frankly, He did a bang-up job. Our ability to form presuppositions and use them subsidiarily is simply astounding.

As we are all too aware, however, we are not perfect. We can make mistakes. We can create concepts that confuse and distort rather than clarify our experience. We can form beliefs that are not true. How we go about recognizing and rooting out those mistakes is beyond the scope of this article. However, understanding the nature of our presuppositions and how they work can be helpful in that task. By knowing that we use presuppositions all the time, and by understanding the role they play, we can develop a sensitivity to our dependence on our own presuppositions. We can better understand how much the words and thoughts of others depend on their presuppositions. We can attune ourselves to look for differing presuppositions behind seemingly odd or discordant claims. Suffice it to say that we do have tools and can form skills that help us in the task of understanding and correcting our presuppositions.

Just because we can make mistakes does not diminish the fact that we do a fantastic job forming the majority of our presuppositions. We do think well and find the truth and communicate with each other all the time. We do so almost effortlessly and unconsciously. So rather than condemning presuppositions as unfortunate or negative, we should embrace them.

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