

What, exactly, are "presuppositions"?

First of all, and most fundamentally, "presuppositions" are what has to be the case in order for any assertion to make sense, and thus to be either true or false; i.e., a presupposition expresses the strictly necessary conditions of the possibility of whatever the assertion asserts. (It is in this strict and proper sense of "presuppositions," I take it, that Anders Nygren speaks of the distinctive task of philosophy as "analysis of presuppositions," or "presuppositional analysis.")

But in a broader and improper sense, "presuppositions" are the particular assumptions made in making an assertion. Such assumptions, also, are understandably called "presuppositions," because they are, in fact, logically necessary to the assertion's having sense, and thus being either true or false. On the other hand, whether or not one makes certain assumptions is optional in a way in which presupposing presuppositions, in the first, strict and proper sense, is not.

One may or may not make certain assumptions in order to assert what one asserts. If one does make them, then they are, in a broad and improper sense, presuppositions of one's assertion in that their truth is a necessary condition of the possible truth of the assertion that one makes in assuming them. By contrast, presupposing presuppositions in the first, strict and proper sense, is not optional, because "presuppositions," strictly and properly so-called, are what *must be* presupposed willy nilly, implicitly if not explicitly, unconsciously if not consciously.

If this answer to the question is essentially sound, it would appear that "presuppositions" in the first, strict and proper sense are precisely what philosophy is concerned with in its first, purely formal aspect as analysis, including purely formal, transcendental metaphysics. On the other hand, what philosophy, in its other critico-constructive aspect has the task of critically validating are presuppositions only in the second and broader sense of assumptions. More exactly, philosophy has the task of critically validating the assumptions involved in making or implying existential and existential-historical assertions.

Thus, for example, whether or not I assume the truth of a certain kind of theism is optional, even if assuming its truth is logically necessary to making or implying the assertion that Jesus is the Christ, i.e., the Messiah of God. But there is nothing optional about my presupposing that something exists or that what exists is either a contingently existing part of the whole or else the necessarily existing whole itself, i.e., the strictly ultimate reality about which theism of this or any other kind is a theory.

Cf. R.G. Collingwood, *Faith and Reason*: 138 f., 144: "Why do we believe that there are laws of nature?' 'Why do we believe that if conclusions follow from true premises they are themselves true?' To these questions people sometimes thoughtlessly reply, 'They are mere assumptions.' It is a thoughtless answer because it is made without reflecting on the meaning of the word 'assumption.' An assumption is an optional thing; if I assume $x = 12$, that implies that I might have assumed $x = 13$. But if we try, we shall find that we cannot assume that there are not laws of nature or that untrue conclusions follow from true premises. . . . The only right answer to questions of this kind is: 'Because we know that it is so.' And if we are asked 'How do you know?' we must reply: 'That is an illegitimate question, because it implies that we ought to have reasons for these pieces of knowledge, which we haven't, and, in the nature of the case, do not need.' If then we are told that this reduces them to mere matters of faith, we shall reply, 'Not at all: faith they are, but not mere faith, because the faith which they express is a rational faith in the sense that it is universal in everyone—even in you, who pretend to doubt it—and necessary to all thought, even the thought by which you pretend to criticize it. . . . Whatever may be said about the *details* of the world, there is always something that may be said about the world *as a whole*, namely, that it *is* a whole: a whole within which all distinctions fall, outside which there is nothing, and which, taken as a whole is the cause of itself and of everything in it. The details of the world are the proper theme of scientific thought; but its characteristics as a whole, its unity and the implications of that unity, are not matters of scientific inquiry. They are, rather, a foundation on which all scientific inquiry rests. If it was possible to deny them—which it is not—scientific inquiry would instantly cease. . . . We thus possess certain pieces of knowledge about the world which we did not acquire, and cannot criticize, by scientific methods. The knowledge in question is our knowledge

of the world, not in its details, but as a whole. And not only is it not acquired by scientific thought, but it is the very foundation of such thought; for only insofar as we know, for instance, that there are laws of nature, can we reasonably devise methods for discovering them. . . . The finite is nothing except as part of a whole. . . . Unless there is a whole, a universe, an infinite, there is no science; for there is no certainty beyond the certainty of mere observation and of bare particular fact; whereas science is universal or nothing, and is bankrupt unless it can discover general laws. But this discovery, as every student of logic knows, rests on presuppositions [*sic!*] concerning the nature of the universe as a whole—laws of thought that are at the same time laws of the real world, not scientifically discovered but embraced by an act of faith, of necessary and rational faith."

Cf. also E. M. Adams, "The Philosophical Grounds of the Present Crisis of Authority," in *Authority: A Philosophical Analysis*, ed. R. Baine Harris (University, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1976): 11 f.: "[W]e need to distinguish between philosophical assumptions and presuppositions. For our purposes, we may regard an assumption as a belief taken for granted and built on as a premise or ground in one's thinking about something else; whereas a presupposition is a necessary condition for the truth or meaningfulness of some sentence. A philosophical assumption on which a scientific or normative theory is built will be presupposed by that theory. But not all philosophical presuppositions make their entry via assumption. Those that do not are the basic ones that provide the ultimate touchstone for philosophy. If a philosophical theory is assumed or taken for granted and thereby shapes the development of a given area of thought, the rejection of that theory in favor of another, whether brought about by philosophical inquiry or otherwise, would work a radical change in the cultural area concerned. On the other hand, the philosophical presuppositions of our primary ways of experiencing, thinking, and talking, those that do not enter the fabric of experience and thought via assumption, cannot be rejected by virtue of inconsistency with philosophical theory. Whenever such inconsistencies arise, so much the worse for the philosophical theory. This is why philosophy must be primarily responsible to the philosophical presuppositions of ordinary discourse rather than those of the specialized disciplines. The latter are more likely to have been influenced by philosophical assumptions

pervasive in the culture. Although philosophy does not contradict specific statements in science or judgments in normative thought, it may overturn them by contradicting philosophical assumptionsd on which they are based."

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