

## Chapter 8: Presuppositions

### “Reading People’s Minds”

*A dream is always simmering below the conventional surface of speech and reflection.*

--- George Santayana

In this chapter we briefly look at some of the deep assumptions, called “presuppositions”, upon which controversy often rests. Too much attention paid directly to a controversial statement tends to miss presuppositions which, in themselves, may be vulnerable to criticism.

By focusing too narrowly on specific things, we can be distracted from the deeper presuppositions they rest on. For example, in the United States, George Washington is generally regarded with admiration. But what presuppositions underlie this admiration? There are many, and they include:

- a. That killing others for political reasons is sometimes necessary, and that
- b. those who efficiently organize and administrate this type of killing are praiseworthy, and that
- c. the American Revolution, itself, was a good idea, and that
- d. we wouldn’t be “free” today had it not occurred.

Each of these presuppositions is open to question. Pacifists, for instance, heartily disagree with the first proposition. With regard to the second, some folks regard generals, admirals, and so forth, as necessary evils. And what about the presupposition that the American Revolution was a good idea and that we wouldn’t be “free” today without it?. Just ask yourself what the present situation would be had the American Revolution never occurred. Would we still be a colony of Great Britain, without rights or freedom? That seems unlikely. More probably the American colonies would have peacefully evolved into an independent nation, probably in the mid 1800’s, in much the same way that Canada, Australia and New Zealand did.

Without the revolution the US and Canada might even be united, forming a much larger, more powerful and more resource rich nation. And since Great Britain outlawed slavery in 1807, America’s racial difficulties might have been significantly lessened. Indeed, the Civil War may never have happened. So you see, it’s possible the American Revolution might not have been such a good thing after all. And from this point of view George Washington becomes less a hero than an impatient hothead.

The point here is not to attack George Washington, per se, but to emphasize that truly powerful questions often arise as soon as we start to consider presuppositions.

## **A School Based Example: No Child Left Behind**

Paying attention to presuppositions can really clarify school-related issues. As this writing, for example, we have just observed the fifth anniversary of the No Child Left Behind Act. Few would question that it is one of the most influential pieces of federal school-related legislation in US history. But what presuppositions underlie it?

Here are a few of them:

- a. That all students are sufficiently capable not to be left behind, and that
- b. all students are, or can be, sufficiently motivated,, or that
- c. motivation doesn't matter, teachers should be able to get them to learn anyway.

Beneath these presuppositions lies a still more basic one. That whatever occurs at home, in the neighborhood, and so forth, can be overcome at school. But that presupposition, which is the foundation upon which the No Child Left Behind Act rests, is sheer nonsense that is unsupported by scientific research.

The failing learner, particularly if they are poor, is often “left behind” as a result of external forces that are far more powerful than they are. And it doesn't have to be something psychological like an abusive father, a crack-addicted mother, or sexual molestation. It can be physical as well. For instance, he or she might have ingested the lead that is in old paint that flakes off the walls of deteriorating housing, permanently damaging their brain. The extent of the damage determines how far they will be left behind.

Experienced teachers know full well that non-school problems cause poor school performance. Here is a real life example that illustrates how untenable the presupposition underlying No Child Left Behind really is. One student—we'll call him Denny—regularly fell sound asleep in his seventh-grade geography class. Obviously, he was learning very little. The teacher worried that his lessons were the sedative, but no one else in class was dozing.

In time the teacher discovered the problem. Denny's father was a mean drunk who often came home “loaded” and then abused Denny's mother. When 14 year-old Denny tried to defend her, he took a licking himself. Enraged and frightened, Denny eventually took refuge in a nearby pool hall. In return for cleaning up after closing, the owner permitted him to sleep, as best he could, on one of the pool tables. Denny's classroom failures had nothing to do with the lessons or with school. But he still learned nothing.

Yes, frontline teachers know from bitter experience that what goes on outside school either limits or enhances school success. But they often are loath to say so for fear they will be accused of incompetence or indifference by public officials or their school administrator collaborators, who presuppose, or pretend to presuppose, that caring, competent teachers who maintain high expectations can overcome all external difficulties. Yet an abundance of scientific research indicates that such a view is bogus.

## **A Procedure**

Remember, in dealing with a controversial issue, we should attempt to uncover the presuppositions that may be hidden within a dispute. Here is a procedure to follow:

**Step 1: In a dispute, identify evaluative statements; they presuppose facts.**

- A. Treat statements as being evaluative or non-evaluative.

Evaluative statements begin (or end) with such phrases as

1. *It is important to remember that...*
2. *It is good that ...*
3. *That ... is not worth considering.*

Examples:

- a. It is important to remember that Sam is a felon.
- b. It is good that taxes have been lowered.
- c. That John has been accused of dishonesty is not worth considering.

**Presuppositions:** Evaluative statements presuppose the truth of that which they evaluate:

Example a. presupposes that it is true that Sam is a felon.

Example b. presupposes that taxes have been lowered.

Example c. presupposes that John has been accused of dishonesty.

**For the purposes of analyzing a dispute, disregard, for the moment, the evaluative frameworks in which presuppositions are embedded.**

**Other Important Points:**

1. The presupposed “facts” may be wrong. They have to be judged on their own merits.
2. Even if we agree on the facts, evaluating them may require additional argument.

**Step 2. Go back through the arguments of the disputants. Sort out non-evaluative statements into three kinds: perceptions, reports or deductions. These three kinds of statement rest on different presuppositions. And any of them might be in error.**

Most statements used as premises in arguments are reports. They may be reports of perceptions, reports of reports, or reports of deductions.

Perception Statements are generally given in the present tense, i.e. statements like

- A. I **hear** a loud sound. (“I **heard** a loud sound” relies on memory, so we will not classify it as a perception statement.)
- B. John is saying nothing.

**Presuppositions of Perception Statements:** Perception statements presuppose

1. that the sense-faculties, sight, hearing, etc. of the perceiver are functioning “normally”.

2. that the deeply acculturated habits of interpretation of the perceiver are relevant to the situation; i.e. that, as a North American, the perceiver is not trying to describe the religious behavior of a Mexican Nahuatl *curandero* (medicine man) thinking him to be just an “ordinary peasant.”
3. that the situation in which the perception is made is not too “unusual.”

If, for example, we know that John is drunk, or that the lighting is bad, we might reject John’s claim, “I see an old Mexican man, dressed in red, mumbling to himself” as indicating the presence of an old Mexican man, or of red clothes, or of mere mumbling.

“Pure” perception statements are rarely found in argument. Rather **reports** of them are given as premises.

**Report Statements** can be of perceptions, other reports, or deductions.

- A. I heard a loud sound.
- B. John said Sam was sick
- C. I concluded that Sam must have been sick..

Reports can be citations from books, or quotations as well, e.g.

1. “The Oxford English Dictionary defines “crime” as...”
2. The New York Times reported that Stevenson died yesterday.
3. John told me he was on his way home.

**The Presuppositions of Reports:** Reports statements presuppose accuracy of quotation or citation, i.e. that the reporters haven’t misheard, misread or misstated, or forgotten what they report on.

They also presuppose that the medium of transmittal has been stable and not subverted, that the personal memory, the word processor, telephone line, computer memory, etc. has not malfunctioned or been tampered with.

“..Our experience is composed rather of illusions lost than of wisdom acquired.”

—Joseph Roux

### **The Vulnerability Of Argument.**

There is no reason to assume that if a person is sincerely offering testimony, we are hearing “the truth.” Someone may report -- with full intention of telling the truth -- what he or she has seen or heard. This does not, in itself, guarantee fact.. On the other hand, people who claim to have seen ghosts, talked with the Goddess Athena, been

visited by extra-terrestrials, or to have cast spells need not be rejected as liars, or insulted by being labeled “irrational.”. What we have to look at are the presuppositions they bring to the claims they make.

This is not to say that truth is “relative” or that we should indulge any old claim to the truth as “true for someone.” It is to say that establishing something as “fact” is a difficult and often tentative endeavor. It is to say that our firmest, most established beliefs might, some day, be convincingly argued to have be based on a false presupposition. Critical investigation cannot bestow absolute certainty. But to forego critical investigation for this reason is cowardice.

## Chapter Highlights

Presuppositions are assumptions about the very sources of knowledge. These sources yield us the claims which we structure into arguments. Questionable statements of fact can be embedded in broader evaluative statements that distract us from focussed critical appraisal.

Our normal “sources of knowledge”, e.g. our senses, our memory, the reports of trustworthy persons, and authoritative books and data bases, can be subject to failure. It is the presupposition of their “normal” functioning that supports our arguments and the claims to truth they rest upon. An argument is only as strong as the presuppositions it rests on.

Controversies may rest not on deliberate misinformation, but on problematic presuppositions that our natural faculties, or other fundamental sources of knowledge are functioning well.

## Other Related Chapters in This Text

7, What’s the Connection?	13, Operationalizing
11, Facts and Feelings	14, Inquiry Blockers
12, Authority	15, Fact vs. Value

## Keywords for Further Data Base Search

verification	certainty	provability
disconfirmation	infinite regress	deduction
illusion	truth	empiricism

## Test Yourself

Consider the following reports. Imagine each reported (internal) statement to be false, but nonetheless to have been sincerely reported by someone who believed them to be true. What presuppositions might have failed which

makes it possible for them to be false despite the conviction of their reporter? How probable, low, moderate, high -- use your intuition -- is such a failure?

<i>(False) Statement</i>	Presupposition (s)
1. <i>Mary was seen stealing Jack's pen.</i>	(a) The person seeing the situation (in good light) had his glasses on. (b) What someone saw her take was a <b>pen</b> . (c) She intended to keep it. (d) The pen belonged to Jack.
2. <i>Jack wrote that he could see his long-dead uncle standing right in front of him.</i>	
3. <i>The New York Times reported that Sam embezzled funds.</i>	
4. <i>Sam says he can feel that his foot is frost-bitten.</i>	
5. <i>Experts claim that gin-and-tonic improves cerebral functioning.</i>	

## Chapter Review Sheet

1. Describe the chapter briefly in your own words.

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2. What are the core ideas developed in this chapter? If more than one, list them in order of their importance to you.

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3. Briefly explain the importance to you of your first choice.

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4. Briefly describe a scenario in which you could apply one of the ideas from the chapter to improve your professional practice.

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5. Connect this chapter to at least one thing you already know.

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6. Suggest one way to make this chapter more effective.

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