

Bahnsen on “Knowing the Supernatural”

A Examination of Chapter 31 of Bahnsen’s *Always Ready*: “The Problem of Knowing the ‘Super-Natural’”

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This essay presents a comprehensive interaction with the 31st chapter of Christian apologist Greg Bahnsen’s book *Always Ready*, entitled “The Problem of Knowing the ‘Super-Natural’.” It was first published as a series of 18 installments on my blog [Incinerating Presuppositionalism](#) in August and September 2007. A [jump page](#) on my blog features links to all 18 installments. An [internet version](#) of the 31st chapter of Bahnsen’s book *Always Ready* is available to those who are interested in reading it. Page numbers refer to Bahnsen’s book unless otherwise noted. Except for the first and the last, the section titles follow those in Bahnsen’s chapter.

Introduction

Bahnsen titles the thirty-first chapter of his oft-celebrated apologetics book *Always Ready* “The Problem of Knowing the ‘Super-Natural’.” Given this title, one might expect that in this chapter Bahnsen will illuminate his readers on how one can confidently gather and validate knowledge about what he calls “the supernatural.” Unfortunately, anyone expecting this is in for a big disappointment. He leaves so many obvious and basic questions untouched that it should become clear to any reader that something other than informing his readers on how to discover what he claims to know must be the focus of this chapter.

Nonetheless a thorough review of Bahnsen’s chapter on “knowing the supernatural” is relevant to an exploration of presuppositional apologetics. Defenders of Christianity often complain that non-believers approach apologetic arguments with an “anti-supernatural bias,” an unsavory obstacle which presumably clouds the non-believer’s judgment with inherently anti-theistic leanings. According to these apologists, it is because of this bias that arguments in defense of Christianity are not given a fair hearing. This prejudice against “the supernatural,” it is said, is very real and very widespread. As one believer puts it,

There is also an unwarranted anti-supernatural bias in academia and elsewhere which causes many to dismiss certain Christian doctrines without a fair consideration. ([Testimony of a YEC Missionary](#))

If, however, after giving Christian defenses the “fair consideration” that apologists think they deserve, we conclude that they are unsound or insufficient to their task, then it would be fair to say that our rejection of those doctrines is *not* based on some “unwarranted anti-supernatural bias.” Moreover, since many apologists cite “anti-supernatural bias” as an impediment to accepting Christianity’s theistic claims, they imply at the same time that an inclination to accept supernaturalism as a legitimate source of explanation is at least in part a key factor in endorsing those claims. Thus an examination of how believers conceive, defend and claim to be able to know “the supernatural” is important to fending off the often-repeated charge of an “unwarranted anti-supernatural bias,” which is intended to brand the accused of some unjustifiable misconduct in regard to the underlying context on which religious beliefs are held. If this so-called “bias” against supernaturalism in fact turns out to be a *rationally warranted wariness* of that which is contrary to objective reality, then it seems that the apologist should have no more objection to such “bias” than he might have against any rationally secured stance. After all, since rationality is the commitment to reason as one’s only means of knowledge and his only guide to action, a rational individual could easily be accused of possessing an anti-*irrational* bias. And who would have a problem with an anti-irrational bias, other than an irrationalist?

By reviewing what Bahnsen says when he takes his opportunity to treat “the problem of knowing the ‘super-natural’,” we can safely put to rest those complaints raised by proponents of supernatural claims that insinuate unjust prejudice on the part of non-believers. Among the many points which I hope to bring out in my thoroughgoing analysis of Bahnsen’s presentation, I will show that he in fact offers nothing to explain *how* one can “know” something that is “supernatural” as he conceives of it, specifically that he fails to identify any means by which one could have awareness of what he calls “the supernatural” or provide any objective method by which one can safely and confidently distinguish between what Bahnsen calls “the supernatural” and what he very well may be [imagining](#). So long as any of these three issues are left outstanding and unattended, especially when feigning to address the question of how one could “know the supernatural,” the suspicion that our leg is being pulled is thereby fortified all the more. Without knowing the means by which we can have awareness of what Bahnsen calls “supernatural,” or the method by which “the supernatural” can be identified and distinguished from imagination or mere error of cognition, we have no business accepting claims about “the supernatural” and thus are sufficiently warranted in rejecting such claims. We will see over and over throughout my analysis that Bahnsen bombs out on each point, and in fact gives us a few lessons along the way on what is dangerously wrong with supernaturalism.

Let us give the floor to Bahnsen and consider his case as he assembles it. Throughout my analysis I use his

Chapter 31: The Problem of Knowing the “Super-Natural”

Bahnsen begins his case on p. 177, where he opens with the following statement:

The Christian faith as defined by Biblical revelation teaches a number of things which are not restricted to the realm of man's temporal experience - things about an invisible God, His triune nature, the origin of the universe, the regularity of the created order, angels, miracles, the afterlife, etc. These are precisely the sort of claims which unbelievers most often find objectionable.

It is true that Christianity “teaches a number of things” which are not confirmed by methods independent of what Bahnsen calls “Biblical revelation.” That is, they do not constitute knowledge which can be acquired and validated by a process of cognition suited to the kind of consciousness which man possesses. (I elaborate on this point in my blog [The Axioms and the Primacy of Existence](#).)

If Christianity's claims could be acquired and validated by a process suited to the kind of consciousness which man possesses, it would not need to rest those claims on an appeal to divine revelation in the first place. On the contrary, the “knowledge” which Christianity claims on its own behalf is something that is allegedly bestowed upon man, transmitted into his mind by a supernatural agent, which seems to do away with the need for a theory of knowledge in the first place. Herein lies the root of the contradiction in Christianity's claim to truth: *we are to accept as knowledge something that is beyond our ability to actually know*. Perhaps this is why John Frame, presumably speaking for all Christians, admits that “We know without knowing how we know.” ([Presuppositional Apologetics: An Introduction \(Part 1\)](#)) So the question of *how* the believer could know what he claims to know, seems unanswerable on this basis. But while Bahnsen's concern is that “unbelievers... find objectionable” the kinds of claims that Christianity makes, the inquiring reader may very well be more interested in learning why one might accept those claims in the first place. That is, what do claims about “the supernatural” have going *for* them? After all, a careful thinker does not accept claims indiscriminately. On the contrary, he will weigh their merits first, considering any substantiation given on their behalf, and rejecting those which he deems unfit for consumption. Bahnsen might object that we are already on the wrong track by presuming to have any cognitive ability in the first place.

Bahnsen continues:

The objection is that such claims are about *transcendent* matters - things which go beyond day-to-day human experience. The triune Creator exists beyond the temporal order; the afterlife is not part of our ordinary observations in this world, etc. If the unbeliever is accustomed to thinking that people can only know things based upon, and pertaining to, the “here-and-now,” then the Christian's claims about the transcendent are an intellectual reproach. (p. 177)

While I cannot speak for all non-believers, I don't think the primary objection non-believers raise against Christianity and other religions is that their “claims are about *transcendent* matters – things which go beyond day-to-day human experience.” For instance, I do not need to directly experience something in order to accept claims about it as truthful. I have never been to Australia, for instance, but I have known people who have, and when they tell me of their experiences – experiences which I have not had – I do not reject their claims on the basis that I myself did not experience the things they have experienced. If my friend who traveled to Australia tells me that he went snorkeling near a coral reef, I have no problem accepting this, even though I have never gone snorkeling near a coral reef in Australia myself. If, however, he told me that he climbed a snow-covered peak over 20,000 feet high in Western Australia, I would think he is mistaken, for I understand that the highest point on the Australian mainland does not even reach 7500 feet and is located in New South Wales. So if a claim contradicts knowledge that I have already validated, why should I accept it as truth?

Now as an adult thinker, I have learned my way around the world in which I live enough to be able to know when a claim is *arbitrary*, that is, when there is no evidence to support it and no good reason to accept it as truth. For instance, suppose my friend tells me that, while returning from Australia, he visited a place called Nathirisia, whose inhabitants are 10-feet tall, have four arms and can levitate at will. Such a claim I would dismiss out of hand as arbitrary, even though he has demonstrated trustworthiness in other affairs. Further, I would interpret any objection against my dismissal of such claims as a roundabout endorsement of sheer gullibility, or worse, a refusal to discriminate between fact and fiction.

Which brings us back to Bahnsen's plight. He tells us that a “triune Creator exists beyond the temporal order.” Well, why would anyone believe this? If we were told that there is a band of gremlins convening on a planet revolving around the planet Betelgeuse over the problem of universals, why would we accept it? How would someone know this? How would a careful thinker know this? Bahnsen has been hailed as a most careful thinker. On the rear jacket of Bahnsen's book, for instance, we find a quote by Douglas Wilson who writes “Greg Bahnsen's mind was nothing if not precise.” Another quote, by Stephen C. Perks, holds that “Greg Bahnsen was a brilliant scholar.” Other writers have had similarly glowing things to say about Bahnsen. With such praise, one would expect Bahnsen to deliver a

genuine *tour de force* when it comes to substantiating his claims before an audience of careful thinkers, especially if he expected some of them to be skeptical of his claims. Presumably it is in this chapter – “The Problem of Knowing the ‘Super-Natural,’” where Bahnsen gives a “precise” and “brilliant” explanation of *how* one can acquire *knowledge* of what he calls “the Super-Natural.” If he is so concerned about non-Christians coming into the knowledge that Christians claim to have, or at any rate about providing believers with the means they need to defend Christianity’s claims, then surely such an explanation would be in order.

For reasons that remain unclear, Bahnsen seems to have a problem with basing knowledge on “the ‘here-and-now,’” which I take to mean the realm of objects which we directly perceive. But if anything, this is what we are aware of *first*: we know that “the ‘here-and-now’” exists and is real, and it is in our very own presence. What’s more is that it includes us and gives context to our present knowledge. The “here and now” has the advantage of close proximity, while what may be taking place on a planet revolving around Betelgeuse or “beyond the temporal order” is not within the reach of our awareness. It is certainly not within the reach of mine. But Bahnsen claimed to possess knowledge from “beyond the temporal order,” and seemed quite irritated with those who were not willing to accept his claim to such knowledge, calling them “dull, stubborn, boorish, obstinate and stupid” (*Always Ready*, p. 56). Bahnsen must have been so intelligent that he baffles those who do not confess belief in invisible magic beings.

“The Reproach of the Transcendent”

Bahnsen quickly shows his concern for how non-Christians react to Christianity’s claims:

Those who are not Christians will often assume that the natural world is all there is, in which case nobody can know things about the “super-natural” (whatever surpasses the limits of nature). (p. 177)

Ever one to constrain definitions of key terms to parenthetical asides, Bahnsen does at least make it clear that by “super-natural” he means “whatever surpasses the limits of nature.”

What does it mean to “surpass the limits of nature”? Bahnsen, in all his renowned precision and brilliance, does not bother to explain. In fact he doesn’t even seem to recognize any need to explain further, even though the title of his chapter implies that his task is to clarify *how* one can know “the supernatural,” suggesting that he intends to divulge the workings of a *process* by which one can acquire knowing awareness of “whatever surpasses the limits of nature.” Wouldn’t an explanation of exactly what he means by “whatever surpasses the limits of nature” be germane to such a task?

This conception, whose subject is represented by the pronoun “whatever,” is probably more open-ended than Bahnsen would have liked, but ultimately this cannot be avoided when it comes to such matters as “the supernatural” and Christianity’s claims. However “the supernatural” is to be defined, it needs to be wide enough for Christianity to fit neatly within it. The expression “whatever surpasses the limits of nature” fits the bill for Bahnsen, and can refer to just about anything one can *imagine*. And as I have concluded elsewhere, a believer’s *imagination* is crucial to the survival of his religious beliefs.

Bahnsen, however, would probably object to interpretations of his conception of “the supernatural” involving any use of the imagination. He was often serious about the realm he called “supernatural” being real and not imaginary. “God’s plan and purpose (and not our imaginations),” he tells us elsewhere, “determine whatever comes to pass.” (*Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 224) So then, at this point, we need to be able to distinguish between “whatever we can imagine” and what Bahnsen means by “whatever surpasses the limits of nature.” But since Bahnsen did not think to anticipate this problem, we are left to our own. So we can turn to “the here and now,” even though Bahnsen doesn’t seem to like it, and see what lessons we can pull from our experience in the *real* world.

One thing that reality teaches us whenever something “surpasses the limits of nature,” is that death and destruction follow. One thing’s for sure: when death and destruction strike in reality, it is not imaginary. Examples include, but are not limited to: [the RMS Titanic](#), which sank, killing some 1500 or so passengers and crew, when its collision with an iceberg in the North Atlantic in 1912 caused its hull to “surpass the limits” of its integrity; [the USS Arizona](#), which sank, killing almost 1200 crewmembers on board at the time, when an explosion caused by an attack by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941 caused its onboard structures to “surpass the limits” of their suitability to sustain human life; [the walkway of the Kansas City Hyatt Regency](#) which collapsed, killing 114 people and injuring more than 200 others in July 1981, when the weight of spectators gathered on the elevated walkway caused its structural design to “surpass the limits” of its load-bearing capacity, etc. These are just a few examples that come to mind when considering the expression “whatever surpasses the limits of nature.” And of course, I do not doubt that these things happened. Indeed, I would hope that later generations learn what dangers await when something “surpasses the limits of nature.”

Christians can be expected to retort to these examples by telling us that they do not represent what is meant by the expression “whatever surpasses the limits of nature.” If so, it is incumbent upon them to clarify what they mean by “supernatural.” They do not want the expression to concede to what men imagine, but they also do not want it to

imply destruction to human life either. Most likely, they need a better definition than what Bahnsen provided.

But one thing that is clear, given Bahnsen's stated conception of "the supernatural," is that it concedes the primacy of the natural over the supernatural, at least conceptually. For it is against what we determine to be *natural* (in "the 'here-and-now'") that Bahnsen wants to inform his conception of "the supernatural." That is, to "know the supernatural," we must first know what is natural, and "whatever surpasses the limits of" what we determine to be natural ("the 'here-and-now'" that is), is therefore to be categorized as "supernatural." But while on this analysis knowledge of the natural comes logically prior to any alleged knowledge of "the supernatural" (for it is defined in contrasting reference to the natural), Christians still want to claim that "the supernatural" holds metaphysical and moral primacy over the natural. After all, they want to claim that the natural was "created" by "the supernatural." Bahnsen himself seemed to recognize this to some degree when he wrote:

In the process of knowing anything, man begins with his own experience and questions – the "immediate" starting point. However, that which man knows metaphysically begins with God (who preinterprets, creates, and governs everything man could know), and God's mind is epistemologically the standard of truth – thus being the "ultimate" starting point. (*Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 100n. 33).

So for Bahnsen, the leap from the "immediate" experience known directly and firsthand by an individual subject, to the "'ultimate' starting point" of Christian supernaturalism, is warranted. How exactly such a leap is justified, remains unclear, and without any viable method of distinguishing between "the supernatural" and the imaginary, it seems dubious at best. For [we have already seen](#) that faith, which Bahnsen conceives as a *belief*, "precedes knowledgeable understanding" (*Always Ready*, p. 88). So this "'ultimate' starting point" is affirmed on the basis of belief that is accepted *before* it is understood.

Bahnsen apparently understood that talk of "the supernatural" invites differing opinions and contentions:

In philosophical circles, discussions and debates about questions like these fall within the area of study known as "meta-physics." As you might expect, this division of philosophical investigation is usually a hotbed of controversy between conflicting schools of thought. More recently, the entire enterprise of metaphysics has in itself become a hotbed of controversy. (*Always Ready*, p. 177)

It is true that, in at least *some* philosophical circles, thinkers advocate for the plausibility of various "supernatural" explanations, and do so under the guise of metaphysics. And naturally, one would expect a high degree of controversy in such discussions, for anyone defending "the supernatural" will have nothing *objective* to point to in defense of his pronouncements. Consequently when one supernaturalist encounters another supernaturalist, neither will have any rational way of finally settling any conflict that may arise between them. Because reason and objectivity have been abandoned, controversy ensues without remedy. History has shown this to be the case between religions as well as among various factions within a religion.

Bahnsen's error from this point forward, is that he frequently conflates "metaphysics" with "supernaturalism" per se. Throughout the rest of this chapter, he will often use the words "metaphysics" or "metaphysical" when in fact the context of his point indicates that he really has some form of supernaturalism in mind. Even Bahnsen's own definitions do not support such a confusion, as we shall see. Bahnsen makes use of this switch in order to grant his mystical views an initial degree of *unearned credibility* within the discussion, thereby excusing himself from the heavy lifting we would like to have seen. Therefore, going forward, when quoting from Bahnsen's chapter, any time he uses the word "metaphysics" where actually he means some association with "the supernatural," I will point this out (such as with brackets).

Bahnsen complains about the increase of negative reactions among academics and lay thinkers alike, to claims involving "the supernatural":

Over the last two centuries a mindset has developed which is hostile toward any philosophical claim which is metaphysical [i.e., supernaturalistic] in character. It is clear to most students that antipathy to the Christian faith has been the primary and motivating factor in such attacks. Nevertheless, such criticism has been *generalized* into a pervasive antagonism toward any claims which are similarly "metaphysical" [i.e., supernaturalistic]. This anti-metaphysical [i.e., anti-supernaturalistic] attitude has been one of the crucial ingredients which have molded culture and history over the last two hundred years. It has altered common views regarding man and ethics, it has generated a radical reformulation of religious beliefs, and it has significantly affected perspectives ranging from politics to pedagogy. Consequently a very large number of the skeptical questions or challenges directed against the Christian faith are either rooted in, or colored by, this negative spirit with respect to metaphysics [i.e., supernaturalism]. (p. 178)

Bahnsen complains that, essentially since the Age of Reason, men no longer readily lay down their minds before the local mystic in the numbers that they used to, that many people now offer up resistance where before they were suggestible and domitable. Non-believers are no longer burnt at the stake for their non-belief, for instance, and this irks people like Bahnsen. In fact, Bahnsen's remarks read like a pining soliloquy to a more primitive past, asking something along the lines of "What happened to the church, that it no longer defines civilization in its own image any more? What happened to the good old days of the Dark Ages, when *everyone* feared and believed and no one

dared to defy the man of the cloth? What happened to the inheritance I was promised?"

By complaining thusly, Bahnsen effectively diverts the attention of his reader away from the task at hand, namely "the problem of knowing the 'super-natural'," which he never intended to settle anyway. This paragraph, the fourth in the whole chapter, serves as a segue to focusing the reader's attention on the spoilsports: the non-believers, the atheists, the skeptics, the people who look at Christianity's and any other religion's supernatural claims and ask "How could anyone believe such garbage?" Instead of identifying any means by which one could acquire awareness of what he calls "the supernatural," Bahnsen wants to discredit what he will call "anti-metaphysical arguments," meaning anti-supernatural arguments, well before they've been heard. Isn't this essentially what theists are objecting to when they accuse non-believers of "anti-supernatural bias"? Throughout his discussion, Bahnsen assumes the reality of what he calls "the supernatural" and the truth of the Christian bible, indicating that he never intended to provide any instruction whatsoever on how one can *know* either in the first place. This is the mentality of a Dark Ages priest: "How dare ye argue against my magic kingdom! Of course it exists! You're not supposed to argue against its reality, you're supposed to believe in fear and trembling on my say so!" Only in this unspoken context does Bahnsen's essay make any sense.

"Defining the Metaphysical"

Bahnsen opens this section of his chapter on "The Problem of Knowing the 'Super-Natural'" by stating:

Before we can elaborate on the anti-metaphysical [i.e., anti-supernaturalistic] arguments which are commonly heard today, it would help to understand better what is meant by "metaphysics." (p. 178)

Is it not premature at this point to focus on *anti*-supernaturalistic arguments "which are commonly heard today," before we examine any *pro*-supernaturalistic arguments, or before Bahnsen even proposes *how* one can have awareness and confirm the existence of what he calls "the supernatural"? After all, isn't that what the title of this chapter of Bahnsen's book leads one to expect to find in it? Had he titled his chapter "Common Arguments Against Supernaturalism," or something along those lines, then we would rightly expect to find Bahnsen focus on reviewing anti-supernaturalistic arguments from the get go. But this is not the case. Moreover, if Bahnsen acknowledges that "knowing the 'super-natural'" is in fact problematic, as the title he did choose for his chapter suggests, why doesn't he discuss the means and methods by which one can know "the supernatural" before turning the spotlight on arguments against "the supernatural"? Wouldn't Bahnsen's readers benefit more from his "precision" and "brilliance" if he illuminated a credible context substantiating belief in "the supernatural" before elaborating on common arguments against "the supernatural"? After all, if Bahnsen is confident in his position, why does he worry so much about what the naysayers might be thinking in the first place?

Bahnsen continues:

This is a technical word that is rarely used outside of academic circles; it will not even be part of the vocabulary of most Christians. Nevertheless, the conception of metaphysics and the reaction to it which can be found in academic circles will definitely touch and have an impact on the life of the believer - either in terms of the popular attacks on the faith which he or she must answer, or even in terms of the way in which the Christian religion is portrayed and presented in the pulpit. (p. 178)

Bahnsen's followers often point out that *Always Ready* was written with the unsophisticated lay-believer in mind. Given the condescending attitude of many presuppositionalists, one might get the impression that admitting that there are unsophisticated believers walking around would be anathema to the presuppositionalist program. Inherent in the presuppositional apologetic program is the insistence that non-believers "account for" how they "make sense" of their experience as human beings in the world, as if believing in Christianity's stories somehow enlightened an individual with their "Spirit-renewed minds" such that questions like this would be easy to address. Nonetheless, it is good that Bahnsen acknowledges, at least performatively through the content of his book, that many believers are not very familiar with philosophy, and thus need philosophical terms explained to them. One would hope that such believers reading Bahnsen's book may become more interested in philosophy, and begin asking a few critical questions as they go through Bahnsen's celebrated primer.

Bahnsen explains what metaphysics studies as follows:

It is often said that metaphysics is the study of "being." It might be more illuminating if we wrote that metaphysics studies "being" - that is, questions about existence ("to be, or not to be"). Metaphysics asks, *what is it* to exist? And, *what sorts* of things do exist? Thus the metaphysician is interested to know about fundamental *distinctions* (i.e., the basic classes of things that exist) and important *similarities* (i.e., the essential nature of the members of these classes). (p. 178)

So, "metaphysics is the study of 'being'," the branch of philosophy which "studies 'being' - that is, questions about existence..." It should be clear, however, that rejection of supernaturalism in no way entails a rejection of "the study of 'being'" or a branch of philosophy which "studies 'being' - that is, questions about existence..." It should not be

difficult to see that one can reject supernaturalism and yet still pursue a study of existence, for there is no conflict in accepting the fact that existence exists and yet rejecting the notion of “the supernatural.”

Compare Peikoff’s conception of metaphysics: “Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that studies the nature of the universe as a whole.” (OPAR, p 3) According to Peikoff’s worldview, Objectivism, ‘universe’ is defined as “the sum total of existence,” such that ‘universe’ is a concept which includes anything and everything that exists. (See my blogs [Responding to Chris](#) and [Exapologist’s Message to Non-Theists](#) for some elaboration on this.)

I point this out here because Bahnsen will soon use the phrase “anti-metaphysical” when he really means “anti-supernatural.” He will refer to thinkers who reject “the supernatural”; I, for instance, am such a thinker. However, my worldview has a branch of philosophy called “metaphysics,” so it should be clear that I am in no way “anti-metaphysical.” But I do reject the notion of “the supernatural” (for reasons that should be crystal clear by the end of my review of Bahnsen’s essay), so one could refer to my position as “anti-supernatural.” *My position is anti-supernatural just as and for the same reasons that it is anti-irrational.*

Bahnsen elaborates a little further:

He seeks the *ultimate causes or explanations* for the existence and nature of things. He wants to understand the limits of possible reality, the modes of existing, and the interrelations of existing things. (p. 178)

I am always curious to know better what Christians mean by “cause” and “causality” when they make use of such words in propounding their worldview’s metaphysical position. (I have written on this before: see my blog [Presuppositionalism vs. Causality](#).) Many Christians (in fact, all that I have discussed this with) speak of the universe having some prior cause. This tells me either that their conception of the universe is radically different from mine or that their conception of causality is. It is likely that both are radically different from mine, which is why I wonder what they mean when they use these terms. Christians make use of the same words, but it’s a different language with its own private meanings. I am all for eliminating such barriers to understanding, which is why I am happy to supply definitions of my terms. Above I mentioned that by ‘universe’ my worldview means the sum totality of existence. By ‘causality’ I essentially mean *the identity of action*, for causality is the application of the law of identity to action. Causality is the recognition that the relationship between an entity and its actions is a *necessary* relationship. On this view, existence is a precondition of causality, for action requires an entity (which exists) to do the action so identified. As one Objectivist philosopher points out, “you can’t have a dance without the dancer.” (Kelley, Induction) So if causality presupposes existence (which it obviously does), and the universe includes by definition everything that exists, then talk of causality could only make sense within the context of the universe, not outside it. To speak of causality outside or “prior to” the universe, would be like talking about a dance taking place without any dancers. If someone pointed to an empty stage with no one on it and asked “Do you like the dance?” we would rightly ask “What dance?” The same is the case with many things I have heard Christians argue in their apologetic defenses of their god-belief.

But none of these points seems to be of any concern for Bahnsen, for he does not stop to illuminate them. He is concerned here only with giving a broad definition of the study of metaphysics, and surreptitiously smuggling his supernatural premises in through the back door. Things like the relationship between causes and existence might be expected to come later, but sadly they don’t.

Then he writes:

It should be obvious, then, if only in an elementary way, that Christianity propounds a number of definite metaphysical claims. (p. 178)

Yes, Christianity does advance quite a number of claims, and those claims do have their share of metaphysical commitments, commitments which most Christians themselves do not fully understand, or perhaps do not even want to understand, as the case may be with religious belief. And while Bahnsen is aware that “Christianity propounds a number of definite metaphysical claims,” he nowhere discusses the issue of metaphysical primacy, i.e., the proper orientation in the subject-object relationship. I have discussed this matter at length elsewhere (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#), for instance), so I will try not repeat myself at length in the present review. But above, Bahnsen pointed out that “the metaphysician is interested to know about fundamental *distinctions*,” and yet what distinction is more fundamental and more important to a discussion of knowledge than the distinction between an object and the cognitive means by which one acquires awareness of it? This is the distinction between the knower and what he knows, between the objects he perceives and the faculty by which he perceives it. The relationship between the subject of experience and the objects one experiences is ever-present in one’s waking life. So long as you are conscious, you are conscious of something, and so long as you are conscious of something, there is a relationship between your consciousness and the something you are conscious of. It is inescapable. And any discussion of knowledge, of philosophy, of its major branches, of its purpose, etc., involves this relationship, even if only implicitly, for knowledge and philosophy involve consciousness.

But nowhere in his discussion of metaphysics or “the supernatural” does Bahnsen even seem aware of the importance of this crucial distinction, let alone let alone show any concern for it. Most people acknowledge that there is a distinction between reality and imagination, between what is actual and what is fictitious. Even many Christians

acknowledging that something is not true because one wishes it to be true. The root of such recognitions is the relationship between the subject of consciousness and the object of consciousness. The fundamental question in metaphysics, then, is: do the objects of consciousness exist independent of consciousness, or do they depend on consciousness? Is reality merely an invention of the (or some) mind? Or, does it exist independent of any minds? Do the objects of consciousness conform to the dictates of consciousness, or are they what they are regardless of the content of consciousness? Does the subject of consciousness hold metaphysical primacy over its objects (subjectivism)? Or, do the objects of consciousness hold metaphysical primacy over the subject (objectivism)? These are fundamental questions which are of central importance to a rational approach to metaphysics, and yet we shall not find Bahnsen discussing them anywhere in his defense of supernaturalism. Needless to say, this would concern me if I were a Christian looking to Bahnsen for apologetic guidance.

“Fundamental Distinctions”

In the following paragraph, Bahnsen identifies the fundamental tokens of Christianity’s metaphysical commitments:

The Scripture teaches us that "there is one God, the Father, by whom are all things...and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things" (I Cor. 8:6). All things, of all sorts, were created by Him (John 1:3; Col. 1:16). But He is before all things, and by means of Him all things hold together or cohere (John 1:1; Col. 1:17). He carries along or upholds all things by the word of His power (Heb. 1:3). Therefore, to exist is to be divine or created. In God we live and move and have our being (Act 17:28). He, however, has life in Himself (John 5:26; Ex. 3:14). The living and true God gives the distinguishable unity or common natures to things (Gen. 2:19), categorizing things by placing His interpretation on them (e.g., Gen. 1:5, 8, 10, 17; 2:9). It is He who also makes things to differ from each other (I Cor. 4:7; Ex. 11:7; Rom. 9:21; I Cor. 12:4-6; 15:38-41). Similarity and distinction, then, result from His creative and providential work. Both the existence and nature of things find their explanation in Him - whether casual (Eph. 1:11) or teleological (Eph. 1:11). (p. 179)

Consider what Bahnsen affirms here in light of the questions I posed above. Does the view that Bahnsen outlines here entail subjectivism, or does it entail objectivism? If you answered subjectivism, you’d be correct. As is always the case with subjectivism, reality is split into two mutually exclusive categories. As Bahnsen puts it, “to exist is to be divine or created.” There is the supernatural realm of the divine creator, and under its control is the created natural realm. The divine creator creates and controls the natural realm “by the word of His power,” that is, by means of its conscious will. The things that exist in the natural realm are assigned their identity by the [wishing](#) of the Christian god.

The creator “categorize[s] things by placing His interpretation on them.” In other words, the identity of the things that exist in the natural realm derive from the content of the divine creator’s consciousness, which means its consciousness holds metaphysical primacy over those things which exist in the natural realm. There is in what Bahnsen describes no instance of an object of cognition holding metaphysical primacy over the subject of cognition when the consciousness of the divine creator is concerned. The starting point is an omnipotent consciousness, the divine creator, and the natural realm is an object it creates by a sheer act of will. The divine creator wishes, and POOF! – whatever it wishes becomes reality. “Creation, on Christian principles, must always mean *fiat* creation.” (Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 26, italics added) You couldn’t get more subjective than this if you wanted to. It should not surprise us, then, when believers in this stuff turn around and launch arguments purporting to conclude that the intelligibility of man’s experience depends on the reality of this same divine creator which voluntarily incarnated itself in human flesh, [becoming “fully God, fully man,”](#) and allowed itself to be executed for a creation gone totally wrong.

The idea that “the existence and nature of things find their explanation in [the Christian god]” is the purported capital that the presuppositionalist apologist is hoping to cash in when he challenges non-believers to “account for” some aspect of experience or cognition, such as the assumption that nature is uniform, inductive generalization, laws of logic, science, morality, etc. The apologist poses as having a “ready explanation” at hand, a woolen blanket that covers his own eyes and which he hopes to pull over everyone else’s. It’s the old “God did it!” formula that seems to have a validity all its own once we grant its fundamental premise, namely the primacy of consciousness metaphysics. Once we grant that the universe and all its contents, events, possibilities and relationships were created by and continue to conform to a conscious will, then all that is needed at that point is a name for that conscious will to give it some semblance of identity in the [imagination](#) of the believer. For the Christian, Yahweh (or Elohim, or Jehovah, or Jesus) “accounts for” all these things; for the Muslim, Allah “accounts for” all these things; for the Lahu tribesmen, Geusha “accounts for” all these things, etc. It’s nothing more than the wave-of-the-wand metaphysics that informs the myths of old and the storybooks of today’s popular literature. Each shares the same fundamental common denominator: the primacy of the subject over the object at the most crucial point.

But Bahnsen isn’t finished yet. He continues, stating:

God is the source of all possibility (Isa. 43:10; 44:6; 65:11) and thus sets the limits of possible reality by His own will and decree. (p. 179)

What Bahnsen describes in this unargued assertion is nothing short of the cartoon universe premise of theism. All facts, objects and events found in the universe conform to the ruling consciousness' wishes and decrees. Its wishes and decrees not only determine what is actual and what actually happens, but also what is *possible* to begin with. The entities, persons and happenings of the universe are analogous to features in a [cartoon](#), while all of history itself is analogous to the cartoon itself and the Christian god is analogous to a master cartoonist who has created a cartoon that begins with the creation of the earth and ends with its destruction. In terms of fundamentals, this view of reality grants metaphysical primacy to a form of consciousness: it is the view that the *subject* of awareness holds primacy over the *objects* of awareness. This view is known as metaphysical subjectivism. It characterizes Christianity from its foundations to its outermost dogmas.

“A Comprehensive Metaphysic”

Bahnsen further explains the task of the philosophical branch of metaphysics:

"Metaphysics" can also be seen as an attempt to express the *entire scheme* of reality - of all existing things. The metaphysician must resolve conflicting accounts about the true nature of the world (over against mere appearances), and he does so in terms of an ultimate conceptual framework. Metaphysics tries to make sense of the world as a *whole* by articulating and applying a set of central, regulating, organizing, distinctive paradigms. These principles govern or guide the way in which a person interrelates and interprets the different parts of his life and experience. Everyone uses some such system of ultimate generalities about reality, evaluative criteria, and structuring relationships. We could not think or make sense of anything without some coherent view of the general nature and structure of reality. (p. 179)

Given these points that Bahnsen himself lists as those items which the branch of metaphysics should cover, it is tellingly curious that he does not even mention the subject-object relationship. Does reality exist independent of consciousness, or is it a creation of consciousness? Does consciousness perceive objects which exist independent of itself, or does consciousness create its own objects? Given what Bahnsen states here, you wouldn't know what his answer to such questions might be. Since Bahnsen charges into philosophy with no clear understanding of the relationship between consciousness and its objects, it is no wonder that he nowhere provides any clue on how his readers might be able to distinguish between what he calls "supernatural" and what is imaginary. Wouldn't such questions be topical to "an attempt to express the *entire scheme* of reality"? And if it is the metaphysician's task to "resolve conflicting accounts about the true nature of the world," how could he do this if he has no objective method by which to distinguish between fact and fiction, the real and the imaginary, the true and the untrue?

Bahnsen makes passing mention of "an ultimate conceptual framework." But if it is the case, as Bahnsen will soon claim, that "[a]n individual's limited personal experience cannot warrant a comprehensive framework encompassing every sort of existent there may be" (p. 181), then upon what is this "ultimate conceptual framework" supposed to be based? Is it supposed to be based upon something *outside* his experience, something to which he has no epistemological access, or that *contradicts* one's own personal experience, regardless of how limited or broad it may be? What Bahnsen's theology fails to provide is precisely what an "ultimate conceptual framework" needs a working knowledge of, namely: *a theory of concepts*. We will see that, if concepts are to relate to the reality in which we live, they need to be formed on the basis of what we perceive in the world. Otherwise, they do not integrate things that exist in this world, but are informed instead by otherworldly content (such as what an individual might *imagine*), and such is of no use to man.

As for "mak[ing] sense of the world as a *whole*," we do need a set of general principles which guide our thinking and allow us to discriminate between the real and the imaginary. By 'principle' I have in mind a general truth upon which other truths logically depend. But specifically what are these principles, how do we acquire them, how do we know they are true, and upon what are they based? For the Objectivist, those principles are informed by the axioms (existence, identity and consciousness) and the primacy of existence (the objects of consciousness exist independent of consciousness). These principles are atheistic because they expose the falsehood of god-belief. (See for instance my essay [The Axioms and the Primacy of Existence](#).)

Bahnsen holds that Christians "must *argue* with those oppose the truth of God's word" (*Always Ready*, p. 129), and tells the believer that he "must respond to the onslaught of the unbeliever by attacking the unbeliever's position at its foundations." (Ibid., p. 55) Bahnsen wants his believing readers to attack the principles upon which my worldview stands. But what exactly is wrong with those principles? Does he think they are wrong? On the contrary, to say they are wrong, he would have to assume them. So what principles does Bahnsen propose as suitable alternatives for serving as the basis of "an ultimate conceptual framework"?

The relevance and importance of my questions are underscored by what Bahnsen himself states:

Instead of dealing with simply one distinguishable department of study or one limited area of human experience (e.g., biology, history, astronomy), metaphysics is *comprehensive* - concerned with, and relevant

to, the whole world. For this reason one's metaphysical views will affect every other inquiry in which he engages, illumine a wide range of subjects, and form the "first principles" for other intellectual disciplines. (pp. 179-180)

Bahnsen acknowledges that the truths established in the metaphysical branch of philosophy are "concerned with, and relevant to, the whole world." They are not truths like "water boils at 212 degrees Fahrenheit," or "Cornelius Van Til was born in the Netherlands," or "an Italian sixth chord usually resolves into a chord on the dominant." Metaphysics is concerned with truths that apply to all areas of human interest. Hence they will, as Bahnsen rightly points out, "affect every other inquiry in which [man] engages." What could occupy such a fundamental role more comprehensively than the axioms of existence, identity and consciousness? And in what area of human interest does the object of consciousness not hold metaphysical primacy over the subject?

Now consider, if one adopts as his metaphysical principles ideas which contradict the axioms of Objectivism. Suppose one takes Bahnsen's exhortations to reject this non-believer's foundations seriously. He would have to argue on a basis which opposes the axioms. Accordingly, he would have to argue on the assumption that there is *no* existence, that there is *no* identity, that there is *no* consciousness. Further, he would have to assume that whatever exists (which he has already denied) must conform to consciousness. So in order to oppose Objectivism he would have to oppose himself. So again, it would be curious to know what Bahnsen proposes as alternatives to this non-believer's foundations.

"The Christian Metaphysic"

Bahnsen describes the globally encompassing nature of Christianity's metaphysic:

The Christian faith comprises a metaphysical system on this account also. Scripture teaches that all things are of God, through God, and unto God (Rom. 11:36). We must think His thoughts after Him (Prov. 22:17-21; John 8:31-32). In this way we can understand and interpret the world as a whole. The Word of God gives us light (Ps. 119:130), and Christ Himself is the life-giving light of men (John 1:4), in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:3). Hence we can discern the true nature of reality in terms of Christ's word: *in Thy light we see light* (Ps. 36:9). (p. 180)

Below we will see Bahnsen try to disqualify one's own "limited personal experience" as the means by which a comprehensive metaphysical framework could be developed. And when I read statements like the above, it is clear to me that Bahnsen has adopted a metaphysic which has nothing at all to do with one's firsthand experiences, save for his emotions. And the only way that the above could relate to one's own experiences is through his imagination. One can certainly imagine that there is a god, that it created everything, that "all things are of God, through God, and unto God" (including all the evil and suffering in the world), that this god "is the life-giving light of men" and that "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" are "hid" in this god somehow. But imagination is not the basis of an objective metaphysic, and to suggest that its inventions can substitute as a metaphysic is pretense.

Bahnsen speaks of Christ as a "life-giving light," a metaphor which allegorically plays to the senses (specifically vision). This "light" is presumably not the same thing that we find in nature, such as from the sun or fire, or from artificial sources, such as incandescent light bulbs. The "life-giving light of men" could not be either natural or artificial, for this would undercut the appeal to supernaturalism. But how are we to make sense of such notions when they are couched in terms which only make sense on the basis of sense experience, and yet are supposed to refer to things that are inaccessible to the senses, if not by retreating to the imaginary? Nevertheless, even though he still has not shown how one can have awareness of "the supernatural" or distinguish what he calls "the supernatural" from mere imagination, or how one can "know" what he calls "the supernatural" by means other than imagination, Bahnsen makes it clear that "the supernatural" is of central importance to his worldview's metaphysical thesis. The natural, on his view, depends on the supernatural. The supernatural created and governs over the natural. This again suggests the involvement of one's imagination. One can look at anything in nature and imagine a supernatural force behind it propping it up, "explaining" it in some way, "accounting for" it, etc. What metaphysical view requires that the natural be explained by an appeal to the supernatural, if not one which grants metaphysical primacy to consciousness? Indeed, does Bahnsen anywhere show how his views can be reconciled to the metaphysical primacy of existence? Not at all.

Bahnsen thinks the key to understanding and interpreting the world as a whole is not found in conceptualizing that material provided by perception (i.e., the process of *reason*), but by thinking the thoughts of the Christian god after it. Again, if what one imagines is one's standard, what would keep one from supposing that any thoughts he thinks are the thoughts of an infallible invisible magic being? And if one supposes that one's own thoughts are the thoughts of an infallible being, then he is naturally conferring infallibility to his own thoughts. This of course could be tested. It would not be very convincing to claim that one's thoughts are thoughts one thinks after his infallible god, only to have those thoughts turn out to be just as fallible as anyone else's thoughts. Someone claiming to think his god thoughts after it can easily be interrogated to see just how well his thinking holds up. A proper test would not include questions whose answers could easily be sought beforehand, such as "In what year was construction on the Empire State Building completed?" Rather, we could ask, for instance, what the product of 32,815.48 times 0.0912

plus 4116.87 times 28.813 is. If his answer does not match what a calculator gives us, should we assume that the calculator is wrong?

Though the presuppositionalist may be confessionally motivated not to admit it, the fact is that the believer is stuck with non-believers on this point. We think our *own* thoughts, and pretending otherwise does not produce a method by which “we can understand and interpret the world as a whole.” Such pretense is an attempt to fake reality, and no value can come from it. An attempt to fake reality surrenders thought to the arbitrary, such that no legitimate thinking can be claimed at that point. It constitutes an evasion in the guise of a “pious truth.”

Bahnsen further elaborates the "Christian metaphysic":

The Bible sets forth a definite metaphysical scheme. It begins with God who is a personal, infinitely perfect, pure spirit (Ex. 15:11; Mal. 2:10; John 4:24). The triune God (2 Cor. 13:14) is unique in His nature and works (Ps. 86:9), self-existent (Ex. 3:14; John 5:26; Gal. 4:8-9), eternal (Ps. 90:2), immutable (Mal. 3:6), and omnipresent (Ps. 139:7-10). Everything else that exists has been created out of nothing (Col. 1:16-17; Heb. 11:3), whether the material world (Gen. 1:1; Ex. 20:11), the realm of spirits (Ps. 148:2, 5), or man. (p. 180)

One can easily claim that “the Bible sets forth a definite metaphysical scheme,” but one could just as easily make the same claim in regard to the tales of Tolkien, Baum, Lucas, Rowling, and other story-writers. It could also be said about the sacred texts of non-Christian religions. The bible has a god which “is a personal, infinitely perfect, pure spirit,” while the worlds of Rowling, Tolkien and Baum are populated by warlocks and witches, and the outcomes in the ancient and distant galaxies of *Star Wars* are determined by an everpresent, omniscient and omnipotent cosmic power called “the Force.” Modern mysticism shares the same fundamentals with the mysticism of the ancients. Boiled down to their implications for the subject-object relationship, storylines like those found in the bible are essentially no different from those by modern fantasy writers in that their mystical dabbling is inspired by the primacy of consciousness metaphysics. The common denominator joining each into one is the directive and regulating role of the imagination.

At root, Bahnsen’s metaphysic thus shares with other versions of fantasy the same orientation between subject and object, both in content and in method. The content of such stories grants, to one degree or another, metaphysical primacy to a conscious power, and the method involved in informing such stories is governed by the imagination (cf. “whatever surpasses the limits of nature”).

Bahnsen outlines the Christian metaphysic as it pertains to man as follows:

Man was created as the image of God (Gen. 1:27), a being who exhibits both a material and immaterial character (Matt. 10:28), surviving bodily death (Eccl. 12:7; Rom. 2:7) with personal awareness of God (2 Cor. 5:8), and awaiting bodily resurrection (1 Cor. 6:14; 15:42-44). (p. 180)

Here Bahnsen affirms the standard biblical view that “man was created in the image of God,” and yet this is a most puzzling doctrinal affirmation given what we know of man and what Christianity claims about its god. Man, for instance, is physical, biological, mortal, corruptible, destructible, imperfect, neither omniscient nor infallible, given to his passions, prone to making mistakes and capable of moral improprieties. On the other hand, however, the Christian god is said to be non-physical, non-biological, immortal, incorruptible, indestructible, perfect, omniscient, infallible, imperturbable, unerring and incapable of moral improprieties. Man faces a fundamental alternative, namely life versus death, and has needs that he must meet in order to continue existing, while the Christian god does not face any such fundamental alternative (it is supposed to be immortal, eternal and indestructible). In the language of analytic philosophy, the Christian god is said to be “necessary,” while man is supposed to be “contingent.” And while we are supposed to accept the claim that the Christian god is a perfect creator, it is hard to see how one could sustain this view given the imperfections, not only in men, but also in the world, which is constantly undergoing change. Wouldn’t the product of a creator that is perfect also be perfect? So in what way is man “created as the image of God”? It could not be man’s rational nature, for rationality assumes non-omniscience. Rationality is the commitment to reason as one’s only means of knowledge and his only guide to action. An omniscient and infallible mind would have no need for any means of knowledge, for it would already possess all knowledge infallibly. So a means of knowledge could only imply a starting point of non-omniscience and an ability to error, and the Christian god is said not to have either of these conditions. Also, rationality is a conceptual faculty, and [as I have already shown](#), an omniscient mind would not possess its knowledge in the form of concepts.

Bahnsen says that man is “a being who exhibits both a material and immaterial character.” But what exactly could this mean? How does man “exhibit” a character in this sense? Objectivism views man as an *integrated* being of both *matter* and *consciousness*. The axiom of consciousness is affirmed by Objectivism at its foundations. But above we saw Bahnsen affirm that the believer “must respond to the onslaught of the unbeliever by attacking the unbeliever’s position at its foundations.” This could only mean that as a Christian he must find the axiom of consciousness objectionable for some reason – namely because a non-believer has affirmed it. So he is committed to rejecting it, even though such rejection involves an act of consciousness. Frequently apologists seem to have some aspect of consciousness in mind whenever they speak of things “immaterial,” such as “spirits.” But if consciousness is rejected as a matter of apologetic principle, then it would be inconsistent to turn around and affirm consciousness in Christianity’s doctrines. Bahnsen needs to make up his mind, and live with the results.

Also, Bahnsen mentions a "personal awareness of God," presumably something the believer is supposed to have. In mentioning it, Bahnsen acknowledges that it is an issue, that awareness of the supernatural deity central to Christianity is something the believer allegedly possesses. But Bahnsen nowhere identifies the *means* by which the believer is supposed to have such awareness. To be aware of the Christian god, for instance, does the believer look *outward*, or does he look *inward*? What options are available, besides the senses, if this awareness is supposedly had by looking *outward*? Bahnsen does not say. If the believer acquires awareness of the Christian god by looking *inward*, then the question of how one distinguishes between what one calls the Christian god and what he may merely be imagining becomes a central concern.

Bahnsen also makes mention of the notion of an afterlife as part and parcel of his worldview's metaphysical view of man. Here, as with many other doctrinal affirmations, Bahnsen radically departs from science and affirms Christianity's view of man on what could only be a storybook basis. Of course, anyone can *imagine* that man has a soul which survives his "bodily death" and floats like a vapor up to a magic kingdom somewhere beyond the cosmos. But again, imagination is not reality. I have pointed out before that the cross is a most fitting symbol of death, which makes it the ideal symbol for the Christian worldview. The Christian view of man was eloquently summarized by Ayn Rand as follows:

They have taught man that he is a hopeless misfit made of two elements, both symbols of death. A body without a soul is a corpse, a soul without a body is a ghost – yet such is their image of man's nature: the battleground of a struggle between the corpse and a ghost, a corpse endowed with some evil volition of its own and a ghost endowed with the knowledge that everything known to man is non-existent, that only the unknowable exists. (*For the New Intellectual*, p. 138)

Rather than viewing man as an *integrated* being, religion wants to *disintegrate* man by tearing him asunder. His "flesh" is that necessary evil that the Christian god, in its self-immolating mercy (which we are supposed to believe temporarily squelched its jealousy and wrath), took on as it allowed itself to be gestated, birthed, raised, spat upon, praised, worshipped, flogged, crucified and resurrected. In reptilian manner the flesh was shed and the soul was set free from its constraints. The grave now held a promise not achievable while still residing in flesh, and morticians could finally serve as gatekeepers to a further installment of the Christian fantasy: eternity in an imaginary realm populated by imaginary beings, where "the chosen" live happily ever after.

Bahnsen goes on with his description of the Christian metaphysic:

In creation God made all things according to His unsearchable wisdom (Ps. 104:24; Isa. 40:28), assigning all things their definite characters (Isa. 40:26; 46:9-10). God also determines all things by His wisdom (Eph. 1:11) - preserving (Neh. 9:6), governing (Ps. 103:19), and predetermining the nature and course of all things, thus being able to work miracles (Ps. 72:18). The decree by which God providentially ordains historical events is eternal, effectual, unconditional, unchangeable, and comprehensive (e.g., Isa. 46:10; Acts 2:23; Eph. 3:9-11). (p. 180)

This statement resoundingly confirms the Objectivist analysis of religious thought, specifically the conclusion that the religious view of the world reduces to the primacy of consciousness metaphysics (i.e., subjectivism). Notice how consistently the primacy of consciousness is assumed in the points which Bahnsen emphasizes:

- "God made all things according to His unsearchable wisdom" - this puts "wisdom," which is a faculty of consciousness, prior to the "things" which were "created," and that includes "all things." On this view it is clear: existence is a result of prior conscious activity.
- "assigning all things their definite character" - this again puts conscious activity prior to the nature of any thing which could serve as a distinct object of that consciousness. On this view it is clear: identity is the result of prior conscious activity.
- "God also determines all things by His wisdom..., preserving..., governing..., and predetermining the nature and course of all things" - this means that whatever happens conforms to the intentions of a consciousness. On this view it is clear: whatever happens in the world is the result of prior conscious activity.
- "thus being able to work miracles" - this means that the ruling consciousness can revise the identity of any object at will. On this view it is clear: the universe is analogous to one very long and involved cartoon, where the cartoonist makes whatever it wants appear and be whatever it wants.

Bahnsen says that "the decree by which God providentially ordains historical events is eternal, effectual, unconditional, unchangeable and comprehensive." Because it is "eternal" and "unchangeable," it sounds like even god cannot change it, which seems to render it quite powerless before its own decrees. This would render its omnipotence utterly useless, for its unchangeable decree would lock it into whatever course has been decreed, resulting in an unending circle. So not only is the primacy of consciousness consistently affirmed in the Christian religion, the power which Christians attribute to their god is self-defeating anyway.

Apparently not concerned with these problems, Bahnsen goes on to say:

These truths are paradigmatic for the believer; they are ultimate principles of objective reality, to be distinguished from the delusions set forth in contrary views of the world. What the unbelieving world sees as wisdom is actually foolish (I Cor. 1:18-25). (p. 180)

It is through statements like these, which are thrown out in a "defend at all cost" manner, which amusingly paint the apologist into a most uncomfortable corner. It does so by conceding to his opponents precisely what the apologist wants to deny them. Now he is committed to calling whatever the non-believer may affirm "delusional," by virtue of the fact that they are "set forth in contrary views of the world." No matter what the non-believer affirms – even if they are undeniable truths – Bahnsen has already classed it as "actually foolish." For instance, I see truth, knowledge, reason, values, rational self-interest, and individual rights as points of wisdom. So given what Bahnsen is telling us here, he thinks each of these things are "delusions" and "actually foolish."

In spite of this self-defeating approach, Bahnsen insists that everyone else is wrong:

Since the minds of the unbelieving are blinded (2 Cor. 4:4), they err according to the faith described above, thus having only a "knowledge falsely so-called" (I Tim. 6:20-21). (pp. 180-181)

Sensing that he has no rational defense for his position - and yet unwilling to admit it, Bahnsen opts for an easy copout: everyone who doesn't agree with his position is "blinded." Accordingly, he's right, and anyone who does not believe what he claims, is cognitively defective. That takes care of that, right? Perhaps it helps to chase away doubts in the minds of those who are simply determined to affirm their religious programming at all costs, but only momentarily. Unfortunately for the apologist who takes this route, the doubts will of course continue to linger, and for good reason. It's certainly not an intellectual approach to these matters. (It calls to mind the image of a stubborn pre-teen who plugs up his ears and shuts his eyes tight while screaming "I'm right! You're wrong! I'm right! You're wrong!" over and over again to silence any unwanted input.)

Meanwhile, it is not likely that non-believers in general are going to be very moved by Bahnsen's charge of error when it comes to getting his faith-based confessions right; after all, they're non-believers, and they would be wise to consider the source. But again, Bahnsen commits himself to calling whatever a non-believer professes to know "false," even before he knows what it might be. It's hard to see how this could be considered at all responsible. For instance, I know that there is a reality. According to what Bahnsen affirms here, this is "knowledge falsely so-called," simply because I, a non-believer, am affirming it. Let Bahnsen have it his way. But that would amount to saying there is no reality. Why should we believe this? Because Bahnsen has no actual defense for his belief in "the supernatural" (he doesn't even address the most basic questions when he sets out to pontificate on "The Problem of the 'Super-Natural'"), he has little option but to take the low road.

Not that it can do his position any good, Bahnsen gives an example of what he means:

For instance, resting in the appearance of total regularity, an unbelieving metaphysic does not teach that Christ will come again to intervene in the cosmic process to judge men and determine their eternal destinies (cf. 2 Peter 3:3-7). (p. 181)

The non-believer who does not believe that "Christ will come again" is simply being consistent, then. By virtue of his non-belief, he does not adopt a worldview which does "teach that Christ will come again." He may not even believe that the Christ depicted in the New Testament actually came the first time around to begin with.

“Distinguishing Appearance from Reality”

In this brief section of his chapter "The Problem of Knowing the 'Super-Natural'," Bahnsen makes the following claims:

Therefore, the Bible distinguishes appearance from reality, and it provides an ultimate conceptual framework that makes sense of the world as whole. The Biblical metaphysic affects our outlook and conclusions regarding every field of study or endeavor, and it serves as the only foundation for all disciplines from science to ethics (Prov. 1:7; Matt. 7:24-27). (p. 181)

This is a rather quizzical statement. Where exactly does the bible "distinguish appearance from reality"? What does it say in this regard? And what exactly is the distinction between appearance and reality? Does the bible tell its readers how they can reliably distinguish between appearance and reality? Is Bahnsen saying that appearances are not real? If we trace it further, wouldn't this amount to saying that consciousness is not real? On the same token, did Bahnsen fully understand that there is a distinction between what we imagine and what is real? If his followers claim that he did, where did he make this distinction explicit, and why didn't he guide his worldview accordingly?

Bahnsen himself was fond of referring to the first chapter of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans. In the first chapter,

twentieth verse, the apostle writes:

For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.

The verse already dumbfounds itself by tidily encapsulating an internal contradiction. For how can something that is invisible be “clearly seen”? But add to this unworkable conundrum Bahnsen’s statement that “the Bible distinguishes appearance from reality.” How well does this statement integrate with what we read in Romans 1:20? Could it be that the “invisible things” which appear to our seeing that the apostle wanted to take as evidence of the Christian god, are merely an *appearance*, and not reality? Supposing the presuppositionalist proposes a method by which appearance and reality can be reliably distinguished (not that he ever will), does Paul’s epistle offer any evidence that he applied that method in order to make sure that “the invisible things” he claims “are clearly seen,” are not merely a passing appearance, but in fact are real?

Bahnsen says that “the Bible... provides an ultimate conceptual framework that makes sense of the world as whole.” But how effectively can the bible do this when it doesn’t even have a theory of concepts, and its very foundation is built on stolen concepts? The bible clearly and incontrovertibly grants metaphysical primacy to consciousness, and yet the primacy of consciousness is false. How can one “make sense of the world as whole” when he views the world as a creation of consciousness? As a creation of consciousness, it is subject to whatever the ruling consciousness desires it to be at any given time. We can say “rocks do not sing,” but if we grant that there is a universe-creating, reality-ruling consciousness which “controls whatsoever comes to pass” (Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 160), how could anyone be confident that “rocks do not sing”? Bahnsen himself asks, “He could even make the stones cry out, couldn’t He?” (*Always Ready*, pp. 109-110) It is doubtful that he would have answered this question negatively. For all we know, the ruling consciousness could have an entire quarry of singing rocks chorusing its praises in the wilderness. The apologist has no epistemological jurisdiction here, for his own worldview’s foundations would undermine any claim to certainty on such basic things. At most he could only claim to be certain that he can never be certain (an “apparent contradiction?”), for the only prevailing standard would be absurdity as such, and nothing more.

So ironically, Bahnsen is correct when he says that “the Biblical metaphysic affects our outlook and conclusions regarding every field of study or endeavor.” Of course it would, if it is taken seriously as a truthful portrait of reality. But it does not follow from this that “it serves as the only foundation for all disciplines from science to ethics,” and it’s not unsurprising that Bahnsen gives no argument to support such a bizarre and untenable thesis.

“Ultimate Questions”

Bahnsen titled the next paragraph of his chapter “Ultimate Questions,” but yet he does not ask one question anywhere in it:

So then, "metaphysics" studies such questions or issues as the nature of existence, the sorts of things that exist, the classes of existent things, limits of possibility, the ultimate scheme of things, reality versus appearance, and the comprehensive conceptual framework used to make sense of the world as a whole. It is not hard to understand, then, how the term "metaphysics" has come to connote the study of that which is "beyond the physical realm." Simple eyeball inspection of isolated and particular situations in the physical world cannot answer metaphysical questions like those just enumerated. An individual's limited personal experience cannot warrant a comprehensive framework encompassing every sort of existent there may be. Empirical experience merely gives us an appearance of things; empirical experience cannot *in itself* correct illusions or get us beyond appearance to any world or realm of reality lying beyond. Nor can it determine the limits of the possible. A particular experience of the physical world does not deal with the world as whole. Nor does the nature of existence manifest itself in simple sense perception of any physical object or set of them.
(p. 181)

Some clarification is in order here before proceeding any further. He says that “‘metaphysics’ studies such questions or issues as the nature of existence, the sorts of things that exist,” etc., but earlier he seemed to mean specifically “supernatural” things when using the term “metaphysics.” It is doubtful that even Bahnsen held that *only* supernatural things exist. So at best, on the understanding of ‘metaphysics’ that he gives here, it would *include* but not be *limited to* study of “the supernatural.” Presumably, since natural things exist, if ‘metaphysics’ studies “the nature of existence, the sorts of things that exist,” the field of metaphysics would at minimum entail the study of natural things. So unless it is already assumed that “the supernatural” is real and not imaginary, a person using the term ‘metaphysics’ would not necessarily have “the supernatural” in mind, especially if he did not subscribe to any form of supernaturalism. Contrary to what Bahnsen’s earlier statements have indicated, then, one can be “anti-supernatural” without being “anti-metaphysical.”

But Bahnsen might have differed with this analysis, for he says that “it is not hard to understand... how the term ‘metaphysics’ has come to connote the study of that which is ‘beyond the physical realm.’” By constraining metaphysics to include “that which is ‘beyond the physical realm,’” Bahnsen implies that metaphysics would have no

interest in studying that which is found *within* “the physical realm” unless “the supernatural” were taken seriously and granted primacy over it. But I see no reason why we should accept this. What exactly is the difference between something that is admittedly natural or physical and that which is “supernatural” or “beyond the physical realm”? Distinctions like this are obviously assumed by Bahnsen, but he nowhere pinpoints them. Consequently any distinction between “the supernatural” and “the physical realm” remains unexpressed, vague, approximate. Perhaps we’re supposed to “just know” how they are distinguished, as if it were a secret we’re not supposed to put into actual words.

Bahnsen seems to think that “‘metaphysics’ has come to connote the study of that which is ‘beyond the physical realm’” because, according to him, it also studies the “limits of possibility, the ultimate scheme of things, reality versus appearance, and the comprehensive conceptual framework used to make sense of the world as a whole.” Even if we accept this, it is still not clear why a “supernatural” realm needs to be posited in distinction to “the physical realm.” If metaphysics is devoted to the study of what is real, and “the physical realm” is real, then certainly we should not expect metaphysics to ignore that which is within “the physical realm.” But on Bahnsen’s view, “the physical realm” is, for reasons he does not clearly state, at best relegated to a secondary position and subordinated to a realm which he calls “supernatural” if not shoved aside altogether. The result is that, if metaphysics is “the study of that which is ‘beyond the physical realm,’” it becomes troublesomely unclear why it would have any importance for beings which exist *in* “the physical realm.” We are physical beings (those who doubt this can verify it by taking a physical knife to their physical skin) and we live in a physical world. We value physical things (e.g., food, water, shelter, clothing, shoes, beds, television sets, CDs, computers, cars, other human beings, etc.), and we obtain them through physical means (action, effort, work, money, trade, etc.). A worldview whose metaphysics focuses on “that which is ‘beyond the physical realm’” seems to abandon man along with “the physical realm” that it seeks to ignore. What could possibly justify this?

Perhaps Bahnsen thinks that metaphysics studies “that which is ‘beyond the physical realm’” because the form in which our knowledge of metaphysical truths and principles is not itself physical. After all, a “comprehensive conceptual scheme,” which Bahnsen lists among the things which metaphysics studies, is not something we put in our pocket or contain in a jar. But this would be most naïve as it would indicate a dimly primitive understanding of man’s mind and the process by which he forms concepts. Indeed, Bahnsen makes mention of a “comprehensive conceptual scheme,” but his biblical worldview provides no native theory of concepts. Concepts do not represent a supernatural dimension; on the contrary, the mind’s ability to form concepts is as natural as its ability to perceive physical objects. But for Bahnsen, the conceptual realm somehow implies a supernatural realm, apparently because the conceptual is not a physical object that can be studied in a chemistry lab.

One of the most important relationships which a serious metaphysics should study, but which Bahnsen nowhere lists among those things which metaphysics – on his understanding – studies, is the relationship between consciousness and its objects. An objective worldview is one in which the object of consciousness is understood to hold metaphysical primacy over the subject of consciousness. On this view, for example, an object is what it is no matter what the subject wishes it to be. This is the proper orientation between a subject and its objects. A subjective worldview is one which allows the subject to hold – either always (in the case of a privileged subject) or at least occasionally (when such bestowals are distributed) – metaphysical primacy over its objects. On this view, there exists at least one subject which has the power to wish its objects into anything it prefers them to be. This power is often called “authority” or “sovereignty,” as in the case of Bahnsen’s god. The subjective view thus constitutes a reversal of the objective view, for it trades on reversing the proper orientation between a subject and its objects.

Inherent in Bahnsen’s habit of conflating metaphysics with supernaturalism is the reversal of the relationship between the subject of consciousness and its objects. Note that, in addition to studying “such questions or issues as the nature of existence, the sorts of things that exist, the classes of existent things” and other matters, metaphysics is also the branch in which the relationship between consciousness and its objects is first encountered. The object of study in metaphysics is reality, and the awareness *that* there is a reality requires a *means* of awareness. The issue of metaphysical primacy asks whether reality exists independent of consciousness, or whether it conforms to consciousness. This is the most fundamental issue in all philosophy, for however one answers it, defines the rest of metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, etc. Unfortunately, Bahnsen expresses no concern for understanding this fundamental relationship. Whatever observations, inferences, conclusions or verdicts one reaches in metaphysics, they are by means of consciousness about *some* object of consciousness. Thus the question of the relationship between consciousness and its objects is inescapable.

The closest Bahnsen comes to the issue of metaphysical primacy is “reality versus appearance.” But he does not bring this issue up because there is an actual problem here, or because he has an actual solution to the supposed problem. Rather, Bahnsen brings it up in order to sow doubt in the mind of the reader about the efficacy of his own mind, for he nowhere explains how appearance is different from reality, nor does he explain how any difference between how reality appears and how reality actually is can be overcome. He interjects this dichotomy for the express purpose of posing a conflict between man’s mind and the world he perceives. In actuality, the problem is between Bahnsen’s worldview and the world in which we exist.

On an objective theory of perception, there is no insidious conflict between appearance and reality whatsoever. Appearance is merely the *form* in which we are visually aware of something. In any instance of awareness, there is the object of which we are aware (the *what* of awareness) and the *form* in which we are aware of it (the *how* of

awareness). When we perceive an *object*, we are *perceiving* that object. Kelley explains:

Consciousness is not metaphysically active. It no more creates its own contents than does the stomach. But it *is* active epistemologically in processing those contents. *What* we are aware of is defined by reality – there is nothing else to be aware of – but *how* we are aware of it is determined by our means of awareness. How could there be any conflict between these two facts?... Metaphysically, our cognitive faculties determine the manner in which we grasp reality, but it is reality we grasp. In perception, the way objects appear to us is partly determined by our perceptual apparatus...; but the objects themselves appear, the objects themselves we are aware of by means of their appearances. (*The Evidence of the Senses*, p. 41)

When we perceive an object, we have awareness of that object. We do not “perceive appearances” – that would be a stolen concept. Rather, we perceive objects in the form dictated by the nature of our awareness and the objects we are perceiving. But what we are perceiving all along are the objects themselves. And since our consciousness is real, the form in which we perceive something is just as real as the object that we are perceiving. Understanding what distinguishes them from one another allows us to recognize that there really is no conflict here at all. But the “reality versus appearance” dichotomy is still likely to hold sway with the defender of supernaturalism, not because he really thinks there is a conflict between his means of perceiving a turn in the road, a tree, or a stop sign, and the turn, the tree or the stop sign itself, but because he has accepted a false model of consciousness to begin with, and this false model of consciousness is vital to his god-beliefs.

Again, the topic of Bahnsen’s chapter is “The Problem of Knowing the ‘Super-Natural’.” In knowing anything, there is, as Kelley reminds us, the *what* of which we are aware, and the *how* by which we are aware of it. For Bahnsen to gain any credibility in his endorsement of supernatural claims, he would at minimum have to enlighten us on *both* of these concerns. Remember that on the jacket of *Always Ready*, Douglas Wilson hails Bahnsen’s mind as “nothing if not precise.” *What* precisely does the term “supernatural” denote? *How* precisely does Bahnsen have awareness of it? At every turn, Bahnsen resists addressing both questions with any specificity, even though they are fundamental to any claim to knowledge of “the supernatural.”

Bahnsen goes on to tell us that “simple eyeball inspection of isolated and particular situations in the physical world cannot answer metaphysical questions like those just enumerated.” In other words, he is saying, perceptual observation “cannot” address such issues as “the nature of existence, the sorts of things that exist, the classes of existent things, limits of possibility, the ultimate scheme of things, reality versus appearance, and the comprehensive framework used to make sense of the world as a whole.” Bahnsen’s reason for stating this is clear enough: “An individual’s limited personal experience cannot warrant a comprehensive framework encompassing every sort of existent there may be.” This can only mean that Bahnsen is taking omniscience as a minimum necessary condition for answering the metaphysical questions he mentions and forming “the comprehensive framework used to make sense of the world as a whole.” To possess answers to the issues he lists, one would presumably need “unlimited personal experience” and something more than “simple eyeball inspection of isolated and particular situations in the physical world.” On this view, in order to have “a comprehensive framework encompassing every sort of existent there may be,” he would presumably need to have exhaustive knowledge of “every sort of existent there may be.” So on Bahnsen’s own standard, unless he himself was omniscient, he didn’t have any answers to these questions. Bahnsen would likely reject this conclusion for he holds in his back pocket a substitute consciousness which allegedly possesses the omniscience his standard requires. Thus we have an epistemology of vicariousness: the believer himself confesses that his own mind, allegedly created by a perfect, infallible and omnipotent creator, is basically worthless when it comes to supplying “the comprehensive framework encompassing every sort of existent there may be” which metaphysics is intended to deliver, but this does not matter for he has access (by means he does not identify) to a consciousness which is supernatural (which he does not precisely define in positive terms) and which has all the answers already. It’s the standard “I may not know, but my god knows” position in philosophy.

Bahnsen is on record repeatedly claiming that the Christian worldview is the precondition to intelligibility of human experience. This is one of his fundamental debating points, a claim which is couched in the context of epistemological vicariousness described above. Naturally we would not expect Bahnsen to confess that he himself lacks “the comprehensive framework encompassing every sort of existent there may be.” And although he would likely claim to possess such a framework, he would likely admit readily that he himself does not have direct awareness of “every sort of existent there may be.” He does not need such awareness, for all he needs to do is stipulate that “every sort of existent there may be” was created by his god. Since his god is omniscient and created every existent distinct from itself, it necessarily has exhaustive knowledge of “every sort of existent there may be,” and that exhaustive knowledge is the master “comprehensive framework” in which “every sort of existent there may be” finds its proper orderly place. So on this view, Bahnsen himself does not have the requisite exhaustive knowledge needed to inform “the comprehensive framework encompassing every sort of existent there may be” which is allegedly the precondition to the intelligibility of human experience, but he claims his god has this knowledge. How could he know this? Well, that question comes under the topic of his present chapter: “The Problem of Knowing the ‘Super-Natural’.” So again, the *what* and the *how* of this alleged cognition are what Bahnsen needs to address, but so far he’s not addressed either in the slightest.

All throughout, Bahnsen seems to be denigrating the role of sense experience in developing the “comprehensive framework” that metaphysics is supposed to deliver. Indeed, if Bahnsen thinks that this “comprehensive framework” is pre-packaged by an omniscient deity in the first place and somehow deposited into select human minds (such as

Bahnsen's own), then talk of "developing" this comprehensive framework from some fundamental starting point is anathema to Bahnsen's position. Since Bahnsen's "limited personal experience cannot warrant" this "comprehensive framework" any better than anyone else's experience can, he wouldn't know where to begin if he had to assemble it on his own. He's so familiar with it and his own mental abilities that he doesn't know how he or any other human being could build such a contrivance.

But whatever the case may be, Bahnsen is sure that one cannot develop such a "comprehensive framework" from the "limited personal experience" man has in the world. No experience that man can have will ever be enough for Bahnsen. The senses are inappropriate anyway, because whatever divine agency created them, in all its otherworldly brilliance, saw to it that they merely give us awareness of *appearances*, not of reality proper. As Bahnsen puts it, "Empirical experience merely gives us an appearance of things; empirical experience cannot *in itself* correct illusions or get us beyond appearance to any world or realm of reality lying beyond." Bahnsen happily tells us that "the Bible distinguishes appearance from reality," perhaps in order to nag his readers without going into any detail. At any rate, all this means that empirical experience could not be the means by which Bahnsen acquires awareness of "the supernatural." Again, Bahnsen only tells us how he does *not* know what he calls "the supernatural"; he does not explain *how* he could know what he claims to know. He constantly keeps this issue conveniently and safely out of sight.

Bahnsen avoids disclosing his position on what role empirical experience does play in acquiring knowledge. Does sense experience for Bahnsen play no role in acquiring any of the knowledge which ultimately informs the "comprehensive framework" by which we make sense of the world? Bahnsen does not confront this question, but from what he does say one can easily get the impression that, on his view, the senses ("empirical experience") play no role of any significance. Sense experience is limited, and what we presumably need is *unlimited* experience. Also, "empirical experience merely gives us an appearance of things," which suggests that the senses cannot give us direct awareness of reality itself, or anything "beyond the physical realm." "Appearance" is a kind of distorting filter through which we can only "see... darkly" (cf. I Cor. 13:12). Bahnsen never questions his supposition that there is a "beyond" to begin with, for he assumes that there is such a place, even though he nowhere explains how he or anyone else could know this. And in spite of this failing, rejecting "supernatural" claims is always unwarranted and indicates an unjustifiable bias. Go figure. And since for Bahnsen there is a difference – indeed, a conflict – between appearance and reality – a conflict Bahnsen nowhere explains how one could resolve – sense experience could only deceive or at best lead us off track. Man's cognitive inabilities are no doubt a testament to the infinite wisdom of his creator.

So two assumptions are vital to Bahnsen's discounting of sense experience, at least to the extent that he wants to marginalize any cognitive role they may play in providing man with the "comprehensive framework" he needs for making sense of the world in which he exists. They are:

- sense experience is limited (and our "comprehensive framework" must have "unlimited" experience)
- sense experience leads to the "reality-versus-appearance" conflict (and sense experience is unable to resolve it)

Bahnsen apparently has both angles covered. Even if one wants to argue that man can assemble a "comprehensive framework" suitable for making sense of the world in which he exists on the basis of the limited experience that his senses provide, Bahnsen can hit him with the "reality-versus-appearance" conflict. And if one wants to argue that the distinction between reality and appearances do not in fact prohibit the senses from providing him with the "comprehensive framework" he needs to make sense of the world in which he exists, Bahnsen can hit him with the "sense experience is limited" objection.

Unfortunately, throughout all this, Bahnsen ignores two important factors:

1. the need to identify some alternative means of awareness to supply the inputs needed for objective knowledge of reality (since sense experience has been discounted)
2. the nature and role of concepts which inform that knowledge

If we throw out sense experience, or even neutralize its epistemological significance, we need an alternative mode of awareness in order to acquire the knowledge which informs the "comprehensive framework" by which we make sense of the world in which we exist. It will not do to say that we have knowledge of X but no mode by which we could be aware of X or of the stepping stones needed to infer X. Bahnsen hastens to discount sense experience, but does not identify an alternative mode of awareness. He wants to discount the senses in part because they allegedly only give us "appearances," not reality as such. But if appearance is simply the form which our awareness of objects takes, then there really is no conflict here, since both the object we perceive and the form in which we perceive it have identity and are factual, i.e., objective. Once we grasp this fact, we have what we need for avoiding the conflict that Bahnsen might charge on account of the "reality versus appearance" dichotomy.

The other reason he wants to discount the senses is because they only give us limited awareness. But what could possibly be an alternative to limited experience? *Unlimited* experience? Why suppose such a thing is either possible or achievable? Why suppose such a notion is actually meaningful? What would "unlimited experience" be like? We can put the words "unlimited" and "experience" together, just as we can put the words "square" and "circle" together.

But together are they really meaningful? Indeed, it seems that once we have called something "experience," it is limited to what is meant by the concept 'experience'. Since to exist is to be something specific, since A is limited to itself, the claim that "unlimited experience" is either possible or real seems quite incoherent. If Bahnsen wants to argue that "limited experience" is insufficient, and his preferred alternative is supposed to be "unlimited experience," then he needs to explain what he means by it before it can be seriously entertained. Otherwise, it seems that he is straining to manufacture points against the efficacy of the human mind, something which he wants to claim his perfect creator-deity created. Quickly it appears we will find ourselves in the quicksand of a Kantian gimmick if we follow Bahnsen on his wild goose chase.

Meanwhile, we should ask: What is so insufficient about "limited experience"? When I see a tree, my experience is limited to what I experience. But if I see a tree in my experience, I still see a tree. I still have awareness of an object. Indeed, I do not need awareness of all trees in the universe and across eternity to have awareness of the one tree before me. It is a fact that I am seeing something. Perhaps at this point Bahnsen would like to raise the "reality-versus-appearance" objection. "How do you know what you're seeing is a tree?" So now I am supposed to have a mind sufficiently sophisticated to produce all kinds of reasoning to prove that what I see is actually a tree, and yet I am supposed to buy into the premise that my senses are so deceptive that I might not actually be seeing a tree. And really, what argument would Bahnsen accept at this point? Perhaps Bahnsen would be satisfied if I were to say something like, "I am absolutely certain that what I perceive before me is a tree because the triune God of Christianity has guaranteed that He will not lie to me, that as creator of my empirical apparatus He will not allow me to be so misled." This is nothing more than the invisible magic being defense: it does not deal with the issue whatsoever, and only lays a new, completely arbitrary burden on the load of burdens Bahnsen would have us accept on our way to adopting such confessions.

Now, the conventional attack against the senses has often been the charge that knowledge has universal scope while the senses do not provide universal awareness. Therefore the leap from awareness of particulars to universally binding knowledge is unwarranted, unjustified, arbitrary, subjective, or any other denigrating adjective the haters of man's mind want to apply to it. Perception on this view could hardly serve as a suitable tie between knowledge and reality. This is Bahnsen's (unargued) assertion that "empirical experience merely gives us an appearance of things." Couple this with the supposition that the senses distort the objects we perceive, and we have Bahnsen's two-fold attack against empiricism in a nutshell. Keep in mind that, all the while, we as readers of Bahnsen's writing are expected to follow the arguments of this "precise" and "brilliant scholar," even though our faculties are too incompetent to distinguish between the reality of what he has written and he may merely appear to have written.

Of course, attacks like this only tell us that the attacker does not understand how concepts are formed in the first place. Universality is a property of concepts; it is not a property we should expect to find in perception. Even more importantly, neither "unlimited experience" nor omniscience is a precondition for the universal scope of conceptual reference. Concepts are how the human mind expands its awareness beyond the immediate inputs provided by sense perception. The content of concepts is based ultimately on what we perceive, but it is not limited to only those units which we have encountered personally. In fact, if the Objectivist account of concepts is true, then there is no problem in supposing that we can acquire knowledge having universal scope on the basis of "limited personal experience." On the Objectivist account, concepts can be formed by integrating as few as only two units which are similar in some way. All objective units have the minimal similarity in the fact that they *exist*. (Incidentally, these points blow Van Til's "One-Many" argument out of the water.) If we are able to form concepts – i.e., open-ended classes which are universal in their scope of reference – on the basis of only two (or more) units, then "limited personal experience" is no hindrance to developing a "comprehensive framework used to make sense of the world as a whole." If "an individual's limited personal experience" incorporates the Objectivist account of concepts, he has all the "warrant" he needs for informing the "comprehensive framework" he needs to make sense of the world and his existence within it. And if we have such a "comprehensive framework" along with the "warrant" we need for whatever reason to have it, then we have what we need to "correct illusions." This is one of the functions of reason: to correct misidentifications. But what reason will not do is take us from this world to another world contradicting it. The only thing that can do this is the imagination, and its product is fantasy, not knowledge. And it is against these – fantasy and imagination – that Bahnsen fails to distinguish his god and whatever else he claims exists "beyond the physical realm."

Now internal to Christianity, Bahnsen's attempts to discredit empirical experience are not without their consequences. If empirical experience is insufficient to get us from the world of appearances to some realm that exists "beyond the physical realm," then what are we to make of Romans 1:20? This passage, beloved by many Reformed apologists, states the following:

For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.

Now it has always struck me as odd to say that "invisible things... are clearly seen." If they are seen at all, whether clearly or obscurely, one can hardly call them "invisible." At any rate, if the mode of awareness indicated here by the phrase "clearly seen" is taken to be a type of empirical experience (e.g., eyesight), then what are we to say of the distinction between appearance and reality, which Bahnsen himself says the bible acknowledges? If there is a distinction between appearance and reality, then there very well may be a distinction between what appears to be

“the invisible things of him from the creation of the world” and the world as it really is. Bahnsen would no doubt want to immunize the bible’s own statements from the objections he wants to raise against man’s perceptual faculties.

As for the “limits of possibility,” this actually belongs to the branch of epistemology, since possibility is epistemological, and what we determine to be possible depends on our understanding of what is actual rather than the other way around. Indeed, it is in the context of a “comprehensive conceptual framework used to make sense of the world as a whole” that we are able to rationally assess the possibility of any proposals.

And though for some thinkers “the term ‘metaphysics’ has come to connote the study of that which is ‘beyond the physical realm,’” this is misleading. It is not as if metaphysics as a field of study were happy to ignore “the physical realm”; however many thinkers may in fact feel intimidated by physical realities which do not conform to their preferences, and thus retreat into an imaginary realm where anything goes. If one is serious about studying “that which is ‘beyond the physical realm,’” he would at minimum need to identify the means by which he acquires awareness of “that which is ‘beyond the physical realm,’” if anything in fact exists “beyond the physical realm.”

Bahnsen writes:

Simple eyeball inspection of isolated and particular situations in the physical world cannot answer metaphysical questions like those just enumerated. An individual’s limited personal experience cannot warrant a comprehensive framework encompassing every sort of existent there may be. (p. 181)

There goes Romans 1:20.

If “a comprehensive framework encompassing every sort of existent there may be” does not come from “an individual’s limited personal experience,” then where does it come from? Is it magically installed into our minds? Is it then infallible? What if mine disagrees with someone else’s?

Is the “comprehensive framework” that Bahnsen has in mind conceptual or something other than conceptual? If it is conceptual, what is Bahnsen’s account of concepts? If it is something other than conceptual, how can Bahnsen claim to know it?

The task of statements like the one Bahnsen gives above, is to discount the role and relevance of one’s own firsthand perception of the world in developing “a comprehensive framework.” Essentially, Bahnsen’s reasoning is: ‘Since one’s own firsthand awareness is not awareness of *everything* (i.e., since one is not omniscient to begin with), he cannot formulate his own “comprehensive framework”.’ If man’s consciousness were bound to the perceptual level of consciousness (i.e., if it had no recourse to the conceptual level), there might be some argument for this; though as an argument for skepticism, it would still have its work cut out for itself. However, since man has the ability to form concepts on the basis of what he perceives, Bahnsen’s argument is not only fallacious, it’s downright naïve, especially coming from someone sporting a philosophy degree. At the very least, such statements betray a glaring ignorance of concepts, how they are formed and how they expand our awareness beyond the perceptual level of consciousness.

It needs to be pointed out that we demonstrate the ability of concepts to expand our awareness beyond our perceptual limitations whenever we talk about great distances, for example, in terms of units that reduce to the perceptual level. Applying arithmetic operations to units of measurement is one means by which we expand our awareness beyond what we perceive at any given moment.

Sadly, Bahnsen himself probably did not even realize how profoundly he was undercutting his own case by slipping his own head through the noose he had just fashioned, for after all, he was operating on the basis of a Dark Ages worldview.

“Suprasensible Reality”

After sanitizing metaphysics of any dependence on sense experience, Bahnsen rests on the conclusion that “metaphysics eventually studies non-sensuous or *suprasensible* reality.” When reading this, it is hard to resist interpreting Bahnsen to mean *nonsensical* reality. After all, he has so far given us no guidance on how to discriminate “the supernatural” from sheer nonsense. Bahnsen wants to say that his god, its magic kingdom and its eternal gulag belong to the category of “suprasensible reality.” Why could not the Lahu tribesman make the same claim about Geusha, the supreme being of their religion? It is easy to see how a child might claim that his [imaginary friend](#) exists in a “suprasensible reality,” and thus should not expect its existence to be verifiable by means of empirical tests. If such claims are valid for Bahnsen, why could they not be valid for any claim that, on a rational basis, would appropriately be deemed arbitrary? Again, how do we distinguish between Bahnsen’s “suprasensible reality” and his imagination?

In this section of his chapter on “The Problem of Knowing the ‘Super-Natural,’” Bahnsen tells us of the methods that

we should *not* expect to use in order to validate his supernatural claims, leaving unattended the identification of any reliable method by which one can validate his supernatural claims.

As I pointed out earlier, Bahnsen often really means *supernaturalism* when he uses the word “metaphysics.” Supernaturalism has engulfed metaphysics so completely for Bahnsen that even he is not aware of the perversity of this insidious equivocation. He has sought to hide this by arguing that the “ultimate conceptual framework” that philosophers use to separate the intellectual wheat from the nonsensical chaff is not something we perceive directly. But anyone could have told you this. Indeed, there is a fundamental distinction between the perceptual and the conceptual levels of consciousness. But this distinction in no way invalidates the senses or annuls their epistemological significance, nor does it suggest that “the physical realm” was created by an act of consciousness. In his effort to protect Christianity from the growing “anti-supernatural bias” of modern academics, Bahnsen has swapped metaphysics as a study of being for metaphysics as a study in concealing the subjectivism of one’s worldview. This is accomplished by keeping things vague and ambiguous. For instance, he writes:

In the nature of the case the metaphysician examines issues transcending physical nature or matters removed from particular sense experiences. And yet the results of metaphysics are alleged to give us intelligible and informative statements about reality. That is, metaphysics makes claims which have substantive content, but which are not fully dependent on or restricted to empirical experience (observation, sensation). (pp. 181-182)

Does Bahnsen give an example of what he means by “issues transcending physical nature or matters removed from particular sense experiences”? Do the issues which “transcend physical nature” have anything to do with the reality in which we actually live (as opposed to some *imaginary* realm)? He wants to say that “the results of metaphysics [so-conceived] are alleged to give us intelligible and informative statements about reality.” But how does this work? If metaphysics is an examination of “matters removed from particular sense experiences,” what informs them? What is their connection to the reality they allegedly describe? Can it be that the issues Bahnsen has in mind are actually the result of abstraction from sense experience, and Bahnsen simply does not know how this process works and thus mistakenly supposes that sense experience has no fundamental role in metaphysics? It does appear that this is the case. He’s all a-swirl in his own ignorance of how the conceptual mind works. How does Bahnsen know that the “substantive content” of (conceptually legitimate) metaphysical claims is “not fully dependent on or restricted to empirical experience (observation, sensation)”? Is it the case that what Bahnsen takes as metaphysical claims which have “substantive content” are actually based on imagination and fabrication rather than on an objective process of identifying reality? If they are based on reality, they need something to connect them to reality, namely a process by which their content is derived from reality. Otherwise, how could we have any confidence in the supposition that the content of those claims has anything to do with reality? What process of validation does Bahnsen propose? He has not identified any means by which we can gain awareness of what he calls “supernatural,” nor has he identified any means by which we can confidently discriminate between what he calls “supernatural” and what he is imagining. Unless Bahnsen can identify a connection between his metaphysical claims (which he presented above) and reality, are we to assume that a connection is there anyway? Who would encourage us to be so intellectually irresponsible and imprudent, and why?

Notice how 'always ready' Bahnsen is to identify those means by which his supernatural claims are not supported:

For that reason the means by which metaphysical [i.e., supernatural] claims are intellectually supported is not limited to natural observation and scientific experimentation. Herein lies the offense of metaphysics [i.e., supernaturalism] to the modern mind.^[1] Metaphysics [i.e., supernaturalism] presumes to tell us something about the objective world which we do not directly perceive in ordinary experience and which cannot be verified through the methods of natural science. (p. 182)

The “offense” of supernaturalism is not only in its stipulation of which means do *not* support its claims, but also in its conspicuous failure to identify in positive terms the means which allegedly *do* support its claims. Those who claim that the supernatural is real do not present evidence of the supernatural, and what they claim is difficult if not impossible to distinguish from what is merely imaginary. One can, of course, *imagine* the things Bahnsen claims (just as we can imagine the things described in a *Harry Potter* novel), but in order to accept such claims as truth, Bahnsen needs to identify some means other than imagination by which we can “know” what he’s talking about.

With the development of science, thanks to the rebirth of reason which effectively put religion in retreat, many thinkers are now more critical about what they accept as truth, just as people who want to take care of their bodies are more critical about what they put into their bodies. So when they encounter claims which are not backed up by evidence and/or contradict knowledge that has already been validated, they naturally (and rightly) reject them, whether or not they find them “offensive.” In fact, it is typically the religionist himself who is offended when his claims are *not* accepted on his say so. After all, he accepted these same or similar claims on someone else’s say so, so it is very frustrating for him to find others who are not as unquestioning and uncritical as he is. Even worse, if thinkers arm themselves with fundamental principles which are impervious to the religionist’s anti-rational attacks (such as [the primacy of existence](#)), the religionist often becomes so inflamed that he resorts to name-calling (and some will even try to justify this behavior).

So we are finding that Bahnsen is no different in this respect. He is quick to point out the kinds of methods which will

not substantiate or verify his supernatural claims, but he nowhere identifies any methods which *will* substantiate or verify those claims. This is most unhelpful to his own case, and yet he wants to slander those who don't readily accept such claims on his say so.

Bahnsen continues:

Of course, antipathy to metaphysics [i.e., supernaturalism] is even more pronounced in the case of Christianity because its claims about the entire scheme of things include declarations about the existence and character of God, the origin and nature of the world, as well as the nature and destiny of man. Such teachings do not stem from direct, eyeball experience of the physical world, but transcend particular sensations and derive from divine revelation. They are not verified empirically in a point by point fashion. Scripture makes absolute pronouncements about the nature of the real world as a whole. Biblical doctrine presents truths which are not circumscribed or limited by personal experience and which are not qualified or relativized by an individual's own way of looking at things. Such authoritarian claims about such difficult and wide-ranging matters are offensive to the skeptical mood and religious prejudices of the present day. The modern age has a contrary spirit regarding philosophical (especially religious) claims which speak of anything super-natural, anything "beyond the physical," anything metaphysical. (p. 182)

Here's a case in point. Bahnsen tells us that Christianity's claims "do not stem from direct, eyeball experience of the physical world," they "are not verified empirically in a point by point fashion," they "are not circumscribed or limited by personal experience" and "are not qualified or relativized by an individual's own way of looking at things." Bahnsen tells us which criteria do *not* support his supernatural claims, but he does not tell us which criteria *do* support them. He simply tells us that the contents of his claims "transcend particular sensations and derive from divine revelation." In other words, he appeals to *magic* in order to substantiate them. He tells us that magic is real, and to validate this claim he appeals to magic. This is just another instance of [tape-loop_apologetics](#). Round and round in a circle we go. And meanwhile, as is typically the case with Christianity's defenders, what the apologist calls "divine revelation" is indistinguishable from simply and uncritically accepting what is written in an ancient storybook. And to rationalize this, Bahnsen concocts an epistemology of negation, telling us how his claims are not validated, and remaining silent on how they could be validated.

"Pure Motives?"

Bahnsen wants to suppose there's something more than intellectual behind anyone's rejection of something he cannot distinguish from imaginative fantasy. He writes:

It would be profitable to pause and reflect upon an insightful comment by a recent writer in the area of philosophical metaphysics. W. H. Walsh has written, "It must be allowed that the reaction against [metaphysics – i.e., supernaturalism] has been ... so violent indeed as to suggest that the issues involved in the controversy must be something more than academic." (p. 182)

To appreciate the context of Walsh's quote, it would be interesting to see some examples of what he considers "violent" reactions. Are they merely words on a page that believers in the supernatural find disturbing ([some believers have shown themselves to be quite insecure](#), in fact), or are they actually riotous actions causing harm and destruction to life and limb? Would these theists consider my point-by-point examination of Bahnsen's attempts to defend supernaturalism "violent" in some way?

And what about theist's reactions to "anti-supernaturalism"? Is it not also vehement and full of indignation that they, too, can likewise be called "violent," even if they do not result in the turning over of vehicles on the street and the burning down of houses? If the "violence" of the reactions that Walsh and Bahnsen has in mind turns out to be nothing more than, say, petty name-calling and insulting language, well, it seems that Bahnsen is prone to some "violence" of his own. As we have already seen, on pg. 56 of *Always Ready*, Bahnsen calls people who do not believe in his invisible magic being "dull, stubborn, boorish, obstinate and stupid." Are we to suppose that there is something more than intellectual to the believer's faith commitments when merely the existence of non-believers prompts him to contemptuous derision like this? If not, why not?

Of course, Bahnsen is all too happy to agree with Walsh:

Precisely. The issues are indeed more than academic. They are a matter of life and death - eternal life and death. (p. 182)

That must be it: non-believers must have some kind of death wish. That explains why they reject the supernatural and other irrational ideas. They deny religion because they secretly want to suffer the fate of religion's non-believers. It could not be that they simply don't believe what religion teaches, or in fact understand why religion is irrational. They want eternal torment. That is what Bahnsen apparently would have his readers believe. If they believe Christianity's myths and legends, it is quite possible that they'll believe Bahnsen's apologetic hazing as well.

Bahnsen appeals to the bible to buttress his suspicions:

Christ said, "And this is life eternal, that they should know thee the only true God, and him whom thou didst send" (John 17:3). However, if the unbeliever can stand on the claim that such a God *cannot be known* because nothing transcending the physical (nothing "metaphysical") can be known, then the issue of eternal destiny is not raised. (pp. 182-183)

As should be clear by now, we do not have to "stand on the claim that such a God *cannot be known* because nothing transcending the physical (nothing 'metaphysical') can be known." Rather, we can stand on the truth of the axioms and the primacy of existence, truths which the religious believer himself must assume while denying, in order to expose religion's commitment to irrationality. So long as one realizes that there is a fundamental distinction between reality and imagination, and religious defenders cannot provide an objective method by which one can distinguish between what they claim and what they may merely be imagining, then rejecting religious teachings is merely being intellectually responsible.

Bahnsen then identifies what he finds most worrisome:

Accordingly, men may think and do as they please, without distracting questions about their nature and destiny. (p. 183)

Why would it bother Bahnsen or anyone else if other "men may think and do as they please"? The thought that "men may think and do as they please" really bothered [Jim Jones](#), too.

Why is it that religious leaders so often find intellectual liberty objectionable? Is it because intellectual liberty threatens their leadership, livelihood, or the perks of their station? Bahnsen claims that "every believer wants to see the truth of Christ believed and honored by others." (*Always Ready*, p. 115) My initial thought on reading this was, "Does Christ want this, too?" If Christ is omnipotent and able to change non-believers into believers (as is supposedly the case with Christians themselves, according to Bahnsen's type of Reformed Theology), then whatever is the case now must be what Christ wants to be the case now. After all, according to Bahnsen's mentor Van Til, "God controls whatsoever comes to pass" (*The Defense of the Faith*, p. 160). Indeed, if Jesus can make a visiting appearance before Saul of Tarsus as he was on his way to persecute Christians, that same Jesus should be able to appear before anyone whose heart needs to be changed. If Jesus doesn't do this, well, that is not the non-believer's fault.

And what of those who do not consider "questions about their nature and destiny" to be "distracting," even though they do not believe in any invisible magic beings? What of those who are pleased to contemplate such questions? Personally speaking, I enjoy contemplating such questions. But I still observe the distinction between the real and the imaginary, and this is what earns me the religionists' contempt.

Then Bahnsen projects what worries him onto everyone else:

Men will, as it were, build a roof over their heads in hopes of keeping out any distressing revelation from a transcendent God. The anti-metaphysical perspective of the modern age functions as just such a protective ideological roof for the unbeliever. (p. 183)

An old polemical tactic is to broad-brush one's accusations at large without naming specific culprits or citing evidence to substantiate the charge being made. Here Bahnsen shows that he is familiar with this tactic. Does Bahnsen identify those who allegedly "build a roof over their heads in hopes of keeping out any distressing revelation from a transcendent God"? No, he does not identify any particular individual who does this. Presumably Bahnsen has in mind anyone who disputes the existence of his god. Does he produce any evidence to substantiate his charge that those anonymous persons "build a roof over their heads" to keep out the Christian god? No, he doesn't. All he provides is a quote from Nietzsche, but that didn't prove anything but the fact that Bahnsen had to dig a quote out of a source that is some 100 or so years old to find an instance of a non-Christian apparently providing a case in point (when in fact it didn't).

Worshippers of Geusha, the supreme being of the Lahu tribe, could play the same game. They could quite easily say that men seek to "build a roof over their heads in hopes of keeping out any distressing revelation from" Geusha. And on their Geusha-centric "presuppositions," this would of course "make sense." But is it an *argument*? No, it is not.

What's noteworthy in either case, is the fact that there would be no *need* to "build a roof over" one's head to begin with. Bahnsen betrays the very irrational fear that the bible seeks to inculcate in its readers, a fear which Bahnsen bought into and projected on everyone else.

Bahnsen was no doubt emotionally taken captive by passages such as Luke 12:5, which states:

Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell.

Of course, if one grants the whole bag of assumptions that the bible uses to entice fish into its nets, such passages will of course be very compelling psychologically. But that's just the point: why grant the basic claims of the Christian worldview to begin with? This just brings us back to the original issue of "the problem of knowing the 'super-natural'," which Bahnsen leaves unattended in characteristic manner.

Indeed, what we have here is a classic case of projection: Bahnsen fears "the supernatural" because he thinks it is something both real and beyond his comprehension (and yet he insists that we accept it as "knowledge" and postures as a spokesman for its wishes and pronouncements). He wants protection from supernatural wrath, so as a matter of course he supposes everyone else does, too. Indeed, if one thought there were an angry supernatural deity in the first place, who wouldn't want to take cover? Bahnsen takes cover in his feigned piety, by pretending to be a know-it-all when it comes to "the supernatural" (however, do not ask him how one can have awareness of "the supernatural" or distinguish what he calls "the supernatural" from his vain imaginations). Bahnsen simply projects his own irrationality onto everyone else, supposing all human beings are just as frightened and dishonest as he is. The choice to be dishonest "accounts for" the persisting and insistent delusions of the theist.

In spite of the deception that shines through the faded patina of Bahnsen's feigned piety, he brings the discussion back to the topic at hand:

The fact is that one cannot avoid metaphysical commitments. The very denial of the possibility of knowledge transcending experience is *in itself* a metaphysical judgment. Thus the question is not *whether* one should have metaphysical beliefs, but it comes down to the question of *which kind* of metaphysic one should affirm. (p. 183)

I would agree that "one cannot avoid metaphysical commitments," so long as "metaphysical" neither equates nor implies "the supernatural." I certainly do not think it is the case that "one cannot avoid *supernatural* commitments." I am living proof of this. As for considering "the possibility of knowledge transcending experience," this not only depends on one's metaphysical view, but also on what assumptions are packed into the notion of "knowledge transcending experience." It is not clear what Bahnsen means by this expression, for he nowhere makes it explicitly clear. If he means knowledge that is implicitly available as a result of conceptual integration or inductive generalizations based on objective models, then yes, such knowledge is in fact possible. But if by "knowledge transcending experience" Bahnsen means to denote some ideational content that is ultimately fictitious or based on imagination (even if it is not admitted as such), then I would say it is wrong to call such content "knowledge." 'Fantasy' is the appropriate concept to denote this.

And yes, if it is the case that "the question is not *whether* one should have metaphysical beliefs" – because "one cannot avoid metaphysical commitments" – I would add that "it comes down" *not only* "to the question of *which kind* of metaphysic one should affirm," but also *how consistently* one's worldview applies that metaphysic. My worldview openly and knowingly affirms the metaphysic of the primacy of existence in the subject-object relationship. And my worldview is consistent with this metaphysic. It is, in fact, an extension of this principle, the essential principle of objectivity, applied to the rest of philosophy. Christianity, as we have seen, affirms a metaphysic which grants primacy to consciousness. Can Bahnsen consistently apply this principle in his operative view of the world? Bahnsen nowhere engages the issue of metaphysical primacy, and yet here he is, talking about metaphysical commitments, judgments and their associated principles. Why does he avoid the issue of the proper relationship between subject and object? Did he not think there is a proper relationship between a subject and its objects? Or, is this something one need not address in his metaphysical views? Or, is it something anyone can be justified in taking for granted without ever understanding what his professed views imply in regards to this relationship? Since Bahnsen remained silent on this issue, we will never know. But one thing's for sure: we won't learn about the proper relationship between a subject and its objects from Bahnsen.

Failing to address this issue when he had the opportunity, Bahnsen then sought to turn his guns on those who do not embrace his particular brand of subjectivism, namely Calvinist Christianity:

The apostle Paul teaches us that all unbelievers (including Nietzsche) "suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom. 1:18); they attempt to hide the truth about God from themselves due to their immoral lives. "The carnal mind is enmity against God" (Rom. 8:7) and "minds earthly things" (Phil. 3:18-19). Those who are enemies in their minds due to evil works (Col. 1:21), and are foolish in their reasoning (Rom. 1:21-22; 1 Cor. 1:20), are led in particular to an anti-biblical metaphysic (e.g., "The fool has said in his heart there is no God," Ps. 10:4) - disguised as an anti-metaphysical posture in general. (pp. 183-184)

Because he cannot present any epistemology which warrants any assertion of "the supernatural," Bahnsen wants to morph the issue into a matter of moral impropriety. He cannot rationally justify belief in the supernatural, but he's still anxious to vent his contempt for the spoilsports.

So Bahnsen reiterates the Pauline accusation that non-believers "suppress the truth in unrighteousness," and "attempt to hide the truth about God from themselves due to their immoral lives." These are not light accusations to say the least. Apparently "mind[ing] earthly things" – like one's own life, the welfare of one's loved ones, the consequences of one's choices and actions – is a vice. Note that he echoes these charges even though he nowhere identifies any means by which a human being can acquire awareness of what he calls "the supernatural,"

or by which we can confidently distinguish between what he calls "the supernatural" and what he may very well be merely imagining. It is common for those who are trying to hide something to redirect attention away from their subterfuge by making accusations against individuals. The goal of such a move is to put others on the defensive, thus enabling evasion. But here Bahnsen does not restrict his accusations to specific individuals. He broad-brushes with very wide strokes, accusing people he does not even know of living "immoral lives." And what's behind the charge that they live "immoral lives"? Merely the fact that they do not believe in Bahnsen's invisible magic beings. And why should they, especially given the fact that Bahnsen does not explain how we could be aware of "supernatural" agents or confidently discriminate them from the believer's imagination? Indeed, Bahnsen fails in this task even when he set it before himself. Can it be that Bahnsen is simply projecting here? Can it be that the immorality that is being swept under the rug is Bahnsen's own dishonesty as he tries to defend a worldview which insists on faking reality?

All these sweeping accusations, asserted without any evidence whatsoever, probably made Bahnsen feel good for a moment. By putting the blame on a collective of anonymous persons despised because of their non-belief in his deity, Bahnsen finds momentary relief from his guilt, the guilt that results from enshrining a fake environment and pretending that it is reality while denigrating methods that even he uses on a daily basis.

“The Case Against Metaphysics”

What is the case against supernaturalism? Bahnsen wants to know. But before addressing this question, we need to ask: What is the case *for* supernaturalism? Bahnsen has been hailed as one of the most talented and formidable of Christian apologists, but what case has he presented *in favor* of supernaturalism? He has presented no case at all. He claims that there is a realm "beyond the physical realm," a realm allegedly populated by beings which "surpass the limits of nature," a realm which lies, not merely beyond the reach of man's senses (for telescopes and microscopes prove that we are able to expand the reach of our senses, and it is doubtful that Bahnsen would admit that looking through a high-powered telescope will one day give us a glance of a supernatural being), but beyond any ability we will ever have to perceive. However, Bahnsen identifies no alternative means by which we could have awareness of what he calls "the supernatural." So if Bahnsen claims to have awareness of "the supernatural," by what means does he have it, and why doesn't he tell us? If he does not claim to have awareness of "the supernatural," then what is he talking about, and how can we know? Blank out. Furthermore, because human consciousness has its limits and because the human mind can imagine things that "surpass" those limits, men will always be able to claim that some thing (which they imagine) exists beyond our ability to perceive. But Bahnsen provides no indication of how we can discriminate between what he calls "the supernatural" and what he may in fact only be imagining. These concerns hang like a dark shadow over every point that Bahnsen has sought to raise in his apologetic, and yet he ignores them throughout.

Sadly, those who accept supernatural claims do so on the say so of those who author or reiterate those claims, not on the basis of any objective evidence that impartial parties can discover and verify for themselves (hence presuppositionalism's disdain for so-called "autonomous reasoning"). And those who demand unearned authority in such manner already show their willingness to abuse the trust of their followers, taking such trust as license to make the story up as they go (for their followers show that they will believe anything on their leaders' say so). As we already know, men have five senses. It would literally be as easy as child's play to claim that there exists something which could only be perceived if we had the appropriate sixth sense, which is never named and which we lack anyway. If we had 200 sense modalities, one could always come along and assert the existence of something we'd need a 201st sense modality to perceive. But how did the one making these claims perceive it in the first place if he lacks that crucial 201st sense modality? Again, blank out. We will never be able to perceive what men imagine, because the imaginary is not real, and something needs to be real in order to be perceived by impartial witnesses. But such facts do not cause Bahnsen to pause and consider. He steamrolls right over them as he races towards a cliff.

So Bahnsen not only fails to address these concerns, he does not show that he is even prepared to consider them, perhaps because he never was concerned about them himself. And no doubt, he most likely did not want his readers to be concerned about such issues either, so he would be motivated to suppress them even if they did occur to him in the privacy of his own thoughts. Let's face it, most readers of Bahnsen's apologetics books would be looking to strengthen their faith - i.e., to quell doubts rather than invite them. So the first thing we can say here is that Bahnsen does not present a case *for* the supernatural. If "the supernatural" is given no positive case on its behalf by its own defenders, why would opponents need to assemble any case against it? If there is nothing to recommend a position, why would we need to bother refuting it? So long as Bahnsen fails to identify any means by which we can acquire awareness of "the supernatural" (he only tells us how we do *not* have awareness of it), and so long as he fails to produce a serious, objective method by which we can distinguish what he calls "the supernatural" and what he is merely imagining, then he has failed to produce even the rudimentary beginnings of a case for the supernatural.

What else can we say? We can also point out that supernaturalism cannot survive on a proper metaphysics. It is clear that supernaturalism assumes the primacy of consciousness metaphysics, for it affirms the existence of a

supernatural consciousness which holds metaphysical primacy over any object distinct from itself. But even to say that such a consciousness exists, we implicitly make use of the opposite principle, namely that the objects of consciousness exist independent of consciousness: they are what they are regardless of what we know, think or imagine about them. Otherwise the proponent of supernaturalism claims that the supernatural consciousness of his imagination exists essentially because he *wants* it to. And any honest adult should be able to recognize without a lot of deliberation that wishing does not make it so. Already we can see that an insurmountable case against supernaturalism is at our disposal.

In spite of these points, which seem to have eluded Bahnsen's finely tuned intellectual powers of brilliance and precision, the master apologist nonetheless sought to take on "the case against [the supernatural]," at least, whichever "case" is most easily defused. When confronting non-religious philosophers, Bahnsen prefers to go up against the lightweights, perhaps because they were the only ones he bothered to read:

The most common philosophical reason advanced by unbelievers, from Kant to the Logical Positivists of our century, for antagonism to metaphysical claims is quite simply the allegation that "pure reason" apart from sense experience cannot itself provide us with factual knowledge. Metaphysical statements speak of a suprasensible reality which is not directly experienced or verified by natural science; it might be said quite baldly, then, that metaphysics is a kind of "news from nowhere." Those antagonistic to metaphysics argue that all informative or factual statements about the objective world must be derived empirically (based on experience, observation, sensation), and therefore human knowledge cannot transcend particular, physical experience or the appearance of the senses. (p. 184)

Bahnsen acknowledges that a common criticism of supernaturalism is the lack of an epistemological methodology which can take us from what we do know in the "here and now" (i.e., by reference to the evidence of the senses) to the "suprasensible reality" that Bahnsen claims to know about. We will find below that his response to this type of objection is to remove such knowledge claims from the field of epistemology altogether, which is a most fatal move if there ever were one. It is pointed out that we do not perceive such a phenomenon, but the response to this is that we should not expect to perceive it and accept claims about in spite of our inability to perceive it. Bahnsen does not seem to be claiming that he possesses a mode of perception beyond the five that we know human beings to possess. That is a wise move, but it garners him no points. Regardless, as pointed out above, even if man possessed 150 sense modalities, what would keep the Bahnsens of the world from claiming the existence of something which could only be perceived if we had a 151st sense modality, which, it is acknowledged, we lack? Then as now, we would be told not to expect to perceive whatever it is that we could not perceive, but that it is there nonetheless. At any rate, Bahnsen is well aware that a major concern is *how* one could "know" what it is he and other religionists are talking about when they speak of "the supernatural," and yet what does he provide to answer this concern? Does he identify the means by which *he* is (allegedly) aware of what he calls "the supernatural"? No, he does not. Instead, he seeks to undermine reliance on the sense modalities that we do have, pronouncing them tainted or even inadequate to begin with. But nowhere does he identify any kind of alternative, and nowhere does he prove the existence of what he calls "supernatural." Again, he provides no positive case for "the supernatural."

So again, when Bahnsen affirms the existence of "a suprasensible reality which is not directly experienced or verified by natural science," he merely identifies the means by which we do *not* know "the supernatural," but he resists indicating the means by which one *could* know "the supernatural." It is, as he confesses, "a kind of 'news from nowhere'," only it's not news at all. He gives us nothing by which we could distinguish this "[good] news" from fantasy and fiction. That is because it is fantasy and fiction. If there's a difference between fact and fiction, then Bahnsen and other advocates of "the supernatural" need to explain how we can acquire knowledge of what they call "the supernatural" and distinguish it from mere imagination. One does not even need explicitly to "argue that all informative or factual statements about the objective world must be derived empirically (based on experience, observation, sensation)" in order to recognize a difference between fact and fiction. But if one does make the claim that "informative and factual statements about the objective world" can be informed without content originally gathered from the world by "experience, observation, sensation," he needs to identify an alternative to these. What alternative does Bahnsen identify? That's just the problem: he identifies *no* alternative.

Consider:

According to Kant, metaphysical discussions trade in purely verbal definitions and their logical implications; hence they are arbitrary, suspended in the sky, and result in irresolvable disagreements. Metaphysical statements have no real significance. By nature, human knowledge is dependent on the senses, and thus reasoning can never take one to conclusions that apply *outside* the empirical realm. (p. 184)

The notion of "conclusions that apply *outside* the empirical realm" is a rather vague way to identify something one wants to defend. It identifies a contrast, but it does not necessarily imply objectivity. As I have pointed out several times already, anyone can *imagine* something that exists "outside the empirical realm." But imagination is not an objective means of knowledge. Apologists will have to do better than this if they want their religious views taken seriously by rational thinkers.

“Logical Positivism”

We have seen repeatedly throughout my analysis of Bahnsen’s “Problem of Knowing the ‘Super-Natural,’” that he evades every opportunity to identify the means by which one might acquire awareness of what he calls “supernatural,” and any methodology for acquiring and validating knowledge from sources which allegedly exist beyond the reach of man’s senses. To enable this grand evasion, Bahnsen trains his sights on a soft target: the philosophy of Logical Positivism.

Logical Positivism is sort of a halfway house for those who do not understand why faith and reason, religion and science, mysticism and rationality are fundamentally opposed and, frightened by their own pragmatist shadows, retreated to a religious stunt-double under the guise of saving science. The Logical Positivists in part rejected all talk of metaphysics because it had been taken over by mystics and witch doctors. Consequently, having bought into the idea that this was a necessary association, the Logical Positivists threw the baby out along with the bath water. Not unlike Bahnsen himself, the Logical Positivists did not understand the relationship between the perceptual and the conceptual, thus supposing they were mutually opposed and irreconcilable, pointing to mystical models as evidence of the problem. So just as [Kant](#) "found it necessary to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith*," the Logical Positivists found it necessary to sacrifice fundamental philosophical principles in order to save science. But of course, this just undercuts any effort they make to protect science.

Unwittingly, this makes them an easy target for those who are desperate for even the cheapest momentary psychological validation. Enter now Greg Bahnsen:

The Logical Positivists intensified Kant's criticism. For them metaphysical claims were not simply empty definitions without significance (without existential referents), they were quite literally *meaningless*. Because metaphysical claims could not be brought to the critical test of sense experience, they were concluded to be senseless. (p. 184)

Bahnsen focuses on Logical Positivism’s rejection of supernaturalism because they reject any metaphysical position (apparently even one which would support their own epistemological defenses of science). So Bahnsen misses the point of Logical Positivism's own weaknesses: according to Logical Positivism, supernaturalism is meaningless – not because it violates principles of rationality (even though it does) – but because any generalized assessment of reality is ultimately meaningless. This was more or less the result of the attitude which the Logical Positivists adopted:

[S]uch concepts as metaphysics or existence or reality or thing or matter or mind are meaningless – let the mystics care whether they exist or not, a scientist does not have to know it; the task of theoretical science is the manipulation of symbols, and scientists are the special elite whose symbols have the magic power of making reality conform to their will. (*For the New Intellectual*, p. 34)

In this way, Logical Positivism represents yet another variant of the mysticism which its adherents were purportedly rejecting, since in the end it too reduces to the primacy of consciousness, the foundation of any form of mysticism. Is it any surprise that Bahnsen's response to Logical Positivism does not consist in correcting its charge of *meaninglessness* by demonstrating the *meaningfulness* of supernaturalism?

What the Logical Positivists intensified was the concrete-boundness of British empiricism, that is: sense-perception without recourse to concepts. In this respect, Logical Positivism and Bahnsen’s presuppositionalism are kissing cousins in that they both impale themselves on the same jagged point: the lack of an objective theory of concepts, and consequently no understood connection between perception and knowledge. So focusing on the Logical Positivists is not going to be very productive if Bahnsen’s goal is to rebut positions opposed to taking belief in "the supernatural" seriously. The weaknesses of Logical Positivism offer presuppositionalism an opportune occasion to come out appearing victorious.

In spite of Bahnsen’s polemics, one should be able to isolate a common theme in criticism of supernaturalism, even if it is only hinted at in the counter-positions which Bahnsen attacks: an absence of credulity in supernaturalism due to absence of any epistemological support for it. At this point, one would think that, if Bahnsen could correct the record by identifying in positive terms the means and methods by which one could acquire awareness of “the supernatural,” objectively inform supernaturalist terminology and claims with meaning that logically connects to something that can be verified as real, and distinguish the content of those claims from mere imagination, he would produce such a contraption. But he continually fails to come through on this. Instead, he allows his belief in supernaturalism to remain unsupported, shivering in the stark and barren wasteland of isolated nonsense, and chooses to attack naysayers for simply being persistent spoilsports, comforted by the fact that the opposing models which he does examine are self-defeating and thus non-threatening.

Bahnsen goes on, saying:

So then, opponents of metaphysics (and thereby of the theology of the Bible) view metaphysical reasoning as conflicting with empirical science as the one and only way to acquire knowledge. (p. 184)

Bahnsen would have made a terrible poker player as he was so transparent when attempting a bluff. If it were not so obvious that he has been package-dealing supernaturalism with metaphysics up to this point, there should be no question now, given his own parenthetical clarification. For the record, I am not an "opponent of metaphysics" (my own worldview has a branch devoted to metaphysics) and I would not say that (what I mean by) "metaphysical reasoning" is "conflicting with empirical science," for my worldview's metaphysical principles do not contradict the reality in which I exist, nor are they based on the fake environment of supernaturalism, biblical or otherwise. Hence it is important to clarify what Bahnsen really means when he uses the words "metaphysics" and "metaphysical" in such instances; he really means "supernatural" since he makes clear that what he has in mind is associated with what the bible teaches. We've seen this over and over throughout Bahnsen's chapter on "Knowing the 'Super-Natural'."

So we should restate Bahnsen's statement to what he's really trying to say:

So then, opponents of *supernaturalism* (and thereby of the theology of the Bible) view *supernatural* reasoning as conflicting with empirical science as the one and only way to acquire knowledge.

The meaningfulness of this version is much clearer as it does not need to be dug out from underneath a haze of package-deals. And here is something we can agree with: someone who is seeking to "reason" from premises which take supernaturalism (such as that of the bible) seriously, will quickly expose his position's enmity with the empirical sciences, and this is because supernaturalism contradicts the principle of objectivity. The rational physicist will simply laugh at the supernaturalistic idea that men can walk on unfrozen water (cf. Mk. 6:48-50), especially if for "authority" the supernaturalist points to a storybook; the viniculturalist will laugh at the supernaturalistic idea that water can be wished into wine (cf. John 2:2-11); the biologist will simply laugh at the idea that a man will rise from the dead three (or really only two) days after dying, or that corpses will reanimate themselves and crawl out of their graves as described in Mt. 27, etc. No, laughing is not an argument, but the arbitrary does not deserve counter-arguments. Such reactions can be expected; should we really be surprised when someone scoffs at the arbitrary? If we are, perhaps there's something wrong. But often there is something wrong, for many in science today still have not recovered from the intellectual destruction of either Christianity or Logical Positivism.

Many popular philosophies leave the human mind vulnerable to the mystics' attacks often because they inherit or unwittingly borrow from mystics' premises. The presuppositionalist claim that many non-Christians have borrowed from Christianity is sometimes more accurate than apologists realize; the communism of the Soviets is a case in point. Irrationalism comes in many flavors, many of them only apparently opposed to religion. In fact, however, many non-theistic worldviews are merely secularized variants of overtly mystical worldviews. This is one reason why it is so important to understand our need for an *objective* starting point. If we begin by accepting any of the mystics' false assumptions about reality, only a variant of the mystics' irrationality can result.

But all of this underscores an insidious double standard on the theist's part. If scientists are expected to take one set of primitive folklore seriously, to be consistent, they should not dismiss any claim, no matter how outlandish. Biblicists will mind if their biblical doctrines are dismissed out of hand, but they won't mind if the animists' doctrines are dismissed out of hand. Similarly, Vedists will get upset if their sacred Vedic passages are dismissed by scientists out of hand just as biblicists will. But so what? The discriminating scientist will always be open to the charge of "bias!" from the backers of any arbitrary worldview. But the tender emotions of those who feel slighted should not concern him.

Bahnsen posits an antithesis between the scientist and "the metaphysician" as follows:

Whereas the scientist arrives at contingent truths about the way things appear to our senses, the metaphysician aims at absolute or necessary truths about the reality which somehow lies behind those appearances. (p. 184)

There is in fact a fundamental antithesis between the scientist on the one hand, and someone espousing a supernaturalistic worldview like Christianity on the other. But it's not as Bahnsen characterizes it here. The scientist's enterprise is reality-bound; his goals, methods and procedures are developed and conducted in concert with the fact that there is a fundamental distinction between fact and fantasy. The religionist, on the other hand, is willing to ignore this fundamental distinction, for the overt teachings of his worldview expressly require that fact and fantasy be blurred into an indiscriminate whole, thus resulting in a fatal compromise to truthful understanding.

The scientist studies actual things using an objective process (the scientific method) to discover specific truths about those actual things, truths which he recognizes as obtaining independent of anyone's wishes, preferences, or commandments. And while he may draw general conclusions from specific samples, these conclusions do not go beyond the universe to indicate a supernatural consciousness controlling everything. There is no reason why the scientist should not be able to conduct his research and validate his findings in keeping with the primacy of existence. In fact, it is only by adhering to the primacy of existence would his results be of any value in the first place.

By contrast, if Bahnsen's "metaphysician" is ultimately guided by the primacy of consciousness, he will of course find a way to rationalize his imagination that a conscious force is what "somehow lies behind those appearances." He then declares that his imagination consists of "absolute or necessary truths" which, as a member counting himself

among "the chosen," he "knows" by "revelation." Contrary to the scientist, the supernaturalist in this case does not draw conclusions about "the supernatural" from inputs he gathers from reality using an objective method. Instead, he is guided by a storybook whose oral lore, mythical allegories, poetic indulgences and mystical teachings serve as substitutes for objective inputs.

But the antithesis between the scientific approach to the world and the religious approach, as Bahnsen would characterize it, leads to what he will call "the anti-metaphysical polemic," when in actuality an informed scientist would not at all reject an *objective* metaphysics – i.e., one which is not willing to relent on the fact that there is a fundamental distinction between fact and fantasy – but would recognize the fundamental importance of such metaphysical underpinnings to the integrity of his vocation. On Bahnsen's premises (in which the distinction between fact and fantasy is fundamentally blurred):

A gulf is posited between the truths of empirical fact (arrived at on the basis of information from the senses) and truths of speculative reason (which could only be arbitrary verbal conventions or organizing concepts that are inapplicable outside the sphere of experience). (pp. 184-185)

If what is taken as "truths of speculative reason" are in fact "arbitrary verbal conventions," then of course we would posit that a "gulf" exists between them and facts that are discovered on an empirical basis. But there is no good reason to suppose that *speculation* (i.e., groping guesses, frantic hunch-making, stabs in the dark, etc.) is the only alternative to "empirical fact" (i.e., facts that are perceived directly), or that empirical fact and speculation are inherently partnered, as if the one lead naturally to the other. Reason is not a stab in the dark consisting of "arbitrary verbal conventions." In fact, concepts allow the human mind to expand its awareness beyond the immediate perceptual level while preserving the integrity of fundamental truths that are discovered on the basis of firsthand discriminated awareness and performatively reaffirmed in every act of awareness (such as the fact that there is a fundamental distinction between fact and fantasy, that wishing does not make it so, etc.).

By characterizing reason as "speculative," however, Bahnsen shows how willing he is to poison the well in order to salvage his supernaturalism. Who wants to rely on a method which is at best "speculative"? This only tells us what Bahnsen thinks of reason, and by extension the human mind, if he thinks reason is inherently speculative. At the very least, it tells us that he does not have a principled understanding of reason, and this is likely due to his worldview being clouded by a commitment to affirming the contents of a storybook as "divine revelation." This should not surprise us, for his apologetic is not aimed at increasing man's understanding of the world and his own mind, but at leaving him helpless and defenseless against the mysticism which his worldview is bent on promulgating.

Bahnsen thus presents "the anti-metaphysical polemic" as he understands it:

In that case, according to modern dogma, all meaningful and informative statements about the world were judged to be empirical in nature. The case against metaphysical claims, then, can be summarized in this fashion:

1. there cannot be a non-empirical source of knowledge or information about reality, and
2. it is illegitimate to draw inferences from what is experienced by the senses to what must lie outside of experience.

In short, we can only know as factually significant what we can experience directly with our senses - which nullifies the meaningfulness of metaphysical claims and the possibility of metaphysical knowledge. (p. 185)

Again, by "metaphysical claims," I understand Bahnsen actually means claims of a "supernatural" character. It should be clear that the two affirmations which Bahnsen lists here in no way encapsulate the criticism of supernaturalism that I have put forth. I have not stipulated that "there cannot be a non-empirical source of knowledge or information about reality," and I certainly do not hold that "it is illegitimate to draw inferences from what is experienced by the senses to what must lie outside of experience." Rather, my approach has been to a) isolate what Bahnsen means by "supernatural," b) probe Bahnsen's case for any indication of how we might distinguish what he calls "supernatural" from what he may merely be imagining; c) ask how one can have awareness of what Bahnsen calls "supernatural" (if not by perception, then how?); d) can claims about "the supernatural" being real be reconciled with the primacy of existence metaphysics (i.e., the foundation of truth), etc. Specifically, my interest is in discovering what Bahnsen's case *for* "the supernatural" may be.

In regards to the first statement that Bahnsen formulates to represent the case against supernaturalism as he understands it, a couple points can be made that are somewhat sympathetic to the epistemological concern it raises.

We must bear in mind that knowledge is not something we have automatically, nor is it produced automatically. We need to act in order to acquire and validate knowledge, just as we need to act in order to achieve any goal. Our theory of knowledge needs to be consistent with the nature of our consciousness, for ignoring the nature of our consciousness will only undercut any theory of knowledge we attempt to establish on such ignorance. And it is a fact that we have senses and that we perceive objects because of the senses we possess. It is by means of sense-perception that we are aware of things distinct from our consciousness, and without awareness of something

distinct from our consciousness, it has no content by which it can be identified as being conscious to begin with. "A consciousness conscious of nothing but itself is a contradiction in terms: before it could identify itself as consciousness, it had to be conscious of something." (*For the New Intellectual*, p. 124) It is undeniable that our awareness of reality begins at the perceptual level, and in this sense the statement that "there cannot be a non-empirical source of knowledge or information about reality" is in fact true.

The question which Bahnsen should be asking, but doesn't, is: What is the relationship between perception and knowledge? On the presuppositional (indeed the Christian) model, this is relationship never clear, most likely because it would not be religiously expedient to have a principled understanding of this relationship. In fact, it is the failure to understand the relationship between perception and knowledge that presuppositionalism as an apologetic method seeks to exploit in unwitting non-believers. But from what Bahnsen does say, it is clear enough what he thinks: knowledge of reality does not depend on perception. His followers might qualify this to say that "theological knowledge" (or knowledge of "the supernatural") does not depend on or reduce to perception. And if so-called "theological knowledge" is ultimately informed by the imagination, this would certainly be the case.

But is it really the case that metaphysical knowledge - that is, knowledge of the nature of reality - is not dependent or related to perception? To claim this, it may either be that a) what is claimed as "metaphysical knowledge" is not actually knowledge, or b) the relationship between knowledge and perception is simply not understood, and thus supposed not to be of any epistemological importance. In the case of religious belief and the presuppositional defense of it, both components play an important role.

Below we will examine Bahnsen's interaction with the premises of "the anti-metaphysical polemic" that he listed above. For now, however, let us propose the following alternatives those premises:

1. there cannot be a non-*objective* source of knowledge or information about reality, and
2. it is illegitimate to draw inferences from what is experienced by the senses to what *contradicts* experience.

Would Bahnsen object to either of these premises if they imperiled his beloved supernaturalism? Would he be willing to contend for a *non-objective* source of knowledge about reality in order to save his theism? Would he endorse a worldview which draws inferences from what is experienced by the senses to what contradicts that experience? I suspect that Bahnsen would in the end need to take issue with these premises, given his commitment to Christian theism.

In regard to (1), guarding our knowledge against incursions from any non-objective source of knowledge would prevent subjectivity from creeping into our worldview. At minimum, this would take care of any view which reduces to the primacy of consciousness (such as the notion that reality was created by consciousness and conforms to the dictates of a consciousness). It would also checkmate the desire to manufacture one's worldview on the basis of the content of a storybook, especially if the content of that storybook affirmed views which reduce to the primacy of consciousness (such as is the case with the Christian bible). The principle of objectivity in fact serves as a fire-wall protecting the human mind against any variant of mysticism. This principle equips the human mind with what it needs to distinguish between fact and fiction, reality and imagination, knowledge and fabrication.

Moreover, recognizing that it is illegitimate to draw inferences from what we experience firsthand by means of sense-perception to conclusions which contradict what we experience, would equip the discriminating mind with the ability to filter out many arbitrary claims at the outset, thus allowing a thinker to devote his attention to things that are of actual value to his life. For instance, if he reads that dead corpses which had been buried in graves suddenly reanimated and rose out of those graves (cf. Matt. 27:52-53), he would – armed with the principle described in (2) above – recognize that this is fiction and entertainment, for his experience consistently indicates that the dead remain dead, and corpses do not reanimate in their graves and rise out of them.

The Christian worldview, however, stands on an explicit rejection of such principles. It cannot survive for a moment on principles which explicitly exclude the contaminants of subjectivism and contradiction. It can only get away with rejection of such principles by deceptively obscuring the nature of the human mind and reducing it to a subhuman level – to the level of a terrified stock animal that is "always ready" for slaughter, "always ready" to prostrate itself, not in order to live, but in order not to die.

"Double Standards and Begging the Question"

Bahnsen begins this section of chapter 31 of his book *Always Ready* by interacting with the second premise that he attributes to the case against supernaturalism. That premise is:

it is illegitimate to draw inferences from what is experienced by the senses to what must lie outside of experience. (p. 185)

Bahnsen probes this statement with a series of questions:

We should first ask why it is that metaphysicians (and theologians) should not reason from what is known in sense experience to something lying beyond sensation. After all, isn't this precisely what empirical scientists do from day to day? They continually reason from the seen to the unseen (e.g., talking of subatomic particles, computing gravitational forces, warning against radiation simply on the basis of its effects, prescribing medicine for an unseen infection on the basis of an observed fever, etc.) It certainly appears capricious for those with anti-metaphysical leanings to prohibit the theologian from doing what is allowed to the scientist! Such an inconsistency betrays a mind that has been made up in advance against certain kinds of conclusions about reality. (p. 185)

So, is Bahnsen saying that we reason *from an empirical source*? Indeed, we do just this. But one does not need to be a metaphysician or theologian to be able to do this. Ordinary mortals do this all the time. What makes this possible? Bahnsen wants to argue that his god makes this possible. But in fact, the ability to conceptualize is what makes this possible. One will never learn this point from Bahnsen, for his desire to assimilate the human intellect into the context of his god-beliefs will only cloud the matter rather than pave the way for clear understanding.

The ability to form concepts allows the human mind to create open-ended classes of entities, attributes, actions, etc., which include not only those qualifying entities, attributes, actions, etc. which we perceive, but also those which we do not perceive. The concept 'cat', for instance, includes the cat we are looking at in the neighbor's yard, as well as cats that we saw in another neighborhood, cats that lived 100 years ago, cats that will live in the future, etc. The membership of individual cats within the range of reference of the concept 'cat' is not restricted to some specific number; the concept 'cat' does not "expire" after it's been used to denote 10, 100 or 5,000 specific cats. On the contrary, the concept is open-ended, and there is no quantitative limit to the units which can be included in it. What specifically makes it possible for the human mind to continue integrating new units into the concept 'cat' is the operation known as *measurement-omission*. Measurement-omission is the principle which guides conceptual integration: "the relevant measurements must exist in *some* quantity, but may exist in *any* quantity." (ITOE, p. 12) With simple principles such as this, which are accessible to any thinker, there's no reason to posit an invisible magic being to understand how the mind operates when it "reason[s] from what is known in sense experience to something lying beyond sensation."

Note that the cats which we do not see but include in the concept 'cat' are just as *finite* and *this-worldly* as the cats which we *do* see. There is no reason to suppose that the cats which we do not see and yet include in the scope of reference of the concept 'cat' cannot be seen at some point in time by someone, even ourselves, unless of course they no longer exist or will not exist during our lifetimes. But even then, the units included in the concept are still just as non-supernatural, non-otherworldly, non-miraculous as the ones we have actually perceived, for the ones we have actually serve as the model for the concept in the first place. So while concepts do in fact serve as our cognitive means by which to reason from what we do see to what we do not see, we don't leave the universe by performing this process, and what we reason to is just as non-supernatural as that from which we originally reasoned.

But is this really what Bahnsen is proposing that theologians are doing when they assert the existence of "the supernatural"? If theologians who assert "the supernatural" are simply drawing conclusions pertaining to what is not seen from what they do see, what are the steps in their reasoning process which lead to such conclusions? Scientists can identify the steps they take in developing their conclusions, so why doesn't Bahnsen identify the steps that the theologian takes in concluding that "the supernatural" is real?

Bahnsen seems to be setting up a subtle false dichotomy: either one affirms that it is completely illegitimate to reason "from the seen to the unseen," or – if we grant that this is impossible – then supernatural claims are perfectly legitimate. But he gives us no reason to suppose that both positions are wrong. Why not entertain the objective alternative which Bahnsen ignores: that we do in fact reason from what is given in perception to what lies beyond perception, and yet the units which lie beyond perception that we integrate into the sum of our knowledge are just as natural and this-worldly as the units which we perceived and which we used as models for the integration process in the first place.

Bahnsen wants to make it all appear so innocent (and yet, Bahnsen himself has warned us that there is a distinction between appearance and reality) by pretending that what theologians do is essentially no different from "what empirical scientists do from day to day." And yet he conspicuously ignores the fact that his scheme requires us to drop the principle of objectivity from the context of the reasoning process he's trying to assimilate into his defense of supernaturalism. Moreover, he does not show how the process of reasoning to the supernatural from what is seen is at all similar to the process of integrating unperceived but still completely natural and this-worldly units into concepts formed on the basis of perceived models.

Thinkers of all professions – not just those involved in the special sciences – do in fact reason from what they perceive firsthand to things that they do not perceive or have not yet perceived. But there is nothing inherent in this process which requires that what is concluded from such reasoning cannot be perceived at some point. The cats about which I draw general conclusions from a small sample, for instance, are just as non-supernatural as the cats which I perceive and which make up my sample.

For instance, I have been to many, many cities in my lifetime. I have seen them firsthand, walked their streets, eaten at their cafes, gone to board meetings in their tall buildings, strolled in their parks, etc. Every city I have seen has had trees. I have never been to Pittsburgh, PA, but I have no reason to suspect it does not have trees. I reason from what I have seen (other cities) to what I have not seen (trees in Pittsburgh, PA). There is nothing illegitimate about this, and if I do in fact one day go to Pittsburgh, I wager that I will see trees there. This is an important point: the reasoning process that Bahnsen alludes to (“from what is known in sense experience to something lying beyond sensation”), does not require that we reason from what we perceive to what must be imperceptible, supernatural or otherworldly. What Bahnsen mentions – subatomic particles, gravitational forces, radiation, causes of infection, etc., may be imperceptible, but this does not mean that all things concluded by a course of reasoning that begins with what we perceive must also be imperceptible. Moreover, there’s no reason to suppose that subatomic particles, gravitational forces, radiation, causes of infection, etc., are just as finite, non-supernatural and this-worldly as the cats and trees we perceive on a daily basis.

But Bahnsen wants to make sure that we allow at the very least the ability to reason from what is perceived to that which is imperceptible. That’s because his invisible magic being is held to be imperceptible. That is why he specifically names examples which are imperceptible (e.g., subatomic particles, gravitational forces, and the like). But does Bahnsen explain how one can reason from what is perceived to that which is not perceived? No he does not. Does he explain how conceptualization makes this possible? No, he does not. If he did, he’d have to show how this process could be executed and validate his god-belief claims at the same time. Bahnsen nowhere comes close to doing this. I suspect that his defenders will probably say that his book was intended for an untutored audience, meaning: he hadn’t intended on tutoring them. But this is a roundabout way of admitting that he in fact did not explain these things. So such defenses are unhelpful.

Bahnsen then writes:

Everybody should be expected to play by the same rules. (p. 185)

But does Bahnsen truly want “to play by the same rules” as non-believers? If anything, one gets the impression that he emphatically does not. Bahnsen clearly wants to reserve for himself the option of appealing to “revelation” as a defense for his claims. This is simply a variant of the invisible magic being defense: if you cannot establish your position on the basis of facts which are accessible to anyone who reasonably investigates the matter, claim that your position has is certified by an invisible magic being who makes it so. This assessment of Bahnsen’s apologetic is no stretch, not even in the least.

In [his opening statement when he debated Gordon Stein](#), one of Bahnsen’s chief points was that “the existence, factuality, or reality of different kinds of things is not established or disconfirmed in the same way in every case.” Apparently some claims should be established by means of reason, but other claims are exempt from this requirement. Bahnsen found it important to segregate his god-belief claims epistemologically from other types of claims, insisting that we should not expect his god-belief claims to be verified in the same manner as we might verify other claims, particularly claims having to do with things that exist *in* the universe (i.e., things which are not believed to “surpass the limits of nature”). Of course, if “the supernatural” were really imaginary, we would not expect the methods we use to verify truths in the actual world to be sufficient when it comes to verifying claims about “the supernatural.” So such reservations are not surprising.

To illustrate his point, Bahnsen employed his famous “crackers in the pantry” example, which achieves its aim by trivializing the methods we use to verify claims in “the ‘here-and-now’.” His point was that one cannot expect to verify the claim that the Christian god exists in the same manner as we verify the claim that there are crackers in the pantry. The existence of the crackers in the pantry can be verified by simply going over to the pantry and checking to see if the crackers are there. If we see the crackers in the pantry, then we can be sure that the claim that the crackers are in the pantry is true.

But, according to Bahnsen, the existence of the Christian god cannot be verified in such a manner. Okay. How then can it be verified? He implies that the existence of his god can in fact be verified by the same mind that can verify whether or not there are crackers in the pantry. But this is where Bahnsen led the audience on a wild goose chase, never elucidating any methodology by which we can verify such claims. Throughout the debate, one of Bahnsen’s primary aims was to shield his god-belief claims from criticism (his other aim was to discredit non-belief in Christian supernaturalism), and in the present context he sought to do so by pointing to other things whose existence is not verified in the same way we verify whether or not there are crackers in the pantry, such as: “barometric pressure, quasars, gravitational attraction, elasticity, radioactivity, natural laws, names, grammar, numbers, the university itself (that you’re now at), past events, categories, future contingencies, laws of thought, political obligations, individual identity over time, causation, memories, dreams or even love or beauty.” What Bahnsen ignores is the fact that all these examples are of things that can be verified and understood by means of *reason*. In fact, we use reason when we check to see if the crackers are in the pantry just as we do when we measure barometric pressure, search for the existence of quasars, test gravitational attraction, etc. Reason is the common denominator for exploring all these inquiries. But reason does not help us when investigating the alleged existence of “the supernatural,” and Bahnsen’s own appeals to “revelation” confirm this. Since Bahnsen does not show how reason can be used to verify his god-belief claims, and numerous statements of his verify that the existence of his god cannot be known by means of autonomous inference from what we perceive (in fact, he says, this knowledge needs to be “revealed” to us), then it

does in fact look like Bahnsen wants to reserve for himself a different set of game rules, in spite of his statement to the opposite effect.

Could it be that the method by which Bahnsen has “knowledge” of “the supernatural” is just too sophisticated to explain? It would appear not. Instead of going and looking on the shelf, as we might do if we’re in doubt about there being any crackers in the pantry, Bahnsen’s method for “knowing the supernatural” seems to be nothing more than consulting a storybook to settle questions about the existence of his god. Christians might object to this characterization, saying that it is just as geared toward trivializing Bahnsen’s methodology of confirming his god-belief claims as his crackers-in-the-pantry example trivializes methodologies used to verify claims in “the ‘ here-and-now’.” But again we must ask: what exactly is the methodology that Bahnsen proposes for investigating claims about “the supernatural”? If Bahnsen never presents any methodology for investigating such claims, how can we be accused of trivializing it? And if Bahnsen does have a methodology which for one reason or another prefers to keep close to his chest, how exactly does it differ from taking what the bible says at face value on its own say so? Here we just get another massive blank-out.

But notice what Bahnsen says next:

Moreover, it is important to notice that (2) above is not really relevant to making a case against biblical metaphysics. Christianity does not view its metaphysical (theological, supernatural) claims as unguided or arbitrary attempts to reason from the seen world to the unseen world - unwarranted projections from nature to what lies beyond it. In the first place, the Christian claims that God created this world to reflect His glory and to be a constant testimony to Him and His character. God also created man as His own image, determined the way in which man would think and learn about the world, and coordinated man's mind and the objective world so that man would unavoidably know the supernatural Creator through the conduit of the created realm. (pp. 185-186)

Bahnsen needs to make his position on this matter clear instead of clouding it with the murkiness of statements like this. He needs to come clean on this: Does man (according to Bahnsen’s view) infer the reality of “the supernatural” from what he perceives in the world around him, or not? If Bahnsen thinks so, then what are the steps in that inferential process? How does one infer the existence of “the supernatural” (i.e., that which “surpasses the limits of nature”) from the natural? As I ask in my blog [Is Human Experience Evidence of the Christian God?](#)

How does that which is natural, material, finite and corruptible serve as evidence of that which is supernatural, immaterial, infinite and incorruptible? In other words, how does A serve as evidence of non-A?

Or,

How does something serve as evidence of that which completely contradicts it?

On the other hand, if Bahnsen does not think we infer the reality of “the supernatural” from what we perceive in the world around us, then he admits that such beliefs cannot be rational, for they have nothing to do with reason. Bahnsen cannot have it both ways. Indeed, he will have to play by the same rules. If he cannot establish his claims on the basis of reason, he needs to admit this, and with that he will concede all debate.

Now those who confuse their imagination with reality and give special names to their confusion (e.g., “the supernatural”) will always be able to concoct explanations for how they come into possession of what they call “knowledge.” By accepting one arbitrary premise, especially in a position of hierarchical importance in one’s overall understanding of the world (cf. Bahnsen’s “ultimate presuppositions”), the believer shows his willingness to compromise his rational faculties and thus opens the door to any other arbitrary notions that he will need to support the original. Essentially, he uses a fabrication to cover up another fabrication. The common currency here is pretense in the guise of profound philosophical truth. But in doing so he outlines a worldview that is completely incompatible with what we learn from the world. We learn from the world, for instance, that we possess a volitional consciousness, but here Bahnsen tells us that an invisible magic being has “determined the way in which man would think and learn about the world.” According to this view, we are merely puppets manipulated by strings dangling from a magic kingdom, or characters in a [cartoon universe](#) executing an elaborately contrived script.

The commitment to the primacy of consciousness here is difficult to miss. This deity – a supernatural consciousness – “coordinated man’s mind and the objective world so that man would unavoidably know the supernatural Creator through the conduit of the created realm.” On this view, both the subject (“man’s mind”) and the object (“the objective world”) conform to the wishful dictates of the supernatural consciousness, whose will holds metaphysical primacy over both. The subjectivism of such a view is echoed by Van Til: “the world of objects was made in order that the subject of knowledge, namely man, should interpret it under God... The subject and the object are therefore adapted to one another.” (*The Defense of the Faith*, 3rd ed., p. 43) According to such a view both man (even as a subject himself) and the world about him, are objects of the consciousness of the supernatural deity, and [they conform precisely to its intentions](#).

This view suggests more than that knowledge of “the supernatural” is not the conclusion of a rational process, but

that man is completely infallible so long as his “conclusions” (which are “unavoidably know[n]” and not derived from any rational process to begin with) agree with the content of the storybook (and so long as those conclusions conform to the prescribed interpretation of that storybook), but wholly fallible in any other use of his intellect. If man’s mind and the world he beholds were “created” such that they are both “adapted to one another” by a perfect creator which can never err, then it seems that infallibility in theological assertions is exactly what is being claimed.

Bahnsen continues:

God Himself intended and made it unavoidable that man would learn about the Creator from the world around him. This amounts to God coming to man through the temporal and empirical order, not man groping toward God. This amounts to saying that the natural world is not in itself random and without a clue as to its ultimate meaning, leaving man to arbitrary speculation and metaphysical projections. (p. 186)

While Bahnsen wants to characterize the alleged “unavoidability” of this knowledge of “the supernatural” as the cause behind the world’s non-randomness, the view he presents here renders epistemology completely futile. For it puts man’s mind in a completely passive role when it comes to his acquisition of knowledge. Since it holds that the “knowledge” that the Christian god exists is “unavoidable” and this same god “com[es] to man through the temporal and empirical order,” man’s mind can remain completely idle and still possess this alleged knowledge. So Bahnsen is in effect coming full circle in divorcing knowledge from the operation of man’s mind, which is confined to “groping” were it not for a supernatural deity rescuing it from its own devices and helplessness.

It is at this point that Bahnsen introduces the dichotomy between “arbitrary speculation” and “divine revelation,” a commonplace assumption in Christian apologetics. This dichotomy is integral to the religious view that man’s mind is epistemologically helpless, and Bahnsen is in no way the only one who has tried to exploit it. Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, makes it quite explicit:

How, then, do you discover the purpose you were created for? You have only two options. Your first option is *speculation*. This is what most people choose. They conjecture, they guess, they theorize ... Fortunately, there is an alternative to speculation about the meaning and purpose of life. It’s *revelation*. We can turn to what God has revealed about life in his Word. (pp. 19-20)

Reacting to this, Mister Swig accurately encapsulates its apologetic use:

Either you guess at the truth like a hardcore skeptic, never knowing whether you're right, or you look at the Bible and accept its make-believe answer on faith. Given only these two options—and not the explicit alternative of reason, logic, and the scientific method—why would anyone choose mere speculation? ([Rick Warren: Master Assimilator for the Christian Collective](#))

The reason why Christians want to characterize the discovery of one’s purpose in life as a matter of speculation vs. revelation, is to frontload a set of assumptions which will be recruited to discredit any purpose one might decide for himself that does not subordinate him to the will of an invisible magic being, specifically the Christian deity. If, for instance, a thinker recognizes that his purpose is to live and enjoy his life – a purpose which religionists want to discourage at any cost – then any reasoning he cites in support of this purpose can be discounted as the product of mere “speculation.” The message here is quite clear: don’t try to think for yourself, let the church elders do it for you, and abide by whatever pronouncements for your life that they might issue. Which means: you are not to live for your own sake, you are to sacrifice your life to whatever end the religionists decide for it.

Embedded within all this is the question of whether or not the world is “random.” Bahnsen wants to use the concept ‘random’ as if it denoted a metaphysical attribute, when in fact it describes an epistemological vantage. If the law of identity obtains throughout the universe (the apologist is free to argue that it does not), then “randomness” could only indicate a lack of knowledge on the part of any knower as to the causes of what he discovers or encounters. For instance, it may be a random incident that my coworker and I both show up to the water fountain with empty cups in hand at the same moment, but this would not entail that there is no causality behind our mutual meeting. If A is A, and A is what it is independent of conscious functions (e.g., beliefs, misunderstandings, wishes, emotions, etc.), then not only can we affirm that the universe is not random, we can affirm it on an explicitly non-theistic basis, that is: on the basis of the primacy of existence metaphysics.

Of course, I am a man, but no god has come to me “through the temporal and empirical order.” Only other men have, and men can be misinformed or dishonest (and even both). Many in the world are prone to making all kinds of outlandish claims. Would Bahnsen have me discard all discriminating awareness and simply accept whatever the first passer-by might claim? Perhaps this depends on who that first passer-by might be and what he might claim. If he claims what Bahnsen claims, then the answer would be yes: consider it true, even if you don’t at first believe it, and apply his scheme of apologetics to make sure what is claimed is in the end believed. If the first passer-by happens to be a Muslim, a Buddhist, a Scientologist, or even a rational man, don’t trust anything he says, for he does not number among “the chosen.”

Sensing that what he has presented is still not sufficient to shield his position from scrutiny, Bahnsen ups the ante by invoking the doctrine that man is inherently sinful:

Moreover, given the intellectually corrupting effects of man's fall into sin and rebellion against God, man's mind has not been left to know God on the basis of man's own unaided experience and interpretation of the world. God has undertaken to make Himself known to man by means of verbal revelation - using words (chosen by God) which are exactly appropriate for the mind of man (created by God) to come to correct conclusions about His Creator, Judge and Redeemer. (p. 186)

Bahnsen's tactic here is less than sophomoric. He's essentially saying: "If you deny that my invisible magic being, then you're morally worthless!" Which is essentially to say: "If you defy my authority, then you're a disgrace!" That is what the appeal to sin is all about: it's a last ditch effort to discredit anyone and everyone who does not believe what the Christian claims by exploiting any self-doubt or lack of self-esteem as an indication of the presence of this magical contaminant called "sin." The doctrine of "sin" allows the Christian apologist to cover his resort to childish slander with something that seems seriously important: man's moral nature. And yet, the doctrine of "sin" itself only demonstrates how out of touch Christianity as a worldview is with a rational understanding of morality. One of the ways Christianity's own teachings succeed in nullifying morality as such, is by its underlying doctrine of collective guilt: all men are guilty by virtue of one man's transgressions. Men "inherit" a "fallen nature" - and with it an innate "rebelliousness" against the Christian god - as a result of the "sin" of one man whom none of us living today ever met and whose existence cannot be objectively corroborated; all we have is a storybook, told in campfire fashion, that this man allegedly existed in some unspecified era of the distant past. You can't be good by your own choices and actions, so why try? After all, morality on Christianity's own view is primarily about being "good" (at least in the eyes of an imaginary being), not about how to govern your choices and actions in order to live. Your choices and actions, like your life, are of no concern in the eternal scheme of things, so they shouldn't concern you in your life to begin with.

Even Bahnsen's own statements confirm the accuracy of this analysis, for he admits that this presumption of "man's fall into sin" is not something he can discover by means of reasoning from the world that he experiences firsthand. According to the Christian view, this "presupposition" is based in "verbal revelation," which is essentially nothing other than indiscriminately believing what one reads in the storybooks of the bible. Observe:

Christian theology is not the result of a self-sufficient exploration of, and argument from man's unaided and brute empirical experience, to a god lying beyond and behind experience. Rather the Christian affirms, on the basis of Scripture's declaration, that our theological tenets rest on the *self-revelation* of the transcendent Creator. Theology does not work from man to God, but from God to man (via infallible, verbal revelation; cf. 2 Peter 1:21). (p. 186)

So while above Bahnsen wanted to take thinkers to task for supposing we cannot reason from the seen to the unseen (because surely we do this all the time) as a premise in the case against supernaturalism, he's now saying that this is not how one arrives at religious truths in the first place! Is Bahnsen coming, or going? It's hard to tell, principally because the position he wants to defend requires a lot of shape-shifting on its defenders' part. Recall that in the previous section, Bahnsen declared that "the metaphysician aims at absolute or necessary truths about the reality which somehow lies behind those appearances." (*Always Ready*, p. 184) He may "aim" at such "truths," but simply aiming for them does not validate them or make them truthful. So the question remains: *How does he know?* What epistemological procedure does he undertake to secure these "absolute or necessary truths about the reality which somehow lies behind those appearances"? Again, Bahnsen resorts to the claim of revelation, and he also characterizes the human mind as epistemologically passive as it is supposed to idly receive revelatory transmissions from "the supernatural." Thus Bahnsen appeals to the supernatural in order to validate the supernatural, which is terminally circular. If this method is "valid" for Bahnsen's purposes, why wouldn't it be valid for any rival position? For instance, what would stop someone who wanted to validate *The Wizard of Oz* from validating the claim that *The Wizard of Oz* is true by appealing to what *The Wizard of Oz* says? The conclusion is inescapable: Bahnsen has *no* epistemological warrant for his claims whatsoever, for he identifies no epistemological process by which his belief in supernaturalism can be validated.

From all of this, however, Bahnsen wants to draw the following conclusion:

Therefore, the anti-metaphysical polemic - already seen to be arbitrary and inconsistent - begs the main question. If God as portrayed in the Bible does indeed exist, then there is no reason to preclude the possibility that man who lives in the realm of "nature" can gain a knowledge of the "supernatural." (p. 186)

In spite of the fact that Bahnsen's defense is terminally circular, as we have seen, he can't wait to accuse non-believing positions of begging the question themselves. This is not uncommon at all: presuppositionalists seem to delight in posturing as if non-belief in the supernatural somehow stood on a wobbly foundation full of fallacy and error. But does it really? Bahnsen's focus is on dismissing efforts which "preclude the possibility that man... can gain a knowledge of the 'supernatural'," but fails to explain why anyone's worldview should *include* claims about "the supernatural" as valid knowledge. Even Bahnsen's own hypothetical "If God... does indeed exist" is intellectually shortsighted. If such a being existed, then all bets are off when it comes to assessing anything proposed as a possibility, no matter how absurd it might seem. If such a being exists, anything would be possible, both the theist's proposals as well as any atheist's. That's because the very notion of a god presupposes the primacy of consciousness, and on such an assumption nothing could be written off as either an absurdity or an impossibility.

What about corpses rising from their graves and walking around in cities a la Matthew 27:52-53? This is perfectly possible, on the assumption that an invisible magic being is running the universe like a cartoon. Same with the idea of a pack of acid-breathing canines typing out dissertations on Goldratt's Theory of Constraints on the surface of Venus. If a mere human being could imagine these things, how could one say it's not possible for the being which allegedly created man in the first place to be able to make what a human being imagines real? Can man's imagination range beyond the abilities of the Christian god? What card-carrying Christian would admit to this?

But such "what if?" appeals are not helpful to Bahnsen. What if men were actually water-breathing lilies that grew in the silts of the Ayeyarwady delta? Well, we're not, so why treat such questions as if they were important?

At this point, Bahnsen can only *assert* his position and treat it as a *given*:

God created and controls all things, according to the Biblical account. Given that perspective, God could certainly bring it about that man learns the truth about Him through both the created order and a set of divinely inspired messages. (p. 186)

In such a way, Bahnsen demonstrates how affirming one arbitrary claim and treating it as centrally important (cf. "presupposition"), allows one to argue *any* arbitrary claim he wants, since he's already granted legitimacy to the arbitrary. A little leaven, leaveneth the whole lump. If we grant one absurdity, on what basis could we rule out any other absurdity? Blank out.

This in turn gives Bahnsen the license to speak for "the unbeliever":

When the unbeliever contends that nothing in man's temporal, limited, natural experience can provide knowledge of the metaphysical or supernatural, he is simply taking a roundabout way of saying that the Biblical account of a God who makes Himself clearly known in the created order and Scripture is mistaken. (pp. 186-187)

I suppose that, no matter how solid a case the non-believer presents on behalf of his position that supernaturalism is irrational, the apologist will always be able to dismiss it as "a roundabout way" of saying the bible is mistaken. If the apologist has no arguments for his position, such maneuvers might be psychologically palliative, though only momentarily. But since Bahnsen prefers to philosophize on the basis of "what if?" scenarios, let's ask one of our own: what if "the unbeliever" gives the apologist ample opportunity to

- a) identify the means by which one can have awareness of "the supernatural,"
- b) explain how supernatural claims can be verified in a manner consistent with the nature of consciousness which man actually possesses,
- c) provide a reliable method by which "the supernatural" can be distinguished from what the believer may merely be imagining, and
- d) credibly explain how "revelation" is not essentially the same as believing something one reads in a storybook,

and it turns out that the apologist fails to deliver on all four points? What then? If Bahnsen is so certain that "the Biblical account of a God who makes Himself clearly known in the created order" is not mistaken, why doesn't he explain how such claims can be substantiated on the basis of the primacy of existence, which we know is true and fundamental, instead of just avoiding this and these other issues repeatedly, even when he sets out to write a chapter purportedly intended to deal with "The Problem of Knowing the 'Super-Natural'"? If this god has made itself "clearly known" to men, why do disagreements about the identity of this god and its accompanying theology persist so stubbornly among those who number themselves among "the chosen," just as we would expect them to do if in the end their theology were seated in the imagination of its adherents?

But Bahnsen insists that his position's detractors must be committing some fallacy in their rejection of supernaturalism:

This begging of the question is sometimes veiled from the unbeliever by his tendency to recast the nature of theological truth as man-centered and rooted initially in human, empirical experience. However, the very point in contention between the believer and unbeliever comes down to the claim that Christian teaching is rooted in God's self-disclosure of the truth as found in the world around us and in the written word. (p. 187)

Let us make one thing clear: one is not "begging the question" when he rejects subjective, irrational or arbitrary claims. If a man claims that Blarko, an invisible conscious being which exists beyond the universe, created the universe by making a wish, designing all its structures and contents according to its wise "counsel" such that everything "reflects" its infallible mind and unquestionable plan, and he offers no objective method by which we can independently discover the existence of this Blarko and verify the truth of his claim, on what basis should we accept that claim as knowledge? Suppose we point out that, like Bahnsen, this man fails to explain how such knowledge can be possible, but instead focuses on supposed problems in rival positions which reject belief in Blarko. Would this gain any ground for his case? Of course not; problems in a rival position are not going to substantiate such claims.

And notice how Bahnsen's own position is guilty of the very fallacy he charges the non-believer with committing: begging the question. Bahnsen makes it clear that he must appeal to the supernatural in order to validate his supernaturalism. He refers to "the truth in the world around us and in the written word" of the bible as "God's self-disclosure," but nowhere does he explain how man could know this, even if it were in fact true. Simply reading something in a storybook is not sufficient to accept it as truth. Moreover, if what we read in the storybook would require us to ignore fundamental facts which we do know in order to believe what it says, why would we believe it? Time and time again, apologists fail to factor the nature of man's cognition and its needs into his defenses, and that is because man's cognition and its needs are of no concern to his religious doctrines. What is important to the believer is believing, not understanding. So we should not expect understanding to be the goal of their apologetic program. Bahnsen confirms this assessment with statements such as the following:

There is no reason to think that theology would be intellectually required to be built upon the foundation of human sense experience, unless someone were presupposing in advance that all knowledge must ultimately derive from empirical procedures. But that is the very question at hand. (p. 187)

By "empirical procedures," I understand Bahnsen means sense perception. Again, he does not want his readers to think that sense perception is our primary means of awareness and, consequently, the base of our knowledge. He says that this is "the very question at hand," namely whether or not "all knowledge must ultimately derive from empirical procedures." Would Bahnsen say that some knowledge is derived from an absence of consciousness? If not, then he needs to identify some alternative to "empirical procedures" (i.e., sense perception) as the base from which knowledge can be derived. If "that is the very question at hand," why doesn't he address this point?

Instead, Bahnsen prefers to dwell on soft targets:

The anti-metaphysical polemic is not a supporting reason for rejecting Christianity; it is simply a rewording of that rejection itself. (p. 187)

It may be the case that "the anti-metaphysical polemic... is simply a rewording of that rejection itself," but what if "the anti-metaphysical polemic" that Bahnsen has described is not the basis upon which one rejects Christianity? What if instead the non-believer has adopted what may be called the anti-irrational polemic, the anti-subjective polemic, or the anti-arbitrary polemic? I tend to prefer calling it the anti-mystical position. It is anti-mystical because it is first *pro-reason, pro-rationality, pro-reality and pro-man*. As such, this anti-mystical position is broader than merely a rejection of Christianity; it involves a total decontamination of the human intellect of any irrational, subjective or arbitrary worldview influence, Christianity being merely one of the many views filtered out as a result of an uncompromising commitment to rationality. This is consistent with the two alternative positions which earlier I had proposed in lieu of the Logical Positivism that Bahnsen shadow-boxed:

1. there cannot be a non-*objective* source of knowledge or information about reality, and
2. it is illegitimate to draw inferences from what is experienced by the senses to what *contradicts* experience.

Let the apologist come out of the closet to argue for a non-objective source of knowledge about reality. Let him claim legitimacy to drawing inferences from experience to what contradicts it. Let him defend the willingness to blur the distinction between fact and fiction, reality and imagination, truth and arbitrariness, for this is the substance of his faith.

"Philosophical Self-deception"

Bahnsen opens this section of the chapter "The Problem of Knowing the 'Super-Natural', the 31st chapter of his book *Always Ready*, by referencing a position that he characterizes as "the first and foundational step in the case against metaphysics" – by which he really means, "the case against *supernaturalism*." Recall what that "first and foundational step in the case against metaphysics" – according to Bahnsen – was:

There cannot be a non-empirical source of knowledge or information about reality (*Always Ready*, p. 185)

In response to his own rendition of what "anti-supernaturalists" hold, Bahnsen asks:

What are we to make of the assertion that "all significant knowledge about the objective world is empirical in nature"? The most obvious and philosophically significant reply would be that if the preceding statement were true, then - on the basis of its claim - we could *never know* that it were true. Why? Simply because the statement in question is *not itself* known as the result of empirical testing and experience. Therefore, according to its own strict standards, the statement could not amount to significant knowledge about the objective world. It simply reflects the subjective (perhaps meaningless!) bias of the one who pronounces it. Hence the anti-metaphysician [i.e., anti-supernaturalist] not only has his own preconceived conclusions (presuppositions), but it turns out that he cannot live according to them (cf. Romans 2:1). On the basis of his own assumptions he *refutes himself* (cf. 2 Timothy 2:25). As Paul put it about those who suppress the truth of God in unrighteousness: "They became futile in their speculations" (Romans 1:21)! (p. 187)

Did anyone besides me notice the switch here? In the above paragraph Bahnsen announces that he is turning his focus on “number (1) above,” which he states here as follows:

All significant knowledge about the objective world is empirical in nature. (*Always Ready*, p. 185)

But earlier, when he first listed point (1), it was stated as follows:

There cannot be a non-empirical source of knowledge or information about reality (*Always Ready*, p. 187)

There is a fundamental difference between the two statements that Bahnsen sets before himself. One version speaks of the nature of *knowledge* itself, while the other version makes a statement about the nature of the *source* of knowledge about reality. The two are not the same thing. At some point Bahnsen swapped the one for the other, but he does not explain why. Perhaps, in spite of his acclaimed precision and brilliance, Bahnsen did not notice the switch, or did not think it was worth explaining.

In regard to the affirmation that “all significant knowledge about the objective world is empirical in nature,” Bahnsen misses his opportunity to point out the most obvious error committed by such a statement. Knowledge itself is not “empirical” in nature. On the contrary, *knowledge is conceptual in nature*. That is, knowledge consists of concepts and concepts are the form in which we retain our knowledge. That Bahnsen missed this painfully obvious opportunity to correct such a statement, is itself indicative of his own position’s inadequacy to deal with much of anything philosophical, especially epistemology. This correction is enough to put all of the concerns that Bahnsen raises in the above paragraph to rest. For instance, if knowledge is conceptual in nature, there is no reason to suppose that “we could *never know*” this to be the case. For there is no reason to suppose that we could not form concepts to identify the nature of knowledge. All we need is an understanding of how concepts are formed, and we have this understanding thanks to an objective philosophy. And while Bahnsen might point out that the claim that all knowledge is empirical in nature is not itself open to “empirical testing,” such difficulties need not concern us if knowledge is in fact conceptual in nature. This recognition is itself conceptual, thus qualifying as knowledge on its own terms. Furthermore, if the concepts which informs one’s knowledge of the world were formed according to the objective theory of concepts (a theory which we will not find in the bible), then we need not worry that such knowledge “simply reflects the subjective (perhaps meaningless!) bias of the one who pronounces it.” If they are formed according to an objective process, one which is fully consistent with the primacy of existence, then the conceptual products of our methodology have an objective, rather than subjective, basis. Meanwhile, by identifying the nature of knowledge as conceptual rather than empirical, the non-believer can confidently plead innocent to Bahnsen’s charge that the anti-supernaturalist cannot live according to his own worldview’s premises. For by understanding and acknowledging that knowledge is conceptual in nature, the non-believer nowhere “refutes himself,” nor is there any need to suppose that such recognition commits thinkers to “become futile in their speculations.” The bible’s canned platitudes and denunciations thus resound in the hollow vacuum of its own anti-conceptual wasteland.

Now in regard to the affirmation that “there cannot be a non-empirical *source* of knowledge or information about reality,” this is an altogether different claim, for it speaks about the nature of the *source* of knowledge rather than the nature of *knowledge* as such. Unfortunately Bahnsen nowhere addresses it. His comments aimed at discrediting the idea that the nature of *knowledge* is empirical do nothing to refute the position that the nature of the *source* of knowledge is empirical in nature. Indeed, there is no incompatibility between the position that the nature of knowledge itself is *conceptual* on the one hand, and on the other the position that the *source* of knowledge is in fact ultimately empirical in nature.

Concepts need content to inform them. Where do we get that content? To what do our concepts refer? What do our concepts denote? How do we form our concepts? We do not know how Bahnsen’s worldview might answer such questions, for the source of Bahnsen’s worldview is the bible, and the bible does not provide a theory of concepts. Indeed, the bible is totally silent on the issue of what concepts are, how the mind forms them and how they can represent things in reality.

But an objective worldview which is not constrained to conforming its understanding of reality to ancient storybooks, does not promote such intellectual disability. In fact, an objective worldview which provides a working theory of concepts has the power of opening an individual’s mind both to itself and to the universe in which he lives, giving the understanding he needs to maximize his mind’s abilities and efficacy in his life. An objective theory of concepts recognizes why man needs concepts (for they bring the universe of things and facts into the range of human consciousness) and how they are formed (by a process of abstraction). It also identifies the source from which the content of our concepts ultimately comes, namely empirical experience.

We need inputs from reality to inform our concepts with content that is relevant to reality. Otherwise, if what informs our concepts does not come from reality, on what basis would we say that those concepts have anything to do with our living in reality? How could we say that any statement we make is true if the conceptual constituents of our affirmations do not ultimately refer to things in reality? Perception supplies us with the inputs we need to inform and integrate the concepts we need to identify and live in reality. If Bahnsen does not like this idea, he needs to identify and argue for an alternative to perception as the mode of awareness by which we acquire the inputs we need to

give our concepts the content they need to qualify as knowledge of reality. As we have seen throughout his chapter, however, Bahnsen does not identify any alternatives to perception as means of awareness of things that exist. And when he claims that supernatural things do exist, he presents no method by which we can confidently distinguish the things he calls “supernatural” from what he may merely be imagining. Consequently, he gives us no reason to suppose that his god-belief is anything other than an elaborate fantasy.

An objection to the effect that the view that the *source* of knowledge is empirical would cripple our ability to arrive at universal truths about things in nature, would of course be a non sequitur. If concepts are understood as open-ended classes which are formed on the basis of the limited input provided by sense perception, then there is no reason to suppose that man’s mind cannot arrive at universal truths by beginning with an empirical source. The nature of the product is not – and need not be – the same as its source, because the units given in perception undergo a process of abstraction, which consists essentially of four steps: isolation, integration, measurement-omission and definition. Universality is a property of concepts; it is nothing more than the open-endedness of a concept’s scope of reference vis-à-vis the units subsumed by it.

We form the concept ‘ball’ on the basis of just a few (two or more) units which we perceive in our firsthand experience, but the concept ‘ball’ includes *all* balls which exist now, which have existed in the past and which will exist in the future. This all-inclusive capacity of concepts is made possible by the third step in the process of forming them, namely measurement-omission. This is the step which acknowledges that specific units possess relevant attributes in *some* measure, but those attributes can exist in *any* measure. A ball can be 2 inches in diameter or it can be 10 inches in diameter; it may be red, or it may be black and white; it may be inflated with air such that it floats on water, or it may be solid and more dense than water such that it does not float, etc. The concept is thus universal, i.e., open-ended in its scope of reference.

It should be noted at this point, to preempt common presuppositionalist refrains, that propositions are not primaries. On the contrary, propositions are assemblages consisting of concepts put together in a coherent manner. As such, propositions represent a further step in the process of integration beyond concept-formation, for they integrate two or more concepts into a meaningful whole, resulting in a unit all its own and denoting a complete thought. But the universality of a generalized proposition (e.g., “all balls have a radius and a diameter”) is derived from the universality of its constituent concept(s). Since we can form the concept ‘ball’ on the basis of just a few units of which we acquire awareness through perception, and since the concept ‘ball’, as a result of measurement-omission, is universal in its scope of reference, a proposition such as “all balls have a radius and a diameter” which encompasses all balls is possible because of the universality already available to us in the concept ‘ball’.

None of these points on behalf of the view that knowledge is conceptual in nature necessitates belief in a god or necessitates a leap beyond the natural to “whatever surpasses the limits of nature.” Indeed, the formation of concepts and their assembly into larger units (e.g., thoughts, propositions, theories, etc.) are natural processes of the human mind. They are consistently identifiable according to a process which most thinkers should be able to understand without too much difficulty, and they are open to a means of testing which is in fact scientific. There is no contradiction in affirming that knowledge is conceptual in nature and that the source of knowledge is perceptual (or empirical) in nature. The objective theory of concepts bridges the perceptual and the conceptual levels of cognition, thus demystifying the process whose misunderstanding is so central to the presuppositionalist strategy.

“Further Difficulties”

Bahnsen then raises a most curious concern:

There are other difficulties with the position expressed by (1) as well. We can easily see that it amounts to a presupposition for the unbeliever. What rational basis or evidence is there for the position that all knowledge must be empirical in nature? That is not a conclusion supported by other reasoning, and the premise does not admit of empirical verification since it deals with what is universally or necessarily the case (not a historical or contingent truth). Moreover, the statement itself precludes any other type of verification or support other than empirical warrants or evidence. Thus the anti-metaphysical opponent of the Christian faith holds to this dogma in a presuppositional fashion - as something which controls inquiry, rather than being the result of inquiry. (pp. 187-188)

We have already seen that the presumption that knowledge must be “empirical” in nature is a mistake which can be easily corrected. And correcting this mistake does not in any way compel us to affirm or appeal to supernaturalism.

But Bahnsen wants to ask those who affirm that knowledge is empirical in nature, what rational basis they might have for supposing this. It may simply be that they do not know of a better way to express what they sense to be the case about the knowledge they have acquired. But if Bahnsen wants to know what rational basis one has for his suppositions, he should at the very least tell his readers what rational basis he might have for supposing that Christianity’s claims about “the supernatural” are true. Unfortunately, Bahnsen does not indicate any rational basis that his supernatural beliefs might have. In fact, he has only told us how his supernatural beliefs are *not* supported. For instance, their “support is *not* limited to natural observation and scientific experimentation.” They “do *not* stem

from direct, eyeball experience of the physical world." "They are *not* verified empirically in a point by point fashion." "Empirical experience" must *not* be sufficient, for it "merely gives us an appearance of things," and "the Bible distinguishes appearances from reality," so there is obviously a conflict between how things "appear" to us and what they "really are." Indeed, Bahnsen does not even explain what *he* means by "rational basis," and yet he wants to know what "rational basis" others have for their claims, even though when he has an opportunity to identify any "rational basis" for his supernaturalism, he reneges on it. The consequence of this for Bahnsen is, obviously, if he has a problem with others not providing a "rational basis" for their position, he is quite simply a hypocrite for holding that against them.

Bahnsen wants to reserve the right to raise questions about what "rational basis" his adversaries might claim for their own positions, but when it comes time for him to defend his claim to "knowing the 'super-natural'," he's content to leave such concerns completely unattended. So when Bahnsen says that "everybody should be expected to play by the same rules" (p. 185), that holds only some of the time.

Bahnsen elaborates on the problem with empiricism as he understands it:

However that anti-metaphysical presupposition has certain devastating results. Notice that if all knowledge must be empirical in nature, then the uniformity of nature cannot be known to be true. And without the knowledge and assurance that the future will be like the past (e.g., if salt dissolved in water on Wednesday, it will do likewise and not explode in water on Friday) we could not draw empirical generalizations and projections - in which case the whole enterprise of natural science would immediately be undermined. (p. 188)

So what is missing? Does Bahnsen think that this problem is somehow overcome by belief in "the supernatural"? Would believing in "the supernatural" somehow make it sensible to assume that nature is uniform with itself? How would this follow? Bahnsen likes to raise problems, but doesn't explain how we can resolve them.

Let us entertain Bahnsen's supposition that "if all knowledge must be empirical in nature, then the uniformity of nature cannot be known to be true." Unfortunately, Bahnsen nowhere explains why this would be the case. Moreover, Bahnsen does not correct the error in the assumption that "all knowledge must be empirical in nature" by pointing out the fact that knowledge is actually *conceptual* in nature. Why doesn't he do this? I suspect there are two factors involved here: 1) Bahnsen does not understand that knowledge is conceptual in nature because he does not have a conceptual understanding of knowledge (and this in turn is due to the fact that the biblical worldview has no native theory of concepts); and 2) a conceptual understanding of knowledge would actually undermine the presuppositional apologetic, since presuppositionalism is geared toward exploiting Christianity's lack of an understanding of concepts in order to attack the human mind. In fact, had Bahnsen understood the nature of his mind and of knowledge before he became a Christian, he probably would never have become a Christian in the first place.

Also noteworthy is the fact that Bahnsen raises against non-Christians the very concern non-Christians could easily (and rightfully) raise against Christianity, given its commitment to [metaphysical subjectivism](#), its lack of a viable conceptual theory and its moral proscriptions against autonomous judgment.

If I truly believed that the universe in which I exist were a creation of an invisible supernatural being which had the power to manipulate at any time or any place any object which exists in this universe, including myself, how would I know that salt would dissolve in water on one day, and not explode in water on other days? Bahnsen's mentor Cornelius Van Til tells us that the Christian god

may at any time take one *fact* and set it into a new relation to created law. That is, there is no inherent reason in the facts or laws themselves why this should not be done. It is this sort of conception of the relation of facts and laws, of the temporal one and many, imbedded as it is in the idea of God in which we profess to believe, that we need in order to make room for miracles. And miracles are at the heart of the Christian position. (*The Defense of the Faith*, p. 27)

On this "presupposition," the ruling consciousness ("God") could decide that, on Wednesday, it is a fact that salt dissolves in water, and on Friday, it is a fact that salt explodes in water. It can do this, according to Van Til, because "there is no inherent reason in the facts or laws themselves why this should not be done." It is simply setting the fact of how salt responds to water "into a new relation to created law," which it can do at will, and without advance notice or approval of the church elders. If one were to believe that such a thing as Van Til's god were real and active in the universe, where's this "assurance that the future will be like the past" that Bahnsen speaks of? If I truly believed that facts could be altered by the will of an invisible supernatural consciousness, how I could acquire the foreknowledge that it would or would not manipulate some object in my experience or some state of affairs in my life? How could I know that salt always dissolves in water? What if the ruling consciousness planned that later today salt will cease dissolving in water, and turn into rubber trees when it comes into contact with water? Surely the Christian believes that his god has the ability to do this. So what tells the believer that it won't do this or something else that is as absurd? What if the ruling consciousness is having a bad day, prone to wrath as the bible says it is? What if it's in a bad mood, and decides to send a tornado, earthquake, hurricane, or tsunami? Or, perhaps it decides to whip reality around such that utterly unpredictable chaos ensues? On Christianity's premises, we are to accept that such things

are possible on the basis of the will of an invisible supernatural consciousness. But Christianity's defenders seem oblivious of the implications such views have for epistemology, which is utterly ironic given their characterization of rival positions.

Suppose I assumed what Christianity says is true, that there is an invisible supernatural being which can alter the facts of the universe at will. Even if I deluded myself into thinking I could forecast events before they happen, such as salt dissolving in water, my bus coming on schedule, or the sun warming the day, I do not know how I could acquire any degree of confidence in my forecasts, for my mind is not a supernatural mind, nor does my mind have the power to read the mind of any invisible supernatural consciousness (I cannot "think the thoughts" of an omniscient, infallible being after it, and I'm simply too honest to pretend that I can). In essence, all inductive generalizations and projections would be worthless. Some might perchance come true, but not because my inductive inferences were cogent. Only because my conclusions happened to coincide with the present wishes of the ruling consciousness would they seem to be true. Epistemology would thus be reduced to a crapshoot. But even here, "true" is a contextual assessment, and there would be no context corresponding to what actually happens available to me, for I would be unable to assume that the present is a reliable indicator of the future. If Christianity were true, as Van Til indicates, there would be no necessary relationship between an entity and its own actions, just as there would be "no inherent reason" why the ruling consciousness could not "at any time take one *fact* and set it into a new relation to created law." My "knowledge" would ultimately boil down to chance occasions of just so happening to get things right. And yet, this is the very same weakness that Bahnsen wants to charge against non-believing worldviews. Bahnsen thus hangs himself with his own rope.

"No Predictability"

Bahnsen is desperate to sneak his religious position into the basis of scientific research:

Scientists could not arrive at even one dependable, rationally warranted conclusion about future chemical interactions, the rotation of the earth, the stability of a bridge, the medicinal effects of a drug, or anything else. Each and every premise that entered into their reasoning about a particular situation at a particular time and in a particular place would need to be individually confirmed in an empirical fashion. (p. 188)

Did Bahnsen truly think that one needs to believe in "the supernatural" in order to come to conclusions about "future chemical reactions, the rotation of the earth, the stability of a bridge," etc.? What exactly does "the supernatural" have to do with these things, and why couldn't one formulate conclusions about these things without believing in some supernatural being? As we have seen repeatedly throughout Bahnsen's treatment of "the problem of knowing the 'super-natural'," he has given us no reason to suppose there is anything beyond his own imagining that actually "surpasses the limits of nature," and the items he list here are not things which "surpass the limits of nature" anyway. Drawing conclusions about chemical reactions, the earth's rotation, the structural integrity of construction projects, etc., is possible only if we remain within the bounds of natural law. Venturing beyond them and into the realm of imagination only produces fiction, and fiction is not truth. In fact, as I pointed out early on in my examination, trying to push these things "beyond the limits of nature" may very well result in disaster.

What Bahnsen should be concerned about here is how general knowledge of the *natural* can be formulated on the basis of a limited range of perceptual inputs. Indeed, the examples he mentions here are all within the realm of the natural anyway, so why is this not his concern? Exploring how we formulate general knowledge of the natural on the basis of perceptual input is altogether different from supposing that we can conclude that there are things that exist "beyond the physical realm" by observing things *in* the physical realm. What we have here is an insidious package-deal: by acknowledging the conceptual nature of generalized knowledge, we're supposed to accept with that a magical realm that exists "beyond sense experience" but which is just as concrete and non-conceptual (and non-imaginary) as the things we perceive in the world, only they "surpass the limits of nature" and are capable of all kinds of wondrous feats in the physical realm (which of course we never get to observe). But here we are talking of two completely different animals. Concepts are not concretes; they are the form in which a mind retains its knowledge. They are not "things" that exist in some other dimension. They represent the *activity* of a mind, not entities which inhabit another world "beyond the physical realm." The "supernatural" entities that Bahnsen has in mind are not themselves supposed to be conceptual in nature. The mind forms concepts, but Bahnsen is not going to allow that his "supernatural" realm and the beings which allegedly populate it are formed by the mind. No, he wants to suppose that they exist independent of human mental activity, unlike concepts. But it's clear that he's trying to use his own misunderstanding of the conceptual as a front-door, if you will, to the supernatural. Bahnsen thus gives us a textbook case of how errors can grow like weeds when they go unchecked.

This is truly getting to the heart of the presuppositionalist's confusion. It is based on a most superficial half-truth that is subsequently distorted far beyond recognition. He observes that there is a difference between the physical concretes that we perceive in the world about us and the form in which he conceptualizes those concretes. It is true that there is a distinction between the objects we perceive and the manner in which we integrate those objects into conceptual wholes, just as there is a distinction between subject and object. And there is much to discover and learn about how the mind does this. But the presuppositionalist distorts this distinction beyond recognition and then tries

to exploit it as evidence of the existence of the "supernatural" things he has enshrined in his imagination.

Like other human beings, scientists can extrapolate from the relatively few units they perceive in the world and formulate wide-ranging principles which apply to units which they have not perceived and which they will never perceive. The presuppositionalist interprets this as reasoning from "the seen" to "the unseen," which seems plausible on the face of it, but he does so in the most superficial manner possible, not understanding the mental operation which is responsible for this. In essence, the presuppositionalist wants to use the scientist's "reasoning from the seen to the unseen" to lend credibility to the idea of "knowing the supernatural" by putting both on the same level. After all, the scientist can have knowledge of things that he does not perceive, so why can't the religious believer have knowledge of "the supernatural"? Not being able to perceive something does not prohibit the scientist from having knowledge of that something, so why should the religious believer be held to a standard that is more stringent than that enjoyed by the scientist? This is roughly the kind of reasoning that the apologist seems to be using. Says the presuppositionalist, the science reasons from the seen to the unseen, and does so all the time. To say then that we cannot reason from the seen physical universe to the unseen realm of the supernatural, is special pleading, according to Bahnsen. It doesn't matter to the presuppositionalist that "the unseen" things about which the scientist forms his theories or draws his conclusions, are just as finite, natural and this-worldly as the things he does see.

More fundamentally, however, this kind of reasoning will seem most plausible in direct proportion to one's ignorance of the way the mind forms concepts. In fact, not only does this type of reasoning itself stem from a failure to understand how the mind functions conceptually, it also seeks to feed off the ignorance of any potential convert. The whole move from "the seen" to "the unseen" here is not a conceptual operation for Bahnsen, but a leap from the actual world to the world of imagination. Only he prefers not to acknowledge it as such. But the denial of the conceptual operation of the human mind is hard to miss once the nature of that operation is understood.

As if he were anticipating any doubts in my analysis, Bahnsen goes on to make it clear that the assumptions underlying his assessment of the "anti-supernaturalist" mindset include the denial of the capacity for concepts:

Nothing experienced in the past could become a basis for expectations about how things might happen at present or in the future. Without certain beliefs about the nature of reality and history - beliefs which are supra-empirical in character - the process of empirical learning and reasoning would become impossible. (p. 188)

Keep in mind that the scientist does not pretend to move from knowledge of things that exist in the universe to knowledge of things that allegedly exist in a realm which contradicts it. He does not move from things existing in nature to knowledge of things which are claimed to "surpass the limits of nature." Rather, like other human beings do everyday, he moves from direct awareness of specific, natural things to generalizations pertaining to the classes to which those specific, natural things exist. The classifications are generalized by virtue of their omission of specific measurements; the classifications include a broad range of specific measurements, but given the fact that to exist is to be specific, any specific thing included in those classifications would itself possess its attributes in specific measure.

This is supported by a network of core constants which are found at the basis of rational (and therefore non-theistic) thought. If existence exists independent of consciousness (the primacy of existence), to be something is to have a nature which obtains independent of consciousness (the law of identity), and the action of an entity is dependent upon its identity (the law of causality), then there is a constant metaphysical basis for general classifications regardless and independent of temporal constraints (for temporal measurement itself would need to assume and consist of general classifications). So things happening in uniform manner from past to present and into the future is not metaphysically problematic.

Also, if man has the ability to form concepts on the basis of perceptual inputs, then he has the elementary epistemological prerequisites for forming general classifications on the basis of limited inputs. The ability to do this is not itself dependent on what a person *believes*; he has this ability by virtue of his nature as a human being, not because he believes in invisible magic beings. His ability did not come into being as a result of assenting to some ideational content (he'd have to have the ability in question to do this intelligently in the first place), and likewise he does not lose this ability by believing some content, or disbelieving or failing to believe some content (though taking irrational beliefs seriously will undermine the efficacy of this ability). To suppose that merely believing something will turn this ability on would commit the fallacy of the stolen concept, as should be readily apparent. The distinction between past and present can only be made on the basis of certain constants (the primacy of existence, the law of identity, the law of causality), and these constants obtain regardless of what we believe. It is the task of philosophy to *identify* these constants (as opposed to installing them in reality as if they didn't already exist), and their relationship to the process by which knowledge is acquired and validated.

But watch as Bahnsen digs himself even deeper into his own intellectual pit:

At this point we can press even harder, arguing that if one presupposes that all knowledge must be empirical in nature, then not only has he undermined science and refuted himself, but he has actually scuttled all argumentation and reasoning. To engage in the evaluation of arguments is to recognize and utilize

propositions, criteria, logical relations and rules, etc. However, such things as these (propositions, relations, rules) are not empirical entities which can be discovered by one of the five senses. (p. 188)

This statement not only confirms my analysis above (namely that the presuppositionalist is trying to dignify his supernatural claims by likening them to the scientist's reasoning from "the seen" to "the unseen"), but also the need for an objective approach to knowledge which Bahnsen's worldview specifically (and conspicuously) lacks and could not support. The apologetic scheme that Bahnsen deploys here might work well against those who affirm that "all knowledge must be empirical in nature." But it won't work against the Objectivist model, for Objectivism recognizes that knowledge is *conceptual* in nature. Bahnsen himself indicates just how feeble his own apologetic tactic is against Objectivism when he points out that "to engage in evaluation of arguments is to recognize and utilize propositions, criteria, logical relations and rules, etc." This is the realm of concepts, and Christianity's lack of a native theory of concepts only proves its utter insufficiency on the very issues which Bahnsen raises.

Bahnsen further elaborates what he wants his readers to suppose is the case of all non-Christians:

Accordingly, according to the dogma of empiricism, it would not make sense to speak of such things - not make sense, for instance, to speak of validity and invalidity in an argument, nor even to talk about premises and conclusions. All you would have would be one contingent electro-chemical event in the physical brain of a scholar followed contingently by another. (p. 189)

But it does make sense to speak, for instance, of validity and invalidity in an argument, or talk about premises and conclusions, if we have concepts. In fact, concepts not only allow us to speak of issues regarding validity of argument, but also of electro-chemical reactions in the brain. (Without explanation, Bahnsen says "the physical brain" as if he had to specify it in contrast to a "non-physical brain.") And yet, it is specifically a theory of concepts which Bahnsen lacks in his bible-based worldview. So ironically, he is accusing non-believers of something he himself cannot produce: an account of human reason.

If these events are thought to follow a pattern, we must (again) note that on empirical grounds, one does not have a warrant for speaking of such a "pattern"; only particular events are experienced or observed. (p. 189)

He has warrant if he can form concepts from empirical inputs, and every man (save perhaps for utter and complete imbeciles) has this ability to some degree. Concepts are how a thinker integrates "particular events [that] are experienced or observed" firsthand into general classes which imply like events that he has not experience or observed, whether hypothetical or actual.

Moreover, even if there were a pattern within the electro-chemical events of one's brain, it would be accidental and not a matter of attending to the rules of logic. Indeed, the "rules of logic" would at best be personal imperatives expressed as the subjective preference of one person to another. In such a case there is no point to argument and reasoning at all. An electro-chemical event in the brain cannot meaningfully be said to be "valid" or "invalid." (p. 189)

Although electro-chemical reactions are a reality in the human nervous system, they are not a substitute for epistemology. In spite of this, Bahnsen wants to suppose (and wants his readers to suppose) that this is the consistent testimony of every non-believer, not because he has witnessed every non-believer confess it (that would be too principled for Bahnsen), but because it is apologetically expedient to do so.

As for "personal imperatives expressed as the subjective preference of one person to another," this bears striking resemblance to the supernatural, commandment-issuing deity enshrined in Christianity. Again, having fashioned a noose after his own image, Bahnsen decisively thrusts his own worldview's head right into it. Indeed, when Bahnsen's god issues its commandments, does Bahnsen argue with his god about them? Is there any place for argument in Bahnsen's worldview when his god has issued commandments? Commandments are given to settle matters without any back-talk or haggling. So just how does one reason with someone who thinks he's always right? Did Abraham try to reason with his god when he was commanded to prepare his son for sacrifice? The Genesis story surely does not model this.

Incidentally, the reason why "an electro-chemical event in the brain cannot meaningfully be said to be 'valid' or 'invalid,'" is not because "the supernatural" is real, but because concepts of validity apply to conceptual methodology, and electro-chemical events are not a conceptual methodology. Had Bahnsen understood this in full, he would have seen the philosophical futility of this application of his apologetic.

"Naturalism versus Supernaturalism as Worldviews"

A common tactic throughout Bahnsen's apologetic is to focus the spotlight of his (and his readers') attention on the purported failings of "unbelievers" who remain anonymous and thus by implication include virtually any non-Christian that a believer may encounter. By dwelling on purported failings of non-believing worldviews, Bahnsen is safe to

ignore the issues surrounding his claims that I have highlighted throughout my analysis of his chapter on "The Problem of Knowing the 'Super-Natural'." Concentrating on what other worldviews do or don't do puts these issues securely out of mind. The intention here should be obvious: to direct the thinker's attention away from the questionable nature of religious claims while putting those who do not accept those claims on the defensive. It's nothing more than an attempt to shift the burden of proof. This is why Bahnsen devotes so much of his chapter on raking over failings of certain philosophies and happily leaves the reader free to assume that those failings are endemic to any non-believing worldview by virtue of its non-belief. In this sense, Bahnsen's captivation with what "anti-metaphysicians" may be guilty of endorsing serves as an effective red herring, dragging the reader off the trail which Bahnsen should be following (in order to explain how one can have knowledge of what Christianity calls "the supernatural") and onto something irrelevant (e.g., Logical Positivism contradicts itself) to the task at hand.

This embedded fallacy is key to the presuppositionalist strategy of framing the debate as a clash of opposing worldviews. If debate concerning the existence of a god reduces to a conflict between two rival philosophies, and it is implicitly accepted that the two philosophies involved in that clash are jointly exhaustive (i.e., the only two possible), and the philosophy opposing the Christian worldview is exposed to suffer certain fatal internal problems, then – so goes the reasoning – Christianity wins by default. Such a strategy will of course be satisfactory to those who are confessionally committed to the Christian faith (i.e., to the *hope* that it is true), but it is hard to see how such a scheme could be deemed intellectually responsible.

We see this kind of reasoning in action when Bahnsen opens the final section of "The Problem of Knowing the 'Super-Natural'," the 31st chapter of his book *Always Ready* with the following statement:

Enough has now been said to make it clear what kind of situation we have when an unbeliever argues against the Christian's claim to knowledge about the "super-natural" - when the unbeliever takes an anti-metaphysical stand against the faith. (p. 189)

So while earlier Bahnsen focused on the failings of Logical Positivism, he now conflates Logical Positivism with non-belief as such by intimating that non-belief entails a rejection of metaphysics (even non-supernaturalist metaphysics). This is most naïve. One does not need to reject the philosophical branch of metaphysics in order to recognize the irrationality of god-belief, Christian or otherwise. Bahnsen acts as if he's felled all non-believing worldviews by toppling one. Not only is this deceptive, it does not address any of the questions which have been raised on the topic of "knowing the 'super-natural'." Meanwhile, Bahnsen's hoping that everyone's looking the other way. Here's one who isn't.

Bahnsen claims:

The believer holds, on the basis of infallible revelation from the transcendent Creator, certain things about unseen reality (e.g., the existence of God, providence, life after death, etc.). (p. 189)

Bahnsen still does not address the fundamental question here, namely: *how did the believer acquire awareness of this "revelation"?* Again we come back to the "problem of knowing the 'Super-Natural'," which Bahnsen seems unable to address. Did the believer not learn it from the bible? If so, this would have required him to use his senses. Reading a book is hardly a supernatural event. This would mean that the source of "revelation" is actually *material* in nature: a book consisting of paper pulp and synthetic jacket material, produced by human effort and distributed by a vendor, often for financial profit. This is essentially what constitutes "divine revelation" for the Christian. Ironically, the believer's own sense perception is plays an inextricable role in his acquisition of knowledge of the Christian god's "revelation" if reading the bible is how he acquired awareness of it.

But this suggests that "revelation" for the Christian believer is nothing more than simply believing whatever he reads in a storybook. Indeed, it even suggests that "revelation" consists of assuming that whatever the bible says is true, even before one has read all of it. This is not uncommon among Christians, who consider it a virtue to believe religious pronouncements on the basis of faith. Not only does such an attitude not require the existence of a god to explain it (for it is an attitude that any parent can foster in his philosophically defenseless children, for instance), it also goes against certain statements by Bahnsen's own mentor, Cornelius Van Til. For instance, in his book *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, Van Til wrote:

Who wishes to make such a simple blunder in elementary logic, as to say that we believe something to be true because it is in the Bible? (p. 12)

Here Van Til clearly indicates that it "a simple blunder in elementary logic" to suppose that something is true simply "because it is in the Bible." What implications does this statement have for the notion of "revelation," whereby "revelation" ultimately signifies believing whatever is written in the bible? Nowhere does Bahnsen seem to deal with this problem, and in the meanwhile he still fails to explain how one can "know" what he calls "the supernatural."

Regarding this, Bahnsen affirms that

Knowledge of such matters is not problematic within the worldview of the Christian (*Always Ready*, p. 189)

And we can see why. For as we saw above, if the believer grants one arbitrary premise, why not grant others? And if simply believing what is written in the bible constitutes "revelation" of the Christian god, then of course it would be easy to ignore epistemological questions (as Bahnsen does), since there really is no epistemology here: all one needs to be able to do is read and be willing to regard whatever he reads in the bible as unquestionable truth. Questions about the means and range of human awareness, the relationship between the conceptual level and the perceptual level of consciousness, the distinction between "the supernatural" and what is merely imaginary, are of no concern here. These matters can be safely swept under the rug so that nobody has to consider them, for indulgence in fantasy has replaced any concern one might develop for the way human cognition operates.

Notice how everything up to this point has served to prepare Bahnsen for an appeal to the supernatural to justify belief in the supernatural, which is viciously circular. In spite of this "simple blunder in elementary logic," Bahnsen writes:

God knows all things, having created everything according to His own wise counsel and determining the individual natures of each thing; further He created man as His own image, capable of thinking His thoughts after Him on the basis of revelation, both general (in nature) and special (in Scripture). (p. 189)

Encapsulated within this statement, we have what can be validly called the summary description of an epistemology of pretended vicariousness. It consists of justifying a claim to knowledge that is not rationally defensible by inventing an all-knowing deity which, on account of its all-knowingness, would know what the believer claims to know. As such, it serves as a substitute for justification, one which is supposed to be superior to any that the believer himself could ever provide of his own (which would immediately be dismissed as a product of "autonomous reasoning" if it were presented by a non-believer). Now frankly, anyone can do this. It just requires a willingness to fake reality, not only to others, but to oneself (for as Bahnsen demonstrates, the proponents of such vicariousness take it seriously). Appealing to an imaginary being that is omniscient and infallible can cover any lie, deception, fraud or arbitrary claim one wants to promote. This is the appeal to "someone smarter than I know, so it doesn't matter what I don't know" gimmickry that colors the whole of Christian "epistemology." For the Christian believer, when it comes to knowledge, it is not what *he* (the believer) knows, it is what (the believer claims) *his god* knows. And since his god knows *everything*, then the appeal to what (he claims) his god knows is a sure bet, given his mystical premises. The believer can even claim to have insight into his imaginary deity's decrees by claiming to "think" its thoughts "after Him," thereby increasing his descent into the labyrinth of self-deceit. For Bahnsen, this is the stuff of philosophy. And while such an ability to "think" the "thoughts" of an omniscient and infallible being should endow Bahnsen with astounding mental capacity, what we find instead is quite disappointing.

Unfortunately for Bahnsen, he makes at least one thing indisputable: that he has no rational defense for those mystical premises which he clearly wants to take for granted. Observe:

Thus man has the rational and spiritual capability to learn and understand truths about reality which transcend his temporal, empirical experience - truths which are disclosed by his Creator. (p. 189)

Clearly Bahnsen thinks that truths which "go beyond" the perceptual level of consciousness, must be "truths which are disclosed by [the Christian god]." For how else could man know them if his primary faculty of awareness is sense perception? This amounts to nothing more than a confession of ignorance and serves as further evidence that Bahnsen does not understand the relationship between the perceptual and the conceptual levels of consciousness. This persisting default is commonplace in presuppositionalism. The fallacy behind this symptom is made most obvious in non sequiturs such as the following:

there is no universality in perception so that which is based on perception cannot be universal. (Peter Pike, [The Contra-Pike Files](#), p. 79)

It is true that perception does not provide us with universal awareness. But as [I have already shown](#), if we could have direct awareness of all things past, present and future such that we were omniscient, we would not need concepts to retain our knowledge in the first place.

Moreover, the argument that "that which is based on perception cannot be universal" ignores the fact that universality is a property of concepts resulting from the mental operation of measurement-omission. Universality is nothing more than the open-endedness of a concept's range of inclusive reference, and this open-endedness of a concept's range of reference is what measurement-omission makes possible. There is no reason (and unsurprisingly, Pike offered none) for supposing that concepts cannot be open-ended in their range of reference because they are ultimately based on perception. Perception gives us direct awareness of actually existing objects, and these objects are used by the mind as models from which concepts are formed by a process of abstraction and according to which similar units can be mentally integrated when they are encountered. So while perception does not give us universal awareness, the concepts which we form on the basis of what we perceive do in fact universal reference.

Notice how crucial a role presuppositionalism gives to ignorance here. Mysticism is borne not only in ignorance, but also in the desire to perpetuate that ignorance. We have seen how insidiously presuppositionalism seeks to exploit a thinker's ignorance of the way his mind operates in order to substitute an objectively informed understanding of how

it works with an elaborate fiction resting ultimately in imagination, ad hoc invention and intellectual self-negation, such as we have seen. We saw rudimentary elements of this syndrome in Bahnsen's debate with Gordon Stein, where Bahnsen seeks to mock Stein for not having a ready answer to Hume's "problem of induction." Bahnsen was so eager to fault Stein for this, not because Stein was a dimwit, but because doing so is apologetically expedient. The presuppositionalist defense claims that the problem of induction is answered by an appeal to the supernaturalism of Christianity, indicating that the apologist has at best a storybook understanding of induction. This simply announces that Bahnsen and co. do not have a *conceptual* understanding of induction. A persisting ignorance of the nature of concepts, the process by which they are formed, their relationship to the perceptual level of consciousness, and the rich implications they have for philosophy in general, is one of the calling cards of the presuppositionalist.

Again, Bahnsen must appeal to the supernatural in order to validate his supernaturalism:

It is evident that the Christian defends the *possibility* of metaphysical knowledge, therefore, by appealing to certain metaphysical truths about God, man, and the world. He reasons presuppositionally, arguing on the basis of *the very metaphysical premises* which the unbeliever claims are *impossible* to know in virtue of their metaphysical nature. (p. 189)

Again Bahnsen announces that he does not understand either the process by which general truths about reality are discovered and formulated, or their relationship to our experience (both in their formulation as well as their application). He thinks he needs an invisible magic being to impart these truths to us, which is a dead giveaway that he is going by premises he got from a storybook rather than legitimate knowledge of the mind and the world. He says that these truths "transcend [man's] temporal, empirical experience," but does not give an example of such truths. Does he explain how these "truths... are disclosed by his Creator"? No, he does not. He neither gives any details about such a phenomenon, nor does he explain how he knows that this takes place. He simply asserts it to be the case. But notice how Bahnsen really means "supernatural" here rather than "metaphysical" proper. Intellectually, it is not sufficient merely to affirm that knowledge of "the supernatural" is "possible," and leave it at that. This would only abandon knowledge, a key value to man's life, to the wilds of the imagination. But nowhere does Bahnsen either seem to recognize this, nor does he seem at all concerned by it. His primary concern is discrediting Christianity's detractors, and in his vigilance to submit the opponents of the Christian worldview to a setup and a shakedown, as if the truth of Christianity could be established as the result of pulling off some devious sting operation. This will only turn off honest inquirers, and announce to virtually all comers that the apologist is trying to hide something dishonest here.

But notice Bahnsen's description of the presuppositional method here. He makes it clear that "presuppositional reasoning" involves "arguing on the basis of the very... premises" which the non-believer disputes. So it is clear, by what Bahnsen says here, that he wants to treat as a given that which is already controversial. This is quite an admission, one which exposes the profoundly anti-intellectual nature of presuppositional apologetics. It suggests that he has no intention of presenting a defense for those premises which he acknowledges as being controversial. This is not the course of reasoning one would take in an upstanding philosophical debate. Bahnsen needs to be prepared to defend those premises which are disputed from the very beginning rather than simply affirm them in spite of their controversial nature. But his preferred method only raises the suspicion that he *cannot* in fact defend them, but wants to cling to them nonetheless.

Bahnsen continues:

However, the anti-metaphysical unbeliever has his own metaphysical commitments to which he is presuppositionally committed and to which he appeals in his arguments (e.g., only sensible individuals or particulars exist). (p. 190)

If the non-believer has metaphysical commitments of his own, then perhaps characterizing him as "anti-metaphysical" may actually be inaccurate. Perhaps he simply rejects Christianity's metaphysics. This alone would not make him "anti-metaphysical." Since Logical Positivism is not the universal testimony of non-Christians, what may very well be the case is that the non-believer rejects Christianity because its metaphysics, epistemology (to the extent that it has an epistemology) and its ethics are in conflict with what he knows about reality and with his intellectual and axiological needs. And though he may recognize that there is a conflict here, he may not be able to articulate it very clearly or explicitly. In fact, the presuppositional apologetic is counting on the non-believer not being well informed on these matters (for instance, I doubt Gordon Stein thought that he was attending a debate on the problem of induction). An informed mind is more likely to be able to defend itself against the apologist's program of bamboozling, and conversely an uninformed mind is more likely to be vulnerable to such bamboozling.

Now while Bahnsen has stated on numerous occasions that everyone has their "presuppositions" (cf. *Van Til's Apologetic: Reading & Analysis*, pp. 461-462), he seems to resent non-believers for having their own:

His materialistic, naturalistic, atheism is taken as a final truth about reality, universally characterizing the nature of existence, directing us how to distinguish appearance from reality, and resting on intellectual considerations which take us beyond simple observation or sense experience. The this-worldly outlook of the unbeliever is *just as much* a metaphysical opinion as the "other-worldly" viewpoint he attributes to the

Yes, the "this-worldly outlook of the unbeliever" is in fact a metaphysical outlook (in the sense of metaphysics as the branch of philosophy which formulates a view of existence as a whole), just as the other-worldly view of the Christian is. The non-believer may be a non-believer ultimately because he takes the fact that reality exists as a final truth, whereas the theist chooses to treat the fact that reality exists as a derivative truth, one that is "contingent" on the wishing of an invisible magic being.

The non-believer is simply being consistent with the recognition that wishing doesn't make it so; whereas the believer is affirming a metaphysical position which essentially affirms that reality conforms to conscious intentions (at least to those of an invisible magic being), which robs him of any basis on which to affirm with the non-believer that wishing does not make it so. And while many non-believers do not identify this metaphysical orientation explicitly, and many may in fact not be totally consistent with it, it does have a name: [the primacy of existence](#).

So what does Bahnsen do now that the non-believer willingly acknowledges that his position has a metaphysical basis to it? He proceeds to characterize him as contradicting himself by putting words into his mouth:

What is glaringly obvious, then, is that the unbeliever rests upon and appeals to a metaphysical position in order to prove that there can be no metaphysical position known to be true! He ironically and inconsistently holds that nobody can know metaphysical truths, and yet he himself has enough metaphysical knowledge to declare that Christianity is wrong! (p. 190)

No doubt this would be a self-defeating position for one to take (though not all non-believers affirm what Bahnsen attributes to them). But what does it have to do with "knowing the 'super-natural'"? Predictably, Bahnsen turns every opportunity to "account for" his worldview into an occasion to lambaste those who do not believe in his invisible magic being (even if it means attributing to them a position they do not affirm). What is irresponsible is the fact that Bahnsen does not caution his readers to keep in mind that not all non-believers repudiate the philosophical branch of metaphysics. This is in addition to his default on the very topic of the thirty-first chapter of his book *Always Ready*.

For Bahnsen, it always boils down to a matter of antithesis:

It turns out that two full-fledged presuppositional philosophies stand over against one another when the anti-metaphysician argues with the Christian. (p. 190)

There are two fundamental orientations to the world, the objective and the subjective. I have already explained this in a previous blog: see [Only Two Worldviews?](#)

Bahnsen makes it clear that vicious circularity is inevitable and unavoidable for his position, for he must rest his defense of his supernaturalism on an appeal to supernaturalism:

The metaphysical claims of Christianity are based on God's self-revelation. (p. 190)

This is a confession that Christianity's "metaphysical claims" do not rest on *reason*. One must accept those claims *on faith*, which is the only option open to any position which reduces to the primacy of consciousness. And [as I have already shown](#), Bahnsen's conception of faith as *belief without understanding* is clearly indicated by his own statements on the topic.

Then Bahnsen makes a most perplexing claim:

Moreover, they are consistent with the assumptions of science, logical reasoning, and the intelligibility of human experience. (p. 190)

Specifically, which metaphysical claims of Christianity in particular does Bahnsen think "are consistent with the assumptions of science, logical reasoning, and the intelligibility of human experience"? Is the claim that reality conforms to conscious intentions (cf. Van Til's "God controls whatsoever comes to pass," *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 160), that is "consistent with the assumptions of science, logical reasoning, and the intelligibility of human experience"? How about dead men reanimating and emerging out of their graves, walking around in a city and showing themselves unto many (cf. Mt. 27:52-53) – is this "consistent with the assumptions of science"? How about men walking on unfrozen water (cf. Mark 6:48-50)? And what about water being wished into wine (cf. John 2:1-11)? Why stop there? What about an extra-universal consciousness wishing the universe into being? How about a worldwide flood from which a tiny group of human beings and a collection of all animals living on earth escape on a wooden ark? How are any of these claims, which carry incredible metaphysical implications, at all "consistent with the assumptions of science, logical reasoning, and the intelligibility of human experience"? The intelligibility of human experience does not assume such a cartoon universe paradigm. On the contrary, it assumes the non-cartoon universe of rational atheism. Is it any surprise that Bahnsen does not stop to substantiate his claim here? Indeed, to do so would tarnish his reputation for drive-by assertions.

And instead of substantiating his own claims, Bahnsen prefers to dwell on the perceived errors of others:

On the other hand, the unbeliever who claims metaphysical knowledge is impossible reasons on the basis of presuppositions which are arbitrarily applied, self-refuting, unable to pass their own strict requirements, and which undermine science and argumentation - indeed undermine the usefulness of those very empirical procedures which are made the foundation of all knowledge! (*Always Ready*, p. 190)

Again, what does this have to do with unraveling “the problem of knowing the ‘super-natural’”? Pointing out the problems in position A does not validate the assertions informing position B.

Bahnsen closes the 31st chapter of *Always Ready* with a last gasp which does nothing to explain how one can have knowledge of “the supernatural”:

This is simply to say that the anti-metaphysical position has as its outcome the total abrogation, not simply of metaphysical knowledge, but of all knowledge whatsoever. In order to argue against the faith, the unbeliever must commit intellectual suicide - destroying the very reasoning which he would feign to use against the truth of God! This is too high a personal and philosophical price to pay for prejudices and presuppositions which one hopes can form a roof to protect him from the revelation of God. (p. 190)

It is indisputable that knowledge requires a metaphysical foundation. And it is true: anyone who disputes this is implicitly drawing from a set of metaphysical assumptions and thus undercutting his own claim. But not just any foundation will do. Philosophers and laymen alike need to examine their own understanding of the world and identify what it holds in terms of the issue of metaphysical primacy. Do they "believe" that reality conforms to the wishes and dictates of a reality-creating, universe-ruling consciousness (even though there is no evidence for such a proposal), or do they recognize that the objects of consciousness hold metaphysical primacy? This is the real root of the antithesis between rational men and those who abandon it.

Final Assessment and Conclusion

Before Greg Bahnsen's death, Christian apologist John Frame hailed him as “one of the sharpest apologists working today,” opining that “he is the best debater among Christian apologists of all apologetic persuasions.” (*Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*, p. 392) [Elsewhere](#) he says that Bahnsen was “singularly gifted for the spiritual warfare of our time” by the Christian god, and perhaps because of this divine endowment, “Bahnsen still has no peer.” “Bahnsen's mind is razor sharp,” says Blake White in his [brief review of *Always Ready*](#). [Another source](#) refers to Bahnsen as “the man atheists fear most.”

Given this noteworthy adulation, one would suppose that, if anyone can tackle “The Problem of Knowing the ‘Super-Natural’,” it would be Greg Bahnsen. And many Christian warriors would probably agree with this, supposing that books like *Always Ready* and its 31st chapter are quintessential armaments against the Christian worldview's critics and the objections they raise. “The Problem of Knowing the ‘Super-Natural’,” then, gives us a firsthand look at how this amply lauded apologist addresses a matter of fundamental importance to the Christian worldview.

As I pointed out at the beginning of my examination of Bahnsen's chapter on “Knowing the ‘Super-Natural’,”

Christianity's defenders are prone to characterizing the non-believer's rejection of “the supernatural” as a symptom of some unjustifiable “bias” or unfair “prejudice” which precludes an honest hearing of the case for supernaturalism or validation of knowledge whose source is in “the supernatural.” But if it turns out that, when the defense they offer for the notion of “the supernatural” is full of gaping holes and missed opportunities, as we find in the case of Bahnsen's treatment of the issue, such charges are shown to have no credibility whatsoever. Over and over we find that Bahnsen ignores fundamental questions to the point that it becomes clear that he is seeking to evade them. This became clear by reviewing his attempt to deal with “The Problem of Knowing the ‘Super-Natural’” with a few basic questions germane to the topic of the chapter in mind, such as:

How can one “know” what the believer calls “the supernatural”?

By what means does the believer have awareness of what he calls “the supernatural”?

How does the believer distinguish what he calls “the supernatural” (or “God”) from what he may merely be imagining?

How is “revelation” as applied to the bible different from simply assuming that the stories in the bible are true?

Etc.

Add to this list the question of how the notion of “the supernatural” is compatible with the principle of objectivity, the primacy of existence metaphysics, and rational philosophy in general, and we find that Bahnsen simply did not do his homework on the issue.

Instead of addressing questions of this nature, Bahnsen expends much of his energy baldly asserting Christian dogma as if it were self-evidently true and trying to discredit rival positions, as if doing so will somehow resolve “The Problem of Knowing the ‘Super-Natural’.” At no point does he validate the notion of “the supernatural,” explain why we should believe it is anything other than imaginary, identify the means by which man can have awareness of it, or show how belief in “the supernatural” is compatible with the principle of objectivity and rational philosophy.

Upon close examination of what Bahnsen does present, we find numerous new problems instead of any resolutions, such as:

1. Bahnsen nowhere identifies in clear terms the starting point which grounds a “comprehensive metaphysic” suitable for man, the means by which one might have awareness of its starting point, or the process by which one can know that its starting point could be true.
2. Bahnsen’s conception of “supernatural” (“whatever surpasses the limits of nature”) is too open-ended for his own apologetic interests. It does not specify any actual thing, and could apply to anything one imagines. To accept “the supernatural” on Bahnsen’s conception of it, would be to accept not only Christianity’s supernatural beings, but also those of other religions, since - like Christianity’s supernatural agents - the supernatural agents of other mystical worldviews likewise “surpass the limits of nature.” Also, in practical matters, “whatever surpasses the limits of nature” quite often spells danger and disaster for man.
3. Bahnsen nowhere enlightens his readers on *how* they can know “the supernatural,” even though the very title of the 31st chapter of his book suggests that this is something he would be setting out to do in that chapter.
4. Bahnsen totally neglects the issue of how one might have awareness of what he calls “the supernatural.” He notes at many points that one does not have awareness of “the supernatural” by means of sense-perception, or by any empirical mode of awareness. However, this only tells us how we do *not* have awareness of “the supernatural.” It leaves completely unstated how one *does* have awareness of “the supernatural,” if in fact he claims to have such awareness. Bahnsen resists identifying what that mode of awareness is.
5. Bahnsen’s theology entails knowledge acquired and held by a passive, inactive mind, which is a contradiction in terms. The “knowledge” in question is the “knowledge of the supernatural” that Christians claim to have as a consequence of divine revelation, which is characterized as the Christian god coming to man rather than man “speculating” or “groping” his way to it through some cognitive activity.
6. Bahnsen promulgates a most tiresome and outworn dichotomy: either the mind is passive and inactive in its acquisition of knowledge (since its “revealed” to him by supernatural spirits), or he is left with “arbitrary speculations.” This arbitrary dilemma ignores the very faculty by which man acquires and validates knowledge in the first place, namely *reason*.
7. Bahnsen provides no indication of how one can confidently distinguish “the supernatural” from what he is *imagining*. If there is a difference, then the ability to distinguish them is of vital concern, since neither “the supernatural” nor the constructs of one’s imagination exist in the “here and now,” are beyond the testimony of the senses, and “surpass the limits of nature.” In other words, since the imaginary and “the supernatural” look and behave very much alike, the absence of an objective process by which the one can be reliably distinguished from the other indicates a glaring epistemological oversight of enormous proportions, suggesting that our leg is being pulled.
8. Bahnsen exhibits a hesitant fickleness regarding the role of inference in knowing “the supernatural.” Is his god’s existence *inferred* from objectively verifiable facts (if yes, from what objectively verifiable facts?), or directly known (if yes, by what mode of awareness?)? At times he seems to be affirming the former, at others the latter. At no point is he explicit in how exactly the human mind can have knowledge of a being which “surpasses the limits of nature.”
9. Bahnsen expends much energy focusing his readers’ attention on purported failings of non-believing worldviews, even though they are irrelevant to explaining how one can acquire and validate knowledge of “the supernatural.” The detection of internal problems within Logical Positivism, for instance, is not a proof of the existence of “the supernatural,” nor does it serve to inform any epistemological basis to suppose that “the supernatural” is real.
10. Bahnsen seems resentful of epistemologies which take sense perception as a starting point - that is, as the fundamental operation of consciousness upon which knowledge of reality depends - but nowhere identifies any clear alternative. Indeed, he seems not to have thought this through very well at all. For upon analysis it becomes clear that “special revelation” (i.e., accepting whatever the bible says as truth) requires sense perception in order to “read the book,” and “general revelation” (i.e., inferring the Christian god’s existence and/or message from what we discover in nature) also involves sense perception (as a mode of awareness of nature) as well as at least in part consulting “internal evidences” - which could be feelings, wishes, imagination, hopes, etc. So there is strong evidence here of an ad hoc

approach to epistemology as such.

11. Bahnsen is oblivious of how conceptualization works. This is can be attributed to the fact that Christianity does not have its own theory of concept-formation. Specifically, much of his case against supernaturalism's detractors demonstrates that he does not understand the relationship between the perceptual level of awareness and the conceptual activity. For instance, Bahnsen supposes that a comprehensive metaphysic cannot be based ultimately on sense experience because sense experience is "limited." But concepts allow a thinker to expand his awareness beyond what he personally experiences and while still basing his knowledge ultimately on what he experiences. So the conflict against which Bahnsen reacts is really due to his own ignorance of the nature of concepts.
12. Bahnsen shows that he must appeal to the supernatural in order to validate the supernatural, which is terminally circular.
13. Elements in Bahnsen's case are incompatible with elements that are part of the worldview which he is trying to defend (e.g., that appearances are distinct from reality, and yet "the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen" per Romans 1:20).

So instead of providing an objectively reliable answer to the problem he purports to be addressing in the 31st chapter of his book *Always Ready*, Bahnsen relies on a list of cheap gimmicks and blaring gaffs that carry him haphazardly into areas that no careful thinker would want to go. Persisting throughout the chapter is Bahnsen's ignorance of the relationship between the perceptual and the conceptual levels of human consciousness. In fact, it is this relationship that is key to unraveling many of Bahnsen's confusions over issues such as the purported dichotomy between appearance and reality (which Bahnsen raises, but does not explain or resolve), the *conceptual* (as opposed to "empirical") nature of knowledge, the fundamental weaknesses of Logical Positivism, and a host of other related issues. In typical presuppositionalist fashion, Bahnsen seeks to exploit this ignorance, which he shares with many unwitting non-believers as well, in a concerted effort to turn the spotlight from the problem which he should be addressing in his chapter (given its title), to problems which he perceives in rival worldviews. But anyone should be able to recognize that pointing out a problem in someone else's position does nothing to validate the claim that "the supernatural" is real and that "knowledge" of it is legitimate. Exposing fundamental errors in Logical Positivism, no matter how egregious they may be, will not explain Bahnsen allegedly acquires knowledge of what he calls "the supernatural."

But in spite of these problems which should be obvious to any critical thinker, we still find that many are charmed by Bahnsen's sophistry. Blake White, for instance, in his [review of *Always Ready*](#), tells us that

Bahnsen spends a lot of time on epistemology and the need for a truly Christian theory of knowledge.

What contribution does Bahnsen make on the topic of epistemology when he doesn't address the fundamental questions pertaining to "The Problem of Knowing the 'Super-Natural'," and how do the gimmicks, fallacies and evasions listed above address man's need for a theory of knowledge? Contrary to what White tells his readers, Bahnsen gives us *at best* an epistemology of utter negligence.

In conclusion, then, we can with certainty say that any appeal to the supernatural is irrational. This is because supernaturalism assumes the primacy of consciousness metaphysics, which constitutes a crass departure from the reality-based orientation to the world which makes rationality possible in the first place. In addition to this, appeals to supernaturalism fail to identify how the content of its claims can be established in a manner consistent with the nature of the human mind and its cognitive functions; they fail to identify the means by which one can acquire awareness of that which is allegedly "supernatural," how claims that supernatural beings exist can be validated, and how such claims can be tested for their supposed truth value. Adherents to supernaturalism are quick to point to the means by which supernatural claims are *not* validated or tested, but fail to identify the means by which they *could be* validated and tested. Furthermore, adherents to supernaturalism fail to provide a method for distinguishing what they call "the supernatural" and what they may merely be imagining, thus priming the mind of one who is prone to believing supernatural claims for compromising fact with fantasy. As evidence of these points indicating the irrationality of supernaturalism, adherents of supernaturalism inevitably find that they need to appeal to their supernaturalism in order to defend their supernaturalism, which is viciously circular and therefore fallacious. So not only is supernaturalism by virtue of its nature and content irrational, it also invites the call for fallacy in its defenses. To accuse non-supernaturalists of an "unjust bias" for their rejection of supernaturalism, then, is consequently also irrational, indeed hypocritical.

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