

Bahnsen on "Knowing the Supernatural" Part 1: Introduction

I. 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 acquire 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 sub-chapter headings as section titles.

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 (ibid.):

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.

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.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Always Ready](#), [Knowledge](#), [Presuppositional Gimmickry](#)

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [6:00 AM](#)

2 Comments:

[Zachary Moore](#) said...

Clearly, since the supernatural is such an irrational concept, it is the perfect choice for an appeal to any irrational claim.

[August 14, 2007 5:46 AM](#)

[MisterSwig](#) said...

Very interesting stuff. In fact, I think I'm addicted. Now I'll have to cancel my Bible-thumping road trip to Arizona next week, just so I can read the other installments of your mammoth article. Thanks a lot!

[September 13, 2007 2:24 PM](#)

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