

## Bahnsen on "Knowing the Supernatural" Part 2: "The Reproach of the Transcendent"

Continued from [Part 1](#).

### "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). (*Always Ready*, 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 ([as we have seen](#)) 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]. (*Always Ready*, 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 even 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.

by Dawson Bethrick

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

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

## 2 Comments:

[Sterling VanDerwerker](#) said...

I am a Christian, and I think with the Mind of Jesus Christ, and using your mind to deny Him is a demonstration of Romans 1:18-32

Rom 1:18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,

Rom 1:19 because **that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.**

Rom 1:20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, **have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.**

Rom 1:21 For even though they knew God, they **did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.**

Rom 1:22 **Professing to be wise,** they became fools,

Rom 1:23 and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

Rom 1:24 Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.

Rom 1:25 **For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.**

Rom 1:26 For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural,

Rom 1:27 and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

Rom 1:28 And **just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind,** to do those things which are not proper,

Rom 1:29 being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, **strife, deceit, malice;** {they are} gossips,

Rom 1:30 **slanders, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful,** inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,

Rom 1:31 without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful;  
Rom 1:32 and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.

Repent,

Sterling

[September 10, 2007 7:28 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hi Sterling,

I'm so glad you stopped by my blog! I hope you continue reading - and commenting - more.

Sterling wrote: "I am a Christian, and I think with the Mind of Jesus Christ,"

Wonderful!

Here's a question for you: Is Christ omniscient and infallible, or not? If Christ is not omniscient and infallible, then what good is "think[ing] with the Mind of Christ"? It seems that you'd just be thinking with a mind that's no better than the one you have, but for some reason prefer to think with someone else's mind instead of yours. What's wrong with your own mind? Why not think with it?

Now, if Christ is omniscient and infallible, then you should be able to demonstrate that you "think with the Mind of Christ" rather than simply assert that you do. For thinking with an omniscient and infallible mind would mean that you don't need to stop and figure things out and learn as you go. Someone who thinks with an omniscient and infallible mind should know everything without having to learn (for an omniscient and infallible mind could not learn anything to begin with - there would be nothing for it to learn). So perhaps you can tell me what I had for breakfast this morning. You should also be able to tell me things like:

- where I was living in 1995
- where I got married and to whom
- how many degrees I have earned and in what subjects
- my birthdate and the birthdates of any family members I have
- the kind of car I drive and how much I paid the last time I filled the tank
- what my salary is
- the square footage of my house
- how long I've been living at my present address
- the name of my current boss
- how many fillings I have
- what my favorite restaurants are
- what kind of surgeries - if any - I've had
- my favorite sports
- my favorite music
- the number of states and countries I've traveled in
- the year I graduated from high school
- etc.

An omniscient and infallible mind would know all these details. So if you think with an omniscient and infallible mind, I would expect you to be able to answer all these questions without any hesitation or error. But if you're simply pulling my leg, I would expect that you would not be able to answer any of these questions accurately and that you would come up with a line of excuses for why you wouldn't be able to in spite of your claim to think with an omniscient and infallible mind. I will know you by your fruits and your excuses.

The point is: the believer needs to give some very good reason why we should not suppose he is merely pretending when he claims to "think with the Mind of Jesus Christ."

Sterling continued: "and using your mind to deny Him is a demonstration of Romans 1:18-32"

It is gratifying to see that Christians can only respond by reciting from their storybook. It shows how quickly they reduce to the level of a stubborn pre-adolescent who shuts his eyes and cups his hands over his ears while screaming "I'm right! You're wrong! I'm right! You're wrong!" over and over and over again. It is truly an unrivaled spectacle!

In fact, however, using my mind is not a confirmation that what some ancient storybook says is true. The storybook was written in order to supply those who have been netted by its fishermen to interpret the actions of outsiders in terms which reinforce the storybook's party line. But it's all on a most superficial and untenable level. For instance, what "unrighteousness" am I guilty of? I've simply written some essays that critically examine what people have claimed and desire me to accept as truth. If Christianity considers this an instance of "unrighteousness," then that tells us all we need to know about the Christian worldview. And how is my "heart darkened"? Does using my mind in a critical fashion "darken" my "heart"? How so? Did I "profess to being wise"? Where? I'm simply asking questions. I see that those who want to call me "foolish" have no answers to those questions. That's not my fault. And what "truth of God" have I "exchanged for a lie"? If there is no god, then there's no "truth of God" that can be exchanged for any lies to begin with. You also highlighted the following phrase: "slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful." Are you calling me a "slanderer"? What have I slandered? A "hater of God"? What makes you think I hate anything? How am I "insolent," or "arrogant" or "boastful"? Do you really think these words of disparagement can substitute for an argument?

Also, by appealing to the bible as a supernaturally inspired source, you're simply begging the question. Specifically, you're appealing to the supernatural to validate the supernatural, which is viciously circular. Also, you're not addressing any of the points that I have raised in my critique of the 31st chapter of Bahnsen's book *Always Ready*. Indeed, if you claim to think with an omniscient and infallible mind, but demonstrate neither omniscience nor infallibility when this claim is probed, then my thesis that "the supernatural" is actually imaginary in nature is thereby confirmed.

Also, you quoted Romans 1:20, which says that "invisible attributes... are clearly seen." If something is invisible, how do you see it? If you can see it, then by definition it could not be invisible. If it's invisible, maybe you're seeing something that isn't really there. As Delos McKown states, "the invisible and the non-existent look very much alike."

Regards,  
Dawson

[September 10, 2007 1:20 PM](#)

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