

## Bahnsen on "Knowing the Supernatural" Part 3: "Defining the Metaphysical"

Continued from [Part 2](#).

### "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." (*Always Ready*, 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. (*Always Ready*, 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). (*Always Ready*, 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. (*Always Ready*, 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 Bahnsen writes:

It should be obvious, then, if only in an elementary way, that Christianity propounds a number of definite metaphysical claims. (*Always Ready*, 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](#) 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 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 acknowledge 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.

by Dawson Bethrick

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

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