

Bahnsen on "Knowing the Supernatural" Part 5: "A Comprehensive Metaphysic"

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"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. (*Always Ready*, 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 their truth. So what principles does Bahnsen propose as suitable alternatives for 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. (*Always Ready*, 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.

by Dawson Bethrick

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