

Bahnsen on "Knowing the Supernatural" Part 6: "The Christian Metaphysic"

Continued from [Part 5](#).

"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). (*Always Ready*, p. 180)

We already saw in the last installment that Bahnsen will 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. (*Always Ready*, 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). (*Always Ready*, 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, such as man does.

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). (*Always Ready*, 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). (*Always Ready*, 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). (*Always Ready*, p. 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). (*Always Ready*, 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. But notice how Bahnsen's own characterization of the non-believer's consistency indicates that *irregularity* is key to holding the Christian view of the world. If "an unbelieving metaphysic" is thought to need to "rest on the appearance of total regularity" in order not to "teach that Christ will come again to intervene in the cosmic process to judge men," this

suggests that belief that Christ will "come again" involves the supposition that regularity in the universe can be turned off and turned back on at will. Such supposition would only undercut any claim to certainty on anything at its very root.

by Dawson Bethrick

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