

Bahnsen on "Knowing the Supernatural" Part 9: "Suprasensible Reality"

Continued from [Part 8](#).

"Suprasensible Reality"

After sanitizing metaphysics of any dependence on sense experience, Bahnsen rests on the conclusion that “metaphysics eventually studies non-sensuous or suprasensible reality.” When reading this, it is hard to resist interpreting Bahnsen to mean *nonsensical* reality. After all, he has so far given us no guidance on how to discriminate “the supernatural” from sheer nonsense. Bahnsen wants to say that his god, its magic kingdom and its eternal gulag belong to the category of “suprasensible reality.” Why could not the Lahu tribesman make the same claim about Geusha, the supreme being of their religion? It is easy to see how a child might claim that his [imaginary friend](#) exists in a “suprasensible reality,” and thus should not expect its existence to be verifiable by means of empirical tests. If such claims are valid for Bahnsen, why could they not be valid for any claim that, on a rational basis, would appropriately be deemed arbitrary? Again, how do we distinguish between Bahnsen’s “suprasensible reality” and his imagination?

In this section of his chapter on “The Problem of Knowing the ‘Super-Natural’,” Bahnsen tells us of the methods that we should *not* expect to use in order to validate his supernatural claims, leaving unattended the identification of any reliable method by which one *can* validate his supernatural claims.

As I mentioned in an earlier installment of this series, we must be on guard for when Bahnsen really means *supernaturalism* when he uses the word “metaphysics.” Supernaturalism has engulfed metaphysics so completely for Bahnsen that even he is not aware of the perversity of this insidious equivocation. He has sought to hide this by arguing that the “ultimate conceptual framework” that philosophers use to separate the intellectual wheat from the nonsensical chaff is not something we perceive directly. But anyone could have told you this. Indeed, there is a fundamental distinction between the perceptual and the conceptual levels of consciousness. But this distinction in no way invalidates the senses or annuls their epistemological significance, nor does it suggest that “the physical realm” was created by an act of consciousness. In his effort to protect Christianity from the growing “anti-supernatural bias” of modern academics, Bahnsen has swapped metaphysics as a study of being for metaphysics as a study in concealing the subjectivism of one’s worldview. This is accomplished by keeping things vague and ambiguous.

For instance, Bahnsen writes:

In the nature of the case the metaphysician examines issues transcending physical nature or matters removed from particular sense experiences. And yet the results of metaphysics are alleged to give us intelligible and informative statements about reality. That is, metaphysics makes claims which have substantive content, but which are not fully dependent on or restricted to empirical experience (observation, sensation). (*Always Ready*, pp. 181-182)

Does Bahnsen give an example of what he means by “issues transcending physical nature or matters removed from particular sense experiences”? Do the issues which “transcend physical nature” have anything to do with the reality in which we actually live (as opposed to some *imaginary* realm)? He wants to say that “the results of metaphysics [so-conceived] are alleged to give us intelligible and informative statements about reality.” But how does this work? If metaphysics is an examination of “matters removed from particular sense experiences,” what informs them? What is their connection to the reality they allegedly describe? Can it be that the issues Bahnsen has in mind are actually the result of *abstraction* from sense experience, and Bahnsen simply does not know how this process works and thus mistakenly supposes that sense experience has no fundamental role in metaphysics? It does appear that this is the case. He’s all a-swirl in his own ignorance of how the conceptual mind works. How does Bahnsen know that the “substantive content” of (conceptually legitimate) metaphysical claims is “not fully dependent on or restricted to empirical experience (observation, sensation)”? Is it the case that what Bahnsen takes as metaphysical claims which have “substantive content” are actually based on imagination and fabrication rather than on an objective process of identifying reality? If they are based on reality, they need something to connect them to reality, namely a process

by which their content is derived from reality. Otherwise, how could we have any confidence in the supposition that the content of those claims has anything to do with reality? What *process* of validation does Bahnsen propose? He has not identified any means by which we can gain awareness of what he calls “supernatural,” nor has he identified any means by which we can confidently discriminate between what he calls “supernatural” and what he is imagining. Unless Bahnsen can identify a connection between his metaphysical claims (which he presented above) and reality, are we to assume that a connection is there anyway? Who would encourage us to be so intellectually irresponsible and imprudent, and why?

Notice how 'always ready' Bahnsen is to identify those means by which his supernatural claims are *not* supported:

For that reason the means by which metaphysical [i.e., supernatural] claims are intellectually supported is *not* limited to natural observation and scientific experimentation. Herein lies the offense of metaphysics [i.e., supernaturalism] to the modern mind. Metaphysics [i.e., supernaturalism] presumes to tell us something about the objective world which we do *not* directly perceive in ordinary experience and which *cannot* be verified through the methods of natural science. (*Always Ready*, p. 182; italics added)

The “offense” of supernaturalism is not only in its stipulation of which means do *not* support its claims, but also in its conspicuous failure to identify in positive terms the means which allegedly *do* support its claims. Those who claim that the supernatural is real do not present evidence of the supernatural, and what they claim is difficult if not impossible to distinguish from what is merely imaginary. One can, of course, *imagine* the things Bahnsen claims (just as we can imagine the things described in a *Harry Potter* novel), but in order to accept such claims as truth, Bahnsen needs to identify some means other than imagination by which we can “know” what he's talking about.

With the development of science, thanks to the rebirth of reason which effectively put religion in retreat, many thinkers are now more critical about what they accept as truth, just as people who want to take care of their bodies are more critical about what they put into their bodies. So when they encounter claims which are not backed up by evidence and/or contradict knowledge that has already been validated, they naturally (and rightly) reject them, whether or not they find them “offensive.” In fact, it is typically the religionist himself who is offended when his claims are *not* accepted on his say so. After all, he accepted these same or similar claims on someone else's say so, so it is very frustrating for him to find others who are not as unquestioning and uncritical as he is. Even worse, if thinkers arm themselves with fundamental principles which are impervious to the religionist's anti-rational attacks (such as [the primacy of existence](#)), the religionist often becomes so inflamed that he resorts to name-calling (and some will even try to justify this behavior).

So we are finding that Bahnsen is no different in this respect. He is quick to point out the kinds of methods which will not substantiate or verify his supernatural claims, but he nowhere identifies any methods which will substantiate or verify those claims. This is most unhelpful to his own case, and yet he wants to slander those who don't readily accept such claims on his say so.

Bahnsen continues:

Of course, antipathy to metaphysics [i.e., supernaturalism] is even more pronounced in the case of Christianity because its claims about the entire scheme of things include declarations about the existence and character of God, the origin and nature of the world, as well as the nature and destiny of man. Such teachings do not stem from direct, eyeball experience of the physical world, but transcend particular sensations and derive from divine revelation. They are *not* verified empirically in a point by point fashion. Scripture makes absolute pronouncements about the nature of the real world as a whole. Biblical doctrine presents truths which are not circumscribed or limited by personal experience and which are not qualified or relativized by an individual's own way of looking at things. Such authoritarian claims about such difficult and wide-ranging matters are offensive to the skeptical mood and religious prejudices of the present day. The modern age has a contrary spirit regarding philosophical (especially religious) claims which speak of anything super-natural, anything “beyond the physical,” anything metaphysical. (*Always Ready*, p. 182)

Here's a case in point. Bahnsen tells us that Christianity's claims “do not stem from direct, eyeball experience of the physical world,” they “are not verified empirically in a point by point fashion,” they “are not circumscribed or limited by personal experience” and “are not qualified or relativized by an individual's own way of looking at things.” Bahnsen tells us which criteria do *not* support his supernatural claims, but he does not tell us which criteria *do* support them. He simply tells us that the contents of his claims “transcend particular sensations and derive from divine revelation.” In other words, he appeals to magic in order to substantiate them. He tells us that his worldview's magic is real, and to validate this claim he appeals to magic. This is just another instance of [tape-loop apologetics](#). Round and round in a circle we go. And meanwhile, as is typically the case with Christianity's defenders,

what the apologist calls "divine revelation" is indistinguishable from simply and uncritically accepting what is written in an ancient storybook. And to rationalize this, Bahnsen concocts an epistemology of negation, telling us how his claims are *not* validated, and remaining silent on how they *could be* validated.

by Dawson Bethrick

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