

## Bahnsen on "Knowing the Supernatural" Part 10: "Pure Motives?"

Continued from [Part 9](#).

### "Pure Motives?"

Bahnsen wants to suppose there's something more than intellectual behind anyone's rejection of something he cannot distinguish from imaginative fantasy. He writes:

It would be profitable to pause and reflect upon an insightful comment by a recent writer in the area of philosophical metaphysics. W. H. Walsh has written, "It must be allowed that the reaction against [metaphysics - i.e., supernaturalism] has been ... so violent indeed as to suggest that the issues involved in the controversy must be something more than academic." (*Always Ready*, p. 182)

To appreciate the context of Walsh's quote, it would be interesting to see some examples of what he considers "violent" reactions. Are they merely words on a page that believers in the supernatural find disturbing (some believers have shown themselves to be quite [insecure](#), in fact), or are they actually riotous actions causing harm and destruction to life and limb? Would these theists consider my point-by-point examination of Bahnsen's attempts to defend supernaturalism "violent" in some way?

And what about theist's reactions to "anti-supernaturalism"? Is it not also vehement and full of indignation that they, too, can likewise be called "violent," even if they do not result in the turning over of vehicles on the street and the burning down of houses? If the "violence" of the reactions that Walsh and Bahnsen has in mind turns out to be nothing more than, say, petty name-calling and insulting language, well, it seems that Bahnsen is prone to some "violence" of his own. As we have already seen, on pg. 56 of *Always Ready*, Bahnsen calls people who do not believe in his invisible magic being "dull, stubborn, boorish, obstinate and stupid." Are we to suppose that there is something more than intellectual to the believer's faith commitments when merely the existence of non-believers prompts him to contemptuous derision like this? If not, why not?

Of course, Bahnsen is all too happy to agree with Walsh:

Precisely. The issues are indeed more than academic. They are a matter of life and death - eternal life and death. (*Always Ready*, p. 182)

That must be it: non-believers must have some kind of death wish. That explains why they reject the supernatural and other irrational ideas. They deny religion because they secretly want to suffer the fate of religion's non-believers. It could not be that they simply don't believe what religion teaches, or in fact understand why religion is irrational. They want eternal torment. That is what Bahnsen apparently would have his readers believe. If they believe Christianity's myths and legends, it is quite possible that they'll believe Bahnsen's apologetic hazing as well.

Bahnsen appeals to the bible to buttress his suspicions:

Christ said, "And this is life eternal, that they should know thee the only true God, and him whom thou didst send" (John 17:3). However, if the unbeliever can stand on the claim that such a God cannot be known because nothing transcending the physical (nothing "metaphysical") can be known, then the issue of eternal destiny is not raised. (*Always Ready*, pp. 182-183)

As should be clear by now, we do not have to "stand on the claim that such a God cannot be known because nothing transcending the physical (nothing 'metaphysical') can be known." Rather, we can stand on the truth of the axioms and the primacy of existence, truths which the religious believer himself must assume while denying, in order to expose religion's commitment to irrationality. So long as one realizes that there is a fundamental distinction between reality and imagination, and religious defenders cannot provide an objective method by which one can distinguish between what they claim and what they may merely be imagining, then rejecting religious teachings is merely being intellectually responsible.

Bahnsen then identifies what he finds most worrisome:

Accordingly, men may think and do as they please, without distracting questions about their nature and destiny. (*Always Ready*, p. 183)

Why would it bother Bahnsen or anyone else if other “men may think and do as they please”? The thought that “men may think and do as they please” really bothered [Jim Jones](#), too.

Why is it that religious leaders so often find intellectual liberty objectionable? Is it because intellectual liberty threatens their leadership, livelihood, or the perks of their station? Bahnsen claims that “every believer wants to see the truth of Christ believed and honored by others.” (*Always Ready*, p. 115) My initial thought on reading this was, “Does Christ want this, too?” If Christ is omnipotent and able to change non-believers into believers (as is supposedly the case with Christians themselves, according to Bahnsen’s type of Reformed Theology), then whatever is the case now must be what Christ wants to be the case now. After all, according to Bahnsen’s mentor Van Til, “God controls whatsoever comes to pass” (*The Defense of the Faith*, p. 160). Indeed, if Jesus can make a visiting appearance before Saul of Tarsus as he was on his way to persecute Christians, that same Jesus should be able to appear before anyone whose heart needs to be changed. If Jesus doesn’t do this, well, that is not the non-believer’s fault.

And what of those who do not consider “questions about their nature and destiny” to be “distracting,” even though they do not believe in any invisible magic beings? What of those who are pleased to contemplate such questions? Personally speaking, I enjoy contemplating such questions. But I still observe the distinction between the real and the imaginary, and this is what earns me the religionists’ contempt.

Then Bahnsen projects what worries him onto everyone else:

Men will, as it were, build a roof over their heads in hopes of keeping out any distressing revelation from a transcendent God. The anti-metaphysical perspective of the modern age functions as just such a protective ideological roof for the unbeliever. (*Always Ready*, p. 183)

An old polemical tactic is to broad-brush one’s accusations at large without naming specific culprits or citing evidence to substantiate the charge being made. Here Bahnsen shows that he is familiar with this tactic. Does Bahnsen identify those who allegedly “build a roof over their heads in hopes of keeping out any distressing revelation from a transcendent God”? No, he does not identify any particular individual who does this. Presumably Bahnsen has in mind anyone who disputes the existence of his god. Does he produce any evidence to substantiate his charge that those anonymous persons “build a roof over their heads” to keep out the Christian god? No, he doesn’t. All he provides is a quote from Nietzsche, but that didn’t prove anything but the fact that Bahnsen had to dig a quote out of a source that is some 100 or so years old to find an instance of a non-Christian apparently providing a case in point (when in fact it didn’t).

Worshippers of Geusha, the supreme being of the Lahu tribe, could play the same game. They could quite easily say that men seek to “build a roof over their heads in hopes of keeping out any distressing revelation from” Geusha. And on their Geusha-centric “presuppositions,” this would of course “make sense.” But is it an argument? No, it is not.

What’s noteworthy in either case, is the fact that there would be no need to “build a roof over” one’s head to begin with. Bahnsen betrays the very irrational fear that the bible seeks to inculcate in its readers, a fear which Bahnsen bought into and projected on everyone else.

Bahnsen was no doubt emotionally taken captive by passages such as Luke 12:5, which states:

Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell.

Of course, if one grants the whole bag of assumptions that the bible uses to entice fish into its nets, such passages will of course be very compelling psychologically. But that’s just the point: why grant the basic claims of the Christian worldview to begin with? This just brings us back to the original issue of “the problem of knowing the ‘super-natural,’” which Bahnsen leaves unattended in characteristic manner.

Indeed, what we have here is a classic case of projection: Bahnsen fears “the supernatural” because he thinks it is something both real and beyond his comprehension (and yet he insists that we accept it as “knowledge” and postures as a spokesman for its wishes and pronouncements). He wants protection from supernatural wrath, so as a matter of course he supposes everyone else does, too. Indeed, if one thought there were an angry supernatural

deity in the first place, who wouldn't want to take cover? Bahnsen takes cover in his feigned piety, by pretending to be a know-it-all when it comes to "the supernatural" (however, do not ask him how one can have awareness of "the supernatural" or distinguish what he calls "the supernatural" from his vain imaginations). Bahnsen simply projects his own irrationality onto everyone else, supposing all human beings are just as frightened and dishonest as he is. The choice to be dishonest "accounts for" the persisting and insistent delusions of the theist.

In spite of the deception that shines through the faded patina of Bahnsen's feigned piety, he brings the discussion back to the topic at hand:

The fact is that one cannot avoid metaphysical commitments. The very denial of the possibility of knowledge transcending experience is in itself a metaphysical judgment. Thus the question is not whether one should have metaphysical beliefs, but it comes down to the question of which kind of metaphysic one should affirm. (*Always Ready*, p. 183)

I would agree that "one cannot avoid metaphysical commitments," so long as "metaphysical" neither equates nor implies "the supernatural." I certainly do not think it is the case that "one cannot avoid supernatural commitments." I am living proof of this. As for considering "the possibility of knowledge transcending experience," this not only depends on one's metaphysical view, but also on what assumptions are packed into the notion of "knowledge transcending experience." It is not clear what Bahnsen means by this expression, for he nowhere makes it explicitly clear. If he means knowledge that is implicitly available as a result of conceptual integration or inductive generalizations based on objective models, then yes, such knowledge is in fact possible. But if by "knowledge transcending experience" Bahnsen means to denote some ideational content that is ultimately fictitious or based on imagination (even if it is not admitted as such), then I would say it is wrong to call such content "knowledge." 'Fantasy' is the appropriate concept to denote this.

And yes, if it is the case that "the question is not whether one should have metaphysical beliefs" - because "one cannot avoid metaphysical commitments" - I would add that "it comes down" not only "to the question of which kind of metaphysic one should affirm," but also how consistently one's worldview applies that metaphysic. My worldview openly and knowingly affirms the metaphysic of the primacy of existence in the subject-object relationship. And my worldview is consistent with this metaphysic. It is, in fact, an extension of this principle, the essential principle of objectivity, applied to the rest of philosophy. Christianity, as we have seen, affirms a metaphysic which grants primacy to consciousness. Can Bahnsen consistently apply this principle in his operative view of the world? Bahnsen nowhere engages the issue of metaphysical primacy, and yet here he is, talking about metaphysical commitments, judgments and their associated principles. Why does he avoid the issue of the proper relationship between subject and object? Did he not think there is a proper relationship between a subject and its objects? Or, is this something one need not address in his metaphysical views? Or, is it something anyone can be justified in taking for granted without ever understanding what his professed views imply in regards to this relationship? Since Bahnsen remained silent on this issue, we will never know. But one thing's for sure: we won't learn about the proper relationship between a subject and its objects from Bahnsen.

Failing to address this issue when he had the opportunity, Bahnsen then sought to turn his guns on those who do not embrace his particular brand of subjectivism, namely Calvinist Christianity:

The apostle Paul teaches us that all unbelievers (including Nietzsche) "suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Rom. 1:18); they attempt to hide the truth about God from themselves due to their immoral lives. "The carnal mind is enmity against God" (Rom. 8:7) and "minds earthly things" (Phil. 3:18-19). Those who are enemies in their minds due to evil works (Col. 1:21), and are foolish in their reasoning (Rom. 1:21-22; 1 Cor. 1:20), are led in particular to an anti-biblical metaphysic (e.g., "The fool has said in his heart there is no God," Ps. 10:4) - disguised as an anti-metaphysical posture in general. (*Always Ready*, p. 183-184)

Because he cannot present any epistemology which warrants any assertion of "the supernatural," Bahnsen wants to morph the issue into a matter of moral impropriety. He cannot rationally justify belief in the supernatural, but he's still anxious to vent his contempt for the spoilsports. So Bahnsen reiterates the Pauline accusation that non-believers "suppress the truth in unrighteousness," and "attempt to hide the truth about God from themselves due to their immoral lives." These are not light accusations to say the least. Apparently "mind[ing] earthly things" - like one's own life, the welfare of one's loved ones, the consequences of one's choices and actions - is a vice. Note that he echoes these charges even though he nowhere identifies any means by which a human being can acquire awareness of what he calls "the supernatural," or by which we can confidently distinguish between what he calls "the supernatural" and what he may very well be merely imagining. It is common for those who are trying to hide something to redirect attention away from their subterfuge by making accusations against individuals. The goal of such a move is to put others on the defensive, thus enabling evasion. But here Bahnsen does not restrict his

accusations to specific individuals. He broad-brushes with very wide strokes, accusing people he does not even know of living "immoral lives." And what's behind the charge that they live "immoral lives"? Merely the fact that they do not believe in Bahnsen's invisible magic beings. And why should they, especially given the fact that Bahnsen does not explain how we could be aware of "supernatural" agents or confidently discriminate them from the believer's imagination? Indeed, Bahnsen fails in this task even when he set it before himself. Can it be that Bahnsen is simply projecting here? Can it be that the immorality that is being swept under the rug is Bahnsen's own dishonesty as he tries to defend a worldview which insists on faking reality? All these sweeping accusations, asserted without any evidence whatsoever, probably made Bahnsen feel good for a moment. By putting the blame on a collective of anonymous persons despised because of their non-belief in his deity, Bahnsen finds momentary relief from his guilt, the guilt that results from enshrining a fake environment and pretending that it is reality while denigrating methods that even he uses on a daily basis.

by Dawson Bethrick

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