

Bahnsen on "Knowing the Supernatural" Part 12: "Logical Positivism"

Continued from [Part 11](#).

"Logical Positivism"

We have seen repeatedly throughout my analysis of Bahnsen's "Problem of Knowing the 'Super-Natural'," that he evades every opportunity to identify the means by which one might acquire awareness of what he calls "supernatural," and any methodology for acquiring and validating knowledge from sources which allegedly exist beyond the reach of man's senses. To enable this grand evasion, Bahnsen trains his sights on a soft target: the philosophy of Logical Positivism.

Logical Positivism is sort of a halfway house for those who do not understand why faith and reason, religion and science, mysticism and rationality are fundamentally opposed and, frightened by their own pragmatist shadows, retreated to a religious stunt-double under the guise of saving science. The Logical Positivists in part rejected all talk of metaphysics because it had been taken over by mystics and witch doctors. Consequently, having bought into the idea that this was a necessary association, the Logical Positivists threw the baby out along with the bath water. Not unlike Bahnsen himself, the Logical Positivists did not understand the relationship between the perceptual and the conceptual, thus supposing they were mutually opposed and irreconcilable, pointing to mystical models as evidence of the problem. So just as [Kant](#) "found it necessary to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith*," the Logical Positivists found it necessary to sacrifice fundamental philosophical principles in order to save science. But of course, this just undercuts any effort they make to protect science.

Unwittingly, this makes them an easy target for those who are desperate for even the cheapest momentary psychological validation. Enter now Greg Bahnsen:

The Logical Positivists intensified Kant's criticism. For them metaphysical claims were not simply empty definitions without significance (without existential referents), they were quite literally *meaningless*. Because metaphysical claims could not be brought to the critical test of sense experience, they were concluded to be senseless. (*Always Ready*, p. 184)

Bahnsen focuses on Logical Positivism's rejection of supernaturalism because they reject any metaphysical position (apparently even one which would support their own epistemological defenses of science). So Bahnsen misses the point of Logical Positivism's own weaknesses: according to Logical Positivism, supernaturalism is meaningless - not because it violates principles of rationality (even though it does) - but because any generalized assessment of reality is ultimately meaningless. This was more or less the result of the attitude which the Logical Positivists adopted:

[S]uch concepts as metaphysics or existence or reality or thing or matter or mind are meaningless - let the mystics care whether they exist or not, a scientist does not have to know it; the task of theoretical science is the manipulation of symbols, and scientists are the special elite whose symbols have the magic power of making reality conform to their will. (*For the New Intellectual*, p. 34)

In this way, Logical Positivism represents yet another variant of the mysticism which its adherents were purportedly rejecting, since in the end it too reduces to the primacy of consciousness, the foundation of any form of mysticism. Is it any surprise that Bahnsen's response to Logical Positivism does not consist in correcting its charge of *meaninglessness* by demonstrating the *meaningfulness* of supernaturalism?

What the Logical Positivists intensified was the concrete-boundness of British empiricism, that is: sense-perception without recourse to concepts. In this respect, Logical Positivism and Bahnsen's presuppositionalism are kissing cousins in that they both impale themselves on the same jagged point: the lack of an objective theory of concepts, and consequently no understood connection between perception and knowledge. So focusing on the Logical Positivists is not going to be very productive if Bahnsen's goal is to rebut positions opposed to taking belief in "the supernatural" seriously. The weaknesses of Logical Positivism offer presuppositionalism an opportune occasion to come out appearing victorious.

In spite of Bahnsen's polemics, one should be able to isolate a common theme in criticism of supernaturalism, even if it is only hinted at in the counter-positions which Bahnsen attacks: an absence of credulity in supernaturalism due to absence of any epistemological support for it. At this point, one would think that, if Bahnsen could correct the record by identifying in positive terms the means and methods by which one could acquire awareness of "the supernatural," objectively inform supernaturalist terminology and claims with meaning that logically connects to something that can be verified as real, and distinguish the content of those claims from mere imagination, he would produce such a contraption. But he continually fails to come through on this. Instead, he allows his belief in supernaturalism to remain unsupported, shivering in the stark and barren wasteland of isolated nonsense, and chooses to attack naysayers for simply being persistent spoilsports, comforted by the fact that the opposing models which he does examine are self-defeating and thus non-threatening.

Bahnsen goes on, saying:

So then, opponents of metaphysics (and thereby of the theology of the Bible) view metaphysical reasoning as conflicting with empirical science as the one and only way to acquire knowledge. (*Always Ready*, p. 184)

Bahnsen would have made a terrible poker player as he was so transparent when attempting a bluff. If it were not so obvious that he has been package-dealing supernaturalism with metaphysics up to this point, there should be no question now, given his own parenthetical clarification. For the record, I am not an "opponent of metaphysics" (my own worldview has a branch devoted to metaphysics) and I would not say that (what I mean by) "metaphysical reasoning" is "conflicting with empirical science," for my worldview's metaphysical principles do not contradict the reality in which I exist, nor are they based on the fake environment of supernaturalism, biblical or otherwise. Hence it is important to clarify what Bahnsen really means when he uses the words "metaphysics" and "metaphysical" in such instances; he really means "supernatural" since he makes clear that what he has in mind is associated with what the bible teaches. We've seen this over and over throughout Bahnsen's chapter on "Knowing the 'Super-Natural'."

So we should restate Bahnsen's statement to what he's really trying to say:

So then, opponents of *supernaturalism* (and thereby of the theology of the Bible) view *supernatural* reasoning as conflicting with empirical science as the one and only way to acquire knowledge.

The meaningfulness of this version is much clearer as it does not need to be dug out from underneath a haze of package-deals. And here is something we can agree with: someone who is seeking to "reason" from premises which take supernaturalism (such as that of the bible) seriously, will quickly expose his position's enmity with the empirical sciences, and this is because supernaturalism contradicts the principle of objectivity. The rational physicist will simply laugh at the supernaturalistic idea that men can walk on unfrozen water (cf. Mk. 6:48-50), especially if for "authority" the supernaturalist points to a storybook; the viniculturalist will laugh at the supernaturalistic idea that water can be wished into wine (cf. John 2:2-11); the biologist will simply laugh at the idea that a man will rise from the dead three (or really only two) days after dying, or that corpses will reanimate themselves and crawl out of their graves as described in Mt. 27, etc. No, laughing is not an argument, but the arbitrary does not deserve counter-arguments. Such reactions can be expected; should we really be surprised when someone scoffs at the arbitrary? If we are, perhaps there's something wrong. But often there is something wrong, for many in science today still have not recovered from the intellectual destruction of either Christianity or Logical Positivism.

Many popular philosophies leave the human mind vulnerable to the mystics' attacks often because they inherit or unwittingly borrow from mystics' premises. The presuppositionalist claim that many non-Christians have borrowed from Christianity is sometimes more accurate than apologists realize; the communism of the Soviets is a case in point. Irrationalism comes in many flavors, many of them only apparently opposed to religion. In fact, however, many non-theistic worldviews are merely secularized variants of overtly mystical worldviews. This is one reason why it is so important to understand our need for an objective starting point. If we begin by accepting any of the mystics' false assumptions about reality, only a variant of the mystics' irrationality can result.

But all of this underscores an insidious double standard on the theist's part. If scientists are expected to take one set of primitive folklore seriously, to be consistent, they should not dismiss any claim, no matter how outlandish. Biblicists will mind if their biblical doctrines are dismissed out of hand, but they won't mind if the animists' doctrines are dismissed out of hand. Similarly, Vedists will get upset if their sacred Vedic passages are

dismissed by scientists out of hand just as biblicists will. But so what? The discriminating scientist will always be open to the charge of "bias!" from the backers of any arbitrary worldview. But the tender emotions of those who feel slighted should not concern him.

Bahnsen posits an antithesis between the scientist and "the metaphysician" as follows:

Whereas the scientist arrives at contingent truths about the way things appear to our senses, the metaphysician aims at absolute or necessary truths about the reality which somehow lies behind those appearances. (*Always Ready*, p. 184)

There is in fact a fundamental antithesis between the scientist on the one hand, and someone espousing a supernaturalistic worldview like Christianity on the other. But it's not as Bahnsen characterizes it here. The scientist's enterprise is reality-bound; his goals, methods and procedures are developed and conducted in concert with the fact that there is a fundamental distinction between fact and fantasy. The religionist, on the other hand, is willing to ignore this fundamental distinction, for the overt teachings of his worldview expressly require that fact and fantasy be blurred into an indiscriminate whole, thus resulting in a fatal compromise to truthful understanding. The scientist studies actual things using an objective process (the scientific method) to discover specific truths about those actual things, truths which he recognizes as obtaining independent of anyone's wishes, preferences, or commandments. And while he may draw general conclusions from specific samples, these conclusions do not go beyond the universe to indicate a supernatural consciousness controlling everything. There is no reason why the scientist should not be able to conduct his research and validate his findings in keeping with the primacy of existence. In fact, it is only by adhering to the primacy of existence would his results be of any value in the first place.

By contrast, if Bahnsen's "metaphysician" is ultimately guided by the primacy of consciousness, he will of course find a way to rationalize his imagination that a conscious force is what "somehow lies behind those appearances." He then declares that his imagination consists of "absolute or necessary truths" which, as a member counting himself among "the chosen," he "knows" by "revelation." Contrary to the scientist, the supernaturalist in this case does not draw conclusions about "the supernatural" from inputs he gathers from reality using an objective method. Instead, he is guided by a storybook whose oral lore, mythical allegories, poetic indulgences and mystical teachings serve as substitutes for objective inputs.

But the antithesis between the scientific approach to the world and the religious approach, as Bahnsen would characterize it, leads to what he will call "the anti-metaphysical polemic," when in actuality an informed scientist would not at all reject an *objective* metaphysics - i.e., one which is not willing to relent on the fact that there is a fundamental distinction between fact and fantasy - but would recognize the fundamental importance of such metaphysical underpinnings to the integrity of his vocation. On Bahnsen's premises (in which the distinction between fact and fantasy is fundamentally blurred):

A gulf is posited between the truths of empirical fact (arrived at on the basis of information from the senses) and truths of speculative reason (which could only be arbitrary verbal conventions or organizing concepts that are inapplicable outside the sphere of experience). (*Always Ready*, pp. 184-185)

If what is taken as "truths of speculative reason" are in fact "arbitrary verbal conventions," then of course we would posit that a "gulf" exists between them and facts that are discovered on an empirical basis. But there is no good reason to suppose that *speculation* (i.e., groping guesses, frantic hunch-making, stabs in the dark, etc.) is the only alternative to "empirical fact" (i.e., facts that are perceived directly), or that empirical fact and speculation are inherently partnered, as if the one lead naturally to the other. Reason is not a stab in the dark consisting of "arbitrary verbal conventions." In fact, concepts allow the human mind to expand its awareness beyond the immediate perceptual level while preserving the integrity of fundamental truths that are discovered on the basis of firsthand discriminated awareness and performatively reaffirmed in every act of awareness (such as the fact that there is a fundamental distinction between fact and fantasy, that wishing does not make it so, etc.).

By characterizing reason as "speculative," however, Bahnsen shows how willing he is to poison the well in order to salvage his supernaturalism. Who wants to rely on a method which is at best "speculative"? This only tells us what Bahnsen thinks of reason, and by extension the human mind, if he thinks reason is inherently speculative. At the very least, it tells us that he does not have a principled understanding of reason, and this is likely due to his worldview being clouded by a commitment to affirming the contents of a storybook as "divine revelation." This should not surprise us, for his apologetic is not aimed at increasing man's understanding of the world and his own mind, but at leaving him helpless and defenseless against the mysticism which his worldview is bent on

promulgating.

Bahnsen thus presents “the anti-metaphysical polemic” as he understands it:

In that case, according to modern dogma, all meaningful and informative statements about the world were judged to be empirical in nature. The case against metaphysical claims, then, can be summarized in this fashion:

1. there cannot be a non-empirical source of knowledge or information about reality, and
2. it is illegitimate to draw inferences from what is experienced by the senses to what must lie outside of experience.

In short, we can only know as factually significant what we can experience directly with our senses - which nullifies the meaningfulness of metaphysical claims and the possibility of metaphysical knowledge. (*Always Ready*, p. 185)

Again, by “metaphysical claims,” I understand Bahnsen actually means claims of a “supernatural” character. It should be clear that the two affirmations which Bahnsen lists here in no way encapsulate the criticism of supernaturalism that I have put forth. I have not stipulated that “there cannot be a non-empirical source of knowledge or information about reality,” and I certainly do not hold that “it is illegitimate to draw inferences from what is experienced by the senses to what must lie outside of experience.” Rather, my approach has been to a) isolate what Bahnsen means by “supernatural,” b) probe Bahnsen’s case for any indication of how we might distinguish what he calls “supernatural” from what he may merely be imagining; c) ask how one can have awareness of what Bahnsen calls “supernatural” (if not by perception, then how?); d) can claims about “the supernatural” being real be reconciled with the primacy of existence metaphysics (i.e., the foundation of truth), etc. Specifically, my interest is in discovering what Bahnsen’s case *for* “the supernatural” may be. In regards to the first statement that Bahnsen formulates to represent the case against supernaturalism as he understands it, a couple points can be made that are somewhat sympathetic to the epistemological concern it raises.

We must bear in mind that knowledge is not something we have automatically, nor is it produced automatically. We need to act in order to acquire and validate knowledge, just as we need to act in order to achieve any goal. Our theory of knowledge needs to be consistent with the nature of our consciousness, for ignoring the nature of our consciousness will only undercut any theory of knowledge we attempt to establish on such ignorance. And it is a fact that we have senses and that we perceive objects because of the senses we possess. It is by means of sense-perception that we are aware of things distinct from our consciousness, and without awareness of something distinct from our consciousness, it has no content by which it can be identified as being conscious to begin with. “A consciousness conscious of nothing but itself is a contradiction in terms: before it could identify itself as consciousness, it had to be conscious of something.” (*For the New Intellectual*, p. 124) It is undeniable that our awareness of reality begins at the perceptual level, and in this sense the statement that “there cannot be a non-empirical source of knowledge or information about reality” is in fact true. The question which Bahnsen should be asking, but doesn’t, is: What is the relationship between perception and knowledge? On the presuppositional (indeed the Christian) model, this is relationship never clear, most likely because it would not be religiously expedient to have a principled understanding of this relationship. In fact, it is the failure to understand the relationship between perception and knowledge that presuppositionalism as an apologetic method seeks to exploit in unwitting non-believers. But from what Bahnsen does say, it is clear enough what he thinks: knowledge of reality does not depend on perception. His followers might qualify this to say that “theological knowledge” (or knowledge of “the supernatural”) does not depend on or reduce to perception. And if so-called “theological knowledge” is ultimately informed by the imagination, this would certainly be the case.

But is it really the case that metaphysical knowledge - that is, knowledge of the nature of reality - is not dependent or related to perception? To claim this, it may either be that a) what is claimed as “metaphysical knowledge” is not actually knowledge, or b) the relationship between knowledge and perception is simply not understood, and thus supposed not to be of any epistemological importance. In the case of religious belief and the presuppositional defense of it, both components play an important role.

In upcoming installments we will examine Bahnsen’s interaction with the premises of “the anti-metaphysical polemic” that he listed above. For now, however, let us propose the following alternatives those premises:

1. there cannot be a non-*objective* source of knowledge or information about reality, and
2. it is illegitimate to draw inferences from what is experienced by the senses to what *contradicts*

experience.

Would Bahnsen object to either of these premises if they imperiled his beloved supernaturalism? Would he be willing to contend for a non-objective source of knowledge about reality in order to save his theism? Would he endorse a worldview which draws inferences from what is experienced by the senses to what contradicts that experience? I suspect that Bahnsen would in the end need to take issue with these premises, given his commitment to Christian theism.

In regard to (1), guarding our knowledge against incursions from any non-objective source of knowledge would prevent subjectivity from creeping into our worldview. At minimum, this would take care of any view which reduces to the primacy of consciousness (such as the notion that reality was created by consciousness and conforms to the dictates of a consciousness). It would also checkmate the desire to manufacture one's worldview on the basis of the content of a storybook, especially if the content of that storybook affirmed views which reduce to the primacy of consciousness (such as is the case with the Christian bible). The principle of objectivity in fact serves as a fire-wall protecting the human mind against any variant of mysticism. This principle equips the human mind with what it needs to distinguish between fact and fiction, reality and imagination, knowledge and fabrication.

Moreover, recognizing that it is illegitimate to draw inferences from what we experience firsthand by means of sense-perception to conclusions which contradict what we experience, would equip the discriminating mind with the ability to filter out many arbitrary claims at the outset, thus allowing a thinker to devote his attention to things that are of actual value to his life. For instance, if he reads that dead corpses which had been buried in graves suddenly reanimated and rose out of those graves (cf. Matt. 27:52-53), he would - armed with the principle described in (2) above - recognize that this is fiction and entertainment, for his experience consistently indicates that the dead remain dead, and corpses do not reanimate in their graves and rise out of them.

The Christian worldview, however, stands on an explicit rejection of such principles. It cannot survive for a moment on principles which explicitly exclude the contaminants of subjectivism and contradiction. It can only get away with rejection of such principles by deceptively obscuring the nature of the human mind and reducing it to a subhuman level - to the level of a terrified stock animal that is "always ready" for slaughter, "always ready" to prostrate itself, not in order to live, but in order not to die.

by Dawson Bethrick

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

2 Comments:

[JSackey](#) said...

I haven't read much Bahnsen, but I'm liking this series :)

[September 06, 2007 8:48 AM Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hi JSackey,

I'm glad you're enjoying it. When I'm finished with the series (there will be 18 installments in a;)), I will be assembling all parts into a single HTML document and posting it on my website. I will announce once it's up on my blog as well.

It will be a one-stop shop for those who want to accuse non-believers of harboring some "unargued bias" against supernaturalism. So if any Villains come your way telling you that you can't know this or can't know that, tell them they can swallow this.

Best regards,
Dawson

[September 07, 2007 6:00 AM](#)

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