

Bahnsen on "Knowing the Supernatural" Part 13: "Double Standards and Begging the Question"

Continued from [Part 12](#).

"Double Standards and Begging the Question"

Bahnsen begins this section of chapter 31 of his book *Always Ready* by interacting with the second premise that he attributes to the case against supernaturalism. That premise is:

it is illegitimate to draw inferences from what is experienced by the senses to what must lie outside of experience. (*Always Ready*, p. 185)

Bahnsen probes this statement with a series of questions:

We should first ask why it is that metaphysicians (and theologians) should not reason from what is known in sense experience to something lying beyond sensation. After all, isn't this precisely what empirical scientists do from day to day? They continually reason from the seen to the unseen (e.g., talking of subatomic particles, computing gravitational forces, warning against radiation simply on the basis of its effects, prescribing medicine for an unseen infection on the basis of an observed fever, etc.) It certainly appears capricious for those with anti-metaphysical leanings to prohibit the theologian from doing what is allowed to the scientist! Such an inconsistency betrays a mind that has been made up in advance against certain kinds of conclusions about reality. (*Always Ready*, p. 185)

So, is Bahnsen saying that we reason *from an empirical source*? Indeed, we do just this. But one does not need to be a metaphysician or theologian to be able to do this. Ordinary mortals do this all the time. What makes this possible? Bahnsen wants to argue that his god makes this possible. But in fact, the ability to conceptualize is what makes this possible. One will never learn this point from Bahnsen, for his desire to assimilate the human intellect into the context of his god-beliefs will only cloud the matter rather than pave the way for clear understanding.

The ability to form concepts allows the human mind to create open-ended classes of entities, attributes, actions, etc., which include not only those qualifying entities, attributes, actions, etc. which we perceive, but also those which we do not perceive. The concept 'cat', for instance, includes the cat we are looking at in the neighbor's yard, as well as cats that we saw in another neighborhood, cats that lived 100 years ago, cats that will live in the future, etc. The membership of individual cats within the range of reference of the concept 'cat' is not restricted to some specific number; the concept 'cat' does not "expire" after it's been used to denote 10, 100 or 5,000 specific cats. On the contrary, the concept is open-ended, and there is no quantitative limit to the units which can be included in it. What specifically makes it possible for the human mind to continue integrating new units into the concept 'cat' is the operation known as *measurement-omission*. Measurement-omission is the principle which guides conceptual integration: "the relevant measurements must exist in *some* quantity, but may exist in *any* quantity." (ITOE, p. 12) With simple principles such as this, which are accessible to any thinker, there's no reason to posit an invisible magic being to understand how the mind operates when it "reason[s] from what is known in sense experience to something lying beyond sensation."

Note that the cats which we do not see but include in the concept 'cat' are just as *finite* and *this-worldly* as the cats which we *do* see. There is no reason to suppose that the cats which we do not see and yet include in the scope of reference of the concept 'cat' cannot be seen at some point in time by someone, even ourselves, unless of course they no longer exist or will not exist during our lifetimes. But even then, the units included in the concept are still just as non-supernatural, non-otherworldly, non-miraculous as the ones we have actually perceived, for the ones we have actually serve as the model for the concept in the first place. So while concepts do in fact serve as our cognitive means by which to reason from what we do see to what we do not see, we don't leave the universe by performing this process, and what we reason to is just as non-supernatural as that from which we originally reasoned.

But is this really what Bahnsen is proposing that theologians are doing when they assert the existence of "the

supernatural”? If theologians who assert “the supernatural” are simply drawing conclusions pertaining to what is not seen from what they do see, what are the steps in their reasoning process which lead to such conclusions? Scientists can identify the steps they take in developing their conclusions, so why doesn’t Bahnsen identify the steps that the theologian takes in concluding that “the supernatural” is real?

Bahnsen seems to be setting up a subtle false dichotomy: either one affirms that it is completely illegitimate to reason “from the seen to the unseen,” or - if we grant that this is impossible - then supernatural claims are perfectly legitimate. But he gives us no reason to suppose that both positions are wrong. Why not entertain the objective alternative which Bahnsen ignores: that we do in fact reason from what is given in perception to what lies beyond perception, and yet the units which lie beyond perception that we integrate into the sum of our knowledge are just as natural and this-worldly as the units which we perceived and which we used as models for the integration process in the first place.

Bahnsen wants to make it all appear so innocent (and yet, Bahnsen himself has warned us that there is a distinction between appearance and reality) by pretending that what theologians do is essentially no different from “what empirical scientists do from day to day.” And yet he conspicuously ignores the fact that his scheme requires us to drop the principle of objectivity from the context of the reasoning process he’s trying to assimilate into his defense of supernaturalism. Moreover, he does not show how the process of reasoning to the supernatural from what is seen is at all similar to the process of integrating unperceived but still completely natural and this-worldly units into concepts formed on the basis of perceived models.

Thinkers of all professions - not just those involved in the special sciences - do in fact reason from what they perceive firsthand to things that they do not perceive or have not yet perceived. But there is nothing inherent in this process which requires that what is concluded from such reasoning cannot be perceived at some point. The cats about which I draw general conclusions from a small sample, for instance, are just as non-supernatural as the cats which I perceive and which make up my sample.

For instance, I have been to many, many cities in my lifetime. I have seen them firsthand, walked their streets, eaten at their cafes, gone to board meetings in their tall buildings, strolled in their parks, etc. Every city I have seen has had trees. I have never been to Pittsburgh, PA, but I have no reason to suspect it does not have trees. I reason from what I have seen (other cities) to what I have not seen (trees in Pittsburgh, PA). There is nothing illegitimate about this, and if I do in fact one day go to Pittsburgh, I wager that I will see trees there. This is an important point: the reasoning process that Bahnsen alludes to (“from what is known in sense experience to something lying beyond sensation”), does not require that we reason from what we perceive to what must be imperceptible, supernatural or otherworldly. What Bahnsen mentions - subatomic particles, gravitational forces, radiation, causes of infection, etc., may be imperceptible, but this does not mean that all things concluded by a course of reasoning that begins with what we perceive must also be imperceptible. Moreover, there’s no reason to suppose that subatomic particles, gravitational forces, radiation, causes of infection, etc., are just as finite, non-supernatural and this-worldly as the cats and trees we perceive on a daily basis.

But Bahnsen wants to make sure that we allow at the very least the ability to reason from what is perceived to that which is imperceptible. That’s because his invisible magic being is held to be imperceptible. That is why he specifically names examples which are imperceptible (e.g., subatomic particles, gravitational forces, and the like). But does Bahnsen explain how one can reason from what is perceived to that which is not perceived? No he does not. Does he explain how conceptualization makes this possible? No, he does not. If he did, he’d have to show how this process could be executed and validate his god-belief claims at the same time. Bahnsen nowhere comes close to doing this. I suspect that his defenders will probably say that his book was intended for an untutored audience, meaning: he hadn’t intended on tutoring them. But this is a roundabout way of admitting that he in fact did not explain these things. So such defenses are unhelpful.

Bahnsen then writes:

Everybody should be expected to play by the same rules. (*Always Ready*, p. 185)

But does Bahnsen truly want “to play by the same rules” as non-believers? If anything, one gets the impression that he emphatically does not. Bahnsen clearly wants to reserve for himself the option of appealing to “revelation” as a defense for his claims. This is simply a variant of the invisible magic being defense: if you cannot establish your position on the basis of facts which are accessible to anyone who reasonably investigates the matter, claim that your position has is certified by an invisible magic being who makes it so. This assessment of Bahnsen’s apologetic is no stretch, not even in the least.

In his [opening statement when he debated Gordon Stein](#), one of Bahnsen's chief points was that "the existence, factuality, or reality of different kinds of things is not established or disconfirmed in the same way in every case." Apparently some claims should be established by means of reason, but other claims are exempt from this requirement. Bahnsen found it important to segregate his god-belief claims epistemologically from other types of claims, insisting that we should not expect his god-belief claims to be verified in the same manner as we might verify other claims, particularly claims having to do with things that exist *in* the universe (i.e., things which are not believed to "surpass the limits of nature"). Of course, if "the supernatural" were really imaginary, we would not expect the methods we use to verify truths in the actual world to be sufficient when it comes to verifying claims about "the supernatural." So such reservations are not surprising.

To illustrate his point, Bahnsen employed his famous "crackers in the pantry" example, which achieves its aim by trivializing the methods we use to verify claims in "the 'here-and-now'." His point was that one cannot expect to verify the claim that the Christian god exists in the same manner as we verify the claim that there are crackers in the pantry. The existence of the crackers in the pantry can be verified by simply going over to the pantry and checking to see if the crackers are there. If we see the crackers in the pantry, then we can be sure that the claim that the crackers are in the pantry is true.

But, according to Bahnsen, the existence of the Christian god cannot be verified in such a manner. Okay. How then can it be verified? He implies that the existence of his god can in fact be verified by the same mind that can verify whether or not there are crackers in the pantry. But this is where Bahnsen led the audience on a wild goose chase, never elucidating any methodology by which we can verify such claims. Throughout the debate, one of Bahnsen's primary aims was to shield his god-belief claims from criticism (his other aim was to discredit non-belief in Christian supernaturalism), and in the present context he sought to do so by pointing to other things whose existence is not verified in the same way we verify whether or not there are crackers in the pantry, such as: "barometric pressure, quasars, gravitational attraction, elasticity, radioactivity, natural laws, names, grammar, numbers, the university itself (that you're now at), past events, categories, future contingencies, laws of thought, political obligations, individual identity over time, causation, memories, dreams or even love or beauty." What Bahnsen ignores is the fact that all these examples are of things that can be verified and understood by means of reason. In fact, we use reason when we check to see if the crackers are in the pantry just as we do when we measure barometric pressure, search for the existence of quasars, test gravitational attraction, etc. Reason is the common denominator for exploring all these inquiries. But reason does not help us when investigating the alleged existence of "the supernatural," and Bahnsen's own appeals to "revelation" confirm this. Since Bahnsen does not show how reason can be used to verify his god-belief claims, and numerous statements of his verify that the existence of his god cannot be known by means of autonomous inference from what we perceive (in fact, he says, this knowledge needs to be "revealed" to us), then it does in fact look like Bahnsen wants to reserve for himself a different set of game rules, in spite of his statement to the opposite effect.

Could it be that the method by which Bahnsen has "knowledge" of "the supernatural" is just too sophisticated to explain? It would appear not. Instead of going and looking on the shelf, as we might do if we're in doubt about there being any crackers in the pantry, Bahnsen's method for "knowing the supernatural" seems to be nothing more than consulting a storybook to settle questions about the existence of his god. Christians might object to this characterization, saying that it is just as geared toward trivializing Bahnsen's methodology of confirming his god-belief claims as his crackers-in-the-pantry example trivializes methodologies used to verify claims in "the 'here-and-now'." But again we must ask: what exactly is the methodology that Bahnsen proposes for investigating claims about "the supernatural"? If Bahnsen never presents any methodology for investigating such claims, how can we be accused of trivializing it? And if Bahnsen does have a methodology which for one reason or another prefers to keep close to his chest, how exactly does it differ from taking what the bible says at face value on its own say so? Here we just get another massive blank-out.

But notice what Bahnsen says next:

Moreover, it is important to notice that (2) above is not really relevant to making a case against biblical metaphysics. Christianity does not view its metaphysical (theological, supernatural) claims as unguided or arbitrary attempts to reason from the seen world to the unseen world - unwarranted projections from nature to what lies beyond it. In the first place, the Christian claims that God created this world to reflect His glory and to be a constant testimony to Him and His character. God also created man as His own image, determined the way in which man would think and learn about the world, and coordinated man's mind and the objective world so that man would unavoidably know the supernatural Creator through the conduit of the created realm. (*Always Ready*, pp. 185-186)

Bahnsen needs to make his position on this matter clear instead of clouding it with the murkiness of statements like this. He needs to come clean on this: Does man (according to Bahnsen's view) infer the reality of "the supernatural" from what he perceives in the world around him, or not? If Bahnsen thinks so, then what are the steps in that inferential process? How does one infer the existence of "the supernatural" (i.e., that which "surpasses the limits of nature") from the natural? As I ask in my blog [Is Human Experience Evidence of the Christian God?](#)

How does that which is natural, material, finite and corruptible serve as evidence of that which is supernatural, immaterial, infinite and incorruptible? In other words, how does A serve as evidence of non-A?

Or,

How does something serve as evidence of that which completely contradicts it?

On the other hand, if Bahnsen does not think we infer the reality of "the supernatural" from what we perceive in the world around us, then he admits that such beliefs cannot be rational, for they have nothing to do with reason. Bahnsen cannot have it both ways. Indeed, he will have to play by the same rules. If he cannot establish his claims on the basis of reason, he needs to admit this, and with that he will concede all debate.

Now those who confuse their imagination with reality and give special names to their confusion (e.g., "the supernatural") will always be able to concoct explanations for how they come into possession of what they call "knowledge." By accepting one arbitrary premise, especially in a position of hierarchical importance in one's overall understanding of the world (cf. Bahnsen's "ultimate presuppositions"), the believer shows his willingness to compromise his rational faculties and thus opens the door to any other arbitrary notions that he will need to support the original. Essentially, he uses a fabrication to cover up another fabrication. The common currency here is pretense in the guise of profound philosophical truth. But in doing so he outlines a worldview that is completely incompatible with what we learn from the world. We learn from the world, for instance, that we possess a volitional consciousness, but here Bahnsen tells us that an invisible magic being has "determined the way in which man would think and learn about the world." According to this view, we are merely puppets manipulated by strings dangling from a magic kingdom, or characters in a [cartoon universe](#) executing an elaborately contrived script.

The commitment to the primacy of consciousness here is difficult to miss. This deity - a supernatural consciousness - "coordinated man's mind and the objective world so that man would unavoidably know the supernatural Creator through the conduit of the created realm." On this view, both the subject ("man's mind") and the object ("the objective world") conform to the wishful dictates of the supernatural consciousness, whose will holds metaphysical primacy over both. The subjectivism of such a view is echoed by Van Til: "the world of objects was made in order that the subject of knowledge, namely man, should interpret it under God... The subject and the object are therefore adapted to one another." (*The Defense of the Faith*, 3rd ed., p. 43) According to such a view both man (even as a subject himself) and the world about him, are objects of the consciousness of the supernatural deity, and [they conform precisely to its intentions](#).

This view suggests more than that knowledge of "the supernatural" is not the conclusion of a rational process, but that man is completely infallible so long as his "conclusions" (which are "unavoidably know[n]" and not derived from any rational process to begin with) agree with the content of the storybook (and so long as those conclusions conform to the prescribed interpretation of that storybook), but wholly fallible in any other use of his intellect. If man's mind and the world he beholds were "created" such that they are both "adapted to one another" by a perfect creator which can never err, then it seems that infallibility in theological assertions is exactly what is being claimed.

Bahnsen continues:

God Himself intended and made it unavoidable that man would learn about the Creator from the world around him. This amounts to God coming to man through the temporal and empirical order, not man groping toward God. This amounts to saying that the natural world is not in itself random and without a clue as to its ultimate meaning, leaving man to arbitrary speculation and metaphysical projections. (*Always Ready*, p. 186)

While Bahnsen wants to characterize the alleged "unavoidability" of this knowledge of "the supernatural" as the cause behind the world's non-randomness, the view he presents here renders epistemology completely futile. For it puts man's mind in a completely passive role when it comes to his acquisition of knowledge. Since it holds that the "knowledge" that the Christian god exists is "unavoidable" and this same god "com[es] to man through the temporal and empirical order," man's mind can remain completely idle and still possess this alleged knowledge. So Bahnsen is

in effect coming full circle in divorcing knowledge from the operation of man's mind, which is confined to "groping" were it not for a supernatural deity rescuing it from its own devices and helplessness.

It is at this point that Bahnsen introduces the dichotomy between "arbitrary speculation" and "divine revelation," a commonplace assumption in Christian apologetics. This dichotomy is integral to the religious view that man's mind is epistemologically helpless, and Bahnsen is in no way the only one who has tried to exploit it. Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, makes it quite explicit:

How, then, do you discover the purpose you were created for? You have only two options. Your first option is speculation. This is what most people choose. They conjecture, they guess, they theorize ... Fortunately, there is an alternative to speculation about the meaning and purpose of life. It's revelation. We can turn to what God has revealed about life in his Word. (pp. 19-20)

Reacting to this, Mister Swig accurately encapsulates its apologetic use:

Either you guess at the truth like a hardcore skeptic, never knowing whether you're right, or you look at the Bible and accept its make-believe answer on faith. Given only these two options—and not the explicit alternative of reason, logic, and the scientific method—why would anyone choose mere speculation? ([Rick Warren: Master Assimilator for the Christian Collective](#))

The reason why Christians want to characterize the discovery of one's purpose in life as a matter of speculation vs. revelation, is to frontload a set of assumptions which will be recruited to discredit any purpose one might decide for himself that does not subordinate him to the will of an invisible magic being, specifically the Christian deity. If, for instance, a thinker recognizes that his purpose is to live and enjoy his life - a purpose which religionists want to discourage at any cost - then any reasoning he cites in support of this purpose can be discounted as the product of mere "speculation." The message here is quite clear: don't try to think for yourself, let the church elders do it for you, and abide by whatever pronouncements for your life that they might issue. Which means: you are not to live for your own sake, you are to sacrifice your life to whatever end the religionists decide for it.

Embedded within all this is the question of whether or not the world is "random." Bahnsen wants to use the concept 'random' as if it denoted a metaphysical attribute, when in fact it describes an epistemological vantage. If the law of identity obtains throughout the universe (the apologist is free to argue that it does not), then "randomness" could only indicate a lack of knowledge on the part of any knower as to the causes of what he discovers or encounters. For instance, it may be a random incident that my coworker and I both show up to the water fountain with empty cups in hand at the same moment, but this would not entail that there is no causality behind our mutual meeting. If A is A, and A is what it is independent of conscious functions (e.g., beliefs, misunderstandings, wishes, emotions, etc.), then not only can we affirm that the universe is not random, we can affirm it on an explicitly non-theistic basis, that is: on the basis of the primacy of existence metaphysics.

Of course, I am a man, but no god has come to me "through the temporal and empirical order." Only other men have, and men can be misinformed or dishonest (and even both). Many in the world are prone to making all kinds of outlandish claims. Would Bahnsen have me discard all discriminating awareness and simply accept whatever the first passer-by might claim? Perhaps this depends on who that first passer-by might be and what he might claim. If he claims what Bahnsen claims, then the answer would be yes: consider it true, even if you don't at first believe it, and apply his scheme of apologetics to make sure what is claimed is in the end believed. If the first passer-by happens to be a Muslim, a Buddhist, a Scientologist, or even a rational man, don't trust anything he says, for he does not number among "the chosen."

Sensing that what he has presented is still not sufficient to shield his position from scrutiny, Bahnsen ups the ante by invoking the doctrine that man is inherently sinful:

Moreover, given the intellectually corrupting effects of man's fall into sin and rebellion against God, man's mind has not been left to know God on the basis of man's own unaided experience and interpretation of the world. God has undertaken to make Himself known to man by means of verbal revelation - using words (chosen by God) which are exactly appropriate for the mind of man (created by God) to come to correct conclusions about His Creator, Judge and Redeemer. (*Always Ready*, p. 186)

Bahnsen's tactic here is less than sophomoric. He's essentially saying: "If you deny that my invisible magic being, then you're morally worthless!" Which is essentially to say: "If you defy my authority, then you're a disgrace!" That is what the appeal to sin is all about: it's a last ditch effort to discredit anyone and everyone who does not believe what the Christian claims by exploiting any self-doubt or lack of self-esteem as an indication of the presence of this

magical contaminant called “sin.” The doctrine of “sin” allows the Christian apologist to cover his resort to childish slander with something that seems seriously important: man’s moral nature. And yet, the doctrine of “sin” itself only demonstrates how out of touch Christianity as a worldview is with a rational understanding of morality. One of the ways Christianity’s own teachings succeed in nullifying morality as such, is by its underlying doctrine of collective guilt: all men are guilty by virtue of one man’s transgressions. Men “inherit” a “fallen nature” - and with it an innate “rebelliousness” against the Christian god - as a result of the “sin” of one man whom none of us living today ever met and whose existence cannot be objectively corroborated; all we have is a storybook, told in campfire fashion, that this man allegedly existed in some unspecified era of the distant past. You can’t be good by your own choices and actions, so why try? After all, morality on Christianity’s own view is primarily about being “good” (at least in the eyes of an imaginary being), not about how to govern your choices and actions in order to live. Your choices and actions, like your life, are of no concern in the eternal scheme of things, so they shouldn’t concern you in your life to begin with. Even Bahnsen’s own statements confirm the accuracy of this analysis, for he admits that this presumption of “man’s fall into sin” is not something he can discover by means of reasoning from the world that he experiences firsthand. According to the Christian view, this “presupposition” is based in “verbal revelation,” which is essentially nothing other than indiscriminately believing what one reads in the storybooks of the bible. Observe:

Christian theology is not the result of a self-sufficient exploration of, and argument from man’s unaided and brute empirical experience, to a god lying beyond and behind experience. Rather the Christian affirms, on the basis of Scripture’s declaration, that our theological tenets rest on the self-revelation of the transcendent Creator. Theology does not work from man to God, but from God to man (via infallible, verbal revelation; cf. 2 Peter 1:21). (*Always Ready*, p. 186)

So while above Bahnsen wanted to take thinkers to task for supposing we cannot reason from the seen to the unseen (because surely we do this all the time) as a premise in the case against supernaturalism, he’s now saying that this is not how one arrives at religious truths in the first place! Is Bahnsen coming, or going? It’s hard to tell, principally because the position he wants to defend requires a lot of shape-shifting on its defenders’ part. Recall that in the previous section, Bahnsen declared that “the metaphysician aims at absolute or necessary truths about the reality which somehow lies behind those appearances.” (*Always Ready*, p. 184) He may “aim” at such “truths,” but simply aiming for them does not validate them or make them truthful. So the question remains: *How does he know?* What epistemological procedure does he undertake to secure these “absolute or necessary truths about the reality which somehow lies behind those appearances”? Again, Bahnsen resorts to the claim of revelation, and he also characterizes the human mind as epistemologically passive as it is supposed to idly receive revelatory transmissions from “the supernatural.” Thus Bahnsen appeals to the supernatural in order to validate the supernatural, which is terminally circular. If this method is “valid” for Bahnsen’s purposes, why wouldn’t it be valid for any rival position? For instance, what would stop someone who wanted to validate *The Wizard of Oz* from validating the claim that *The Wizard of Oz* is true by appealing to what *The Wizard of Oz* says? The conclusion is inescapable: Bahnsen has no epistemological warrant for his claims whatsoever, for he identifies no epistemological process by which his belief in supernaturalism can be validated.

From all of this, however, Bahnsen wants to draw the following conclusion:

Therefore, the anti-metaphysical polemic - already seen to be arbitrary and inconsistent - begs the main question. If God as portrayed in the Bible does indeed exist, then there is no reason to preclude the possibility that man who lives in the realm of “nature” can gain a knowledge of the “supernatural.” (*Always Ready*, p. 186)

In spite of the fact that Bahnsen’s defense is terminally circular, as we have seen, he can’t wait to accuse non-believing positions of begging the question themselves. This is not uncommon at all: presuppositionalists seem to delight in posturing as if non-belief in the supernatural somehow stood on a wobbly foundation full of fallacy and error. But does it really? Bahnsen’s focus is on dismissing efforts which “preclude the possibility that man... can gain a knowledge of the ‘supernatural’,” but fails to explain why anyone’s worldview should *include* claims about “the supernatural” as valid knowledge. Even Bahnsen’s own hypothetical “If God... does indeed exist” is intellectually shortsighted. If such a being existed, then all bets are off when it comes to assessing anything proposed as a possibility, no matter how absurd it might seem. If such a being exists, anything would be possible, both the theist’s proposals as well as any atheist’s. That’s because the very notion of a god presupposes the primacy of consciousness, and on such an assumption nothing could be written off as either an absurdity or an impossibility. What about corpses rising from their graves and walking around in cities a la Matthew 27:52-53? This is perfectly possible, on the assumption that an invisible magic being is running the universe like a cartoon. Same with the idea of a pack of acid-breathing canines typing out dissertations on Goldratt’s Theory of Constraints on the surface of Venus. If a mere human being could imagine these things, how could one say it’s not possible for the being which allegedly created man in the first place to be able to make what a human being imagines real? Can man’s imagination

range beyond the abilities of the Christian god? What card-carrying Christian would admit to this?

But such “what if?” appeals are not helpful to Bahnsen. What if men were actually water-breathing lilies that grew in the silts of the Ayeyarwady delta? Well, we’re not, so why treat such questions as if they were important?

At this point, Bahnsen can only assert his position and treat it as a *given*:

God created and controls all things, according to the Biblical account. Given that perspective, God could certainly bring it about that man learns the truth about Him through both the created order and a set of divinely inspired messages. (*Always Ready*, p. 186)

In such a way, Bahnsen demonstrates how affirming one arbitrary claim and treating it as centrally important (cf. “presupposition”), allows one to argue *any* arbitrary claim he wants, since he’s already granted legitimacy to the arbitrary. A little leaven, leaveneth the whole lump. If we grant one absurdity, on what basis could we rule out any other absurdity? Blank out.

This in turn gives Bahnsen the license to speak for “the unbeliever”:

When the unbeliever contends that nothing in man’s temporal, limited, natural experience can provide knowledge of the metaphysical or supernatural, he is simply taking a roundabout way of saying that the Biblical account of a God who makes Himself clearly known in the created order and Scripture is mistaken. (*Always Ready*, pp. 186-187)

I suppose that, no matter how solid a case the non-believer presents on behalf of his position that supernaturalism is irrational, the apologist will always be able to dismiss it as “a roundabout way” of saying the bible is mistaken. If the apologist has no arguments for his position, such maneuvers might be psychologically palliative, though only momentarily. But since Bahnsen prefers to philosophize on the basis of “what if?” scenarios, let’s ask one of our own: what if “the unbeliever” gives the apologist ample opportunity to

- a) identify the means by which one can have awareness of “the supernatural,”
- b) explain how supernatural claims can be verified in a manner consistent with the nature of consciousness which man actually possesses,
- c) provide a reliable method by which “the supernatural” can be distinguished from what the believer may merely be imagining, and
- d) credibly explain how “revelation” is not essentially the same as believing something one reads in a storybook,

and it turns out that the apologist fails to deliver on all four points? What then? If Bahnsen is so certain that “the Biblical account of a God who makes Himself clearly known in the created order” is not mistaken, why doesn’t he explain how such claims can be substantiated on the basis of the primacy of existence, which we know is true and fundamental, instead of just avoiding this and these other issues repeatedly, even when he sets out to write a chapter purportedly intended to deal with “The Problem of Knowing the ‘Super-Natural’”? If this god has made itself “clearly known” to men, why do disagreements about the identity of this god and its accompanying theology persist so stubbornly among those who number themselves among “the chosen,” just as we would expect them to do if in the end their theology were seated in the imagination of its adherents?

But Bahnsen insists that his position’s detractors must be committing some fallacy in their rejection of supernaturalism:

This begging of the question is sometimes veiled from the unbeliever by his tendency to recast the nature of theological truth as man-centered and rooted initially in human, empirical experience. However, the very point in contention between the believer and unbeliever comes down to the claim that Christian teaching is rooted in God’s self-disclosure of the truth as found in the world around us and in the written word. (*Always Ready*, p. 187)

Let us make one thing clear: one is not “begging the question” when he rejects subjective, irrational or arbitrary claims. If a man claims that Blarko, an invisible conscious being which exists beyond the universe, created the universe by making a wish, designing all its structures and contents according to its wise “counsel” such that everything “reflects” its infallible mind and unquestionable plan, and he offers no objective method by which we can independently discover the existence of this Blarko and verify the truth of his claim, on what basis should we accept that claim as knowledge? Suppose we point out that, like Bahnsen, this man fails to explain how such

knowledge can be possible, but instead focuses on supposed problems in rival positions which reject belief in Blarke. Would this gain any ground for his case? Of course not; problems in a rival position are not going to substantiate such claims.

And notice how Bahnsen's own position is guilty of the very fallacy he charges the non-believer with committing: begging the question. Bahnsen makes it clear that he must appeal to the supernatural in order to validate his supernaturalism. He refers to "the truth in the world around us and in the written word" of the bible as "God's self-disclosure," but nowhere does he explain how man could know this, even if it were in fact true. Simply reading something in a storybook is not sufficient to accept it as truth. Moreover, if what we read in the storybook would require us to ignore fundamental facts which we do know in order to believe what it says, why would we believe it? Time and time again, apologists fail to factor the nature of man's cognition and its needs into his defenses, and that is because man's cognition and its needs are of no concern to his religious doctrines. What is important to the believer is believing, not understanding. So we should not expect understanding to be the goal of their apologetic program. Bahnsen confirms this assessment with statements such as the following:

There is no reason to think that theology would be intellectually required to be built upon the foundation of human sense experience, unless someone were presupposing in advance that all knowledge must ultimately derive from empirical procedures. But that is the very question at hand. (*Always Ready*, p 187)

By "empirical procedures," I understand Bahnsen means sense perception. Again, he does not want his readers to think that sense perception is our primary means of awareness and, consequently, the base of our knowledge. He says that this is "the very question at hand," namely whether or not "all knowledge must ultimately derive from empirical procedures." Would Bahnsen say that some knowledge is derived from an absence of consciousness? If not, then he needs to identify some alternative to "empirical procedures" (i.e., sense perception) as the base from which knowledge can be derived. If "that is the very question at hand," why doesn't he address this point? Instead, Bahnsen prefers to dwell on soft targets:

The anti-metaphysical polemic is not a supporting reason for rejecting Christianity; it is simply a rewording of that rejection itself. (*Always Ready*, p. 187)

It may be the case that "the anti-metaphysical polemic... is simply a rewording of that rejection itself," but what if "the anti-metaphysical polemic" that Bahnsen has described is not the basis upon which one rejects Christianity? What if instead the non-believer has adopted what may be called the anti-irrational polemic, the anti-subjective polemic, or the anti-arbitrary polemic? I tend to prefer calling it the anti-mystical position. It is anti-mystical because it is first *pro-reason*, *pro-rationality*, *pro-reality* and *pro-man*. As such, this anti-mystical position is broader than merely a rejection of Christianity; it involves a total decontamination of the human intellect of any irrational, subjective or arbitrary worldview influence, Christianity being merely one of the many views filtered out as a result of an uncompromising commitment to rationality. This is consistent with the two alternative positions which earlier I had proposed in lieu of the Logical Positivism that Bahnsen shadow-boxed:

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.

Let the apologist come out of the closet to argue for a non-objective source of knowledge about reality. Let him claim legitimacy to drawing inferences from experience to what contradicts it. Let him defend the willingness to blur the distinction between fact and fiction, reality and imagination, truth and arbitrariness, for this is the substance of his faith.

by Dawson Bethrick

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