

Bahnsen on "Knowing the Supernatural" Part 14: "Philosophical Self-Deception"

Continued from [Part 13](#).

"Philosophical Self-deception"

Bahnsen opens this section of the chapter "The Problem of Knowing the 'Super-Natural', the 31st chapter of his book *Always Ready*, by referencing a position that he characterizes as "the first and foundational step in the case against metaphysics" - by which he really means, "the case against *supernaturalism*." Recall what that "first and foundational step in the case against metaphysics" - according to Bahnsen - was:

There cannot be a non-empirical source of knowledge or information about reality. (*Always Ready*, p. 185)

In response to his own rendition of what "anti-supernaturalists" hold, Bahnsen asks:

What are we to make of the assertion that "all significant knowledge about the objective world is empirical in nature"? The most obvious and philosophically significant reply would be that if the preceding statement were true, then - on the basis of its claim - we could *never know* that it were true. Why? Simply because the statement in question is *not itself* known as the result of empirical testing and experience. Therefore, according to its own strict standards, the statement could not amount to significant knowledge about the objective world. It simply reflects the subjective (perhaps meaningless!) bias of the one who pronounces it. Hence the anti-metaphysician [i.e., anti-supernaturalist] not only has his own preconceived conclusions (presuppositions), but it turns out that he cannot live according to them (cf. Romans 2:1). On the basis of his own assumptions he *refutes himself* (cf. 2 Timothy 2:25). As Paul put it about those who suppress the truth of God in unrighteousness: "They became futile in their speculations" (Romans 1:21)! (*Always Ready*, p. 187)

Did anyone besides me notice the switch here? In the above paragraph Bahnsen announces that he is turning his focus on "number (1) above," which he states here as follows:

All significant knowledge about the objective world is empirical in nature. (*Always Ready*, p. 187)

But earlier, [when he first listed point \(1\)](#) on page 185, it was stated as follows:

There cannot be a non-empirical source of knowledge or information about reality (*Always Ready*, p. 185)

There is a fundamental difference between the two statements that Bahnsen sets before himself. One version speaks of the nature of *knowledge* itself, while the other version makes a statement about the nature of the *source* of knowledge about reality. The two are not the same thing. At some point Bahnsen swapped the one for the other, but he does not explain why. Perhaps, in spite of his acclaimed precision and brilliance, Bahnsen did not notice the switch, or did not think it was worth explaining.

In regard to the affirmation that "all significant knowledge about the objective world is empirical in nature," Bahnsen misses his opportunity to point out the most obvious error committed by such a statement. Knowledge itself is not "empirical" in nature. On the contrary, *knowledge is conceptual in nature*. That is, knowledge consists of concepts and concepts are the form in which we retain our knowledge. That Bahnsen missed this painfully obvious opportunity to correct such a statement, is itself indicative of his own position's inadequacy to deal with much of anything philosophical, especially epistemology. This correction is enough to put all of the concerns that Bahnsen raises in the above paragraph to rest. For instance, if knowledge is conceptual in nature, there is no reason to suppose that "we could *never know*" this to be the case. For there is no reason to suppose that we could not form concepts to identify the nature of knowledge. All we need is an understanding of how concepts are formed, and we have this understanding thanks to an objective philosophy. And while Bahnsen might point out that the claim that all knowledge is empirical in nature is not itself open to "empirical testing," such difficulties need not concern us if knowledge is in fact conceptual in nature. This recognition is

itself conceptual, thus qualifying as knowledge on its own terms. Furthermore, if the concepts which inform one's knowledge of the world were formed according to the objective theory of concepts (a theory which we will not find in the bible), then we need not worry that such knowledge "simply reflects the subjective (perhaps meaningless!) bias of the one who pronounces it." If they are formed according to an objective process, one which is fully consistent with the primacy of existence, then the conceptual products of our methodology have an objective, rather than subjective, basis. Meanwhile, by identifying the nature of knowledge as conceptual rather than empirical, the non-believer can confidently plead innocent to Bahnsen's charge that the anti-supernaturalist cannot live according to his own worldview's premises. For by understanding and acknowledging that knowledge is conceptual in nature, the non-believer nowhere "refutes himself," nor is there any need to suppose that such recognition commits thinkers to "become futile in their speculations." The bible's canned platitudes and denunciations thus resound in the hollow vacuum of its own anti-conceptual wasteland.

Now in regard to the affirmation that "there cannot be a non-empirical *source* of knowledge or information about reality," this is an altogether different claim, for it speaks about the nature of the *source* of knowledge rather than the nature of *knowledge* as such. Unfortunately Bahnsen nowhere addresses it. His comments aimed at discrediting the idea that the nature of *knowledge* is empirical do nothing to refute the position that the nature of the *source* of knowledge is empirical in nature. Indeed, there is no incompatibility between the position that the nature of knowledge itself is *conceptual* on the one hand, and on the other the position that the *source* of knowledge is in fact ultimately empirical in nature.

Concepts need content to inform them. Where do we get that content? To what do our concepts refer? What do our concepts denote? How do we form our concepts? We do not know how Bahnsen's worldview might answer such questions, for the source of Bahnsen's worldview is the bible, and the bible does not provide a theory of concepts. Indeed, the bible is totally silent on the issue of what concepts are, how the mind forms them and how they can represent things in reality.

But an objective worldview which is not constrained to conforming its understanding of reality to ancient storybooks, does not promote such intellectual disability. In fact, an objective worldview which provides a working theory of concepts has the power of opening an individual's mind both to itself and to the universe in which he lives, giving the understanding he needs to maximize his mind's abilities and efficacy in his life. An objective theory of concepts recognizes why man needs concepts (for they bring the universe of things and facts into the range of human consciousness) and how they are formed (by a process of abstraction). It also identifies the source from which the content of our concepts ultimately comes, namely empirical experience.

We need inputs from reality to inform our concepts with content that is relevant to reality. Otherwise, if what informs our concepts does not come from reality, on what basis would we say that those concepts have anything to do with our living in reality? How could we say that any statement we make is true if the conceptual constituents of our affirmations do not ultimately refer to things in reality? Perception supplies us with the inputs we need to inform and integrate the concepts we need to identify and live in reality. If Bahnsen does not like this idea, he needs to identify and argue for an alternative to perception as the mode of awareness by which we acquire the inputs we need to give our concepts the content they need to qualify as knowledge of reality. As we have seen throughout his chapter, however, Bahnsen does not identify any alternatives to perception as means of awareness of things that exist. And when he claims that supernatural things do exist, he presents no method by which we can confidently distinguish the things he calls "supernatural" from what he may merely be imagining. Consequently, he gives us no reason to suppose that his god-belief is anything other than an elaborate fantasy.

An objection to the effect that the view that the *source* of knowledge is empirical would cripple our ability to arrive at universal truths about things in nature, would of course be a non sequitur. If concepts are understood as open-ended classes which are formed on the basis of the limited input provided by sense perception, then there is no reason to suppose that man's mind cannot arrive at universal truths by beginning with an empirical source. The nature of the product is not - and need not be - the same as its source, because the units given in perception undergo a process of abstraction, which consists essentially of four steps: isolation, integration, measurement-omission and definition. Universality is a property of concepts; it is nothing more than the open-endedness of a concept's scope of reference vis-à-vis the units subsumed by it.

We form the concept 'ball' on the basis of just a few (two or more) units which we perceive in our firsthand experience, but the concept 'ball' includes *all* balls which exist now, which have existed in the past and which will exist in the future. This all-inclusive capacity of concepts is made possible by the third step in the process of forming them, namely measurement-omission. This is the step which acknowledges that specific units

possess relevant attributes in some measure, but those attributes can exist in *any* measure. A ball can be 2 inches in diameter or it can be 10 inches in diameter; it may be red, or it may be black and white; it may be inflated with air such that it floats on water, or it may be solid and more dense than water such that it does not float, etc. The concept is thus universal, i.e., open-ended in its scope of reference.

It should be noted at this point, to preempt common presuppositionalist refrains, that propositions are not primaries. On the contrary, propositions are assemblages consisting of concepts put together in a coherent manner. As such, propositions represent a further step in the process of integration beyond concept-formation, for they integrate two or more concepts into a meaningful whole, resulting in a unit all its own and denoting a complete thought. But the universality of a generalized proposition (e.g., “all balls have a radius and a diameter”) is derived from the universality of its constituent concept(s). Since we can form the concept ‘ball’ on the basis of just a few units of which we acquire awareness through perception, and since the concept ‘ball’, as a result of measurement-omission, is universal in its scope of reference, a proposition such as “all balls have a radius and a diameter” which encompasses all balls is possible because of the universality already available to us in the concept ‘ball’.

None of these points on behalf of the view that knowledge is conceptual in nature necessitates belief in a god or necessitates a leap beyond the natural to “whatever surpasses the limits of nature.” Indeed, the formation of concepts and their assembly into larger units (e.g., thoughts, propositions, theories, etc.) are natural processes of the human mind. They are consistently identifiable according to a process which most thinkers should be able to understand without too much difficulty, and they are open to a means of testing which is in fact scientific. There is no contradiction in affirming that knowledge is conceptual in nature and that the source of knowledge is perceptual (or empirical) in nature. The objective theory of concepts bridges the perceptual and the conceptual levels of cognition, thus demystifying the process whose misunderstanding is so central to the presuppositionalist strategy.

by Dawson Bethrick

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