

Bahnsen on "Knowing the Supernatural" Part 16: "No Predictability"

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"No Predictability"

Bahnsen is desperate to sneak his religious position into the basis of scientific research:

Scientists could not arrive at even one dependable, rationally warranted conclusion about future chemical interactions, the rotation of the earth, the stability of a bridge, the medicinal effects of a drug, or anything else. Each and every premise that entered into their reasoning about a particular situation at a particular time and in a particular place would need to be individually confirmed in an empirical fashion. (*Always Ready*, p. 188)

Did Bahnsen truly think that one needs to believe in "the supernatural" in order to come to conclusions about "future chemical reactions, the rotation of the earth, the stability of a bridge," etc.? What exactly does "the supernatural" have to do with these things, and why couldn't one formulate conclusions about these things without believing in some supernatural being? As we have seen repeatedly throughout Bahnsen's treatment of "the problem of knowing the 'super-natural'," he has given us no reason to suppose there is anything beyond his own imagining that actually "surpasses the limits of nature," and the items he list here are not things which "surpass the limits of nature" anyway. Drawing conclusions about chemical reactions, the earth's rotation, the structural integrity of construction projects, etc., is possible only if we remain within the bounds of natural law. Venturing beyond them and into the realm of imagination only produces fiction, and fiction is not truth. In fact, as I pointed out early on in my examination, trying to push these things "beyond the limits of nature" may very well result in disaster.

What Bahnsen should be concerned about here is how general knowledge of the natural can be formulated on the basis of a limited range of perceptual inputs. Indeed, the examples he mentions here are all within the realm of the natural anyway, so why is this not his concern? Exploring how we formulate general knowledge of the natural on the basis of perceptual input is altogether different from supposing that we can conclude that there are things that exist "beyond the physical realm" by observing things in the physical realm. What we have here is an insidious package-deal: by acknowledging the conceptual nature of generalized knowledge, we're supposed to accept with that a magical realm that exists "beyond sense experience" but which is just as concrete and non-conceptual (and non-imaginary) as the things we perceive in the world, only they "surpass the limits of nature" and are capable of all kinds of wondrous feats in the physical realm (which of course we never get to observe). But here we are talking of two completely different animals. Concepts are not concretes; they are the form in which a mind retains its knowledge. They are not "things" that exist in some other dimension. They represent the activity of a mind, not entities which inhabit another world "beyond the physical realm." The "supernatural" entities that Bahnsen has in mind are not themselves supposed to be conceptual in nature. The mind forms concepts, but Bahnsen is not going to allow that his "supernatural" realm and the beings which allegedly populate it are formed by the mind. No, he wants to suppose that they exist independent of human mental activity, unlike concepts. But it's clear that he's trying to use his own misunderstanding of the conceptual as a front-door, if you will, to the supernatural. Bahnsen thus gives us a textbook case of how errors can grow like weeds when they go unchecked.

This is truly getting to the heart of the presuppositionalist's confusion. It is based on a most superficial half-truth that is subsequently distorted far beyond recognition. He observes that there is a difference between the physical concretes that we perceive in the world about us and the form in which he conceptualizes those concretes. It is true that there is a distinction between the objects we perceive and the manner in which we integrate those objects into conceptual wholes, just as there is a distinction between subject and object. And there is much to discover and learn about how the mind does this. But the presuppositionalist distorts this distinction beyond recognition and then tries to exploit it as evidence of the existence of the "supernatural" things he has enshrined in his imagination. Like other human beings, scientists can extrapolate from the relatively few units they perceive in the world and formulate wide-ranging principles which apply to units which they have not perceived and which they will never perceive. The presuppositionalist interprets this as reasoning from "the seen" to "the unseen,"

which seems plausible on the face of it, but he does so in the most superficial manner possible, not understanding the mental operation which is responsible for this. In essence, the presuppositionalist wants to use the scientist's "reasoning from the seen to the unseen" to lend credibility to the idea of "knowing the supernatural" by putting both on the same level. After all, the scientist can have knowledge of things that he does not perceive, so why can't the religious believer have knowledge of "the supernatural"? Not being able to perceive something does not prohibit the scientist from having knowledge of that something, so why should the religious believer be held to a standard that is more stringent than that enjoyed by the scientist? This is roughly the kind of reasoning that the apologist seems to be using. Says the presuppositionalist, the science reasons from the seen to the unseen, and does so all the time. To say then that we cannot reason from the seen physical universe to the unseen realm of the supernatural, is special pleading, according to Bahnsen. It doesn't matter to the presuppositionalist that "the unseen" things about which the scientist forms his theories or draws his conclusions, are just as finite, natural and this-worldly as the things he does see. More fundamentally, however, this kind of reasoning will seem most plausible in direct proportion to one's ignorance of the way the mind forms concepts. In fact, not only does this type of reasoning itself stem from a failure to understand how the mind functions conceptually, it also seeks to feed off the ignorance of any potential convert. The whole move from "the seen" to "the unseen" here is not a conceptual operation for Bahnsen, but a leap from the actual world to the world of imagination. Only he prefers not to acknowledge it as such. But the denial of the conceptual operation of the human mind is hard to miss once the nature of that operation is understood.

As if he were anticipating any doubts in my analysis, Bahnsen goes on to make it clear that the assumptions underlying his assessment of the "anti-supernaturalist" mindset include the denial of the capacity for concepts:

Nothing experienced in the past could become a basis for expectations about how things might happen at present or in the future. Without certain beliefs about the nature of reality and history - beliefs which are supra-empirical in character - the process of empirical learning and reasoning would become impossible. (*Always Ready*, p. 188)

Keep in mind that the scientist does not pretend to move from knowledge of things that exist in the universe to knowledge of things that allegedly exist in a realm which contradicts it. He does not move from things existing in nature to knowledge of things which are claimed to "surpass the limits of nature." Rather, like other human beings do everyday, he moves from direct awareness of specific, natural things to generalizations pertaining to the classes to which those specific, natural things exist. The classifications are generalized by virtue of their omission of specific measurements; the classifications include a broad range of specific measurements, but given the fact that to exist is to be specific, any specific thing included in those classifications would itself possess its attributes in specific measure.

This is supported by a network of core constants which are found at the basis of rational (and therefore non-theistic) thought. If existence exists independent of consciousness (the primacy of existence), to be something is to have a nature which obtains independent of consciousness (the law of identity), and the action of an entity is dependent upon its identity (the law of causality), then there is a constant metaphysical basis for general classifications regardless and independent of temporal constraints (for temporal measurement itself would need to assume and consist of general classifications). So things happening in uniform manner from past to present and into the future is not metaphysically problematic. Also, if man has the ability to form concepts on the basis of perceptual inputs, then he has the elementary epistemological prerequisites for forming general classifications on the basis of limited inputs. The ability to do this is not itself dependent on what a person believes; he has this ability by virtue of his nature as a human being, not because he believes in invisible magic beings. His ability did not come into being as a result of assenting to some ideational content (he'd have to have the ability in question to do this intelligently in the first place), and likewise he does not lose this ability by believing some content, or disbelieving or failing to believe some content (though taking irrational beliefs seriously will undermine the efficacy of this ability). To suppose that merely believing something will turn this ability on would commit the fallacy of the stolen concept, as should be readily apparent. The distinction between past and present can only be made on the basis of certain constants (the primacy of existence, the law of identity, the law of causality), and these constants obtain regardless of what we believe. It is the task of philosophy to *identify* these constants (as opposed to installing them in reality as if they didn't already exist), and their relationship to the process by which knowledge is acquired and validated. But watch as Bahnsen digs himself even deeper into his own intellectual pit:

At this point we can press even harder, arguing that if one presupposes that all knowledge must be empirical in nature, then not only has he undermined science and refuted himself, but he has actually scuttled all argumentation and reasoning. To engage in the evaluation of arguments is to recognize and utilize propositions, criteria, logical relations and rules, etc. However, such things as these (propositions, relations, rules) are not empirical entities which can be discovered by one of the five senses. (*Always Ready*, p. 188)

This statement not only confirms my analysis above (namely that the presuppositionalist is trying to dignify his supernatural claims by likening them to the scientist's reasoning from "the seen" to "the unseen"), but also the need for an objective approach to knowledge which Bahnsen's worldview specifically (and conspicuously) lacks and could not support. The apologetic scheme that Bahnsen deploys here might work well against those who affirm that "all knowledge must be empirical in nature." But it won't work against the Objectivist model, for Objectivism recognizes that knowledge is *conceptual* in nature. Bahnsen himself indicates just how feeble his own apologetic tactic is against Objectivism when he points out that "to engage in evaluation of arguments is to recognize and utilize propositions, criteria, logical relations and rules, etc." This is the realm of concepts, and Christianity's lack of a native theory of concepts only proves its utter insufficiency on the very issues which Bahnsen raises. Bahnsen further elaborates what he wants his readers to suppose is the case of all non-Christians:

Accordingly, according to the dogma of empiricism, it would not make sense to speak of such things - not make sense, for instance, to speak of validity and invalidity in an argument, nor even to talk about premises and conclusions. All you would have would be one contingent electro-chemical event in the physical brain of a scholar followed contingently by another. (*Always Ready*, p. 189)

But it does make sense to speak, for instance, of validity and invalidity in an argument, or talk about premises and conclusions, if we have concepts. In fact, concepts not only allow us to speak of issues regarding validity of argument, but also of electro-chemical reactions in the brain. (Without explanation, Bahnsen says "the physical brain" as if he had to specify it in contrast to a "non-physical brain.") And yet, it is specifically a theory of concepts which Bahnsen lacks in his bible-based worldview. So ironically, he is accusing non-believers of something he himself cannot produce: an account of human reason.

If these events are thought to follow a pattern, we must (again) note that on empirical grounds, one does not have a warrant for speaking of such a "pattern"; only particular events are experienced or observed. (*Always Ready*, p. 189)

He has warrant if he can form concepts from empirical inputs, and every man (save perhaps for utter and complete imbeciles) has this ability to some degree. Concepts are how a thinker integrates "particular events [that] are experienced or observed" firsthand into general classes which imply like events that he has not experience or observed, whether hypothetical or actual.

Moreover, even if there were a pattern within the electro-chemical events of one's brain, it would be accidental and not a matter of attending to the rules of logic. Indeed, the "rules of logic" would at best be personal imperatives expressed as the subjective preference of one person to another. In such a case there is no point to argument and reasoning at all. An electro-chemical event in the brain cannot meaningfully be said to be "valid" or "invalid." (*Always Ready*, p. 189)

Although electro-chemical reactions are a reality in the human nervous system, they are not a substitute for epistemology. In spite of this, Bahnsen wants to suppose (and wants his readers to suppose) that this is the consistent testimony of every non-believer, not because he has witnessed every non-believer confess it (that would be too principled for Bahnsen), but because it is apologetically expedient to do so.

As for "personal imperatives expressed as the subjective preference of one person to another," this bears striking resemblance to the supernatural, commandment-issuing deity enshrined in Christianity. Again, having fashioned a noose after his own image, Bahnsen decisively thrusts his own worldview's head right into it. Indeed, when Bahnsen's god issues its commandments, does Bahnsen argue with his god about them? Is there any place for argument in Bahnsen's worldview when his god has issued commandments? Commandments are given to settle matters without any back-talk or haggling. So just how does one reason with someone who thinks he's always right? Did Abraham try to reason with his god when he was commanded to prepare his son for sacrifice? The Genesis story surely does not model this.

Incidentally, the reason why "an electro-chemical event in the brain cannot meaningfully be said to be 'valid' or 'invalid'," is not because "the supernatural" is real, but because concepts of validity apply to conceptual methodology, and electro-chemical events are not a conceptual methodology. Had Bahnsen understood this in full, he would have seen the philosophical futility of this application of his apologetic.

by Dawson Bethrick

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