

## Bahnsen on "Knowing the Supernatural" Part 17: "Naturalism versus Supernaturalism as Worldviews"

Continued from [Part 16](#).

### "Naturalism versus Supernaturalism as Worldviews"

A common tactic throughout Bahnsen's apologetic is to focus the spotlight of his (and his readers') attention on the purported failings of "unbelievers" who remain anonymous and thus by implication include virtually any non-Christian that a believer may encounter. By dwelling on purported failings of non-believing worldviews, Bahnsen is safe to ignore the issues surrounding his claims that I have highlighted throughout my analysis of his chapter on "The Problem of Knowing the 'Super-Natural'." Concentrating on what other worldviews do or don't do puts these issues securely out of mind. The intention here should be obvious: to direct the thinker's attention away from the questionable nature of religious claims while putting those who do not accept those claims on the defensive. It's nothing more than an attempt to shift the burden of proof. This is why Bahnsen devotes so much of his chapter on raking over failings of certain philosophies and happily leaves the reader free to assume that those failings are endemic to any non-believing worldview by virtue of its non-belief. In this sense, Bahnsen's captivation with what "anti-metaphysicians" may be guilty of endorsing serves as an effective red herring, dragging the reader off the trail which Bahnsen should be following (in order to explain how one can have knowledge of what Christianity calls "the supernatural") and onto something irrelevant (e.g., Logical Positivism contradicts itself) to the task at hand.

This embedded fallacy is key to the presuppositionalist strategy of framing the debate as a clash of opposing worldviews. If debate concerning the existence of a god reduces to a conflict between two rival philosophies, and it is implicitly accepted that the two philosophies involved in that clash are jointly exhaustive (i.e., the only two possible), and the philosophy opposing the Christian worldview is exposed to suffer certain fatal internal problems, then - so goes the reasoning - Christianity wins by default. Such a strategy will of course be satisfactory to those who are confessionally committed to the Christian faith (i.e., to the *hope* that it is true), but it is hard to see how such a scheme could be deemed intellectually responsible.

We see this kind of reasoning in action when Bahnsen opens the final section of "The Problem of Knowing the 'Super-Natural'," the 31st chapter of his book *Always Ready* with the following statement:

Enough has now been said to make it clear what kind of situation we have when an unbeliever argues against the Christian's claim to knowledge about the "super-natural" - when the unbeliever takes an anti-metaphysical stand against the faith. (*Always Ready*, 189)

So while earlier Bahnsen focused on the failings of Logical Positivism, he now conflates Logical Positivism with non-belief as such by intimating that non-belief entails a rejection of metaphysics (even non-supernaturalist metaphysics). This is most naïve. One does not need to reject the philosophical branch of metaphysics in order to recognize the irrationality of god-belief, Christian or otherwise. Bahnsen acts as if he's felled all non-believing worldviews by toppling one. Not only is this deceptive, it does not address any of the questions which have been raised on the topic of "knowing the 'super-natural'." Meanwhile, Bahnsen's hoping that everyone's looking the other way. Here's one who isn't.

Bahnsen claims:

The believer holds, on the basis of infallible revelation from the transcendent Creator, certain things about unseen reality (e.g., the existence of God, providence, life after death, etc.). (*Always Ready*, 189)

Bahnsen still does not address the fundamental question here, namely: *how did the believer acquire awareness of this "revelation"?* Again we come back to the "problem of knowing the 'Super-Natural'," which Bahnsen seems unable to address. Did the believer not learn it from the bible? If so, this would have required him to use his senses. Reading a book is hardly a supernatural event. This would mean that the source of "revelation" is actually material in nature: a book consisting of paper pulp and synthetic jacket material, produced by human effort and distributed

by a vendor, often for financial profit. This is essentially what constitutes “divine revelation” for the Christian. Ironically, the believer’s own sense perception is plays an inextricable role in his acquisition of knowledge of the Christian god’s “revelation” if reading the bible is how he acquired awareness of it.

But this suggests that “revelation” for the Christian believer is nothing more than simply believing whatever he reads in a storybook. Indeed, it even suggests that “revelation” consists of assuming that whatever the bible says is true, even before one has read all of it. This is not uncommon among Christians, who consider it a virtue to believe religious pronouncements on the basis of faith. Not only does such an attitude not require the existence of a god to explain it (for it is an attitude that any parent can foster in his philosophically defenseless children, for instance), it also goes against certain statements by Bahnsen’s own mentor, Cornelius Van Til. For instance, in his book *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, Van Til wrote:

Who wishes to make such a simple blunder in elementary logic, as to say that we believe something to be true because it is in the Bible? (p. 12)

Here Van Til clearly indicates that it “a simple blunder in elementary logic” to suppose that something is true simply “because it is in the Bible.” What implications does this statement have for the notion of “revelation,” whereby “revelation” ultimately signifies believing whatever is written in the bible? Nowhere does Bahnsen seem to deal with this problem, and in the meanwhile he still fails to explain how one can “know” what he calls “the supernatural.”

Regarding this, Bahnsen affirms that

Knowledge of such matters is not problematic within the worldview of the Christian. (*Always Ready*, 189)

And we can see why. For as we saw in [Part 13](#), if the believer grants one arbitrary premise, why not grant others? And if simply believing what is written in the bible constitutes “revelation” of the Christian god, then of course it would be easy to ignore epistemological questions (as Bahnsen does), since there really is no epistemology here: all one needs to be able to do is read and be willing to regard whatever he reads in the bible as unquestionable truth. Questions about the means and range of human awareness, the relationship between the conceptual level and the perceptual level of consciousness, the distinction between “the supernatural” and what is merely imaginary, are of no concern here. These matters can be safely swept under the rug so that nobody has to consider them, for indulgence in fantasy has replaced any concern one might develop for the way human cognition operates.

Notice how everything up to this point has served to prepare Bahnsen for an appeal to the supernatural to justify belief in the supernatural, which is viciously circular. In spite of this “simple blunder in elementary logic,” Bahnsen writes:

God knows all things, having created everything according to His own wise counsel and determining the individual natures of each thing; further He created man as His own image, capable of thinking His thoughts after Him on the basis of revelation, both general (in nature) and special (in Scripture). (*Always Ready*, 189)

Encapsulated within this statement, we have what can be validly called the summary description of an epistemology of pretended vicariousness. It consists of justifying a claim to knowledge that is not rationally defensible by inventing an all-knowing deity which, on account of its all-knowingness, would know what the believer claims to know. As such, it serves as a substitute for justification, one which is supposed to be superior to any that the believer himself could ever provide of his own (which would immediately be dismissed as a product of “autonomous reasoning” if it were presented by a non-believer). Now frankly, anyone can do this. It just requires a willingness to fake reality, not only to others, but to oneself (for as Bahnsen demonstrates, the proponents of such vicariousness take it seriously). Appealing to an imaginary being that is omniscient and infallible can cover any lie, deception, fraud or arbitrary claim one wants to promote. This is the appeal to “someone smarter than I know, so it doesn’t matter what I don’t know” gimmickry that colors the whole of Christian “epistemology.” For the Christian believer, when it comes to knowledge, it is not what *he* (the believer) knows, it is what (the believer claims) *his god* knows. And since his god knows everything, then the appeal to what (he claims) his god knows is a sure bet, given his mystical premises. The believer can even claim to have insight into his imaginary deity’s decrees by claiming to “think” its thoughts “after Him,” thereby increasing his descent into the labyrinth of self-deceit. For Bahnsen, this is the stuff of philosophy. And while such an ability to “think” the “thoughts” of an omniscient and infallible being should endow Bahnsen with astounding mental capacity, what we find instead is quite disappointing.

Unfortunately for Bahnsen, he makes at least one thing indisputable: that he has no rational defense for those mystical premises which he clearly wants to take for granted. Observe:

Thus man has the rational and spiritual capability to learn and understand truths about reality which transcend his temporal, empirical experience - truths which are disclosed by his Creator. (*Always Ready*, 189)

Clearly Bahnsen thinks that truths which “go beyond” the perceptual level of consciousness, must be “truths which are disclosed by [the Christian god].” For how else could man know them if his primary faculty of awareness is sense perception? This amounts to nothing more than a confession of ignorance and serves as further evidence that Bahnsen does not understand the relationship between the perceptual and the conceptual levels of consciousness. This persisting default is commonplace in presuppositionalism. The fallacy behind this symptom is made most obvious in non sequiturs such as the following:

there is no universality in perception so that which is based on perception cannot be universal. (Peter Pike, [The Contra-Pike Files](#), p. 79)

It is true that perception does not provide us with universal awareness. But [as I have already shown](#), if we could have direct awareness of all things past, present and future such that we were omniscient, we would not need concepts to retain our knowledge in the first place.

Moreover, the argument that “that which is based on perception cannot be universal” ignores the fact that universality is a property of concepts resulting from the mental operation of measurement-omission. Universality is nothing more than the open-endedness of a concept’s range of inclusive reference, and this open-endedness of a concept’s range of reference is what measurement-omission makes possible. There is no reason (and unsurprisingly, Pike offered none) for supposing that concepts cannot be open-ended in their range of reference because they are ultimately based on perception. Perception gives us direct awareness of actually existing objects, and these objects are used by the mind as models from which concepts are formed by a process of abstraction and according to which similar units can be mentally integrated when they are encountered. So while perception does not give us universal awareness, the concepts which we form on the basis of what we perceive do in fact universal reference.

Notice how crucial a role presuppositionalism gives to ignorance here. Mysticism is borne not only in ignorance, but also in the desire to perpetuate that ignorance. We have seen how insidiously presuppositionalism seeks to exploit a thinker’s ignorance of the way his mind operates in order to substitute an objectively informed understanding of how it works with an elaborate fiction resting ultimately in imagination, ad hoc invention and intellectual self-negation, such as we have seen. We saw rudimentary elements of this syndrome in Bahnsen’s debate with Gordon Stein, where Bahnsen seeks to mock Stein for not having a ready answer to Hume’s “problem of induction.” Bahnsen was so eager to fault Stein for this, not because Stein was a dimwit, but because doing so is apologetically expedient. The presuppositionalist defense claims that the problem of induction is answered by an appeal to the supernaturalism of Christianity, indicating that the apologist has at best a storybook understanding of induction. This simply announces that Bahnsen and co. do not have a conceptual understanding of induction. A persisting ignorance of the nature of concepts, the process by which they are formed, their relationship to the perceptual level of consciousness, and the rich implications they have for philosophy in general, is one of the calling cards of the presuppositionalist.

Again, Bahnsen must appeal to the supernatural in order to validate his supernaturalism:

It is evident that the Christian defends the *possibility* of metaphysical knowledge, therefore, by appealing to certain metaphysical truths about God, man, and the world. He reasons presuppositionally, arguing on the basis of *the very metaphysical premises* which the unbeliever claims are *impossible* to know in virtue of their metaphysical nature. (*Always Ready*, 189)

Again Bahnsen announces that he does not understand either the process by which general truths about reality are discovered and formulated, or their relationship to our experience (both in their formulation as well as their application). He thinks he needs an invisible magic being to impart these truths to us, which is a dead giveaway that he is going by premises he got from a storybook rather than legitimate knowledge of the mind and the world. He says that these truths “transcend [man’s] temporal, empirical experience,” but does not give an example of such truths. Does he explain how these “truths... are disclosed by his Creator”? No, he does not. He neither gives any details about such a phenomenon, nor does he explain how he knows that this takes place. He simply asserts it to be the case. But notice how Bahnsen really means “supernatural” here rather than “metaphysical” proper. Intellectually, it is not sufficient merely to affirm that knowledge of “the supernatural” is “possible,” and leave it at that. This would only abandon knowledge, a key value to man’s life, to the wilds of the imagination. But nowhere does Bahnsen either seem to recognize this, nor does he seem at all concerned by it. His primary concern is discrediting Christianity’s detractors, and in his vigilance to submit the opponents of the Christian worldview to a setup and a shakedown, as if the truth of Christianity could be established as the result of pulling off some devious

sting operation. This will only turn off honest inquirers, and announce to virtually all comers that the apologist is trying to hide something dishonest here.

But notice Bahnsen's description of the presuppositional method here. He makes it clear that "presuppositional reasoning" involves "arguing on the basis of the very... premises" which the non-believer disputes. So it is clear, by what Bahnsen says here, that he wants to treat as a given that which is already controversial. This is quite an admission, one which exposes the profoundly anti-intellectual nature of presuppositional apologetics. It suggests that he has no intention of presenting a defense for those premises which he acknowledges as being controversial. This is not the course of reasoning one would take in an upstanding philosophical debate. Bahnsen needs to be prepared to defend those premises which are disputed from the very beginning rather than simply affirm them in spite of their controversial nature. But his preferred method only raises the suspicion that he *cannot* in fact defend them, but wants to cling to them nonetheless.

Bahnsen continues:

However, the anti-metaphysical unbeliever has his own metaphysical commitments to which he is presuppositionally committed and to which he appeals in his arguments (e.g., only sensible individuals or particulars exist). (*Always Ready*, 190)

If the non-believer has metaphysical commitments of his own, then perhaps characterizing him as "anti-metaphysical" may actually be inaccurate. Perhaps he simply rejects Christianity's metaphysics. This alone would not make him "anti-metaphysical." Since Logical Positivism is not the universal testimony of non-Christians, what may very well be the case is that the non-believer rejects Christianity because its metaphysics, epistemology (to the extent that it has an epistemology) and its ethics are in conflict with what he knows about reality and with his intellectual and axiological needs. And though he may recognize that there is a conflict here, he may not be able to articulate it very clearly or explicitly. In fact, the presuppositional apologetic is counting on the non-believer not being well informed on these matters (for instance, I doubt Gordon Stein thought that he was attending a debate on the problem of induction). An informed mind is more likely to be able to defend itself against the apologist's program of bamboozling, and conversely an uninformed mind is more likely to be vulnerable to such bamboozling.

Now while Bahnsen has stated on numerous occasions that everyone has their "presuppositions" (cf. *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, pp. 461-462), he seems to resent non-believers for having their own:

His materialistic, naturalistic, atheism is taken as a final truth about reality, universally characterizing the nature of existence, directing us how to distinguish appearance from reality, and resting on intellectual considerations which take us beyond simple observation or sense experience. The this-worldly outlook of the unbeliever is just as much a metaphysical opinion as the "other-worldly" viewpoint he attributes to the Christian. (*Always Ready*, 190)

Yes, the "this-worldly outlook of the unbeliever" is in fact a metaphysical outlook (in the sense of metaphysics as the branch of philosophy which formulates a view of existence as a whole), just as the other-worldly view of the Christian is. The non-believer may be a non-believer ultimately because he takes the fact that reality exists as a final truth, whereas the theist chooses to treat the fact that reality exists as a derivative truth, one that is "contingent" on the [wishing](#) of an invisible magic being.

The non-believer is simply being consistent with the recognition that wishing doesn't make it so; whereas the believer is affirming a metaphysical position which essentially affirms that reality conforms to conscious intentions (at least to those of an invisible magic being), which robs him of any basis on which to affirm with the non-believer that wishing does not make it so. And while many non-believers do not identify this metaphysical orientation explicitly, and many may in fact not be totally consistent with it, it does have a name: [the primacy of existence](#).

So what does Bahnsen do now that the non-believer willingly acknowledges that his position has a metaphysical basis to it? He proceeds to characterize him as contradicting himself by putting words into his mouth:

What is glaringly obvious, then, is that the unbeliever rests upon and appeals to a metaphysical position in order to prove that there can be no metaphysical position known to be true! He ironically and inconsistently holds that nobody can know metaphysical truths, and yet he himself has enough metaphysical knowledge to declare that Christianity is wrong! (*Always Ready*, 190)

No doubt this would a self-defeating position for one to take (though not all non-believers affirm what Bahnsen attributes to them). But what does it have to do with "knowing the 'super-natural'"? Predictably, Bahnsen turns

every opportunity to "account for" his worldview into an occasion to lambaste those who do not believe in his invisible magic being (even if it means attributing to them a position they do not affirm). What is irresponsible is the fact that Bahnsen does not caution his readers to keep in mind that not all non-believers repudiate the philosophical branch of metaphysics. This is in addition to his default on the very topic of the thirty-first chapter of his book *Always Ready*.

For Bahnsen, it always boils down to a matter of antithesis:

It turns out that two full-fledged presuppositional philosophies stand over against one another when the anti-metaphysician argues with the Christian. (*Always Ready*, 190)

There are two fundamental orientations to the world, the objective and the subjective. I have already explained this in a previous blog: see [Only Two Worldviews?](#)

Bahnsen makes it clear that vicious circularity is inevitable and unavoidable for his position, for he must rest his defense of his supernaturalism on an appeal to supernaturalism:

The metaphysical claims of Christianity are based on God's self-revelation. (*Always Ready*, 190)

This is a confession that Christianity's "metaphysical claims" do not rest on reason. One must accept those claims on faith, which is the only option open to any position which reduces to the primacy of consciousness. And [as I have already shown](#), Bahnsen's conception of faith as *belief without understanding* is clearly indicated by his own statements on the topic.

Then Bahnsen makes a most perplexing claim:

Moreover, they are consistent with the assumptions of science, logical reasoning, and the intelligibility of human experience. (*Always Ready*, 190)

Specifically, which metaphysical claims of Christianity in particular does Bahnsen think "are consistent with the assumptions of science, logical reasoning, and the intelligibility of human experience"? Is the claim that reality conforms to conscious intentions (cf. Van Til's "God controls whatsoever comes to pass," *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 160), that is "consistent with the assumptions of science, logical reasoning, and the intelligibility of human experience"? How about dead men reanimating and emerging out of their graves, walking around in a city and showing themselves unto many (cf. Mt. 27:52-53) - is this "consistent with the assumptions of science"? How about men walking on unfrozen water (cf. Mark 6:48-50)? And what about water being wished into wine (cf. John 2:1-11)? Why stop there? What about an extra-universal consciousness wishing the universe into being? How about a worldwide flood from which a tiny group of human beings and a collection of all animals living on earth escape on a wooden ark? How are any of these claims, which carry incredible metaphysical implications, at all "consistent with the assumptions of science, logical reasoning, and the intelligibility of human experience"? The intelligibility of human experience does not assume such a cartoon universe paradigm. On the contrary, it assumes the non-cartoon universe of rational atheism. Is it any surprise that Bahnsen does not stop to substantiate his claim here? Indeed, to do so would tarnish his reputation for drive-by assertions.

And instead of substantiating his own claims, Bahnsen prefers to dwell on the perceived errors of others:

On the other hand, the unbeliever who claims metaphysical knowledge is impossible reasons on the basis of presuppositions which are arbitrarily applied, self-refuting, unable to pass their own strict requirements, and which undermine science and argumentation - indeed undermine the usefulness of those very empirical procedures which are made the foundation of all knowledge! (*Always Ready*, 190)

Again, what does this have to do with unraveling "the problem of knowing the 'super-natural'"? Pointing out the problems in position A does not validate the assertions informing position B.

Bahnsen closes the 31st chapter of *Always Ready* with a last gasp which does nothing to explain how one can have knowledge of "the supernatural":

This is simply to say that the anti-metaphysical position has as its outcome the total abrogation, not simply of metaphysical knowledge, but of all knowledge whatsoever. In order to argue against the faith, the unbeliever must commit intellectual suicide - destroying the very reasoning which he would feign to use against the truth of God! This is too high a personal and philosophical price to pay for prejudices and presuppositions which one hopes can form a roof to protect him from the revelation of God. (*Always Ready*, 190)

It is indisputable that knowledge requires a metaphysical foundation. And it is true: anyone who disputes this is implicitly drawing from a set of metaphysical assumptions and thus undercutting his own claim. But not just any foundation will do. Philosophers and laymen alike need to examine their own understanding of the world and identify what it holds in terms of the issue of metaphysical primacy. Do they "believe" that reality conforms to the wishes and dictates of a reality-creating, universe-ruling consciousness (even though there is no evidence for such a proposal), or do they recognize that the objects of consciousness hold metaphysical primacy? This is the real root of the antithesis between rational men and those who abandon it.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Always Ready](#), [Knowledge](#), [Presuppositional Gimmickry](#)

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