

Monday, March 28, 2005

Bahnsen's Poof

Presuppositional apologists point with glee to their champion defender, Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen, and his performance in a 1985 debate with high-profile atheist Dr. Gordon Stein. Anxious apologists today rave about this debate in particular as an example of their apologetic strategy, known as presuppositionalism, at work in high gear against non-believers. Audio recordings of the entire debate are available for purchase, and they're also available for free on the internet. (I suggest that interested readers just download the audio file and save their money for something more meaningful.) There is also a written transcript of the debate available on the internet, from which I will be quoting for purposes of my analysis. A free audio file and two written transcriptions can be accessed [here](#).

One point which many of Bahnsen's fans seem to overlook a little too conveniently, is the fact that Gordon Stein was a specialist in science, not in philosophy as such. And although Dr. Stein could have been a little better prepared for some of the tactics he would encounter in Bahnsen's delivery (I think Dr. Stein was expecting an honest debate), his area of specialty was certainly not the problem of universals. Even apologists would have to acknowledge this. When we keep this in mind as we examine the progress of the debate, Bahnsen comes across as a rather opportunistic predator whose intention is to overwhelm and bait his opponent rather than engage him on an intellectual level. If Stein lost the debate, it is not because Bahnsen won, but because Stein should have been more vigilant in pointing out his opponent's dishonest tactics.

That having been said, it must be noted that Bahnsen's challenges about the problem of universals can and has been met, indeed in a manner that Bahnsen could neither simulate on his own religious presuppositions, nor assail, given his presuppositions' negative implications regarding the human mind and their contempt for rational philosophy. But a treatment of the problem of universals is not what my blog today will focus on. Instead, today's blog has to do with the question of whether Bahnsen even presented an argument for his god-belief in his opening statement of the debate he conducted with Dr. Stein. I shall show that he presented no identifiable argument, and that what he did present would be more accurately called a form of bluffing than anything coming close to a legitimate case for any position Bahnsen wanted to defend in that debate.

Below I have pasted the last four paragraphs of Bahnsen's opening statement which are headed with the following subtitle: "The Transcendental Argument For the Existence Of God" - which would lead me to expect to find the presentation of an argument somewhere therein. But unfortunately, nowhere do I find any chain of inference which leads to the conclusion, "Therefore, God exists." Now, typically apologists have attempted to excuse Bahnsen for this apparent oversight by claiming that TAG is what they call an "indirect argument." Okay, but even Frame answers this response: "Any indirect argument of this sort can be turned into a direct argument by some creative phrasing." (*Apologetics to the Glory of God*, p. 76.) If that's the case, why doesn't Bahnsen do this, and, seeing that he hasn't, what "creative phrasing" do apologists offer in order to clarify what Bahnsen should have made clear? Does Bahnsen have an argument, or not? If he does, what is it?

Here are the last four paragraphs of Bahnsen's opening statement:

GB> The Transcendental Argument For the Existence Of God

GB> And so I come thirdly then to the transcendental proof of
GB> God's existence. How should the difference of opinion between
GB> the theist and the atheist be rationally resolved? That was my
GB> opening question. We've seen two of Dr. Steins errors
GB> regarding it: The crackers in the pantry fallacy, and the
GB> pretended neutrality fallacy.

GB> In the process of discussing them, we've observed that belief in
GB> the existence of God is not tested in any ordinary way like other
GB> factual claims; and the reason for that is metaphysically because
GB> of the non-natural character of God and epistemologically
GB> because of the presuppositional character of commitment for or
GB> against His existence.

GB> Arguments over conflicting presuppositions between world-views
GB> therefore must be resolved somewhat differently and yet still
GB> rationally than conflicts over factual existence claims within a
GB> world-view or system of thoughts. When we go to look at the
GB> different world-views that atheists and theists have, I suggest
GB> that we can prove the existence of God from the impossibility of
GB> the contrary.

GB> The transcendental proof for God's existence is that without
GB> Him, it is impossible to prove anything. The atheist world-view
GB> is irrational and cannot consistently provide the preconditions
GB> of intelligible experience, science, logic or morality. The
GB> atheist world-view cannot allow for laws of logic, the uniformity
GB> of nature, the ability for the mind to understand the world, and
GB> moral absolutes. In that sense, the atheist world-view cannot
GB> account for our debate tonight.

In the first paragraph, Bahnsen makes it clear that he is going to present "the transcendental proof of God's existence." But immediately he digresses into the issue of "the difference of opinion between the theist and the atheist," and turns the spotlight on "two of Dr. Steins errors" [sic]. What do Dr. Stein's errors have to do with Dr. Bahnsen's "proof"?

In the second paragraph, Bahnsen continues shining the spotlight on "Dr. Steins errors," reviewing his own efforts to excuse the question of God's existence from tests conducted "in any ordinary way like other factual claims." What specifically does Bahnsen mean by "any ordinary way" in this context? He doesn't say. Bahnsen's aim here is to distinguish the nature of his claim from "other factual claims," which makes me wonder what warrants his assertion's claim to factuality since he wants to put some distance between it and "other factual claims." Notice that Bahnsen has yet to present an argument. But, Bahnsen does add another burden to his plate here: Not only does he have to prove the existence of his god, he now has to prove "the non-natural character of God" as well as "the presuppositional character of commitment for or against His existence."

In the third paragraph, Bahnsen still has yet to present an argument "for the existence of God." Even before he's presented an argument demonstrating the existence of his god, he's already announcing limitations on what will and will not qualify as an acceptable means of validating his claim that his god exists. Bahnsen's statement suggests that "the different world-views that atheists and theists have" will somehow "prove the existence of God from the impossibility of the contrary." So, Bahnsen adds another burden onto his cart: not only does he need to prove that his god exists, he also needs to prove that it is impossible for his god not to exist.

We come now to the very last paragraph in his opening statement, and now it appears he's trying to get back on track to meeting the first of his confessional burdens. He makes the conclusion of his argument very clear: "The transcendental proof for God's existence is that without Him, it is impossible to prove anything." Now, this is an assertion which needs a defense. It's certainly not self-evidently true, and Bahnsen does not give us any reason why we should accept this claim as opposed to the claim that "without Geusha, it is impossible to prove anything." Does Bahnsen present an argument for his claim? No. Immediately he turns the spotlight back onto "the atheist world-view," claiming that it "is irrational and cannot consistently provide the preconditions of intelligible experience, science, logic or morality." So, not only does Bahnsen not present an argument for his conclusion, he manages to lay another burden on his wagon. It's getting pretty heavy 'bout now. Has Bahnsen proven that his god exists? Not yet. Has Bahnsen proven that "the atheist world-view cannot account for our debate tonight"? No, not yet. He hasn't even presented an argument yet. He's simply asserted the very position he's called to prove, and he's added some more claims to his proof deficit. It seems that Bahnsen doesn't offer a proof here. Rather, we should call this the "Transcendental *Poof* of the existence of God," for it seems that Bahnsen presumes to have the power to say "poof!" and voilá, "God exists." That is, Bahnsen's god exists because he wants his god to exist. Where's the argument?

by Dawson Bethrick

(Adapted from my May 13, 2004 post to the [All Bahnsen discussion list](#), which can be viewed on my own website [here](#).)

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