

Monday, June 22, 2009

Demystifying Universality

The Presuppositional Challenge

In his famed debate with the atheist Dr. Gordon Stein, Christian apologist Greg Bahnsen makes it clear that he thinks universality is beyond any non-Christian's ability to "account for" in terms consistent with a non-Christian worldview. On Bahnsen's view, universality presupposes the omniscience and unchanging character which Christianity attributes to its god. For instance, for the laws of logic to be considered universal and unchanging, they must be grounded (so the thinking goes) in a mind which is omniscient and universal, a mind which does not change. Of course, this tends to characterize the Christian god as a mind that does not think, since change is action, and thinking is a type of action. An unchanging mind is a mind which does not act, and a mind which does not act is a mind that is incapable of thinking.

However, in spite of such problems, he presses Stein to provide an "account for" universality which is compatible with his atheism. In [their debate](#), Bahnsen asks:

Now in an atheist universe, what are the laws of logic? How can they be universal, abstract, invariant? And how does an atheist justify the use of them? Are they merely conventions imposed on our experience, or are they something that look like absolute truth?

Bahnsen inquires Stein on the topics of universality, abstraction and invariance so much throughout their debate, that one gets the impression that Bahnsen simply does not know how a non-Christian would answer his questions. When Bahnsen then announces that

No other world view [other than Christianity, that is] can... account for universal invariant, abstract entities

without producing an argument for such a claim, it appears that Bahnsen is simply speaking from his own ignorance here: "I don't know how a non-Christian worldview can account for universal, invariant and abstract entities, so I conclude that no non-Christian worldview can." In connection with this and similar apologetic strategies, I have already proposed that presuppositionalism inherently involves dependence on [argument from ignorance](#).

The Problem

To be sure, failing to produce an "account for" universality is, for Bahnsen, a major philosophical deficiency. Then again, if the failure to provide an "account for" universality is sufficient for us to conclude that a specific position *cannot* provide such an "account," then what are we to make of the bible? I see nothing which approaches a discussion of universality in the bible (much less an "account for" it), so should we conclude that the biblical worldview cannot "account for" universality? Bahnsen would not have this, for he is clearly eager to situate universality on the foundations of Christian theism. He gives his own understanding of the issue as follows:

If the laws of science, the laws of logic, and the laws of morality are not seen as expressions of the unchanging mind of God, then the notion of universal and absolute "laws" or the concept of order in the contingent, changing world of matter makes no sense whatsoever. In what way could anything truly be universal and law-abiding when every event is isolated and random? If universality is supposed to be objective, then there is no justification for holding to it on the basis of man's limited experience, whereas if universality is subjective (internal to man's thinking), then it is arbitrarily imposed by man's mind on his experience without warrant. (*Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 110n.65)

From such statements, Bahnsen makes it clear that universality on the one hand, and "the contingent, changing world of matter" on the other, are somehow incompatible with each other. The world is concrete and in constant "flux" as some have put it, while universality is abstract, unchanging, fixed and stable. Universality, then, could not presumably have its source or origin in the "contingent, changing world of matter" which we all know and adore in our firsthand experiences. Since universality needs something that is *unchanging* in order to give it a solid and

reliable basis, its source or origin must be “the unchanging mind of God.” This makes all the more sense for Bahnsen because his god is supposed to be conscious, and one of the unstated premises to all of this is that universality is epistemological, i.e., a cognitive function. So an “unchanging mind” seems perfectly suited to settle the matter for the theist; he is content to rest once his god-belief has provided what he considers a perfect solution to the matter.

Of course, one could always ask, given Bahnsen’s presentation of the problem, questions such as the following: If universality is so otherworldly and alien to the “contingent, changing world of matter” in which we live, to what would universality apply in our experience? And why would being able to “account for” it be an important task for any worldview to produce, especially if there’s nothing in our experience to which we could apply it? The need to mount a full investigation into answering questions like this has been avoided by presuppositionalism for the same reason that Bahnsen’s “account for” universality seems so satisfying for the theist, namely that universality is *epistemological*, not metaphysical. Universality is primarily a cognitive issue, one which is not explained simply by pointing to something that is “unchanging.” But doesn’t that which is unchanging epistemologically need something that is unchanging metaphysically to give it the invariance we need it to have?

Unchanging Basis

While universality can in fact be thought of as unchanging, its invariance is not, contrary to what Bahnsen appears to be saying, the only factor to consider in searching for an “account for” universality. If that were the case, the theist could have no argument against the Objectivist axiom of existence as the solid, unchanging underpinning of universality, for the simple reason that the fact that existence exists (the fact identified by the axiom of existence) *does not change*. Had this fact ever changed, no one would be here to bicker about the proper “account for” universality.

But the suitability of the axiom of existence is even stronger than just this. Keep in mind that the axiom ‘existence exists’ is an *axiom*, that is, a formal recognition by a mind. So there is an epistemological element here which is undeniably part and parcel to the invariance of its truth. The act of recognizing the fact that existence exists is a cognitive action of a mind, and what it names is the fundamental metaphysical precondition of any change which someone (like Bahnsen) might want to cite as a source of problems for or incompatibility with universality.

If we keep everything in its proper context, however, such complaints will not prevail and can be easily dismissed. Things in the world can be ever-changing; trees can have leaves one day and no leaves another; Tokyo can have a population of only 600,000 one day, and nine million another; I can have a beard one moment, and a few minutes later it’s been shaven off. But in spite of all this, there are certain facts which remain constant throughout, such as: regardless of whether or not I have a beard, regardless of Tokyo’s present population, regardless of the seasons and the trees and the leaves on the ground, the universe exists. The fact that things exist is a constant, an ever-unchanging fact which underlies all change which we notice. In fact, the existence of the universe is a *precondition* for any change to take place (presumably even for the Christian, for it is the world which is “contingent” and “changing”), for if the universe did not exist, then what would be changing? If the universe did not exist, what would give rise to the problem as Bahnsen sees it?

So the incompatibility which is so central to Bahnsen’s presentation of the matter, really isn’t the insurmountable problem he seems to think it is. Yes, change does occur, but not all facts are changing. Tokyo’s population may change, but the *fact* that the universe in which Tokyo can be found exists, does not change. The metaphysical basis, then, for the epistemological invariance which universality requires, according to Bahnsen, is right here under our very noses. We need not look for answers outside the universe, to the imaginary realms which anyone can concoct and to which one might flee when faced with issues that are described in such a manner as to be hopelessly unresolvable without such flights of fancy.

The Conceptual Nature of Universality

Given Bahnsen’s statements about universality, it is clear that he had a rather superficial understanding of the matter. This is all the more demonstrated by what he accepted as a solution to the problem as he understood it. Universality is not a metaphysical phenomenon residing beyond the universe and waiting to be discovered by man through some mystical means (such as by divine afflatus from an invisible magic being, by anamnesis, etc.), but an

epistemological outcome of the process of abstraction. In fact, contrary to what theists like Bahnsen might assume, universality as it applies to our knowledge presupposes *not* the omniscience of a supernatural mind, but the *non-omniscience* of man's mind. This is because universality is an aspect of conceptual awareness. I have already produced an argument for why an omniscient mind, such as that which Christianity claims its god possesses, would not have knowledge in conceptual form [here](#). The proper "account for" universality, abstract and invariant truths, then, is to be found in the *objective* theory of concepts, whose worldview foundations are wholly non-theistic. To link universality to the cognition of an omnipotent mind misses a most fundamental point about the issue at hand.

Since this matter has ultimately to do with the nature of concepts, we need to have explicit understanding of what a concept is in order to appreciate universality as an aspect of conceptual awareness. Ayn Rand gives us this understanding when she writes:

A concept is not formed by observing every concrete subsumed under it, and does not specify the number of such concretes. A concept is like an arithmetical sequence of *specifically defined units*, going off in both directions, open at both ends and including *all* units of that particular kind. For instance, the concept "man" includes all men who live at present, who have ever lived or will ever live. An arithmetical sequence extends into infinity, without implying that infinity actually exists; such extension means only that whatever number of units does exist, it is to be included in the same sequence. The same principle applies to concepts: the concept "man" does not (and need not) specify what number of men will ultimately have existed - it specifies only the characteristics of man, and means that any number of entities possessing these characteristics is to be identified as "men." (*Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, pp. 17-18)

Notice the example which Rand provides here: the concept of 'man'. The concept 'man' "includes all men who live at present, who have ever lived or will ever live." The range of reference of the concept 'man' is *open-ended*; it does not specify a number of units to which it must refer. So there is nothing mysterious about universality. Universality in conceptual thought is nothing more than the *open-endedness* of conceptual integration. That is, universality is essentially man's conscious ability to include an unlimited quantity of units within a concept's scope of reference given its specific definition.

Of course, this understanding of universality was not available to Bahnsen because his worldview (Christianity) does not provide the objective theory of concepts which makes such understanding possible. This is why Bahnsen preferred a *story-book* understanding of universality, supposing that an invisible magic being is needed to make universality possible and meaningful. What Bahnsen did not understand is the process by which the human mind abstracts from the particulars he perceives in his experience. Essentially, he did not know what a concept really is. So to correct this deficiency, I quote again from Ayn Rand:

A *concept* is a mental integration of two or more units which are isolated according to a specific characteristic(s) and united by a specific definition... The units involved may be any aspect of reality: entities, attributes, actions, qualities, relationships, etc.; they may be perceptual concretes or other, earlier-formed concepts. The act of isolation involved is a process of *abstraction*: i.e., a selective mental focus that *takes out* or separates a certain aspect of reality from all others (e.g., isolates a certain attribute from the entities possessing it, or a certain action from the entities performing it, etc.). The unit involved is not a mere sum, but an *integration*, i.e., a blending of the units into a *single*, new *mental* entity which is used thereafter as a single unit of thought (but which can be broken into its components whenever required). (*Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, p. 10)

It should be clear, then, why universality is an outcome of the process of abstraction. The units defined by a concept are *integrated* into a *mental unit* which does not specify how many units can satisfy that definition. It is *open-ended*, which means that *all* units satisfying a concept's definition are included in its range of reference. And this open-endedness is not restricted only to the *quantity* of units subsumed by a concept's scope of reference, but also to *temporal constraints*.

Taking Rand's example of the concept 'man', notice how this concept includes *every* man who exists *today*, who *has* existed in the past and who *will* ever exist in the future, regardless of his height, weight, hair color, facial hair, place of habitation, year of birth, line of work, number of siblings, political affiliation, etc. While it is a fact, for instance, that Dmitri Shostakovich was born in Saint Petersburg, Russia in 1906, and went on to become one of the Soviet Union's most renowned and prolific composers of concert music, we can include Shostakovich in the concept 'man' because he enjoys certain fundamental similarities with other men who have lived, such as Aristotle,

Augustine, Confucius, Thomas Edison, King George III, John F. Kennedy, Bill Gates, or any other man.

It must be pointed out here that the concept 'man' does not *exclude* the particulars which belong to these individuals. On the contrary, in spite of the fact that this is the common assumption (see for instance Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 26), the concept 'man' in fact *includes* these attributes in their particular measurements, but it does not *specify* that all men need to possess them in any specific measurement. Whether a man may be 5'4" tall or 6'2", a machinist or a welfare-recipient or a Fortune 500 CEO, born in BC 212 or AD 1912, longhaired or bald, Mongoloid or Caucasian, married or perpetually single, octogenarian or a twenty-something, a lover of his wife or a hater of his family, he is included in the scope of reference denoted by the concept 'man'. This is what *universality* is: the ability of a *non-omniscient* mind to economize what it observes in reality in a manner which allows it to integrate subsequent observations into a consistently integrated unit. There is no need for the concept's definition to vary with the specifics of any given case, since each given is integrated into the meaning of the concept by means of measurement-omission.

Concepts, then, allow an individual to have awareness of objects beyond those which he only immediately perceives. For instance, I have perceived only so many men in my life. But the concept 'man' in effect gives me awareness of men whom I have not perceived and never will perceive. It is not the same kind of awareness as perception, but concepts allow me to overcome perception's limitation of awareness of only those objects which are immediately accessible to my senses.

Contrary to Bahnsen's assumptions, then, universality is in fact an aspect of concepts, and as such presupposes the *non-omniscience* of human consciousness. There is nothing *otherworldly* going on here. Universality is an outcome of man's method of identifying and integrating what he perceives.

Grounding on Universal Truths

But aren't universal truths needed to ground one's worldview, and thus need a "universal mind" which can provide man with such grounding? The above points already bring much of this into question. If universality is the product of a process of abstraction which man's mind can perform, and the truths which universal identifications name are available to human cognition through such a process that his mind can perform, why would this be a problem for the non-Christian? In fact, why would it not be a problem for the Christian? To see why there is no need for this to be a problem for the non-theist, let us review what Bahnsen means by "universal" in the context of the Vantillian presuppositional apologetic strategy:

Van Til uses the term "universal" for any truth of a general or abstract nature - whether it be a broad concept, law, principle, or categorical statement. Such general truths are used to understand, organize, and interpret particular truths encountered in concrete experience. As Van Til goes on to say, if one does not begin with some such general truths (universal) with which to understand the particular observations in one's experience, those factual particulars would be unrelated and uninterpretable - i.e., "brute." (*Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 38n.10)

If it is the case that one needs to "begin with some such general truths (universal) with which to understand the particular observations in one's experience," then clearly the Objectivist is on safe ground. For his worldview begins with an incontestably true axiom whose scope is as broadly universal as one can get, namely the axiom 'existence exists'. Not only is the concept 'existence' the widest of all concepts (for it includes everything which exists), the fact which the axiom of existence identifies is both a precondition of all thought (if there were no existence, there could be no one to think about anything) and an inescapable presupposition to all cognition (since its truth is implicit in all identifications). The Objectivist's observations are observations of actually existing objects which exist independent of his own consciousness, and integrated into the sum of his knowledge on the basis of a worldview rooted in irreducible identifications of a universal nature. In such a way the preconditions for a unified sum of knowledge consistent with itself and also corresponding to the world of objects existing independent of one's knowledge, have been satisfied by his worldview's fundamentals.

Contrast this with the Christian's dilemma on this point: he confessionally begins, not with the axiom of existence, but with the declaration that the Christian god exists. In this way, he does make use of the axiom of existence by needing it to be true in order to make such declarations (if it were not true, he would not exist and could not claim

that his god exists) and by logically presupposing its truth in the very formation of his confession (where did he get the concept 'exists?'). But he does not recognize the axiom of existence as his starting point, nor does he give it credit for the truth he claims on behalf of his confessional declaration. This latter fact becomes clear when the primacy of consciousness is exposed as the fundamental underpinning of his worldview's confessional system (see for instance my blog [The Inherent Subjectivism of God-belief](#)).

But notice how the Christian's confessional starting point that "God exists" fails to meet Bahnsen's own stated criteria for integrating (i.e., "understanding, organizing, and interpreting") "particular truths encountered in concrete experience," for understanding "the particular observations in one's experience," and for avoiding the scourge of "brute" (i.e., "unrelated and uninterpretable") fact: the claim "God exists" is *not* a universal statement, for it is making a declaration about a *single* entity rather than a *class* of many entities. The word "God" is properly not a concept, unless of course the Christian wants to admit to polytheism (in which case 'god' would take on the characteristics of a concept, integrating two or more entities into a single mental unit; but this would lead to yet other problems). But orthodox Christianity has been most emphatic in its insistence that Christianity is monotheistic (cf. Rom. 3:30; I Cor. 8:6; Eph. 4:6; I Tim. 2:5, James 2:19). According to Christianity's own teachings, then, "God" is not a universal, for it is supposed to denote a specific entity which is *sui generis*, i.e., entirely unique, without equal, and singularly occurring. Dr. Robert Bruce Shelton confirms this when he states bluntly: "Theologically speaking, only God is *sui generis*" ([Jesus the Exegete: A Study of Mark 12:26-27](#)). A term denoting an entity which is supposed to be *sui generis* is by its very nature not a universal term (since it is not integrating a group of entities which are similar in some way into a single mental unit), but essentially a proper name (which is why English-speaking Christians put a capital 'G' in "God"). The claim, then, that "God exists" is not at all universal in the sense of a "truth of a general or abstract nature" (I wouldn't call it a truth to begin with, but even according to Christianity, it is supposed to be a truth, but not a *universal* truth as Bahnsen describes), so it fails to satisfy Bahnsen's own criteria for avoiding "brute fact."

In spite of this, Bahnsen carries on as if Christianity not only equips the believer for integrating his particular observations into an integrated whole, but also as if *only* Christianity can so do this. But as we have seen, according to Bahnsen's own stated criteria, this could not be the case. It is at this point that the Christian is likely to resort to anecdotal positions (essentially storybook claims) to shore up the discrepancy. Yes, he may admit, "God" is *sui generis* and therefore the statement "God exists" is not universal in scope as Bahnsen explains, but since this god "created" everything else (indeed, the whole universe!), it is in essence the "Father" of the universe, and therefore (as [Van Til](#) would [put it](#)) "back of" everything that is universal. These additional claims, then, are made in the hope of exempting the claim "God exists" from having to satisfy the criteria stipulated by Bahnsen for understanding, organizing and interpreting one's particular observations in a unified manner and thus avoiding the insuperable throes of "brute" facts. But such moves constitute an admission that the claim "God exists" does in fact not meet Bahnsen's own stated criteria for integrating particular observations into a meaningful whole, and the need to accommodate such exemptions by reference to storybook details which must ultimately be accepted on faith, only make the whole Christian regime all the more dubious. Were a non-Christian to produce as his starting point a statement of particular scope (comparable in this regard to the Christian's own claim that "God exists") and seek to excuse its failure to meet Bahnsen's stated criteria for holistic worldview integration by pointing to unprovable claims about alleged particular events in the remote past which are completely inaccessible to scientific investigation, he would be cited as an example of what presuppositionalism encourages believers to expect: non-Christians are unable to "account for" worldview intelligibility given their insufficient starting point.

The proper understanding of universality is that it is a component of the objective theory of concepts. As I indicated above, I have not found *any* theory of concepts in the bible, and am skeptical that Christianity in general can produce any theory of concepts (even a bad one) without borrowing from non-Christian teachings. For more details on the objective theory of concepts, I refer readers to Ayn Rand's *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, which outlines the basics of the abstraction process. Unfortunately, my firsthand experience with Christian apologists suggests that they really are not very interested in understanding concept theory or the rudiments of universality, for when I have taken the time to explain these things to them, they typically disengage and become uninterested in further discussion, even though (or perhaps because) their apologetic questions have been answered.

Universality and Objectivity

Now Bahnsen's defenders might come back and say that, since concepts are mental integrations, they are subjective

(since they are “internal to man’s thinking”). But this objection is based on a misunderstanding of the concept of objectivity. In fact, if the conception of objectivity assumed by this objection is correct, this objection itself falls under its own sword, for it is comprised of mental integrations. And more broadly, if “internal to one’s thinking” is the essential which distinguishes something as subjective in nature, how is anything that the Christian god supposedly thinks *not* subjective? How could Christianity’s “spiritual truths,” whose bases allegedly reside beyond sense perception, be other than “internal to man’s thinking” and therefore also subjective on this account?

Such conceptions of objectivity will not do, for they fail to isolate the proper essential. First of all it is important to note that objectivity has to do with the *method* by which we identify and integrate what we perceive (for details, see Peikoff’s *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, pp. 110-121).

Since perception is an automatic process, there is no choice involved in the nature of the objects which we perceive. But what we do mentally with what we perceive is subject to our volition. We have, for instance, the choice to maintain fidelity between our identifications and integrations on the one hand, and the objects which we perceive on the other. Or, we can of course allow our imaginations to blur this distinction, thus allowing our identifications and integrations to distort what we have perceived beyond recognition. Objectivity is essentially [the primacy of existence](#) applied to epistemological activity. Subjectivism, on the other hand, grants metaphysical primacy to consciousness in some respect. The objective theory of concepts, as outlined in Rand’s book *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, teaches how we can maintain this fidelity to the objects of our perception, to adhere to the primacy of existence in our epistemological activity. Any other theory will be prone to granting metaphysical primacy to consciousness, thus resulting in subjectivism in our epistemological activity. If the theist is truly concerned about the hazards of subjectivism, he should abandon his theism, for [theism is inherently subjective](#). That a theist is presented with this truth and yet chooses to remain a theist, indicates that his expressed concern for a position’s alleged result in subjectivism is really just a ruse. And one should not be reluctant to expose it as such.

by Dawson Bethrick

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posted by Bahnsen Burner at [4:00 PM](#)