

Monday, May 21, 2012

Greg Bahnsen on the Problem of Evil

Greg Bahnsen (1948 - 1995) was the most high-profile popularizer of presuppositional apologetics of his day. He remains today one of the foremost interpreters of Cornelius Van Til's apologetic works, his lengthy *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis* being published posthumously from Bahnsen's own manuscript, which he completed shortly before his death (p.xv). The result is 764 pages, including a bibliography and three indices (for bible verses, names and topics) of excessively repetitive droning about how the "unbeliever" can't account for this, can't account for that, doesn't know how to put on his pants in the morning, doesn't know how to put his shirt on, etc. Throughout all this Bahnsen nowhere lays out an actual epistemological *method* for one to apply and come to the same "knowledge" Bahnsen and other Christians claim for themselves. Truly, it is a most ironic spectacle.

What some may find surprising is the fact that, in the space of 764 pages, there is in the topical index only one reference to the problem of evil, and that is to a *footnote* straddling pages 525 and 526 of Bahnsen's thick tome.

And while it is rather lengthy in itself so far as footnotes go, Bahnsen states in that footnote that the problem of evil is, in his experience, "the most popular argument urged against Christianity." So while his book is over 700 pages, he spends just one paragraph, relegated to a passing footnote, on addressing what he says is "the most popular argument urged against Christianity." Since Bahnsen states other things that are of interest in this footnote, I quote it in full here:

Van Til's apologetic is often set forth and illustrated in terms of epistemological and metaphysical issues, but a very simple and understandable example of it can be given in the area of ethics. In my experience, the most popular argument urged against Christianity is "the problem of evil." Unbelievers declare that the Christian worldview is logically inconsistent since it holds that God is powerful enough to prevent evil, that God is good enough not to want evil, and yet that evil exists. Suppose one asks, "How can you believe in a God who permits child molestation to take place?" The believer and the unbeliever apparently agree that molesting innocent children is morally outrageous and objectively wrong. But Van Til would ask what "reference point" (final standard, authority) is necessary to make this moral judgment "intelligible." Surely no autonomous or unbelieving presupposition or fundamental outlook will suffice, since each one, upon analysis, reduces to subjectivism in ethics, in which case child molestation could not be condemned as absolutely or objectively immoral, but simply taken as generally not preferred. Notice also that the usual presentations of the apparent contradiction within the Christian premises about God omit the equally important premise that God has a morally sufficient reason for the suffering and evil that He foreordains. With the addition of that biblical premise, there is no *logical* problem of evil left. Everyone struggles *psychologically* to take God on His word here, to be sure, but that is different from there being an intellectual incongruity within the Christian faith. Unbelievers will not give up their psychological resistance to that premise until God offers His rationale for evil to them for inspection and approval - which is subtle but incontestable evidence that they beg the question, holding that God cannot be proven to be the final authority until *they* are first acknowledged as the final authority.

Notice first off how Bahnsen acknowledges that belief in a god which "permits child molestation to take place" poses problems for the believer. Bahnsen does not want to deal with the matter philosophically, so he will assert his way, without informative explanation or rational support, out of it and then say the whole issue is to be brushed off as a psychological difficulty, as if this resolves the contradiction exposed by the problem of evil.

But the question which readers should consider at this point is: *Does Bahnsen ever answer the question "How can you believe in a God who permits child molestation to take place?"*? The answer is: no, he doesn't answer this question. In fact, he manages only to compound the problem even further, as we shall see.

Immediately after introducing this question, Bahnsen expresses his supposition that “the believer and the unbeliever apparently agree that molesting innocent children is morally outrageous and objectively wrong.” But we should not be hasty in granting this to be the case. While Christian believers themselves are prohibited from having their own moral judgments about chosen actions (forming one’s own moral judgments about chosen actions smacks of “autonomous reasoning,” and this is condemned as “sin”; indeed, if the believer forms his own moral judgments about chosen actions, he might form judgments about the actions which Christianity attributes to its god, and this can only lead to more internal conflict for the believer’s worldview), those who hold the view that it is wrong to violate another person’s individual rights will find child molestation and any other form of initiating force morally condemnable. The Christian worldview does not hold to the doctrine of individual rights - it holds that man does not have a right to exist for his own sake, and makes allowances for rights-denying practices like slavery, taxation, and collectivism (see [here](#)). To confirm this, notice how Christians who give reasons for condemning such violent acts as child molestation do not cite their violation of individual rights as the reason for condemning them, but rather their presumed violation of some god’s moral laws. Rights are not an issue, so harming the child per se is not what’s wrong according to Christianity. On the contrary, what’s wrong is transgressing a supernatural consciousness’s commandments.

Now it has been pointed out before (see [here](#), for instance) that there is no commandment in the bible prohibiting child molestation. Nor is there any overarching principle within Christianity which would cover this consistently so that such prohibition could be inferred. Christians may cite one or more of the many references to lust in the New Testament as a basis for condemning such activity. But this would assume that the perpetrator of the offence in question was molesting the child for his own sexual gratification, and this might not be the case. Indeed, the molester could be a Christian who believes his or her god has commanded the molestation, and that this command is a test of faith. Such a scenario is hardly without biblical precedent. The story of Abraham and Isaac is fundamentally similar to this. In [this segment of the April 15 Magic Sandwich Show](#) (at 9:30-9:34), Christian apologist Sye Ten Bruggencate characterizes the commandment for Abraham to prepare his son Isaac as a burnt offering as “a test of faith.” A test of faith, then, at least for Bruggencate, can be passed when one acts on the willingness to kill another human being. In the case of child molestation, where there is no killing or even intention or willingness to kill, the offence seems far less serious and the test less challenging.

After granting the possibility of common ground between the believer and the non-believer, Bahnsen then asks the WWVTD question - i.e., “What would Van Til do?” Bahnsen writes:

But Van Til would ask what “reference point” (final standard, authority) is necessary to make this moral judgment “intelligible.”

Van Til of course would point to something which the human mind can only *imagine* as the “reference point” or “authority” to back such a moral judgment, which the believer isn’t allowed to make in the first place. So Van Til’s solution is of no value, for it offers nothing of value.

By contrast, Objectivism points to the facts of reality, in keeping with the primacy of existence, among those the fact that man is the rational animal, and, owing to man’s rational animality, recognize man’s right to exist for his own sake, i.e., the doctrine of individual rights. This view, that man has the right to exist for his own sake, is the fundamental right of man; it includes his right to freedom from the initiation of force and coercion along with freedom to act on behalf of his own self-interest. Since the concept of individual rights might be confusing or troubling for Christians, I give Ayn Rand’s definition of ‘right’ in this context:

A “right” is a moral principle defining and sanctioning a man’s freedom of action in a social context. There is only one fundamental right (all the others are its consequences or corollaries): a man’s right to his own life. Life is a process of self-sustaining and self-generated action; the right to life means the right to engage in self-sustaining and self-generated action—which means: the freedom to take all the actions required by the nature of a rational being for the support, the furtherance, the fulfillment and the enjoyment of his own life. (Such is the meaning of the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.) (“Man’s Rights,” *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 93)

So to answer Bahnsen's reference to Van Til, the "reference point" necessary for providing both the basis and the intelligibility of the moral judgment that child molestation is wrong - evil, in fact - is the doctrine that man has a "right to his own life," and all other rights which are "its consequences or corollaries." If the presuppositionalist wants to deny or denounce man's individual rights, then he is free to relinquish them insofar as they apply to himself (lest he be a hypocrite). In keeping with the doctrine of individual rights, no one has a right to force you to enjoy your rights, for they are not "God-given." One has one's own nature as a rational animal to thank for them. If rights are "given," then they can be taken away. There is no right to take away someone else's rights; that would constitute a contradiction. One can surrender his own rights, but there is no right to force someone to do this.

When Bahnsen says:

Surely no autonomous or unbelieving presupposition or fundamental outlook will suffice, since each one, upon analysis, reduces to subjectivism in ethics, in which case child molestation could not be condemned as absolutely or objectively immoral, but simply taken as generally not preferred

he's telling the believer to turn off all willingness to consider alternative viewpoints, including the fact that child molestation is wrong due to its rights-denying nature. Bahnsen would prefer that his readers simply assume, on Bahnsen's say so, that no non-Christian philosophy could possibly have any rational substance to offer on the matter. Bahnsen acts like a lawyer who would prefer that the jury not be allowed to hear opposing arguments. Bahnsen wants his readers to take on his say so his claim that "each [alternative "outlook"], upon analysis, reduces to subjectivism in ethics." We can be certain that Bahnsen wants readers to find his say so on this matter sufficient, for he does not provide *any* analysis of "each" alternative outlook. His mere affirmation is to be regarded as a substitute for evidence. Indeed, if a position in fact "reduces to subjectivism in ethics," what *objective* objection could Bahnsen possibly have against it, given his own worldview's overt commitment to subjectivism? (See [here](#).)

When Bahnsen characterizes alternative worldviews as having nothing better than the view that "child molestation could not be condemned as absolutely or objectively immoral, but simply taken as generally not preferred," he's denouncing something far closer to his own Christian than a genuinely *objective* worldview - i.e., one premised on and consistently developed in keeping with, the primacy of existence metaphysics and committed to the doctrine of individual rights. On Bahnsen's Christianity, it is certainly conceivable that the Christian god could, given its omnipotence and sovereignty, command an individual to molest a child, just as, according to Genesis 22, it commanded Abraham to kill his own son. And in such a case disobeying this commandment would be wrong, not the molesting of the child. And that's pretty much the point in Christianity: what is "wrong" according to Christianity is not hurting others, violating their rights, destroying their values, or depriving them of what they need to live, but *disobeying some divine commandment*. A person who disobeys a divinely authorized commandment to molest a child would be disobeying a divine commandment, and therefore "wrong," regardless of what his own moral judgment might determine he should do.

Bahnsen's main beef with critics who raise the problem of evil against Christianity, is that they've forgotten a key premise in their inference. Bahnsen writes:

Notice also that the usual presentations of the apparent contradiction within the Christian premises about God omit the equally important premise that God has a morally sufficient reason for the suffering and evil that He foreordains. With the addition of that biblical premise, there is no *logical* problem of evil left.

Bahnsen thinks the critics' argument should be revised. Instead of reading as follows:

P1: God is powerful enough to prevent evil.

P2: God is good enough not to want evil.

P3: Evil exists.

C: Therefore, Christianity is internally contradictory and consequently cannot be true.

Bahnsen thinks it should proceed thusly:

P1: God is powerful enough to prevent evil.

P2: God is good enough not to want evil.

P3: Evil exists.

P4: God has a morally sufficient reason for the suffering and evil that He foreordains.

C: Therefore, there's no logical problem of evil!

Premises 1 and 2 represent claims about the Christian god which Christianity wants its believers to accept. So the apologist is forced to contend with these. Premise 3 is not only an empirical fact about reality (given man's nature as a biological organism, he faces the fundamental alternative of life and death, requiring values in order to live, and there are things in reality which threaten his values, including the standard of his values, i.e., his very life), it is also something which Christianity teaches (generally Christianity puts the blame for the existence of evil on man's shoulders, even though at the same time it teaches that men are predestined to do what they do by the "counsel" of the Christian god which informs its "plan" for human history).

So as an internal critique of Christianity, the problem of evil so argued is quite damning indeed.

Bahnsen's preferred version of the argument, which is intended to avoid the damning conclusion of the critics' argument, introduces premise 4, namely the claim that "God has a morally sufficient reason for the suffering and evil that He foreordains."

This premise is problematic from an apologetic perspective for two fundamental reasons.

First, Bahnsen does not validate the notion that there is such a thing as a "morally sufficient reason for... suffering and evil." Since evil is anti-value, this is no different from saying "there's a pro-value reason for allowing the destruction of values." The very notion spells its own demise, and is thus self-contradictory. The notion that there is a "morally sufficient reason for [allowing] suffering and evil" can only imply that "the moral" on this view is not opposed to evil. Indeed, it can only imply that Christianity has a morally cozy relationship with evil.

But suppose the Christian rejects the values-based interpretation of evil. Would the prima facie internal contradiction simply go away at that point? No, it wouldn't. If "evil" is alternatively defined as that which is "anti-God," then Bahnsen's premise essentially reduces to the view that there is a pro-God reason for allowing anti-God things, or: a morally sufficient reason for allowing anti-God phenomena. It should be no surprise that Bahnsen does not elaborate what "a morally sufficient reason for the suffering and evil that He foreordains" might mean when broken down and analyzed: either way one slices it, it comes up internal contradictions.

Second, Bahnsen never clues us in on what specifically this allegedly "morally sufficient reason for the suffering and evil that [the Christian god] foreordains" might be. We are basically told, sight unseen, that something is not allowed to enter into our awareness, should nonetheless be evaluated as "morally sufficient." Bahnsen assumes that his god has a "reason for the suffering and evil that He foreordains," and he assures us that this reason is "a morally sufficient reason." But how is anyone supposed to know that the supposed reason which the Christian god has "for the suffering and evil that He foreordains" is indeed "morally sufficient"? Blank out.

This is like coming to a great ravine and being told that there's a bridge connecting to the other side, and that this bridge, which we don't see and are not shown, is safe and sturdy, sufficient for our crossing. Christianity requires a mindset which accepts such evaluations in the absence of what is being evaluated. And we're expected to accept this as knowledge. We are in effect expected to *imagine* a bridge that does not exist and accept the claim that the bridge which we are imagining will be sufficient to allow us to cross to the other side.

Bahnsen's sight-unseen evaluation flies in the face of that very favorite of presuppositionalist interrogatory tactics, the question "How do you know that?" When Bahnsen tells me that his god has "a morally sufficient reason for the suffering and evil that He foreordains," clearly he's expecting me to accept this claim as knowledge. But then I must ask: How could I *know* this? If I accept this claim and repeat it to the presuppositionalist, and the presuppositionalist had the consistent tenacity to ask me, "How do you know that?" I wouldn't have any rational basis to answer him. I would be stuck in the very corner into which the presuppositionalist wants to confine me. Even worse, I would have to accept the morally contradictory premise of "a morally sufficient reason" for authoring evil. So not only would I lack any epistemological basis for accepting such a claim, I would be accepting a self-contradictory position if I accepted it!

None of this troubles Bahnsen, however. He's content to assume that such a notion as "a morally sufficient reason for" evil is unquestionably sound, and simply affirms it in passing, hoping no one catches on. He thinks this notion is all that's need to put a lid on the problem of evil, and then he's off to redirect the reader's attention onto something else. But in fact, he has not resolved the problem. What Bahnsen has accomplished is to make his god into a morally self-contradictory ogre. Indeed, Christian faith is said to be all about "trusting" the Christian god. But if this god has "a morally sufficient reason" to allow - or worse, "foreordain" - evil, how can it be trusted? Trusting a person means we have confidence that this person will not betray our values. But a person who has "a morally sufficient reason" to destroy values is simply not trustworthy. So Bahnsen only manages to make the mess bigger than it was before he came onto the scene.

But as if that weren't enough, he doesn't stop there. Bahnsen is anxious to redirect the focus of his response to the problem of evil away from its philosophical difficulties and onto what he thinks is a more manageable playing field, namely psychology. Unfortunately this doesn't do him any good. Observe again what he states at this point:

Everyone struggles *psychologically* to take God on His word here, to be sure, but that is different from there being an intellectual incongruity within the Christian faith. Unbelievers will not give up their psychological resistance to that premise until God offers His rationale for evil to them for inspection and approval - which is subtle but incontestable evidence that they beg the question, holding that God cannot be proven to be the final authority until *they* are first acknowledged as the final authority.

First of all, by "everyone" here, Bahnsen must mean theists - people who believe there's a god in the first place. Belief in a god is the starting point, not for a worldview proper for man, but for all kinds of logical problems, including (but not limited to) the problem of evil. And of course, when a person makes a blanket statement like this about "everyone," he's naturally including himself, and thus Bahnsen is acknowledging that *he* "struggles *psychologically*" with the problem of evil. But if it were so easy to dispel the problem of evil as Bahnsen thinks he can do with the addition of one premise (which he does not explain, inform or defend), then why should there be any psychological struggle here?

Bahnsen wants his readers to think that the psychological difficulties raised by the problem of evil do not indicate or stem from "an intellectual incongruity within the Christian faith." But psychological conflict does not arise causelessly. Indeed, psychological conflict is a result from the mind's unsuccessful attempt to integrate two contrary beliefs. If I'm out with friends one evening and they want to order a round of drinks, I will be conflicted if I go along with this because I refuse to drink and drive. So I don't go along with it. But Bahnsen's view amounts to saying that such psychological conflict does not indicate a real problem. If I were to adopt his view of the psychological struggle posed by the problem of evil, I would say that drinking with friends over dinner and later driving myself home posed no "intellectual incongruity," when in fact I know that such action has a good probability in resulting in the destruction of my values. Since I am dedicated to protecting my values, I go with my moral judgment and pass on having the drinks. So I remain loyal to my worldview and do not partake in Bahnsen's.

When Bahnsen says that "unbelievers will not give up their psychological resistance to that premise," the premise he has in mind is the one which he introduced, namely: "God has a morally sufficient reason for the suffering and evil that He foreordains." Really, the premise which I reject is the one which this statement

assumes, as I pointed out above, namely the assumption that there is such a thing as “a morally justifiable reason” for allowing (let alone “foreordaining”) evil. As I pointed out, Bahnsen has not argued for the philosophical soundness of such a notion, and I’ve pointed out that it is in fact self-contradictory in the context of *objective* morality. So my resistance to Bahnsen’s beloved premise is not “psychological” in nature - since I have not accepted it and subsequently attempted to integrate it with truths which conflict with it. Rather, my resistance is philosophical in nature, so it never enters the confines of my psychology as something I’ve tried to accept as truth. I know it’s not truthful, so I don’t “struggle” with it. But Bahnsen does, and he believed “everyone” else did, too.

Bahnsen still wants to put the blame on non-Christians though. He’s never satisfied with defending a Christian position unless and until he can turn the occasion into an opportunity to belittle non-believers, especially critics who point out problems within Christianity. Bahnsen resents non-believers who seek to understand something before they pass moral judgment on it. That is precisely what he objects to when he says that non-believers will resist the premise he offers in order to quell the problem of evil “until God offers His rationale for evil to them for inspection and approval.” Bahnsen is angry at non-believers for having the audacity not to accept the claims of Christian apologists on their mere say so. If Bahnsen posits the notion of “a morally sufficient reason” for allowing or “foreordaining” suffering and evil, he’s frustrated when people don’t accept this notion when he affirms it as a token of faith.

So while Bahnsen is clearly unable to solve the problem of evil philosophically, he actually has two psychological conflicts to struggle with. One he’s already identified - namely the task of trying to integrate a series of contradictory claims into his overall worldview. No thinker can ever succeed at this task, which is why he’s so confident in stating that “everyone” struggles with this. His other psychological conflict is in dealing with the fact that many people will simply not accept his claims on his mere say so, many people will not accept the bible’s claims on its mere say so, and thus he resents people for insisting on understanding things before they accept another person’s evaluation of that thing, especially when its contradictions are so obvious and so striking as they are in the problem of evil.

Meanwhile, hoping his readers ignore the facts that

- (a) Bahnsen has not provided a philosophically viable solution to the problem of evil;
- (b) the “solution” which he does offer tells us that “morality” on his view is not a basis on which one can reliably and consistently oppose evil (for it explicitly allows for such a thing as “a morally sufficient reason” for allowing and even *foreordaining* suffering and evil); and
- (c) psychological conflict, which Bahnsen acknowledges on the part of theists when they consider the problem of evil, indicates that there’s something wrong with what they’re trying to accept as knowledge and integrate with the broader sum of their knowledge,

Bahnsen wants his readers to think that non-Christians who do not accept his garbage on his say so are providing “subtle but incontestable evidence that they beg the question, holding that God cannot be proven to be the final authority until *they* internal critique of the *Christian worldview*. While its findings as such imply that the Christian god is simply not real, it is not specifically an argument for disproving its existence. Its conclusion can certainly be incorporated into a larger argument which concludes that the Christian god does not exist; but as such the problem of evil is focused on exposing the logical incongruity of positions affirmed within and necessitated by the Christian worldview.

Moreover, it is not an instance of begging the question when someone seeks to *understand* a position before accepting another person’s *evaluations* of that same position. Bahnsen tells us that the reason why his god “foreordains” suffering and evil is “a morally sufficient reason” for doing so. But how can one accept such a judgment on something that remains concealed? Since Bahnsen does not tell us what his reason is, we cannot share his enthusiasm for this evaluation, especially when the very notion of “a morally sufficient reason” for allowing or “foreordaining” suffering and evil very strongly seems self-contradictory on the face of it. Desiring to see a bridge we’re told to believe is safe and sturdy when there is no bridge in sight, is not an instance of begging the question. Bahnsen keeps something concealed from the non-believer and then accuses him of begging the question when the non-believer does not accept his claims about what he’s kept concealed on his say so. If Bahnsen knew what this alleged “morally sufficient

reason” for allowing or “foreordaining” evil was, but nonetheless decided to keep it under wraps, then he likely did so because he had little confidence that his own evaluation (that it was “a morally sufficient reason”) would withstand scrutiny. If he did not know what this reason which he calls “morally sufficient” might be, then he is wrong to tell us that it is “morally sufficient” in the first place, since he’s passing judgment on something he has no knowledge of.

Lastly, a person who demands to see the goods before he commits to accepting another person’s evaluation of those goods, is not insisting on being “the final authority” in all things, as Bahnsen wants his readers to believe. Such a person is simply being a morally responsible thinker. Bahnsen’s accusation that the non-believer is “begging the question” by not simply accepting Bahnsen’s point of view on his mere say so, in spite of its contentlessness, is most ironic, coming from a defender of an apologetic tradition which relies so heavily on the question, “How do you know that?” Bahnsen never explains how he “knows” that the alleged “reason” his god has for foreordaining suffering and evil is “morally sufficient.” Bahnsen does not even explain how he “knows” that there is such a thing as “a morally sufficient reason” for “foreordaining” suffering and evil. So Bahnsen’s own castigations against non-believers here, namely that they “beg the question,” are in fact inconsistent with his apologetic program’s own debating tactics.

Bahnsen wants his audience to believe his claims; yet he accuses those who want to understand them before they accept his evaluations of those claims, of “begging the question.” It appears that Bahnsen’s charge of fallacy is driven from personal resentment rather than an understanding of what actually constitutes a question-begging argument. The non-believer may not have presented any argument to begin with, and yet Bahnsen wants to charge him with begging the question anyway. Did Bahnsen really have that hard a time understanding logic? It appears so.

So the next time you encounter a Christian who’s trying to heckle you into “submission,” ask him how he solves the problem of evil. Does he look you straight in the eye and acknowledge that this is indeed a difficulty which he himself has not been able get his mind around? Or, does he compound the contradictions of theism by claiming that there is, in his worldview, such a thing as a “morally sufficient reason” for allowing (or “foreordaining”) suffering and evil? If he does, then stop him in his tracks and invite him to explore the matter with you, to determine whether or not such defenses are really philosophically sound. My suspicion is that he’ll try to change the subject, perhaps by shifting the burden onto you, when in fact it is his worldview that he’s trying to sell to you. The price is your mind, your soul, your ability to reason. He knows that you won’t exchange these for Christianity if you’re wise to its labyrinthine subterfuges. But he will try his best to blindside you with his gimmicks and devices. Hopefully what I’ve presented above will give you some pointers on how you can keep the focus in the right direction and probe the issue in a manner more thorough than the theist is likely willing to do for himself.

by Dawson Bethrick

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