

Tuesday, December 06, 2011

Some Thoughts on the "Sensus Divinitatis"

In the comments section of my blog [Cognitive Reliability vs. Supernatural Deception](#), a Christian blogger by the name of Michael Russell (whose blog [Something to say](#) has some interesting posts) challenged my view that Christianity's supernaturalism undercuts any assumed cognitive reliability on the part of the believer given the possibility, implied by its supernaturalism, that malevolent spirits may be deceiving them undetectably.

In his rebuttal to this point, Michael cited Romans 1, arguing (as best I can tell) that the content of this chapter essentially guarantees the reliability of man's cognitive faculties. The ensuing discussion focused on Romans 1:20, which states:

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

Seizing particularly on the part of this verse which says that human beings are "without excuse," Michael's rebuttal to my point went as follows:

But given we are all without excuse, it follows that our senses and perceptions must be have a certain degree of proper function. That degree of proper function must be such that (within our epistemic environment)we are without excuse before God for ignoring him.

For this to be so, it must be the case that despite the supernatural demons and whatever else might negatively impinge on our perceptions, God has so ordered the world to ensure people have no excuse for ignoring him. God makes sure there will be no saying, "you weren't clear enough God".

Now after some going back-and-forth with Michael on the matter, I indicated that I have gotten the impression from him that he thinks that, in spite of Christianity's affirmation of the existence of malevolent and deceptive spirits (demons and devils and the like), the human mind is immune to supernatural deception. I have since asked for explicit clarification from him as to whether or not this is his position, and am waiting for his reply.

Since Michael drew attention to Romans 1:20, I pointed out that this verse contains a self-contradictory statement. It states that something that is "invisible" has been "clearly seen." At this point I had asked: "if something is 'clearly seen', what basis does one have to call it 'invisible'?"

Michael seems to agree that a plain reading of this text seems to contain a self-contradiction, and suggested that "seen" here should be understood more broadly than "merely about optics." In this passage, Michael suggests that 'seeing' may better be understood as meaning 'perceiving'. And this would indeed alleviate the impression that the apostle was contradicting himself, for we in fact can and do *perceive* things which are *invisible* (i.e., not perceptible by means of "mere optics"), such as a piece of music: we hear (i.e., *perceive*) the symphony's melodies, harmonies and musical events, but we do not *see* them. Of course, if something perceived by means of hearing were in mind, one would not use "see" to denote the means by which he perceived it; we have another concept for this. If man had perceptual awareness of "the invisible attributes" of the Christian god by means of *hearing*, for instance, one would not write that they are "clearly *seen*," but rather "clearly *heard*."

But since Michael suggested that 'seen' in Romans 1:20 really means 'perceived', I then pointed out that this requires us to identify the *mode* of perception by which all human beings everywhere and throughout all time *perceive* the "invisible attributes" of the Christian god. Michael satisfied this need by introducing the notion of the "sensus divinitatis," which, he writes, is

'a kind of faculty or a cognitive mechanism, which in a wide variety of circumstances produces in us beliefs about God.' (that's how Plantinga put it).

In response to this, I pointed out that appealing to the “sensus divinitatis” (SD) “seems only to deepen the mystery,” amounting to the claim of “a sixth mode of perception which all humans presumably possess” (in addition to vision, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching). The notion of the SD raises a number of new sticky questions. Examples that I cited included:

- [C]an it be studied scientifically, as the other five modes can be?
- Is it a part of our biology, like seeing, hearing, tasting, touching and smelling?
- Is it associated with any specific sensory organs, as hearing, seeing, touching, smelling and tasting are?
- Or, is it altogether non-biological?
- If so, what is it if it’s not biological?
- How does it work?
- Is it infallible?
- How are its workings (if it has any workings) to be discovered and examined?
- How does one reliably distinguish it from human imagination?

Additionally, in one of his comments, Michael stated in passing that “the knowledge of God... is innate in us.” When I read this, I found it difficult to put together with his earlier statements which sought to avoid a contradiction in Romans 1:20 by proposing that “seeing” really meant “perceiving.” By saying that “the knowledge of God... is innate in us,” Michael gave me the impression that man’s (alleged) knowledge of the Christian god was *a priori* - i.e., known *independent of* experience. But the earlier discussion indicating that this “knowledge of God” comes to us through some means of “perception” - a la the “sensus divinitatis” - suggested that such (alleged) knowledge is *a posteriori* - i.e., known *as a result of* experience.

Michael indicated that he had not considered these questions before, and did not have ready answers to supply in response to them. Specifically he wrote:

These are high quality responses you’ve made and questions you’ve asked. There is no doubt I am being pushed to think new thoughts in these interactions, and I’m learning things in this interaction. let me acknowledge that at this point you are now asking me questions to which I have not before tried to formulate an answer.

Michael indicated that he needed some time to think about “the question whether the sensus [divinitatis] is a priori or a posteriori.”

Of course, it should be noted that the term “sensus divinitatis” is not found in the bible, nor are the concepts *a priori* and *a posteriori*. And because Romans 1 is rather vague, a variety of conflicting implications can be drawn from what can be read in that passage.

At any rate, I can certainly appreciate a thinker’s need to gather his thoughts on an issue before he commits them to writing. So in this regard, and in regard to the openness and cordial manner which Michael has displayed so far in our exchanges, I can definitely say that his conduct is very refreshing and commendable, especially in comparison to apologists who have unfortunately succumbed to the “bunker mentality” which [S. Joel Garver](#) associates with the inclination of many internet presuppositionalists to “come across as cocky know-it-alls who continually try to insult non-Christians.” Michael has exhibited none of these undesirable traits, and I wish more Christians like Michael would come and comment on my blog!

After a brief intermission, Michael posted a two-part comment (necessitated of course by Blogger’s very annoying character limit) in which he expressed willingness to focus attention on the epistemological questions raised by the notion of the “sensus divinitatis.” In the remainder of this post I will focus on Michael’s statements in this comment.

Michael wrote:

First, most importantly, I say this: 'You know deep down that God is there, you're just suppressing that truth'. I say this partly because it rings true to my experience, and partly because Romans 1 implies I should say just that.

While it's true that I really don't believe there are any gods (I'll speak more directly to Romans 1 on this below), I would not say that I think Michael's claim is "arrogant," but rather *presumptuous*, since it is a claim to know what other people believe in spite of what they say, especially about things which are said to reside beyond the reach of man's five natural senses and in a realm that is accessible (from all that I can tell) only by means of imagination, and also because it necessarily implies that those whom it references are morally opposed to truth. I don't see how anyone could *legitimately* know such things about other people's minds, especially those whom he's not met, when in fact if he received a box in the mail from some mysterious address that had no markings other than the address label to him, he'd have no way of knowing what's in it until he opened it and checked. How could one know what's in the mind of a person he's never met who resides some 10,000 miles away, when he couldn't know what's enclosed in a sealed box he holds in his own hands?

Needless to say, a believer in any supernatural being could make any claim about those who don't believe, and he might very well think it "rings true" to his experience, and may even have some document which states it explicitly.

Then again, I could very well point out (as in fact I do think) that Michael knows deep down that he's really only *imagining* his god, but has been suppressing this fact. I would say this because of numerous points of evidence in favor of this recognition and the fact that there's no evidence that refutes it. (See, for instance, my blog [The Imaginative Nature of Christian Theism](#).)

But I wonder if Michael would say that this claim he's making would "ring... true to [his] experience" if he had never read Paul's epistle to the Romans, or the entire NT for that matter. I know that before I ever studied the NT, I probably never would have thought this, unless I were simply imagining on my own and projecting from my imaginative experience. In fact, it seems that the contents of the bible serves as a source of suggestions from which believers draw when they interpret the world and its elements according to their worldview.

Romans 1 suggests that I, as Michael puts it, "know deep down that God [exists]" and that I'm really just "suppressing this." If I really do know something to be the case but am "suppressing" that knowledge, I want to know this. I am aware of my desires, and I am not aware of any desire of mine to suppress something I really know to be true. But this is what I'm accused of. So, I take a look into my mind to see what I can find. When I introspect and look at the "knowledge" I have of the Christian god, I recognize that it is actually *imaginary* in nature. I can *imagine* the Christian god just as easily as anyone else who is familiar with the NT. But the problem is that *what I'm imagining is still imaginary*. And I'm adult enough to recognize that the imaginary is *not real*. To say I "believe" that the Christian god is real, would require me to suppress the fact, which I have confirmed by firsthand review, that my imagination is doing the alleged "knowing" here, and to do that I would have to be *dishonest*. But I refuse to be dishonest. So now what?

Not only do I find that I have to use my imagination even to think about the Christian god (drawing from the OT and NT for primary inputs to assemble an integrated image in my mind), but there's also the unfathomable diversity of god-belief even within Christianity proper, complete with dynastic schisms, doctrinal infighting, raging debates, backbiting quarrels, party shunning, charges of heresy, break-off sects, etc., all dividing the "body of Christ" almost down to a person. There's no end to all the *-isms* which Christian thinkers invent to distinguish one group of believers from another, and this has been necessary only because of the profound *lack of uniformity* of teachings among the plethora of Christian factions that exist today and have existed since its earliest founding (for Paul's epistles themselves indicate that in his day, rival factions already colored the Christian landscape). Today's seminary graduate might refer to himself as an "a-mil supralapsarian compatibilist" holding to the substitutionary theory of atonement, to which the Jesus of the gospels would, in great despair, probably say, "What!?"

When discussing possible objections to the Christian view, Michael invoked Sigmund Freud and pointed out that he “was full of ‘you really think this deep down, even though you deny it’, and he was taken reasonably seriously.”

Yes, Freud took a similar approach, and for a while he enjoyed wide popularity. But while his influence may still hold sway with some thinkers, his ideas have been questioned pretty much beyond repair. And Michael’s not the first, so far as I’m aware, to liken the claim we find in Romans 1 to what we find in Freud’s theories. I’m reminded of Anton Thorn’s retort to the view that “all men know” that the Christian god exists, but some “suppress it in unrighteousness” when he wrote:

This is as unfalsifiable as the Freudian claim that all women suffer from penis-envy. Any woman’s denial of it can be interpreted as evidence of her guilt. ([A Dialogue with Greg Bahnsen](#))

But yes, I will deny the claim that I actually “know” that the Christian god exists, and I deny it because I know it’s not true.

However, I don’t want to focus on me, but rather on the Christian doctrine itself, specifically with regard to the epistemological questions which Romans 1 raises (which I presented above).

The notion of the SD is apparently inspired by verses like Romans 1:20 which basically say that everyone automatically knows the Christian god. When Michael says that it “could be *a priori* or *a posteriori* or both,” he’s basically saying that to whatever extent this notion is suggested in the NT, its nature is vague, even unknown, at least to him. But he’s the one who invoked it in response to objections to Christianity in the first place.

Before one can address the question of whether the “*sensus divinitatis*” is *a posteriori* or *a priori*, one would need to know what specifically the word “*sensus divinitatis*” is supposed to *denote*. Does it denote some item of knowledge, a method by which knowledge is acquired and validated, or a mode of awareness? Or, does it denote something else? Once we have this part ironed out (and that would include good reasoning or solid evidence to support the claim that the “*sensus divinitatis*” actually exists in the first place, a task which is still outstanding so far as I can tell), then we can determine whether or not either category - *a posteriori* or *a priori* - applies, or perhaps even doesn’t apply. Typically these categories are applied to *knowledge* which one holds or claims to have. Either way, none of this rests on me. Since my worldview does not affirm something called “*sensus divinitatis*,” these questions are not something I need to answer.

I have to say that the whole notion of the SD seems to have been invented by believers to bolster the credibility of verses like Romans 1:20. The bible itself does not name any faculty or item of knowledge as “*sensus divinitatis*,” and my experience with the term as it is used in apologetics is that it is sometimes invoked, but typically not explained. It’s as though the notion were invented to fill the need to point to some “faculty” which human beings allegedly have to correspond to the claim that all men have knowledge of the Christian god. But this is precisely where the claim breaks down: since a “faculty” has been identified as presumably the means by which human beings “know” the Christian god, we can now explore the anatomy of human knowing to see if in fact such a faculty really exists. That’s why I asked the question that I did in a previous message, beginning with: if the SD is a mode of perception, is it biological (like all of man’s other modes of perception), or not? We’ve made no progress so far in answering this question.

Michael wrote:

If ‘what has been made’ is ‘that which we experience of the world around us’, the SD is a *posteriori*, since in that case, we know God on the basis of our experience of the external world.

If the “*sensus divinitatis*” is a mode of perception, then presumably any knowledge one acquires by use of it would be *a posteriori*, since personal experience is involved in the knowing process (as is the case with any knowledge acquired through the use of any of the five known modes of perception). But again, I would point out that if the “*sensus divinitatis*” is a mode of perception, then we’re again back to the point which I have already raised, namely that perception gives us awareness of *objects*, not *knowledge*. Perception by itself is not sufficient to give us *knowledge*. We perceive objects but merely perceiving them does not give us knowledge of what they are.

I can drive down a street here in Bangkok and *perceive* building after building, with signs written in a different language, but that's not enough to give me *knowledge* of what those signs say or what kind of buildings they are (whether residential, governmental, commercial, etc.). And it's not because I just haven't perceived one more object that I am still lacking knowledge here, but because I need to perform a series of *mental processes* - namely *abstraction* and *integration* - in order to *identify* what I have seen and thus *have knowledge* of the objects of my perception.

In fact, just this afternoon as I was preparing to pick up my daughter from school, I was getting ready to leave my condo; I grabbed my wallet, my cell phone, my keys, and headed out the door. Once I got out the door and had already locked it, I suddenly realized that I had locked my keys in my condo! I had grabbed the wrong set of keys. What had happened was that I did in fact *perceive* the keys, but I didn't take the time to *identify* them properly. Luckily a friend of mine has a full set of my condo's keys, so I was able to get back in without much trouble.

But since identifying what we perceive is a process subsequent to perceiving itself, merely perceiving is not sufficient to give us knowledge. Indeed, dogs perceiving things everywhere they go, but they lack the conceptual ability to identify and integrate what they perceive, and thus have nothing that compares to what we understand by knowing something.

Really, if we want to exonerate Romans 1:20 from containing an internal contradiction ("clearly seeing" something that is "invisible"), it seems to be saying we are unavoidably aware of something and this something is unmistakable evidence of the Christian god. So we have to ask, regarding the "sensus divinitatis" and the claim made in Romans 1:

- a) *What* is it that we are aware of which supposedly gives us knowledge of or serves as unmistakable evidence of the Christian god?
- b) By what means do we have awareness of a)?
- c) If in answer to b) the Christian points to the "sensus divinitatis," what sense organ(s) (if any) does this (alleged) faculty of awareness require and use?
- d) Since the objects of our awareness are finite, material, natural, and corruptible, what justifies the supposition that they are evidence of something that is said to be infinite, immaterial, supernatural and incorruptible?

Also, since all human beings are said to be "without excuse," not only would we have to suppose that the knowledge process contained in this mysterious epistemological chain which produces knowledge of the Christian god is infallible (there can't be any possibility of making mistakes, since we're *all* said to be "without excuse"), but also that any sensory organ or cognitive faculty involved in this knowing process must be incorruptible. For instance, a person can be born blind or lose his vision during the course of his life. Thus, he cannot reasonably be expected to have visual awareness of something when he can't see. Similarly with hearing, smelling, and tasting. Some people even lose tactile sensation in parts of their body, such as if they become paralyzed. But in the case of the "sensus divinitatis," given the claim that *all* human beings are "without excuse," every element involved in the process by which one is said to have knowledge of the Christian god must be immune to impairment of any kind. But our bodies are fragile and subject to deterioration, and many are born lacking certain faculties. What faculties do we have that are impervious to impairment, corruption, deterioration, disfigurement, or damage?

Again, we have a very tall claim, but upon investigation, it appears that there's no objective evidence whatsoever to back it up.

Michael wrote:

If on the other hand 'what has been made' is 'ourselves', then the SD may be a priori. In this case, we can say that we know God because we sense within ourselves that we are made by God. In this case, our knowledge of God may simply be in us, in an a priori fashion.

But if the “knowledge that God exists” (or something akin to this) is something comes by “sensing” something (cf. “we know God because we *sense* within ourselves that we are made by God”), then we’re talking knowledge that is *a posteriori*, and this will necessarily involve a volitional operation of identification, and it seems wildly unrealistic to expect all individuals regardless of when and where they live, or even perhaps how much they may have matured cognitively, to perform precisely the same cognitive operation, *and wind up with the same results to boot*.

At any rate, if one holds that *all* human beings who have lived, are living, and will live, do this, then I’d say the onus is on him to produce some very powerful evidence indeed. And involved in this would be the need to identify the mode by which the “sensing” in question happens, and an analysis of the identificatory operation which everyone supposedly has, does and will *choose* to perform. If the volitional aspect of identification is denied, then we are essentially robots, and just doing what we are programmed to do, in which case there’s no justice in saying everyone’s without excuse. ‘Excuse’ in such a context would be a stolen concept, since one of its key genetic roots - namely volition - is being denied.

Needless to say, there are some problems here. And they aren’t for me to resolve.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: ["Sensus Divinitatis"](#), [cognitive reliability](#), [Epistemology](#), [Knowledge](#)

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [7:00 AM](#)