

Sunday, July 26, 2009

## A Rejoinder to Chris Bolt

Chris Bolt has posted [a response](#) to [my blog](#) critiquing his statements concerning the [conditions of knowledge](#).

**Chris:** “The discussion of concepts being entailed in beliefs presented by Bethrick does not strike me as being any sort of refutation.”

It’s a refutation of the view that knowledge is composed of beliefs, as if beliefs are irreducible primaries. I showed that this is incorrect in [my blog](#).

Anyway, my point in regard to beliefs was that they are not irreducible, and that knowledge is in fact composed of concepts, not of “beliefs” per se. And since knowledge is composed of concepts, to have an account for knowledge you need a theory of concepts. Consequently, a worldview which lacks a theory of concepts (such as Christianity) cannot provide an account for knowledge.

**Chris:** “When I write that beliefs are not reducible to being natural or physical things I do not mean anything like what Bethrick takes ‘natural’ to mean. That is, he is guilty of equivocation.”

How am I equivocating? Either concepts are natural, or they are not. If they are, and beliefs are composed of concepts, then beliefs are in fact reducible to natural things. I am not equivocating because I do not equate “natural” with “physical.” They are two different concepts.

**Chris:** “Of course ‘concepts are a natural part of the human mind’s cognition’ in many senses, but not when we define ‘natural’ as ‘physical’ as opposed to ‘non-physical’.”

Who does this? And where did you make this clarification in your blog? I don’t see that you did.

**Chris:** “Now Bethrick may not be a materialist. If he is not a materialist I would love to hear it for this would prompt further inquiry regarding his doctrine.”

If by “materialism” we understand to mean a worldview which denies the axiom of consciousness, then obviously I am not a materialist. For my worldview affirms the axiom of consciousness.

**Chris:** “Bethrick writes that beliefs are ‘mental integrations’.”

Actually, I wrote this about concepts.

**Chris:** “Are mental integrations physical (natural) or not?”

Again, I do not equate the concepts “physical” and “natural.” I certainly do not think they are synonymous. Mental integrations are an activity of consciousness. So far as I know, I would not class them as “physical” objects.

**Chris:** “If he states that they are non-physical then he, by his own standards, fails to state what beliefs actually are with respect to his statement.”

As I stated above, I have identified mental integrations as an activity of consciousness. This is what they \*are\* in an ontological sense. You do acknowledge that consciousness exists, don’t you? You do recognize that consciousness is active, right?

**Chris:** “That is, Bethrick is only pressing the problem further back.”

How so?

**Chris:** “What about consciousness itself; is it physical?”

So far as I know, consciousness is its own kind of existent. Also, it is necessarily an attribute, namely of a certain class of biological organisms, and specifically one that is active in nature. Consciousness is *not* an entity. The organism possessing consciousness is the entity, and consciousness is one of its attributes.

**Chris:** “Again, natural objects do not possess the feature of ‘aboutness’.”

But physical objects can. For instance, when I go to the zoo and get a brochure, it’s “about” the zoo. Of course, while the brochure is physical, it is not naturally occurring; it is man-made.

By the way, who says that “natural objects do not possess the feature of ‘aboutness’”? How would one show this without having omniscience of all natural objects?

**Chris:** “Concerning truth is Bethrick of the persuasion that an ‘aspect of conceptual awareness’ is physical or not?”

See above.

Again, since I affirm the axiom of consciousness, and I don’t think consciousness is a physical entity, but its own type of existent, there’s no problem here on my position.

**I wrote:** “Truth is a relationship between the subject of cognition and its objects... the objects of consciousness are what they are independent of anyone’s conscious activity.”

**Chris:** “Perhaps this is a misunderstanding on my part but it looks like these two statements lead to a contradiction if they are not themselves contradictory.”

The problem is Chris’ understanding. That the objects of consciousness are what they are independent of consciousness in no way contradicts the fact that we can have awareness of them. Where’s the contradiction?

**I wrote:** “the ‘belief’ that it is snowing in Miami because you dreamed it is snowing there, is only objectionable if one assumes the primacy of existence, the view that the objects of consciousness are what they are independent of consciousness activity, that the task of consciousness is not to create or alter reality, but to perceive and identify it.”

**Chris:** “Actually no, for if the world is as God says it is then whether or not it is snowing in Miami is not contingent upon the human consciousness in view here.”

This ignores what the primacy of existence teaches, namely that the objects of consciousness are what they are independent of *any* consciousness. Notice that Chris needs to qualify his use of consciousness in his response to specify “*human* consciousness.” In other words, he cannot consistently affirm the primacy of existence; he must make allowances for some consciousness (which he can only imagine) as the base of contingency of occurrences on earth. Chris is simply confirming that Christianity assumes the primacy of consciousness. But I already know this.

**Chris:** “Perhaps it would be better for Bethrick to stick with the ‘self-evident’ nature of the primacy of existence rather than to try and prove it through such large leaps.”

I’ve not tried to prove it, nor do I need to. It is preconditional to any proof. The alternative to the primacy of existence amounts to affirming that wishing makes it so, that consciousness dictates what reality is and what its objects do and can do.

**Chris:** “Of course I do not quite understand the Objectivists’ more specific objection to Christian Theism at this point anyway, their theory being that consciousness itself exists and hence the axiom of consciousness does not in any way contradict the metaphysical primacy of existence.”

For starters, see [here](#).

**Chris:** “If this is the case then I do not see where the problem is with the Christian God as a conscious being according

to Objectivist standards.”

For starters, see [here](#).

**Chris:** “Bethrick is missing my point here though. Even if the “primacy of existence” is assumed, why is it *objectionable* to suggest that there may be knowledge of snow in Miami based upon a dream? Why is it *wrong* to think this way? We are speaking of knowledge of facts, not facts themselves.”

I addressed this specifically in my blog. Relying on a dream to tell you about reality fails to adhere to an objective method.

**Chris:** “We are not speaking of whether or not it actually is snowing or not in Miami. Bethrick appears to confuse these two categories.”

Not at all, since my entire discussion explicitly recognizes the distinction between the subject of knowledge and the objects of knowledge. Hence the need to come to grips with the subject-object relationship, something no biblical author attempts to do.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Beliefs](#), [Concepts](#), [Knowledge](#)

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [3:00 PM](#)

## 5 Comments:

[madmax](#) said...

Dawson,

More awesome stuff.

When Chris refuses to distinguish between 'natural' and 'physical' he is using a strategy that I have now seen numerous times from theistic apologists. They are trying to prove that supernaturalism is valid and they argue that rejecting supernaturalism is like rejecting consciousness because consciousness is 'not natural' just like their 'supernatural god' is not 'natural'. This is connected to their argument that all atheists are materialists and materialists deny the existence of consciousness and reduce everything to matter. While that does describe materialists, it is not true that all atheists are materialists. Objectivists certainly aren't.

In one sense, I am almost sympathetic to theistic arguments like Chris Bolt's because many secularists \*are\* materialists and materialism does lead to subjectivism which IMO does inevitably lead to Leftist politics which leads to tyranny. Also, I don't think that an anti-materialist secularism has ever really existed prior to Rand although I could be wrong there. And understanding Objectivism's rejection of materialism is not easy. It took me a great deal of reading to get it and I still have more work to do.

That said, its crucial to argue, as you do, that 'physical' or 'material' and 'natural' are not the same thing. Its true that concepts are not material, that logical proofs are not material, that mathematical theorem's are not material, and that consciousness itself might not be material (ultimately for neuro-science to answer I think) but that in no way means that because they are not material they are therefore supernatural (the theistic position). This whole argument is designed to conflate the metaphysical with the epistemological. Concepts, theorems, logic all have epistemological status not metaphysical. They do not exist as Platonic archetypes in some supernatural realm (ie "the mind of God") as theist's believe.

So, once again, you are doing Yeoman's work in countering theistic presuppositions and arguments and your site really is becoming a "one-stop-site" for counter-arguments to theism.

[July 27, 2009 6:36 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hi Madmax,

Thanks for your comments.

Many apologists equate 'natural' and 'physical' implicitly, but with Chris it's explicit. But a thing can be natural without being physical, and vice versa. For instance, consciousness is natural, but it's not physical. Meanwhile, a stapler is physical, but it's not natural, it's man-made. On my view, if someone uses 'natural' I tend to think the alternative is man-made. Of course, for the theist, the alternative to natural is "supernatural," but this is where he departs from reality and retreats into the imaginary.

In regard to materialism, I think it's necessary to ask: what's the problem? What does materialism say? "Everything is material" is typically how it is characterized. Well, what's wrong with this? We know that matter exists. "But logic is not material," they might say. Fine. Logic is conceptual, and the conceptual has to do with human consciousness. That's why in my blog I make the clarification: "If by 'materialism' we understand to mean a worldview which denies the axiom of consciousness, then obviously I am not a materialist. For my worldview affirms the axiom of consciousness." This cuts to the heart of the issue.

The real reason why apologists will associate mental or psychological phenomena with the supernatural, is because "the supernatural" is in fact imaginary. So the association with other aspects of mental activity is immediate. That is why the conceptual realm will always be treated as a doorway to the supernaturalist's object of veneration. Look at Michael Butler's comments:

"That the Christian worldview can account for the principles of logic is readily demonstrable. Christianity allows for abstract and universal laws. Abstract because the Christian worldview teaches that more things exist than material objects. Thus it makes sense for there to be abstractions." ([TAG vs. TANG](#))

For Butler, providing an "account for the principles of logic" is so easy: Just "allow... for abstract and universal laws" and "teach... that more things exist than material objects." Of course, it's not clear why other worldviews cannot do this (though we're told that only Christianity can). But is this really an "account for the principles of logic"? Does this move our understanding any closer to the nature of logic as it applies in human thought? I don't think so. The underlying reasoning is: "logic is immaterial, and so is God. If you use logic, then you grant the existence of the immaterial. Therefore, you cannot deny God's existence." But logic is not just "immaterial," it is conceptual. Is "God" too a concept? I thought it was supposed to be an independently existing entity. Presup resists delving into a deeper understanding of logic, because the alleged kinship between "God" and logic will dissolve. Logical principles, for instance, are not conscious entities, nor do they create existence. Etc.

I can understand your sympathy for protestations against materialism. But it's important to note that materialism is just the other side of the same coin as theism. Both reject the primacy of existence. It's important to keep in mind that the primacy of existence identifies a \*relationship\* between consciousness and its objects. Religion rejects the primacy of existence by explicitly granting primacy to consciousness in the subject-object relationship. Materialism rejects the primacy of existence by denying consciousness, so there's no relationship between consciousness and objects possible. Both theists and materialists typically fail to recognize that they're joined at the hip, that in terms of philosophical principles, they're kissing cousins. When presuppositionalists claim that materialists "borrow" from Christianity, they don't realize how right they are. The primacy of consciousness is the ultimate unquestioned premise serving as the common denominator among both archetypes.

Regards,  
Dawson

[July 28, 2009 9:15 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Also, MM, you might find this interesting.

In his [blog](#), Chris Bolt raised the example of learning that it is snowing in Miami because one dreamed of it, as an example of having insufficient “warrant” for the belief that it is snowing in Miami in the case that it really is snowing in Miami. Chris says that “there is a right way and a wrong way to believe things,” and his implication is clearly that going by what one sees in a dream is a “wrong way to believe things.”

Now, if I truly believed the Christian god exists and is active in people’s lives, and that there is such a thing as a “sensus divinitatus” by which this god communes directly with the believer (see the comments [here](#)), why suppose that learning about snowfall in Miami through a dream is “without warrant,” that this constitutes a “wrong way to believe things”?

In Genesis 20 we read how this god speaks to Abimelech in a dream on two occasions. In Numbers 12:6, the “Lord” promises to speak to a prophet in a dream. In Matthew 1:20, this same deity appears to Joseph in a dream, telling him about Mary having been impregnated by the Holy Spirit.

There are, then, examples of the Christian god communicating to human beings through dreams, which serve as precedents which the Christian needs to take seriously.

How, then, can Chris Bolt consistently claim that learning of something about reality through a dream lacks “warrant” and is a “wrong way to believe things”? If the Christian god came to a believer in a dream and told him in that dream that it is snowing in Miami, wouldn’t the believer be in “sin” if he disputed this? Wouldn’t he be relying on “men’s wisdom” if he thought he needed to check the facts first?

Also, if the believer did have a dream that it is snowing in Miami, how would he determine whether or not this was a communication from a god which has been known to come to human beings in their dreams and give them messages which they are supposed to accept as knowledge?

Tell me, who’s being consistent with his worldview, and who isn’t? And who is borrowing from whose worldview?

Regards,  
Dawson

[July 28, 2009 9:43 AM](#)

[madmax](#) said...

"But it’s important to note that materialism is just the other side of the same coin as theism...The primacy of consciousness is the ultimate unquestioned premise serving as the common denominator among both archetypes."

What an excellent identification. I have never thought of that relationship between theism and materialism before. Materialism replaces one version of the primacy of consciousness (the supernatural version) with another version (either the social or personal). Theism says we are ruled by god, materialism says we are ruled by glands. Your point about "kissing cousins" reminds me of how mystics and skeptics are also kissing cousins in a way. Mystics / theists assert (divine) omniscience as their epistemological standard. Skeptics accept omniscience as the ultimate standard but say its impossible. They then deny that the attainment of any absolute knowledge is possible. Both materialism and skepticism are really just irrational reactions against theistic positions. Thanks for making me aware of that.

[July 28, 2009 5:08 PM](#)

[Andrew Dalton](#) said...

Another way of looking at the false alternative of supernaturalism vs. materialism is that both sides agree that consciousness, if it exists, must have properties that are spooky, non-causal, and otherworldly. They part ways over whether to accept or reject *that* notion of consciousness, with no alternative view of consciousness being considered at all.

[July 29, 2009 8:39 AM](#)

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