

Bolt on Evidence and the Need to Take a Claim Seriously

As with [many Christian apologists](#), Chris Bolt exhibits a special knack for embarrassing himself. He recently took a comment of mine and has attempted to interact with it in [a blog of his own](#). The results are, well, rather dismal.

The statement of mine which Bolt has seized upon is the following:

If there is no evidence for a proposition, there is no need to take it seriously.

Since context is important, I will repeat my above quote with its original surrounding statements (see my 11 Oct. comment [here](#)):

Justin stated: “There is absolutely no evidence that the universe will start acting chaotic the next second...”

Chris: “This is irrelevant to the problem, though I think Dawson would disagree with me in this.”

Me: “Yes, I do disagree. Knowledge (objective knowledge, that is) is built on factual evidence, not on hypotheses which are arbitrary in nature (rightly understood - see OPAR pp. 163-171). If there is no evidence for a proposition, there is no need to take it seriously. If someone tells you that he has a dragon living in his garage but can produce no evidence for it, there’s no need to take that claim seriously. Feel free to disagree, Chris.”

I’m guessing that by posting an entire blog devoted to grappling with this one statement (and an example) which I made in a comment of [one of my own blogs](#), Chris Bolt is expressing disagreement with some or all of what I had stated above.

In the leading statement, Justin Hall points out to Bolt essentially what I had stated: On the Objectivist view, if a proposition has no evidential support for it, there is no need to take it seriously. Of course, a skeptic (someone whom Bolt says we “must” take seriously) may come along and claim that our projections of future happenings are inherently unreliable because the universe could suddenly start behaving chaotically in the next moment. Justin’s point was that, if there is no evidence to support the supposition that the universe could start behaving chaotically in the next moment, it is not worth our attention. It is clear that Bolt does not think one should require evidence to take such proposals seriously. That may “work” in his faith-based epistemology, but Objectivism has more important tasks for its theory of knowledge.

To inform my point, I cited the fact that objective knowledge is built on factual evidence rather than on arbitrary hypotheses. In addition to this, I gave a reference which further expands on what I mean here. I also gave an example to illustrate my point.

In his blog, Bolt seems anxious to discredit the principle which I stated, but has a very hard time doing so. A noteworthy deficiency in his analysis is its glaring ignorance of the content of the source which I cited to back up my position. It is clear from what Bolt has written, both here and elsewhere, that he has no informed understanding of the Objectivist position to which I alluded. He has attempted to interact with my position without knowing “the fullness thereof.”

In challenging my statement, Bolt raised four concerns, beginning with the following:

First, there needs to be a definition of “evidence”. Different people consider different things to constitute evidence. One needs to know what type of evidence one must require in order to take a proposition seriously.

Peikoff provides a definition of ‘evidence’ in the source which I cited in my comment (OPAR). Had Bolt taken the time to familiarize himself with the Objectivist position before attempting to defeat it, he might have seen that his first concern has already been addressed in the literature.

Next, Bolt states:

Second, there needs to be evidence provided for this proposition itself. Since the proposition is not self-evident, and since no other evidence for accepting the proposition is provided with the proposition, then there is no reason to take it seriously according to the proposition itself.

Same problem here. The evidence for the position is the Objectivist analysis of knowledge, beginning with the primacy of existence, and including the objective theory of concepts. This is why I pointed out to Bolt that knowledge, on the objective conception of it, is built on factual evidence as opposed to arbitrary hypotheses. Again, this concern has already been addressed in the literature, and Bolt would have known this if he were familiar with his subject matter.

Bolt's next concern is:

Third, it is not clear what is meant by "no evidence". An individual having no evidence for a proposition is a very different matter from there being no evidence at all to be had by anyone at anytime for a proposition. An individual may have no evidence for a proposition and hence not take it seriously when there is in actuality evidence for the proposition to be taken seriously. There may actually be no evidence at all for a proposition, but how a limited subject would come to know this might become a problem depending upon the proposition.

It's curious to me that Bolt does not understand the phrase "no evidence." "No evidence" means "no evidence." I see no reason to make this more difficult. My statement was not "if a person has difficulty producing evidence for his claim, then there is no need to take it seriously," or "if there is in actuality evidence for a proposition but an individual may not have it, there's no need to take it seriously." As I said, "no evidence" means "no evidence." Bolt seems to be having trouble dealing with the principle which I stated on its own terms.

Last, Bolt writes:

Fourth, if there is evidence for a proposition then one presumably needs to take it seriously. It would need to be explained why anyone would "need" to do so, however, and this without appealing to other evidenced propositions lest an infinite regress be the result.

My statement does not affirm - nor is it intended to imply - the view that one does in fact *need* to take a proposition seriously if it has evidence for it. This would be determined by one's hierarchy of values. Observing that claims of a certain type (e.g., those lacking evidential support) do not impute a need to take them seriously, does not entail that claims of any other type (e.g., those which do have evidential support) do impute such a need. It may be the case that the proposition in question does in fact have evidential support for it (such as which team won last night's pennant game), and yet represents no impact on one's values to begin with (since he couldn't care less about sports scores). No one "needs" to do anything but die, and this comes naturally. The activities which we undertake in life, are undertaken *by choice*. Whether it's going off to work, conversing with a friend, buying groceries, putting the car into park, looking at the calendar, calling a loved one, or writing a blog entry, each of these things we do *by choice*. This is all explained in the source which I have cited in my comment. So again, Bolt's concern has already been answered in the literature, he's simply unfamiliar with it.

Next Bolt focused on the example which I gave to illustrate my point:

If someone tells you that he has a dragon living in his garage but can produce no evidence for it, there's no need to take that claim seriously.

In response to this, Bolt writes:

Unless the term refers to *varanus komodoensis* or some of its relatives that may share the label, dragons are known to be mythical creatures and therefore would not be found living in garages. This is the real reason someone might not take the claim in question seriously. There are problems with the statement quoted above even if we substitute a non-mythical entity into it. Consider, "If someone tells you that he has a llama kushing in his garage but can produce no evidence for it, there's no need to take that claim seriously." Is this statement true?

Not at all. Just because an individual cannot produce evidence for some claim does not mean that the claim is false, nor does it mean that there is no evidence for the claim. It may be that the claim is true and that

there is evidence for accepting the claim but the individual making the claim cannot produce said evidence. It has been said, “A lack of evidence is not evidence of lack”. There is no reason to not take such a claim about a llama kushing in a garage seriously, even when the individual making the claim produces no evidence for it. Please note that taking a claim seriously and accepting the claim as true are two different things.

Bolt does bring up a good point here. Essentially, he asks: to what specifically does the claimant refer by his use of the word “dragon”? This of course would need to be sorted out if one does choose to undertake the project of investigating his claim. He could refer to a Komodo dragon, as Bolt suggests, or to a mythical beast mentioned in a storybook. He could even be referring to his mother-in-law, or perhaps a nasty tenant. But in either case, if we go to his garage and find no evidence of the “dragon” he claims is living there, and he can produce no evidence to support it, why would anyone still *need* to take it seriously?

Bolt apparently thinks we do need to take it seriously, though it is unclear why he thinks this, as this is the point he is trying to make in regard to the claim that “he has a llama kushing in his garage.” Now of course, llamas do exist, and if I understand what “kushing” is supposed to mean, I suppose this is an action possible for llamas to perform. Even given these premises, it is unclear why anyone would consequently have a *need* to take this claim seriously. But supposing we do choose to investigate it, but when we go to this fellow’s garage we find no evidence of a llama, and he is unable to produce evidence for any llama, why suppose anyone has a *need* to take his claim that he has a llama in his garage seriously any further? Bolt does not explain this.

Bolt states that simply because the claimant is unable to produce evidence for his claim, this does not mean that there is no evidence for it. That’s fine. But of course, I did not argue this. Bolt draws from this scenario that “there is no *reason* not to take such a claim about a llama kushing in a garage seriously,” but this too is not what I argued. I specifically stated that there’s no *need* to take such a claim seriously. A person may have no *need* to take a claim seriously, but still think of reasons for deciding to take it seriously. For instance, perhaps you’ve always wanted to see a llama kushing. One may see this as sufficient reason to pursue the claim further. Other reasons could be conceived as well. But what I have stated does not rule out such possibilities. Indeed, he may have evidence that there is a llama kushing in his garage, but this in itself is insufficient to imply that we have a *need* to take it seriously. Bolt fails to demonstrate any *need* to take such claims seriously, thus my statement remains intact.

Then Bolt quoted another statement of mine:

To affirm a possibility, one needs at least some evidence to support it, and no evidence against it.

Apparently he finds this highly summarized view of possibility deficient, for he states:

What was stated previously regarding propositions might be applied now to alleged possibilities. An individual having no evidence for an alleged possibility is a very different matter from there being no evidence at all to be had by anyone at anytime for an alleged possibility. An individual may have no evidence for an alleged possibility and hence not take it seriously when there is in actuality evidence for the alleged possibility to be taken seriously. There may actually be no evidence at all for an alleged possibility, but then how a limited subject would come to know this might become a problem depending upon the alleged possibility.

It’s important to keep in mind here that my point is intended to be taken in regard to first-person epistemology, not third-person narrative mode, a perspective which many philosophers seem to have a hard time shaking. If an individual has no evidence at all to support an alleged possibility, on what epistemological grounds does he then decide to take that alleged possibility seriously? Bolt cites none at all, let alone compelling grounds. So what is Bolt’s point here?

Is the individual expected to say to himself, “I know that I have no evidence to support this alleged possibility, but there may be evidence that I’m not aware of, so I should take it seriously anyway”? Wouldn’t he need at least some evidence for the supposition that there may be evidence that he’s not aware of? Or is his ignorance itself supposed to be taken as sufficient evidence? Wouldn’t this lead down to an argument from ignorance? Is the individual not allowed to go on the facts that he has discovered and validated?

Now it should also be borne in mind that the principles which I have affirmed in no way prohibit an individual from expanding his knowledge as he makes discovery of new facts. Context is vital here. For it is within the context of the

knowledge which we have already validated that we integrate newly discovered facts.

Also, it seems that Bolt has missed the second half of the principle which I stated, namely “and no evidence against it.” If someone is told that something is possible, and he is given no evidence to support it, knows of no evidence which supports it, and in fact has evidence against it, then he is right to reject it. But perhaps Bolt doesn’t like this either. That’s too bad. For him.

Take for example the claim that the Christian god exists. What Christians proffer as evidence to support the claim that it exists continually turns out under examination not merely to be insufficient, but often to be contrived, misconstrued, or simply empty. Meanwhile, there is ample evidence against the alleged truth of god-belief claims (such as the primacy of existence). Given this context, one is more than justified in rejecting the Christian’s god-belief claims. This entails the fact that one can only accept god-belief claims by ignoring, or in fact denying, the over-arching context which the primacy of existence provides for knowledge in the first place, since the primacy of existence is axiomatic, undeniable, and inescapable. The theist himself assumes its truth, while his theism denies its truth.

Bolt then produced a hypothetical example of someone considering the claim that the earth is not flat presumably without the benefit, for example, of modern technology (such as trans-oceanic seafaring, space travel, and the like):

Consider the Objectivist man living long ago who observed the flatness of Earth about him. When presented with the alleged possibility that Earth is not flat, no evidence was found to support it. His observations of the flatness of Earth about him were taken to be evidence against the alleged possibility that Earth is not flat. He therefore could not affirm even the possibility that Earth is not flat. Rather, he exclaimed, “On my worldview, I work from the evidence, not from hypothetical ‘possibilities’ which are essentially no different from fantasies posing as considerations which need to be taken seriously”. The man never came into contact with what he would consider evidence to support the position that Earth is other than flat and thus could not affirm the possibility that Earth is not flat. He even thought he had good evidence against the possibility. His conclusion was that it is impossible that Earth is not flat. Perhaps the man was mistaken due to the Objectivist view of possibility he adhered to, or perhaps it is impossible that Earth is other than flat. The latter conclusion is false and the former is true. The man was mistaken due to the Objectivist view of possibility. The view is seriously flawed.

I highly doubt that the would-be “Objectivist man living long ago” would, as a matter of default, simply assume that the earth is flat. He would require evidence for this position just as much as he would need evidence for any other position on the matter. For instance, in his experience of the earth, he may see primarily mountainous regions. I myself grew up surrounded by mountains and hills; this landscape in no way suggested to me that the earth is “flat.”

In the present case which Bolt asks us to consider, it must be noted that, in order to make an evaluation of the would-be Objectivist’s reasoning concerning the claim that the earth is flat or possibly flat, we would need to know what specifically he was told. The claim that the earth is not flat does not exclusively entail the understanding that the earth is spherical, for instance. One could deny the earth’s flatness, but affirm that it has the shape of an undulating wave, that it is curvedly polyhedral, or that it has the shape of a turtle’s shell (I’m reminded of *The Portable Presuppositionalist*, p. 134.n15). Again, context is vital here. When this individual was “presented with the alleged possibility that Earth is not flat,” what specifically was the alternative indicated? Why wasn’t evidence provided in support of it? What indicators accompanied the claim that the earth is not flat? The scenario which Bolt presents here tends to require us to consider knowledge claims in a sterile environment, when in fact we each bring an enormous context to the knowledge claims we are asked to consider. I’d think even a presuppositionalist could appreciate this.

If Bolt is supposing that there was no evidence available to the peoples of the past to support the inference that the earth is in fact spherical, he’s wrong. Aristotle cited ample observational evidence - for instance, the visibility of certain constellations given one’s latitude on the earth’s surface, the shadow cast by the earth on the moon during an eclipse - that the earth is in fact spherical. (As a side note, Rand herself would probably argue that the Objectivist of the “long ago” past was Aristotle, as her philosophy is predominantly influenced by Aristotle.) Subsequent observations added to this body of evidence. Ironically, for instance, it’s where the earth is “flattest” - such as on the surface of lake or sea - that its curvature is most apparent. Ships on the horizon, for instance, appear to displace

significantly more water (i.e., sit lower in the water) than they are known to.

It should also be pointed out that the earth as a whole is not perceivable in its entirety to anyone standing on its surface. So an individual cannot reasonably be expected to know automatically things about its overall shape - whether flat or spherical or something else - that would be confirmable only from such a vantage. In biblical times, for instance, it was generally assumed that the earth was in fact a flat surface resting on pillars. In Isaiah 40:22, for instance, we read of what the author calls "the circle of the earth." Curiously, many Christian apologists cite this verse as evidence that its authors were aware of the fact that the earth is actually spherical in shape. But a circle is not a sphere. A circle, like a disc, is *flat*, not spherical.

In his conclusion, Bolt states the following:

In any event, given Dawson's rule, "If there is no evidence for a proposition, there is no need to take it seriously" there is no reason to take his statement "To affirm a possibility, one needs at least some evidence to support it, and no evidence against it" seriously. It may be that it should not even be considered possibly true.

The evidence which I offer for the truth of my statements includes (but is not limited to) the following:

- (a) the axioms, especially the axiom of consciousness (consciousness is consciousness *of something*),
- (b) the primacy of existence (existence exists independent of consciousness),
- (c) the integration of (a) and (b) - i.e., the implications which the primacy of existence have in regard to knowledge, e.g., the task of consciousness is to *perceive and identify* its objects, not create them or dictate what their identity should be, etc., and
- (d) the fact that concepts are ultimately formed on the basis of perceptual input.

Epistemologically, the only position open to us given these premises is that knowledge (which for man is conceptual in nature) ultimately requires the basis of perceptual input, i.e., evidence collected from reality which we observe and from which we form our initial concepts. Bolt is welcome to deny any of these points (a) through (d). But what would he offer in their place? Would he deny the truth of the axiom of consciousness? That would be directly self-defeating. Would he deny the truth of the primacy of existence? He would be making use of the principle while denying it. Would he argue that we should not integrate the axiom of consciousness with the principle of the primacy of existence? He would be arbitrarily putting up walls of separation between principles whose truths are self-evident. Would he deny the fact that man's knowledge is conceptual in nature? He would need to do this without using concepts. Would he try to argue that concepts are not ultimately formed on the basis of perceptual input? He would be admitting that, on his worldview, concepts have no objective basis. For that matter, where does he get a theory of concepts? Or does he even have one? Etc.

These problems are just the tip of the iceberg if he wants to dispute my position.

By Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Knowledge](#)

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [5:00 AM](#)

14 Comments:

[NAL](#) said...

C.L. Bolt:

It has been said, "A lack of evidence is not evidence of lack".

Not true.

[Absence of Evidence Is Evidence of Absence](#)

But in probability theory, absence of evidence is always evidence of absence.

And probability theory is the logic of science.

[October 14, 2009 5:13 PM](#)

[Justin Hall](#) said...

@NAL, so would you say a complete lack of evidence for god increases the probability that god does not exist?

[October 14, 2009 8:37 PM](#)

[NAL](#) said...

Yes.

But I would phrase it as: decreases the probability that god does exist.

[October 15, 2009 5:43 AM](#)

[C.L. Bolt](#) said...

The assumption that if God exists He must be discovered through the use of a particular view of the scientific method which involves probability theory is an instance of the Crackers in the Pantry Fallacy. All questions are not answered in the same way.

[October 15, 2009 4:51 PM](#)

[C.L. Bolt](#) said...

The assumption that the existence of God must be discovered*

My apologies.

[October 15, 2009 4:51 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Chris wrote: "All questions are not answered in the same way."

In other words, some questions (like those of science) are answered by rational investigation of the facts, while others (such as "theological truths") are answered by speculating on the basis of faith-based beliefs held paramount in the believer's imagination.

Got it.

Thanks!

Dawson

[October 15, 2009 7:21 PM](#)

[NAL](#) said...

If one's god is of the non-interventionist type, existing outside our space-time, then any event, used to condition the probability of this god hypothesis, would be independent of this hypothesis and hence, have no effect on the probability.

If one's god interferes with our space-time, then the effect of this interference can be detected even if the god cannot be detected. One could argue that the effect on our space-time by this interference cannot be objectively detected. In this case, the absence of objective evidence is objective evidence of absence.

[October 15, 2009 8:41 PM](#)

[Dylan](#) said...

Theists who claim "god" is "outside science" should stop making scientific claims about him.

[October 21, 2009 9:21 AM](#)

[madmax](#) said...

Dawson,

This is off topic to this post but I don't have an e-mail to reach you. I was wondering if you could look at this post by Larry Auster on the "revolutionary" importance of the Hebrew god. Auster believes that the Hebrew god stood outside of creation and therefore made possible the principle of intelligibility.

<http://www.amnation.com/vfr/archives/014708.html>

Auster's blog post is short and at the top. The rest is comments from the faithful. I think it is the other way around. The god that exists "outside the universe" IMO set mankind back by introducing the worst kind of metaphysical subjectivism. Also, what does "outside the universe" mean? Is there the universe and god? But then that would mean that existence consists of god and the universe so does god not exist? And I think we have the problem of divine solipsism here. What existed before god created the universe? Just god? But if he was all that existed how could he differentiate himself from non-god, and if there was no non-god then how could he even know that he existed!?

Anyway, I was wondering what you thought of all this.

Thanks,

MM

[November 07, 2009 10:59 AM](#)

[madmax](#) said...

Also, I encountered a good article over at Auster's blog which challenges three things that you have written on. Kristor, one of Auster's "experts" on metaphysics argues that god must be necessary (first cause and necessary contingent arguments), that Divine Solipsism is false because the Trinity solves that problem, and the irreducible nature of god solves the problem of evil. All three arguments are somewhat sophisticated. More than I usually encounter.

Here is the link:

<http://www.amnation.com/vfr/archives/010889.html>

The posts to focus on are the three longish passages written by Kristor. They are somewhat sophisticated. I think I see errors in them but this is deep Christian metaphysics, something I think you would love. So if you ever get time, going through the errors in that link would be useful in countering Thomistic Apologists who, I am coming to believe, are far more sophisticated and interesting than Presuppositionalists.

For me, Kristor and Auster's insistence that the universe and eternity needs a prior logical cause is the central flaw from which the whole castle that they build, and it is one grand Judeo-Christian Palace that they construct, comes crashing down. They say that the Big Bang Theory has shown that the universe is not eternal and therefor nullified atheist arguments that the universe is eternal. This, they say, proves the existence of a creator god.

I think this is all stolen concepts and package deals like it always is. But it takes someone better than me to sift through this stuff and rip it into shreds. I'm hoping if you need material for future blog posts that you will find some good stuff in the links I have provided.

Best regards,

MM

[November 09, 2009 11:26 PM](#)

[NAL](#) said...

Kristor:

How do you get from sheer nothingness to an actual world, any actual world?

Then he posits that something exists ruining his assumption of sheer nothingness.

... a necessarily existent being, who, because he is necessary, has always existed, ...

Without time, "always" makes no sense. Kristor must first postulate the creation of time before "always" has any meaning. Even creation, a cause and effect process, requires time, so the creation of time makes no sense. That's the problem with trying to use terms and concepts whose understanding is based in our space-time.

I am unimpressed.

/BTW, it's time for another post.

[November 10, 2009 9:31 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hello Madmax & Nal,

Thanks for your comments!

Yes, I'm long overdue for a new post. I was just telling my boss today that we need to increase our days to 30 hours instead of 24. It's just not enough time to get everything done!

Very busy these days, with no light at the end of the tunnel for the foreseeable future. I have some drafts that need some minor editing before I'm ready to post them, but that of course takes time, of which I have precious little these days.

I have lots to say in response to the Auster link, but I'm thinking much of it has already been said. Madmax, check out my blog [Before the Beginning: The Problem of Divine Lonesomeness](#). From what I can tell, neither Auster nor his respondents come close to dealing with the problems I raise here in spite of its relevance to the topic they are discussing. Let me know if you disagree and I'll review it some more.

Regards,
Dawson

[November 13, 2009 11:21 PM](#)

[NAL](#) said...

A consciousness conscious of nothing but itself is a contradiction in terms: before it could identify itself as consciousness, it had to be conscious of something.

I had tried to understand that contradiction before, but just didn't get it. Maybe it's just a different wording, but I now get it. A real light-bulb moment.

/We are placated by the Divine Lonesomeness blog, but it won't last long.

[November 14, 2009 7:57 AM](#)

[madmax](#) said...

Dawson,

I just skimmed the post on Divine Lonesomeness. It looks great. I think it answers all the questions I raised. Thanks.

MM

[November 16, 2009 6:44 PM](#)