

Sunday, September 06, 2009

Bolt's Leaking Boat

In a recent [post](#), Chris Bolt has accused me of dishonesty. He has accused me of dishonesty when I have asked him to clarify something he stated without explanation.

One thing that is clear from Bolt's side of the recent discussion regarding knowledge of the world, is that omniscience and infallibility are the standard of certainty in his worldview, whereas in my worldview the facts of reality and of the nature of man's consciousness provide the standard, and man's nonomniscience is in no way a barrier to discovering and validating knowledge. Details can be found [here](#).

In my previous [discussion of Bolt's questions](#), where I pointed out the failure of his "global skepticism" argument (at least when it's directed at my position), I made the following statement:

I openly admit that I am neither omniscient nor infallible. But neither is he. So we're in the same boat.

Bolt's response to this statement was the following:

Of course this is not true, as I believe in an all-knowing God who has revealed Himself to us and cannot lie.

As stated here, it is not clear what Bolt has in mind as the antecedent of the pronoun "this" in the statement "this is not true." He did not make any effort to clarify that he was disagreeing with my statement that he too is neither omniscient nor infallible, or with my statement that he's not in the same boat because of something he *believes*. That is why I had asked in [a comment to Bolt's blog](#) the following:

So, Chris Bolt is omniscient and infallible? Or you simply believe in something that you imagine is omniscient and infallible? Big difference here. If it's the former, perhaps you can demonstrate your amazing powers of knowledge by producing the VIN and license number of my car. If it "is not true" that you are neither omniscient nor infallible, this should be a snap.

If it's the latter, what does merely believing "in an all-knowing God who has revealed Himself to us and cannot lie" have to do with anything? How does this provide certainty? It's one thing to claim these kinds of things, Chris, but entirely another to explain the specifics and demonstrate their alleged truth.

Even Chris Bolt should see that there is a big difference in what he could mean here, and that failure to be clear in his original statement could easily lead to some major misunderstandings. I prefer to let people speak for themselves rather than trying to interpret their hazy statements without giving them a chance to explain themselves. That is why I ask for clarification.

But Bolt apparently found my query tiresome. In [a follow-up blog](#), Bolt complained about my question:

When I write, "Of course this is not true, as I believe in an all-knowing God who has revealed Himself to us and cannot lie" the referent of "this" is the statement regarding being in the same boat together. Is Bethrick really so ignorant of Christian beliefs that he thinks I am claiming omniscience for myself? Of course not. It is just more dishonest, empty rhetoric. I ask the reader to question why someone would need to constantly resort to this type of tactic.

At any rate, I'm glad that Bolt has at least clarified part of what he has stated. But why suppose that I was being dishonest when I asked him to clarify his own ambiguous statement? Why must asking for clarification be construed as a "tactic" and my motivation for inviting Bolt to clarify himself be called into question? When I point out that both I and my opponent are neither omniscient nor infallible and therefore in the same boat, and my opponent responds by saying "of course this is not true," how am I to know what part my opponent is objecting to, especially when he holds omniscience as a standard of certainty, rejects the philosophy of reason, and claims to receive knowledge via some "internal sense" from a supernatural being?

Bolt suggests that I have asked my question in ignorance of Christian beliefs, but this is not accurate, nor is it a fair

statement. Christians come in a huge variety of flavors, each seeming to affirm something a bit different from the next on some particular issue or another. Sometimes Christians have very profound disagreements among themselves, so what one Christian affirms may not reflect what another believes. Such internal disagreements have raged for centuries throughout Christendom, resulting in hundreds if not thousands of denominations, sects, splits, schisms, etc. That is why I prefer that a Christian speak for himself, and let the chips fall where they may. In fact, I've encountered numerous Christians who carry on as if they were omniscient and infallible, so much so that they don't have to state it for the record that they think they are. So it only seems to me that the honest thing to do is to ask Bolt for clarification, which is what I did, rather than presume to know what precisely he means to say. Either Chris Bolt thinks he's omniscient and infallible, or he doesn't.

At least we're making progress now. Bolt admits that he is neither omniscient nor infallible, just like me.

So why are we not in the same boat?

Now that we can parse his original statement in light of his more recent clarification, Bolt was saying that we're not in the same boat, in spite of his (now) admitted nonomniscience and fallibility, because he believes "in an all-knowing God who has revealed Himself to us and cannot lie." In that case, my second question applies.

Recall what I had asked:

...what does merely believing "in an all-knowing God who has revealed Himself to us and cannot lie" have to do with anything? How does this provide certainty?

Unfortunately, while calling me dishonest for asking if he meant to say that he is himself omniscient and infallible, Bolt gave the following response to my question:

I trust that the reader is competent enough to understand the argument and that Bethick has no answer for it, hence the pretended ignorance. All-knowing, truthful God revealing His certain knowledge to us provides us with certain knowledge of what has been revealed. I am sorry, this is not difficult.

Apparently what this means is that the Christian god can "reveal" things such as (for example):

- Noah built an ark
- Moses freed his people from the Egyptians
- David slew Goliath
- Jonah was swallowed by a whale
- Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist
- Peter was a fisherman
- Paul was a Pharisee
- Etc.

and believers like Chris Bolt, because they believe in this god, can somehow be certain that it's all true.

What this really seems to mean, when it is boiled down, is that the believer reads things like this in the bible, and accepts it as certain truth for no reason other than that it is stated in the bible. This is apparently the Christian's formula for certainty. I don't know of any historian worthy of the title who would treat any ancient text in such a manner. But here's the Christian, who moments before reading any passage in the bible had no knowledge of things like Noah's ark, the liberation of the Jews, baptism, Pharisees, etc., but once he's breezed through the biblical passage in his reading, he can be certain that what it says is true.

But what good does this do the believer in regard to the plethora of matters on which biblegod has not revealed any knowledge, such as the elemental composition of water, or how rainclouds make rain? If the Christian god has not revealed items of knowledge such as this (and Bolt has given no good reason to suppose it has), then it seems that Bolt is in fact in the same boat as someone like myself, for, just like me, he would have to discover this knowledge through some kind of cognitive process which one must perform firsthand.

It doesn't even have to be something as technical as the elemental composition of water, but something more practically accessible, such as finding the nearest gas station when he's out driving around, determining his bank

account balance, or figuring out why his TV set isn't working. One is not going to find items of knowledge like this in "Scripture," but maybe he might say that his god delivers this knowledge to him via the "sensus divinitatus." This remains to be seen, but as I mentioned before, it seems that this would be testable. For instance, he could demonstrate how he determines his bank account balance while blindfolded, so that there's no peeking going on.

If Bolt thinks that the philosophy of reason (i.e., Objectivism) is an inherent failure, and claims to have a superior means of establishing knowledge about the world, it would be refreshing if we could see some details as to how it works. If the only alternative to theism is skepticism, as he seems to think, how does believing that an omniscient and infallible mind which allegedly created the universe ex nihilo overcome skepticism, especially if this sovereign mind can alter the objects in the universe at will at any time without consulting with believers to inform them about upcoming changes first? Simply saying "I believe in an all-knowing God who has revealed Himself to us and cannot lie" does not answer such questions. A mere belief does not an epistemology make. If merely believing the teachings of a mystical philosophy were sufficient to inform an epistemology suited to man's consciousness, it seems that one could escape skepticism by saying "I believe in an all-knowing Blarko who has revealed Himself to us and cannot lie." But if Christianity and Blarko-belief are two different worldviews, the one opposed to the other, then this means that skepticism is answered by conflicting worldviews. Meanwhile, there seems to be no concern on Christianity's part when it comes to establishing reasonable principles by which believers can reliably distinguish between what is real and what is merely imaginary. Is that any cause for confidence that Christianity can answer the skeptic? Not that I can see.

If Bolt insists that we're not in the same boat, then he's in a different boat, one whose hull is leaking badly. I would recommend that he abandon ship as soon as possible, otherwise he'll go down with it.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Beliefs](#), [Certainty](#), [Christian Psychopathy](#), [Knowledge](#)

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [8:00 PM](#)

0 Comments:

[Post a Comment](#)