

Friday, September 04, 2009

Bolt's Loose Screws

Chris Bolt [has responded](#) to [my recent reply](#) to [his questions](#).

Bolt writes:

Bethrick writes that the elemental make-up of water has been discovered and validated, but this is incorrect.

It is? The elemental make-up of water has not been discovered and validated? Bolt is telling us that water is not H₂O. Really? He better let everyone in the science community know that they've been wrong all this time.

Bolt apparently thinks it's possible that the elemental composition of water changes from day to day and from place to place:

The elemental make-up of water on a particular day in a particular valley has been discovered by a particular scientist if it was discovered by the scientist at all and if Bethrick's validation is the kind of process which can bring one to this kind of knowledge to begin with. The scientist in the illustration does not know what the elemental make-up of all water is or what the elemental make-up of other water is or what the elemental make-up of elsewhere water is or if the elemental-makeup of water which was previously validated has not changed since yesterday.

Bolt knows that everyone else cannot know something that they've known for a long time. How does he know this? He gives no indication whatsoever. Apparently he expects his readers to accept what he claims on his say so. Should we? I don't think so.

Bolt is a presuppositionalist, and according to their playbook, presuppositionalists are supposed to refute rival worldviews through an internal critique. As Michael Butler explains:

The presuppositional argument takes any aspect of human experience and reasons that only the Christian worldview can account for or makes sense of such experience. This involves a two-step method. The first step is to answer the fool according to his folly. The fool (one who has denied God in his heart) believes he can understand the world on his own terms and by means of his own philosophy. And so we let him try. We ask him to take any experience and account for it on his own terms. We then proceed to offer an internal critique of his account, showing that his worldview is either contradictory or arbitrary and, thus, unable to account for the experience in question. This process is illustrated as some length below, but a brief example may be helpful at this point. ([The Pulling Down of Strongholds](#))

Unfortunately for Bolt, he is not being faithful to the stated presuppositionalist methodology, which, according to Butler, allows the non-Christian to account for his knowledge of the world "on his own terms." Since the worldview in question in the present case is Objectivism, Bolt needs to deal with Objectivism on Objectivism's own terms. But it's clear from what he says here that he's simply not allowing Objectivism to have its own terms, specifically the axiom of identity, the primacy of existence, and the epistemology of reason (which includes concept-formation, induction, logic, and all those fun things). If these fundamental elements of Objectivism are so wrongheaded, why would Bolt fail to take them into account in his internal critique? These fundamental elements are crucial to Objectivism. If Bolt does not understand them, then I don't see how he is going to understand much else in Objectivism, for he will be prone to retrofit everything else he encounters in Objectivism with his own worldview's mystical premises (like, as we will see, treating omniscience as the standard of certainty, which is arbitrary and has its roots in the primacy of consciousness, which is diametrically anathema to Objectivism's foundational principles).

Since, according to Objectivism's axiom of identity, to exist is to be *something specific* (i.e., to have identity), and according to the primacy of existence, to exist is to be something specific *independent of consciousness*, if water exists, it is what it is independent of anyone's conscious activity. Since water does exist, it has identity, and its identity does not depend on anyone's conscious activity. The same is the case with the elements which make up water: they exist and are what they are independent of conscious activity. If it is discovered that water is composed of hydrogen and oxygen on a specific date in a specific valley in some specific region on earth, why suppose water

has a different identity elsewhere and/or at different times? What relevance do these spatial and temporal aspects have on the nature of a substance? Since Bolt makes this an issue, it is up to him to explain the relevance here. But one thing can be pointed out here: If a substance is discovered on a different day in a different valley in another region on earth, and it is found to have an elemental make-up other than hydrogen and oxygen, why suppose it is water? It wouldn't be water. On what basis could we integrate this other substance into the concept 'water'? Bolt's critique requires that we integrate this other substance into the concept 'water' in spite of its differing elemental make-up, but he does not explain why, nor does he take into account the epistemological principles employed by Objectivism in identifying and integrating the things we perceive and observe in the world.

So Bolt is not performing a true internal critique here. Rather, he's simply mischaracterizing a rival position by means of a series of unargued assertions.

What's ironic is that the problem Bolt attributes to Objectivism, is actually a problem endemic to the Christian worldview. For as I have established [here](#), the Christian worldview rejects the Objectivist axioms and the primacy of existence, and has no theory of concepts. So it has no objective basis for knowledge, nor does it provide an understanding of how knowledge is developed. It should be no wonder then why Christians think knowledge comes from a supernatural source via "revelation." Someone who does not understand what knowledge is and how it is acquired could easily be susceptible to such fantasies as this. So how, on Christianity's terms, one could know the elemental make-up of water, remains unexplained. I find this ironic, however, since Christians claim to have all the answers from a supernatural source, and yet they don't provide any practical intelligence on such matters. If Christians affirm that water is in fact composed of hydrogen and oxygen, how did they discover this? Or did they discover it at all? Was this information downloaded to them via an "internal sense" planted by their god, a "sensus divinitatus" as some (including [Bolt](#)) have called it?

Moreover, we can know that Bolt's "we don't believe in that kind of god" refrain simply doesn't work when Christianity affirms things such as the following:

God may at any time take one *fact* and set it into a new relation to created law. That is, there is no inherent reason in the facts or laws why this should not be done. It is this sort of conception of the relation of facts and laws, of the temporal one and many, embedded as it is in the idea of God in which we profess to believe, that we need in order to make room for miracles. And miracles are at the heart of the Christian position. (Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 27)

Given presuppositions such as this, which explicitly posit the existence of a universe-creating, reality-ruling consciousness able to manipulate everything in the world according to its whims (cf. Psalms 115:3), and its overt rejection of objective epistemological principles, there would be no way to know what the elemental make-up of water is at any given time, or that it even has an elemental make-up to begin with, since the Christian god "may at any time take [this] one *fact* and set it into a new relation to created law," such as any laws of covalent bonding which scientists, in their utter ignorance of everything real, have fumbled together. Hydrogen could bond with oxygen one moment, and if the supernatural ruler of the universe decides to put hydrogen into a new relation to the laws governing chemical bonds, it might not be able to bond with oxygen the next moment. This can only mean that facts are like a pliant putty in the metaphorical hands of an invisible magic being: who on earth could possibly know what's in store at any given moment?

On Bolt's view, then, it is legitimate to suppose that water discovered on a particular day in a particular valley in a particular region of earth is composed of hydrogen and oxygen, while on another day in another valley in another region of earth, water is composed of helium, barium and sodium. Since he has no theory of concepts, he has no objective process of systematically identifying and integrating new facts into the sum of his knowledge, there would be nothing to prevent this maddening chaos from infesting the totality of his cognition. Where Bolt errs, however, is in projecting this cognitive dystrophy onto rival positions.

I wrote:

Perhaps Bolt thinks I need to go out and test every raindrop that has ever fallen on earth in order to be 'certain' that rain is composed of water droplets. With such requirements for any generalized certainty, it seems to be an unattainable commodity.

To this, Bolt responded:

Well yes, it is unattainable for him, and not just certainty, but for probability as well.

Here Bolt is simply holding me accountable to *his* worldview's presuppositions. Again, this fails to meet the parameters of an internal critique. If Bolt is really interested, he can learn more about the Objectivist standard of certainty in Dr. Peikoff's book *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, pp. 171-175. I will be discussing portions of this section of Dr. Peikoff's book below.

Bolt continued:

He posits that this is the same for those receiving knowledge from a supernatural source, which of course it is not if that source knows and controls everything.

This overstates even what Christianity teaches. Christianity does not teach that its god reveals everything to its adherents. Indeed, it withholds much knowledge from them, and many believers have expressed frustration over this. What good does it do Bolt or any other believer if his god allegedly "knows and controls everything" but does not reveal this knowledge to believers? Bolt is still a human being nonetheless, with human faculties, human fallibilities, human frailties, human shortcomings. Unless his god downloads all its knowledge to Bolt's mind, Bolt is still left in the dark on the very matters he is discussing. The believer appeals to an omniscient and infallible god is in vain.

Take the elemental composition of water for example. Does Bolt know which elements water is composed of? If so, where did he learn this? Did he learn it from the book of Isaiah, from one of the Psalms, from Ecclesiastes, from one of Paul's letters? If it's not in the bible (so-called "special revelation"), then how else does he learn this? He's already made it clear that the philosophy of reason is no avail here, so he cannot appeal to science (since science presupposes reason). So what alternative does he propose? He offers nothing here. He only wants to turn out all lights. He makes no attempt to illuminate the darkness in which he says we find ourselves.

Bolt then asks:

How does Bethrick try to deal with his problem here? He writes,

But if we understand the causal process which produces rain (cf. condensation of water vapor in the atmosphere), why would such tests be needed?

Of course, Mr. Bethrick does not know the causal process which produces rain, for not only can he not observe causation, he does not know that the same causal process produces all rain. He then asks if people who depend on and collect rain water for their survival need to perform such tests. The answer is contingent upon what he means by "need".

Again, Bolt fails to execute an internal critique here. He asserts that I do not know what the causal process is by which rain is produced. How does he know this? Because I allegedly cannot "observe causation" and that I do "not know that the same causal process produces all rain." First, how does Bolt know that I cannot observe causation? He does not say, he merely asserts this. Indeed, like other Christians, he never tells us how he can know anything. He just says that whatever way we do know, can't work, for reasons which remain unexplained. What does Bolt mean by "causation"? Quite probably not what Objectivism means by it. Again, he does not say, but if it's anything like Greg Bahnsen's view, then clearly he is inserting his own worldview presuppositions in place of mine in order to find faults, which of course defies the stated aim of an internal critique. Bahnsen's own statements suggest rather strongly that he subscribed to the *event-based* conception of causation. For example, Bahnsen writes:

If the mind of God does not sovereignly determine the relationship of every event to every other event according to His wise plan, then the way things are in the world and what happens there are random and indeterminate. In that case, there is no intelligible basis for holding that any experience is like any other experience, there is nothing objectively common to the two of them, and there is no causal connection between any two events - and thus they are meaningless and undecipherable. (P. 110n.64)

According to what we read here, it's clear that Bahnsen conceived of causation as a "connection between any two events" - i.e., as a sequential relationship between one event and one which happens to follow it. This is the standard Humean understanding of causation, and Objectivism is right to reject it. But Bolt would not know this, because he is not familiar with what Objectivism teaches (if he were, it's unlikely that he'd make all the blunders we've seen from him so far). On this view of causation, there is no necessary relationship between any specific cause

and any particular effect, because presumably any event can follow from any previous event, which is why Christians think it's necessary to posit an invisible magic being which "sovereignly determine[s] the relationship of every event to every other event according to His wise plan." On this view of causation, a billiard ball bumping into another billiard ball and turning it into a mushroom would be just as possible as simply setting the second one in motion, if not for the guiding hand of some supernatural being which we can only imagine operating behind the scenes. This is the essence of the presuppositionalist "solution" to the problem of induction, and it's a wonder that any grown adult would feign to take it seriously.

On the other hand, the Objectivist worldview holds to the *entity-based* conception of causation, where causation is essentially a *necessary* relationship between an entity and its own actions. Causation is thus observable, just as entities are, because we can observe them in motion. When a bird flies, for instance, we can see the action of its wings lifting it into the air. Given this understanding of causation coupled with the Objectivist theory of concepts (another aspect of Objectivism about which Bolt appears to know precious little, but is committed to rejecting nonetheless), knowledge of the causal process by which rain is produced need not be a mystery, so long as we have access to relevant facts, which science in fact makes possible. But Bolt is not going to understand any of this very well unless and until he undertakes the task of learning more about what Objectivism teaches on these matters. I doubt he'll do this, which is why I expect to see more loose screws spewing out his pockets.

I wrote:

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

Bolt responded:

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

Either Bolt is affirming that he is omniscient and infallible, in which case we can test this, or merely that he "believes" in something that he says is omniscient and infallible. Given the statement of mine to which he posted this reply, it's not clear which. If it is the former - that Bolt is claiming to be omniscient and infallible, then he seems to have confused himself with the god he worships in his imagination. Or, at best, he is saying that he has a direct line (such as through the "[sensus divinitatus](#)") to the mind of the god he imagines (cf. "we have the mind of Christ" - 1 Cor. 2:16). If either of these are what Bolt is claiming, then I'm sure we can all think of some questions for him to answer, that only an omniscient and infallible mind could answer. I have asked, for instance, that Bolt tell us what the VIN and license number of my car is. If Bolt is omniscient and infallible, or he has a direct line to an omniscient and infallible mind, this should be a snap.

On the other hand, it if is merely the latter - that he simply believes in a being which he claims is omniscient and infallible - so what? How does merely believing in something (especially something imaginary) exempt him from the problems he thinks are inescapable for non-Christian worldviews? This is pure primacy of consciousness in that it affirms that simply believing something (i.e., conscious activity) will alter reality, in this case effecting the transformation of the human mind from its originally depraved and impotent state, to a state which is somehow immune to the problems he thinks everyone else suffers inextirpably.

Either way, it is up to Bolt to explain what he means here and how it applies to the topic at hand.

Bolt then stated:

Bethrick apparently thinks it would be clever and profitable to ask questions like, "What if your God could lie though? What if your God does not know everything? What if your God has fur?" but as has already been explained to him multiple times now, I believe in the Christian God who neither lies nor lacks knowledge nor has fur. It has become evident that Bethrick cannot answer the arguments presented based on this conception of God and so he must resort to setting up a straw man and attacking the presuppositional argument by substituting another god that none of us believe in to begin with. At this point it has become clear that Bethrick is just dishonest when it comes to this part of the argument.

The question as to whether a Christian can know that his god is being truthful in its self-revelation to him, is a fair question (especially given what we are expected to believe), and has already been covered (see for instance [here](#)). Presuppositionalists like Bolt, RazorsKiss and Brian Knapp have demonstrated that the only way they can answer this

is by pointing to statements contained in that alleged self-revelation (rather than producing arguments, as Bolt seems to think he has done). But since the issue of supernatural deception in fact brings the veracity of said self-revelation into question, appealing to that self-revelation to settle the question in favor of divine honesty simply begs the question. This is not a straw man, since it is not mischaracterizing any *known* facts. It may challenge what presuppositionalists want to believe, but this an entirely different matter. Indeed, it is a query into how the presuppositionalist can support what he claims to believe. I suspect that it is because they cannot defend their views that they react the way they do when those views are challenged.

Moreover, Bolt & co. have not addressed the point which I raised in [my blog](#), which is the prospect of the Christian god lying by omission. Since according to Christianity the Christian god chooses which knowledge to reveal about itself to human beings, it therefore also chooses which knowledge to withhold from them. Since Christians of all stripes admit that the Christian god does not reveal everything about itself, then clearly they believe it is withholding information about itself from believers, and believers cannot tell us what information has been withheld since it has not been disclosed. So they would have no way of rationally confirming that their god has not withheld some item of information which would call into question the claims it makes about itself in its self-revelation, such as the claim that it cannot lie (cf. Titus 1:2). For instance, it may be withholding the part that it does in fact lie, and when it says that it cannot lie, it is in fact lying. All the believer can do is make an appeal to faith at this point, and take the supernatural being he enshrines in his imagination at its word. Faith is an integral part of the Christian heritage. Why aren't defenders of Christianity simply willing to own up to it?

None of these points have been effectively dealt with by the presuppositionalists, and I suspect that they never will be.

Bolt continues:

Bethrick does not accept that newly experienced facts may unseat previously validated knowledge. I do not see that it would be difficult to illustrate that newly experienced facts may unseat previously validated knowledge however, which would of course have the interesting result that the prior fact was not knowledge after all.

Indeed, if we discover new facts and those facts effectively overturn and challenge previous understandings, it very well could be the case that those previous understandings were not in fact fully validated, but were only tentative (whether or not they were admitted as such), awaiting further factual support or disconfirmation. A responsible thinker acknowledges the tentative nature of his conclusions. There's nothing in my statements which state or imply that this cannot happen.

To challenge my view, however, Bolt finds it necessary to appeal to an imaginary counter-example which seats one's knowledge in question on his activity during a dream (!):

Let us suppose that the scientist tested and determined that the water is composed of hydrogen and oxygen then woke up to find that while he had dreamed this, the world, which included water, was really very different and water was made up of different elements, elements which were not even on the Periodic Table of the Elements in his dream world. Perhaps there is no such Table in the real world that he did not experience prior to waking up. We thought we had validated the fact that Pluto is a planet. Now if we can be wrong with respect to all sorts of similar things and indeed often are, why can we not be wrong with respect to essentially everything in similar fashion?

Even here, Bolt allows that water is composed of elements, and that the elemental make-up of water is discoverable by some process (I would argue that it is discoverable by an objective process; we have yet to see what kind of process Bolt would recommend). This is clear from the wording of his imaginative scenario: the scientist "woke up to find that... water was made up of different elements." How did he discover this? Presumably not by dreaming. But even if the scientist employs an objective method to discover the elemental make-up of water and establish it as knowledge, there would be nothing to keep someone like Bolt from inventing essentially the same kind of imaginative scenario that he presents here in order to call that knowledge into question. If one grants primacy to the imagination over the facts of reality, he will always be prone to taking seriously imaginative scenarios like the one Bolt presents here, in an effort to challenge our knowledge. You know that squares have four sides. But what if you determined this when you were dreaming, and when you woke up, you discovered that the world was really very different and squares actually have five sides, and the entire system of geometry that you understood in your dream was completely wrong?

Just as mystics, who discount the nature of the human mind and how it discovers and validates knowledge of the world, can invent arbitrary scenarios like this and expect them to be taken seriously, they can discount man's consciousness for having only five senses, only to posit the existence of a being whose existence we'd need a sixth sense to perceive. If man had 150 sense modalities instead of the five he has, one could still insist that an imperceptible being exists beyond the reach of those 150 sensory receptors.

Clearly Bolt doesn't want us to have any confidence in our epistemological abilities, even though his own invented counter-scenarios presuppose ironically their validity. My question is: Why?

Of course, by inventing artificial and imaginative scenarios like this, Bolt demonstrates not only that he cannot deal with my position on its own terms, but also that he cannot interact with it on a charitable basis. Certainly many of our conclusions are tentative and require additional support in order to be confidently held as knowledge. Bolt will search in vain to find any statement on my part which precludes this. But notice also that these questions are on specific issues, such as Bolt's example of the possibility that Pluto has been incorrectly classed as a planet. This is not a fundamental issue, and if it turns out that scientists have been wrong to class Pluto as a planet, this would not overturn all our knowledge. We would still know that there is a universe, that we eat food, that Tokyo is a city in Japan, that tires can be under-inflated, that libraries have books, that the telephone has been invented, etc., etc. If it is determined that Pluto is not really a planet, but a member of the Kuiper Belt, we integrate this new knowledge into the total sum of our knowledge. It would not contradict the whole, since the whole has been developed on the basis of fact in the first place. To suggest that a revision of a piece of information calls into question all of one's knowledge, is simply ludicrous, and only indicates the level of desperation which grips the presuppositionalist mindset.

Bolt states:

If the world is as Bethrick posits that it is then there is always a possibility that some hitherto unknown fact may radically change our apparent knowledge of the world as it is now.

Again, on my worldview, we work from the evidence, not from hypothetical "possibilities" which are essentially no different from fantasies posing as considerations which need to be taken seriously. Moreover, Bolt's objection here is cast in as generally as is possible, which leaves it vague and ambiguous. Specifically, what "knowledge of the world as it is now" does Bolt think can be radically changed by the introduction of some as yet unknown or not yet understood fact? Would this fact change our knowledge that there is in fact a world? I don't see how, and Bolt has not given any reason to suppose it could. Would it change our knowledge that automobiles are a means of transportation? Would it change our knowledge that Disneyland opened in 1955? Would it change our knowledge that the atomic elements have identity? Would it change our knowledge that squares have four sides? Would it change our knowledge that houses have windows? Again, Bolt needs to reconvene with himself, and determine what exactly he is trying to say here. In the present context, he needs to re-evaluate the scope of potential change a newly discovered fact could have on our knowledge. By using the phrase "radically change," he is suggesting that some new fact could revise everything (that is, *everything!*) we know, and this would ignore the irrefutability of my worldview's fundamentals. If Bolt disputes this, let him identify what kind of fact would disprove the axioms of existence, identity and consciousness, my worldview's fundamentals. If he cannot identify what kind of fact could do this, then the skepticism he's attempting to attribute to my position carelessly oversteps reasonable boundaries, which only means (again): he's not performing an internal critique, but simply arguing against a straw man.

Bolt himself admits that he cannot produce any examples of what he is proposing as a symptom of failure on the part of my worldview:

Bethrick invites me to produce some fact or facts which will overturn a piece of his knowledge, however the argument does not rest upon exemplary facts, which would miss the whole point, but upon the possibility that there are such facts.

So I am supposed to defend against something for which Bolt can provide no examples. Meanwhile, I am supposed to take seriously his assertion of a possibility without evidence. But this is not dealing with Objectivism's requirement for evidence in assessing something as possible. So again, he is not performing an internal critique here. On the contrary, he's performing a critique based on his worldview's arbitrary presuppositions, which my worldview rejects. Moreover, Bolt seems unprepared to take into account the fact that I have nowhere stated that some conclusions are tentative and subject to revision. However, as I have pointed out above, this is not the case when it comes to

fundamentals, nor is it the case when it comes to a whole slew of knowledge which we have validated (I gave some examples above). While some conclusions pertaining to some specific details of reality are subject to revision, this is not sufficient to call into question everything else. If Bolt can recognize this (and I would think he is able to, if he allows himself to), what's the problem?

Bolt continues:

We know that there are such facts with respect to some parts of knowledge, why not with respect to other parts of knowledge?

If "we know that there are such facts," that means those facts have been discovered, and they can be integrated into the sum of the knowledge which we have already validated. Meanwhile, what "other parts of knowledge" does Bolt have in mind?

Bolt also needs to clarify how we can know that there may be other facts as yet undiscovered which will unseat previously validated knowledge. He has not explained this, nor does his own position seem to be immune from the skepticism which he thinks results from contemplating the alleged possibility of such facts existing (especially given the fact that his position ultimately rests on faith). Once he has addressed this, we can ask: Is his knowledge that such facts are possible itself subject to the skepticism which Bolt is pushing? If not, then what justifies the inconsistency here? Belief in a god? How does that work?

Bolt states:

The argument does not require that I produce any facts to overturn what we know about rain.

First of all, all we've seen from Bolt so far is *assertion*, not argument. He has claimed to know what other people do and do not know. He has claimed to know what they can and cannot know. He has claimed that I cannot know some things which in fact I do know. Ultimately, what Bolt is trying to say is that, *in principle*, I cannot (in terms of my worldview's stated premises) know the things I do or claim to know. But he needs to do more than merely assert that this is the case, as has been his practice to date, unless of course we're expected to accept what he says on his say so. Specifically, Bolt would have to deal with a lot of literature from the Objectivist camp to even have a shot at any of this. But from what I've seen, he's not done this, nor have any other presuppositionalists from what I've seen. John Robbins (who is a Clarkian, not a Vantillian) made an attempt at one time (see [here](#)), but overall it was quite weak (at many points miserably so) and his objections have already been refuted (see for instance [here](#)). Beyond that, there have been a few potshots here and there, but they evaporate upon examination, usually due to a failure to consult what Objectivism actually teaches, or to attempts to mischaracterize what it teaches.

Bolt states:

If Bethrick does not know that there are no such facts, then he cannot claim to know what he does concerning rain. Bethrick does not know all facts, hence he cannot claim to know what he does concerning rain.

In other words, Bolt wants me to prove a negative. I.e., "prove that there are no facts which will not radically change our understanding of the nature and causation of rain." So long as one is not omniscient, he is, according to this tactic, never able to claim certainty on any matter. But, as Peikoff rightly points out:

...one cannot demand omniscience. One cannot ask: "How do I know that a given idea, even if it has been proved on the basis of all the knowledge men have gained so far, will not be overthrown one day by new information as yet undiscovered?" This plaint is tantamount to the declaration: "Human knowledge is limited; so we cannot trust any of our conclusions." And *this* amounts to taking the myth of an infinite God as the epistemological standard, by reference to which man's consciousness is condemned as impotent. (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, pp. 171-172)

Sound familiar? Notice how the declaration which Peikoff cites here is self-refuting. The claim that "we cannot trust any of our conclusions" must itself be a conclusion, and yet we're expected to trust it. Of course, if on the other hand it is simply an unargued assertion (i.e., to be taken on faith, like Bolt's god-belief), then why should anyone accept it? Blank out. If the skeptic expects his unargued assertions to be taken at face value, with no objective support to recommend them, then the anti-skeptic can simply reply: "We can trust our conclusions, so long as they are grounded in fact and reached by an objective process," and for good reason to boot (rather than resting on

faith). However, skeptics are unsettled by such replies, as they begin with the assumption that the human mind is impotent (an assumption which only calls itself and the credibility of those championing it into question).

Peikoff continues:

Consciousness has identity, and epistemology is based on the recognition of this fact. Epistemology investigates the question: what rules must be followed by a *human* consciousness if it is to perceive reality correctly? Nothing inherent in human consciousness, therefore, can be used to undermine it.

If a fact is inherent in human consciousness, then that fact is not an obstacle to cognition, but a precondition of it - and one which implies a corresponding epistemological obligation. For instance, man's primary contact with reality is sense perception (a fact) - and he must, therefore, ground his more advanced cognitions on this base (an obligation). Or: man integrates sensory material by a volitional, conceptual process - and he must, therefore, guide the process by adherence to logic. Or: man experiences his evaluations in the form of emotions, which are not perceptions, but reactions to them - and he must, therefore, separate such reactions from the cognitive activity of thought. None of these facts is a difficulty to be bewailed or somehow got around; each is a reality to be recognized and followed in pursuit of knowledge. By its nature as an attribute of man's consciousness, each constitutes part of the context in which epistemological concepts arise. (I mean concepts such as "valid," "true," "certain," "absolute," etc.) In this approach to philosophy, there is no "problem" of the senses, of concepts, of emotions - or of man's nonomniscience. (Ibid., p. 172)

But theists, who know of no way of validating their god-beliefs except by insisting on skepticism as the only possible alternative to their position, are essentially approaching philosophy from the other side of the same coin as skepticism. Both are premised in the primacy of consciousness. We see this in the case of declarations condemning man's mind as inherently impotent which are expected to be taken on the skeptic's say so. It's true because he *wants* it to be true, which assumes that reality is supposed to conform to someone's wishes. But the same premise grounds the theistic approach to knowledge, which holds man to an arbitrary standard ("God's omniscience") which has no factual basis whatsoever. It amounts to knowledge conforming to someone's wishes because the objects of cognition also conform to wishes. As Bahnsen puts it plainly, "God's thoughts make the world what it is and determine what happens" (*Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 243), and "the believer understands that truth fundamentally is whatever conforms to the mind of God" (Ibid., p. 163). Theism and skepticism are, thus, kissing cousins. Indeed, the same false dilemma can be observed in the assumption, common among many apologists, that materialism is the only alternative to theism. As Andrew Dalton eloquently stated in his 29 July comment to my blog [A Rejoinder to Chris Bolt](#):

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.

Both sides of this false dichotomy treat consciousness as if it were some alien object that is ultimately beyond man's comprehension, either to be feared or discarded, whichever the case may be (indeed, both sides end up doing both).

Peikoff continues:

Man is a being of limited knowledge - *and he must, therefore, identify the cognitive context of his conclusions*. In any situation where there is reason to suspect that a variety of factors is relevant to the truth, only some of which are presently known, he is obliged to acknowledge this fact. The implicit or explicit preamble to his conclusion must be: "On the basis of the available evidence, i.e., within the context of the factors so far discovered, the following is the proper conclusion to draw." Thereafter, the individual must continue to observe and identify: should new information warrant it, he must qualify his conclusion accordingly. (Op. cit., p. 172)

As I mentioned earlier, some conclusions are only tentative, and a responsible thinker will acknowledge this. Of course, not all our knowledge is tentative and subject to revision upon the some hypothesized future discovery. The list of examples is endless. For instance, the facts that I breathe air, that I know how to drive a car, that I graduated from a university, that I am right-handed, that I speak English, that I have two eyes, that I can play the piano, that I am married and have a daughter, that I have eaten chop suey, that I have been to a movie theater, that I enjoy

imported beer, that I've traveled to Thailand, that I walk on two legs, etc., etc., etc. These are items of validated knowledge. If Bolt thinks I need to take seriously his suggestion that it is possible for some fact to be discovered some day which overturns these items of validated knowledge, he needs to do more than simply say it is possible, or expect me to prove that no such facts can exist. He may not like it, but I have knowledge, and I did not get it from an invisible magic being.

Peikoff continues:

If a man follows this policy, he will find that his knowledge at one stage *is not contradicted* by later discoveries. He will find that the discoveries expand his understanding; that he learns more about the conditions on which his conclusions depend; that he moves from relatively generalized, primitive observations to increasingly detailed, sophisticated formulations. He will also find that the process is free of epistemological trauma. The advanced conclusions augment and enhance his earlier knowledge; they do not clash with or annul it. (Op. cit., p. 173)

When Bolt first tried to foist his “global skepticism” ploy on me (see [here](#)), I pointed out to him (in my 26 July comment to the same post) that his argument cannot succeed against my worldview, because “I begin with incontestable certainties, certainties which would have to be true in order to question or deny them.” Of course, I'm speaking about the Objectivist axioms here. Notice how these axioms preclude the notion of the possibility that some future fact can be discovered which overturns them. That hypothesized fact would itself have to exist (which would only confirm the axiom of existence, rather than refute it), it would have to be a *fact* - as opposed to a figment of someone's imagination (which would only confirm the axiom of identity), and one would have to be conscious in order to discover and consider it (which would only confirm the axiom of consciousness). Moreover, that fact would have to be what it is independent of anyone's wishing, feelings, desires, temper tantrums, etc., which would confirm the primacy of existence. Since my worldview begins with incontestable certainties which are immune to such imaginary possibilities which Bolt expects us to take seriously, his global skepticism argument has no chance against Objectivism.

Far from calling into question the foundations of my worldview, Bolt also ignores the contextual manner in which knowledge is developed, as Peikoff briefly describes here: “from relatively generalized, primitive observations to increasingly detailed, sophisticated formulations” such that “advanced conclusions augment and enhance his earlier knowledge” rather than clashing or annulling it. So again, Bolt has failed to accomplish what presuppositionalism itself recommends, which is: an internal critique of a non-Christian position. Bolt hasn't jumped into Objectivism with me, into my shoes, and sought his way around within it to find the weaknesses and failings he presumes are there. Rather, he's simply shot past all this legwork, and affirmed what he would want to conclude from such internal exploration, without doing any of the prerequisite homework.

Peikoff also makes numerous other important points in the following pages, such as that “the appearance of a contradiction between new knowledge and old derives from a single source: context-dropping” (p. 173); that “if a man reaches conclusions logically and grasps their contextual nature, intellectual progress poses no threat to him” (p. 174); that “if an idea has been logically proved, then it is valid and it is an absolute - *contextually*” (Ibid.), etc. This last statement brings up a final point:

Contextualism does not mean relativism. It means the opposite. The fact of context does not weaken human conclusions or make them vulnerable to overthrow. On the contrary, context is precisely what makes a (properly specified) conclusion invulnerable. (Ibid., p. 175)

So far, I've seen no good argument from Bolt which effectively challenges the contextual understanding of certainty described here.

I wrote:

I do not ascribe [I think he meant to write “subscribe”] to the epistemological model which equates “possibility” with whatever the human mind can imagine. I can imagine breathing water, but I do not accept it as a possibility that I will ever be able to breathe water. To affirm a possibility, one needs at least some evidence to support it, and no evidence against it.

In response to this, Bolt stated:

Apparently suggesting that other peoples' gods have fur and redefining terms at will is not enough for would-be autonomous Bethrick, as he now gets to decide what is possible! I do not find this to be very "objective" at all.

Bolt again seems to be straw-manning my position. I don't "decide" what is possible (if this is supposed to mean that I can dictate what is and what is not possible based on my own preferences, biases, feelings, etc.). On the contrary, I let the *evidence* decide this, as my statement clearly indicates. Besides, I don't recall positing that anyone's god has "fur." Fur is a material attribute of biological organisms, and I know that Christians characterize their god as [immaterial](#), and therefore that their god could not be biological in the first place. Nor have I suggested, either verbally or in practice, that "redefining terms at will" is legitimate philosophical practice. However, when I do offer my worldview's definition of a term, this does not constitute "redefining." The charge of "redefining" in this case implies that different definitions are philosophically sound, and this very well may not be the case. I would think that presuppositionalists could appreciate this. Van Til himself asks rhetorically (i.e., to make a point):

Is not the important thing that Christian meanings be contrasted with non-Christian meanings? The Apostles did not shun the usage of language borrowed from non-Christian sources. When they used the term *logos* must they be thought of as followers of Philo's non-Christian thought simply because he also used that term?(*The Defense of the Faith*, p. 23n.1)

Similarly, if Objectivists use the term 'causation', must they be thought of as follower's Hume's non-Objectivist thought simply because they also use that term? What harm does Bolt see in allowing Objectivism to have its own definitions of the terms it uses to inform its principles?

As for Bolt not finding a position to be very objective, I have no idea what his analysis of objectivity could possibly be, given his theistic commitments. As I have [demonstrated elsewhere](#), theism is inherently subjective. If it turns out that my position were in fact subjective in nature, what possible objection could Chris Bolt raise against it? That it does not align itself with his preferred form of subjectivism? That's hardly an objection to take seriously.

Bolt makes it clear that he has no plans on interpreting my position charitably:

Since Dawson Bethrick does not accept that it is possible to ever be able to breathe water, it is therefore impossible that he will ever be able to breathe water.

It's amazing: I can point out that, on my position, determining that an idea is possible requires evidential support, and my detractor seeks to characterize this as subjective! I never stated that *because* I don't accept something as possible, that "it is therefore impossible." But this does not stop Bolt from putting such words into my mouth. Does Bolt read what is written, or does he see only what he wants to see in place of what is written? He might want to go back to Presuppositional 101 and re-read the part about *internal* critiques. Talk about "missing the basics."

Bolt then whines:

Never mind that we can imagine a world in which Bethrick can breathe water

That's right: we can imagine a world in which I can breathe water, but the imaginary is not real. My worldview distinguishes between the imaginary and the real (that's a major reason why I am not a theist, by the way). Bolt's does not, which is why he thinks examples based purely on what he imagines need to be taken seriously.

Then he whines some more:

never mind that there is nothing at all logically inconsistent with Bethrick breathing water

Actually, it *is* logically inconsistent, namely with the facts of the case: I am a human organism with *lungs*. I will drown if I try to breathe water. This is a fact, and my position is logically consistent with this fact. With what else, other than facts, should my position be "logically consistent"? To suggest that "there is nothing at all logically inconsistent with Bethrick breathing water," simply discards the need for ideas having a factual basis. It tells us what we need to know about Bolt's position rather than serving as a successful objection against mine. (For more on facts, see my blog [Rival Philosophies of Fact](#) in which I compare and contrast the Objectivist view of facts with the Vantillian view of facts.)

And whines some more:

and never mind that upon consistent Bethrick presuppositions we cannot determine that breathing water will be physically problematic at some time in the future;

Where does Bolt show this? He doesn't. He simply asserts it, again failing to execute an internal critique.

Bolt continues to misrepresent my view:

no, Dawson Bethrick is the sole determiner of what is possible and impossible! Bethrick said it, I believe it, and that settles it!

Actually, what Bolt describes is closer (way way closer, in fact) to his worldview than to mine. On the Christian presuppositionalist view, a mind (albeit an imaginary one) "is the sole determiner of what is possible and impossible," and this mind can do whatever it pleases (cf. Psalms 115:3), regardless of what anyone else thinks. It can make men's respiration require air one moment, and water the next, if it wanted to. What can prevent the sovereign ruler of the universe from changing things at will? The Christian's beliefs? Not even Christianity teaches this! Also, it is the Christian worldview, not the Objectivist, which expects people to believe things on someone's say so. This was precisely how [RK responded to the question of whether or not his god could be deceiving him](#): the bible says "God cannot lie," so it must be true (i.e., one must accept what the bible says on its own say so). Meanwhile, to insinuate that these characterizations are representative of my position, indicates either that Bolt has simply not understood what he has read (or hasn't read it to begin with), or that on his view facts really do not matter in one's analysis, and he can insert whatever he prefers in their place in order to discredit an opponent's position. Neither speaks very well for his credibility as a thinker.

Bolt raises another objection:

By the way, the Bible never uses such a term as "magic" to describe God and neither should Bethrick, first because Bethrick inconsistently appeals to Webster's on the definition of this term but not "possibility", second because he apparently misunderstands the definition he cites anyway, as said definition mentions extraordinary power or influence which is "seemingly" from a supernatural source, (What supernatural *source* is God *seemingly* from according to the Bible?) third because "magic" is a noun, not an adjective, fourth because the adjective related to the noun is so closely related to the noun that it falls prey to the same problems of labeling the God of the Bible as "magic", and fifth because the term is clearly intended to conjure (since we are talking about magic) up in the mind of the reader a picture of evidentiary status like unto fantasy creatures which is to beg the question.

Several theists have taken umbrage to my use of the word "magic" in the expression "invisible magic being" to refer generally to allegedly "supernatural" beings which possess otherworldly powers by which they can alter the metaphysically given. I have stated my reasons for using this expression in my blog [Is the Expression 'Invisible Magic Being' 'Pejorative'?](#) In this blog entry, I cited two definitions from [Webster's Dictionary](#):

"the use of means (as charms or spells) believed to have supernatural power over natural forces,"

or

"an extraordinary power or influence seemingly from a supernatural source."

Incidentally, I stand by what I stated in this entry.

Now to Bolt's objections:

1. A dictionary is not for me what the bible is to Christians. I do not affirm, prior to examining the contents of a dictionary, that all the definitions it provides are properly formulated. That would simply be irresponsible. Also, I know of no rule which says that one should take all his definitions from a particular dictionary, or which prohibits one from evaluating some definitions found in a dictionary as valuable while being critical of others found in that same source. Moreover, dictionaries are not philosophy texts. The concepts 'magic' and 'possibility' are not epistemological equals: the former concept is fantastical (particularly in the sense that it applies to theism) and consequently popular dictionaries are generally

sufficient, while the latter concept is a very delicate philosophical concept, one which - especially given its misuse by irrational philosophies - needs a definition which is consistent with the epistemological principles of rational philosophy. Consequently, I would reserve the right to discriminate here. Apparently Bolt finds this “inconsistent,” but contextually (the only reasonable measure by which to evaluate) there is no inconsistency here. Indeed, I would be inconsistent with rational philosophy if I did not practice some critical discrimination here.

2. In my blog, I explained the significance of the two definitions I cited from Webster’s as follows:

According to the lexicon which I have consulted, magic is associated with that which is alleged to be supernatural. In particular, magic is said to be “an extraordinary power” which is thought to belong to “a supernatural source.”

Christians refer to their god as a “supernatural” being. So do believers of other gods. They think of their deity as a “source” - such as the source of good, of knowledge, of reality, of logic, etc. - and thus affirm it to be a “supernatural source.” Bolt is caught up by the second definition’s use of “seemingly,” but I don’t see this as essential. The definition could easily read “an extraordinary power or influence said to come from a supernatural source.” Either way, the association between magic and the supernatural is affirmed, and this is what justifies my use of the term ‘magic’ as I employ it, since I am using it to refer to what believers call a supernatural being.

3. The word ‘magic’ can be both a noun as well as an adjective. It can even be a verb. The dictionary entry cited above links to the noun “magic,” the adjective “magic,” and the transitive verb “magic.” The definition given for the adjective “magic” also associates it with the supernatural. The particular context in which the word “magic” should be sufficient to indicate its intended part of speech.

4. Since, as Bolt himself acknowledges, the definition of the adjective “magic” (note that his third complaint was that “‘magic’ is a noun, not an adjective”) is so close to the definition of the noun “magic” (both explicitly associate magic with the supernatural), my point #2 above should put Bolt’s fourth complaint to rest.

5. Bolt accuses me of begging the question for using “invisible magic being” to refer to alleged supernatural beings, but he does not explain why this would be the case. The expression “invisible magic being” is not an argument, so there’s no illicit building of a conclusion into premises going on here. Indeed, I’m simply being consistent with my worldview: it views Bolt’s god, just as the good witch in *The Wizard of Oz*, as purely fantastical. I am under no obligation to adopt Bolt’s presuppositions in my rejection of the supernatural.

Bolt produces yet another complaint:

it appears that he has once again redefined a term. Bethrick describes logic as “an objective method of integrating new knowledge with previously validated knowledge”.

As he did earlier in his blog entry, Bolt confuses a description of a concept with its definition. Where have I redefined a term? If what I state here about logic is a description, then it’s not a definition. There’s a difference.

By Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Christian Psychopathy](#), [Knowledge](#), [Objectivism](#), [Presuppositional Gimmickry](#)

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