

Sunday, March 21, 2010

Bolt's Pile of Knapp, Pt. 3

In this entry I continue to examine Chris Bolt's [reaction](#) to my post on [The Uniformity of Nature](#). At this time I would like to take a look at Bolt's defense of the Christian "account for" the uniformity of nature.

The Christian "Answer"

The Christian "answer" to the question "why is nature uniform?" is to assert the existence of a supernatural conscious being which allegedly

has created the universe in which we live (Gen. 1:1, Col. 1:16), and who sovereignly maintains it as we find it to be (Heb. 1:3)... This God has a plan for his creation (Eph. 1:11), not the least part of which is revealing himself to it (Rom. 1:19-20). Part of this revelation involves creating and sustaining the universe in such a way that his creatures are able to learn about it and function within it (Gen. 8:22). (Brian Knapp, "Induction and the Unbeliever," *The Portable Presuppositionalist*, p. 132)

In [my post](#) I developed a detailed critique of this view, pointing out that - instead of "accounting for" the uniformity of nature - it simply moves the problem back. It does so by characterizing - without evidence or even a good argument - the uniformity of nature as a *product* of prior causation, thus invoking one of the natural laws for which it is supposed to provide contextual justification in the first place. I interacted with the potential response to this problem which apologists may raise in their defense against it, namely that the Christian god does not affect the uniformity of nature by making use of "natural causality," but does so instead by using "supernatural causality," and pointed out that this nonetheless assumes uniformity - if nothing else, the uniformity of the supernatural.

Rather than interacting directly with any of the points I raise in response this potential objection, Bolt sought to turn the spotlight on me. For instance, he writes:

Mr. Bethrick is not satisfied with the answer provided by Christians for why nature is uniform.

No one should be "satisfied with the answer provided by Christians for why nature is uniform" if a concern for *truth* is a minimum criterion. The "answer" which Christianity provides for this question cannot be true. This is because the Christian answer presupposes the primacy of consciousness, which is a false metaphysics. Truth presupposes the primacy of existence, not the primacy of consciousness, and this should be easy to recognize for any honest thinker. The primacy of existence is the principle that the objects of consciousness exist independent of the conscious activity by which we are aware of those objects. A statement is true when it maintains fidelity to the natures of the objects which we perceive and/or consider - i.e., to that which exists independent of our consciousness. To say that statement X is true is to say that it corresponds to the state of affairs to which it refers apart from the wishes, preferences, ignorance, commands, imaginations or emotions of the subject of consciousness. If we say that New York City has seven million inhabitants, we are saying that this is the case regardless of anyone's conscious activity, that this is the case independent of consciousness. It is the case whether anyone agrees, has no idea, prefers a different number, loves New York City, hates New York City, wishes it did not exist, imagines fewer people live there, etc., and truth recognizes that facts are what they are independent of such conscious activity. Thus truth presupposes the primacy of existence. But Christianity assumes the primacy of consciousness (see [here](#) and [here](#)), which directly contradicts the primacy of existence, and thus the Christian account for the uniformity of nature presupposes the primacy of consciousness. Thus it is inherently opposed to the metaphysical basis of truth.

Bolt says that I

attempt... to restrict the actions of God to being essentially natural causes. By "natural law" Bethrick means "the law of identity applies". The Christian is not committed to this Objectivist idea that natural law is essentially identity applied to action. Such an idea is inconsistent with the Christian worldview since there are actions God has taken which may be identified but have nothing to do with anything natural (e.g. the exchange of love between the Persons of the Trinity).

But notice the point which I did raise in my blog. By claiming that the uniformity of nature is *caused* by some *action* performed by the Christian god (it “created” and “sustains” the world as we find it to be), the Christian answer clearly characterizes the uniformity of nature as the result of some prior cause, and thus invokes the law of causality, a natural law, and in the very sense which Bolt himself has denied. In fact, assumption of the very sense of causality which Bolt has denied is inescapable for the Christian “account for” the uniformity of nature, since it in fact *names* the actions by which its god allegedly affected uniformity in nature: by means of “creating” and “sustaining.” Just by naming these actions, presuppositionalists tacitly admit that the law of identity does in fact apply to action - in particular to the actions which they claim their god has performed - since they could not do this if those actions did not have identity - i.e., if the law of identity did not apply to action.

Bolt announces that the Christian worldview “is not committed” to the fact that actions do in fact have identity, but instead must prefer the view that actions are indistinct from each other and from anything else. That is the only alternative possible here: either action has identity, in which case the law of identity does in fact apply to action; or, the law of identity does not apply to action, and therefore actions are not distinguishable from anything else, and thus the very concept ‘action’ and any other concepts specifying one action as opposed to another (or anything else) is meaningless.

While I agree with Bolt that the idea that action has identity is in fact “inconsistent with the Christian worldview,” Bolt still attributes specific kinds of actions to his god, borrowing concepts such as “exchange” and “love” from the realm in which actions do have identity to apply in a context which denies identity to action, while failing to explain how he can name actions if the law of identity does not apply to them. Thus, in order to distance his god from the “natural,” Bolt sacrifices the law of identity, and consequently every affirmation he makes about his god acting in one way or another commits the fallacy of the stolen concept. A god which is not subject to natural law would be a god without identity performing actions which have no identity, and thus could not be distinguished from something that is not a god. And yet Christians speak of their god as if it were “unique,” which could only mean that the law of identity applies.

In my post, I had asked:

what exactly is ‘supernatural causality,’ and how is it different from *natural* causality?

While Bolt does repeat this question of mine in his reaction to my post, it is important to note that he does not answer it. He does not deny the applicability of the notion of “supernatural causality” within the context of his god-belief, but he does not tell us what could possibly be different about the category of actions which his god is supposedly capable of performing vis-à-vis those actions which happen in the natural (i.e., *actual*) realm. Instead of taking the opportunity to educate us about his position, he chooses to complain:

If Bethrick does not know what “supernatural” means as opposed to “natural” then I am at a loss as to why he constantly uses the words in his own writings.

I certainly know what *I* mean by “supernatural” (I have explored it in great detail [here](#)), but I expect that Bolt would object to my understanding and criticisms. So I don’t think it would be very helpful for Bolt’s interests to leave definitions of his worldview’s key terms up to me. Christians use the term “supernatural” to characterize their god and other beings associated with the imaginary realm of their god-belief, and as a critic of Christianity, I reserve the right to use the term when referring to the Christian god, just as Christians do. Unfortunately, Christians typically hesitate to put a clear definition to this enigmatic term, especially one which they can defend consistently. Notice that Bolt himself does not take the opportunity to define it for the record. The question is: Why not?

Bolt says that

Reality involves much more than matter in motion.

How does Bolt know this? What other than “matter in motion” exists? Now, before Bolt confuses me with those who do affirm that “only matter in motion exists” (a claim which I have never affirmed or endorsed), as an Objectivist I affirm that existence exists, and *only existence exists*. Since reality is the realm of existence, reality is only that which exists, and it is fundamentally distinct from what any individual happens to *imagine*.

Bolt supposes that the claim that “God is *transcendental and real*” offends me. On the contrary, it *amuses* me. It’s in

the same league as a child who believes that the stories he reads in Harry Potter are true. It's quite a fantasy, but typically the avid fan of the Harry Potter series eventually grows up.

Since Bolt claims that his god is *transcendental and real*, my question for him is: by what means does he have awareness of this "*transcendental and real*" god, if not by means of his own imagination? Christians typically describe their god as having no corporeal body, being invisible, beyond the limits of human perception, etc. But clearly Bolt must have awareness of this being, does he not? It is supposed to exist independent of his own psychology, right? As such, can he identify any means of awareness by which he has awareness of his god which cannot be confused with the internal explorations of the imagination?

In the past, Bolt has affirmed what Reformed Christians call the "sensus divinitatus," but it is unclear how the believer can securely distinguish between this alleged faculty and his own imagination. Moreover, believers who appeal to the "sensus divinitatus" often affirm contradictory positions and exhibit noteworthy difficulty when it comes to explaining how they cannot be deceived by this mystical apparatus (for instance, see [here](#) and [here](#)). To make matters worse, when asked if it is possible for the Christian god to communicate with believers through the "sensus divinitatus" and believers still get the message from their god wrong, Bolt openly admitted, "Yes, this is the case" (see Bolt's 10 Oct. 2009 comment in [this blog](#)). So the theistic approach here, far from producing a convincing case that the uniformity of nature is a product of a supernatural consciousness, offers no bankable promises at all on these matters.

Bolt confirms my suspicions that the Christian "account for" the uniformity of nature does in fact assume the primacy of consciousness when he claims:

Nature is uniform because God created and controls it as mentioned in Knapp's article...

All we have here is a statement of faith, a bald assertion which is supposed to be accepted as if it were true without question or contention, requiring the utmost credulity that any individual can summon up. Bolt provides no argument for the claim that his god "created" nature, let alone for the premise that nature needed something "outside" of it to make it uniform. He just asserts his theistic view, demands that non-theists present elaborate arguments for theirs, and when they do, he dismisses them as if their inadequacy were self-evident (for he does not explain why they're so insufficient).

Bolt expresses the opinion that

Labeling this explanation "supernatural causation" does not change the fact that it is an answer with no apparent problems.

But several problems with this "answer" were in fact pointed out in my post. Note that Bolt does not reject the label "supernatural causation" in referring to his god's alleged creative and controlling activity which is said to result in nature being uniform. Thus he openly accepts the premise that his god affects uniformity in nature through some kind of *action*. But this in itself implies uniformity - even if it is uniformity merely on the supernatural level - for which Bolt provides no account or justification. Bolt completely ignores this problem, thus confirming that Knapp only succeeds in moving the initial problem back rather than resolving it. This is on top of his failure to (a) validate his assumption that nature is not inherently uniform; (b) justify the notion of "supernatural" in the first place, and (c) address my questions about metaphysical primacy.

Bolt suggested that we compare my position on the uniformity of nature to that of the Christian worldview. But if Bolt really wants such a comparison, why didn't he speak to my questions pertaining to metaphysical primacy? The answer to this should be obvious: the Christian cannot deal with the issue of metaphysical primacy *consistently*. While the Objectivist view holds explicitly that the objects which exist in the world are what they are *independent* of consciousness (and therefore that the uniformity of nature is not a *product* of conscious activity), the Christian worldview explicitly characterizes the world as a creation of consciousness and the identities of the objects which exist within it as subject to the ruling consciousness' personal whims. In short, Objectivism maintains fidelity to the *objective* understanding of nature, while Christianity affirms a *subjective* view of nature.

We will delve deeper into the problems of the Christian position as it pertains to the uniformity of nature in my next installment of this series. For now, consider Bolt's following statement:

Mr. Bethrick has failed to answer *why nature is uniform* but Knapp is not after this answer at this point.

Bolt's statement that I have "failed to answer *why nature is uniform*" is patently false, as we saw above. I did in fact give an answer to this question, namely that nature is *inherently* uniform independent of conscious activity by virtue of the fact that it exists. Bolt cannot say that I "failed" to answer this question; even he himself acknowledged [earlier](#) that I answered it by interpreting me to have affirmed the view that nature "just is" uniform. How has he forgotten this so quickly? It may simply be the case that he does not *like* my answer (which is irrelevant; whether he likes or dislikes a position is no indication of whether or not it is *true*), but he has not shown that it cannot be the case that nature is inherently uniform. He may *wish* that there's some supernatural cause for nature's uniformity, but a wish is not to be confused with fact. He may *imagine* that there's some supernatural being which compels nature to be uniform through some conscious activity, but again imagination is not reality.

Stay tuned!

by Dawson Bethrick

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