

Monday, March 22, 2010

## Bolt's Pile of Knapp, Pt. 4

In this installment of my examination of Chris Bolt's [reaction](#) to my post [The Uniformity of Nature](#), I consider (among other things) the fickle relationship Christians have with the notion that nature is uniform.

### Christian Denial of the Uniformity of Nature

Bolt says that

neither Brian Knapp nor Dawson Bethrick nor I have denied the uniformity of nature.

This is false. Christians deny the uniformity of nature in their metaphysics in order to allow for miracles. On the Christian view, any uniformity which nature happens to exhibit must be put there by some conscious action originating outside of nature. This can mean that nature itself has no identity of its own, since any identity it might have has been assigned to it by the will of the ruling consciousness. Thus when presuppositionalists point to Christian theism as the worldview which provides the only justification for the assumption that nature is uniform, they are indulging in the crassest of absurdities, paying no mind to the implications their worldview has on the matter.

This analysis is confirmed in the defenses which Christians produce in response to criticisms citing the doctrine of miracles as a stumbling block for providing a justification for the uniformity of nature. In his essay "Induction and the Unbeliever," for instance, Brian Knapp sought to defend Christianity against the objection of "the possibility of [miracles] presenting a challenge to the Christian's claim that induction presupposes Christianity" (*The Portable Presuppositionalist*, p. 139) on the basis that such an argument would be "sound only if [Christian theism] assumes that nature is absolutely uniform, which it does not" (Ibid., p. 140). In other words, on the Christian view, nature is not *inherently* uniform; any uniformity which nature happens to exhibit is put there by some force "outside" of nature, by means of intentional activity on the part of a supernatural consciousness, which can only mean one thing: that nature is inherently *non-uniform* on the Christian view. The most that Christians affirming this view could say is, not that nature is uniform, but the way in which their god manages it is uniform. But even this would compromise the Christian doctrine of miracles, so - following Knapp - Christians would have to add the caveat that the way their god manages nature is not *absolutely* uniform: sometimes it departs from its "normal" ways of managing nature in order to exercise *abnormal* "procedures" for some purpose or another.

So yes, presuppositionalists do in fact deny the uniformity of nature, and they provide no convincing explanation for how they could know how their god will manage its creation from moment to moment. Knapp even admits that man does not know this.

As an added bonus, Chris Bolt has indirectly but resolutely denied the uniformity of nature. Did you catch it? Let me show you where he does this.

In his post [Knapp's "Induction and the Unbeliever"](#) Bolt stated that the view that "entities... act according to their natures is another way of stating that nature is uniform." A bit further, he *equated* the view that entities act according to their natures with the view that nature is uniform:

"entities act according to their natures" = nature is uniform

So Bolt is saying that the Objectivist conception of causality - i.e., the law of identity applied to action - is another way of saying "nature is uniform." But just a bit later, in the very same post, Bolt made it clear that Christianity *rejects* the Objectivist conception of causality. Bolt wrote:

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).

If the Objectivist premise that the law of identity applies to action is the basis for the view that entities act according to their natures (and it is), then denying that the law of identity applies to action is equivalent to denying the basis for the view that entities act according to their natures. Bolt says that the view that entities act according to their natures is just another way of saying that nature is uniform. But he also says that Christianity is opposed to the premise upon which the view that entities act according to their natures is based, namely the premise that the law of identity applies to action. Bolt thus affirms that his worldview is opposed to the very basis of the uniformity of nature. Thus for Bolt to affirm that nature is uniform is to commit the fallacy of the stolen concept: he is, on his own understanding, affirming a position while denying its genetic roots.

Moreover, keep in mind what Cornelius Van Til has stated:

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 themselves 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 that idea of Go 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. (*The Defense of the Faith*, p. 27)

If nature - including the facts and laws which exist all around us - is as malleable and open to revision as Van Til here holds, then it is nonsensical to speak of nature being "uniform" in any objective sense. On this view, nature has no inherent identity, which is a contradiction in terms: it is to affirm that nature has no nature, that it is a contentless void waiting for content to be given to it, and that content is subject to revision at will at any time by supernatural forces.

The upshot of all this can only mean that the Christian does not and cannot consistently affirm that nature is uniform because his worldview is at odds with it *in principle*. In Christianity, the uniformity of nature is sacrificed on the altar of the doctrine of miracles, for - as Van Til exclaims - "miracles are at the heart of the Christian position." Knapp himself hastens to tell us that Christian does not affirm that is *absolutely* uniform, which is just to say that nature is not *really* uniform at all to begin with. A supernatural form of consciousness is need to *make* nature uniform. This can only mean that, far from providing a justification for induction, Christianity can only stifle inductive reasoning as such. The presuppositionalist argument employing inductive skepticism as a debating tactic is, quite plainly, a self-defeating ruse.

Bolt says that

...a question has been posed which asks "why is nature uniform?" and "how do we know that nature is uniform?" Mr. Knapp is a Christian and has shown that he is able to provide consistent answers to these questions. Mr. Bethrick has not.

Where does Bolt get all this? For one, I stated explicitly in my post [The Uniformity of Nature](#) that nature is *inherently* uniform. Bolt has nowhere shown either that this is not the case, or that it is inconsistent with my worldview's basic premises. Also, in regard to knowing that nature is uniform, I traced the connection of this knowledge directly to the Objectivist axioms. The axioms are knowledge; in fact, they represent the most fundamental knowledge man has. So tracing our knowledge that nature is uniform directly to the axioms shows not only what is properly meant by the concept of the uniformity of nature, but how we know that nature is uniform. Again, Bolt has nowhere shown either that the axioms do not play a central role in this knowledge, or that my view is inconsistent with my worldview's fundamentals. It may be the case that Bolt does not understand what I have stated (he gets a lot of things wrong), but his misunderstanding is not a justification for claiming that I have failed to address these concerns.

Additionally, I pointed out numerous problems with Knapp's stated view, as expressed in his essay "Induction and the Unbeliever":

Man does not have exhaustive knowledge of how the universe operates; God does. Man does not know whether the features of the universe will continue to be as they are at present; God does. Man can be mistaken in what he experiences and how he reasons from those experiences; God is never wrong. (*The Portable Presuppositionalist*, p. 134)

In my consideration of Knapp's stated view, I made the following points:

Contrary to what he intends, Knapp is simply giving us reasons why Christianity *cannot* give us any confidence in the presupposition that nature is uniform throughout the universe. He has in effect abandoned the problem of induction, which is ostensibly the topic of his essay, and moved on to a new problem, namely that of how one can know what a supernatural conscious being knows. It is of no epistemological value for man to list things that he does not know, and then point to a supernatural being which does have knowledge on these things. This does not tell man how *he* can know what he needs to know in order to live. It is epistemological self-deception to concede, on the one hand, that one does not know something, only to claim, on the other, that this ignorance is “made up for” by an [imaginary friend](#) which is said to know everything. When it comes to the uniformity of nature, Knapp demonstrates only that, on the Christian worldview, one could have no confidence that nature is uniform. Everything is “whatever God wills,” and unless the believer is identical to his god, he would have no way of knowing what his god wills from moment to moment.

Moreover, on the points which he mentions, Knapp does not even tell us what specifically his god supposedly knows about these matters. When Knapp states that “Man does not know whether the features of the universe will continue to be as they are in the present,” but figures that the assertion “God does” somehow makes up for this shortcoming, what exactly does his god know, and what good does that do for man in his inductive investigation of the universe if he cannot know it? Blank out. For all Knapp knows, his god could know that the universe will turn inside out in the next second. But since Knapp’s mind is not identical to his god’s mind, simply saying that his god knows something that he does not know, is of no use to him or to anyone else, particularly when it comes to answering Hume. On the contrary, Knapp’s attempted “solution” fully concedes that Christianity has no genuine solution, not only because he fails to question Hume’s own premises, but also because he fails, due to his allegiance to a subjective worldview, to adopt an *objective* approach to the matter in the first place. If Knapp proves anything, he proves that Christianity can only intensify the epistemological darkness which Hume’s skepticism brought to the world.

Bolt nowhere addresses *any* of this in his [reaction](#) to my post on the uniformity of nature. Check it out for yourself, and see if he does. You will find that he does not.

Bolt then projects his own denial of reality onto the skeptic he imagines:

Second, it is of no consequence to the skeptic to state that denying the uniformity of nature entails that statements about the uniformity of nature are nonsensical as this is the point of the skeptic’s argument.

How does Bolt know that “it is of no consequence to the skeptic to state that denying the uniformity of nature entails that statements about the uniformity of nature are nonsensical”? Bolt intimates that this is the case because “this is the point of the skeptic’s argument.” Specifically, what is the “skeptic’s argument”? What are the premises of that argument? What conclusion are those premises supposed to support? Do this argument’s premises consist of concepts? If so, how did the skeptic form those concepts? What do those concepts mean? Do those concepts mean the same thing every time they’re used? Or do their meanings chaotically fluctuate with each use? How does the skeptic validate the concepts he uses in informing his argument’s premises? If the skeptic has in fact presented an argument, does that argument adhere to rules of validity? If so, how can there be rules of validity without a consistent sub-context of reference? Does the skeptic have an explanation for how the concepts he uses can have a consistent meaning if nature is not uniform? I wager that just by claiming to have an argument, the skeptic assumes the uniformity of nature as I have informed it, and I see no reason why pointing out the fact that such an argument is self-defeating does not sufficiently answer the skeptic. What more could put him in his place?

Bolt suggests that pointing out these problems will not faze the skeptic. Maybe so. But so what? Does that mean that the skeptic’s “argument” (if he even has one) should faze us? Bolt is welcome to be fazed by these things. Those who subscribe to a worldview which is itself built on stolen concepts, are already in the habit of being incapacitated by ideas which commit the same fallacy.

Bolt did accuse me of affirming a known falsehood, but in so doing he has garbled what I actually stated. He writes:

At one point Mr. Bethrick mentions that presuppositionalists do not recognize that the justification of induction is an epistemological issue. This alleged lack of recognition is false and Mr. Bethrick knows that it is false as does anyone else who has spent any time examining presuppositionalism. If Bethrick is implying in this same section that there is some other solution to the Problem of Induction which does not involve the uniformity of nature he is welcome to produce it.

The following is [what I actually stated](#):

Involved with the presuppositionalist strategy is the tacit assumption that the principle of the uniformity of nature is the end-all and be-all of induction, that the uniformity of nature is equivalent to the so-called “inductive principle.” (This habit is common outside of presuppositionalist circles as well, which is probably where presuppositionalists get it in the first place.) If it can be proven that nature is uniform, so the implicit reasoning goes, then induction is justified. Of course, this approach takes for granted - and leaves completely uninvestigated - all the activity which the human mind performs in the activity we call inductive reasoning. It rests all of induction’s validity on whether or not nature is uniform and how one “accounts for” this. This tendency fails to recognize that while the uniformity of nature is a metaphysical concern, the justification of induction is an *epistemological* issue. Sadly, those who take the presuppositionalist approach are missing much of the story.

I made this statement specifically in response to Brian Knapp’s article “Induction and the Unbeliever,” which focuses exclusively on justifying the assumption that nature is uniform and treats this as equivalent to justifying induction while ignoring entirely the conceptual process which lies at the heart of inductive generalization. Conceptual integration is the process by which the human mind integrates specific objects which it has directly perceives to form general *classes* to which those objects belong and similar objects encountered elsewhere can be integrated. It is hard to see how someone familiar with how this cognitive operation works could miss the inductive implications inherent in it. But presuppositionalists typically fail to grasp any of this, and I think the reason why they don’t is because to do so would jeopardize their apologetic agenda.

Bolt also stated:

Questions remain for Dawson Bethrick. What are natural laws? Why are they that way? How do we know? I am aware that Mr. Bethrick especially hates that final question, “How do we know?” Wonder why?

Either Bolt did not read my post very carefully, or he didn’t read it at all. For I addressed the question of what the laws of nature are specifically when I wrote:

The laws of nature are not divine commands on the contents of the universe, nor are they rules which the objects literally obey in an effort to remain in good standing with “the Lord.” On the contrary, the *laws* of nature are conceptual integrations, and as such they are general identifications based on perceptual input (as all concepts are ultimately). They represent discoveries of facts which are integrated into open-ended principles which can be applied to all particulars of a certain class. They do not originate from outside the universe, for they are based on facts which obtain within the universe and which are discovered and integrated by minds which also exist in the universe. There is no “outside the universe” to begin with. There is the universe (the sum total of all that exists), and there is what we *imagine*.

Anyone who knows much about Objectivism should be able to see that what I have written here is consistent with Objectivist epistemology, since Objectivist epistemology affirms *reason* as the only proper means by which man knows anything (definitively answering Bolt’s supposedly lethal question of “How do you know?”), as reason is the cognitive process by which man identifies and integrates the material provided by his senses (see [here](#)). Reason is a *conceptual* process (as explained in Rand’s *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*), and the above paragraph quoted from [my blog](#) makes direct reference to this means of knowing by characterizing the laws of nature as conceptual integrations representing general identifications based on perceptual input.

If Bolt did in fact read this section of my blog (and I’ve yet to see any convincing evidence that he has), he clearly did not recognize that I have answered his questions already probably because he is still unfamiliar with what Objectivism teaches, has little understanding of what reason is (he probably thinks it’s what Saul of Tarsus did in the streets of Ephesus and Athens), and has basically zero philosophical understanding of concepts (since his worldview has no theory of concepts).

Bolt insinuates that I have not “provided any valid answers to the challenges posed to [my] worldview,” but it is important to keep in mind that he has not *shown* that any of the answers I’ve produced in response to “challenges to [my] worldview” are untrue or invalid. As we saw just above, he appears not even to recognize when answers have been provided to the types of questions he considers important (and yet fails himself to answer in terms of *his* own worldview!). For instance, he has not shown that the laws of nature are not conceptual integrations involving general

identifications based upon perceptual input representing general facts; he has not shown that these are open-ended principles which can be applied to all particulars of a certain class; he has not shown that man does not know the laws of nature through reason; he has not shown that there is in fact an “outside the universe”; etc. Indeed, he seems not even to have read any of this in my original post. He has asserted that that my answers are inadequate or insufficient, but he has not *demonstrated* any of this. For instance, in response to my view that nature is *inherently* uniform in keeping with the primacy of existence, has Bolt shown that this is *not* the case? Has he shown that nature is *not* inherently uniform, or that its uniformity is the result of subjective intentions? Not at all. [Check for yourself](#). He hasn’t even tried to show that my position is wrong. He simply dismisses it, either because he just doesn’t like it, or because his confessional investment is gravely threatened by it.

Bolt writes:

Bethrick continues his attempt to try and find something wrong with what Knapp wrote.

Let me just say here, I didn’t have to try very hard. But I do realize that Christians prefer that readers of their books not critically examine the claims made in those books. But that’s what I did: I read what Knapp says, and I raised questions about it, the same types of questions which Bolt calls “challenges to [my] worldview” but insists that I did not answer.

Keep in mind what Knapp writes in his essay:

In the Christian’s worldview, at least from the Reformed perspective, laws are not so much “natural” as they are “supernatural”. They are an expression of the way in which God providentially orders his creation, rather than something that is “built-in” which operate on their own and independent from God. [sic] (“Induction and the Unbeliever,” *The Portable Presuppositionalist*, p. 121n.4)

Presumably we’re supposed simply to accept what Knapp says here as truth without question, but I had to go and throw a wrench into things by asking the very question which Bolt says I “hate”: *how do you know?* Specifically, one of the questions I asked in response to what Knapp writes here was:

But how would anyone be able to acquire knowledge of ‘the way in which God providentially orders his creation,’ if said ‘God’ is a mind *distinct from the believer’s own mind*?

Bolt says that I “would not have to ask this question” since I have “interacted with Greg Bahnsen’s material.” It is true - I have interacted with Greg Bahnsen’s material. Bolt has in mind specifically the off-the-cuff retort Bahnsen made in [a debate with Gordon Stein](#):

How do we learn about those things? He revealed Himself to us. Again, these are simple answers, the sorts of things Sunday School children learn, but, you know, I’ve yet to find any reason not to believe them.

If Bolt thinks this answers the questions that I raised in response to Knapp’s admitted ignorance pertaining to the uniformity of nature, I’ve apparently given him too much credit as a thinker. Saying that Christians learn these things in Sunday school simply dodges the question. The epistemological process of knowing these things in the first place would be a precondition without which conducting a Sunday school lesson would be impossible. The teachers of Sunday school would need to know about this process before they could give lessons on it. So one would have to have this knowledge independent of any Sunday school setting, but Bolt does not explain it. But where do the Sunday school teachers go to learn it? Certainly not from Sunday school, do they? In that case, we would have an infinite regress.

By pointing to Sunday school, Bahnsen & co. simply *defer* the question, which is to fail to answer it. Indeed, Bahnsen himself was deferring Stein’s question in order to evade it. Presuppositionalists press non-believers to answer the question “How do you know?” but look at what they themselves offer when the same question is posed to them.

Moreover, Bolt’s response fails to take into account what Knapp actually says. Knapp says repeatedly that man does *not* know these things, but adds “God does.” Bolt’s appeal to Sunday school and Sunday school children does not explain how “God knows” purportedly compensates for the ignorance Knapp attributes to man.

Finally, it is in part *because* I have interacted with Greg Bahnsen’s material that I continue to pose questions like this to presuppositionalists, because Bahnsen himself has failed to answer them. For instance, in chapter 31 of his book *Always Ready*, Bahnsen published a piece titled “The Problem of Knowing the ‘Super-Natural’.” Given the title of this

piece, as well as Bahnsen's profession as a defender of beliefs couched in the mysticism of supernaturalism, one would think that Bahnsen is going to explain the epistemological process by which man can reliably acquire knowledge of "the supernatural." But as I show in [my analysis](#) of this chapter of Bahnsen's book, he comes nowhere close to doing this. The definition which Bahnsen gives for the term "supernatural" - namely "whatever surpasses the limits of nature" (*Always Ready*, p. 177) - gives no indication how one can exclude things which are merely *imaginary* from the rubric "the supernatural." We can all imagine things which "surpass the limits of nature," and Bahnsen's wildly open-ended definition of "supernatural" ("whatever surpasses the limits of nature") would include these imaginings. As I explained in my post:

As the believer imagines his god, his mind departs from reality in radical fashion. When he ascribes the course of nature to the handling of a being which he can only imagine, the believer ignores the constraints of rational epistemology (which addresses the *how* of his knowledge), because he is no longer speaking from knowledge, but from imagination. This is why the believer can speak of "the way in which God providentially orders his creation" as if he were intimately familiar with the universe of details which such cosmic handling of the contents of the universe would entail. It essentially represents the believer attributing what he takes completely for granted (and does not understand philosophically) to the activity of a being which resides only in his own imagination.

Bolt does not interact with *any* of this; in fact, he apparently does not see the problem. But if I were concerned about defending a worldview which is supposed to be rational and objective (which I do), you can bet your bottom dollar that I would not leave my definitions open to including the imaginary on the same par as the real (which Bahnsen clearly does).

Even though I included a link to my analysis of Bahnsen's chapter on "knowing the 'super-natural'" in my post, Bolt does not reference it in his objection that I should know the answer to the question which I pose to Knapps' statement above. Indeed, if Bolt took a little time to consider the issues I raise in response to Bahnsen's chapter on "knowing" the supernatural, he might have a little more appreciation for where I'm coming from. Indeed, if the issues which I raise were so easily resolved, why doesn't Bolt address them?

by Dawson Bethrick

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

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