

Tuesday, March 23, 2010

Bolt's Pile of Knapp, Pt. 5

And now we come to the final installment in my examination of Chris Bolt's [reaction](#) to my post [The Uniformity of Nature](#).

The Imaginary Nature of God-Belief

Chris Bolt is sore over the fact that I consider his god to be imaginary. That the Christian god is imaginary is, according to Bolt,

something [Bethrick] constantly asserts but does not prove; he admits that he does not even think that it needs to be proven

Bolt is correct that my view is that the Christian's god is, like the Muslim's and the ancient Roman's, a pure fantasy, a concoction of the believer's imagination, a construct guided to one degree or another by the inputs selectively culled from a fictional storybook. Bolt says that I do not prove that his god is imaginary. But from what I have seen, he has not interacted with my writings on this topic, to which I provide links below.

Now anyone can *imagine* that there's some "supernatural" being existing beyond the universe (or, as Bolt puts it, "outside of the natural order") which "created" and "sustains" the way things are in the world, that this supernatural being "has a plan" for its "creation." Anyone can *imagine* that there is some conscious force "back of" (as Van Til puts it) everything we see, feel and hear, causing it to be what it is. And since anyone can imagine the Christian god, and we never perceive it firsthand (as we do with non-imaginary entities which exist independent of our cognition), it would behoove apologists to explain how we can reliably distinguish between what the Christian calls "God" and what may in fact merely be imaginary.

But they don't do this.

Unfortunately, believers have invested their psychology so deeply in their god-belief that they don't even realize that what it is they call "God" is only imaginary. When confronted with this fact, they evade and deny and attempt to change the subject.

Several facts work in tandem to support the conclusion that the Christian god is merely imaginary:

1. Anyone can imagine a supernatural being, including the god described by Christianity or any other religion.
2. Religious philosophy provides no epistemological alternative to the imagination as a means of "knowing" its god.
3. Adherents learn details about their god from written stories (which puts the Christian god, for example, in the same camp as characters in texts which are known to be fictional).
4. Religious philosophy squelches reason as man's only means of knowledge, crippling the mind's ability to distinguish the rational from the irrational (thus allowing the adherent to believe that concepts like 'omniscience' and 'omnipotence' are valid).
5. The failure of religious philosophy to provide the mind with a sound metaphysical theory which securely and reliably allows the adherent to distinguish between reality and imagination.
6. The dominant role of allegory in religious thought provides the imagination with the fundamental material to work with in developing lifelike as well as larger-than-life psychological replicas of heroes, villains and events portrayed in religious literature while allowing for a strong element of personal relevance.
7. In Christianity, the bible requires adherents to have child-like faith, and a prominent feature of child

psychology is an active imagination.

8. Intentional subordination of the world which the believer perceives and in which he lives, to alleged personal forces which he cannot perceive and which are indistinguishable from what is only imaginary.

9. Personification of imaginary beings (they “hear” the believer’s prayers, “see” his actions, “know” his thoughts, etc.) to amplify their impact on one’s emotional life.

10. Use of repetition to reinforce artificially a self-imposed obsession with the supernatural in a never-ending effort to convince oneself of something which in the end he can never truly believe.

11. Etc.

Readers may want to consider two fascinating cases in which believers speaking on behalf of their religion make it entirely clear that their god-belief comfortably finds its primary residence in their imagination. The first is found in Cornelius Van Til’s own autobiographical statement of his childhood conversion to Christian theism found in his essay [Why I Believe in God](#), in which he writes:

I can recall playing as a child in a sandbox built into a corner of the hay-barn. From the hay-barn I would go through the cow-barn to the house. Built into the hay-barn too, but with doors opening into the cow-barn, was a bed for the working-man. How badly I wanted permission to sleep in that bed for a night! Permission was finally given. Freud was still utterly unknown to me, but I had heard about ghosts and “forerunners of death.” That night I heard the cows jingle their chains. I knew there were cows and that they did a lot of jingling with their chains, but after a while I was not quite certain that it was only the cows that made all the noises I heard. Wasn’t there someone walking down the aisle back of the cows, and wasn’t he approaching my bed? Already I had been taught to say my evening prayers. Some of the words of that prayer were to this effect: “Lord, convert me, that I may be converted.” Unmindful of the paradox, I prayed that prayer that night as I had never prayed before.

Here Van Til openly reveals the central role which his own imagination played in scaring him out of the daylights at a very young age, resulting in a lifelong commitment to Christian theism. He says he “had heard about ghosts and ‘forerunners of death’,” never stopping to question whether or not these were real or imaginary. As he lay in the barn all alone one night listening to the rustling of cattle chains, he began to imagine that there was someone else there, “someone walking down the aisle back of the cows,” coming for him, someone who represented a mortal threat to his very being. It was in this state of hysterical panic that the young and impressionable Van Til sought refuge in another concoction of the imagination which he believed could rescue him from the imagination which terrified him so much. It was all in the mind of a young child who was effectually unable to distinguish between reality and imagination. And it was the imagination which won out in the end.

Consider also the case of Canon Michael Cole, whose testimony about his own religious experience suggests that a form of self-hypnosis is involved in theistic belief:

Now the evidence that he is God does not depend entirely on the resurrection. Many other things as well. I think I also want to bring in personal experience. I said earlier on that I’ve been a Christian from the age of twelve. And I’m just aware of God being there in the person of Christ in all sorts of different situations, speaking to me by his spirit through the word of God. There was one particular experience when I was very, very conscious of the risen Christ, actually standing with me in the church I was serving, asking whether we would make him Lord of that church... I wouldn’t say anything about that for 24 hours, it was too personal, too close. (taken from my blog [Carr vs. Cole](#))

Cole wants his audience to believe that he was in the presence of a supernatural being which no one else present could perceive. He never questions whether or not he has rationally understood his experience. In fact, he cites this experience as evidence *for* the supernatural. Cole does not identify the means by which he could have awareness of “the risen Christ” allegedly “standing” right next to him. The question “How do you know?” seems to be of no concern whatsoever. From what Cole states here, it is implicit that everyone else present *lacked* the means by which he was aware of this supernatural being powerfully manifesting itself in his presence, since he tells us that he had to wait a day before telling anyone else what happened. So does Cole have some faculty of awareness that no one else has? Or could it be that he was caught up in the hysteria of his god-belief and, like the young Van Til, allowed his imagination to take over?

Apologists like Bolt insist that non-believers prove that the Christian god is imaginary (and seriously, what proof would they find acceptable?), while failing to demand proof from believers who claim to have experienced god. Experiencing the Christian god is to be encouraged, not critically examined. The dirt little secret behind such an attitude is that supernatural beings are in fact merely imaginary, and confessionally invested believers are people who refuse to admit this.

I have already written much on the imaginative nature of Christian god-belief. For instance, see the following blog posts which I have published:

[Christianity: The Imaginary Friend's Network](#)

[The Imaginative Basis of Vytautas' God-Belief: Part 1](#)

[The Imaginative Basis of Vytautas' God-Belief: Part 2](#)

[The Imaginative Basis of Vytautas' God-Belief: Part 3](#)

[The Imaginative Basis of Vytautas' God-Belief: Part 4](#)

[The Imaginative Basis of Vytautas' God-Belief: Part 5](#)

[Faith as Hope in the Imaginary](#)

Until Bolt has interacted with each of these and has shown that the points which I secure in them are wrong, he cannot say that I've not successfully established the verdict that the Christian god is imaginary.

Additionally, in my study of belief in "[the supernatural](#)" as Bahnsen defends it, I uncovered the following shortcomings which collectively indicate that our leg is being pulled:

1) Bahnsen nowhere identifies in clear terms the starting point which grounds a "comprehensive metaphysic" suitable for man, the means by which one might have awareness of its starting point, or the process by which one can know that its starting point could be true.

2) Bahnsen's conception of "supernatural" ("whatever surpasses the limits of nature") is too open-ended for his own apologetic interests. It does not specify any actual thing, and could apply to anything one imagines. To accept "the supernatural" on Bahnsen's conception of it, would be to accept not only Christianity's supernatural beings, but also those of other religions, since - like Christianity's supernatural agents - the supernatural agents of other mystical worldviews likewise "surpass the limits of nature." Also, in practical matters, "whatever surpasses the limits of nature" quite often spells danger and disaster for man.

3) Bahnsen nowhere enlightens his readers on *how* they can know "the supernatural," even though the very title of the 31st chapter of his book suggests that this is something he would be setting out to do in that chapter.

4) Bahnsen totally neglects the issue of how one might have awareness of what he calls "the supernatural." He notes at many points that one does not have awareness of "the supernatural" by means of sense-perception, or by any empirical mode of awareness. However, this only tells us how we do *not* have awareness of "the supernatural." It leaves completely unstated how one *does* have awareness of "the supernatural," if in fact he claims to have such awareness. Bahnsen resists identifying what that mode of awareness is.

5) Bahnsen's theology entails knowledge acquired and held by a passive, inactive mind, which is a contradiction in terms. The "knowledge" in question is the "knowledge of the supernatural" that Christians claim to have as a consequence of divine revelation, which is characterized as the Christian god coming to man rather than man "speculating" or "groping" his way to it through some cognitive activity.

6) Bahnsen promulgates a most tiresome and outworn dichotomy: either the mind is passive and inactive in its acquisition of knowledge (since its "revealed" to him by supernatural spirits), or he is left with "arbitrary speculations." This arbitrary dilemma ignores the very faculty by which man acquires and validates knowledge in the first place, namely *reason*.

7) Bahnsen provides no indication of how one can confidently distinguish “the supernatural” from what he is *imagining*. If there is a difference, then the ability to distinguish them is of vital concern, since neither “the supernatural” nor the constructs of one’s imagination exist in the “here and now,” are beyond the testimony of the senses, and “surpass the limits of nature.” In other words, since the imaginary and “the supernatural” look and behave very much alike, the absence of an objective process by which the one can be reliably distinguished from the other indicates a glaring epistemological oversight of enormous proportions, suggesting that our leg is being pulled.

8) Bahnsen exhibits a hesitant fickleness regarding the role of inference in knowing “the supernatural.” Is his god’s existence *inferred* from objectively verifiable facts (if yes, from what objectively verifiable facts?), or directly known (if yes, by what mode of awareness)? At times he seems to be affirming the former, at others the latter. At no point is he explicit in how exactly the human mind can have knowledge of a being which “surpasses the limits of nature.”

9) Bahnsen expends much energy focusing his readers’ attention on purported failings of non-believing worldviews, even though they are irrelevant to explaining how one can acquire and validate knowledge of “the supernatural.” The detection of internal problems within Logical Positivism, for instance, is not a proof of the existence of “the supernatural,” nor does it serve to inform any epistemological basis to suppose that “the supernatural” is real.

10) Bahnsen seems resentful of epistemologies which take sense perception as a starting point - that is, as the fundamental operation of consciousness upon which knowledge of reality depends - but nowhere identifies any clear alternative. Indeed, he seems not to have thought this through very well at all. For upon analysis it becomes clear that “special revelation” (i.e., accepting whatever the bible says as truth) requires sense perception in order to “read the book,” and “general revelation” (i.e., inferring the Christian god’s existence and/or message from what we discover in nature) also involves sense perception (as a mode of awareness of nature) as well as at least in part consulting “internal evidences” - which could be feelings, wishes, imagination, hopes, etc. So there is strong evidence here of an ad hoc approach to epistemology as such.

11) Bahnsen is oblivious of how conceptualization works. This can be attributed to the fact that Christianity does not have its own theory of concept-formation. Specifically, much of his case against supernaturalism’s detractors demonstrates that he does not understand the relationship between the perceptual level of awareness and the conceptual activity. For instance, Bahnsen supposes that a comprehensive metaphysic cannot be based ultimately on sense experience because sense experience is “limited.” But concepts allow a thinker to expand his awareness beyond what he personally experiences and while still basing his knowledge ultimately on what he experiences. So the conflict against which Bahnsen reacts is really due to his own ignorance of the nature of concepts.

12) Bahnsen shows that he must appeal to the supernatural in order to validate the supernatural, which is terminally circular.

13) Elements in Bahnsen’s case are incompatible with elements that are part of the worldview which he is trying to defend (e.g., that appearances are distinct from reality, and yet “the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen” per Romans 1:20).

In order to vindicate belief in “the supernatural,” apologists would *at minimum* have to undertake the major endeavor of correcting these issues as well as addressing the facts which I highlighted in the previous list. Until this work is done, defenders of the Christian faith can have no legitimate objection against the supposition that “the supernatural” is in fact merely imaginary. My prediction, however, is that apologists like Chris Bolt will evade all these points and continue in their attempt to shift the burden onto non-believers as if Christianity had all the answers. It doesn’t.

Conclusion

My examination of [Bolt’s reaction](#) to my post [The Uniformity of Nature](#) leaves us with only one conclusion: Bolt’s attempts to rescue Knapp’s defense of the Christian “account for” the uniformity of nature and, subsequently, the claim that only Christianity can provide a justification for inductive reasoning, are unresuscitable.

The problems he faces begin with his worldview’s assumption of the primacy of consciousness metaphysics, circumstantially confirmed by his own decision to ignore the questions I posed on whether or not nature according to his

worldview is uniform independent of consciousness. Had he a defensible response to these questions, we could reasonably expect that he would have answered these questions. However, he did not. Moreover, in response to my examination of Knapp's defense of Christian theism as providing the proper justification for assuming that nature is uniform, Bolt's efforts to salvage the Christian position were weak to say the least. He gives no reason to suppose that nature could not be *inherently* uniform, and provides no argument for supposing that uniformity must be imposed upon nature by some outside force (particularly by means of some conscious activity). In regard to the question of how we know that nature is uniform, Bolt's insistence that the axioms of existence and identity play no role in this knowledge is inexplicable.

Meanwhile, Bolt neither explains how one could know that nature is uniform on Christian grounds, nor does he adequately deal with the relevant areas of ignorance which Knapp claims on behalf of man which are supposedly compensated by the accompanying claim that "God knows": it is not explained how "God knows" is of any help when it is insinuated that man has no knowledge on the issues under consideration. Ironically, presuppositionalism models the saying put into Jesus' mouth at John 3:19, that "men loved darkness rather than light," for these apologists continually show their preference for hiding in the darkness of evasion and non-answers while cursing the enlightenment of reason.

by Dawson Bethrick

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

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

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