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Chris Bolt on the Conditions of Knowledge

Chris Bolt of the [Choosing Hats](#) blog has written a post on the [Conditions of Knowledge](#). Chris is a presuppositionalist, and thus views knowledge and its conditions from a presuppositionalist perspective.

“Justified True Belief”

It is clear that Bolt assumes the “justified, true belief” account of knowledge (JTB) in his discussion of the conditions of knowledge. This conception of knowledge is widely popular, especially among academics, and of course presuppositionalists. Bahnsen makes it clear that his apologetic assumes the JTB view of knowledge (cf. *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, pp. 177, 181, et al.). Bahnsen in fact tells us that “knowledge is a subcategory of belief” (p. 159). Since the JTB account assumes that knowledge is comprised of *beliefs*, it would be important to have a good understanding of what a “belief” is. Though it is not completely clear to me what “belief” is for Bahnsen (he characterizes it as “a positive attitude toward a proposition, meaning that one relies upon it... in guiding one’s actions,” p. 160), but he does allow that “there are many kinds of belief... and many interesting aspects of belief” (Ibid.). Beyond remarks like these, Bahnsen offers little of value in enlightening his readers as to what a belief is.

In my view, it is not the case that “knowledge is a subcategory of belief,” as if the concept ‘belief’ is broader than *and includes* the concept ‘knowledge’ (as the concept ‘mammal’ is broader than and includes the concept ‘dog’). Rather, belief is the degree of confidence we have in a conclusion, affirmation, assessment, estimation, judgment, etc. Bahnsen comes close to this when he says that “beliefs are held with differing degrees of confidence” (Ibid.), but on my view belief *is* the degree of confidence - specifically one which is less than certain. For instance, if my co-worker asks where our boss is presently, I might respond, “I believe he’s at lunch,” which is to say that I have some confidence in this supposition. Importantly, by saying “I believe” this to be the case, I am signifying that I am not certain, but that’s the best that I can offer without further input, and I’m open to correction on the matter. Note also that the measure of this degree of confidence is typically indicated by use of modifiers, especially adverbs, such as when one says he “firmly believes” or “somewhat believes” something to be the case.

Now I reject the JTB account of knowledge not only because it assumes that knowledge is comprised of beliefs, but also because it erroneously treats “beliefs” as irreducible primaries. JTB treats beliefs as if they were the fundamental building blocks used in assembling our body of knowledge, which is sorely mistaken. This aspect of the JTB account of knowledge typically seems reasonable to many thinkers because beliefs are often thought of as complete units. But in fact, they are not irreducible. On the contrary, they are composed of yet more fundamental building blocks. Bahnsen’s own characterization of belief as “a positive attitude toward a proposition” only confirms this, for propositions are also not irreducible (as I point out [here](#)), and yet, on this understanding, in order to have belief, there’d first have to be propositions toward which to have “a positive attitude.” So the propositions, which themselves are not irreducible, would have to come before one could believe in them. What’s more, he would have to have awareness (indeed, *knowledge*) of those propositions in order to have any attitude toward them, even if that attitude is (as Bahnsen has it) only implicitly positive.

Take for example a very simple “belief” which might typically be counted as an example of a “justified, true belief.” Let that example be “dogs eat food.” As a unit of thought, it seems complete, right? Perhaps so. But the question for our purposes here is: *is it irreducible?* The answer is no, it is not irreducible. Specifically, it is not *conceptually* irreducible, which is to say: it can be broken down into its constituent components, namely the concepts ‘dog’, ‘eat’ and ‘food’. The “belief” is in fact composed of *concepts*. Without these concepts, how could you form this “belief”? You couldn’t. So to have the “belief” “dogs eat food,” you need the concepts which inform that belief. As the building blocks of “beliefs,” concepts are more fundamental than “beliefs,” *and need to be accounted for*. Where did you get them? Or, more specifically, how did you form them? Or did you? The answers to such questions are provided by a good theory of concepts, which is ultimately what is needed if one wants to give an “account” for knowledge.

The Need for a Theory of Concepts

Now, in Bolt's paper, he says that "It appears that beliefs are not reducible to being natural or physical things." But as can be shown with any "belief," it can be reduced to its constituent concepts, and concepts are a natural part of the human mind's cognition. There's certainly nothing *supernatural* about concepts. One may interject at this point, saying: "But concepts aren't physical!" That's fine. But this only tells us what they are *not*; it does not answer the question of what they *are*. We need a theory of concepts for this. And the Objectivist theory of concepts does have an answer for this last question: they are *mental integrations*, i.e., the product of a conscious process. Objectivism is fully consistent with its foundations in making this identification since it recognizes the axiom of consciousness as one of its chief fundamentals.

Bolt then writes: "Truth is the same way. Truth has no mass, charge etc.; no scientifically measurable qualities." That's fine, but again, this only tells us what is not the case with respect to truth. It does not tell us anything positive about truth. On the Objectivist view, truth is an aspect of conceptual awareness, specifically its contextual correspondence to the objects of awareness. Truth is a relationship between the subject of cognition and its objects that is achievable only by following the strictures of an objective method. This is in keeping not only with the fact that the knowledge, as a vast conceptual network, has a hierarchical structure (from baseline concepts, including axiomatic concepts, to ever-higher abstractions), but also with the principle of the primacy of existence: that the objects of consciousness hold metaphysical primacy over the subject of consciousness. It is this principle which underwrites obviously true generalizations like "wishing doesn't make it so" or "believing it to be true won't make it true." It is the recognition that the objects of consciousness are what they are *independent* of anyone's conscious activity. This is the basis of the concept 'objectivity', since it recognizes the primacy of the *object* in the subject-object relationship. (The opposite view, that the *subject* holds metaphysical primacy over its objects, is known as *subjectivism*.)

So, since truth is an aspect of concepts, to provide a full account of truth, we need a theory of concepts.

Bolt also wrote:

If you define reality as being composed of nothing other than what is physical, material, natural, whatever; then you have neither belief nor truth available for you to use in your understanding of knowledge.

Of course, I do not define the concept 'reality' in this manner, and since I have the axiom of consciousness, there's nothing to preclude the possibility of truth or knowledge for my position. So if what Bolt states here is a problem, it's not a problem for me.

Bolt's next statement is that "you also need to have warrant if you are going to have knowledge," by which he means: "It is not enough to just happen to believe something that turns out to be true; that is not knowledge." There's something extra needed. Bolt explains this with the following example:

For example, if you believe that it is snowing in Miami, and it really is, but you believe it because you had a dream that it is snowing in Miami, then you do not have warrant and also do not have knowledge. If you see that it is snowing in Miami though, then you have warrant.

The "warrant" aspect of knowledge that Bolt is talking about here, is really nothing more than the *contextual* nature of conceptual integration, which involves an organization of elements, each relating to and having a bearing on the others, on a very wide scale, and its fidelity to an objective method. Here is where logic comes into play. The question is: what inputs inform this affirmation or "belief" that it is snowing in Miami? Suppose it really is snowing in Miami, but, as in Bolt's example, you believe this because you dreamt it, not because you saw news reports and video footage informing a substantial contextual support for this belief. Bolt's example shows how failing to apply an objective method can render untrue a statement which on other premises could very well be true. The fact that one has a dream that it is snowing in Miami has nothing to do with what is actually happening in Miami. Dreams are an activity of the subconscious, and are not a means of identifying what is true about things independent of consciousness, and Miami is certainly something that exists independent of consciousness (for example, it existed before I had ever heard of it, and continues to exist when I stop thinking about it). But of course, the "belief" that it is snowing in Miami because you dreamed it is snowing there, is only objectionable if one assumes the primacy of existence, the view that the objects of consciousness are what they are independent of conscious activity, that the task of consciousness is not to create or alter reality, but to perceive and identify it. If one drops this axiomatic truth from the context from his conceptual integrations, it is not very likely that his "beliefs" are going to coincide

with reality in the manner we see in Bolt's example.

The point here is that, again, we need a theory of concepts to have a full account of Bolt calls "warrant."

Out of the Blue: Asserting Christianity

Then Bolt says a most perplexing thing:

a person who does not believe in the Christian God has no basis upon which to say that there is a real "right" or "wrong" to anything.

If I have a theory of concepts which addresses the issues which Bolt has raised in his paper about the conditions of knowledge, why would someone need to "believe in the Christian God" in order to have "basis upon which to say that there is a real 'right' or 'wrong' to anything"? What relevance would belief in a supernatural being have? If anything, belief in the supernatural can only undermine the objectivity of one's knowledge by underwriting it with a subjectivist platform.

Also, if (as we saw above) truth presupposes the primacy of existence (that the objects of consciousness are what they are independent of conscious activity), then how does *believing* in any god provide a "basis upon which to say that there is a real 'right' or 'wrong' to anything"? Bolt does not explain, but what does he ultimately have in this regard other than "believing make it so"? And what if there is no god, does one need to still *believe* in one in order to have a "basis upon which to say that there is a real 'right' or 'wrong' to anything"? If so, then essentially he is saying that the concepts "right" and "wrong" have no objective relationship to reality, and therefore there's nothing about "right" and "wrong" for the human mind to discover in reality through an objective process, which is why "right" and "wrong" need to be "revealed" by a supernatural being. This explains why Christian apologists endorse a *storybook* view of knowledge rather than a *conceptual* understanding of knowledge: examining knowledge in terms of its conceptual nature would demystify knowledge, make it understandable to the human mind, demonstrate how legitimate concepts have an objective relationship to reality so that they can be discovered by an individual thinker, and liberate him from those who seek to control him through the subterfuge of religious indoctrination.

So it is no surprise that Bolt's examination of the conditions of knowledge is not informed by an understanding of concept theory. Such an understanding is fatal to the religious agenda of his presuppositionalism.

And notice the [stolen concept](#) here. On Bolt's view, whether or not there is a "basis upon which to say there is a real 'right' or 'wrong' to anything" depends on what one *believes*. So one must form his beliefs (at least those upon which such a basis supposedly depends) without the benefit of such a basis. So how could he know that his beliefs are "right" and not "wrong"? To adopt such a reversal denies the genetic roots of the concepts 'right' and 'wrong' by establishing them after the fact upon settled beliefs which could only be accepted in the absence of such concepts. The result of this is internal cognitive suffocation which deprives the believer of such a view from ever being able to objectively consider the question: "On what basis would a person believe in the Christian God?" He essentially chokes on his own reversals.

If one is truly serious about understanding the "basis upon which to say that there is a real 'right' and 'wrong' to anything," he should be willing to acknowledge that it is in fact meta-epistemological, or more simply, available to us *before* we form any beliefs to begin with, rather than something which is put into place as a result of whatever beliefs a person might have. Believing one thing or another does not alter the universe or our natures.

Bolt holds that if one does not believe in the Christian god,

not only is there no room for belief and truth, but there is not room for a standard of right and wrong ways to come to believe something or to continue to believe something.

I've tried to make sense of this statement in light of the previous one, but I always come to the same difficulty. Essentially what Bolt seems to be saying is that the precondition for having "room for belief" is "believ[ing] in the Christian God." But this is self-defeating. It's like saying the precondition for having room for eyesight is seeing a particular thing. If you don't see a particular thing, then you don't have room for eyesight. But if I didn't have eyesight in the first place, how could I be expected to see any particular thing to begin with? You need to have the

ability before you can actually exercise it. Similarly with belief: if I do not first have “room for belief” so that I am able to have any belief, how can I believe anything? One needs to have the capacity to believe before he can exercise it. So it seems rather that we need to have room for belief before we could believe in any particular thing (be it the Christian god, the boogie man, Quetzalcoatl, or what have you).

But again, if (as I have shown above) (i) beliefs are not conceptually irreducible and (ii) truth presupposes the primacy of existence (the fundamental standard of right and wrong), then clearly what Bolt says cannot be the case. Believing that something is the case (e.g., that the Christian god is real) does not make something exist that would not exist if one did not have that belief. Consciousness simply does not have such orientation to reality. Also, since there is a fundamental distinction between what is real and what is only imaginary, what we identify as preconditions of knowledge must comply with this fact. Unfortunately, Christians have been unable to explain to me how I can reliably distinguish between what they call “God” and what they are merely imagining. Christians tell me that anyone can believe in their god. What they are really saying is that anyone can *imagine* their god. The stories found in the bible, for instance, serve this end by providing the believers’ imagination with allegorical and narrative inputs. But that’s fantasy, not reality. To understand knowledge, we need to understand that we’re primarily talking about knowledge *of reality*, not of fantasy. There’s a big difference here, and if we jettison the primacy of existence, we’ll be unable to make such distinctions.

Moreover, since believing one way or another does not alter, reshape or revise reality in any way, it is incoherent to say that disbelieving in something which is accessible to the human mind only by means of imagining it, will result in having “not room for a standard of right and wrong ways to come to believe something or to continue to believe.” We already have that standard, the primacy of existence, and it is attendant from the first instance of the subject-object relationship: the objects of consciousness have metaphysical primacy over the subject of consciousness whenever the subject is conscious. To dispute, deny or trivialize this, amounts to an endorsement for subjectivism.

Bolt also wrote:

The concept of beliefs having or lacking warrant is necessary for knowledge, but the concept is inconsistent with what non-Christians want to say about the world.

Well, I’m a non-Christian. What is it about knowledge’s need for “warrant” that is inconsistent with what I have said about the world? If something I have said needs clarifying, that’s one thing. But saying that something I have affirmed is inconsistent with the contextual nature of conceptual integration is a completely different charge, and I would want to see support for such a charge. But notice that this charge is sweeping in its scope: it makes a highly generalized pronouncement against “what non-Christians want to say about the world,” This insistence on antithesis between the believer and non-believer tends to put the believer in a most disadvantageous position, for now he is committed to denying whatever the non-Christian may affirm about the world. If the non-Christian affirms that the world exists independent of consciousness, the believer is now committed to saying, “no it doesn’t!” or risk having to take back his generalized pronouncement against “what non-Christians want to say about the world.” Indeed, how does the recognition that the world exists independent of consciousness conflict with knowledge’s need for what Bolt has called “warrant”? Blank out.

Finally, Bolt claims that

Christianity allows for these three parts of knowledge without much difficulty.

In fact, however, this is not true. For one thing, Christianity does not have a theory of concepts which addresses the three parts of knowledge which Bolt identified, namely “beliefs” (which, as we saw above, are not conceptually irreducible), truth (which is an aspect of conceptual awareness), and “warrant” (which requires a conceptual understanding of knowledge, not the storybook view found in the bible), in any philosophically intelligible manner. Also, since Christianity is not underwritten by the primacy of existence (objectivism), but by the primacy of consciousness (subjectivism), any attempt to address these issues as I have enlarged on them from a Christian point of view will necessarily be self-defeating. As a minimum requirement, Bolt does not even show how belief in the Christian god is necessary for these components of knowledge.

Will the Real Conditions of Knowledge Please Stand Up?

As for what actually constitute the “conditions of knowledge,” I point to the following:

1. Existence exists (the axiom of existence)
2. Consciousness exists (the axiom of consciousness)
3. Things which exist are what they are independent of conscious activity (the primacy of existence)
4. Consciousness possessing the ability to form concepts (e.g., the human mind)

The axiom of existence explicitly identifies the source of objects which can be known, and the axiom of consciousness formally recognizes the faculty by which we can know anything. Without these two elements, there’s nothing to be known, and no one to know it. The primacy of existence formally acknowledges that there is a distinction between what is known (the objects of knowledge) and the conscious activity by which the subject acquires awareness of those objects. The ability to form concepts is necessary to expand the subject’s consciousness beyond awareness of merely that which is immediately perceived (e.g., the specific tree in front of you) to discriminated awareness of an unlimited range of objects as units belonging to classes of existents (e.g., trees in general). Thus I have identified as conditions of knowledge the objects of knowledge, the subject of knowledge, the relationship between the subject and its objects, and the means by which the “one-many problem” is objectively addressed (thus stealing TAG’s “thunder” right out of its hungry jaws).

No one’s specific beliefs are going to make these exist or go away. I can believe that the moon is made of green cheese, but these four factors will still obtain: objects will still exist, consciousness is still consciousness of objects, the proper relationship between subject and object is still the primacy of existence, and knowledge of reality is still conceptual in nature. In fact, notice that these four conditions would need to be in place for me to even *consider* the notion that the moon is made of green cheese, let alone *believe* it. And yet Bolt is saying that the components of knowledge mentioned above (“beliefs,” truth, “warrant”) are inconsistent with the conditions I’ve pointed out (“what non-Christians want to say about the world”)?

Clearly there are some problems on the Christian side of the fence which need to be sorted out. Good luck!

by Dawson Bethrick

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