

Sunday, July 22, 2012

Chris Bolt vs. the Evils of Demanding Evidence in Support of Truth Claims

In his blog [Answering the Evidentialist Objection](#), Chris Bolt makes it clear that does not like the idea, attributed to W.K. Clifford, that

It is wrong always, everywhere and for everyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.

He calls this a “marvelously strong claim” (perhaps stronger than the claim that a first century Palestinian Jew was resurrected by a supernatural consciousness after dying by means of crucifixion) and asks, “What reason does one have for thinking it true?”

Bolt’s reply to this question is “Probably none,” which strikes me as somewhat deficient in confidence. Perhaps this is the reason why he has turned off the commenting option for this blog entry.

First let us ask: What is the alternative to accepting a claim on the basis of sufficient evidence in support of it? Two alternatives that I can think of are:

(a) accepting a claim with insufficient evidence supporting it, and (b) accepting a claim without any evidence supporting it whatsoever.

But curiously, Bolt nowhere argues for either of these two alternatives being rationally acceptable (let alone preferable to the view he seeks to discredit). Consequently he leaves his readers somewhat perplexed as to what he affirms in place of the view which he criticizes. Like many commentators, Bolt scoffs at an idea, but fails to present and defend an alternative.

Something which must be borne in mind is the fact that an arbitrary claim is one which has no objective evidence to support it. “An arbitrary claim is one for which there is no evidence, either perceptual or conceptual” (Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, p. 164). Such a claim has no tie to reality and “has no relation to man’s means of knowledge” (Ibid.). Evidence ties our knowledge to reality, making what we know knowledge *of reality*. Our only cognitive contact with reality is perceptual awareness. Conceptual structures which are informed by the evidence of the senses, formed according to the strictures of an objective process, and consistent with the norms of rationality, are objective. The alternative to this is to abandon objectivity in preference for faith in revelations, devotion to something one merely imagines, and fantasies informed by mystical or superstitious input. So it should not surprise us when religionists object to adherence to evidence in epistemology.

Bolt says that the quote (presumably the statement he quotes from W.K. Clifford) “has been dealt with extensively in epistemology texts for some time now as a woefully inadequate requirement for rational belief.” Unfortunately Bolt does not cite any examples of “epistemology texts” in which the position in question “has been dealt with extensively.” Indeed, by “extensively” Bolt suggests that these epistemology texts which he has in mind devote entire chapters to picking Clifford’s position apart, which would seem rather dubious if that position were “woefully inadequate” as a requirement for “rational belief” in the first place. Good epistemology texts will not dwell “extensively” on refuting a position which is obviously so wrongheaded as Bolt implies. So I suspect Bolt may simply be exaggerating his case here, perhaps to make his own position seem all the more formidable.

Bolt might have made his own expressed angst against Clifford’s position more credible had he actually cited, or better yet, quoted some of the “epistemology texts” to which he alludes in passing. Had he informed his readers with something more authoritative than his own opinion (and expressions of ignorance to sweeten the deal), his protestations might have more credibility. But as it stands now, Bolt’s reaction strikes me as rather flimsy and puffed up to make it seem bigger than it really is. Sort of like the blowfish when it is threatened.

Moreover, if Bolt’s concern is for the integrity of “rational belief,” then why does he not provide at least a brief analysis of what he means by rationality in this context in order to support his denunciation of Clifford’s

position? This, too, would serve to bolster the credibility of his position. But without it, it appears that Bolt is using a term - namely 'rational' - without truly grasping its actual meaning. This simply allows opponents to come in and fill Bolt's vacuum with an alternative view which is informed with an analysis of rationality, thus exposing Bolt's epistemological empty-handedness for all interested readers to see.

One important fact which commentators like Bolt seem to miss when they denounce a non-believer's requirement for evidence in accepting claims, is the fact that religious belief is not simply acceptance of some incidental claim, but in fact a total life commitment which one is expected to make along with accepting an entire worldview of claims. Christian apologists themselves have insisted that their religious belief is not simply something additional one appends to beliefs which he has already accepted, but an entire worldview of "presuppositions" which are supposed to knock out and replace beliefs one has accepted independently of religious devotion. So there's a lot at stake here, but presumably one is not supposed to require evidence to make such a transformation of mind and character. On the other hand, since religious belief requires the complete investment of one's mind and life activity - a complete reorientation of oneself to his own being, to the world and to what religionists call "the supernatural" - it hardly seems unreasonable to require evidence before making such a commitment.

Bolt is concerned that, if one can legitimately require evidence for accepting belief claims, he might very well produce contra-theistic arguments such as the following:

One cannot rationally believe something without evidence.

There is no evidence for the claim that God exists.

Therefore, one cannot rationally believe that God exists.

I must admit that I find such worries as this rather odd coming from a Christian. Christians are always telling us that there is abundant evidence for their god's existence, indeed that *everything* in existence is evidence for their god's existence. In contrast to this, the strong undercurrent pushing Bolt to criticize the need for evidence to accept belief claims is apparently the tacit concession that there really is no evidence for his god's existence. Why else would he raise any objection to the requirement for evidence in the context of supporting god-belief claims?

Let us ask at this point: Is the position denoted by the Clifford quote really as unreasonable as Bolt suggests? I certainly do not think so, and I will explain why as I examine Bolt's statements on the matter.

To combat the evils of requiring evidence for accepting another person's claims, Bolt recommends the following procedure:

Rather than oversimplifying the task of answering the evidentialist objection a series of questions should be asked of the unbeliever in hopes of highlighting the following concerns.

I am happy with this proposal. Questions are good. And they're welcome, too.

1. The Nature of Evidence

Bolt's first question has to do with the "nature of evidence," and goes as follows:

What is the *nature* of evidence that the unbeliever has in mind?

I cannot speak on Bolt's behalf, but the type of evidence that I require for accepting claims, is evidence which is *objective* in nature. Objective evidence is rationally distinguishable from something one may merely be imagining. It would seem rather self-defeating for a person to object to this. Now in elaborating on my response to Bolt's question, it is important to point out here, as I did in the first year of my blog back in 2005 (see [here](#)), that the kind of "evidence" which many believers cite in the interest of supporting their theistic belief claims is at best deeply problematic. Presuppositionalists like to appeal to two different types of evidence for their god, which they call "natural revelation" (sometimes called "general revelation") and "

special revelation.” The “special revelation” is the written word found in the Old and New Testaments of the Christian bible. It consists of a series of texts informed with “God said it” kind of stuff. But this kind of “evidence” essentially assumes one has already accepted that the god of the bible is real. Without this underlying belief already in place, the texts of the Christian bible are indistinguishable from fiction and fantasy. Thus appeal to biblical texts is typically quite unpersuasive to non-Christians.

So the apologist points to “natural revelation.” The biblical impetus for the notion of “natural revelation” typically cited by the apologist, is found in Romans chapter 1, specifically the 20th verse:

For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.

Citing Romans 1:20 (and other biblical verses) to support an apologetic point is problematic for the reason already indicated above: appeals to biblical texts are unpersuasive to the unconverted, so reciting them does nothing to move the conversation in the direction the apologist wants to take it. In fact, it seems quite dubious to say, on the one hand, that the world around us is evidence of the Christian god, and yet, on the other, we need to consult “special revelation” (i.e., the biblical text itself) to discover this. When I look at the world around me, I see the world around me. Nothing in it tells me that it is “evidence” of the existence of some supernatural consciousness which I must imagine in order to conceive at all. But the Christian assures us that the world which we perceive around us is in fact “evidence” of the Christian god’s existence, only we need to read this in the bible in order to come to this belief in the first place.

Of course, there’s also the problem that a direct contradiction is embedded in the Romans 1:20 verse. It states that “invisible things... are clearly seen.” If something is “clearly seen,” then it cannot be “invisible.” Meanwhile, if something is in fact “invisible,” then how can one legitimately claim to have seen it? This is all a major blank-out which the apologist hopes to ignore or explain away with some shape-shifting of his own. But it all underscores the fact that our leg is being pulled.

So the Christian is in a bit of a quandary here, to put it mildly. And this is simply the tip of his iceberg of problems.

The fundamental problem involved in pointing to the natural world which we perceive around us as “evidence” indicating the existence of the Christian god, is that it commits a profound category error. The Christian god is said to be supernatural, immaterial, infinite and incorruptible. Yet the world which we perceive around us is natural, material, finite and corruptible. As I ask in my blog [Is Human Experience Evidence of the Christian God?](#) back in 2005:

How does that which is natural, material, finite and corruptible serve as evidence of that which is supernatural, immaterial, infinite and incorruptible? In other words, how does A serve as evidence of non-A?

Or, restated for simplicity (in case the apologist doesn’t get it):

How does something serve as evidence of that which completely contradicts it?

This is a wall against which apologists continually bang their heads, but in which they cannot make the slightest dent.

Bolt continues:

Ask what sort of evidence it would take for the non-Christian to begin to believe that God exists. Often the unbeliever has not given this question very much thought at all. Or if he or she has, then the answer is rather arbitrary. Perhaps one unbeliever wants God to write a message in the sky, while another wants God to turn his or her computer desk into a monkey. And why should God submit Himself to either of these silly requests? Unbelievers are to come to God on His terms and not their own.

I’m curious how much thought Christians put into Bolt’s question when they were first converted to their religious confession. Bolt’s chosen wording suggests that it is only the anonymous “unbeliever” who “has not

given [his] question very much thought at all.” But a great portion of Christian believers are people who grew up in a religiously influenced household and made their full commitment to “the Lord” when they were yet in their tender, suggestible teens. What kind of thought did these people give to the question of what kind of evidence it would take to believe that god exists prior to and during their conversion? Perhaps they did not give the question any thought until well after their conversion, when they had to *defend* their religious commitment, and already had made an emotional investment in the belief that their religious commitment were truth-based.

Insofar as non-theists are concerned, Bolt seems rather hasty in assuming that his twin alternatives are the only ones available. It could be the case that the non-theist has in fact given the matter a lot of thought, and his criteria on the matter are rational, not arbitrary. For instance, I mentioned above that evidence for claims should be objective in nature in order for accepting them to be rational. Would Bolt say that the requirement for objective evidence is arbitrary?

Bolt suggests that different atheists might expect different *specific* evidences, indeed those which would unmistakably point to the god in question. This hardly seems objectionable, particularly in the case of the Christian god, for such a god is not only said by its adherents to be able to perform such actions, but the “special revelation” in which we’re all supposed to learn about this god’s “will” for man indicates that this god enjoys revealing itself to human beings in such unusual ways. But Bolt dismisses these as “silly requests” and wonders “why should God submit Himself to” them. But this is a different matter; now it is Bolt who is changing the topic, and only after he’s made an evaluative pronouncement about the desires he has placed on the non-believer’s lips that he does not defend. Bolt follows this up with “unbelievers are to come to God on His terms and not their own.” Again, this is a different topic. Bolt set out with the question of “what sort of evidence it would take for the non-Christian to begin to believe that God exists,” but quickly redirects the discussion to what his god is willing to do and expects from people. This does not suggest that Bolt is truly prepared to investigate the original topic in an adult-like manner.

Of course, expectation of a demonstration of supernatural power is hardly unreasonable given the nature of the religious claims believers expect non-believers to accept as truths. If one has the god of the New Testament in mind, it hardly seems arbitrary to expect the kind of “evidences” which its characters are portrayed as enjoying when they came to the faith. The New Testament is chock-full of examples where supernatural power is demonstrated to attract converts to the faith. The most notable example is the apostle Paul who, while he was yet Saul the Persecutor - certainly no friend to Christianity, and certainly no one who was prepared to “open his heart” to the gospel message - experienced a personal visit by Jesus-god himself, according at least to the book of Acts. (Curiously, Paul says nothing about this in his own letters.) According to the legend we find in Acts, this appearance of the risen Jesus occurred when Saul was in hot pursuit of Christian devotees whom he wanted to pester. Yet in spite of his marauding attitude and “carnal mind,” the risen Jesus appeared right before him and spoke to him directly. Does Bolt think this story is “arbitrary”? Does he think it is “arbitrary” to suppose that this kind of personal appearance by the risen Jesus to non-Christians would be evidentially appropriate? The New Testament, if taken as historically factual, presents the conversion story of Saul as it is found in Acts as a precedent which the Christian god, qua the risen Jesus, has been willing to make in the past. We are assured that “God is no respecter of persons” (cf. Acts 10:34), presumably meaning that the Christian god does not play favorites. So why not suppose that, if the Christian god wants a particular non-Christian to be convinced of its existence, that a very good way of achieving this end is to reveal itself in a manner similar to what we find described in the book of Acts in relation to Paul’s conversion?

Whether the believer wants to say his god has no obligation or duty to reveal itself to the non-theist in such a manner, is neither here nor there. That was not the question. The question at this point becomes (since Bolt’s original question has been answered): What is wrong with expecting a demonstration of supernatural power as evidence supporting the Christian’s religious claims? If one expects another to “believe in the supernatural,” then by all means, a demonstration of “the supernatural” is in order. Christians will object to this, not because it is an irrational requirement, but because they know deep down that such a demonstration will never be forthcoming.

2. Is “Evidentialism” Self-Refuting?

But Bolt continues to dwell on the imagined failings of the position identified by the Clifford quote. He goes so far as to say that it is self-refuting. He states:

A self-refuting statement is a statement with a self-referential problem. A self-refuting statement not only *refers* to itself, but actually proves itself *false*! Remember Clifford’s claim that, “It is wrong always, everywhere and for everyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.” Clifford’s claim can be labeled with a “C,” so that C = “It is wrong always, everywhere and for everyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.” Now, why should anyone believe C? Or more to the point, what evidence is there for believing that C is true at all? The claim is certainly not self-evident, and it is difficult to imagine what sort of evidence might be offered in its favor. So according to the requirements of C, C must be rejected. And that is something like the aforementioned idea of a self-refuting statement. God has implanted beliefs in human beings that are not obtained in virtue of evidentialism.

Of course, it does not follow from the fact that a claim is not self-evidently true, that it is therefore false or even self-refuting. If a claim which is not self-evidently true can be logically reduced to the axioms of existence, consciousness and identity as well as to the facts which inform them without breaching the norms of rationality and objectivity, then it has basis for being supposed true. After all, that is the purpose of logic: to tie conceptual cognition to the perceptual level of awareness.

Nor does it follow from the fact that Bolt suddenly has a lapse in imaginative output that Clifford’s position must have no evidence in support of it and consequently be false or self-refuting. It could be that Bolt simply does not know what evidence might be cited to support it, and perhaps would prefer to suppose that there is no evidence in support of it. But this is hardly an objective procedure.

Bolt then affirms the stubbornly mysterious claim that “God has implanted beliefs in human being that are not obtained in virtue of evidentialism,” which I take to mean: beliefs which are not formulated on the basis of rational investigation (and which have no evidence to support them). Bolt’s affirmation is in fact a claim which has no evidence in support of it. So if the policy indicated by the Clifford quote can be rationally vindicated, then we are fully justified in rejecting Bolt’s affirmation, which essentially reduces human beings to cognitive puppets who have no means of determining whether or not the beliefs which happen to have been “implanted” in their minds are true or even relevant to anything in their lives. Indeed, if a person has X number of beliefs, how does one determine which of those beliefs have been “implanted” by said god? What about the remaining beliefs? If the Christian holds that beliefs are “implanted” in the human mind by a supernatural agent, why suppose they’ve been implanted by the Christian god and not, say, some rogue transgressing spirit trying to thwart said god’s relations with human beings? It appears that Bolt has given this little to no thought, for this claim seems to be an injection of pure arbitrariness in the hopes of playing to the faithful.

But let us ask, aside from Bolt’s rash and uninformed dismissal, what evidence is there for supposing that knowledge claims need evidence in order to be rationally viable? The answer to this question is actually very simple, so simple that it is odd for Bolt to have missed it. The evidence is three-fold:

- 1) the nature of human consciousness;
- 2) the nature of knowledge;
- 3) the nature of reason.

Let us examine each of these individually, keeping in mind the definition of ‘evidence’. According to [one common online dictionary](#), evidence is “that which tends to prove or disprove something; ground for belief; proof.” Peikoff quotes the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which defines ‘evidence’ as follows: “testimony or facts tending to prove or disprove any conclusion” (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, p. 176). So the question becomes: is there anything which we can cite which proves or tends to prove that evidence is necessary for rationally accepting truth claims? I have cited three areas which I consider as sufficient evidence, so I shall explain why I consider them evidence supporting this policy.

In regard to the nature of human consciousness, the very fundamental fact that consciousness is consciousness *of something* has pervasive import to the present area of inquiry. It means that consciousness needs an *object*, and it is this object which conscious activity beyond the perceptual level of cognition (i.e., conceptualization) identifies and integrates into this grand phenomenon known as *knowledge*. The objects of awareness inform consciousness so that our consciousness has *content*. Without content to be conscious *of*, there is no consciousness. Consciousness with nothing to be conscious of is a contradiction in terms (as I explained to Dustin Segers [here](#)). Since consciousness needs an object, any activity which consciousness performs must have an object - whether it is in the form of direct perception or inference based ultimately on direct perception. The object(s) of awareness inform its activity with the content it requires to act on in the first place.

In regard to the nature of knowledge, we must keep in mind that, just as consciousness is consciousness *of something*, knowledge is also knowledge *of something*. Knowledge of nothing at all is likewise a contradiction in terms. Knowledge, then, must have an object, and it is ultimately our awareness of objects which provides the basis of knowledge as such. Where Bolt seems to have the view that beliefs can be “implanted” in human minds in the absence of rational investigation, evidence, and epistemological procedure performed by the human knower, in reality knowledge is *earned* by the cognitive effort of the mind which possesses it. The content of objective knowledge is the facts of reality. This ties in directly with the proper understanding of the concept of objectivity, which is provided by Objectivism. “To be ‘objective’ in one’s conceptual activities is volitionally to adhere to reality by following certain rules of method, a method based on facts *and* appropriate to man’s form of cognition” (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, p. 117). If what one claims to “know” is *not* based on facts gathered by “a method based on facts *and* appropriate to man’s form of cognition,” it is not legitimate knowledge. These facts which inform our knowledge are the *evidence* which provides knowledge with its objective content. Consequently, without evidence to inform one’s knowledge, what he calls “knowledge” is not fact-based, and thus it is not really knowledge at all.

In regard to the nature of reason, consider first of all what reason is: “Reason is the faculty that identifies and integrates the material provided by man’s senses” (Ayn Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 20). Without “the material provided by man’s senses,” there is no content for reason to identify and integrate. Reason is conceptual activity, and conceptual activity requires input - i.e., evidence - from reality, beginning with perceptual awareness. Concepts are formed in part by isolating and integrating objects which a knower perceives in the world around him. Thus evidence is a non-negotiable part of rational knowledge.

In all three cases - the nature of man’s human consciousness, the nature of knowledge, the nature of reason - evidence, i.e., factual content gathered from reality by an objective process, is vital to human cognition. These are the evidences, as intimate to the human mind as they are, underwriting the epistemological policy that evidence is necessary for rationally accepting truth claims. Starving the mind of evidence will not produce knowledge of reality. On the contrary, it will only turn the mind loose in a fantasy-world of its own creation as it surreptitiously borrows from the very realm it seeks to reject.

3. Universal Negatives

Bolt wants to say that his god’s existence is not disprovable and that it is impossible to evaluate all the evidence available for his god’s existence (he gives the impression that there is endless evidence for his god’s existence). In framing his case, he states that “a *universal* is something that is absolutely true at all times and all places.” While I always understood ‘universal’ to denote a general category of items (e.g., *all* marbles or *all* men), I am happy to grant Bolt his definition of this term for his purposes, since it is not a term that I tend to use in the first place. But let us pause here and ask: what example can we find of “something that is absolutely true at all times and all places”? The first thing that comes to my mind is the Objectivist axiom of existence: *existence exists*. Since the concepts ‘time’ and ‘place’ presuppose existence as the underlying metaphysical precondition of their meaning, any *time* must take place sometime *in existence*, just as any *place* must exist somewhere *in existence*. So it seems indisputable that a prime example of a universal as Bolt has defined it is the Objectivist axioms of existence: the fact that existence exists is absolutely true at all

times and all places. Can Bolt or anyone else cite a time or place when and where there is no existence? I trow not.

Bolt goes on to speak of universal negatives. He states:

It is notoriously difficult to demonstrate a universal negative (the claim that one “cannot prove a universal negative” is itself a universal negative which cannot be proven). But one might be able to prove that there are no square-circles. Likewise, one might prove that there is no elephant in the room. Given the logical impossibility of square-circles, and given the extremely limited context wherein one proclaims the pachydermian preclusion, it is safe to say that some universal negatives are demonstrable. Yet evidence for the existence of God is strikingly different, because evidence for God would be neither logically impossible nor limited to the context of individual, finite experience. In short, one cannot discredit every possible shred of evidence for the existence of God since one cannot so much as even *examine* every possible shred in one’s lifetime. According to Scripture, there is not only *some* evidence for the existence and nature of God, but the evidence is *abundant* and *plain*.

There are numerous points that can be raised against Bolt’s statements here, but I will limit my response to the following:

a) Bolt grants that “some universal negatives are demonstrable” and allows that “one might be able to prove that there are no square-circles,” though he does not explain how “one might” go about doing this. That is fine by me, however, as I have already argued that the one can rationally reject the notion that the Christian god is real for reasons which are essentially similar to those for rejecting the notion that square circles are real. See specifically my paper [Gods and Square Circles](#). Additionally, Anton Thorn provides similar reasons for supposing that [the claim “God exists” contradicts itself](#).

b) Bolt says that “evidence for the existence of God is strikingly different” from evidence that square circles do not exist or that there is no elephant present in a room. He says this is the case “because evidence for God would be neither logically impossible nor limited to the context of individual, finite experience.” In the case of Bolt’s first reason, he supplies no reasons for supposing that “evidence for God would [not] be... logically impossible.” The paper to which I have provided a link in the previous point argues that the very notion of a god (at least so far as Christianity conceives of it) is logically impossible (in the same sense as a square circle is impossible), and I have not seen Bolt interact with any of the points which I have raised in support of this conclusion. In regard to Bolt’s second reason, Bolt seems at least a bit confused. To speak of “finite experience” implies that there is such a thing as “infinite experience,” and yet such a notion strikes me as incoherent. Experience as such is finite in nature, regardless of who happens to enjoy it. Experience is one thing as opposed to another, and given the fact that experience has a nature, it is distinguishable from other things, and thus finite. Moreover, there is no such thing as experience of an unlimited or infinite sum of objects, since experience always requires some means (such as man’s perceptual faculties), and those means themselves are finite, limited in their range, and constrained to specific objects available to their reach at a given time. No one experiences all units of a given class, unless of course they are artificial, extremely limited in quantity, and present in their entirety at a single moment. I think what Bolt means is that the evidence he believes exists for his god’s existence is not limited to immediate perceptual experience. The question at this point then becomes: by what means does one obtain awareness of this alleged evidence? On this Bolt says nothing. But it is a vital question if the apologist wants to claim that evidence for his god exists. The question is even more pressing if the theist wants to say, a la Romans 1:20, that non-believers are “without excuse” for denying any alleged evidence for the Christian god’s existence.

c) Bolt alludes to Romans 1:20 when he says that “there is not only *some* evidence for the existence and nature of God, but the evidence is *abundant* and *plain*.” Romans 1:20 says that this evidence for the Christian god’s existence is something that is “clearly seen” (in spite of it being “invisible”), which can only mean that this evidence must be concrete as it would need to reflect light in order for our visual receptors to be activated by its presence. So what is this alleged evidence? Why do theists resist telling us what it is they “clearly see” that they interpret as evidence for their god’s existence? Many Christians suppose that the realm of nature, with all its “beauty” and “intricacy,” screams out that it was created by the god associated with the Christian bible. But Bolt apparently repudiates aesthetic and teleological arguments (see [here](#)), and likely rejects other “evidentialist” arguments, given his presuppositionalist leanings. So it is unclear how Romans

1:20, in spite of its internal contradiction, figures epistemologically into Bolt's apologetic.

d) Bolt states that "one cannot discredit every possible shred of evidence for the existence of God since one cannot so much as even *examine* every possible shred in one's lifetime." Unfortunately, if one grants this claim, at best it serves as an argument for interminable agnosticism. Essentially Bolt is saying that one could never hope to evaluate all the evidence relevant to the question of his god's existence, in which case one could never come to a conclusion in which one could have lasting confidence. This achieves something quite opposite from what Bolt wants it to achieve, yet it is simply a matter of Bolt trying to have his ice cream, and eat it, too. So long as one alleges that there is still evidence yet to be examined and evaluated against a claim or set of claims, the jury is out, for it cannot be known until such evidence has been examined and evaluated which position it will support.

Appeals to the figment of as-yet unseen or undiscovered evidence potentially supporting the belief that a god exists, will only backfire on the apologist. While Bolt's premise that "one cannot so much as even *examine* every possible shred [of alleged evidence for his god's existence] in one's lifetime" is intended to give the impression that there exists this vast wealth of evidence for his god's existence that lies outside the sum of evidences that one can examine within one's lifetime, thus implying that the task of refuting the claim that his god exists will never be finished, appeals to such figments can only work both ways: if one can assume that there exists a vast sum of evidence *for* something beyond which non-believers will ever be able to examine in their lifetime, one has just as much warrant in assuming that there exists a vast sum of evidence *against* that same thing beyond which believers can examine in their lifetime. A rational thinker goes by the evidence which he has at his disposal, not on the hold-out hope that there could be evidence as-yet undiscovered which does secure something he *wants* to believe. Reality does not cater to our wants and preferences. That's the primacy of existence. A rational approach to knowledge is one which is consistently loyal to the primacy of existence. If the theist knows of any evidence that can be produced on behalf of his god-belief claims in which he has any confidence, let him bring it forward for examination. If he does not produce any, then he should simply acknowledge this and let the chips fall where they may. If he dares to produce something and other thinkers are not persuaded by his attempts to validate it as evidence supporting his claim that a god exists, he should not complain. Other minds do exist, and they act independently of the theist's wishes. The theist needs to make peace with this fact once and for all.

e) Bolt ignores the fact that something which is *imaginary* is *not real*. Since something imaginary is not real, something imaginary *does not exist*. I have already presented an ample supply of evidences documenting the imaginary nature of the Christian god (see my blog [The Imaginary Nature of Christian Theism](#), which incidentally was written in response to Chris Bolt's own concerns that I had not supported my view that the Christian god is imaginary). Moreover, I have already also shown how the imaginary nature of the Christian god can be used as an anti-apologetic argument proving that the Christian god therefore does not exist (see my blog [A Proof that the Christian God Does Not Exist](#)).

4. "Presuppositions"

Unsatisfied with discussions relating directly to the nature of evidence, Bolt sought to redirect the discussion - as presuppositionalists are wont to do - to a discussion about the "presuppositions" which underlie one's understanding of specific evidences. He writes:

Evidence does not interpret itself. The presuppositions people bring to evidences ensure that those evidences are interpreted in a particular way.

That is true: evidence does not interpret itself; rather *people* interpret evidence. And yes, certain background assumptions, or "presuppositions," do influence the manner in which an individual "interprets" evidence. But before any of this can take place, the person doing the interpreting must have *awareness* of said evidence, he must have awareness of that evidence by some *specific means*, and he must consider it to be evidence *of something* in the first place. To consider some item or aspect of reality as evidence supporting a particular conclusion, one needs good reasons. Indeed, he needs evidence for this step in the process. This might seem to entail an infinite regress, and I pity those philosophical systems which have no resolution to such

quandaries. But Objectivism avoids such conundrums by beginning with perceptually self-evident and conceptually irreducible axioms. The axiomatic concept 'existence' is the widest of all concepts (it includes everything which exists), so it would be incoherent, even nonsensical, to ask a thinker to produce evidence other than existence for the baseline recognition that existence exists.

As an example of the point he's trying to make, Bolt cites the controversy between those who "believe in" global warming, and those who are skeptical of it:

So, for example, someone who rejects "global warming" might believe that since the water and air temperatures have significantly cooled that the earth is obviously not getting any hotter. Someone who accepts global warming might counter that this is because the polar icecaps are melting. Perhaps someone more skilled in the sciences will come along and set both of the aforementioned characters straight!

Since science is the systematic application of reason to specific areas of natural inquiry, the person who is "more skilled in the sciences" would likely be someone who is more skilled in applying *reason* to areas of natural inquiry. This is not a given, however, for it is entirely possible for a thinker to compartmentalize his application of reason in one area of investigation while abandoning it in others. But who would be more consistent in this particular application of reason than someone whose philosophy is consistently based on reason as its only epistemological norm? Certainly not someone whose committed worldview reduces to blurring the distinction between the real and the imaginary. Naturally this does not erase the role of one's "background, experiences, evidences, inclinations, and the like that a person brings to the evidence" which concerns Bolt. On the contrary, all these factors do play a role, since knowledge is contextual. But devotion to reason puts all the rationally secure elements of a thinker's context into their proper place while equipping him with the tools he needs to discard irrational notions. There is no substitute for reason; not even the confessional investment of religion can supplant loyalty to reason.

Bolt's emphasis that

the point is that the background, experiences, evidences, inclinations, and the like that a person brings to the evidence actually serve to affect how one views the evidence

only underscores one's need for reason. We need reason *because* we are neither omniscient nor infallible: we need reason in order to acquire knowledge, and we need reason because we are capable of error in our cognition. What alternative does theism offer in place of reason? It offers only a pretense, namely a series of falsehoods which deceive the theist into believing that knowledge can be acquired from some supernatural source, and the effort which reason requires can be avoided.

Bolt says that "it is impossible to jettison one's presuppositions from an honest evaluation of the evidence," but we must keep in mind that these "presuppositions" do not come from nowhere, and they are not *automatically* true. A person may adopt, through the influence of an irrational philosophy, the presumption that reality conforms to conscious activity, either his own or someone else's (either real or unreal). While this presumption is common (it is a distinctive assumption in one form or another among the world's religions), it is typically buried under a morass of allegory, religious language, stolen concepts, anti-conceptual teachings, emotion-arousing sentiments, fearsome imagery, empty promises of wish-fulfillment, etc., so much so that such obviously untrue assumptions go undetected and are accepted as part of a larger package designed to distract the believer from noticing that his leg has been pulled.

So one's "presuppositions" are not immune to error, nor are they exempt from rational inquiry. Error occurs when our cognitive activity deviates from the facts which exist in reality and which are relevant to the matter one is investigating.

The concept of "truth" identifies a type of relationship between a proposition and the facts of reality. "Truth," in Ayn Rand's definition, is "the recognition of reality." In essence, this is the traditional correspondence theory of truth: there is a reality independent of man, and there are certain conceptual products, propositions, formulated by human consciousness. When one of these products corresponds to reality, when it constitutes a recognition of fact, then it is true. Conversely, when the mental content does not thus correspond, when it constitutes not a recognition of reality but a

Now the presuppositionalist might react to this by claiming that the Objectivist axioms are also not immune to rational inquiry. Indeed, one would hope that at least some presuppositionalist out there would be willing to examine the Objectivist axioms honestly. Most attempts to examine the Objectivist axioms that I've seen are embarked with an ambition to refute them before they've even been examined, which typically has the detractor resorting to misrepresentation, hasty conclusions and a lack of awareness of the fact that the truth of the axioms is preconditional to their efforts (see for example [my examination of the "Maverick Philosopher's" attempts to criticize Objectivism](#)). But if one still wants to denounce the Objectivist axioms, I recommend he review the mock dialogue which I quoted from Peikoff's book in my blog [Can a Worldview "Provide" the "Preconditions of Intelligibility"? - Part III](#), and I will be happy to discuss it if he has further questions or disputes.

Bolt asserts that "the unbeliever has a deep hatred for the things of God." But what are these "things of God" for which "the unbeliever" has such "a deep hatred"? Bolt does not specify them, nor does he explain how he knows what another person hates. The common presuppositionalist debating refrain "How do you know?" is not something that presuppositionalists themselves appear to be willing or able to answer. Bolt simply gives us an empty assertion that his readers are apparently expected to take on his say so.

5. Hypocrisy?

Bolt wants to accuse those who affirm the policy that evidence is required for accepting truth claims as legitimate knowledge of reality, of hypocrisy. He writes:

Truth be known, there are all sorts of beliefs that the unbeliever accepts on his or her own and apart from evidence anyway. For example, most people accept that other minds exist, yet there is *zero* evidence that this is the case. The same is true with respect to the *principle of the uniformity of nature*, or the premise that things will tend to go on the way that they have in the past. Such beliefs are just taken for granted, and are assumed to be rational, but they do not admit of any evidence in favor of their acceptance. So the unbeliever is a bit of a hypocrite when it comes to demanding evidence for the existence of God. Knowing God is every bit as basic as knowing oneself.

There are numerous problems with what Bolt states here, and so many of them strike me as obvious blunders that I have to admit I feel some embarrassment for the fellow. Let me make a few points in response.

a) If Bolt holds that "there is *zero* evidence" for the existence of other minds, then he admits that "there is *zero* evidence" for the existence of his god, for his god is supposed to be a mind distinct from any human mind, including his own.

b) The claim that "there is *zero* evidence" for the existence of other minds is a universally negative claim, which earlier Bolt had stated is "notoriously difficult to demonstrate." Does Bolt even try to give any support for this claim? No, he doesn't. He just affirms it and apparently expects his readers to accept it on his mere say so. Perhaps Bolt is impressed by some philosophical text which wrestles unsuccessfully with this question, and from this he's concluded that "there is *zero* evidence" for the existence of other minds. That's too bad.

c) Human beings demonstrate ample evidence that they have minds. But perhaps what Bolt means by 'mind' is different from what I understand a mind to be. Bolt does not explain himself, but I'm happy to explain myself. The first question to ask when considering whether or not there is evidence for the existence of other minds, is whether or not there is any evidence of other *consciousnesses*, that is, *consciousnesses other than one's own*. For this I would say there is abundant evidence. While examples occur every time one encounters another human being, a good example occurred just the other day when I was outside my house with my four-year-old daughter. It was morning and we were in our front yard. We heard a jet passing overhead, but we did not see it. My daughter was excited and said she heard a jet airplane, but she did not know where to look. Finally she saw it and pointed it out to me, and sure enough it was flying behind our house and was soon out of sight. This was evidence not only of the fact that my daughter possesses the faculty of consciousness (she would not be able to *see* the aircraft if she were not conscious), but also that she has a *conceptual*

consciousness - i.e., a *mind*. The fact that she not only *perceives* objects, but also *identifies* them and can indicate them concretely (as with the word “airplane”), is more than sufficient evidence to prove that she is conscious and also has a mind. So this is definitely not something that I am “just taking for granted,” as Bolt believes and apparently does himself. Consequently, there’s no instance of hypocrisy on my part here.

d) But how about in the case of the uniformity of nature? Is this something that I have no choice but to take for granted, that I am *forced* to take for granted, as a kind of faith belief, like Christians and their belief in a god? According to Bolt, I am, since he thinks that “there is *zero* evidence” for this as well. Of course, Bolt serves up yet another universal negative for which he offers no support. Indeed, it appears that he expects his readers to “just take it for granted” that he is right on this matter. But is he?

I have written extensively on this issue before. Most recently I wrote on the uniformity of nature in response to Dustin Segers - see here: [Answering Dustin Segers’ Presuppositionalism, Part IIIa: The Uniformity of Nature](#) . I have also written on the uniformity of nature in response to Chris Bolt himself - see here: [The Uniformity of Nature](#) and [Bolt’s Pile of Knapp](#) .

While I do not want to repeat everything I’ve argued in these previous papers (especially since neither Segers nor Bolt have interacted with what I have already written - indeed, *no presuppositionalist* has), I do want to make a few points directed to Bolt’s claim that “there is *zero* evidence” for the uniformity of nature. Some of this is a summary of points I have made in the papers I cite above. Of course, I am not expecting that this will satisfy Bolt, primarily because he has an emotionally-based confessional investment to protect, and also because I doubt he will examine what I’ve written with a mind to understand what I am putting forward. As in the case of my previous responses to Chris Bolt, he will likely pretend that my responses do not exist and proceed with business as usual, defending his god-belief with exceptionally poor arguments (if they can even be called that!).

The first point that needs to be made in response to Bolt is the fact that, if a person perceives *any* object, he already has evidence of the uniformity of nature. This is because the object which he perceives *is an object* - he perceives something that *is itself*, which means: it is something that is inherently *uniform* with itself. On the Christian worldview, this state of affairs is thought to be the product of conscious activity: nature, according to Christianity, is not *inherently* uniform. Nature’s uniformity is subjectively imposed on it by some supernatural form of [wishing](#). The believer thus says he “knows” that nature is uniform by faith in revelations, not by means of rational discovery. Consequently he doesn’t really know that nature is uniform, and given the doctrine of miracles which is so vital to Christianity, he can have no confidence that nature’s subjectively imposed uniformity will obtain from moment to moment. It’s all “God’s will,” and nothing else.

In contrast to this, Objectivism holds that nature is *inherently* uniform. This means that consciousness does not *cause* nature to be uniform (the very notion that something *causes* nature to be uniform commits the fallacy of the stolen concept), but rather *discovers* this fact, and identifies it by an objective process (if such a process is selected by the conscious subject). In other words, the uniformity of nature is something we discover and identify by means of concepts. We have direct perceptual awareness of the world of objects, but our cognition is not restricted exclusively to the level of perception. We have the ability to conceptualize, and this is the vital aspect of induction which presuppositionalists ignore and apparently do not understand at all.

Once we begin forming concepts on the basis of perceptual input, we are identifying the evidences of the senses in conceptual form, which means: we now have the means by which we can categorize specific entities and features (i.e., concrete objects) which we observe, in the form of stable, open-ended classifications. These classifications, i.e., *concepts*, are formed ultimately on the basis of what we perceive, but include a potential infinity (quantity-wise) of units which we have *not* perceived (and never will perceive). The concept ‘man’, for example, includes not only those men whom we have actually observed firsthand, but *every* man who exists now, who existed in the past, and who will exist in the future, however many that sum total may be.

What is of key importance to the present issue is the fact that concept-formation involves the process of *measurement-omission*. A man can be 6’2” tall or 5’3” tall; he can be *any* height, but he must be *some* height. The concept ‘man’ includes *all* variations of this nature. When someone points to a man on the street and says “That man is waiting for the bus,” one cannot say, “That’s not a man because he’s not the proper height” - i.e., the unit is not excluded because of the specific measurements it happens to have, since

particular measurements are not a specified criterion in the formation of the concept in question. They are “omitted” - i.e., included in the continuum of a parameter’s range of potential specific measurements, but not specified as a qualifying criterion of inclusion.

Two key parameters of measurements which are omitted in the formation of concepts of concretes are *time* and *place*. The reason why the concept ‘man’ includes individuals who live anywhere on the earth (and elsewhere, should they venture beyond it) as well as those who live at *any time* in history, whether present, past or future, is because the measurements of time and place are omitted in the formation of such concepts. The concept ‘man’ allows that any particular man is a man *regardless of when and where he lives, has lived, or will live*. This allows us to apply a concept which we have formed objectively (i.e., on the basis of perceptual input and in keeping with the primacy of existence) without constraining its units of reference to any particular time and/or place.

Couple this feature of concept-formation with the fact that the concept ‘future’ denotes the continuation of existence *forward in time from the present*, and we have all the objective foundation we need for assembling projections of potential future scenarios on the basis of what we know *in the present*. All of this is a *conceptual* exercise of cognition, and the solution to the problems which Bolt and other presuppositionalists want to raise against non-believers is in fact conceptual in nature. Without the proper understanding of the nature of concepts and the process by which they are formed, all these points will be lost on the apologist, and he will continue pressing his divisive debating schemes as though he’s not been answered simply because he has not stopped long enough to look at such matters *objectively* and according to a rational understanding of how the human mind operates.

So not only is there more than sufficient evidence for the uniformity of nature, Objectivism supplies the *conceptual* warrant for assembling future projections on the basis of present knowledge. Contrast this with the Christian position: it holds that “there is *zero* evidence” for the uniformity of nature, and it supplies no *conceptual* understanding of how the mind can formulate estimations of activity across the temporal spectrum on the basis of present knowledge. So which worldview is providing a suitable account? It should be clear that Objectivism is light years ahead of Christianity on such matters.

Now observe precisely how the presuppositional approach relies in denying the conceptual level of human cognition. The presuppositionalist approaches the issue of the uniformity of nature as though we needed to *perceive* every entity in existence, directly and firsthand, in order to have any justification or confidence in the supposition that nature is uniform. This approach arbitrarily restrains human cognition to the perceptual level of consciousness while both employing the conceptual level of consciousness (to formulate the position in the first place) *and* denying it at the same time (in the *content* of that formulation). In this way the presuppositionalist approach trades on a massive stolen concept which, once detected, can only take all the wind out of its sails.

Conclusion

In concluding his blog entry, Bolt surmises that “probably *most* discussions between believer and unbeliever can be resolved by quickly stepping *through* this issue of so-called ‘evidence’.” Probably “most discussions” that believers have with non-Christians are with non-Christians who lack a rationally integrated worldview. Many atheists out there are simply borrowing elements of mystical worldviews and framing them in a secular imprint. When apologists like Chris Bolt have the opportunity to engage an Objectivist informed on the tactics of presuppositionalism, they tend to shy away from discussion and either keep their responses conspicuously terse, or simply do not engage at all. That is what I have observed anyway.

This is because the Objectivist is likely to bring other issues into the discussion, issues which presuppositionalists have proven themselves time and time again to be unable to address, such as the issue of metaphysical primacy, the role of reason in human cognition, the nature of concepts and their implications for theistic debate, the objectivity of the uniformity of nature, the conceptual nature of induction, the conceptual nature of logic, the fundamental distinction between reality and imagination, etc., etc., etc. And yes, the need for evidence for rational acceptance of claims. Objectivists are likely not to accept the unargued

assertions of presuppositionalists, such as those which we have observed in Chris Bolt's statements, as though they were true on someone's mere say so.

Bolt continues, saying, "The *nature* of that evidence is very rarely ever discussed." Then I must be a rare breed, for I have discussed it above. If Bolt complains that something which should be done is rarely done, then he should come here. But this complaint seems odd coming from Bolt, for he's the one objecting to the view that every claim needs evidence to support it in order to accept it rationally. This is why he states, in the same breath, that "the *evidentialism* underlying the shrill demands for evidence is fatally problematic." Has Bolt *shown* this to be the case? No, he has not. Has he *presented evidence* to support this assessment? No, he has not. All he has done in regard to this point is *assume*, and then *assert*, that there is no evidence supporting the view that claims need evidence to be rationally accepted. Bolt's own preferences are hardly a compelling case for the view he wants to put forward.

Bolt states that, "the assertion that there is no evidence for the existence of God [is] impossible to substantiate." But as we have seen, Bolt is willing to grant that a rational case can be made supporting the universal negative that no square circles exist. I have provided links to arguments on my blog and webpage which make the same kinds of arguments against the claim that the Christian god exists, and yet Bolt has not addressed any of these. Nevertheless, if Bolt or any other theist thinks he has solid evidence for his god's existence, let him produce it, and be ready for it to be examined. But if he does have evidence in which he has any confidence, why does he choose to rail against the policy that one should have evidence in support of a claim in order rationally to accept it? Bolt seems to be at cross purposes with himself.

He then states, again, that "evidences are interpreted in light of *presuppositions*." Indeed, if one holds the "presupposition" that reality conforms to conscious intentions, he could interpret any evidence according to his wishes and preferences, for that evidence - on such a supposition - conforms to the knower's conscious intentions. But this is pure subjectivism. And yet, it is the fundamental core of the theistic worldview. It is called the primacy of consciousness, and it is utterly self-defeating. On the assumption of the primacy of consciousness, one consciousness can wish that something is evidence for one thing, and another consciousness can wish that the same thing is evidence for something contradicting it. Given the assumption that the primacy of consciousness is true metaphysics, how could one determine which of the two, if any, is correct? There would be no objectivity possible, so the concepts of 'true' and 'false', 'right' and 'wrong' are out of the question. So "presuppositions" need to be examined for their conceptual integrity. Presuppositionalism does not equip its adherents to do this.

Bolt also reiterates his claim that "there are many common, *basic beliefs* that people hold without evidence anyway." There may indeed be many beliefs which people have accepted as true without the benefit of evidential support. No one has disputed this. But the fact that people do in fact do this, does not make those beliefs rational, nor does it justify categorizing those beliefs as "basic beliefs," as though they were secure from further inquiry. At any rate, we saw two examples of what Bolt considers to be beliefs commonly accepted with "zero evidence" to support them - namely the existence of other minds and the uniformity of nature - and I have shown that such items of knowledge are in fact not without evidence as Bolt supposes.

Bolt warns that "merely giving into the unbeliever's request for evidence without taking the considerations above into account is detrimental to one's apologetic." But such a statement suggests that Bolt is unaware of the enormous implications of his own god-belief claims. Remember that the claim that the Christian god exists is not simply some additional piece of information which non-believers are expected to accept and integrate with the rest of their knowledge. On the contrary, this is supposed to be accepted in a way such that it topples everything the non-believer knows about the world. It is not simply some new item among many, but an entire erasure of one paradigm and replacement with another in its place along with a lifelong commitment to something one will be able only to imagine and a life of sacrifice on behalf of something which could never need the believer's sacrifices. So why would the demand for evidence in support of such claims be so unreasonable? Bolt never really explains this. Even if we jettison the policy that *every* claim we accept needs evidence to support it, Bolt nowhere makes the case that his god-belief claims qualify as the kind of claim one should be willing to accept as knowledge without evidence. Thus he comes across as far too anxious to give his god-belief claims a pass to figure that he has given serious thought to all this.

Bolt advises that "there have been volumes written about Christian theistic evidences, but dumping them all

on the unbeliever will blind him or her to the big picture.” Indeed, the last thing that a theist should do, if in fact he thinks he has a credible case to be made for his god-belief claims, is hit non-believers with piles of more text. Most people who identify themselves as non-believers are already aware of what Christians claim. Christians need to produce evidence, or simply admit that they do not have evidence to begin with. Diverting the discussion to “presuppositions” will only turn off those who are willing to look at whatever evidence the believer might produce on behalf of his claims, or it might lead to scrutinizing the theist’s presuppositions, which will only multiply his problems.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Concepts](#), [Epistemology](#), [Induction](#), [Presuppositional Gimmickry](#), [stolen concepts](#)

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