

Tuesday, September 01, 2009

Chris Bolt's Questions

Because Blogger now limits the number of characters allowed in a comment, I find more and more that my comments are better posted on my blog as separate entries. This is only in keeping with my ambition to write - as Chris Bolt calls them - "lengthy, arrogant posts." After all, I have a reputation to uphold.

In a comment which he recently posted to [his own blog](#), Bolt asked me a series of questions.

While I am happy to address them, I surmise that Bolt will probably not interact with my answers. I have responded to Bolt's questions before (see for example [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), with no further discussion on Bolt's part. One can interpret the situation in a variety of ways, such as that Bolt cannot respond to my answers, that Bolt doesn't care to, that he's still working on a response, that he's utterly flabbergasted by them, that he has not read them, or that he's not interested in pursuing the matter any further once I've had my say. The upshot is that, if he thinks I am wrong, he passes up the opportunity to make his points known.

The kind of questions which Bolt typically asks me, seems to be aimed at exposing some crucial area of uncertainty on my part. And while I have no problem admitting that there are many areas of inquiry in which I have little or no knowledge (things like the history of papier mâché, Tagalog, Azerbaijani cuisine, Britney Spears' discography, etc., come to mind), let alone certainty, I would suppose that Bolt is essentially in a similar position, having little or no knowledge of many things, and thus no certainty on a variety of topics. Whatever relevance this has, needs to be explained. Is one's lack of knowledge or certainty on a certain subject important for some reason? Is that where we are going to discover something that cancels out everything else we know? If this is the predicament which I allegedly face, it seems that the same predicament would apply to every human being, including those who claim to have knowledge "revealed" to them from a supernatural source.

Bolt asks:

What do you mean by "previously validated knowledge"?

Previously validated knowledge is knowledge that has already been validated, specifically in the context of new discoveries. For instance, when a scientist studies the flow tendencies of rain water in a particular valley, he does not have to begin every day of his research by discovering the elemental make-up of water. Once this has been discovered and validated, he can move on to exploring new discoveries. That water is composed of hydrogen and oxygen, is knowledge that has, in the context of the scientist's research, been previously validated. He does not need to continue to discover and validate this knowledge over and over again before he proceeds to other areas of study.

Now I had used the phrase "previously validated knowledge" in [my 31 Aug. comment](#) on Bolt's blog, when I explained to him that his own comment (posted on the same date) did not deal with the failure of his "global skepticism" argument. Clearly it is important to Bolt that I lack certainty in some area of my knowledge. But I openly admit that I am neither omniscient nor infallible. But neither is he. So we're in the same boat. (And appeal to "revelation" does nothing to shore up a Christian's own ignorance, as I show [here](#).) My statement specifically was:

We take in facts and integrate them, as we discover them. But these facts do not unseat previously validated knowledge.

I don't know what is so controversial about what I've stated here. But this is where Bolt asked what I mean by "previously validated knowledge." It is odd that I should have to explain this to someone [who insists](#) that the view that "God does not lie" is something that any Sunday school child should blindly believe simply because he's been instructed to.

Bolt then asked:

Is it not a possibility that you will come across some fact in future experience which will overturn your apparent knowledge concerning what rain is made up of?

I do not ascribe to the epistemological model which equates “possibility” with whatever the human mind can *imagine*. I can imagine breathing water, but I do not accept it as a possibility that I will ever be able to breathe water. To affirm a possibility, one needs at least some evidence to support it, and no evidence against it. I have already allowed (in [a comment I made to Bolt’s blog](#)) that rain can be composed of different substances, such as on Saturn’s moon Titan ([evidence discovered by scientists](#) studying this moon suggests that it rains methane). The rain with which I am personally familiar here on earth is composed primarily of water droplets formed from water vapor in the atmosphere. If Bolt knows of any facts that can overturn this, I invite him to produce it.

Perhaps Bolt thinks I need to go out and test every raindrop that has ever fallen on earth in order to be “certain” that rain is composed of water droplets. With such requirements for any generalized certainty, it seems to be an unattainable commodity, even for someone who thinks he’s receiving knowledge from a supernatural source (which prohibits any testing whatsoever). But if we understand the causal process which produces rain (cf. condensation of water vapor in the atmosphere), why would such tests be needed? Do people who depend on and collect rain water for their survival need to perform such tests?

Of course, I would not accept as a “possibility” the proposal that rain is actually composed of 24-carat diamonds or automobiles cleverly disguised by a reality-controlling consciousness to look like water droplets. If I believed such a consciousness actually existed, I have no idea how I could rule out such proposals as legitimate possibilities, since on such a view “all things are possible” (Mt. 19:26). But that’s not my problem.

Bolt then stated:

So far as I know Christianity does not teach anything about an invisible magic being who manipulates a lawless world;

But I know this, since I know what Christianity teaches. It teaches that the world was created by an [invisible magic being](#) and that the things which exist in it are what that invisible magic being [wishes](#) them to be. If Christianity taught that the universe were inherently lawful, it would make no sense for Christians to assert that an invisible magic being (i.e., “God”) created and sustains it through its magical powers. Now how is it that a non-Christian understands what Christianity teaches better than an adherent of Christianity?

Bolt then asked:

but really, how do you know that water might not turn into merlot the next time you drink it?

Oh, if only it were so easy to make merlot!

But to answer Bolt’s question, it is simple: I know this *by a means of knowledge*. Specifically, by means of *reason*. Its method is called [logic](#), an objective method of integrating new knowledge with previously validated knowledge, beginning with the truth of the [axioms](#).

Of course, if we are not allowed to be certain that water will not magically turn into merlot the next time I am about to drink some, how can Christians claim to be certain that their god is real, or that what they call “God” is not really some malevolent agent deceitfully portraying itself as what Christianity defines as “God”? Blank out.

Bolt’s next question was:

What percentage of the universe do you think you have access to anyway? Does 4% sound reasonable?

There are many, many things throughout the universe to which I have no access and never will have access. I’ve never made any claim otherwise. I have no statistics on this, so I cannot give a precise answer to Bolt’s question. I would assume it is even less than his proposed 4% though. If Bolt has any more knowledge than this, it seems that we should be asking him all the questions, and he should be prepared to answer them, since he has so much more knowledge than us.

Bolt then asked:

Do you really believe you have enough facts in to make the kinds of judgments you do?

Yes, I do. I wouldn't attempt to make the judgments I make if I didn't think I had enough facts. There are times when I withhold judgment just because of this.

Bolt then made a confession:

I am not even sure why you would think your conceptual map meshes with the external world, if there is such a thing.

Bolt's understanding in this area would be greatly improved if he familiarized himself with the objective theory of concepts. (See specifically Ayn Rand's *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*.) It is not as if there were "the external world" on the one hand, and this huge sum of knowledge existing independently of it in my head on the other, and somehow they have to come together and "mesh" with each other. Armchair omniscience is not the proper standard for knowledge; reason is. There is the world, and there is my awareness of the world (which in fact is part of the world), and my knowledge of the world builds on the basis of my awareness of the world. If I build my knowledge according to an objective method (which the objective theory of concepts supplies) from the basis of what I perceive and observe, then the resulting knowledge is in fact *knowledge of the world*, since it is based on facts discovered in the world.

On the other hand, Christianity takes armchair omniscience seriously as the ideal model for knowledge, which means that knowledge is ultimately unattainable by man. Consequently, for him to know anything, an invisible magic being needs to spoonfeed it to him, and man, on this model, has no choice but to accept whatever he receives from this alleged source at face value, and believe it unquestioningly, without examination, on faith. Which means: he can never really know anything, since independent verification is prohibited. How this model provides something that constitutes "knowledge" is never explained, since the Christian worldview does not provide a theory of concepts, and man's knowledge is undeniably conceptual in nature. It requires that we "just believe," while many non-believers simply want to *know*. It is no accident that the thing which was prohibited to Adam and Eve in the Garden was *knowledge*. They were punished when they acquired knowledge. On Christianity's terms, we're not supposed to know, and when we know, we're condemned for knowing.

Bolt then asked:

I know, "existence exists" (whatever that means), but what types of things exist and how do you know? I mean are we talking about external things?

Many categories have been formed to identify and classify the things which we discover in existence. The concept 'existence' is the widest concept, including *all* the things we discover in existence. From there, we form categories which subdivide the things we find in existence according to various purposes, which can vary from context to context. For instance, we might use the categories "natural" and "man-made" to distinguish between those things which are naturally occurring (such as rocks, rivers, rainbows, planetary bodies, etc.) from those which are artifacts produced by human action (such as kitchenware, computers, automobiles, the US Constitution, etc.). Or, we can divide what we discover in the world by the categories of animate objects (e.g., reptiles, rose bushes, bobcats, cuttlefish, human beings, etc.) and inanimate objects (e.g., rocks, mountains, ash, silverware, paper, etc.). These are conceptual categories into which we integrate objects as we discover them. If an object we discover is entirely new, we can formulate a new category to classify it. But if it exists, it can due to this fact still be integrated into the concept 'existence', which again is the widest of all concepts.

How do we know? By means of reason: the faculty which identifies and integrates what we perceive or observe.

Are we talking only of "external things"? Bolt himself posed the question, so he needs to address this. But if "external things" is understood to refer to things distinct from conscious activity, I would point out that the same method by which we identify and integrate "external things" so defined, applies in principle to identifying and integrating the actions of consciousness. See specifically chapter 4, "Concepts of Consciousness," of *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, which deals specifically with this area of inquiry.

The answers are there. If Bolt is truly interested, he can seek them out and enlighten himself.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Certainty](#), [Knowledge](#), [Presuppositional Gimmickry](#)

posted by [Bahnsen Burner](#) at [11:00 AM](#)

6 Comments:

[Keith](#) said...

Hi Dawson,

If I might suggest a future topic for a blog entry: I would love to see a detailed analysis of what, exactly, composes a valid argument and why, and by whom, it is/should be accepted as valid. Reason being, I noticed (especially recently) that you often claim that presupper's present their claims but have no argument to back them up. Having read many of your posts, and noticing that you never refer to such an entry, I'm assuming it hasn't been dealt with in detail on your blog. While I'm sure many of your readers can readily see the vacuity of presup claims by your interactions with their writings, I wonder how many who are sympathetic to theism don't see the connection and really have no idea what makes an argument valid (or how to present a valid argument). This may sound too elementary to deal with, but I would submit that if it is dealt with then that would be one more reference for you to make when a presupper attempts to turn to the tables on you by asserting that you have no basis for your claims about Objectivist axioms. I think dissecting what makes a valid argument, demonstrating how the Objectivist axioms apply and then showing how one of your arguments fits the description would remove yet another hiding spot for the presuppers. Obviously, if they agree with what comprises a valid argument, then there's little excuse for not presenting one when they debate. Just my opinion.

Regards,

Keith

[September 02, 2009 9:53 AM](#)

[C.L. Bolt](#) said...

A "valid" argument is deductive rather than inductive or transcendental. The last thing we need is another link to follow in Mr. Bethrick's shotgun spree.

[September 02, 2009 2:15 PM](#)

[Keith](#) said...

I don't know much about "transcendental" arguments but I've analyzed my share of mathematical proofs from induction so I don't see how using induction to provide support for an argument is invalid - if that, indeed, is your implication. To be sure, I would posit that virtually all theists utilize some form of induction (whether in error or not) when they attempt to rationalize their god beliefs. Isn't this what the whole "Intelligent Design" argument is based upon: There is an orderly construction to the universe - ergo God exists? Smacks of induction to me. My apologies if I've misinterpreted your brief and rather caustic reply.

Regards,

Keith

[September 02, 2009 3:39 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hi Keith,

Thank you for your suggestion. I figured there's so much information available pertaining to proper argument form that a primer authored by myself would be superfluous. In print, I would recommend introductory logic texts by H.W.B. Joseph, Patrick Hurley, and Objectivism's own Dr. David Kelley. I'm sure there are plenty of resources

on the internet as well. But you'd be correct in noting that my writings presuppose at least some background knowledge of basic logic.

I would like to make a few comments in regard to what you have stated.

I have no idea how many theists in general have little or no idea what makes an argument, but it seems that quite a few suffer from this malady. Presuppers, for instance, point to the [Bahnsen-Stein debate](#) as the model of presuppositional argumentation. But [my review of Bahnsen's opening statement](#) (the portion of the debate that he'd be most prepared to present), I found no argument at all. Instead, he simply rattles off a bunch of assertions, with no attempt to articulate the steps of an inference, which is what an argument should do.

Validity of argumentation presupposes that there is in fact an argument to begin with. If no argument has been presented, then the question of validity simply does not apply. When I review a debate like [the one between RazorsKiss and Mitch LeBlanc](#) and discover that RazorsKiss presents no argument for his position on the resolution (that "the Triune God of the Scriptures is the basis of knowledge"), pointing out that RK has not presented a debate is simply an observation (a rather damning one, I'd say). I have asked Chris Bolt and Brian Knapp, who apparently feel I'm wrong in my observation, to reproduce RK's argument, and am waiting for them to decide whether or not they will do this. At that point, we can look to determine whether the argument RK allegedly presents is valid. But it would be yet a different matter to determine whether or not the argument is *sound*, which is a valid argument with true premises.

(continued...)

[September 02, 2009 4:40 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

(Part II)

In his comment above, Chris Bolt distinguishes between deductive, inductive and transcendental arguments, stating that validity pertains only to deductive arguments, not to inductive and transcendental arguments. This is correct in the case of inductive arguments, which are classically categorized according to their cogency (as opposed to validity). As Hurley explains, a cogent argument is "an inductive argument that is strong and has true premises" (*A Concise Introduction to Logic*, p. 534).

But it's not clear that validity does not or cannot pertain to transcendental arguments. Validity of deductive argumentation has to do with its form. And it should be noted that a valid argument can be produced for any conclusion one wants to defend, regardless of its truth value. E.g.,

Premise 1: If my car is blue, then TAG is false.

Premise 2: My car is blue.

Conclusion: Therefore, TAG is false.

This is a valid argument, because it is cast in a valid argument form. It is not a sound argument, however, because the truth or falsehood of TAG is not dependent on the color of my car.

Presuppositional theorist David Byron, who was active on James Anderson's [Van Til Lists](#) for a number of years, categorizes transcendental arguments as a type of deductive argument, and states that a transcendental argument is "distinguished from other deductive arguments by its modality and its particular subject matter." He also states that "a transcendental argument may be expressed in the form of Modus Ponens." ([The Van Til List](#), "Re: Question: Transcendental vs. Indirect Arguments," 28 Aug. 1998, msg #00374).

Hurley defines modus ponens as "a valid argument form/rule of inference" (Op. cit., p. 538).

Also, in his essay "The Transcendental Argument for God's Existence," apologist Michael Butler writes:

"Transcendental arguments typically have the following form: For x (some aspect of human experience) to be the case, y must also be the case since y is the precondition of x. Since x is the case, y is the case." (*The Standard*

Bearer, p. 79)

This argument scheme essentially takes the following form:

Premise 1: If X, then Y.

Premise 2: X.

Conclusion: Therefore, Y.

Looks like standard modus ponens to me, so I don't see why validity does not pertain to transcendental arguments, especially given what these two heavyweights (Byron and Butler) have to say on the matter. If Chris differs with them, this would not be the first time presuppositionalists have trouble staying on the same page.

I hope this helps.

Regards,
Dawson

[September 02, 2009 4:47 PM](#)

[C.L. Bolt](#) said...

To whom it may concern,

My response to the main post here is now up at <http://www.choosinghats.com>

Thanks.

[September 02, 2009 10:59 PM](#)

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