

Friday, April 27, 2007

### Pike on Concepts and Omniscience

Peter Pike has [attempted to interact](#) with my [recent posting](#) on the question of whether or not an omniscient being would have its knowledge in the form of concepts. What's interesting is that he tries to raise objections to several of my points, but at the end of his post he expresses firm agreement with my main conclusion. Throughout the content of his response, however, it seems that he did not grasp the issue that the paper talks about very well.

For example, he asks:

is it impossible for a being that knows all that is possible to know to know what a concept is? If it is possible to know what a concept is, then a being that knows all that is possible to know, would indeed know these concepts too.

This completely misses the point. Nowhere does my paper argue that an omniscient being would not know what a concept is. Rather, my point is that it would not possess that knowledge in the form of concepts. Pike fails to distinguish between the object of knowledge and the form in which that knowledge is held. He's talking about the former while my paper talks about the latter.

Another example of Pike missing the issue is when he asks:

is it not possible for a being that knows all that can logically be known to use concepts that He knows to communicate to beings He created with the ability to understand these same concepts? If God intends to use concepts to communicate with His creation, how would that cause any logical problems?

This is a red herring which occurs repeatedly throughout Pike's response. Nowhere does my paper conclude that an omniscient being cannot use concepts to communicate with minds which do possess their knowledge in the form of concepts. It crossed my mind at one point to make mention of this point, but I had supposed it was so obvious that I wouldn't have to. Again, the question is not what tools an omniscient being would use to communicate to non-omniscient beings, but in what form would that omniscient being have its knowledge? This all goes straight over Pike's head.

Then Pike wrote:

By now, you may be wondering just how Dawson defines what a concept is anyway. Seeing the definition helps to demonstrate why there is no contradiction in Christian theism.

If Pike agrees that his god's knowledge is "not conceptual," as he clearly affirms at the end of his post, then what is he worried about? My paper provides a rationale, based on the objective theory of concepts, for supposing that an omniscient being would not have its knowledge in the form of concepts. Pike himself said his god's knowledge is not conceptual, but he did not provide an alternative rationale for supposing this other than the loose statements found in the bible which say nothing about concepts whatsoever.

Those statements are:

For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (Isaiah 55:9).

For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 2:11).

Neither of these verses say anything about whether or not the god it speaks of possesses its knowledge in the form of concepts. In fact, just like Pike, the verses he cites make no distinction between the content of knowledge and the form in which it is retained.

Pike writes:

I'll interrupt for a second to point out the obvious problem with the last sentence. "Consciousness is consciousness of something" demonstrates that Dawson cannot define "consciousness" without referencing the very thing he's trying to define!

Several points.

First, my statement "consciousness is consciousness of something" was nowhere offered as a *definition*. Why does Pike suppose it was? Rather, it is a statement which makes consciousness' need for an object explicit.

Second, 'consciousness' is an axiomatic concept. Like other axiomatic concepts, it lies at the fundamental level of the conceptual hierarchy, which means: it is not defined in terms of prior concepts. Any prior concepts would genetically assume what is being identified in the definition, since concepts presuppose consciousness. This is all Basic Concepts 101 stuff.

Again Pike shows that he misses the essence of the argument:

Now it should be noted that I have no objection to any of the above. Man certainly does seem to think in this manner. But how Dawson gets from the above definitions to the idea that an omniscient being cannot use concepts is where the problems are.

As I pointed out above, I did not argue that "an omniscient being cannot use concepts" such as when it seeks to communicate with other minds which do have their minds in the form of concepts. Rather I asked whether or not it would have its own knowledge in the form of concepts, and gave reasons why it wouldn't. Pike is welcome to claim that his god has its knowledge in the form of concepts, but even he came out and expressed agreement with my position that his god's knowledge is "not conceptual."

Pike then got sidetracked on the unrelated issue of whether or not concepts are open-ended, and presented a thought experiment to substantiate his position that they don't have to be. He writes:

Suppose the entire universe consisted of one room with two objects in the room. These objects both had the same shape. One observer looked in this room and said that the shape of the first object was "square." The other shape is also a square. He can thereby state that if anything else were to pop into existence with that shape, it would also be square. He has abstracted the shape "square" and yet has full knowledge of all the actual existent objects in the universe.

Consider the problems here. For one it asks us to entertain the unreal by imagining it. That's fine as far as it goes, but we need to keep in mind that we're entering a fake environment at this point, and conclusions produced in the sterile zone of a fake environment are often not at all applicable to the actual environment. This is especially the case when that fake environment is deliberately concocted to neutralize the original issues. The original issue is whether or not concepts are open-ended, but the scenario Pike presents in his illustration is deliberately crafted so that open-endedness cannot apply.

Also, he asks us to assume that "the entire universe consisted of one room with two objects in the room." "Room"? What does this mean? Where did he get this concept? That's right, he got it from the real environment. To make his thought experiment work, he needs to borrow from outside it, which makes it an unclean laboratory for developing his point.

Then, without explanation, Pike adds an "observer." Is this observer part of the universe? If so, then we're asked to contradict what we were first asked to suppose, namely that the entire universe consisted of one room with two objects. Now it's a room with three objects, one of which is an observer. How many more changes to the thought experiment are we to expect coming down the pike?

Another problem is that we're asked to suppose we know something without any explanation of how we're supposed to know it; we're asked to suppose that the entire universe consists of one room with two (um, make that three) objects in the room. How would we know this? Pike doesn't say. We're supposed to "just know," perhaps by stipulation for the sake of an artificial setting needed to make his point. But even then, Pike undercuts his own point by granting that the concept 'square' which he formed on the basis of only two objects is in fact open-ended when he says: "He can thereby state that if anything else were to pop into existence with that shape, it would also be square." In other words, if a new object were discovered to possess similarities with

those that were initially integrated to form the concept 'square', it could be integrated into that concept along with the rest. The concept is still open-ended, even on Pike's thought experiment!

Pike writes:

Or, to put it another way, if you can conceptualize based on a few objects, you can conceptualize based on a few more than that. And if you can conceptualize with more objects, you can conceptualize even when you have all objects, both real and potential.

This does not reverse the facts that we are directly aware of only a small number of units at any time, that there are always many units of which we are not aware at any time, and that we need concepts to help us cognitively manage those units which lie outside our immediate awareness. Moreover, even if we conceptualize with a very large sum of units, as Pike proposes, our concepts will still be open-ended, they will still omit specific measurements, and they will still be useful to us because they condense an enormous sum of data into single units. Again, all these points are lost on Pike as he tries to swim upstream beyond his understanding.

Pike writes:

Of course, I should point out that Dawson did couch his argument in terms of "need" for he said: "Concepts are therefore a kind of mental shorthand which he needs because he does not have direct awareness of all members of a class." So perhaps he could argue that God did not need the ability to form concepts even though He could do so.

Again, Pike has missed what my paper argues. It argues that an omniscient being would not have its knowledge in the form of concepts. I did not say that Pike's god could not have the ability to form concepts. I'm fully aware that someone who believes there's a god can attribute any abilities to it he imagines, since in the end imagination is what he has to go on.

Pike then concedes:

But God did not need to create man either, and He chose to do so. Once God created man, then the need would certainly be there if He desired to communicate with man. If God did not wish to communicate with man, then there would be no need for Him to be able to form concepts; but because that view is heretical to the Christian position

So the Christian god "did not need to create man," but since it "chose to do so," did it have to create man with a mind that retains its knowledge in the form of concepts, or was this an option for the Christian god as well? The way Pike's response reads, it does not seem to allow his god any options on this matter once it chose to create man. I'd be surprised, however, if Pike did not think his god could have created man without a conceptual format for knowledge retention. Regardless, what Pike says here is damning enough for one of his later points.

Pike then writes that

the Bible doesn't treat God's knowledge as only "conceptual in nature."

I'd like to see where it treats any knowledge as "conceptual in nature." From what I can tell, the bible doesn't speak of concepts at all and its authors display no significant knowledge of the process by which concepts are formed.

Pike writes:

But what Dawson fails to realize is that an all-knowing God could still form concepts in order to communicate to those He created.

On the contrary, I am fully aware that a god can do whatever its believers are willing to imagine it does. Imagination is the ultimate standard when it comes to the content of god-belief. But notice how Pike still hasn't grasped what my paper is arguing? Take a look:

God knows what concepts are; if He is all-knowing, He knows not only all objects but all true conceptualizations of these objects too. God can use them to communicate (revelation) with man. There is nothing inherently illogical with this.

Pike still confuses the object of knowledge with the form in which it is possessed. My paper does not argue that

Pike's god would not know what concepts are, or that it would not know "all true conceptualizations." Rather, it asks in what form would it possess that knowledge, and answers that it would not be in the form of concepts.

Pike continues:

Dawson, after quoting Bahsen [sic], concludes:

Since, according to this view, the Christian god "has no 'percepts' from which He constructs His knowledge," it would have no need for a faculty which "integrates and thus condenses a group of percepts into a single mental whole."

Once again, Dawson begs the question. He supposed God would have no "need for a faculty which 'integrates and thus condenses a group of percepts into a single mental whole'", which begs the question that God does not wish to communicate to concept-based beings! God most certainly WOULD need the faculty to do so if He wished to relate to His creation, and (as I argued above) it is not illogical to state that God can do so. Since He logically can do so, and since Christians state God does want to communicate to us, then Dawson has no argument left.

How is this begging the question? If it is the case that that the Christian god "has no 'percepts'," as Bahnsen has affirmed, then it could not - on an objective understanding - have concepts, for concepts are ultimately formed from the basis of percepts. So I'm simply taking Bahnsen's point to the next logical step.

At any rate, Pike himself stated above that his god "did not need to create man" in the first place. On Pike's view, his god *chose* to create man. If the issue at this point is the Christian god's use of concepts for the purpose of communicating with minds which do possess their knowledge in the form of concepts, this would - as I indicated - still not be an issue of need. Pike himself makes it a matter of his god's *wishing*, even though Paul Manata [tells us](#) that "God doesn't wish."

Pike concludes:

God's knowledge--what He Himself knows--is not conceptual.

I am pleased that Pike has agreed that his god's knowledge is not conceptual. I am pleased because this conclusion will later lend itself as a premise in a broader argument, and I have it on record now that Pike endorses it. But this does lead to a question: If the Christian god does not possess its knowledge in conceptual form, what is the form in which it possesses its knowledge? Pike did not speak to this.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Concepts](#), [imagination](#), [Knowledge](#), [Peter Pike](#), [wishing](#)

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

## 1 Comments:

[openlyatheist](#) said...

Truly interesting stuff. I am amazed at the similarity to Pascal Boyer's work in Religion Explained, where he describes the action of the brain in terms of 'inference systems.'

Meaning, for instance, the process by which we conclude that all cats are warm blooded, without having to dissect all cats, since they belong to a larger category (concept) such as 'mammal.'

More interesting is the fact that your previous post sparked a defensive rebuttal from a Christian despite no actual disagreement being presented. It seems more like a territorial reaction.

[April 27, 2007 2:24 PM](#)