

Sunday, September 05, 2010

A Reply to Andrew Louis

Andrew Louis has posted two blogs interacting with statements I have made in an effort to clarify my position and correct some of his misunderstandings on my blog (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

Andrew's blog entries can be found here:

[A Response to Dawson](#)

[P.2 Response to Dawson](#)

Below I reply to Andrew's questions and objections, beginning with his first blog and continuing to his second.

I had written:

Objectivism *begins* with incontestable certainties.

Andrew writes:

I gather that these incontestable certainties are [e.g.] existence & perception.

The Objectivist axioms are existence, identity and consciousness. Specifically, they are the recognitions that (a) existence exists (i.e., reality exists, things exist, something exists); (b) to exist is to be something (i.e., to have identity); and (c) consciousness is consciousness of something.

The context of these three axioms entails a fourth axiom - the primacy of existence: existence exists independent of consciousness, to exist is to be something independent of consciousness, a thing is what it is independent of consciousness.

I refer to these as incontestable certainties because they would have to be true in order to deny, doubt, dispute or question them. Since certainty essentially means without doubt or reservation, anyone can be certain that these axioms are true for they are not only the indispensable foundation of truth, their truth is self-evident - not in a Cartesian sense, but in the sense that any knower can recognize their truth firsthand by means of his own awareness of the world about him. Just by being aware of anything, the truth of the axioms is established: one must exist in order to be aware of anything (the axiom of existence), something has to exist for him to be aware of (the axiom of existence again), that something must be something as opposed to something else (the axiom of identity), and one must have the faculty of consciousness to be aware of anything (the axiom of consciousness). Being aware of anything is a minimum requirement for denying, doubting, disputing or questioning something, for these are conscious activities.

I had written:

Universality is essentially nothing more than the human mind's ability to form open-ended classifications of reference (namely mental integrations) into which new units can be integrated when they are discovered or considered.

Andrew replied:

I think I gather what you're saying here just fine, other than the fact that the word 'reference' seems a bit teasing as I'm thinking, 'In reference to what? Concepts? And what are the concepts in reference to?'

Baseline concepts - i.e., concepts which are formed on the basis of perceptual input (such as 'chair', 'table', 'sofa') denote those specific objects which we perceived when we formed them, as well as other objects which are relevantly similar to them (i.e., other chairs, tables and sofas which we've perceived, as well as those

which we haven't perceived and even those which we'll never perceive). Higher concepts are formed using the same process, but instead of drawing their content directly on the basis of what we immediately perceive, these concepts integrate previously formed concepts. We've already formed the concepts 'chair', 'table' and 'sofa'; now we integrate all three of them into a new concept - 'furniture' - a concept which includes all chairs, tables and sofas, and other items (such as dressers, nightstands, hutches, buffets, etc.) - both those which we have perceived as well as those which we haven't perceived and may never perceive. The concept 'furniture' is a higher concept or higher abstraction, since it was formed on the basis of more fundamental concepts/abstractions.

So ultimately concepts refer to or denote objects that we perceive with our senses. But while some concepts do this directly, others do so indirectly, via other concepts.

Andrew wrote:

I'm not seeing how, when an objectivist ultimately speaks of fact and truth, that it isn't looked upon as ultimately a reference to or correspondence with reality.

There is reference to reality here, there is correspondence to reality here. As I had stated before, some have called the Objectivist view a version of the correspondence theory of truth. Peikoff goes so far as to call it "the traditional correspondence theory of truth" (OPAR, p. 165). He writes:

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 contradiction of it, then it is false. (Ibid.)

Now I'm not persuaded that referring to Objectivism's theory of truth as "the *traditional* correspondence theory of truth" is the most responsible equation to make. I say this because there are many traditions in philosophy which Objectivism rejects but which may be associated with one or another version of the "traditional" correspondence theory of truth, and to the extent that such association may be read into Peikoff's statement, I think it can lead to misunderstanding. But Peikoff does explain what he means in terms of "recognition of fact" taking the form of "conceptual products... formulated by human consciousness," which is vital.

Also, there is context involved, beginning with the context provided in perception (since both differentiation and integration are so vital to the process of forming concepts). A proposition integrates what may be an enormous context of information, and every element of that context must conform to reality in order for that proposition to be true. This is why I could not agree with Sye when he says that "truth is absolute." The underlying context informing Sye's conception of truth involves false premises, such as the premise that the primacy of consciousness metaphysics is true. Since I'm aware of this, I cannot affirm *with Sye* that truth is absolute. On the contrary, it is because the primacy of consciousness metaphysics is in fact false that I can affirm the absoluteness of truth in a context uncontaminated by error.

I wrote:

Truth, on my view, is a property of identification. Identification is a mental activity which involves a consciousness' interaction with the objects of its awareness.

Andrew responded:

This is where I'm tempted to force you a bit. But let me say this, I'm with you completely when you state that 'A rock is not true'. Correct, that is NOT a proposition, it's only what we say about the rock the has the property of being either true or false as in, 'The rock is gray' - in that sense that is either a true statement or a false one. My question would be, then, (and I think I know what your answer would be) is a rock and for that matter 'grayness' a property that exists in the word (outside of

consciousness) or would you rather say that both are 'concepts'? i.e. that the world is neither in itself rock-like (in some ways) or gray-like (in others) but that these are merely objective concepts which are mind dependent.

First, let us talk about rocks. There are the things in the world that we call "rocks," and there is the concept 'rock' by which we denote the things in the world that we call "rocks." There is reality, and there is our consciousness of reality, and there is the relationship between the two. The things in the world that we call "rocks" exist in the world independent of consciousness. They are not concepts. On the other hand, the concept 'rock' is a product of mental activity which is formed on the basis of what we discover about these things in the world that we call "rocks."

In the case of "grayness," I take it that this refers to the quality of "being gray." So, using my point above, there is presumably the quality of being gray, and the concept 'grayness' by which we denote this quality. The important thing to note in the case of sensory qualities (such as colors, sounds, smells, etc.) is that they are the *form* in which we experience the objects we perceive. Because objects reflect light and our sensory organs have their particular natures, we experience things which we perceive with our eyes as having certain colors. The rock appears gray; appearance being the *form* in which we see something. This does not make colors and other sensory qualities "subjective." The color gray does not exist in the rock, nor does it exist in the mind. Rather, it exists in the interaction between object and perceiver. Without the perceiver, the rock simply reflects any light that happens to hit it. It is not "gray" or any other color, since colors are the form in which a perceiver sees an object.

Andrew wrote:

Also noting that the world is not 'objective' either, it just exists, as you say. i.e. objective is merely another 'concept', a means by which we approach talking about the world, hence objectivism.

The concept 'objective' is a very important concept, since it has to do with the method by which we acquire and validate knowledge. Rand explains:

Objectivity is both a metaphysical and an epistemological concept. It pertains to the relationship of consciousness to existence. Metaphysically, it is the recognition of the fact that reality exists independent of any perceiver's consciousness. Epistemologically, it is the recognition of the fact that a perceiver's (man's) consciousness must acquire knowledge of reality by certain means (reason) in accordance with certain rules (logic). This means that although reality is immutable and, in any given context, only one answer is true, the truth is not automatically available to a human consciousness and can be obtained only by a certain mental process which is required of every man who seeks knowledge—that there is no substitute for this process, no escape from the responsibility for it, no shortcuts, no special revelations to privileged observers—and that there can be no such thing as a final "authority" in matters pertaining to human knowledge. Metaphysically, the only authority is reality; epistemologically—one's own mind. The first is the ultimate arbiter of the second.

The concept of objectivity contains the reason why the question "Who decides what is right or wrong?" is wrong. Nobody "*decides*." Nature does not *decide*—it merely *is*; man does not *decide*, in issues of knowledge, he merely *observes* that which is. When it comes to applying his knowledge, man decides what he chooses to do, according to what he has learned, remembering that the basic principle of rational action in *all* aspects of human existence, is: "Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed." This means that man does not create reality and can achieve his values only by making his decisions consonant with the facts of reality. ("Who Is the Final Authority in Ethics?" *The Objectivist Newsletter* , Feb. 1965, 7.)

Andrew asked:

To spin this another way, would you agree with the statement that, yes, the world causes us to have certain beliefs, but it does not give us the reason? In this way we supply the concepts of 'objective', 'grayness', 'rock', etc., but that the world is none of these things...

I do not think that "the world causes us to have certain beliefs," as if our minds were passive balls of clay manipulated without our own active participation. Cognition is both active and volitional. As Rand points out,

“Consciousness, as a state of awareness, is not a passive state, but an active process that consists of two essentials: differentiation and integration.” (*Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, p. 5) When we perceive, we perceive an enormous contextual sum. From this sum we *select* that which we will identify and integrate into the sum of our knowledge. So just by developing our minds - prior to any formed beliefs about anything - we are exercising volition. Our first choice is to think, or to evade thinking. So just by having any beliefs, we've had to have made some choices.

I wrote:

Realism in terms of universals is the view that “that universals have a reality of their own, an extra-mental existence. Positions are often marked out, running from moderate to absolute Realism. The more definite, fixed, and eternal the status of the universals, the more absolute is the Realism.” (Reese, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion*, p. 637). This of course does not describe the Objectivist view; but it does describe Plato's view.

Andrew responded:

Because of the hang-up I stated with the word 'reference' above, I'm tempted to push this matter a bit. Because you use the word 'reference', and to some degree (you talk about this more as I quote below) you use correspondence jargon, I'm tempted to infer something along the lines of the following. I agree with you that we should not look at universals as having an existence all their own. However, since we're talking about 'reference' and 'correspondence', I'm tempted to consider that the objectivist position, whereas it does not see the universals as existing on their own, nonetheless see them as representative, correspondent of, and/or in reference to a reality. In this way truth is judged via an adequate correspondence to reality - i.e. we know when something is true when it adequately represents reality (which again, this also brings out that dirty “mirror” metaphor, which I know you've stated you shun). It is within that idea that I raise my suspicions over how ones knows they've 'adequately adhered to anything'.

I'm hoping that some of what I wrote above, particularly the Peikoff quote on the nature of truth, will address Andrew's concern here. I have been explicit in using words like “reference,” “denote” and “correspondence” in speaking about the relationship between concepts and the world. I resist “representation” primarily because I want to avoid wrongful association with the representationalist theory of perception (which I addressed earlier in my exchange with Andrew), and also because I don't think concepts are “representations” per se, but rather *integrations*. Concepts are not replicas, they are not an exercise of holding a mirror up to reality, as if reality needed to look at its own reflection. Rand explains:

A concept is a mental integration of two or more units which are isolated according to a specific characteristic(s) and united by a specific definition. . . . [In concept-formation], the uniting involved is not a mere sum, but an *integration*, i.e., a blending of the units into a *single*, new *mental* entity which is used thereafter as a single unit of thought (but which can be broken into its component units whenever required). (*Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, p. 10)

My earlier point about truth being a property or aspect of identification of reality, and identification being a type of mental activity, should serve to indicate that the correspondence between our knowledge and reality is not automatic, like the reflection which a mirror produces, nor is it a mere recreation of what is perceived, as if that would do the mind any good. If the mind reflected reality as a mirror reflects an image, that would still not explain how we form concepts and how they can be applied from situation to situation, nor would it explain the logical structure we find in knowledge.

I wrote:

As for language, according to Objectivism, it is “a code of visual-auditory symbols that serves the psycho-epistemological function of converting concepts into the mental equivalent of concretes” (ITOE, p. 10). “The primary purpose of concepts and of language is to provide man with a system of cognitive classification and organization, which enables him to acquire knowledge on an unlimited scale; this means: to keep order in man's mind and enable him to think.” (Ibid., p. 69)

Andrew replied:

I'm a bit hung on your use of concepts, and whereas I know you're staring [steering?] clear of Kant, I can't help but stir up the idea of Kant's a priori [a priori?] concepts when thinking about this. But I move on.

The reason why Andrew has Kantian ideas in mind is most likely because he's accepted many Kantian assumptions and also because he has little or no understanding of the objective theory of concepts. There is no such thing as an "a priori concept," in spite of the heritage of thinkers who've signed on to the idea. Concepts are formed by a mental process ultimately on the basis of what we perceive. There must be interaction between consciousness and its objects ("experience") in order for a subject to have the materials necessary to form its first concepts.

I wrote:

In essence, a statement is true when it adheres to an objective process of identification of reality. Some have called this a version of the correspondence theory of truth. "Reflect" implies a one-to-one relationship, but in fact conceptualization allows for much, much more than this.

Andrew responded:

Now, if I'm correct, your "objective process of identification" is also conceptual, but perhaps not a priori conceptual? My problem here is the same one I have above, you seem to have a trail of correspondence here to follow (at least, that's where I'm going with it). What I'm seeing is that language (a fact statement say) is true when it adheres to this "process", this process is a concept, but what's the concept derived from. Again, I'm tempted (from the metaphors you're using) to infer that implicit with all this is a connection between language and reality that may not be one to one per se, but is nonetheless representative in some fashion - i.e. truth is a matter of correspondence to reality. But, I suppose for now I'll have to take that as my misunderstanding of objectivist lingo.

The objective process of identification is a mental activity. We do use concepts to identify this process, and it is a process of forming concepts to denote what we perceive, or to integrate other concepts which are either directly or ultimately based on perceptual input. It is not "a priori" since it is part of the interaction of a consciousness with its objects, an activity which is volitional in nature. Our identifications are not automatic, nor are they part of our consciousness "out of the shrink wrap" as it were. It takes a budding consciousness years of effort to come to grips with its own nature and abilities. Some never learn how it works or how to control it.

Andrew asks "what's the concept derived from," which is essentially asking: how are concepts formed? Rand devotes a specific chapter of her book *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology* to explicating the steps of this process. I will not quote the entire chapter here, as there are issues which she brings out in the first chapter ("Cognition and Measurement") which must be understood before the process of forming concepts can be fully grasped. But let's look at a few points from that chapter. First, let's consider Rand's definition of 'concept':

A concept is a mental integration of two or more units possessing the same distinguishing characteristic(s), with their particular measurements omitted. (ITOE, p. 13)

Notice that Rand does not define a concept as a "representation" of two or more units which possess the same distinguishing characteristics, for this would potentially conflict with the second aspect of her definition of 'concept': the omission of particular measurements. Representations, as in "mirror-like" reflections, do not omit specific measurements, but rather reproduce what they reflect as replicas retaining their specific measurements. This would disable the conceptual faculty of man's consciousness before it had a chance, for it would completely stifle integration. The correspondence of knowledge to reality does not require "mirror-like" reflection which recreates what is perceived in replica form, for this would strand man's consciousness to the perceptual level, to the level of concretes. It is because knowledge is formed by a process involving *measurement-omission* as Rand explains it in this very chapter that man is capable of knowledge which is essentially transferable from situation to situation, from one circumstance to another, in different times and different places. As a result, I can get on the phone with my sister in Vermont (I'm on the west coast) and she can talk about her house, and since I have the concept 'house' - an open-ended mental unit which allows me to integrate new units from the world along with other units from the world that I've perceived - I can know

what she's talking about. If I did not have this capacity, if knowledge were merely a "mirror-like" representation of reality, she could talk about her one-storey house and I wouldn't be able to follow, because my house has a second storey, and here she would be using an idea that does not correspond to the "mirror-like" representation that I have in mind.

I wrote:

Since knowing in Objectivism is essentially a process of identification (and also integration), we know this implicitly just by perceiving and attempting to identify and interact with what we perceive. If I perceive an object, my senses are reliable - they are doing what senses do by virtue of their nature: responding to external stimuli, transmitting sensations to the brain, and automatically integrating those senses into percepts.

Andrew responded:

I gather this, one cannot wrongly see something, you just see what you see.

So why then would anyone think we need to *prove* the validity of the senses? Why does the fact that Objectivism acknowledges that the validity of the senses is axiomatic such a stumblingblock for Andrew? And why has he said that I've given no reason for supposing that the validity of the senses is axiomatic? In fact, I've pointed to a number of reasons why it is proper to categorize the validity of the senses as axiomatic. For instance, sense perception is non-volitional, autonomic, on the same level as digestion and photosynthesis. It is the primary mode of awareness (in human beings). Also, since proof is essentially a process of showing the logical connection between that which is *not* perceptually self-evident to that which *is* perceptually self-evident, which means: the very concept of proof presupposes the validity of the senses. To demand a proof for the validity of the senses ultimately leads to a series of stolen concepts.

Andrew continued:

Perceiving, however, is one thing, knowing another. To know something is to be able purport, to make an assertion in a language game, to make a commitment as in, "I know this rock is gray." In the statement above, you're connecting the act of knowing (the act of making statements in a language game, as I've forced it) to the very act of perceiving itself, thereby (as I see it for the moment) making a direct connection between language (truth) as correspondence and/or representation of reality. i.e. I know it (and in fact it's true) because it properly represents reality - so the representationalist baggage is right there. Now again, I know you want to stay away from that, but I don't see how you have. I'll accept that as my problem for the moment.

Of course, knowledge (of reality) is connected to perception, for it is by means of perception that we have awareness of reality. We cannot know anything unless we are first aware of something. But this does not validate or depend on the representationalist theory of *perception* - not in any way, shape or form. Nor does it smuggle its fallacious baggage into Objectivist epistemology since Objectivist epistemology slashed off the very source of that baggage by correcting the fundamental error of representationalism.

But I don't think this is what Andrew's really talking about (nor do I see any indication that Andrew understands the fallacious nature of the fallout caused by accepting the representationalist understanding of perception). People often refer to a statement's correspondence to reality in terms of representation, as in the case of a statement such as "the defendant's testimony did not accurately represent the situation of the night of the murder," which is harmless. But such treatments are not intended as a philosophical analysis of knowledge's relationship to reality. Nor do such statements necessarily imply the representationalist theory of perception. When we get to a philosophical analysis of knowledge, however, I think we need to be careful with how we state our positions and recognize that certain terms carry meanings governed by the history of philosophy. Also, I gave some more technical reasons above for cautioning against its use in trying to understand the nature and formation of concepts.

I wrote:

I suspected that you had some knowledge of the history of philosophy - the representationalist view of

perception having quite a lineage - and that you would understand what I was saying here. The representationalist view essentially says that we perceive appearances of things. Objectivism holds that this is false (it commits the fallacy of the stolen concept), and that we are perceive things directly (not their appearances). In Objectivism, appearance is the *form* in which we see something, but what we're seeing is the thing itself, not a representation of it.

Andrew responded:

Here again are a few hang-ups. You are in fact saying that what we perceive is, "the thing itself". Here's the problem, if on the one hand you want to say that we're perceiving the thing itself, but on the other you want to reject representation, (i.e. the truths we speak don't represent the thing in itself from above, not here) then what sense does it even make to state that we actually perceive "the thing itself"? But I've got ahead of myself here, as in this particular case what you're rejecting is the perception of the "appearance of things". I'm using representation in a different way, which (I think) you also reject. However by talking about and rejecting one form of representation, I seem you as grabbing the other, in which case I ask the epistemic question.

Note that in the above statement, I was contrasting the Objectivist view of perception from the representationalist alternative. According to Objectivism, we perceive the thing itself (not "the thing *in* itself" as in Kant's "Ding an sich"), whereas according to representationalism we perceive "appearances" of things, i.e., *not* the things themselves. So specifically in this sense I am trying to convey the fact that Objectivism rejects representationalism, what this means, and why. It is the representationalist theory of perception which, according to Objectivism, commits the fallacy of the stolen concept (for it makes use of the concept 'appearance' while ignoring its genetic roots). I did not say that the view that truthful propositions represent reality commits the fallacy of the stolen concept. Andrew states that he's using "representation" in a different sense (i.e., not in regard to the representationalist theory of perception, but presumably something more along the lines of the example I gave above from the hypothetical murder trial). Again, I'm hoping my statements above help clarify my thoughts on this. I would say in general (such as in everyday conversation), such use of "representation" is harmless, but in a discussion of the philosophical nature of knowledge I try to avoid it because of it can be very misleading.

I wrote:

I'm somewhat speculating here, but I think, for the most part, the process of learning the correspondence of language symbols to specific concepts is automatized memorization which is reinforced by repetition and use.

Andrew:

Here again you're using correspondence lingo (which implies representation, mirroring, adherence, etc. to reality) however in this case you state that it's a correspondence to concepts, which I'm a but mystified about at this point as to where you make the connection between reality (existence, the thing in itself from above) and the concept.

Again, not between concepts and reality as in "the thing *in* itself" (Kant's "Ding an sich"), but between concepts and the things which we perceive. This distinction may not register with Andrew if he's not familiar with the problems in Kantian philosophy. But Andrew continues to read "the thing *in* itself" when I write "the thing itself."

The connection between language and reality (i.e., the objects of perception) involves several intervening steps. And certainly there is correspondence involved - even representation, especially when it comes to the correspondence between the symbols which make up the code which is language, and the concepts for which they stand. But let's look at the steps in order, beginning with the first step: perception.

We begin our search for knowledge where we are aware of reality - in perception - and only after we've begun perceiving. (A child perceives his surroundings long before he starts to develop knowledge of what he's perceiving.) Perception inherently *corresponds* to objects (since - and I hope Andrew doesn't wince at this again - perception is perception *of objects*), but it does not "represent" objects (since perception is not a

form of representing anything - it's our form of being aware of what we're aware of), nor is perception "mirror-like" - since it is not a means of reflecting an image back to reality.

Next comes concept-formation. On the basis of this perceptual input, we form concepts which identify and integrate what we perceive. We form concepts by integrating two or more units which we've perceived and which are similar to each other in some way, into a single mental unit. Integration of multiple perceptual units into a single mental unit is made possible by means of measurement-omission: each specific object (or "perceptual unit") has its own specific characteristics. Take for example our concept 'ball'. A child sees two balls: one ball is about 2.7 inches in diameter, covered with yellow felt, with the rubber surface below the felt exposed in a single looping line curving about the exterior of the ball (I'm trying to describe a tennis ball here). The other ball is quite smaller, denser in mass, with a hard white plastic exterior covered with about 300 or so equally spaced dimples (I'm trying to describe a golf ball here). Both objects have similar attributes - especially their shape. But they possess those attributes in different measurements (some of which I've tried to describe). The child perceives both of these objects and can tell that they are similar in some ways and different in other ways just by looking at them. Their similarity is readily apparent by differentiating them from other objects in his surroundings (they don't look anything like his chair, the television set, the rug on the floor, his tricycle, building blocks, etc.), and their differences are readily apparent by setting them side by side and noting different color, size, exterior features, weight, etc. So they are similar, but possess their characteristics in different measurements. In the process of forming the concept 'ball', these measurements are "omitted" or "de-specified" (as Porter puts it) in order to integrate both objects into a single mental unit, namely the concept 'ball'. Of course, the child does not need to know what inches and feet are and calculate the size of each object in order to see that one is bigger than the other. In this way, measurement is initially ostensive given the perceptually self-evident variations in degree between the two objects. One is obviously bigger than the other, they are obviously not the same color, etc. This mental unit allows us to integrate yet more objects into its scope of reference, provided they meet the similarity requirements implied by the concept's first forming, such as their shape. The concept 'ball' thus *includes* not only the particular tennis ball and golf ball which the child saw, but *all* tennis balls, *all* golf balls, *all* baseballs, *all* beach balls, etc., whether he's seen them or not, even those which he will *never* see.

Granted, there's a lot more involved in concept-formation, but I'm hoping this example summarizes the main point that we form our initial concepts on the basis of what we perceive. What should be noteworthy in regard to some of Andrew's concerns is that the concept 'ball' is not a "mirror-like" reflection of the balls which the child has actually perceived, for this would ignore the integrative capacity which concepts provide to human cognition. It would in effect disallow subsuming new units (whether perceived directly or indicated through communication) into the same mental unit, for those new units are not part of the original "image" (i.e., direct awareness of two particular objects) from which the concept was initially formed. It is in part because our knowledge is conceptual in nature that I believe the mirror analogy is harmful.

Then, after we've formed concepts, we assign verbal or visual symbols to represent them (here's where "representation" is most appropriate). Language essentially gives our concepts perceptual form, to the extent that this is possible, and it does this by consistently assigning symbols to individual concepts. In this sense, language's symbols represent concepts (without implying the representationalist theory of perception). Porter explains:

One function of language... is an ample supply of symbols. Another is communication, when we all use the same symbols for the same things. Public storage is a third, a byproduct of communication. But these are all derivative functions. The essential function of language... is that words turn concepts themselves into *identifiable* things. So we can distinguish them, manipulate them, exchange them and store them, like physical things. And think about them, like philosophers. (*Ayn Rand's Theory of Knowledge*, p. 27)

So we can safely say that language symbols *represent* the concepts to which they're assigned (for that's what symbols do - the *represent* something beyond themselves), and those symbols are man's way of giving what Peikoff calls "conceptual products" concrete form. But prior to developing a language, we need concepts which that language's symbols will represent. And concepts are more than merely representations; they are open-ended mental units allow the mind to continue integrating new units without implying a quantifiable limit. (For instance, the concept 'ball' does not have a ceiling beyond which new particulars cannot be added;

it does not come with a label saying “do not exceed 500 units”). We do use concepts to assemble propositions which are intended to represent things, but this is possible only because concepts themselves are not restricted to any specific representation in the first place.

Andrew asked:

[W]hat's the connection (in your philosophical system) between truth's, facts (statements in a language game) and reality.

Since on my view facts are inherent in reality apart from conscious activity, I would need to rephrase the question as follows: What's the connection between truthful statements and reality? That connection is, in a word, concepts. Statements or propositions, whether true or false, are composed of concepts. Concepts integrate what we've perceived into mental units, and are themselves integrated into higher units and propositions. We use language to give concepts perceptual form, but the meaning of language's symbols is entirely dependent on their conceptual content. Grunts, snorts and groans have no conceptual content, so they cannot be either true or false.

I wrote:

the code of symbols which is language converts concepts “into the mental equivalent of concretes” (emphasis added) - in other words, the code of symbols allows the mind to manage concepts as units, thus overcoming (an understatement here) the limitations of the crow epistemology.

Andrew replied:

Perhaps I'm not understanding you here? How does changing from the idea of "adhering to concepts" to "managing concepts as units" get one away from correspondence to concepts (representing concepts, mirroring concepts, etc.), and crow epistemology?

I'm not sure I understand this question entirely. But let me point out a few things which may facilitate better understanding.

Language symbols give concepts perceptual form. This is essentially what Rand means by converting concepts “into the mental equivalent of concretes.” We form the concept ‘freedom’, which is a very broad, higher abstraction, which would be stranded in our minds and beyond our ability to manage if we did not tie it to something perceptual - i.e., a word. As a writer, I'm very aware of this, as there are often times when I have a thought that I'm trying to nail down in a formal manner which requires the use of many concepts, and many symbols corresponding to those many concepts, so that I can work with it - i.e., refine it, test it, improve it, remember it, record it, communicate it, etc.

Because they integrate an enormous sum of information into a single, open-ended unit, concepts expand the human mind's capacity far beyond his perceptual awareness. In other words, concepts broaden man's awareness beyond what he can see in any given moment. Peikoff explains:

Consciousness, any consciousness, is finite. A is A. Only a limited number of units can be discriminated from one another and held in the focus of awareness at a given time. Beyond this number, the content becomes an unretainable, indeterminate blur or spread, like this:
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For a consciousness to extend its grasp beyond a mere handful of concretes, therefore - for it to be able to deal with an enormous totality, like all tables, or all men, or the universe as a whole - one capacity is indispensable. It must have the capacity to compress its content, i.e., to *economize the units* required to convey that content. This is the basic function of concepts. Their function, in Ayn Rand's words, is “to reduce a vast amount of information to a minimal number of units...” (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, p. 106, quoting Rand's *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, p. 63)

I'm hoping this explains my reference to the crow epistemology.

At one point I wrote:

In addition to what I stated above about general and particular truths, please try to understand that universality is an aspect of concepts.

Elsewhere I wrote:

In Objectivism, universals are essentially concepts, and have been misunderstood for millennia because issue[s] of how the many and the one relate to one another got sidetracked into debates about the ontological status of universals. Rand's theory corrects this by providing an analysis of how the mind forms open-ended mental units which condense whole constellations of data.

Andrew inquired:

So which is it? Are universals an aspect of concepts, or are they essentially concepts, i.e. the two are synonymous. I accept your objections to the things I've said, but understand you haven't been all that clear yourself. Which, I understand does happen when we're both barfing out long posts and talking past the other.

Notice what my first statement above says: "universality is an aspect of concepts." Now notice what I stated in the second statement above: "universals are essentially concepts." I am clearly differentiating between *universals* (a plural noun denoting mental categories) and *universality* (a singular noun denoting the quality of open-endedness belonging to those mental categories). I am not treating *universals* and *universality* synonymously. And while it's certainly true that I've been "barfing out long posts" in response to Andrew's queries and contentions, I have tried my best to be careful in my delivery. And in this case, I was careful.

Throughout history, philosophers have talked about "universals." Rand argues that these are really concepts, even though many philosophers have treated universals as if they were independently existing entities residing in some otherworldly dimension accessible to human minds only by means of revelation, anamnesis, or some other mystical connection. Rand rejects this notion and shows how the human mind in fact forms the mental units commonly called "universals" from sense perception. By contrast, universality is the open-endedness of a concept's scope of reference, the human mind's ability to continue adding new units to the content of a concept without implying a maximum capacity (as I mentioned above about the concept 'ball' being limited to the first 500 units).

Universals (i.e., concepts) and universality (a property of concepts) are definitely related. In fact, you can't have one without the other. But they are not interchangeable as Andrew suggested.

I wrote:

Universality is essentially nothing more than the human mind's ability to form open-ended classifications of reference...

Andrew replied:

Moving on then, you do [seem to] explicitly state that language (codes) adherence's to these concepts (you even state that objectivism has been called a correspondence theory of truth, which I've found to be true), however you don't explicitly state that concepts are a direct "one-to-one" adherence's to the world.

In fact, I did say that "conceptualization allows for much, much more than" a one-to-one relationship between man's consciousness and the objects he perceives in the world. Rather, concepts provide him with a one-to-*many* relationship, since each concept (a single unit) is open-ended in its reference, denoting an unlimited quantity of existents (be they balls or men or automobiles or instances of injustice, etc.).

Andrew continued:

Although I can only assume since you do state explicitly that we "experience a thing in itself"

No, not "a thing in itself" - we perceive the *thing itself* as opposed to its *appearance*.

He went on:

(not a shadowy image) that the concepts must then be a representation, or a correspondence to those things, other wise I don't see how it even makes sense to say it at all. That said it then follows that language (truths, facts, etc.) are representations of the way the world is in itself, which then makes all my original contentions valid and me not as bat-shit crazy as you'd like to think (of course you didn't call me that, but I just like the word).

Andrew affirmed many criticisms, such as his view that certainty in the axioms is unjustified, that Objectivism is “parasitic” to Platonic Realism, that “what is in the mind (according to Rand) is a mirrored reflection of the world in itself,” that the Objectivist position is just as circular as that of the Christian’s, etc. None of these points are validated by granting that statements are representative of the world in some way (as I have understood this above).

by Dawson Bethrick

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