

Tuesday, November 01, 2011

## A Reply to Dustin Segers' Dismantled Blog Entry on Objectivism

Dustin Segers, who attempted to refute the primacy of existence in [a podcast](#) with Sye Ten Bruggencate and the folks at [Fundamentally Flawed](#), also posted an entry on his blog restating and to some extent elaborating on the refutations he gave in that podcast. Unfortunately Segers has subsequently decided to remove his blog entry after I brought to his attention that he had made a fundamental error (namely confusing the principle of the secondary objectivity of consciousness with the primacy of existence). This was not what I had expected or even desired, for it is always good to have examples of failed critiques of Objectivism on the web to learn from.

Luckily I was able to save a copy of Segers' post before he removed it from his blog. I have reposted it on my personal website here: [Dustin Segers' Failed Attempt to Refute the Primacy of Existence](#). My repost of Segers' blog entry includes all the comments which I know were submitted to his blog, including his own final comment announcing his decision to take it down.

I have already interacted with Segers' objections to the principle of the secondary objectivity of consciousness (i.e., the position that consciousness can in fact have itself as an object, but only after it has acquired awareness of objects other than itself) in a previous blog which can be accessed here: [Has the Primacy of Existence Been Refuted?](#)

In the present entry I will explore some of the issues which he brought out in his blog entry on the topic that were not covered in his initial statement of his refutation on the Fundamentally Flawed podcast.

In his podcast, Segers quotes Ayn Rand, the discoverer of the secondary objectivity of consciousness principle, as follows:

A consciousness conscious of nothing but itself is a contradiction in terms: before it (the "I") could identify itself as a consciousness, it (the "I") had to be conscious of something.

In his blog posting, Segers responded to the Rand quote with the following points:

\* False, one of the first things a conscious mind is conscious of is *itself*. Thus, this argument fails to show a contradiction.

\* Self-Refuting: Rand refutes her own "primacy of existence" argument by presupposing the primacy of her own consciousness in order to argue against the primacy of consciousness! In other words, if you claim you need something to be conscious of to be conscious, then you have to *first* presuppose that the conscious "I" or "self" is the one doing the conscious observing in order to claim that existence is primary over consciousness.

\* Begging the Question: (1) She assumes her own conclusion implicitly as her own premise. It would be akin to saying "A consciousness that isn't conscious of anything but itself is a contradiction in terms because it isn't conscious of anything."

\* A posteriori epistemology: i.e., they believe only those things that are empirically verifiable exist and this is the fundamental assumption behind their definition of "existence". They are defining all that exists as all space, time, energy, and matter that we can observe. God isn't made of space, time, energy, and matter that we can observe. Therefore God doesn't exist (John 4:24; 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:16). However, like logical positivism, this is self-refuting since it claims a priori that the only way we can know things are through the five senses when that proposition itself isn't known through the five senses.

\* For Rand, the primacy of existence equals the material world and not consciousness. But why must the *only* the material world count as what actually exists instead of a non-material entity like an all-knowing, personal, and self-sufficient conscious Mind?

Segers offers nothing new in his first and third points, so I'm content to rest on my response to both in my previous blog entry. I will instead focus on his second and fourth points, as well as his last paragraph and concluding remarks, which contain new claims in need of correction.

In the case of his second point, Segers adds something new to what he originally stated in his presentation on the Fundamentally Flawed podcast. In the restatement of Segers' second point below, I have underlined the portion which was not present in the podcast:

**Self-Refuting:** Rand refutes her own "primacy of existence" argument by presupposing the primacy of her own consciousness in order to argue against the primacy of consciousness! In other words, if you claim you need something to be conscious of to be conscious, then you have to first presuppose that the conscious "I" or "self" is the one doing the conscious observing in order to claim that existence is primary over consciousness.

Numerous points can be made against this.

First, notice that Segers offers no reason for supposing that one needs "to first presuppose that the conscious 'I' or 'self' is the one doing the conscious observing in order to claim that existence is the primary over consciousness." Even more importantly, Segers gives no reason why one's identification of himself as a conscious subject (as the "I" or "self" performing the conscious activity) cannot be a later discovery, a discovery made *after* the subject has experienced awareness of objects distinct from itself. This is in fact what can be observed in human children as they develop. Their first conscious experiences are of the objects which they see, touch and hear around them. In fact, in the case of my own daughter's first moments outside the womb, her conscious state was as primitive as they come, operating purely on the sensory level of consciousness. She did not have the ability to distinguish different objects from each other qua <>entities - this would come much later in her cognitive development. Specialists who have investigated the matter scientifically have even identified various stages in the cognitive development of infants and toddlers. They certainly do not come out of the birth canal knowing propositions, language, mathematics, logic, etc. If that were the case, why would we send our children to schools?

Take a non-human organism which possesses consciousness as an example. For instance, the family dog. A dog is an organism possessing consciousness, namely in the form of sensations and perceptions. Unlike man, however, it does not have conceptual ability. It will never form the concept 'I' or 'self', and yet this does not preclude its ability to be conscious of objects. It does not "presuppose that the conscious 'I' or 'self' is the one doing the conscious observing," it just perceives the objects it perceives in its environment without knowing that it is conscious. It does not introspect (i.e., turn its consciousness inward on itself), so its own consciousness is not one of the objects it's aware of - its consciousness remains focused on primary objects (things which it immediately perceives with its senses) without the secondary objectivity of consciousness ever becoming an issue.

Man also has consciousness in the form of sensation and perception, but also possesses along with this the ability to form concepts. This ability allows him greater latitude and refinement in focusing on objects and distinguishing them from others, retaining them in memory, and of course identifying and integrating them in the form of concepts. It also enables him to introspect once he's explicitly grasped the fact that he is conscious. But before he can do this, he needs to be conscious of something in order for his consciousness itself to be an object to be identified and examined via introspection.

A more detailed answer to Segers' unargued objection is found in the objective theory of concepts. Concepts for nouns such as 'self' and pronouns such as 'I' are not first level concepts - they are complex abstractions integrating numerous more primitive concepts, including but not limited to the axioms - and thus their formation or the mind's grasp of these concepts could not in any way be preconditional to consciousness of objects independent of one's own conscious activity. To insist that such is the case would simply collapse into stolen concepts - it would be using higher abstractions (i.e., concepts such as 'self' and 'I') while denying or ignoring their genetic roots.

I suspect that Segers' confusion lies in failing to distinguish between conscious activity as such (such as direct perception of objects in one's immediate environment) and one's discovery and identification of this

activity. These two activities are not the same, nor do they occur simultaneously. On the contrary, the former must occur before the latter can ever be possible, and in fact, it may be the case (and is the case with children, for instance, and many adults unfortunately) that the former occurs while the latter never occurs. For one thing, perception of objects needs to take place before it can be an object of one's own consciousness. I made the case for this in [my previous reply to Segers](#). If one does not first perceive some object(s), his activity of perceiving them will not have happened, and thus cannot be something one discovers and identifies. If you come to a swimming pool and there's no one swimming in it, there's no swimming (an activity) to be aware of, simple as that.

Let us also not forget the inescapable fact that the former activity - direct perception of objects in one's immediate environment - is in fact autonomic, non-volitional cognitive activity (if I'm awake and my eyes are open, I cannot help but see; also, we cannot turn off pain at will, or expect to feel pleasure when pressing the palm of our hand on the surface of a hot stovetop). By contrast, identifying what one discovers (whatever it might be) is a volitional process, meaning one would have to *choose* to perform this activity once he's capable of it, and nothing will force an individual to make this choice. Many in fact choose not to identify important facts, especially if they implicitly sense the fact that doing so would compromise a commitment they hold on faith.

Segers himself is a case in point. It's clear that he's aware of the fact that he's aware, but he has failed to identify and integrate this fact in an *objective* manner. His denial of the secondary objectivity of consciousness is proof of this: he doesn't want consciousness inherently to need to be conscious of objects other than itself before it can be available to itself as a secondary object. Rather, he *wants* it to be the case that a conscious mind can be its own first object, apparently unaware of the absurdities that such a view leads to. And he wants this to be the case because it's clear that the alternative has fatal implications for his god-belief, and that's what's important to him: protecting his god-belief. Since he is essentially acting on what he *wants* to be the case (rather than on what he can discover in reality by means of an objective method), he is attempting to replace facts with fantasies, as if fantasy could substitute for fact, which means his argument reduces to an expression of subjectivism.

Quite simply, Segers' confessional investment compels him to accept an innumerable series of contradictions, and this is one of them.

So not only would I contend that Rand in fact *does not* "presuppose that the conscious 'I' or 'self' is the one doing the conscious observing in order to claim" either that existence enjoys metaphysical primacy over existence, or that consciousness requires an object independent of its own activity in order to be available as an object itself, I would argue that such a feat would actually not be possible given the fact that she makes this identification on the basis of self-evident facts and through an objective process.

Segers' fourth point in his dismantled blog entry also included additional material that was not present in the version of his "refutation" that he gave in the Fundamentally Flawed podcast. The underlined text below represents the content which is unique to his blog entry:

A posteriori epistemology: I.e., they believe only those things that are empirically verifiable exist and this is the fundamental assumption behind their definition of "existence". They are defining all that exists as all space, time, energy, and matter that we can observe. God isn't made of space, time, energy, and matter that we can observe. Therefore God doesn't exist (John 4:24; 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:16). However, like logical positivism, this is self-refuting since it claims a priori that the only way we can know things are through the five senses when that proposition itself isn't known through the five senses.

The portion of text without underlining, which likens Objectivism to logical positivism, has already been dealt with in [my previous reply to Segers](#).

As for the text which is underlined above, what is noticeable right off is that Segers attributes a position to Objectivism without citation or supporting quotes. If Segers had read such views being affirmed in the Objectivist literature, it seems he should give some references; indeed, it's probably the first thing he would have done! But the Objectivist literature does not affirm what Segers attributes to it, so he is either casually

assuming that it does, or is simply misrepresenting Objectivism for the sake of making for an easy kill.

The fact is that Objectivism nowhere affirms that “only those things that are empirically verifiable exist,” nor is such a view “the fundamental assumption behind their definition of ‘existence’.” Nor does Objectivism define “all that exists as all space, time, energy, and matter that we can observe.” Had Segers any genuine familiarity with the basics of Objectivism, he would recognize that the concept ‘existence’ is in fact an *axiomatic* concept, which means (among other things) that it is not definable in terms of prior (i.e., more fundamental) concepts. Because of this, it is entirely inaccurate to charge Objectivism with “loading” the concept ‘existence’ with underlying assumptions which supposedly - even surreptitiously - inform its meaning. Therefore it is important to point out that, *on Objectivism’s own terms*, its fundamental axiom *could not* mean what Segers says it means.

Objectivist philosopher Leonard Peikoff reminds us that the axiom of existence “does not tell us anything about the nature of existents; it merely underscores the fact that they exist.” (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, p. 4). The axiom of existence - constituting a formalized recognition of a general fact at the fundamental level of thought - makes no claim about the constitution of the things which actually exist. Knowledge of this sort will come later, after reason has been systematically applied to what we discover in the world around us. To make the point clearer, it may in fact be discovered that all that exists is some kind of matter or another, but even then, as a later discovery, this would not be an *axiomatic* truth; it would be a truth founded on an enormous hierarchy of more fundamental truths.

Elsewhere Peikoff makes the following point:

*Existence is a self-sufficient primary.* It is not a product of a supernatural dimension, or of anything else. There is nothing antecedent to existence, nothing apart from it—and *no alternative to it.* Existence exists—and only existence exists. (“The Analytic-Synthetic Dichotomy,” *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, p. 109)

Seriously, I cannot for the life of me understand how a rational *adult* could think there’s any legitimate dispute against the position expressed here. Occasionally objections against this view arise from an attempt to understand it through a prism which informs key concepts involved in its statement with conspicuously non-Objectivist notions, and these can typically be easily corrected by explaining what specifically Objectivism means by its key terms. I’ve performed such corrections numerous times on my blog and elsewhere, so I’m somewhat of an old hand at it. But when Objectivists state “Existence exists - and only existence exists,” as Peikoff does here, many “thinkers” bristle in reaction to the tone of *certainty* contained in that statement, and it is this - the mere presence of certainty in affirming one’s position, especially at the fundamental level of thought - that some individuals find objectionable, even threatening. Such certainty as is found in Objectivism is commonly met with a mixture of resentment and envy - both arising from the same cause: such certainty is something Objectivism’s detractors wish they had in their fantasies, but realize in their conscience that they’ll never achieve it.

But speaking directly to the matter: If one denies the view that “existence exists - and only existence exist” - what *other than existence* does he think exists, and why? By what means would one have awareness of it? How would one discover it? Do not expect direct answers to such questions at this point. Rather, understand that what will be offered in place of answers will be a series of evasions, rationalizations, highfalutin-sounding counter-questions, murky notions, perhaps even name-dropping and maybe even faltering attempts at poetry. For at this point, knowledge of reality is not the legal tender securing such transactions.

So Segers will not find any support for his claim that Objectivists begin their worldview with the “presupposition” that “only those things that are empirically verifiable exist.” I have never read this claim in the Objectivist literature. What Objectivism denies is the supposition, secretly implicit in theistic worldviews, that the things which the mystical mind *imagines* are real. While Christian apologists prefer to frame the debate between theism and atheism as a contest between materialism and immaterialism, the real issue is in fact the proper orientation between the subject of consciousness and its objects, and the worldview perspectives which result from the primacy of existence (i.e., the *objects* of consciousness hold metaphysical primacy over the subject of consciousness) and the primacy of consciousness (i.e., the *subject*

of consciousness holds metaphysical primacy over its objects). The former (i.e., the worldview which is based on and consistently applies the primacy of existence) is the *objective* view of the world (since the *object(s)* of consciousness hold metaphysical primacy) while the latter (i.e., the worldview which grants metaphysical primacy to some form of consciousness, whether one's own, to some alleged "group consciousness," or to some imagined supernatural consciousness) is the *subjective* view of the world (since in either case the *subject* of consciousness holds metaphysical primacy). The objective view (informed consistently by the primacy of existence) is the position which recognizes that *wishing does not make it so*. The subjective view (which grants metaphysical primacy to consciousness in some capacity at some point) is the position which ultimately reduces to: wishing *does* make it so. This is the issue of metaphysical primacy which Segers portrays himself as tackling, but in fact seems not even to understand to begin with.

Given these points, it's hard to see how one might seriously suppose that the Objectivist response to theism would be to concoct an argument such as Segers suggests:

Premise 1) All that exists is space, time, energy, and matter that we can observe.

Premise 2) God isn't made of space, time, energy, and matter that we can observe.

Conclusion: Therefore, God doesn't exist.

I've never seen such an argument in the Objectivist literature, and given the fact that Objectivism in fact does not inform its fundamental concepts as Segers mistakenly assumes it does, one should not expect to find such an argument in the Objectivist literature to begin with. And indeed, it is no surprise that Segers nowhere cites an Objectivist source endorsing such an argument. In fact, while individual Objectivists may in fact produce arguments which secure the conclusion that theism is irrational, Objectivism as such recognizes no *obligation* to devote time to the matter since the claim that a god exists is ultimately arbitrary. Besides, there are far better reasons to reject theism than arguments such as the one illustrated above, and Objectivism supplies them.

If Segers wants to examine an argument against theism informed with Objectivist principles, perhaps he might have a look at my article [How Theism Violates the Primacy of Existence](#). Instead of interacting with positions to which Objectivism does not subscribe and calling it Objectivism, Segers can rectify his course of worldview analysis by examining what I have argued from specifically Objectivist premises.

In his [blog entry](#), Segers offered an additional statement which I would like to address:

For Rand, the primacy of existence equals the material world and not consciousness. But why must the *only* the material world count as what actually exists instead of a non-material entity like an all-knowing, personal, and self-sufficient conscious Mind? [sic]

Statements like "For Rand, the primacy of existence equals the material world and not consciousness," only tell those of us who are informed on the issues involved here, that Segers simply doesn't know what he's talking about. The primacy of existence has to do with the *relationship* between consciousness and its objects. Preconditional to such a relationship is the existence of both consciousness and something for consciousness to be conscious of. There is nothing in the Objectivist literature which equates the primacy of existence with "the material world and not consciousness," or suggests that *only* "the material world" is real and consciousness is simply a non-issue. Existence exists. Consciousness also exists. It is part of existence. Consciousness is an attribute of those organisms which possess it. These are facts which Objectivism is content to take into account in developing its philosophical perspective on reality, man, and knowledge.

Segers asks: "But why must the *only* the material world count as what actually exists instead of a non-material entity like an all-knowing, personal, and self-sufficient conscious Mind?" If Segers governed his thought by means of reason, he would not have to ask others to help him with this question. We know without any doubt that "the material world" exists. Why suppose that something else "actually exists *instead* of" the material world?

As I stated above, since Objectivism is built self-consciously on the primacy of existence metaphysics, Objectivists recognize that figments of the imagination are not real. If I imagine a giant four-legged man

walking down the beach juggling 747s in his bionic arms, I would have to be dishonest to suppose that what I am imagining is actually real. Similarly, when I imagine Segers' god creating the universe out of nothing by an act of will and incarnating itself in the form of a human being in first century Palestine, I would have to be dishonest to suppose that what I'm imagining is actually real. We can, along with Segers, *imagine* the "all-knowing, personal, and self-sufficient conscious Mind" that he mentions, but it would be beyond foolishness to mistake what we imagine for what is real. Part of the problem which apologists like Segers face but cannot overcome is the fact that their apologetic program provides no objective alternative to the imagination as the means by which one can apprehend what he calls "God." Another part of the problem he faces, which again he cannot overcome, is the fact that the worldview informed on the basis of such beliefs, assume the primacy of consciousness, a metaphysical perspective which is self-contradicting given the fallacy of the stolen concept which undergirds it.

As part of his "Biblical Refutation" - i.e., a response which explicitly presupposes precisely what is in question - Segers baldly asserts:

God existed logically and temporally prior to the existence of the material world as a non-material, personal entity (cf. John 17:5). This is possible because God's own nature possesses the attribute of aseity; i.e., God is sufficient in His own being and so needs nothing external to Himself. God is eternally triune and eternally interpersonal (cf. John 17:5), thus, the three persons of God enjoyed eternal consciousness of each other within the community of the Trinity.

Of course, we can, along with Segers, *imagine* his god existing "logically and temporally prior to the existence of the material world as a non-material, personal entity"; we can *imagine* that what Segers calls "God" has a nature which "possesses the attribute of aseity"; we can *imagine* that Segers' "God is sufficient in His own being and so needs nothing external to Himself." But the problem is that we have *no alternative* but rely on our imaginations in order to apprehend these claims. Accepting these claims would also commit us to a series of stolen concepts as well as require us to ignore a plethora of facts that we can in fact know about consciousness and related matters for certain, such as that consciousness is biological in nature, that consciousness does not hold metaphysical primacy, that consciousness is finite and operates on the basis of specific means, that those means are identifiable, that consciousness terminates with the expiration of the organism possessing it, etc. We would also have to ignore the fact that the Christian notion of "the Trinity" is internally incoherent, and that accepting such a notion as knowledge of reality constitutes a fundamental departure from reality and the norms of knowledge as defined by the objective theory of concepts - something Christianity does not have.

Segers concluded that

the assumption that there must be a dichotomy between the primacy of existence and the primacy of consciousness and that because of this dichotomy God must necessarily *not* exist is a self-refuting argument that is easily answered by Scripture and reason.

Several points can be made here, and hopefully they will help to enlighten Segers on some of the profound mistakes which his attempt to refute Objectivism occasion:

\* Objectivism does not assume that "there *must* be a dichotomy between the primacy of existence and the primacy of consciousness"; rather, Objectivism *recognizes* that there is an unbridgeable *antithesis* between the two perspectives, and also that anyone attempting to affirm the primacy of consciousness as a truthful metaphysical account would, if only performatively, have to assume the truth of the primacy of existence metaphysics (since the alternative would be to affirm openly that one thinks the primacy of consciousness is true *because one \*wishes\* it to be true*).

\* The primacy of existence teaches us that the objects of consciousness are not only distinct from the activity by which a subject is aware of those objects, but also that those objects obtain independent of the activity by which it is conscious of them. This axiomatic recognition provides for many subsequent implications, including the recognition that the subject does not create its own objects, but in fact achieves consciousness of them by some specific means which also obtain independent of their present operation (just as a bulldozer exists independently of someone operating it; operating a bulldozer does not result in its existence). Thus the idea of a conscious "

mind” creating the universe by an act of will clearly trades on the primacy of consciousness and is dismissable on this basis alone.

\* Segers has not shown that either the principle of the primacy of existence, its discovery, its validation, or its application to any claim (including the claims of theism) is in any way “self-refuting.” Segers asserts this on the basis of his own [wishing](#), which only tells us that he’s desperately trying his best to be consistent with the primacy of consciousness metaphysics which underwrites his theistic confessional investment.

\* If by “Scripture” Segers means the Christian bible, he couldn’t be more wrong in claiming that this compilation of ancient poetry, narrative, letters, genealogies, legal records and prophetic musings have anything of substance or value to offer in reply to arguments consistently applying the primacy of existence principle. For one, no passage in the bible self-consciously addresses the issue of metaphysical primacy (i.e., the proper relationship between the subject of consciousness and its objects), and two, no biblical doctrine could survive for an instant in a worldview which is loyal to the primacy of existence.

\* Segers is unclear on the metaphysical basis of reason. Reason does not operate on the assumption that “wishing makes it so,” but rather endorses the principle which tells us why wishing does *not* make it so, which is: the primacy of existence.

Of course, Segers’ statements are so pregnant with pernicious philosophical implications that I could go on and on here, but I simply do not have the time, and I admit that I’m confident that anyone who takes the time to review my two blog entries devoted to Segers’ attempt to refute a fundamental truth discovered by Ayn Rand , will see that his position has no avenue of recovery open to it. So I am happy to close with this.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Consciousness](#), [Primacy of Existence](#), [Secondary Objectivity](#)

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