

A Reply to Tennant on Theistic Foundationalism vs. the Objectivist Axioms

In the round of comments following my blog [Another Response to David, Part 6: Signs of the Legend](#), commenter David Parker identified his worldview's starting point as the statement "the Bible is the Word of God." I had raised a number of brief objections to this statement serving as a genuine starting point. For the record, here is what I had written:

Well, for one thing, your founding affirmation assumes the truth of mine; mine would have to be true before you could chance to propose yours. See for instance my blog [Theism and Its Piggyback Starting Point](#). Also, in tandem with my previous point, the affirmation you propose as your founding truth is not conceptually irreducible, which means that it assumes prior truths which would need to be identified and explored for any prior assumptions they make. Also, the statement "the Bible is the Word of God" does not identify a perceptually self-evident fact. Even if we accept it as true, it would have to be the conclusion of prior inference, which itself would ultimately need to be rooted in the perceptually self-evident. We could spend days and weeks exploring why one might accept it as truth, where as 'existence exists' identifies a fact which is perceptually self-evident, undeniable, inescapable. Another concern is that it is not undeniable: I can deny the assertion that "the Bible is the Word of God" and I am in no way undercutting truths which I do affirm or contradicting facts which I accept as facts. Another problem (and I'll stop with this), is: what exactly is it referring to? It certainly does not have the scope of reference that 'existence exists' has (since 'existence' is the widest of all concepts, it includes everything which exists), and seems to be irrelevant to pretty much everything. Its applicability is wholly artificial, forced as it is as an interpretative filter on a reality which has no need for such notions. To justify the claim that it has relevance in our world, the one affirming this claim would probably resort to the claim that the universe and everything within it were created by said "God." But this again is not perceptually self-evident; that the universe was created by an act of consciousness (e.g., "God spoke the universe into existence") is a claim for which I have certainly seen no good evidence whatsoever.

In essence, my objections are that the statement "the Bible is the Word of God" could not be fundamental because:

- (a) It assumes prior truths, for instance the truth of my worldview's starting point, and consequently could not be fundamental.
- (b) The statement "the Bible is the Word of God" is not conceptually irreducible (i.e., it consists of terms which can and must be defined in terms of prior concepts)
- (c) The statement "the Bible is the Word of God" does not identify a perceptually self-evident fact (even if it were true, the statement in question does not denote a fact given in immediate awareness, but would need to be a conclusion of prior inference)
- (d) It is not undeniably true (I can deny the claim that "the Bible is the Word of God" without contradicting genuinely fundamental facts)
- (e) The statement "the Bible is the Word of God" does not identify a universally attendant fact
- (f) The statement "the Bible is the Word of God" is far too narrow to serve as a starting point
- (g) Justification of the statement "the Bible is the Word of God" as a founding principle would resort to other claims (e.g., "the universe was created by God") which themselves are not fundamental, perceptually self-evident, conceptually irreducible, etc.

In addition to these points, one could also raise other objections, which I'll get to below.

In my blog [Probing Mr. Manata's Poor Understanding of the Axioms](#), I listed the following qualifying criteria which an axiom needs to satisfy in order to be an axiom:

- It names a perceptually self-evident fact
- Its truth is not inferred from prior truths
- Its truth is conceptually irreducible

Its truth is implicit in all perception
Its truth is implicit in all knowledge and any statement
Its truth must be assumed even in denying it

My points above jointly serve to disqualify the statement “the Bible is the Word of God” as an axiom for failure to meet these conditions, and consequently I conclude that “the Bible is the Word of God” cannot serve as a fundamental principle for a rational worldview.

Now it should be clear that the axioms proposed by Objectivism fulfill these criteria. Those axioms are the axioms of existence, consciousness, and identity. The facts that existence exists (i.e., there is a reality), that consciousness is consciousness of something (i.e., that a subject is aware of some object), and that to exist is to be something specific, finite and distinct from anything else that exists, are self-evident, independent of “prior truths” (for there could be no truths prior to these facts), indefinable in terms of prior concepts (i.e., conceptually irreducible; to what would any “prior concepts” refer? Blank out), implicit in any act of perceiving and in any knowledge, claim, thought, memory, emotion, exercise of volition, etc., and would have to be true in order to be challenged, denied, ignored, etc.

Detractors of Objectivism often object to the axioms on the basis that there are no self-evident facts, that “self-evident” is meaningless, or that what is self-evident to one person is not self-evident to another. Sometimes they try to invent other reasons for challenging the axioms, but they are doomed to result in futility.

Peikoff presents an elegant illustration, in the form of a mock dialogue in which the defender of these axioms assumes for the sake of argument that they are false, in order to show how they are in fact inescapably true and fundamental, even in an attempt to deny their truth:

A. “Your objection to the self-evident has no validity. There is no such thing as disagreement. People agree about everything.”

B. “That’s absurd. People disagree constantly, about all kinds of things.”

A. “How can they? There’s nothing to disagree about, no subject matter. After all, nothing exists.”

B. Nonsense. All kinds of things exist. You know that as well as I do.”

A. “That’s one. You must accept the existence axiom even to utter the term ‘disagreement’. But, to continue, I still claim that disagreement is unreal. How can people disagree, since they are unconscious beings who are unable to hold ideas at all?”

B. “Of course people hold ideas. They *are* conscious beings - you know that.”

A. “There’s another axiom. But even so, why is disagreement about ideas a problem? Why should it suggest that one or more of the parties is mistaken? Perhaps all of the people who disagree about the very same point are equally, objectively right?”

B. “That’s impossible. If two ideas contradict each other, they can’t both be right. Contradictions can’t exist in reality. After all, things are what they are. A is A.” (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, pp. 9-10)

Here we see how a thinker who began by disputing the truth of the axioms, ends up not only assuming them, but protesting that they are true when their defender, taking the role of a devil’s advocate, goes along with the view that they are untrue. Peikoff continues:

Existence, consciousness, identity are presupposed by every statement and by every concept, including that of “disagreement.” (They are presupposed even by invalid concepts, such as “ghost” or “analytic” truth.) In the act of voicing his objection, therefore, the objector has conceded the case. In *any* act of challenging or denying the three axioms, a man reaffirms them, no matter what the particular content of his challenge. The axioms are invulnerable. (Ibid., p. 10)

Not only are the axioms *invulnerable*, they’re inescapable as well. As Porter points out:

Every philosopher must start somewhere, and wherever he starts, he must include the validity of these three axiomatic concepts [‘existence’, ‘consciousness’, ‘identity’] in his starting lineup. So wherever he claims to

start, he really starts here. He has to; they're *axiomatic*. (Ayn Rand's *Theory of Knowledge*, p. 209)

In his effort to find advice on how to respond to my points of criticism, David forwarded my objections to Christian blogger Dominic Bnonn Tennant, who posted his own thoughts in response to my criticism in his blog [The Chronological Priority Objection revisited](#).

Tennant begins his response to my points of criticism with the following confession:

I must confess I don't really understand Dawson's argument.

Tennant opens his critique with the announcement that he doesn't "really understand" my argument. Does this keep him from launching into a response of his own? No, unfortunately, it does not. He continues:

He seems to be assuming that any first principle which implicitly presupposes some *other* self-evident proposition must then *defer* to that prior proposition.

It is not clear to me what Tennant means here by "*defer* to that prior proposition." One of my criticisms was that, if the statement proposed as a "first principle" in fact presupposes more fundamental truths, then for this reason alone it would not be a "first principle." If it is conceded that the statement "the Bible is the Word of God" presupposes more fundamental truths, then obviously that statement itself could not be considered fundamental. It won't do to begin our philosophizing in mid-stream. The call to identify one's starting point is a call to identify one's *irreducible primary*. Since the statement "the Bible is the Word of God" in fact rests on more fundamental assumptions, it is disqualified as an irreducible primary and therefore cannot be a "first principle." It's simply not first *logically*.

My point (a) above recognizes that, if a statement logically presupposes the truth of prior affirmations, then clearly those prior affirmations would need to be true in order for the stated principle to hold, and those prior affirmations would be more fundamental to the principle in question. This should not be controversial. Consider: if a statement presupposes prior assumptions, and those prior assumptions turn out to be untrue, then the integrity of any supposed hierarchy involving those untrue assumptions would be fatally compromised internally.

It is important at this point to draw attention to the principle of reduction. The principle of reduction is a necessary component for any epistemological system which recognizes the fact that knowledge is *hierarchical* in nature, i.e., that some knowledge rests on and presupposes the truth of more fundamental knowledge, that there is a logical dependence of some truths on more fundamental truths. Leonard Peikoff explains the principle of reduction as follows:

Reduction is the means of connecting an advanced knowledge to reality by traveling backward through the hierarchical structure involved, i.e., in the reverse order of that required to reach the knowledge. "Reduction" is the process of identifying in logical sequence the intermediate steps that relate a cognitive item to perceptual data. Since there are options in the detail of a learning process, one need not always retrace the steps one initially happens to take. What one must retrace is the essential logical structure. (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, p. 133)

Peikoff makes it clear that reduction of knowledge found at the higher levels of the knowledge hierarchy is *logically* reducible to more fundamental knowledge. Note that Tennant seems concerned that *chronological* relations between items of knowledge are at the forefront of the criticism I offered in response to the notion that the statement "the Bible is the Word of God" can serve as one's foundational principle. It is hard to see how one could intelligibly suppose that the statement "the Bible is the Word of God" could be either *chronologically* or *logically* fundamental, assuming no prior truths whatsoever, either in terms of logical dependence or in terms of discovery and learning processes. At any rate, Peikoff makes it clear that the principle of reduction is concerned with identifying and making explicit the "logical structure" of an item of knowledge.

It should also be borne in mind that propositions per se cannot be ultimately fundamental. As I explained in my blog [Paul's "Necessary Propositions"](#):

Propositions are not irreducible primaries. They are composed of concepts, and without concepts there would be no propositions. Concept-formation is a volitional process; nothing in reality forces us to undertake it. When we look out at the world, we see concrete entities, not "propositions." We form propositions to identify what we conceive, remember, project, etc., but only after we have formed concepts which identify the entities, attributes, actions, etc. Nothing forces us to do this, we do this because we choose to do this. If the content of any given proposition is valid concepts denoting data we have gathered from objects we have discovered

(i.e., facts), and its purpose is to denote those facts, then that proposition would be describing fact(s). Must the proposition "existence exists" describe a fact? It does denote a basic fact, but not because the proposition itself "must" do so. It does because of a human epistemological need, a need which we have as a result of our desire for knowledge, and knowledge requires a starting point. The proposition itself has no needs of its own to satisfy, as if it were going to be starved if we do not feed it something, or as if it had the ability to condemn us to an eternity of torment unless we sacrifice burnt offerings to it.

The point is that legitimate knowledge of reality is reducible to the perceptual level of human cognition. As thinking adults who are accustomed all too often to taking for granted the more primitive processes by which we came to the knowledge we have (whether that knowledge is legitimate or not), we often ignore the fact that the knowledge enterprise begins, *both chronologically and logically*, at the perceptual level. A worthy epistemology, one which sufficiently identifies the process by which man acquires and validates his knowledge, needs to take this fact into account. We do not begin with propositions, either chronologically or logically. We begin by perceiving, and only then is there content for us to identify, and the process of identifying that content is by forming concepts which integrate what we perceive into economized units which subsequently can be used in assembling propositions. But before we can assemble those propositions, we need concepts to inform them, and in order to have concepts, we need to form them from what we perceive. So a proposition cannot be fundamental, either logically or chronologically.

Tennant writes:

This doesn't seem different, in principle, to the oft-repeated objection leveled by empiricists: they will say that, since we Christians must first be able to *read* the Bible before we can formulate the proposition that it is the word of God, we are actually presupposing *empiricism* to be able to affirm revelational foundationalism.

It would be absurd to deny the fact that one has a lot of learning about the world to accomplish before he would be in a position to read and evaluate a vast tome like the bible. Clearly he would need to have the ability to correlate linguistic symbols to concepts, and this is not a fundamental or baseline ability. As adults we take this ability for granted because we do it everyday and have automatized the process. But this does not mean we can simply ignore the epistemological importance of that process.

Tennant:

Well, even if this were true, it remains that empiricism does not constitute a viable worldview.

Does Tennant realize that he's critiquing the work of an Objectivist, not an empiricist?

Tennant:

Maybe it is true in itself

I take it that the "it" here refers to empiricism, which he says "does not constitute a viable worldview."

Tennant:

(I don't think it is since I deny that knowledge comes directly through the senses;

What exactly Tennant is denying here? Is he denying the thesis that we perceive *knowledge* directly? If this is what he means by "empiricism," I would agree: we perceive *objects*, things that exist in the universe, e.g., trees, cars, fences, flag posts, mountains, people, ironing boards, books, telephone poles, etc. I would expect Tennant to agree here. In fact, to suppose that we perceive *knowledge* would commit [the fallacy of the stolen concept](#).

Is he denying that perception plays any role in acquiring and validating knowledge? Again it's not clear here. But I would expect that Tennant needs to perceive the print on the pages of his bible in order to read it and thus have knowledge of what it teaches. It's not clear what he thinks his mind does after perceiving the symbols on a printed page though.

Tennant:

I draw a careful distinction between physical and non-physical events in terms of causation);

Here's another position which Tennant affirms but does not explain, either what it is saying or its relevance to the

topic at hand. Like many other theists I've encountered, he seems very concerned about being able to distinguish between "physical and non-physical events." (I wonder if he has a similar concern for being able to distinguish between the real and the imaginary.) He says that he draws "a careful distinction between physical and non-physical events *in terms of causation*." I wonder which view of causation he ascribes to. Since he wants to be careful to draw distinctions "between physical and non-physical *events*," I suspect he may ascribe to the event-based theory of causation. Incidentally, it is this view of causation which helped lead David Hume to his skepticism about inductive thinking.

Tennant:

but it doesn't provide us grounds for believing that it is true in itself, nor for believing pretty much anything. So, at best it is merely part of a larger body of truth, and must be incorporated into that body of truth by way of some overarching, governing principle (like the proposition "the Bible is the word of God").

I'm guessing that Tennant is still talking about empiricism here. He seems to think it's fine as a component within a larger worldview, but that the worldview itself needs "some overarching, governing principle," perhaps to unify it within a cohesive system. He suggests that principle should be "the Bible is the word of God." But why this statement, and not "The Wizard of Oz is the Blurb of Klaigh" or "Prahpubenjao is the Kwamlao of Geusha"? It seems that at this point, since one arbitrary statement can serve Tennant's purposes, any other arbitrary statement can just as well. For that matter, why not begin with the proposition "Man breathes sulfuric acid"? On Tennant's standard of what constitutes a viable starting point, what could possibly be wrong with any of the alternatives I mention here?

Of course, if a requirement of a founding principle be that it is "overarching" or all-encompassing, then the axiom of existence fits the bill perfectly. Since the concept 'existence' is the widest of all concepts, it includes everything which exists. You can't get more all-encompassing than this. And because it includes everything which exists, no other concept could be more overarching than the concept 'existence'. Moreover, unlike the bible or any other storybook, we never experience the absence of what the Objectivist axioms denote. Whether we're in an automobile, an elevator, on the deck of a cruise ship, in our office cubicle, in a grocery store check-out line, or on a desert island, existence is everywhere. But bibles surely are not. As Porter rightly points out, "anybody can deny the validity of 'God', but nobody can deny the validity of 'existence'." (*Ayn Rand's Theory of Knowledge*, p. 176)

Think about it: How could "God" be broader than the concept 'existence'? Even if one wants to allow for the existence of a god, he would certainly also need to allow that much more than just that god exists. Think of all the "billions and billions" (to quote Sagan) of things which exist right here in our universe. They exist, just as the theist supposes his god exists. So clearly the concept 'existence' is broader - incalculably broader - than said god. So on this basic and undeniable point, the axiom of existence is vastly more overarching than any god could hope to be, which could only mean that the Objectivist axioms provide for a more overarching foundation than theistic foundationalism could ever aspire to providing.

The theistic foundationalist is most likely going to find this alternative unsatisfactory, perhaps even unsettling. He may contend in response to this that his god existed first, that everything else which exists was created by it. After all, this is what his worldview teaches. Of course, this would require us to *imagine* something "prior to" the existence of the universe - what alternative to imagination do we have here? - even though imagination is not a means of confirming the existence of anything which exists independent of the human mind. It would also lead to [the problem of divine lonesomeness](#), indicating an even more faulty starting point than the criticisms I've raised in this paper, thus multiplying theistic foundationalism's liability against itself. And ironically, such a move would implicate the theist as the one vying for chronological priority, for at this point his intention is not to identify an objective starting point for knowledge (if for anything else, he shows that he needs to retreat into the imaginary at this point), but to defend a storybook view of the universe, something altogether different.

Perhaps what Tennant objects to is a *conceptual* starting point. Unfortunately, it seems he's already ruled out the senses with his pronouncements about empiricism. So what is left? To be meaningful, the proposition "the Bible is the Word of God" would need to be comprised of concepts, so he seems rather stuck here.

Tennant:

The same is true of the proposition "existence exists". That's a pretty bally meaningless first principle.

I'm reminded of Porter when he observes:

Philosophers denigrate tautologies. “Existence exists” tells them nothing they don’t already know... And especially nothing they enjoy being reminded of... “Consciousness is conscious” is especially insensitive, threatening to expose the dirty little secret of almost every philosopher since Aristotle... They can only hope it’s meaningless. (*Ayn Rand’s Theory of Knowledge*, p. 229)

They may say that the axioms don’t tell them anything “new.” But the task of a starting point is not to identify new knowledge, but to secure the old knowledge we already have. Stating one’s most fundamental assumptions *explicit* “puts them in jeopardy of being found false. That’s why the resistance. But you’re guiding your life by them; if they’re not true, you need to know it. Now.” (*Ibid.*, p. 238)

How do the Objectivist axioms satisfy this?

Awareness of axiomatic facts is what’s needed. That’s implicit in all knowledge. But awareness that’s only implicit is easily bypassed by a slick salesman or a philosopher’s argument. Axiomatic concepts recognize axiomatic facts explicitly. They’re guardians of thought because they’re active reminders of the absolutism of reality. (*Ibid.*, p. 236)

It does not surprise me, then, when theists resist the Objectivist axioms, because an absolute reality is precisely what stands in the way of their mystical [imaginings](#).

So Tennant declares that “existence exists” is meaningless. But why? Is he saying that the concept ‘existence’ is meaningless? Or, is he saying that statements which affirm that something exists are meaningless? Meaning is a property of concepts, and the concept ‘existence’ does in fact have a meaning. Theists assume it has meaning all the time when they claim their god *exists*. So I don’t think it will do to object to the axiom of existence by calling it “meaningless,” for it is clearly meaningful, and even Tennant should agree with this since later in his paper he lists it as a statement which is “*obviously true*.” I wouldn’t expect that Tennant would consider a statement “*obviously true*” and at the same time “meaningless.” But maybe I’m wrong on this?

Perhaps what Tennant doesn’t like is the proposal of ‘existence exists’ as a first principle. He gives no argument for rejecting the axiom of existence as a first principle. Instead he simply asks:

What useful propositions can be deduced from it without relying on unjustified subjective beliefs or perceptions?

Apparently Tennant is concerned most with “useful propositions,” and/or how such propositions “can be deduced from” one’s founding principle. My first questions in response to this would be, how is the proposition “the Bible is the Word of God” at all useful? To whom would such a proposition be “useful”? In what way would such a proposition be “useful” to anyone? Naturally, on Tennant’s criteria, one would expect the founding proposition from which subsequent propositions were derived be at least as useful as the ones derived from it. So Tennant’s qualification of “usefulness” needs to be explained, and the criteria by which such qualification can be measured need to be identified.

Even more fundamental than these questions would be my point that Tennant’s question itself misconstrues the role of an axiom within a philosophical system as Objectivism understands it. Tennant’s question betrays a common misunderstanding about philosophical axioms, a misunderstanding rooted in rationalism. Objectivism rightly characterizes rationalism as ‘deduction without reference to reality’ (A. Thorn, [Observations](#)). Rationalism is the other horn to the rationalist-empiricist dichotomy:

[Philosophers came to be divided] into two camps: those who claimed that man obtains his knowledge of the world by deducing it exclusively from concepts, which come from inside his head and are not derived from the perception of physical facts (the Rationalists)—and those who claimed that man obtains his knowledge from experience, which was held to mean: by direct perception of immediate facts, with no recourse to concepts (the Empiricists). (Rand, *For the New Intellectual*, p. 30)

Where rationalism would expect a philosophical system to be derived exclusively by deduction from an axiom or set of axioms, Objectivism repudiates this expectation by recognizing that an objective, conceptually irreducible starting point has a different task.

Traditional axioms stated initial assumptions about relations among their terms. A one-term axiom... provides no such assumptions. Except one: the implied validity of that term, the existence of its denotation. Imagine Euclidean geometry starting out, “Points exist, lines exist, planes exist...” They’re true, but nobody today thinks axioms identify truths. Or that any truths could be fundamental or self-evident; these are. But what

could we deduce from them? Nothing. Ayn Rand's theory is axiomatic but it's not deduced from its axioms. They have another job. They distinguish knowledge from its objects, awareness from existence. (Porter, *Ayn Rand's Theory of Knowledge*, p. 203)

Similarly Ron Merrill observes:

...unlike mathematical postulates, philosophical axioms should not be expected to be "fertile," that is, capable of generating a body of knowledge by deduction... It is clear that Objectivism does not aim at developing philosophy as a system of deductive implications from its axioms, in the manner of the rationalists. For Rand, the purpose of axioms is to ground the knowledge gained by the senses, not to replace it. ([Axioms: The Eight-fold Way](#))

Not even Objectivists claim that their worldview is *deduced* from the axioms. The axioms are not a *substitute* for further discovery of the world. That's because Objectivism is a *reality-based* worldview: we get our understanding of the world and how our minds function from inputs we gather from reality, for reality (as opposed to internal musings over emotions such as fear, or some ancient storybook) is the ultimate source of knowledge. As I pointed out to one Christian critic of the axioms:

Objectivism nowhere proposes that the mind *stops* with any one of these recognitions, or that the axioms serve as a substitute for further knowledge that we may acquire about the world. On the contrary, they provide an anchor for knowledge, a foundation upon which to build our knowledge, not an escape from knowledge... Together the axioms of existence, identity and consciousness set the stage that subsequent knowledge requires by identifying the constants which apply throughout all knowledge and providing the mind with an explicit recognition of the fact that there is a fundamental distinction between *what is perceived* and the *action of perceiving it*, between *what is known* and the *process by which it is known*, between the *object of cognition* and the *subject of cognition*. ([The Axioms and the Primacy of Existence](#))

So Tennant's question tendentiously misconstrues the role of an axiom within a philosophical system. The purpose of an axiom is to ground man's cognition by identifying the fundamental connection between reality and his knowledge, and recognizing the inalterable distinction between the two at the same time. Its purpose is not to serve as a wellspring for deductions. Indeed, our knowledge *begins* with the axiom of existence, it does not stop with it. To learn more about reality, we have to study it, to examine its particulars, to discover its processes. There is no substitute for this.

Tennant:

Of course, a Christian certainly *believes* that existence exists.

Of course he does; he needs to. But he takes it completely for granted, and never stops to recognize the relationship between existence and consciousness *explicitly*. Identifying the terms of this relationship explicitly is death to Christianity. So to play it safe, it is left implicit, ignored, out of sight and out of mind. Unfortunately for the Christian, ignoring a fact will not make it go away. It is because his worldview is at odds with the axioms, particularly in the case of the primacy of existence, that it falters from the very get-go; it does because of this system-wide carelessness which cannot outrun facts which are implicit in all knowledge. On that note, I would think that anyone would recognize the truth of the axiom of existence, since it is so obviously true. But believe it or not I have encountered some individuals who have openly denied it. They have always been Christians.

Tennant:

He incorporates this into his worldview by way of his governing principle.

Actually, in the case of the Christian, he *smuggles* it, and does a poor job of it, for he never acquires an explicit recognition of the proper relationship between subject and object, between knowledge and the objects it denotes, ever risking the hazard of confusing the two. Confusing the roles of subject and object is essential to the Christian worldview; there's no Christianity without this confusion. So Christians don't dare come to terms with axiomatic facts explicitly. The excuse they give is that this is "uninteresting," that it does not tell them anything "new," that they're so obviously true that no one in their right mind would waste their time with them. These are the kinds of excuses they give when they're called on it. But the real reason they prefer to leave them implicit is because they're dynamite, and they don't know how to handle dynamite properly. This is why detection of [stolen concepts](#) can be so lethal to worldviews like Christianity. As Porter points out:

The Stolen Concept is the *arch-transcendental* argument, a universal refutation of any philosophy which denies

that we can know reality as it is. That's a *terrible* weapon in the hands of just one school of philosophy. (Ayn Rand's *Theory of Knowledge*, p. 176)

Tennant:

In fact, from this first principle, he is able to discover a far more sublime and useful variant on that proposition, as revealed in Exodus 3:14: "I AM WHO I AM".

Really? How does he discover this without reading it in the bible? Or, is he, like the rationalists, looking to deduce his entire worldview from his starting point, rather than looking to reality to provide inputs which guide the development of his knowledge? And why suppose that Exodus is talking about something real instead of imaginary, especially when imagination is the only means open to us for conceiving of what it's talking about?

Tennant:

That is necessarily presupposed in the proposition "the Bible is the word of God".

See, I was right: the statement "the Bible is the word of God" makes numerous prior assumptions. Therefore, it is not fundamental. It is not a starting point. The Christian who affirms the statement "the Bible is the word of God" as his starting point, is simply hiding something. Indeed, he's hiding *a lot*!

Tennant:

But it is not *in itself* useful for building a framework of epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics.

What isn't "useful," the axiom of existence? Sure it's useful. And indispensably so. Try denying its truth, and see how intelligible statements about reality can be without it. What use would statements about reality be if reality did not exist? Blank out. The axiom of existence is the very cornerstone of the hierarchy of man's knowledge. Its truth is perceptually self-evident, it is conceptually irreducible, it is all-encompassing, all-integrating, implicit in all knowledge, and serves as the only objective foundation in cognition in terms of recognizing the proper orientation of the subject-object relationship. Without this, one risks the inability to reliably distinguish between reality and imagination. But that's why Christians prefer to go without it.

Tennant:

That is why we take the *whole* Bible as our starting point; not merely some proposition therein.

If a proposition like "the Bible is the Word of God" assumes prior knowledge, including more fundamental concepts, how much more would "the *whole* Bible" do the same? And why the bible, and not some other source, such as the Upanishads, The Iliad, or the Gintu Kwamlao? If one were to prefer one of these sources over the others as one's ultimate starting point, how could it not be the result of utterly arbitrary choosing? A rationally guided choice at this point would not be possible, since we're talking about starting point; rational guidance is possible only after one has acquired a fair degree of knowledge, and we're talking about a step which logically precedes this. Regardless, the bible, either whole or in part, cannot be a philosophical starting point for the very reasons I have already cited. It is not conceptually irreducible, its truth is not perceptually self-evident, it is not all-encompassing, its content isn't even all true - vast portions of it are merely legends, tales and sometimes even lies. Moreover, much of it can only be meaningful in the confines of the believer's imagination, since much of what he reads in the bible are *stories* which allegedly took place in the ancient past. We don't perceive Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses or Jesus, but we can *imagine* them as we read the stories about them found in the bible. In fact, it is because of this that the bible owes its persisting success as sacred literature to its ability to enthrall the believer at the level of his imagination, which is certainly not axiomatic, and strike him with paralyzing fear. As Prov. 1:7 makes very clear, the believer's *fear* of his god is the "starting point" of his knowledge. This clearly puts emotion as the believer's starting point, which can only indicate that his worldview's starting point is subjective in nature. Without an objective starting point, irrational fears tend to be taken seriously. This is precisely what Van Til's autobiographical sketch of his own conversion experience illustrates. See for example my blog [Faith as Hope in the Imaginary](#).

Christians want to take the "the *whole* Bible" as their starting point, not because it is truly fundamental to knowledge, but because they know that its contents cannot be validated without giving it such an advantageous head start. If one begins with a genuine objective starting point, such as the Objectivist axioms, he would know early on in the development of his knowledge of reality that primitive (i.e., pre-rational, pre-scientific) literature like the stories found in the bible have no value as philosophical principles.

Tennant:

We need far more than an existential affirmation to build a worldview.

This is true, and Objectivism nowhere suggests that we can simply rest our heels once we've recognized the facts which the axioms identify. Indeed, we need a constant supply of objective inputs as well as a process for properly identifying those inputs and integrating them into our summary knowledge of reality. But that's why an axiomatic system should never attempt to deduce all its knowledge from a foundational statement. Just as we would never learn the atomic weight of copper from the axiom 'existence exists', we would never learn about photosynthesis by reading the Psalms or the gospel of Luke. We need to be in constant touch with existence to learn about it. Reality is full of specifics; no one will acquire knowledge of those specifics simply by acknowledging that reality is primary, and Objectivism never contends that we will. But explicitly acknowledging that reality is primary in relation to consciousness of it is non-negotiable when it comes to grounding our cognition, for distinguishing between the objects of knowledge and the processes by which that knowledge is acquired and validated. The statement "the Bible is the Word of God" does not accomplish this.

Tennant:

We need a great deal of information about existence: including its origin, its essential nature, and our relationship to it.

Yes, we do need a great deal of information about existence, at least for our own specific purposes, which determine our needs for knowledge of existence. So what is the source of that information, if not existence itself? That's the Objectivist's starting point: Existence! Again, we are not going to learn about photosynthesis by consulting the bible. On the contrary, we are constantly referring back to existence, in fact never losing touch with it, since it is our starting point. Recognition that existence holds metaphysical primacy over consciousness means that the knowledge of reality will always be able to be validated by reference to reality. This of course requires an unshakable commitment to reality, which in turn requires an unshakable commitment to the recognition that there is a fundamental distinction between the objects we know and our knowledge of those objects. "We all distinguish implicitly between independent existence and our means of awareness" (Porter, p. 216). This is the fundamental causal fact behind any attempt to provide the mind with a guide to cognition. But because this distinction *typically* remains *implicit*, it is *typically* never very well understood. That is why we need the axioms: to isolate this distinction *explicitly* so that its implications for cognition, knowledge and philosophy can be consciously (even self-consciously) understood. If you saw a man repeatedly smacking his body against a brick wall, and cursing at the wall between self-propelled impacts against it, demanding it to move out of his way, and continuing such a sequence of actions without avail, would you suppose that he simply needs to read some chapter in Jeremiah or the Book of Revelation in order to remedy his futile efforts? Probably not. On the contrary, he needs to grasp the primacy of existence principle. Most people do so implicitly, at least in the context of their actions in the world (be it tying his shoes, balancing his checkbook, filling his car with gasoline, walking across a street, etc.), that's why we don't see them making such obvious blunders. But we see comparable blunders in philosophy all the time because the primacy of existence has not been understood *explicitly*. Indeed, if one seeks to guide his worldview seriously by consulting the contents of a storybook like the bible, he may very well expect the walls to obey his commandments. "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Phil. 4:13).

Tennant raises the notion of an "origin" of existence. Let's think about this for a moment. Apparently he thinks existence has an origin, presumably in something other than existence (otherwise it would be pretty unproductive to say that existence finds its origin in existence). That would be quite an admission, for as a Christian he most likely would want to say that existence has its origin in the Christian god. But that would mean that the Christian god, as the origin of existence, would have to be something other than existence, otherwise we're just point to existence all over again, for which we're trying to find an origin. Such a procedure is as unproductive as a dog chasing its own tail. Indeed, it strikes me as a tacit acknowledgement that his god really doesn't exist.

As for our relationship to existence, this is described by the principle of the primacy of existence, which is the explicit recognition of the fact that objects of consciousness exist and are what they are independent of the processes by which we are aware of them.

Tennant:

And that is information which can only truthfully and certainly be gleaned from the revelation of God.

I wonder where we can learn about photosynthesis in the bible.

Tennant:

It sounds like Dawson wants to require of you that you take only self-evident or properly basic propositions as foundational.

Well, for whatever basic affirmation we identify as our foundational principle, we need to address certain basic questions, such as: What is it identifying? How do we have awareness of what it is identifying? Is it true? Does it stand on prior assumptions? Is it all-encompassing? Etc.

If it is acknowledged that a proposed starting point in fact rests on the truth of prior assumptions, then it needs to be acknowledged that what has been proposed as a starting point is in fact not fundamental, and its defenders need to keep digging, reducing their claims to their most basic fundamentals, until the bedrock of cognition has finally been reached. If he rises to this challenge and sticks with it honestly, he'll find us, the Objectivists, waiting for him at the end. We've already been there.

Tennant:

I suspect that traditional foundationalism might require this, though I haven't a clue why (I haven't read widely on it I'm afraid).

It seems pretty easy to figure out to me. If a proposed starting point or foundational truth is not self-evident, i.e., readily available to the mind at the fundamental level of cognition, then something else would be, and that something else would have the advantage of epistemological priority over the one proposed. If it is not self-evident, then it needs to be argued for. Therefore, you need premises. Those premises, if in fact they support the proposed starting point that is not self-evidently true, would be more fundamental than the proposed starting point itself. An inferred position rests on prior inference, and that inference needs content. What is that content, and where did you get it? How do you know whether or not it's true? An attempt to start with something like "the Bible is the Word of God" only indicates an attempt to evade these more fundamental questions.

Tennant:

I can't see any non-arbitrary reason for this stipulation;

Tennant's failure to see is not an argument, and his characterization of our need for a conceptually irreducible starting point as a "stipulation" is unwarranted.

Tennant:

and it's also obviously self-refuting since no such proposition (or combination thereof) can be used to deduce enough of a worldview to justify the stipulation itself. Remember that first principles must contain enough information to deduce themselves and their context, as well as the rest of the worldview.

Says who? Again, a philosophical axiom is not a deductive starting point, but a *philosophical* starting point. Deduction comes later, and as I explained above, it will require a ready source of inputs. We get our inputs from *what* we identified as our starting point (i.e., from existence), not from our *identification* of that starting point. Fact-gathering never seizes when one seeks to learn about existence, and there's a fundamental distinction between the real and the imaginary. A worldview which fails to grasp the primacy of existence explicitly can easily and probably will fall prey to a blurring of this distinction, which would in turn only compromise any effort one makes in remaining objective.

Tennant:

The whole point of them is to bootstrap our grounds for knowledge. So not only is there no good reason to require first principles to be self-evident or properly basic, but there is very good reason to require that they *not* be.

If "the whole point of [first principles] is to bootstrap our grounds for knowledge," why not start where our awareness starts, with perception of objects existing independent of our awareness? That's where we have to start. To make good on his protestations against this view, the *objective* view (objective because it recognizes the primacy of objects over the subject of awareness), Tennant would have to explain how we can have direct awareness of that which is not self-evident, for otherwise he offers no alternative to inferring his way to them, and

as I pointed out above, inference requires content, and that content would have to be more fundamental than any product of inference.

Tennant:

An even better reason can also be given: we can trivially show that the *only* sure justification for knowledge *in toto* must be based on the revelation of a personal God, because without this we are forced to ground universals in our particular experience. This is formally fallacious, and thus useless for justifying anything. We can therefore exclude any other kind of proposition as a useful foundation for an entire worldview—so on what basis is he making the sorts of claims you quote him making? (Cf *The Wisdom of God*, 2.4 & 2.5.)

Why does Tennant think that “ground[ing] universals in our particular experience” is formally fallacious? He does not explain in his blog entry; perhaps he explains this in the source which he cites. At any rate, I have seen this kind of argument many times before. It often seeks to argue that an omniscient mind is needed for universal knowledge to be possible. And since man is not omniscient, any universal knowledge man claims to have must be knowledge that has been “revealed” to him by a supernatural source. Here is an argument which Tennant himself presents:

Our experience of reality is particular, whereas objective knowledge must—by definition—be universal. Since we are not universal, we can never make any claim to universal or objective knowledge about reality by appealing to our own experiences or perceptions. To do so would be to commit the fallacy of induction: by reasoning from the specific to the general, without due warrant. In other words, if we are to know a universal and objective truth, we must derive it from a universal and objective source. If we go by what we perceive, then we are by definition appealing to a particular and subjective source instead; and so to assume that, because it is true in one instance, it is therefore true in all, is quite unjustified. ([The Wisdom of God](#), p. 36)

It is true that our experience is particular, and that our knowledge - at least some of it - has a universal nature about it. But is it true that universal knowledge cannot be derived from the inputs of our particular experience? Many philosophers throughout history have agreed with some variant of the kind of thinking on this issue which Tennant models here. Indeed, how could an individual acquire knowledge of *all men* based upon the tiny sample of men whom he has actually met and observed firsthand? The theistic solution to this problem may seem, at least to those who grant the notion of ["the supernatural"](#) some initial validity, an elegant way of tidying the matter up.

The problem with this approach, however, is that it fails to grasp the facts that knowledge is *conceptual*, and that *universality is a quality belonging to concepts*, not of the knower himself. This much we can be certain of: human beings do possess universal knowledge, and the form in which they possess their knowledge is conceptual in nature. But the nature of concepts is what is ignored by the kind of approach Tennant presents. For those who are taken in by argument's such as Tennant's, universality is mysterious, enigmatic, unknowable to the unaided human mind (since on this view, man's mind is ultimately incompetent, hence the need for a supernatural helping hand). But in fact, universality is no mystery at all. It is, in fact, nothing more than the *open-endedness* of a concept's scope of reference, and this is a result of the abstraction process, specifically the process of measurement-omission, which the human mind performs on the basis of perceptual inputs. It is through this process that a man can isolate two objects which he perceives or has perceived, integrate them into a mental unit, and assign a visual-auditory symbol to represent that mental unit, e.g., 'ball'.

In fact, it is because man is not omniscient that concepts are so useful to him, since concepts condense an enormous sum of information, a sum which always has the potential to increase as a result of new discoveries about objects which his concepts subsume, thus making it possible for him to treat an unlimited quantity of units as a single unit. An omniscient being wouldn't need such a tool; indeed, it would only get in its way. This is one of the major points I defended in my article [Would an Omniscient Mind Have Knowledge in Conceptual Form?](#) In that article I explain my negative answer to this question.

But theists, lost in their efforts to establish an objective basis to their knowledge claims not only because they lack an objective theory of concepts, but also because their claims have a [subjective basis](#), are still eager to appeal to revelation and seek to explain human knowledge as a result of revelation. It's baffling how one could seriously take such an approach to knowledge, but it's quite common in some circles even today. But how does it purportedly work? Take for example the fact that copper melts at 1984 F. Every mint which produces copper coins and every factory which produces copper tubing, needs to integrate this fact into its processes in order to work with it. Indeed, this is adherence to the primacy of existence: obedience to the nature of the objects of knowledge. Now the question before us in the present discussion is: Is this fact something that was revealed to us from a supernatural source? The bible surely does not tell us that copper melts at 1984 F, does it? If so, I'd like to see where. If it's not in the bible, does revelation disguise itself to look at feel like an active knowledge-gathering

process which men perform by their own effort, such as observation, experimentation and scientific validation? If so, how do we know that it's revelation giving us knowledge and not us producing knowledge for ourselves according to an objective process, since we're doing all the work, sometimes encountering error, sometimes never reaching reliable conclusions? Revelation is supposed to be infallible (is it not?), while human actions are admittedly fallible (that's why we need an *objective* process in the first place). The appeal to revelation is extremely dubious, and since man is capable of rational inquiry and applying the scientific method, why would revelation even be needed? Blank out.

Tennant concluded with the following remarks:

To summarize, I think Dawson is confusing the *chronological* priority of propositions (what must be true to even formulate the biblical worldview?) with *logical* priority (how do we logically justify these chronologically prior propositions?) The whole point of revelational foundationalism is that there are a lot of things which are *obviously* true ("existence exists"; "an external world exists"; "events we perceive are correlated to events in the external world"; etc), but which we cannot rationally justify or give account for without reference to God's objective revelation. Revelational foundationalism works backward by first assuming these truths, so as to find justification for them; then justifying them with reference to Scripture.

Much of this has already been addressed by the points I raised above. But for my readers' benefit I will simply restate my original response to this when David Parker had quoted just this portion from Tennant's article in the comments section of my blog [Another Response to David, Part 7: The Anatomy of Legend and the Ruse of Revelation](#):

First he seeks to dichotomize the role of a starting point by splitting it into two types: chronological and logical. He does this in order to show that I have confused these types, when in fact he nowhere shows that I have (he simply asserts that I have and provides no support for this). In fact, the axiom 'existence exists' satisfies both, because this recognition comes first both in our apprehension of reality (i.e., chronologically) as well as in the hierarchy of knowledge which we develop in our understanding of reality (i.e., logically). Since the axiom of existence satisfies a genuine *conceptual* need which we all have, there is no confusion here. Not on my part anyway. A philosophical starting point needs to identify the most fundamental of all truths, and this need requires it to be conceptually irreducible. As I pointed out in an earlier comment, the concept 'existence' is not defined in terms of prior concepts. If one supposes that it could be defined in terms of prior concepts, to what would those concepts refer, if not to things which exist? If they refer to things which exist, then clearly they assume the truth of the axiom of existence already, even if only implicitly, and make use of the concept they're trying to define. That would lead to an infinite regress, which the axiom of existence avoids. If those concepts purported to define the concept 'existence' do not refer to things which exist, what good are they, and why would we have them in the first place? Blank out. A starting point also needs to identify a fact which is perceptually self-evident, for this is where our awareness of reality begins, with perception. It would not do to affirm a starting point which seeks to jump ahead of where our awareness begins, because this would treat a later recognition (or imagination) as being more fundamental than what we are first aware of. So both types of priority which your friend introduces are thus satisfied in one basic recognition, a recognition which would have to be true for anything else to be accepted as true.

The notion of 'revelation' is certainly not conceptually irreducible. The test for this is to ask whether or not it can be defined, and if so, how is it defined? One of my bible dictionaries does give this term a definition: "a term expressive of the fact that God has made known to men truths and realities that men could not discover for themselves." Notice all the assumptions packed into this one idea. It is clearly not fundamental, for it stands on a whole host of prior assumptions. It fails the conceptual irreducibility test. Also, given this definition (and I've seen others which essentially say the same thing), it clearly cannot pass the perceptually self-evident test, for it stipulates by definition that whatever "truths and realities" are known through revelation are "truths and realities that men could not discover for themselves," while perception gives man direct awareness of objects which exist.

Notice also that your friend realizes that "revelational foundationalism works backward." It has no choice but to do this, because it begins with a large assortment of assumptions, bundles them into an enormous package-deal, and accepts that package-deal as a non-negotiable, and then "works backward" from there in order "to find justification for them." The purpose of identifying one's starting point is to cut past assumptions which we take for granted so that we can understand what is truly fundamental and determine whether or not those assumptions are in fact rationally grounded. A "revelational foundationalism" has its priorities completely reversed, since it does not want to concede any assumptions, but rather wants to hang onto them and find ways of justifying them. This is why it is so fruitful, from an atheological standpoint, to ask a theist to name is

starting point. Whatever he offers is most likely going to fail the fundamentality tests. See also these essays: [TAG and the Fallacy of the Stolen Concept](#) and [Is the Assumption of the Christian God Axiomatic?](#) Also, the notion of 'revelation' defies the very concept of objectivity, since the appeal to revelation is used in cases where purported "knowledge" has no actual tie to reality. The above definition for 'revelation' given in my bible dictionary confirms this. It is the attempt to accept as knowledge ideational content which has not been epistemologically earned, and is thus another expression of the theist's desire for the unearned. It is because theistic assertions are in fact objectively baseless, that theists need to resort to appeals to revelation in order to safeguard them. Of course, any set of arbitrary claims could be "justified" by appealing to an invisible magic being which allegedly "revealed" them to a privileged clique of mystics.

In closing, let me say a few final points. Many theistic apologists are naturally going to want to affirm the existence of the god they worship in their starting point. They do this because they realize at some level of thought that their efforts to prove its existence are doomed to futility. So they claim that their god is "presupposed." And even though they need to make use of the truth of the Objectivist axioms in any foundational statement they affirm, they prefer to leave these truths implicit, dismissing the practice of making them explicit as preposterous, uninteresting, or even degrading in some way. But clearly, as I have shown, there is no contest between so-called "theistic foundationalism" and the Objectivist axioms. Theistic foundationalism is not and cannot be fundamental: for one thing, the notion of a god is deniable (while the fact of existence is not), it is not perceptually self-evident (while existence is), and is not an irreducible primary (while existence is). Also, as its own proponents typically admit themselves, what theistic foundationalism takes as its "first principle" rests on a plethora of prior assumptions, which can only mean it is not a baseline recognition or irreducible affirmation. Indeed, those prior assumptions all come as part of an enormous package, expected to be taken completely for granted, leaving them implicit, unexamined and unsupported. This can only raise the suspicion that a whole host of unstated presuppositions are being smuggled into one's worldview at the ground level. If those presuppositions were legitimately defensible, such a move would not be needed. And lastly, if we are expected to suppose that theistic foundationalism is valid, why should we also not suppose that Thoran foundationalism, Geushan foundationalism, Quetzlcoatlan foundationalism, Horus foundationalism, etc., are also valid? If we accept one arbitrary position, why can't we accept an alternative, equally arbitrary position? Theistic foundationalism can offer no good reason why we shouldn't if we haven't already accepted it.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Axioms](#), [Concepts](#), [Knowledge](#)

posted by [Bahnsen Burner](#) at [6:00 AM](#)

15 Comments:

[john](#) said...

Hi Dawson, first time visitor. That's quite a monumental rejoinder to theists attempting to establish objective validity. They must be either highly persistent or influential for you to be at such pains. For as much obliterating of their claims you can accomplish, salute, but your post has other value for Objectivists wanting better ways to stand on the Axioms of Objectivism; you've assembled an excellent array of formulations, yours and Dr. Peikoff's.

Would your response be any different if they claimed their foundation to be "God Is?" I've always thought that to be the First Principle of theists in its purest form. I think that formulation is the most "honest" representation of the theist position. However, I believe you hinted above at why they prefer to argue "The Bible is the Word of God". Gives them something tangible on which to hitch a rope. I usually try to funnel any argument to "God Is" because then it is easy to demonstrate that both sides claim irrefutable certainty, the difference being the Objectivist's evidence being everywhere and everything, the theist's none and nowhere.

John Donohue
Pasadena, CA

[October 24, 2008 8:19 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

John said:

"Hi Dawson, first time visitor."

Hi, John. Welcome to my blog! I'm glad you dropped by and left a comment.

John: "That's quite a monumental rejoinder to theists attempting to establish objective validity."

I guess it is rather long for a blog. But that's how I am I guess. I love to write, I love to make points. I love to make counter-points.

John: "They must be either highly persistent or influential for you to be at such pains."

Actually, it's pleasure and joy to grapple with these things. That is my primary motivation to keep a blog - it's purely selfish enjoyment for me. But there are other reasons as well. When asked if he would make any changes to his book *The Ominous Parallels* on its 25th anniversary, [Leonard Peikoff replied](#):

Yes. Though I *do* cover religion, I would place more emphasis on it both in Weimar Germany and in recent America, along with its importance in the rise of dictatorship, even one that professes to be secular. The explanation of my error is the fact that, when I wrote the book (I started it in 1968), I could not have imagined the recent religious upsurge in America. In my youth, religion was regarded by educated people as a joke—a stagnant backwater of the passive and mindless specimens concentrated in the Bible Belt.

In reading this, I wonder if Peikoff was simply sheltered or not paying attention, or if explicitly religious positions were simply not openly endorsed in the academia of his day. His words suggest the latter alternative, but I know that there's been virtually no let-up among Christians in cooking their apologetic and theological viewpoints and publishing their tomes. Though arguably it's become more mainstream in recent years. I know that in my own circles, religion (usually Christianity) is typically at best a muted afterthought, a topic which is only tangentially encountered, like an occasional bumper sticker one sees in traffic, or in a passing expression of anxiety or frustration (e.g., "Lord, help me get through this today!"). But I don't tend to "hang out" with religious people in the first place. But even in the work place, the people I work with tend to be mostly secular. A handful are churchgoers, but you wouldn't know this from their day-to-day conversation. I don't raise the topic of religion if they don't first. And if it comes up once, you can be pretty sure it won't come up again after I've had my two minutes' say. (Really, they stay clear of me on that subject from then on.)

The internet, of course, is a different story. On the internet, there are mystics of every stripe all over the place. Christianity on the web has become a frothing rabid dog.

John: "For as much obliterating of their claims you can accomplish, salute, but your post has other value for Objectivists wanting better ways to stand on the Axioms of Objectivism; you've assembled an excellent array of formulations, yours and Dr. Peikoff's."

Thank you, John. In fact, I do think there are better ways to express many of the truths which Rand, Peikoff and other Objectivist literati have defended. I don't think they were wrong in how they've presented Objectivism. I just don't think their presentation is optimally geared toward atheological application, which of course is my area of focus. Principles like the primacy of existence can and should be explained better, in terms of the subject-object relationship. I realized this about a decade ago when I tried to explain it to my brother. It was not easy to lead him to an understanding, but eventually he got it and wondered why it was so difficult to understand at first. The reason for why it was difficult to understand at first is because he simply wasn't accustomed to thinking in terms of fundamentals. Neither was I when I first encountered rational philosophy.

John: "Would your response be any different if they claimed their foundation to be 'God Is'?"

Essentially no. I would still measure such a proposal against the criteria I listed in my blog, namely the following:

**It names a perceptually self-evident fact
Its truth is not inferred from prior truths
Its truth is conceptually irreducible
Its truth is implicit in all perception
Its truth is implicit in all knowledge and any statement
Its truth must be assumed even in denying it**

It would be up to the theist defending the statement “God is” as an irreducible foundation to defend it as such, and in order to do so I would expect him to explain how it fulfills these criteria. A god is typically supposed to be invisible, imperceptible, beyond empirical access, impervious to scientific examination. If that’s the case, its existence could not be a perceptually self-evident fact. That leaves open the question of how the theist supposedly acquires awareness of what he calls “God.” If it is not by means of perception, then how? It is usually at this point that they redirect to a discussion of abstractions (as if they understood what abstractions are; it’s clear to me that they don’t). We don’t perceive ‘liberty’ or ‘justice’, they’ll say, as if our understanding of these concepts were comparable to their awareness of what they call “God.” Well, as Objectivists, we can understand how these higher abstractions are formed on the basis of more fundamental abstractions. What’s important to keep in mind at this point is that the concepts of liberty and justice, and other similar higher-level abstractions, do not denote *entities*. ‘Justice’ is conceptual; it does not denote a species of entities running around in the world. As a concept, ‘justice’ is an abstraction produced by the human mind, based on objective inputs. Because it is something which the mind produces, the concept ‘justice’ has a certain characteristic which is essential to the believer’s notion of “God,” namely his mind’s activity in forming it. But the input source is not objective fact, but his imagination. What the Christian, for example, takes as a substitute for objective fact in forming the fantasy he calls “God,” is the inputs he selects from a storybook, such as the bible.

For some further insights, see my blog [Lord Oda’s “Problem with Pain”](#) for my response to a theistic apologetic which seeks to put one’s experience of pain as analogous to the believer’s experience of his god. Theists like to think of their god as something that is so close to them and their daily experience that it is analogous to one’s experience of pain. (It is noteworthy that Lord Oda did not associate his experience of his god with the experience of pleasure.) But while pain is not an independently existing entity, the theist claims that his god is neither an invention of his imagination nor a mistaken identification of some metaphysical experience of his biology, like pain or pleasure. So how is he aware of it? Good luck getting a theist to answer this in a way which avoids subjective implications.

If the statement “God is” does not identify a perceptually self-evident fact, then why accept it as a truth? Historically theists have offered arguments to defend this claim. In other words, it is a “truth” (according to them) which can be *inferred*. In other words, it’s a conclusion of a prior argument. Which means: other truths are more fundamental than the claim in question. So on this score, “God is” loses as a foundational claim. Other assumptions, presuppositions, recognitions, or what have you, would be more fundamental and thus would need to be identified as one’s foundational truth.

Is the claim “God is” conceptually irreducible? Well, the first question I might ask a theist proposing such a statement as his starting point, might be: Where did you get the concept ‘is’? What does it mean? To what does it refer? I would ask the same about the “God” part as well, but as Rand rightly pointed out, “‘God’... is not a concept. At best, one could say it is a concept in the sense in which a dramatist uses concepts to create a character. It is an isolation of actual characteristics of man combined with the projection of impossible, irrational characteristics which do not arise from reality, such as omnipotence and omniscience.... Besides, God isn’t even supposed to be a concept: he is *sui generis*, so that nothing relevant to man or the rest of nature is supposed, by the proponents of that viewpoint, to apply to God. A concept has to involve two or more concretes, and there is nothing like God. He is supposed to be unique. Therefore, by their own terms of setting up the problem, they have taken God out of the conceptual realm. And quite properly, because he is out of reality.” (ITOE, p. 148) Rand is correct here: ‘God’ could not be a concept, at least as the objective theory of concepts understands what concepts are. But this does not keep theists from making slips like “God is defined as conscious, which is certainly true in the classical concept of God and many others” (Parrish). Definitions apply to concepts, not to entities; we do not define entities, we identify them. But theists themselves treat “God” as definable in terms of prior concepts, which means - on their own terms - that “God” is not conceptually irreducible; some set of prior concepts comes first, i.e., *logically* first. But if it is recognized that “God” could not be a concept (since it is not integrating two or more similar units; there’s supposed to be only one, right? Or is it three?), then we must ask: to what does the word ‘God’ refer? And this will take us back to the earlier question: by what means do you have awareness of this thing you call ‘God’? Lurking in the background of course will be the question of how the theist who attempts to identify the means by which he is supposedly aware of his god or any other allegedly supernatural being, distinguishes this supposed mode of awareness from his own imagination. I’ve challenged numerous theistic apologists to address this question, and so far I’ve not seen any intelligible responses.

By this point, it should be clear that the statement “God is” could not meet any of the criteria which the Objectivist axioms elegantly and more than satisfactorily fulfill. Indeed, the axioms are truths which theists wish they had on their side, because they score a winning knock-out every time.

John: "I've always thought that to be the First Principle of theists in its purest form."

It may be what they should be expected to say if they've put some genuine thought into the matter. But on the other hand, I don't think most theists really have put any good thought into the question of what truly grounds their knowledge of the world. Rather, I think what typically happens is that they're trying to use questions about the grounding of knowledge as an opportunity to develop some apologetic agenda, to hijack knowledge from its foundations. The Objectivist axioms, properly applied, show not only how this doesn't work, but also how it's doomed to failure.

John: "I think that formulation is the most 'honest' representation of the theist position."

I'm guessing you're more generous than I am. I question whether honesty is possible once one attempts to defend theism. Straight out of Galt's Speech: "Honesty is the recognition of the fact that the unreal is unreal and can have no value..."

John: "However, I believe you hinted above at why they prefer to argue 'The Bible is the Word of God'. Gives them something tangible on which to hitch a rope."

Right. They recognize, at least implicitly, that some semblance of an *objective* standard is required. Hence they want to point to a storybook which exists on virtually any library shelf and translated into virtually every language that has been spoken over the last four or five hundred years. They want to be able to claim that their god's words are "the same today, yesterday and forever," which is supposed to somehow satisfy the requirement for an objective basis. But printing millions of copies of *Harry Potter* in various languages will not make it a true story.

John: "I usually try to funnel any argument to 'God Is' because then it is easy to demonstrate that both sides claim irrefutable certainty, the difference being the Objectivist's evidence being everywhere and everything, the theist's none and nowhere."

Yep. And when you point out that the theist in fact assumes the truth of your worldview's starting point - the starting point of (horrids!) an *atheistic* worldview, that's liable to cause quite a stir.

Stir like mad, I say!

Regards,
Dawson

[October 24, 2008 10:08 PM](#)

[madmax](#) said...

Dawson,

Another great post. Have you thought of writing a book on the subject? Books on atheism have become very popular as the success of authors such as Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, Dale Dennet and Richard Dawkins indicate. But all of these atheists are of the skeptic variety. It would be great to see a popular atheist book debunking religion from the perspective of Objectivism.

In many ways today's atheists scare me almost as much as today's religionists. They tend to be serious skeptics, relativists, egalitarians and socialists (and rabid subjectivists). I would love to see the growth of a rational atheistic movement. I don't know if book writing is a long term ambition of yours but I believe you certainly are knowledgeable enough for it.

[October 24, 2008 11:31 PM](#)

[madmax](#) said...

Also, I wanted to add that I too found Peikoff's comment on religion and The Ominous Parallels interesting. I would have thought that in 1968 religion would have been enough of a cultural force to take notice of but apparently it wasn't.

An Objectivist made a good point to me recently saying that in all of Ayn Rand's novels there is not one religious villain. All her villains are Marxist/socialists. When she was writing in the 30's, 40's, 50s religion was not the same type of cultural force that it is now. I have a feeling if she were writing today, she would have religious villains. There would definitely be theocrats and Christian socialists (like Bush) in her novels.

[October 24, 2008 11:44 PM](#)

[john](#) said...

Hi, I'm in the midst of a consuming weekend and so cannot respond to your responses at the moment. I will do so, however. I'm glad to have discovered your blog.

Meanwhile on the subject of Dr. Peikoff and religion.....

1) he was at NYU for many years, and certainly there were no born-againists in the foxholes there!
2) being older, I remember a similar truth....in the 50s and 60s 'religion' was Catholics and MildProtestants.; it was before the rabid born-againists. Frankly, we just did not believe the religion could rise again, either in the US or world...and now look at what we've got.
3) I don't know if this was the source of the point about Rand and religious characters, but I responded with that idea last April on a seriously smarmy website that was attempting to shove forth the idea that Rand was a "militant" atheist. Not my responses, nor other brilliant counters, nor a direct quote from Ayn Rand, could deter this person from a 14-part essay whose entire purpose was to construct Ayn Rand's unreligious principles as a virulent enemy position, therefore glorifying her 'enemy', namely the author of the site. You can see my 2nd comment about 1/2 way down the page. Caution: In my opinion this dishonest site is merely an apology for religion. He makes no overt mission statement, nor will he admit it when called on it. He is very slippery and very determined.
<http://aynrandcontrahumannature.blogspot.com/2008/04/objectivism-religion-part-1.html>

Here's what I said:

[Rand is a-theist; her philosophy is fully conceived, articulated and extrapolated with no mention of God whatsoever. There is no way that can be denied, or a case made that this per se forms "militancy." Meanwhile, and secondarily, she is only anti-religion for the amount of time needed to swat down historical aggression - physical and philosophical -- by every variant of religion/mystical persuasion. Thus, in Galt's speech, the identification and condemnation of the shaman. In the narrative portion of her novels, Ayn Rand did not even bother to create one of her famous bad guys as 'of the cloth.' Except for the Stoddard Temple incident, and for one famous and hugely ironic joke at the end of Atlas Shrugged, she ignores religion as not worthy of mention. As for her non-fiction writings, you can be sure that if religious people did not keep thrusting in her face their (unproven) premise and attempting everything from outright condemnation on the basis of godlessness to begging for rapprochement (which amount to 'Love me or hate me Miss Rand but I will not be ignored'), she would not mention religion at all.]

More later,

John Donohue
Pasadena, CA

[October 25, 2008 9:39 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hi Madmax,

Thanks for your comments. Insightful as always!

To your question about writing a book, it's been an ambition of mine for years, and I have enough material probably for 10 or more books (of course, it would take 10 years just to edit what I have already!). It's a matter of time and resources at this point, though I also think more research on my part is needed. Eventually, hopefully I can get to doing something like that in the future. For now, my blog is my work bench. That's why I like the comments feature in blogging so much - it allows for interaction on the topic and proposed arguments, something not possible in a book.

Of course I think you're entirely correct about Hitchens, Dennett, Dawkins and Harris, the so-called 'four horsemen' of the 'New Atheism'. You'll notice that I do not rely on their work, nor do I even refer to their arguments. Their primary fault, as far as I see it, is that they're arguing for atheism per se. But atheism is simply absence of

god-belief; it's a negation, not a worldview. They aren't defenders of a rational worldview, nor are they trying to promote a rational worldview.

I remember some years ago I attended a conference at UC Berkeley where Dan Barker gave a presentation on morality. I was reluctant to go in the first place, since I could only imagine what Barker was going to say. But at the persistent urging of a close friend of mine I decided I'd go. Barker did not let my low expectations down. Throughout his lecture, which was about morality and religion, he never once defined what he meant by 'morality'. Finally the issue came up in the Q & A period following his lecture, and he gave his definition of morality, which was "minimizing harm." I was almost nauseous at this point. But this is what passes as informed standard among many circles today, not just among religionists, but also among atheists. Now, not to knock Barker entirely. He's made some good points here and there, but in the end he's part of the problem, not the solution.

I wholly agree with Porter when he announces, "I think the primacy of existence is the most important issue in philosophy" (ARTK, p. 198). It is the ultimate standard which any claim to knowledge needs to pass. But the "New Atheists" (Dawkins, Hitchens, et al.) seem to think that atheism as such should be the ultimate standard. Or maybe this is too generous; maybe they are not even this principled. I am no authority on these folks as I've not read a lot of their work. But what little I have read of them is enough for me.

As for the growth of a rational atheist movement, I think the growth of a rational movement would be sufficient. Atheism would come as a rightful consequence. [Anton Thorn](#) puts it perfectly: "My atheism is not a primary, but a consequence of my allegiance to Reason."

As for Peikoff's comment about paying more attention to religion if he were writing *The Ominous Parallels* today, John Donahue's comments are interesting. I don't know much about the culture of NYU in the 60's and 70's, but it would not surprise me if born-again Christians were absent from the scene. It's been a while since I've been on a college campus. I attended SFSU in the early 90s, and while there were a couple small pockets of born-again Christians and other religious groups around, they were pretty much laughed at. But what would you expect in a city like San Francisco? This was back during the first Gulf War, and the biggest thing on most people's minds were the plight of Iraqi refugees and pro-Palestinian demonstrations (they turned the whole place into a 'shanty town' using dumpsters collected from across the campus).

Regardless, religion in our culture has made a come-back, particularly in the philosophy departments, and this is a consequence of the perverse irrationality which has predominated in academia throughout the 20th century. Today's religionists are simply filling a void left by the academics' collective failure. Objectivism is the only antidote. The 'New Atheism' we see gaining popularity today will only deepen that void and give more opportunities to any form of mysticism which comes along and seeks to fill it.

Regards,
Dawson

[October 26, 2008 8:32 AM](#)

[Justin Hall](#) said...

Thank you Dawson, its good to see you once again getting back to basics. Only a few weeks ago I had an encounter on the street with a pair of orthodox Jews who where attempting to preform instant Bar Mitzvahs for anyone of proper heritage. Namely you're mother had better be Jewish. I made the mistake of answering honestly that my mother was and got dragged into a discussion as they were keen to understand why I was an atheist.

I launched into what I hope was a good explanation of why even to say god exists, where we define god as a conscious that enjoys a subjective relationship with the objects of its awareness would necessitate a contradiction. For altho the form of the statement god exists (x is y) implicitly assumes metaphysical objectivism, the actual content of the statement explicitly states metaphysical subjectivism. They seemed confused by this and thought that I was asking how they could tell weather god was lying or not, which of course is one of the pit falls of subjectivism. However they seemed to fail completely to understand that I was addressing fundamentals and stressing there importance. Once you cease to use concepts willy nilly devoid of there roots, it can be hard to fathom why others continue to do so. However to under score what John discussed, once you realize just how silly and nonsensical religion is, you can lose interest in debating it. The topic really is not worthy of debate.

Dawson keep up the good work, the non existent god knows I don't have the time:)

Justin Dewitt Hall
Portland Oregon

[October 26, 2008 10:14 AM](#)

[madmax](#) said...

Dawson,

Thanks for the response. I'm glad to see that a book may be somewhere in your future. If and when you publish it, I for one will definitely buy it. As for the "Four Horseman" (love the name), here is an article by Alan Germani of The Objective Standard on the subject of the "New Atheists":

<http://www.theobjectivestandard.com/issues/2008-fall/mystical-ethics-new-atheists.asp>

It does an excellent job of exposing their irrationality, especially in ethics. Almost without exception, every atheist I encounter is a philosophical skeptic and a committed altruist. You have occasionally intimated that today's skeptics are such because they have been conditioned by religious epistemology. I hope you develop that one day in a blog post because I suspect there is a lot of truth to it.

Lastly, let me say that I have read close to 3/4 of your archives and my understanding of rational atheism, religious apologetics, as well as Objectivism has improved dramatically. I can't thank you enough.

[October 26, 2008 6:16 PM](#)

[madmax](#) said...

John,

I think you did an admirable job in your debate against Greg Nyquist. You should know that Nyquist is perhaps the biggest Rand-hater on the internet. The other contender for that distinction would probably be Neil Parille. These are people who have dedicated themselves to challenging and attacking pretty much everything Rand stood for.

Their main goal is to discredit Rand as a philosopher and demonstrate that she didn't know anything she was talking about. Their biggest argument is that Rand was naive and scientifically uninformed. She was so uninformed that she didn't know how important Christianity was for the development of the West and how important religion is for man in general. Add to that the fact that she didn't validate her philosophy with scientific experiments and that she didn't cite at least 1000 scientific studies and this is all undeniable proof that she was a fraud. You get the point. Nyquist is a terrible philosopher and dishonest to boot. And as you picked up on, he is a religious apologist as well. It's good to engage him every now and then, but such a person will go to his grave hating Rand. IMO, personality types like Nyquist make the average Christian apologist seem almost rational and benevolent by comparison.

Also, thanks for the info about Peikoff and the 50s and 60s. Very useful.

[October 26, 2008 7:22 PM](#)

[Justin Hall](#) said...

Madmax had anyone ever challenged Nyquist on the fundamental principles that science relies on to even work that Rand made explicit? When I have debated persons who attempt to discredit Rand, they rarely actually refute the core axioms or their relationship to each other, they just don't like the logical consequences of them. I think people just get ticked off that Rand calls out their dishonesty or inconsistencies. It would seem to me that if Nyquist grants such authority to science then he is already in agreement with Rand on the fundamentals of her world view. I honestly didn't know of this man until this thread, just curious.

[October 26, 2008 7:59 PM](#)

[madmax](#) said...

Dawson,

If I may be forgiven for three posts, let me bring to your attention (if you haven't seen it already) Nyquist's attack

against the Objectivist axioms. They're a little different than the ones I've usually seen from apologists. Nyquist is a weird mix, a kind of Conservative who is also an empiricist. Here is arguments against the axioms:

<http://aynrandcontrahumannature.blogspot.com/2008/06/objectivism-religion-part-11.html>

Some samples:

"Rand claims that those who deny the primacy of existence believe that existence is "created" by consciousness. Plato, Christianity, and German Idealism are all presented as advocates of this view. Unfortunately, no Objectivist has ever provided any evidence of a genuine platonist or Christian or German Idealist who actually holds that view. Idealists don't believe consciousness creates existence. Nor do they believe in the primacy of consciousness. What they believe in is the primacy of the contents of consciousness—which is something different."

"When Peikoff declares that God can't be the creator of existence because existence is primary, what has he established? He's established nothing. No theist, Christian or otherwise, ever asserted that God created existence. God, it is claimed, created the "heavens and the earth" or the "universe"—which, again, is something different. Since God existed before the creation of the universe, any notion of God creating "existence" is absurd. Peikoff is here playing fast and loose with the term existence, trying to use it as if it were a precise synonym for universe or material world."

"This implicit premise of Objectivism, masked by the often repeated mantra A is A, is problematic in several directions. While it is true that intelligibility is a precondition of knowledge, this does not mean that intelligibility is also a precondition of existence as well—not if we wish to be consistent with realism. Realism asserts that material objects have a place, movement, origin and destiny of their own, regardless of what the individual may think or fail to think about them. Embedded in this view is the possibility of both error and unintelligibility. Since the object of knowledge lays beyond the realm of consciousness, the possibility not only of error, but of partial unknowability cannot be ruled out of hand... ...Not every aspect of the universe exists for the convenience of our intellects. To think otherwise is to flounder into the morass of idealism."

He's a skeptic alright and a sophist to boot.

[October 26, 2008 8:12 PM](#)

[openlyatheist](#) said...

Hey Dawson,

I was perusing this thread the other day and thought of you: [Existence Exists, but what if it didn't?](#)

It lead to this blog post: [Yes, Virginia, existence exists](#)

As well as this old blog post [criticizing Objectivism](#).

And so on...

I know that discussion of the axioms are an integral part of your blog. Perhaps these links can offer you some cannon fodder for future articles. Keep up the good work.

[October 26, 2008 11:21 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Greetings Madmax and Openly Atheist,

Thanks again for all your comments. (Yes, Madmax, you're allowed more than three comments per day... in fact, there is no limit, especially good stuff like yours.)

Greg Nyquist.... [groan] I've seen a number of his blogs and articles before. You're right - he's a terrible philosopher and not at all honest as well. When I read Nyquist's stuff, I'm reminded of Scott Ryan's and John Robbins' stuff as well. I get the strong impression that it is mostly motivated by spite for Rand herself. That's a terrible way to try to critique a position.

Look at the first Nyquist quote that Madmax cited:

“Rand claims that those who deny the primacy of existence believe that existence is ‘created’ by consciousness. Plato, Christianity, and German Idealism are all presented as advocates of this view. Unfortunately, no Objectivist has ever provided any evidence of a genuine platonist or Christian or German Idealist who actually holds that view.”

Really? Christians tell us all the time that their god created the universe. The universe is existence. How did it create the universe? By an act of will: it “spoke” and the universe came into existence as a result. I’ve seen a lot of fancy footwork in trying to characterize the religious doctrine of creation ex nihilo as meaning something other than consciousness creating things that exist, but they aren’t very convincing to say the least. Stephen Parrish, for instance, in his “God and Objectivism” (*The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies*, Spring 2007, pp. 169-210), says that “a theist does not have to say that ‘existence’ is dependent upon consciousness, but rather on a being, God, who possesses consciousness” (p. 177). I’ve tried to see how this is saying something other than existence is dependent on existence, which would be completely redundant and, from what I can tell, totally unnecessary, but in all honesty I don’t know what else it could be saying. In the same breath, Parrish claims that “God’s consciousness is vastly greater than that of human beings,” which is not very specific (“greater” in what way?), but implied in this is that his god does have the power to create existence. If “God” is more than just consciousness, but also has a “being,” what role does this “being,” however it is distinct from its consciousness, play in the creative process (if we can call it a process)? It seems to be mere smoke and mirrors tactics to me. Did this god choose to create the universe? Did the material from which it created the universe exist already, and, like a cabinet-maker, he simply reworked that material and put it together, obeying its nature in order to work with it? Theists, particularly Christians, do not allow this interpretation of divine creation. Typically they claim creation ex nihilo, that none of the substance, material, existents or what have you which populate the universe existed prior to the divine act of creation. But Parrish seems to be trying to hedge his position so that something other than his god’s consciousness is involved in the creative act. If so, what is that something else?

Consider the words of Christian apologist Mike Warren, who writes:

In knowing a flower, for example, God knows everything about the flower. Humans can have that flower as an object of their knowledge as well, so there is a similarity in the knowledge; but a difference is that humans cannot know the flower exhaustively. Not only is there a quantitative difference between divine and human knowledge of the flower, but there are qualitative differences. God knows the flower originally. Everything about the flower originates from His own consciousness. Indeed, God’s thinking about the flower makes it so.

(For references, see my blog [Confessions of a Vantillian Subjectivist](#).)

Warren’s pretty explicit: “Everything about the flower originates from His own consciousness. Indeed, God’s thinking about the flower makes it so.”

I don’t think you can get more explicitly subjective than this, and it flies directly in the face of Nyquist’s denials.

Besides, consciousness creating its own objects is not the only expression of the primacy of consciousness. It is occasioned any time one attempts to give the subject in the subject-object relationship the upper hand in that relationship. And we find this in religion all over the place, from the doctrine of creation ex nihilo (as we just saw), to the doctrine of miracles, to the doctrine of faith, to the doctrine of exorcism, etc. There’s no denying the dependence of Christianity on the primacy of consciousness.

Nyquist continues, saying “What they believe in is the primacy of the contents of consciousness—which is something different.”

Did he perchance explain what the difference between the primacy of consciousness and the primacy of the contents of consciousness might be?

Openly Atheist linked to Michael Prescott’s blog entry, where Prescott writes:

When I first became acquainted with the Objectivism, the philosophy of Ayn Rand, I was very impressed with the idea that one could derive an entire, logically consistent worldview from a few simple axiomatic premises. This approach promised total certitude in philosophizing. It took me quite a few years to understand that, as appealing as this promise may seem, it is a promise that cannot be kept.

This is the same mistake Tennant made (and which I corrected in my present blog). Please, someone, find me one quote from Rand where she “promises” that her whole philosophy can be deduced or derived directly from the three axioms? I’ve never seen this kind of claim about the axioms in the Objectivist corpus. Like Tennant, Prescott is looking at Objectivism through rationalist goggles.

I wish I could linger and write more... but I have to get ready for work.

Regards,
Dawson

[October 27, 2008 6:03 AM](#)

[Justin Hall](#) said...

Dawson, a question for you, and I hope I am not being a bother on this thread, I feel that I do not have the same caliber of mind of some of the others that you regularly interact with here. My question pertains to the definitions of metaphysical subjectivism and metaphysical objectivism. Would not subjectivism be just the mere possibility of a subjective relationship between even one consciousness and its objects of awareness even in a limited fashion, even over a limited period of time. Where objectivism would be defined as a universal relationship between all acts of consciousness and excluding the possibility of subjectivism in any form no matter how limited. In this fashion then the two forms of metaphysics become mutually exhaustive and mutually exclusive. You're thoughts?

In my discussions with theists, they often try to have it both ways. We have a objective relationship and god has a subjective relationship. I have given theses definitions as a way to cut that line of argumentation of at the start.

And thank you again for you time that you have given to this web site. You have been a great resource to point people too, that do not necessarily wish to go purchase a bunch of books by Rand.

[October 27, 2008 6:45 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hi Justin,

These are great questions!

Justin: “My question pertains to the definitions of metaphysical subjectivism and metaphysical objectivism. Would not subjectivism be just the mere possibility of a subjective relationship between even one consciousness and its objects of awareness even in a limited fashion, even over a limited period of time.”

Metaphysical subjectivism obtains any time one affirms or implies that that the objects of consciousness conform in some way to the subject of consciousness. It does not need to affirm such a reversal in the case of all subjects. Affirming such a relationship in the case of just one consciousness is sufficient to occasion this error. Some theists have attempted to salvage their religion’s claim to objectivity by essentially saying that the primacy of consciousness occurs only in the case of one consciousness, namely their god. For instance, internet apologist Paul Manata once wrote:

in theism, there’s a sense in which reality is subjective - based on the divine mind, but it’s still objective for us humans.

The implication behind this kind of disclaimer is that, for a worldview to violate the primacy of existence, it would have to do so in the case of every acknowledged consciousness. But what supports applying this universal criterion? No rational principle is offered to support it. It’s simply an attempt to slither out of the charge of subjectivism. You can see my response to Manata in my blog [Theism and Metaphysical Subjectivism](#), which interacts directly with this attempted evasion.

Keep in mind that it is not the case that Christianity affirms the primacy of consciousness only in the case of its god. Christianity also affirms the primacy of consciousness in the case of other consciousnesses, both fictional and factual. For instance, Christianity posits the existences of devils, demons, angels, and other supernatural beings,

which to varying extents are characterized as possessing certain powers which involve conforming objects to intentions. For instance, demons and devils can strike human beings with diseases or other afflictions. They can throw obstacles in the path of the righteous intended to make them trip and displease the ruling consciousness. Demons and angels can manipulate men's thoughts, dreams, feelings, decisions, etc. Some believe that calling on angels can summon a rescue from a bad situation, sort of like calling Superman when you're in distress. Only in the case of Superman, you really see your rescuer, whereas in the case of angels they remain invisible and locked inside the believer's imagination. Christianity also grants primacy of consciousness to believers in certain circumstances, such as in the doctrine of faith, which allows the believer to blur the factual with the imaginary, sometimes even allowing the believer to command reality to obey his wishes. I'm reminded of a story which Andrew Bernstein related in one of his lectures which he learned from watching the PTL Club or the 700 Club (or some other religious program like these) where the parents of a diabetic boy were interviewed after the boy died from his condition. The parents, faithful believers all the way, decided to take their child off insulin therapy because they thought faith and prayer to their god should suffice to cure him. So they had the boy's doctors take him off insulin and any other medical treatments he was getting, and began to pray to their god. The boy's condition of course did not get better, it started to get worse. So they prayed and prayed more, but the boy's condition continued to get worse. So the parents stayed up every night, depriving themselves and their son of sleep, binging on a marathon of prayer ritualizing, but eventually the boy's condition got so bad that he eventually died. The parents of course felt very bad about this outcome, but their reaction to it was not to question their religious beliefs, but to conclude that they simply did not have enough faith, that had their faith been stronger, the miracle cure would have kicked in and saved their child from diabetes. The underlying assumption to all this of course is that faith is the license to believe that reality will obey your desires if those desires are strong enough. That's the primacy of consciousness no matter how you look at it, don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

Justin: "Where objectivism would be defined as a universal relationship between all acts of consciousness and excluding the possibility of subjectivism in any form no matter how limited. In this fashion then the two forms of metaphysics become mutually exhaustive and mutually exclusive. You're thoughts?"

Objectivism recognizes that there are no exceptions to the primacy of existence, no matter how badly one wishes otherwise. Wishes do not alter the metaphysically given. Only in a fictional environment, such as in the confines of a storybook, does wishing enjoy metaphysical primacy. This is possible in a storybook because a storybook can be informed by the author's imagination.

Justin: "In my discussions with theists, they often try to have it both ways. We have an objective relationship and god has a subjective relationship. I have given these definitions as a way to cut that line of argumentation of at the start."

Right, I've seen this as well. As I pointed out in my response to Paul Manata, "Qualifications like this simply demonstrate that theists have no consistent metaphysic to begin with." Philosophically, that's a pretty bad place to be.

Justin: "And thank you again for your time that you have given to this web site. You have been a great resource to point people too, that do not necessarily wish to go purchase a bunch of books by Rand."

Thanks for the compliment. But please, do not suppose that my blog is a suitable substitute for Rand's or anyone else's writings. Most of Rand's books are pretty cheap, and they're fascinating to read. You can probably find most of them for \$5 or less at a used book store. You can find many excerpts from her books on the online version of [The Ayn Rand Lexicon](#) as well. And on [Origin Research](#), there are a couple chapters from her book *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*. But I would urge you to get Rand's philosophy from its original source, her own writings.

Anyway, I hope I answered your question. If not, please let me know.

Regards,
Dawson

[October 28, 2008 5:55 AM](#)

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