

Saturday, September 11, 2010

### Andrew Louis' Persisting Confusions

Andrew Louis replied to my comment (in [this post](#)) responding to another of his confused attempts (found [here](#)) to interpret my statements (found [here](#)).

Andrew's latest response can be found [here](#).

In his latest offering, Andrew Louis once again demonstrates his persisting habit of confusing and distorting what has been very carefully stated in reply to his previous batch of confusions. Throughout our exchanges, Andrew seems bent on finding some element in my responses to him which supposedly undercuts the entirety of my position. At several points throughout our prolonged discussion, he's declared that certain things I've said in fact undermine, undercut or contradict "my case." Though in each instance, it's unclear exactly what he seems to think the problem is, though it is clear that in the run-up to these little "Eureka moments" he's gotten some basics wrong. Quite often, Andrew's problem seems to arise when he reads one word, but apparently thinks he's read a significantly different word, which throws off his understanding of the whole. A few examples of this appear in his latest response.

Earlier on in our discussion, I had recommended that Andrew read some of the primary Objectivist literature in order to become more familiar with the philosophy which he's trying to critique. But after observing his persisting habits of error and carelessness, I am now persuaded that this wouldn't do any good.

Andrew had stated:

To see words as representation is to bring to light certain skeptical questions such as, "How do you know you've represented reality properly?"

I responded:

It depends on the situation. If I say to my daughter "Take my hand," and she does it, then I've obviously communicated what I intended, for she understood me.

Andrew now replies:

No, it doesn't depend on the situation, it depends on the context (or so I'll suggest).

Yes, it's definitely true that it depends on context as well. But the context varies depending on the situation, as my example clearly indicates. The situation governs context. There's no dichotomy here as Andrew seems to think.

Andrew continued:

In this case your example is a rhetorical context of the everyday where the test for truth is less about philosophical representation (or a philosophical conversation) and more about simple understanding and triangulation.

Right: the situation determines the context in regard to Andrew's question about knowing when we've represented reality properly. Outcomes are one way we can test this, and whether or not a desired outcome has been achieved varies from situation to situation. Of course, it takes two to tango. I can "represent" the Objectivist position properly, for instance, but this does not guarantee that someone who is habitually careless in his reading and understanding will grasp it properly.

Andrew explains:

In other words if I tell you (in the midst of us talking face to face), "STOP, Dawson, that stove is hot!

” as you’re about to put your hand down on it, you don’t question my ability to adequately represent reality, you take it that both your and my experiences and beliefs are to a certain degree on par.

So what gives rise to Andrew’s skeptical question “How do you know you’ve represented reality properly?”? What solution does Andrew provide in response to his own skeptical question? What have we learned from Andrew in this regard? Or, does he have only heat, and no light to offer on the matter?

I wrote:

I thought I was pretty clear on this. Words are symbols for (“represent”) concepts. I also gave an example (the defendant’s testimony) of how the use of the word “represent” in my view is unproblematic. So I guess I’m not seeing what the problem is.

My example was as follows:

People often refer to a statement’s correspondence to reality in terms of representation, as in the case of a statement such as “the defendant’s testimony did not accurately represent the situation of the night of the murder,” which is harmless.

Andrew replied:

You’re right, it is harmless, and once again we have to make a distinction between the everyday rhetorical use of “representation”, and its use in a philosophical context, because a philosophical context carries with it certain implications and baggage.

That’s right, and that’s why I tried to elevate the issue to Andrew’s attention. In philosophy, the term “representation” has specific meaning, particularly in the case of the representationalist theory of perception which I brought to Andrew’s attention. Objectivism rejects the theory of representationalism. I am still not convinced that Andrew grasps the significance here.

Additionally, I explained that, philosophically, there’s much more to knowledge than merely representing something observed in reality. This too seems to have been lost on Andrew, perhaps because he’s already adopted a version of nominalism. This would explain much.

Andrew writes:

It’s one thing to suggest that by the above discourse you can glean some sort of understanding of the circumstance, it’s entirely another to use it as an analogue for how language works - but in fact, that’s exactly what your philosophical system does, but not what you’re saying here.

Statements like this are all we need to confirm that Andrew has not grasped very much of what I’ve written, particularly about consciousness’ task of identification and the conceptual process by which it undertakes this task. How many times do I have to explain that Objectivism does not subscribe to representationalism? How many times do I have to explain the role of concept-formation in providing content to language? How many times do I have to explain why elements of language (i.e., words) do represent concepts (words are “visual-auditory symbols that serves the psycho-epistemological function of converting concepts into the mental equivalent of concretes” - Rand, ITOE, p. 10), but that concepts are not merely “representations” of objects (concepts provide man with a one-to-many correspondence to reality; he’s not limited to a one-to-one relationship of a mirror-like representation)? Andrew misses the open-ended nature of conceptual content as well as the fact that we use language to convey what we *mean*, not merely to represent specific objects in our immediate perceptual awareness.

Andrew wrote:

Allow me to simplify this even more. I think I made a pretty clear case that you do in fact see truth (language, propositions) as representing the “facts of reality” (that reality existing independent of man, and containing facts), in a philosophical sense... You then go on to make a clarification regarding facts, however it doesn’t help your case any. Actually, I think it makes your case even worse

and plays right back into my hands.

Again, it's completely unclear what Andrew is trying to say here. He does not explain how my conception of facts - as existing independent of consciousness - works against my position. On the contrary, if I held that facts conform to conscious intentions, that would drastically undermine my position. Does Andrew understand the concept 'objectivity'? I did try to explain it to him at one point.

I wrote:

By "facts," I generally mean existents in relationships. E.g., tree next to the house, bird on the fence post, mountain south of the city, etc. The task of consciousness is to perceive and identify facts, not create them... The concept "reality" includes all existents and the relationships in which we find them.

Andrew responded:

This is essentially a restatement of what we've already been through. All you've done (or added) is defined what these facts are that we're identifying - or their nature. You have existents, (let me call them particulars) and their relationships (we could call those concepts, universals, whatever).

Just in trying to interpret the meaning of "fact" that I had given, Andrew is already confusing himself. Why does he suppose that the relationships in which we find existence should be called "concepts, universals, [or] whatever"? Why automatically suppose that those relationships are not themselves particular? Andrew does not say. Again, he seems to be confusing concepts with particular objects which they subsume. This mistake is actually more common than some might realize. On my view, the existents which constitute facts are particular, and so are the relationships in which we find those existents. We use concepts ("universals") to *identify* (and integrate) those existents and the relationships we find them in. As I pointed out numerous times now, truth is an aspect or property of identification. But apparently no matter how many times I remind Andrew of this, or try to explain it to him, it never seems to sink in.

Andrew writes:

Now, since you've already stated explicitly that the facts of reality exist independently of man, and that the facts of reality are "particulars" in relationships, all you've done is essentially tie along with particulars, the relationship of particulars to the reality outside of man's consciousness as well.

So what's wrong with that? I explicitly stated that facts are existents in relationships. I have also been consistent in stating that facts obtain independent of consciousness. Additionally, I have pointed out that concepts are products of a mental process. Why then does Andrew suppose that a key element of facts as I have understood them must be a product of mental activity (he called them "concepts, universals, whatever")? I have not been inconsistent here, nor have I undercut my own case.

Andrew continued:

And in essence, there goes your defense of concepts and universals.

How so? Facts exist independent of consciousness, and we use concepts to identify them. I've never wavered from this, nor does the conception of facts that I gave undercut this view. If Andrew thinks I've contradicted myself in some way, he needs to show this by pointing out which two (or more) statements of mine (when rightly understood) actually conflict with each other. So far, Andrew has not done this. As we saw above, he has a tendency to insert his own (mis)interpretations into my statements. And as I showed above, this carelessness does in fact result in problems, but they're problems that are not original to the position I've presented.

I had written (in the comments of [this blog](#)):

Realism in terms of universals is the view that "that universals have a reality of their own, an extra-mental existence. Positions are often marked out, running from moderate to absolute Realism. The more definite, fixed, and eternal the status of the universals, the more absolute is the Realism."

(Reese, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion*, p. 637). This of course does not describe the Objectivist view; but it does describe Plato's view.

Andrew writes:

But wait, you've already given them a reality 'all their own'.

Where have I given *universals* (i.e., *concepts*) a reality "all their own" - i.e., an *extra-mental* existence, an existence apart from conscious activity? I'm guessing that Andrew comes to this conclusion as a result of misinterpreting my description of what facts are. Recall that I had written:

I wrote:

By "facts," I generally mean existents in relationships.

Andrew understood this to mean the following:

You have existents, (let me call them particulars) and their relationships (we could call those concepts, universals, whatever).

He seems to think that, since on my view facts are extra-mental, while on his views the relationships which are inherent in facts are concepts or universals, that I'm therefore giving concepts or universals a reality of their own, apart from conscious activity. But this is a mistake on Andrew's part, and a big one, too. When giving my description of what facts are - as existents in relationships - I nowhere stated that the relationships should be called concepts or universals (nor did anything I say imply that these relationships themselves are conceptual in nature), and my own statements neither require nor stipulation such an interpretation. I see no reason why the relationships in which we find existents cannot be just as particular as the existents involved in those relationships. My own examples ("tree next to the house, bird on the fence post, mountain south of the city, etc.") are examples of particular relationships.

Is Andrew understanding what he's read? His following statements indicate that he does not.

Andrew wrote:

Once again you state, 'truth identifies a sort of relationship between the facts of reality'.

I could not find anywhere in my writings where I had stated what Andrew attributes to me here.

I suspect what Andrew has in mind is the quote I recited from Peikoff:

"The concept of 'truth' identifies a type of relationship between a proposition and the facts of reality." (OPAR, p. 165)

Andrew forgot the part about truth identifying a type of relationship between *a proposition* and the facts of reality.

Andrew continued:

You've agreed and stated explicitly that facts exist in reality independent of man. We know that truths are proposition spoken in a language game, and we already know that you believe something to be true when one of these proposition corresponds to the reality which exists independently of man (but not just the particulars of reality, their relationships as well). *That's* correspondence, *that's* representation, *that's* the mirror of reality, and *that's* Realism.

Andrew has not shown that any of this is "Realism," for he has not clarified what he means by "Realism," in spite of my asking him to do so on several occasions now. Going back to Andrew's original criticism of Objectivism, he was eager to demonstrate (or at any rate, *assert*) what he called "the parasitic nature of Objectivism upon Platonism/Realism" (see Andrew's 1 Sept. comment, time-stamped 3:47 PM, on [this blog](#)). Clearly he set out on his mission with a conception of "Realism" as it is associated with Platonism. This can only mean that Andrew is claiming that Objectivism is a type of Platonic Realism. He has not explained

otherwise, and yet I've already corrected him on this several times now. Either he is not reading, is not digesting what he reads, doesn't care or is unable to integrate what he reads, or is simply ignoring what has been presented in response to his objections. This has happened so frequently throughout my discussion with Andrew that I'm of the opinion that he may very well be unteachable on the topic, which is why I have come to suspect that studying Objectivism's primary sources probably won't do Andrew any good.

Andrew continued:

Now you can argue that Rand doesn't say that, believe that, etc., and I must admit again that I haven't read Rand. However in the very least you have to accept that perhaps you've simply done a poor job representing what Rand's core beliefs are, and in fact have made it explicit that they're just further forms of Realism, words as representation, and thus carries with it the skeptical baggage I've been pinging you with from the start.

I'm happy to grant the possibility that there are areas where my presentation of the Objectivist position could be improved; given the little amount of time I have to edit what I've written, there's always room for improvement. But in the present case, I frankly do not see what more I could have done to prevent Andrew's persisting misunderstandings. For instance, citing Reese, I identified the distinctives which characterize Realism, and also showed how Objectivism both repudiates Realism and explained how the Objectivist alternative to Realism is not (and cannot be) just another version of Realism so defined. At no point has Andrew come back saying anything to the effect of, "No, that's not what I mean by Realism - *this* is what I mean by realism," going on to cite an alternative definition and explain (in an informed manner) how Objectivism falls into that category. In short, he has not made good on his charges against Objectivism. He's not even come close. Of course, Andrew's lack of familiarity with Objectivism is a key factor in his persisting confusions. But I suspect their root lies deeper than this, since efforts to correct his errors and misunderstandings have so far been futile.

Andrew then wrote:

Which is, of course, that you'll ultimately be unable to provide a non question begging account of your core axioms, or that anyone should (for that matter) just blindly accept your axioms. Just like we shouldn't blindly accept Syc's.

The very idea that Objectivism requires an individual to "just blindly accept [its] axioms," only indicates that its author does not grasp what the axioms are in the first place. Andrew may be able to recite them (though even here he's had trouble), but understanding what they mean and why they are axioms is apparently a different matter, particularly for Andrew. On the contrary, Objectivism points out that just by opening our eyes and seeing anything, we are confirming the truth of the axioms. If you see any thing, you are seeing existence. If you are seeing any thing, you are seeing one thing as opposed to another thing. If you are seeing any thing, you are seeing. The axioms denote each of these facts: the axiom of existence (there is a reality - *what* you see); the axiom of identity (that to be is to be something specific - that *what* you see has a nature); the axiom of consciousness (that consciousness is the faculty of awareness - that you *see* as opposed to not seeing). I'm always amazed when thinkers apparently feel that these fundamental recognitions are somehow controversial, that they are unjustified, that they must be accepted on faith, etc. Do they realize what they are taking for granted?

So it's quite ironic that Andrew would characterize the axioms as something that one should "just blindly accept." What is the alternative to blindly accepting something? It would be to accept something with one's seeing eyes wide open. When your seeing eyes are wide open, you're seeing, you're seeing something. To do this, you would have to exist, the something that you see would have to exist, and you would have to see - i.e., be conscious. Just by seeing anything, the axioms are implicitly established. And since seeing something is not an inference seeking to establish a conclusion, just by seeing we have a non-question-begging account of our core axioms. Andrew has not shown that this account does beg the question, nor has he shown that the axioms must be accepted blindly. Additionally, he has not shown that this is anything akin to presuppositionalism, which requires a thinker to treat as actual something that is in fact imaginary.

For that matter, what does Andrew offer in place of the axioms? What are the foundations of human thought that he would propose as alternatives to the axioms of existence, identity and consciousness? How would

anything he might propose in their stead avoid assuming the truth of these axioms? Andrew only seems willing to criticize Objectivism, for errors which Objectivism does not commit, and has no solutions to propose in their place.

Andrew wrote:

Let me clear up one final piece regarding Realism. Of course I could have cut with the “general” Realist/Platonist usage and made a distinction between, say, Platonic Realism, Immanent Realism, and Nominalism - but the reality is all 3 of those forms will ultimately contain the same or similar baggage previously stated (but I don't even want to get into that at this point). The fact that I was throwing Platonism around so willy nilly is really a poor clarification on my part - I should have taken what was going on more seriously, but I really didn't think you'd want to carry the conversation this far, although I'm happy you did.

Now Andrew acknowledges that his earlier use of “Platonism” was in fact careless, and mentions that there is a distinction between “Platonic Realism, Immanent Realism, and Nominalism.” But he does not explain what distinguishes these three positions from each other. Additionally, he fails to show that Objectivism is a version of one or more of these (or that it is “parasitic upon” any of them), and he also fails to clearly explain what he means by “baggage” which “all 3” of these schools of thought allegedly contain. What is this baggage, and what makes it objectionable? Is Andrew now admitting that Objectivism is not a form of Platonism? Is he conceding that, after all, Objectivism is not “parasitic... upon Platonism/Realism” as he had originally asserted? Clearly he thinks some kind of “baggage” burdens Objectivism, but after all my effort to tease out of Andrew specifically what objection(s) he has in mind, he is still unable to explain himself.

by Dawson Bethrick

*posted by Bahnsen Burner at [9:50 PM](#)*