

Tuesday, September 07, 2010

### Another Reply to Andrew Louis

This is in response to Andrew Louis' [recent blog entry](#) responding to [my blog](#).

Andrew wrote, quoting me:

"Again, not [a correspondence] between concepts and reality as in 'the thing in itself' (Kant's 'Ding an sich'), but between concepts and the things which we perceive." That couples nicely with "There is reality, and there is our consciousness of reality, and there is the relationship between the two." Couple that with "whereas according to representationalism we perceive 'appearances' of things, i.e., not the things themselves.

In response to these points, Andrew wrote:

If I gather you correctly then, what you call 'the thing itself', is that which exists (maybe a bad word there) in perception, *not* reality.

Andrew, what makes you think that this is what I'm saying? Where have I dichotomized objects of perception from reality in this manner? On the contrary: if the objects did not exist (in reality), we wouldn't be able to perceive them in the first place. As I have maintained consistently throughout the discussion: perception gives us direct awareness of objects - of things which exist, of things that are in reality.

Andrew:

You grant (as I would as well) that there's a world out there, but that we do not (in speaking of truth and facts) mirror the way the world is in itself.

There's a world out there, and we're part of it, we perceive it, and we identify it (if we choose to). I already spoke to the "mirror" analogy in [my blog](#). Did you see that part?

Andrew:

Furthermore, if I gather you properly, you're stating [e.g.] that there are rocks in reality, however the truths that we speak about them relate not to them as they are in themselves, but to them as they relate to the relationship between us and reality, i.e. in perception.

No, you haven't understood me correctly. What you're describing is Kantianism. Kant distinguishes between the world out there (the "noumenal realm") and what we perceive (the "phenomenal realm"). Your clause "as they are in themselves" (and have tried twice now to correct this) as well as the disjunction you apparently think I've affirmed, give this away. Objectivism rejects this view. On the contrary: objects exist, we perceive them, and we perceive them *directly*. The view you're describing is as silly as saying that we can enter New York City on I-80, but we can't enter New York City as it is "in itself."

There are rocks in reality, and the statements we make about those rocks can only be true if we follow an objective process of identifying them. If we use some subjective method (i.e., some procedure which ignores the fact that existence exists independent of consciousness), then we won't be identifying the rocks we perceive. Rather, we will essentially be fantasizing. At root, this is the problem which plagues Christianity.

Andrew:

I have no overwhelming issue with that either

With what you described? You should.

Andrew:

The volitional/active portion of cognition is what supplies the reasons for believing the things we do

Not on my view. On my view, the facts of reality supply the reasons for believing the things that I believe. As a volitional consciousness, I have to make the choice to go with the facts, or to ignore them.

Andrew:

Let me throw this out there; I'm with Richard Rorty when he says that beliefs are not representations, but rather habits of action;

Does he say this about all beliefs of all men? How could he know this? (I'm not saying he can't; just wondering how he does.) I think people do generally automatize many of their belief patterns, but they were not originally habitual. We had to learn them at some point. And even then, one must have capacity to form concepts and subsume new units into their content.

For instance, if I have developed a habit of fearing loose dogs - i.e., the belief that a loose dog can be dangerous - when I encounter a loose dog I've never seen before, I can identify it as a dog and integrate into the sum of my knowledge (including, relevantly, my belief that it could be dangerous) only if my beliefs have a conceptual basis.

I'm not an expert on Rorty, but I'm sure even he would grant at least some of what I'm saying here.

Mind you, I tend to see belief as a degree of confidence in a claim, namely a degree falling short of certainty. If my co-worker asks, for instance, where the boss is, I might reply that I \*believe\* he went to lunch. By stating it this way, I'm tacitly communicating to my co-worker that I think this, but also that I'm not sure.

Similarly, if I encounter a loose dog, I believe it may be dangerous, but I'm not certain. It may be a really dopey, friendly dog who comes running up to me to make friends. It's happened before, and such counter-examples are integrated into my beliefs.

Andrew:

and that words are not representations, but tools.

On Rorty's view, what's the relationship between words and concepts? Or would he say there's no relationship there to begin with?

Andrew:

Furthermore I'd add that the manner with which we define things to be (or talk about things, the nature of our discourse) is related not to the way the world is in itself, but according to how things best suit our current needs and interests.

Actually, we do not define things - i.e., the particulars that exist in the world. We define the concepts we form to identify and integrate those things.

Andrew:

To say that the world causes us to have beliefs is simply to recognize that there is a world out there that's ultimately going to push us around in ways that are not under our control.

The world does not push us around to believe certain things. The diversity of thought throughout mankind's history shows at least this.

But causality is a strict taskmaster. So is the pleasure/pain mechanism built into our biology. A person will feel pain when he touches a hot stove. If he doesn't want to feel the pain again, he would do well to identify its cause. Nevertheless, he's still free to concoct the belief that the pain he experiences was caused by a group of invisible gremlins hiding behind the pot. There's nothing in reality that's going to come into his mind and stop him from confusing what he imagines with what is real. That's why religion can persist so apparently

unchecked.

Andrew:

I think where there would ultimately be a hang up between you and I is your idea of an objective process of identification as a means of ascribing truth, and how far that stretches.

Fine. I'll go the way of objective identification, you go the way of... whatever. Deal? Just understand that the way of objective identification is not Platonic, nor is it "on par" with anything involved in Sye's worldview when I affirm that truth is absolute.

Andrew:

Secondly, I don't see the need (as a pragmatist) to hold to the axioms you do.

In addition to telling us where knowledge begins, the axioms demarcate the relationship between consciousness and its objects, and thus explain why, for instance, the imaginary is not real. You don't see the need for this? Neither does Sye.

In the comments section of [my blog](#), visitor OpenlyAtheist wrote the following:

As for the axiomatic nature of the senses; whenever an apologist pulls some such Plantinga-type move, I simply point out that anyone attempting to convince me my senses aren't reliable makes use of those very senses in presenting their argument to me.

Andrew responded:

This all hangs upon what one means by the senses and consciousness.. If one defines consciousness and the senses as on par with a mental state which aligns itself with (say) a "feeling" (as in, I feel that I'm conscious as I'm perceiving) as opposed to a more behaviorist/objective approach that simply says consciousness is "what we observe" [simply] in other people as they interact with their environment, then you're begging the question and/or presupposing that someone else has such feelings.

Consciousness is the faculty of awareness. It is essentially active in nature. Perception is man's means of acquiring awareness of the world. Knowledge is knowledge of objects, of reality, of things that exist. In order to acquire knowledge of things that exist, a subject must have awareness of those things. Man has awareness of the things in his environment by means of perception. Perception thus precedes knowledge.

Is a man "begging the question" just by perceiving an object? Of course not. His perception of the object is not an argument, nor is it an inference from some prior non-sensory (or nonsensical) knowledge. Is he begging the question by grasping the fact that he's perceiving an object? No, he's not. He did not need to argue his way to this awareness. All he needed to do was recognize the fact that he's perceiving something, which - like perception - is itself a form of direct awareness called introspection. Nor is he begging the question by identifying the faculty which he has observed in himself. Moreover, he is not begging the question when he observes other human beings possessing sensory organs and actions analogous to his own in response to how those sense organs are stimulated, and inferring from this that those other human beings must therefore possess a faculty of awareness analogous to his own. What premise would he be affirming in such an argument that assumes the truth of its own conclusion? Blank out.

Even if one wants to argue that OpenlyAtheist's point here begs the question, his statement can easily be modified to bypass this objection completely and still accomplish its intended end. He could simply point out that anyone attempting to convince him that his senses aren't reliable requires him (OpenlyAtheist himself) to make use of those very senses in learning what that argument may be, thus performatively defeating itself. OpenlyAtheist would have either to look at some text and read it (thus requiring him to use his eyes - the sense organs associated with sight), or listen to some speech and comprehend it (thus requiring him to use his ears - the sense organs associated with hearing). (Similarly, if he were blind and had to discover the nature of the argument through Braille, he would still be relying on his sense of touch.) Thus the argument could be coming from a robot which has no consciousness of its own, and yet OpenlyAtheist still needs to rely on those very senses which the argument is trying to undermine. Thus even to have awareness of the argument, means

that his senses had to be functioning.

As Peikoff points out:

The validity of the senses is not an independent axiom; it is a corollary of the fact of consciousness. (As we have seen, it is only by grasping the action of his senses that a child is able to reach the implicit concept of consciousness.) If man is conscious of that which is, then his *means* of awareness are means of *awareness*, i.e., are valid. One cannot affirm consciousness while denying its primary form, which makes all the others possible. Just as any attack on consciousness negates itself, so does any attack on the senses. If the senses are not valid, neither are any concepts, including the ones used in the attack. (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, p. 39)

Andrew continued:

This runs along the lines of a comment I made earlier in that, you cannot prove with certainty that someone else loves you, you cannot prove they're experiencing a certain mental state.

A person can prove his or her love for someone else. Love is not an isolated emotion locked away in the chambers of some remote mental sphere with no external manifestation. Love is devotion to one's values, and this can be proven beyond any and all doubt through one's actions in relation to those values he loves.

Andrew:

The only thing we can say is that "behaviors" we associate with love are reflected in a certain person, and from that infer certain behavioral patterns from them in the future.

I don't think we'd need to "infer certain behavioral patterns... in the future" to know that someone loves something or someone *in the present*. Love is not merely some fleeting emotion, but in fact a response to one's own values. Human beings need values in order to live, and one's loyalty to his own values is observable in his actions regarding those values. The connection between love and "behavior" (or, more broadly, one's choices and actions) is found in the fact that he values and in what he values.

Andrew:

In other words I'm making a distinction between consciousness as an internal state, and consciousness as an observed behavior.

Why restrict yourself to these two options? Why not think of consciousness as an active faculty of awareness? Why not recognize that consciousness requires means of consciousness, namely perception?

If we are distinguishing things in our awareness, then we are perceiving. In other words, simply distinguishing one object from another is all the "evidence" one needs to vouchsafe the reliability of his senses. Because that's their job: to give us awareness of objects as entities distinct from one another.

As for Andrew's thought experiments regarding artificial intelligence, I think it would be premature to wade into such issues, since there's obviously so much that needs correcting and clarification on more fundamental matters. Besides, given what he did provide, I'd say there's still far too little information to formulate the kinds of judgments he's asking for.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Concepts](#), [Consciousness](#), [Knowledge](#), [Objectivism](#)

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [11:00 PM](#)