

Sunday, December 17, 2006

Apologetic Evasion Overload

We continue now with more examination of Paul's [lengthy, problem-filled diatribe against me](#). In this installment, we will find numerous attempts by Paul to evade points that have been explained to him repeatedly. There's a reason why my initial encounters with Paul Manata in the spring of 2004 inspired me to compose [a one-act play](#). If it seems prophetic, Paul can thank himself for this, for he has fulfilled what I saw.

I asked:

How is that “mak[ing] a mountain out of a molehill”? Does Paul have any sustainable objection to make against Objectivism?

Paul responded:

I suppose I could just spout unjustified assertions as you are.

This does not answer either of my questions. This is a persistent habit of Paul's: avoid interacting with direct questions which probe his own assertions and assessments. And if you pay attention, you just might find that his own evasive ploys divulge his own modus operandi, which he projects onto his interlocutor. For instance, so far, that's all Paul has been doing: spouting unjustified assertions, the very thing he accuses me of doing. But he wouldn't be able to do this if the axioms were not true. Meanwhile, it's obvious that he has no sustainable objection to make against Objectivism. But he still tries, however inadequately, to recover his reputation as a thinker. Observe.

I wrote:

Does [Paul] begin by identifying a starting point that does not assume the truth of mine? No, he begins by mischaracterizing the Objectivist axiom 'existence exists', which he shouldn't need to do if he were so confident in his contention...

Paul responded:

But above he said my understanding was “pretty close.” So, a “pretty close” characterization of Objectivism is a “mischaracterization” in Dawson's little sophistic world. Can the guy even keep his thoughts straight from sentence to sentence?

If Paul had [read carefully](#), he would have noted that my “pretty close” was in regard to one paragraph in particular that he had written (and that I quoted in full), which was a brief outline description of the points he has chosen to criticize. My assessment was not in regard to his attempts to criticize the points in question. In his brief paragraph, he identified the three primary axioms of Objectivism. Things began to fall apart quickly for Paul after that. In his criticism, he chose *not* to integrate the points he himself had identified. For instance, [we saw](#) that he assumed that Objectivism derives the primacy of existence principle from merely one axiom, the axiom of existence. But the primacy of existence characterizes the proper relationship between existence and consciousness. Thus he failed to recognize the importance of the axiom of consciousness to the primacy of existence. Having listed the axiom of consciousness in his brief description of the points which he has chosen to criticize, he has no excuse for this. How can one assess a principle identifying the proper relationship between existence and consciousness when you forget to include the axiom of consciousness, a vital element in that relationship, in your examination of that principle? Blank out. Integration of rational principles is basic methodology to Objectivism, and Paul tries to criticize Objectivism without understanding this. Simply listing points does not assure understanding. So “pretty close” is just not close enough. What excuse does Paul have? I've seen none to suppose his attempts to criticize Objectivism are authentic and sincere.

I wrote:

How will making an argument cause “existence exists” to no longer be axiomatic?

Paul responded:

Because you just told us that “existence exists” really means that “unconscious stuff has always existed” and this

isn't axiomatic. Got it?

Paul does not show how making an argument will cause the axiom 'existence exists' to no longer be axiomatic, even though this is what he had affirmed. Instead, he gives us the red herring dodge that I have inserted a questionable meaning into that axiom when in fact I have nowhere done this. I reviewed my post to find where I equated the axiom of existence with an affirmation that "unconscious stuff has always existed," and did not find it. So Paul is deliberately trying to spread misinformation here, which is deceitful. My position has been clear and consistent. Even if there are things that exist which possess consciousness (and I explicitly recognize that there are with the axiom of consciousness), the axiom 'existence exists' still applies. If Paul is concerned that others might think that "unconscious stuff has always existed" (a statement which I have nowhere affirmed), why doesn't he present his reasoning for supposing that "unconscious stuff has *not* always existed"? Why does he continue to play hide and seek like this?

Contrary to Paul's interpolation, the axiom 'existence exists' does not stipulate what exists or what must exist. Our knowledge of the specific nature of what exists requires discovery, which can only come after the initial recognition of existence. Now, if we later learn that everything is physical (a view which I have not affirmed), my bases are still covered, for if it exists and is physical, the axiom 'existence exists' still applies. If, however, we later learn that consciousness exists (which I explicitly affirm with the axiom of consciousness), my bases are still covered, for if consciousness exists, it is part of existence by virtue of the fact that it exists. "Existence exists - and *only* existence exists." (ITOE, p. 109, emphasis added.)

If we discover out that "unconscious stuff has always existed," what would it profit me to deny this fact? Blank out. Paul is simply wearing his feelings on his sleeve for all to see: he doesn't like it when other thinkers might think outside his little religious box and accept facts they discover in reality. Religionists for millennia have sought to control this, but they never will be able to. And this causes them deep resentment.

I wrote:

What "epistemological missiles" could have any meaning if the axiom 'existence exists' were not true?

Paul responded:

My statements can have meaning apart from the claim that "unconscious stuff exists."

Again, Paul fails to address my question. Specifically he fails to explain how his criticism could have any meaning if the axiom of existence were not true. If the axiom of existence were not true, that would mean there's no existence whatsoever. Even Paul would not exist in that case, nor would his criticisms, nor would what he wants to criticize. Does Paul think that meaning exists in a vacuum? Even if he thought this, there could be no meaning existing in a vacuum if there were nothing existed to begin with, for if nothing exists, then meaning doesn't exist either. Paul's habit of blanking out is his childishness raging out of control.

He continued:

"Unconscious" because Dawson contrasts the primacy of existence with the primacy of consciousness. [sic] So, the existence that exists must be "unconscious."

Again this does not address my question, and only digs him deeper into the pits of deliberate misrepresentation. For one thing, I do not contrast the primacy of existence with "the primacy of consciousness." [sic] Rather, I contrast it with the primacy of *consciousness*. But that's not what I asked about. I asked how something could have meaning if the axiom of existence were not true. Instead of addressing this question, he offers a broken-down dodge.

Moreover, I do not equate existence with "unconscious," a la John Robbins. (Doesn't Paul have any original criticisms of his own?) This would be a stolen concept for it would be asserting a concept while ignoring its conceptual roots. The concept 'unconscious' is only available to us after the concept 'consciousness' is available to us, and even then it only applies in certain contexts. Moreover, the concept 'existence' includes both *non*-conscious as well as conscious entities. For instance, the concept 'existence' applies, among other things, to rocks, water molecules, gold anklets, asteroids, quasars, etc. But I would not say that these things are "unconscious," as if they've been put under anesthesia and will eventually "wake up." Again, my bases are covered, and Paul is the one who needs to wake up.

I wrote:

"The axioms are invulnerable; they have to be true for anyone to launch any "epistemological missiles"[sic] in the

first place.”

Paul responded:

Not your axioms, as we've seen. Notice though that all Dawson does is repetes [sic] himself, over and over and over again. He think [sic] this counts as an argument.

I have shown how well Paul's efforts to disprove the axioms have fared. (See [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#) for instance.) By complaining that I “repete” [sic] myself “over and over and over again,” Paul implicitly acknowledges that I have at least been consistent (while he's been tossed to and fro, like a discarded Styrofoam coffee cup on the side of a busy road). For it is when a position is repeated that inconsistencies, if they are present, can be detected (I'm reminded of the gospels here). And I doubt any inconsistency in my position would get by the razor-sharp wits of Sherlock Manata.

It is interesting, however, to find Paul complaining about me repeating myself “over and over and over again.” That's the impression I get whenever I pick up Bahnsen's *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*. It says pretty much the same thing in different ways from cover to cover: “God exists, unbeliever bad! God exists, unbeliever bad!” But you don't see Paul accusing Bahnsen of thinking that this counts as an argument.

Also, if Paul thinks I'm simply repeating myself, why doesn't he just deal with whatever it is that I'm supposedly repeating in one shot, and get it over with once and for all?

Paul writes:

I launch missiles, not “missles,” whatever those are.

I hope Paul invites us to his next launch. I'd really like to see how well his missiles fly. Hopefully better than his concept-stealing, self-negating attempts to criticize Objectivism! So far there's been a lot of red glare, but nothing's been able to break beyond earth's gravity.

Paul had written:

So the objectivist has two options: (a) keep his axiom and loose his critique against Christianity or (b) loose his axiom and be forced to defend a position not unlike this one: “existence exists means that only indestructible hard bits of matter exist and even an omnipotent God cannot affect them.”

And in response, I wrote:

I was hoping that Paul would explain how assembling an argument (any argument?) would cause 'existence exists' to lose its status as an axiom. Instead, he does a drive-by on this and assumes that's sufficient, then lists two alternatives (as is so common with religious apologists: they love to back people in between an imaginary rock and a fictitious hard place) from which we're supposed to make some difficult choices. The question is: Why are Paul's (a) and (b) our only two options?

Paul responded as follows:

Because they way you understand “existence exists” isn't axiomatic.

I explained how I understand “existence exists,” and it is in fact axiomatic. It is the general, conceptually irreducible recognition that things exist, formulated as an explicit single-concept affirmation. In my use the axiom 'existence exists' it has remained conceptually irreducible and its denotation of perceptually self-evident facts has remained constant. Paul has not shown otherwise, and again seems to think that cognition has some strange need to *stop* with the axiom of existence, when in fact it *initiates* it. The problem for Paul is that his criticism requires cognition to stop with the first recognition, because he's afraid of integrating it with additional recognitions and grasping the fundamental principles to which they lead.

Rand herself was emphatic on this point:

An axiomatic concept is the identification of a primary fact of reality, which cannot be analyzed, i.e., reduced to other facts or broken into component parts. It is implicit in all facts and in all knowledge. It is the fundamentally given and directly perceived or experienced, which requires no proof or explanation, but on which all proofs and explanations rest... The first and primary axiomatic concepts are “existence,” “identity” (which is a corollary of “existence”) and “consciousness.” One can study what exists and how consciousness functions; but one cannot analyze (or “prove”) existence as such, or consciousness as such. These are irreducible primaries. (An attempt to “

prove” them is self-contradictory; it is an attempt to “prove” existence by means of non-existence, and consciousness by means of unconsciousness.) (ITOE, p. 55)

Rand also pointed out that there is a big difference between grasping the axiom of existence and affirming that the physical world exists:

...what’s the difference between saying ‘existence exists’ and ‘the physical world exists’? ‘Existence exists’ does not specify *what* exists. It is a formula which would cover the first sensation of an infant or the most complex knowledge of a scientist. It applies equally to both. It is only the fact of recognizing: there is something... The concept “matter,” which we all take for granted, is an enormously complex scientific concept. And I think it was probably one of the greatest achievements of thinkers ever to arrive at the concept “matter,” and to recognize that that is what the physical world outside is composed of, and that’s what we mean by the term “physical.” (ITOE, 247)

So, contrary to what Paul alleged above, the axiom of existence does not mean “unconscious stuff has always existed.” It does not because it cannot. If the concepts “matter” and “physical” are complex conceptual formulations as Rand held, then obviously they would not be available at the level of fundamental axioms. Rand was simply cohering her view with the hierarchical structure of conceptual knowledge, which is what makes logic both useful and necessary. But Paul seems unable to grasp the difference between fundamental recognitions like those identified by the axioms, and higher-level formulations which involve many prior concepts and take into account a broad category of discoveries made well after those initial recognitions. For his efforts to criticize Objectivism continually play havoc with the knowledge hierarchy, as if fundamental truths could be swapped out and replaced by higher-level formulations. What is so hard to understand about any of this? Paul again gives me the impression that he’s flip-flopping on the matter: one minute it is so obviously true that it is “uninteresting” or worse, the next it is so racked with controversy that no one should accept it. Contrary to what he has stated, I am able to keep my axiom *and* my critique against Christianity, for my axiom states a fundamental truth, and Christianity is not able to stand with it. Paul’s back-and-forth pussyfooting is merely a confirmation of this. The axioms together form the primacy of existence principle, since together they explicitly recognize that the objects of awareness do not depend on the process by which we are aware of them. I.e., existence exists independent of consciousness. Paul has to struggle against this premise because it is so obvious that Christianity affirms the opposite view: that objects ultimately depend on a form of consciousness.

Paul wrote:

There are two options. Either your view is axiomatic, or it’s not.

To say that the concept ‘existence’ is *not* axiomatic, is to say it stands on prior concepts, concepts which name something that comes before existence, concepts which give the concept ‘existence’ its content, concepts which the concept ‘existence’ assumes. Has Paul identified any concepts which come prior to the concept ‘existence’, or any concepts which name something that comes before existence? Of course he hasn’t. And he won’t be able to. “Something’s got to be at the base [of man’s knowledge], and [the axiom of existence] is it.” (Kelley, *The Primacy of Existence*) Paul does not suggest what could be more fundamental than Objectivism’s axioms. Instead, he simply plays the naysayer, inventing non-objections and pretending that they’re devastating objections, not recognizing the self-inflicted fallacies he’s committing along the way.

The opponents of these axioms pose as defenders of truth, but it is only a pose. Their attack on the self-evident amounts to the charge: “Your belief in an idea doesn’t necessarily make it true; you must prove it, because facts are what they are independent of your beliefs.” Every element of this charge relies on the very axioms that these people are questioning and supposedly setting aside. (OPAR, p. 10)

Consequently, since my use of “existence exists” maintains its status as an axiom, then there is no reason to accept the false alternatives that Paul has proposed. There is in fact a third alternative which he finds uncomfortable and has been trying to evade, but which is invulnerable to his attacks: I can have my axiom, and my critique of Christianity, too. Why? Because a) the primacy of existence principle (the principle which states that an object of awareness exists independent of the cognitive functions by which one is aware of it) is a corollary of the axioms (cf. OPAR, 19), b) this principle is necessary to knowledge (cf. ITOE pp. 55-61), and c) Christianity contradicts the primacy of existence by affirming the primacy of consciousness in its metaphysics, epistemology, morality and other branches of philosophy.

I wrote:

Namely: Begin with the fact that existence exists, recognize that it exists independent of consciousness, and move on from there. What’s wrong with that?

Paul responds:

Where's the argument for this? Nowhere.

Paul was asked to explain what is wrong with the basic procedure I described above. But he does not identify anything that is wrong with it. Instead, he asks for an argument. But this is absurd, since the axiom of existence does not rest on arguments. Arguments are possible only if the axioms are true. Moreover, Paul has not identified anything that is more fundamental than existence. If existence is irreducible and primary, and we are aware of it, then why shouldn't we start there? Why start with higher-level assumptions without identifying (or understanding) what they assume, without recognizing their hierarchical dependence on something more fundamental? If the axioms are in fact axioms (Peikoff provides a proof for this in OPAR, pp. 9-11; see also [Probing Mr. Manata's Poor Understanding of the Axioms](#)), then a) they do not need to be established by an argument (ITOE, pp. 55-61), b) they are justified by any and every act of perception (ARTK, p. 217), c) they are conceptually preconditional to any argument (see below), b) attempting to establish them by means of argument would commit the fallacy of the stolen concept (ITOE, p. 55), e) denying them is self-refuting (OPAR, pp. 9-11), etc.

By asking for an argument, Paul essentially wants me to produce an argument to prove the facts that a) things exist, b) we are aware of things that exist, c) there is a fundamental distinction between the objects of awareness and the processes by which we are aware of them, and d) knowledge requires a specific orientation between a consciousness and its objects. But consider: What is an argument? Generally speaking, an argument is the conceptual derivation of a truth from prior truths on which it depends by means of a specific method (i.e., logic). Argument is vastly more sophisticated than merely grasping axiomatic truths, and necessarily assumes that knowledge has a hierarchical structure (otherwise logic would not be applicable). So the axioms would have to be true before an argument could be assembled for any conclusion, whether true or false. Does Paul not realize that argumentation requires a conceptual foundation? If he realizes this, does he not also realize that the foundation required for argumentation to be possible need not be established by argumentation (since that foundation logically comes *prior* to argumentation)? Indeed, for Paul to assemble an argument (even a bad one), he would first have to exist (there's the axiom of existence), an argument would have to have a certain structure to qualify as an argument (there's the axiom of identity), and Paul would have to be conscious in order to formulate it (there's the axiom of consciousness).

Paul needs to come clean on this: does reality depend on consciousness? Or, does reality exist independent of consciousness? When he offers childish comebacks and smart-alecky wordplay in response to straightforward questions like this, then we know he's cornered and has no defense.

Paul continues:

Indeed, I argued that "existence exists" is dependant upon consciousness since "existence" is a term, or universal, and thus created by consciousnesses.

This statement is a dance in equivocations if it is supposed to be a criticism of Objectivism. It's trying to pass itself off as an internal critique, but as such it fails due to its own clumsiness. As a criticism it is similar to efforts that [Paul has tried before](#) in that it seeks to trade on his own (and probably many of his readers') confusion between subject and object, a confusion which Objectivism safely avoids. Yes, there is the *concept* 'existence', but there is also *what* the concept 'existence' denotes. It is the distinction between the concept and what it denotes that Paul's statement above is intended to blur. The *concept* 'existence' was formed by a cognitive method; it is the *form* in which a consciousness identifies a basic fact which it perceives or experiences directly. But the *fact* which the concept 'existence' denotes was *not* formed by consciousness, nor does it depend on consciousness. This is not problematic for Objectivism, because Objectivism recognizes that we need to use concepts to identify such facts and recognize the distinction between what concepts identify and the process by which we form concepts. Ironically, the antidote to Paul's confusion is the position he's seeking to discredit. As we have seen, in order to argue against Objectivism, Paul has continually found it necessary to confuse epistemology and metaphysics, which he can do precisely because he rejects the fact that there is an objective distinction between the objects of awareness and the means of awareness. Paul is confusing the fact identified by the axiom 'existence exists', which is metaphysical, with the act of recognizing it in explicit conceptual form, which is epistemological. Essentially, Paul is objecting to conceptualization as such. If one does not understand the distinction between conscious activity and the objects of consciousness, he may be prone to confusing the two, as Paul has done. But this is precisely why Objectivism is so badly needed here.

Axiomatic concepts distinguish the objects known from the function, means and experience of knowing them." (ARTK, p. 215)

It is axiomatic concepts that identify the precondition of knowledge: the distinction between existence and consciousness, between reality and the awareness of reality, between the object and the subject of cognition. (ITOE, p. 57)

It is true that the *concept* 'existence' is universal (for it applies to everything that exists in the universe) and, *qua concept*, 'existence' is formed by a cognitive process. But the *fact* which the concept 'existence' denotes is not itself conceptual, nor was it produced by a cognitive process. When Objectivists affirm "existence exists" as an axiom, they are making an affirmation about the *fact*, not about the *concept*. It appears that Paul is in bad need of a dose of objectivity!

It is also important to note that we are able to talk about concepts - their nature, their usage, their formation and their denotation - only after we've formed some and thus have some units to serve as secondary objects of our awareness, which is possible through introspection. Introspection is a profoundly selfish activity (for it is a deliberate focus inwards on one's self), one which those who accept as a moral imperative the command to "deny himself" cannot perform without guilt.

Paul then asked:

Does Bethrick think that "existence" exists? I mean, could he take a picture of it? What does "existence" look like?

Not that it matters to Paul, but yes, I think that existence exists, as what Objectivism means by this statement. It would have to in order for Paul to ask his question and for me to consider how to respond to it. And yes, I can take a picture of existence. Any picture I take will be a picture of something that exists, i.e., of existence.

Existence and identity are *not attributes* of existents, they *are* the existents... The units of the concepts "existence" and "identity" are every entity, attribute, action, event or phenomenon (including consciousness) that exists, has ever existed or will exist. (ITOE, p. 56)

... anybody who's seen an existent has seen existence. Then what does existence look like? Well, what color is a rainbow? If you've seen anything real, you've seen existence too. But perhaps you haven't; perhaps you've only introspected your sensations, your feelings or your linguistic experience. Too bad, you've missed a lot. But you have eyes: look! You'll see things, real things. And you'll see existence too. (ARTK, p. 205)

Now Paul will expend his energy to make this look silly. He has to, otherwise he gives up on trying to save face. But it will not be an internal critique, which is what he needs if he is going to be successful in discrediting Objectivism.

by Dawson Bethrick

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