

Sunday, January 01, 2012

Are the Laws of Logic "Thoughts" of the Christian God?

Hello my readers.

Happy 2555 to all!

Yes, here in Thailand, it's not 2012. Thailand goes by a version of the Buddhist calendar, and it's already the year 2555 here. Perhaps you could think of me as writing to you from the future.

As I predicted in earlier messages to you on my blog, I've been busier than Wall Street on a bull rally since getting back to Bangkok late November. The flood waters are for the most part gone, and life for most people is back to normal. But there's a sense of urgency to make up for lost time, both in the private sector and also in public works. Schools are even going six days a week here, which means my daughter, who's only in kindergarten, has a brutal schedule to keep.

Unfortunately, that means I haven't been able to keep up with my blog. I see that Nide is still going at it, and that Justin Hall and Ydemoc are continuing to engage him. They're all welcome to continue doing so. I'm sure it will all make for some interesting reading one day, supposing I get the time.

In the meanwhile, I've been feasting - really, nibbling and grazing, when opportunity arises - on a paper recently published by James Anderson and Greg Welty called [The Lord of Non-Contradiction: An Argument for God from Logic](#). In this paper, the authors set out to "argue for a substantive *metaphysical* relationship between the laws of logic and the existence of God" (p. 1). Specifically they aim to prove "that there are laws of logic *because* God exists," that "there are laws of logic *only* because God exists" (*Ibid.*). Presumably this is the *Christian* god of the New Testament whose existence their argument will finally prove. They say of their own argument that it is "a fascinating and powerful but neglected argument for the existence of God." Of course, this is not meant to be self-congratulatory, but rather a device intended to hook the reader's interest so that he'll continue on for the next twenty-plus pages of fun-filled reading. (I'm guessing that, for Sye Ten Bruggencate, 22 pages devoted to the development of a *single* argument does not constitute "argumentum ad verbosium," since it's intended to establish, once and for all, the existence of a deity.)

After an introduction, the paper is divided into the following sections which function essentially as steps to the paper's desired conclusion, namely that a god exists:

1. The Laws of Logic are Truths
2. The Laws of Logic are Truths about Truths
3. The Laws of Logic are Necessary Truths
4. The Laws of Logic Really Exist
5. The Laws of Logic Necessarily Exist
6. The Laws of Logic are Non-Physical
7. The Laws of Logic are Thoughts
8. The Laws of Logic are Divine Thoughts

While there's nothing that I saw in Anderson and Welty's presentation which challenges [my own exploration of the question of whether or not logic presupposes the Christian god](#), it is gratifying to see an argument from logic to the existence of a god so nicely and systematically laid out. Anderson and Welty have been hard at work in their effort to prove that their god exists.

While I have not had the time I need to develop a full response to every point which Anderson and Welty raise

in their piece, I did have some initial general concerns when I peruse their work. Of course, I have many, many objections to much of what I have read in their paper, but a more penetrating analysis of their paper will have to wait till another time.

For now, I just wanted to note some of the following concerns of mine, hopefully to get the discussion moving in the right direction.

1. Necessary vs. Contingent: Throughout their paper, Anderson and Welty clearly take the necessary-contingent dichotomy for granted. This distinction (dichotomy) plays a central role in the build-up to their desired conclusion (I found 20 instances of the word ‘necessary’ and 16 instance of the word ‘contingent’ , most of which are used in the context of the necessary-contingent dichotomy, throughout their paper). So granting the truth of the necessary-contingent appears to be vital to their conclusion. But if this dichotomy is rejected, how could one accept their paper’s conclusion as they have set out to draw it?

Objectivism rejects the necessary-contingent dichotomy, and for many good reasons. Leonard Peikoff, in his essay “The Analytic-Synthetic Dichotomy,” spells out those reasons, fundamentally arguing that the dichotomy and all its variants (including the necessary-contingent dichotomy) rest on a false theory of concepts. Given this fact, it is not surprising to find Christians making use of the necessary-contingent dichotomy in their theistic arguments, for Christianity itself (as I’ve pointed out numerous times before; see for instance [here](#)) has no native theory of concepts, and thus as a worldview cannot account for conceptual thought. This can only mean, with regard to the necessary-contingent dichotomy, that Christian thinkers are at a profound disadvantage when it comes to detecting the epistemological defects of this commonly accepted mechanism of analyzing knowledge.

What struck me specifically in Anderson and Welty’s paper is the fact that they seek to establish the laws of logic as “necessarily existent” on the one hand, and as “thoughts” on the other (see points 3 and 7 of their paper’s outline above). Assuming the necessary-contingent dichotomy which underwrites much of Anderson and Welty’s methodology, these two premises seem quite at odds with one another. Something that is “necessarily existent” is something that could not have failed to exist. Anderson and Welty make the first point explicitly when they say:

The Law of Non-Contradiction... *could not* have failed to exist—otherwise it could have failed to be true. (p. 19)

So the Law of Non-Contradiction must be something that is “necessarily existent.”

They proceed to argue that “If the laws of logic are necessarily existent thoughts, they can only be the thoughts of a *necessarily existent mind*” (*Ibid.*). Anderson and Welty argue, in their characteristic way, that the laws of logic are “necessarily existent” and also that they are also “thoughts,” but arguing that something is a “necessarily existent thought” seems to go beyond even the most generous charitableness. Thoughts cannot come into being unless a thinker thinks them, which means: thoughts are dependent on thinking. Also, thinking is *volitional* in nature: a thinker - especially a thinker that is a *free agent*, as the Christian god is supposed to be - must *choose* to think what it thinks. Given the fact that thinking is *volitional* in nature, any specific thought that a free thinking agent thinks cannot be “necessary” in the sense that it “*could not* have failed to exist,” for supposing this would deny volition to said thinker. It would render said thinker to a mere automaton, a robot performing actions that it “needs” to perform given some extraneous constraints which hold it in check.

The result is that Anderson and Welty’s argument, so far as I understand it, results in one of two very difficult binds: either the laws of logic are “necessarily existent thoughts” (in which case the thinker responsible for thinking them is not a free agent), or the deity which supposedly thinks the thoughts which we call “the laws of logic” is a free thinking agent (in which case its thoughts are volitional and consequently could have been different, which would mean that no thought it thinks could qualify as a “necessarily existent thought”). Neither alternative seems to jive well for Anderson and Welty’s Christian position (since Christianity affirms the existence of a deity which can do whatever it pleases - cf. Ps. 115:3). Perhaps Anderson and Welty have built some prophylactic into their argument which safeguards against such uncomfortable outcomes, but from what I can tell in my reading, none is necessarily existent.

2. “Intuitions”: Also throughout the paper, there are several vague references to “intuitions,” not only treating them as apparently unquestionable (maybe even *infallible*), but also suggesting a uniformity of intuitions among all thinkers which they nowhere establish. These “intuitions,” which are never specified, appear to have a certain significance for the overall goal of their paper. For instance, on page 1, Anderson and Welty write:

The bulk of the paper will be concerned with establishing *what kind of things the laws of logic must be* for our most natural intuitions about them to be correct and for them to play the role in our intellectual activities that we take them to play.

I’m taking the “our” here in “our most natural intuitions” as intended to refer to human beings in general - to *all of us*; if it referred only to Anderson and Welty, readers might find their exercise to be of little interest: why care if Anderson’s and Welty’s most natural intuitions about the laws of logic are correct? On the other hand, if “our most natural intuitions” means *everyone’s* “intuitions,” then anyone reading this paper has a stake in its outcome. This latter interpretation seems to be what our authors have in mind.

Of course, what is meant by “intuition” as Anderson and Welty understand it, is of great significance here. They do not offer a definition, but I’m guessing that’s because the notion is used as a matter of routine in the philosophical literature they prefer to read. Perhaps they are so accustomed to seeing the word used and granted casual legitimacy that it would seem silly to explain it. But even philosophers who invest the notion of intuition with philosophical validity are not monolithic in their view of what it is or how it operates. So if “our most natural intuitions” about logical principles have any bearing on the argument which Anderson and Welty are presenting, it might help readers like me to clarify their understanding on the matter.

I say this because I tend to be rather suspicious of the term ‘intuition’ to begin with. A standard dictionary definition of ‘intuition’ is “direct perception of truth,” which might strike most readers as rather innocuous. But I’m an Objectivist, and as such, I recognize that what human beings perceive are *concrete objects*, while truth is *an aspect of identification*, which is a function of conceptual cognition and thus *post-perceptual*. In other words, on the Objectivist view, we do not perceive *truths*; rather, we perceive *objects* (specifically, primary-type objects - objects of which our senses give us perceptual awareness), and subsequently identify those objects using a conceptual method resulting in identifications which may be true or not true. To the extent that this analysis of what “direct perception of truth” means is correct (and without further clarification of the notion which endows the notion with better chances for philosophical solvency, I’d say it is correct), I’d say that appeals to “intuitions” need to be reconsidered in light of rational philosophy.

But thinkers who invoke “intuitions” might not have this definition in mind. Some hold “intuition” to denote some kind of *a priori* knowledge - knowledge that is supposedly known without any firsthand experiential participation of the knower in the knowing process. This is essentially the view that one “just knows” something, in which case questions like “How do you know?” simply do not apply, since there’s really no epistemology to speak of in assessing (or accessing) such “knowledge.” I’m quite persuaded that there is no such thing as “*a priori* knowledge,” and tend to view appeals to “*a priori* knowledge” essentially as an admission on the part of the one making such appeals that he really doesn’t know how he knows what he claims to know. (Sort of like John Frame, such as when he announces: “We know without knowing how we know” - [Presuppositional Apologetics: An Introduction \(Part I\)](#).)

Still others hold that “intuition” refers to some kind of *a posteriori* knowledge, though don’t be surprised when explanations of how one supposedly goes about collecting this kind of knowledge wax murky. Defenders of this understanding of “intuition” may have in mind some *automatized* item of knowledge; for in fact, the human mind does *automatize* many epistemological processes (consider your knowledge of how to tie your own shoes, or how you know not to touch a hot stove with your bare hands). But it does not follow from the mere fact that one has automatized the path to some ideational content that he holds as knowledge, that what he holds as knowledge is therefore true, or that the process which he has automatized in arriving at such ideational content is rational. Rationality has not only to do with the logic of the process, but also the objectivity of the inputs which are integrated by that process. The process by which we automatize a certain item of knowledge, is not automatically rational.

But maybe I'm wrong on all this. Perhaps I'm just some dunderheaded Neanderthal who in his contemptible naïveté has the annoying habit of wincing when thinkers treat some unspecified mass of assumptions which they style "intuitions" as some kind of sacred bull that must be preserved and protected, as though their dismantling would mean the entire artifice of human thought will come crumbling down into a worthless heap.

Perhaps my detractors would find this view comforting. But I don't think so.

3. Presuppositionalist Reaction: My attention was first brought to Anderson and Welty's paper when I visited the blog [Choosing Hats](#), where Chris Bolt had posted [an entry about the paper](#). What I found most interesting here is a comment posted on the blog entry by Brian Knapp. In his comment, Knapp was responding to Mitch LeBlanc. LeBlanc had expressed pleasure with and enthusiasm for the paper in a previous comment. In his response to LeBlanc, Knapp announced that he "shall be the presupper who will criticize [Anderson and Welty's] argument," which I would like to read when it's finally available.

In response to LeBlanc's statement that Anderson and Welty's paper is "a refreshing read," Knapp commented:

I will say you find this refreshing because it doesn't challenge your autonomy. Just because the argument is not transcendental in nature, there is no requirement for you (at least as far as the argument goes) to give up yourself as the standard of what is rational. That means you can evaluate the argument and toss it aside (or even accept it), and nothing will really change, as the argument doesn't prove the Triune God of the Bible exists - even if the argument is sound.

I find this curious in part because the under-title to [Anderson's blog](#) (where he posted a link to the paper) reads: "Faltering Attempts to Think God's Thoughts After Him." "Autonomy" in presup-speak is typically contrasted with "analogical thinking," which John Frame defines as "Thinking in subjection to God's revelation and therefore thinking God's thoughts after him" (per his [A Van Til Glossary](#)). Presumably the "analogical thinker" is still actually *thinking*, but apparently he's not allowed to think *his own* thoughts; or, rather, he is to make "God's thoughts" his own by accessing them somehow and giving them primacy in his overall cognitive activity (without question, according to [Bahnsen](#)). And even though Anderson's blog indicates that he's doing his best to accomplish this, Knapp is essentially saying he's failed to do so in the paper he's put together with Welty. One wonders what Van Til would think of all this. But as Knapp indicates, hardcore V'illains will likely take abundant exception to the methodology employed by Anderson and Welty in their joint effort to prove the existence of their god. Knapp assures us that Anderson and Welty's "argument doesn't prove the Triune God of the Bible exists - even if the argument is sound." Having some familiarity with Anderson's background in apologetics, I'd think he'd have a lot to say in response to this. But this wouldn't be the first time that we saw more believer vs. believer conflict erupt with the [Choosing Hats](#) crowd. A feud between [Jamin Hubner](#) (to whose book [The Portable Presuppositionalist](#) several of Choosing Hats' "staff" have contributed writings) and [Triablogue's](#) Steve Hays (see specifically [here](#)) and [TurretinFan](#) has been heating up in recent months.

Depending on what 'autonomy' specifically means (the notion of "yourself as the standard of what is rational" is more vague than helpful), I'd have to agree with Knapp's point that Anderson and Welty's paper offers nothing to challenge my "autonomy" (which I take to denote my ability *and willingness* to think for myself). But then again, nothing that Knapp or any member of the clan at [Choosing Hats](#) has written does either. Or, for that matter, any presuppositionalist paper that I've read or argument that I've examined. Perhaps Knapp would say that my "autonomy" has been challenged and I just don't realize it. That would be the easy path to take.

While I am still examining Anderson and Welty's paper, and surely there are many other things to say in response to it, I have to say already that I'm quite sure I won't be persuaded by their argument. After all, the argument and its conclusion still leave us with *no alternative* but to *imagine* the god whose existence they are attempting to prove. While theists who delight in indulging in fantasies about "the supernatural" will no doubt have no problem with this, it signifies that the argument is a non-starter so far as rational philosophy is concerned. One can imagine all kinds of things in some realm "beyond" the one which actually exists. But at the end of the day the fact remains: what we imagine is merely imaginary.

Although my time in the ensuing months is going to be very constrained (to put it mildly), if I do get a chance, I would like to post some further reactions of mine to specific aspects of Anderson and Welty's argument. I have many thoughts in response to every paragraph in the paper, but insufficient time to prepare them for my blog. So it will have to wait until some future date that I cannot specify now.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Logic](#)

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [7:00 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hey everyone,

Thanks for your comments.

I made a few edits to my post this morning, most of them pretty minor, but a couple were fairly important. (For instance, I completely revised the final statement in the paragraph having to do with automatizing knowledge processes.)

Other areas in Anderson & Welty's paper that need special attention include:

1. The question "what is a truth?" If you read section 1, page 3, you'll see that they raise this question, but nowhere (so far as I can tell) answer it. Immediately upon raising the question, they launch off into a discussion of "propositions" as "the primary bearers of truth-value." They say that "propositions are *by definition* those things that can be true or false, and by virtue of which other things can be true or false." This suggests that truth is something other than merely a proposition, since a proposition could be true or false. The authors admit that "this doesn't shed much light on what truths or propositions are, metaphysically speaking, but at least it provides us with a useful term of art." So we're apparently supposed to be satisfied with what they call "a useful term of art," and continue to call the laws of logic "truths," even though we still are not told what a "truth" is. This seems to be quite a liability.

2. The notion that "propositions" are "the primary bearers of truth-value." The authors tell us that "propositions are regarded as primary truth-bearers because while sentences (i.e., linguistic tokens) can have truth-values by virtue of expressing propositions, propositions do not have truth-values by virtue of anything else." Really? How do they establish this? Perhaps they think it's self-evident, but it isn't to me. Rather, propositions are composed of concepts, and are thus not conceptually irreducible. Without concepts, how could one formulate or "know" any propositions in the first place? I would argue, then, that concepts are in fact the primary bearers of truth, and that truth is an aspect of identification. Since we identify objects by means of concepts, their objectivity is crucial in accurately identifying what we are identifying. If a faulty concept finds its way into a proposition, that proposition's truth-value is severely affected. So the truth of a proposition really does depend on the truth of our concepts as identificatory integrations. That's why it's so important to have a good theory of concepts guiding your worldview. Christianity does not have this. The authors go on to say "Propositions bear truth-values because it is their nature to do so, just as particles bear mass-values because it is their nature to do so." While this may be true, they need to establish it, not merely affirm it, and they need to produce an analysis of propositional content which secures the point. It is at this point that a good theory of concepts proves indispensable. But where will a Christian find such a theory without borrowing from a non-Christian worldview? Blank out.

Anyway, there's more to the story, but this is enough to show that the gears of their argument have no teeth.

Regards,
Dawson

[January 01, 2012 5:12 PM](#)

