

Friday, July 11, 2008

## Before the Beginning: The Problem of Divine Lonesomeness

### In the Beginning: A Question

A visitor to my blog named Glenn left a comment on my blog [Stolen Concepts and Intellectual Parasitism](#), asking:

You appear to assume that there would be something illegitimate in a believer thinking that God was both subject and object, and that his being an object is logically prior to his being a subject, but that both are eternal... You may have a reason for making this assumption, but that reason does not appear to have been spelt out. Would you care to elaborate? Thanks.

Glenn's question has to do with what I call the problem of divine lonesomeness, a problem which we encounter as we probe the deeper implications of the claim that a supernatural conscious being created everything distinct from itself, including but not limited to the universe in which we live. The problem is most closely associated with various strains of creation-theism, most notably Christianity, whose doctrinal assertions about a "beginning" (cf. Gen. 1) lead to dubious implications about the creator-deity *before* that alleged "beginning." In its most basic form, the problem of divine lonesomeness highlights an irresolvable predicament crippling the creator-deity before it could have any opportunity to create anything distinct from itself.

Creation-theism typically entails the affirmation of the existence of a deity which is supposed to be conscious, which created everything distinct from itself by means of conscious activity. As one brief summary on [what Christians believe](#), we find a fairly common expression of the nature of theistic creation:

God is Creator of everything, this vast universe. All was created by His Word. He spoke it into being. It is written: (Genesis 1:3) *And God said... and it was so.* His Word is powerful.

Similarly, James MacDonald, a popular Christian radio sermonizer, recently exclaimed:

Let me say: I do not believe in evolution. I do not believe in so-called theistic evolution. I believe that the second person of the trinity stood in a spaceless, ageless, timeless chasm of nothing in eternity past and he SPOKE. Hebrews 11:3 says "And the worlds were formed." That's Jesus Christ the Lord. In Colossians [applause] In Colossians chapter 1 says [sic], "He is unique, He is the creator" - and notice this - "He is the goal. For by him all things were created, invisible, in heaven and in earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities..." ("[Bending My Knee \(Part 2\)](#)," Walk in the Word, Friday July 11, 2008)

How a person can *stand* "in a spaceless, ageless, timeless chasm of nothing" is not explained, but Christians assure us this really happened. Now while some Christians may suppose that the universe is not the only thing that their god created (MacDonald himself went on to speak of "levels of angels and demons," and it's never really clear whether these are supposed to be part of the universe, or something apart from it), that there are things that exist outside the universe - "supernatural" things that are not "bound" to the laws and constraints of the universe - and that these things were also created by their god, this minor detail would be essentially irrelevant to the issue at hand. For by affirming that all existents distinct from their god, whether it's just the universe, or the universe and some other set of creations, were created by their god, believers necessarily imply that there was a time or state prior to or preceding any act of creation on their god's part when their god existed all by its lonesome. Accordingly, before it created anything distinct from itself, the creator-deity was all that existed.

### A Two-Fold Problem

So the problem of divine lonesomeness involves the question of how one can legitimately posit the existence of a conscious being when there's nothing else in existence for it to be conscious of. The problem is further exacerbated by the stipulation that said conscious being is incorporeal, or bodiless, as is supposed to be the case with the immaterial deity of Christianity. The problem as it arises for Christianity, then, is really two-fold: not only (a) do the implications of the description which Christians give of their god suggest that it could have *no object to be conscious of prior to creating anything distinct from itself*, but also (b) that description also indicates that it would have no

*means by which it could be conscious* of anything. Thus both aspects of the subject-object relationship are fundamentally undermined, which means the believer commits the fallacy of the [stolen concept](#) when he points to a conscious being as the creator of the universe. As described, the Christian god in its pre-creative state at best resembles a non-conscious non-entity stranded in an utterly lonesome void. Unfortunately for Christians, even if one could propose a plausible solution to the first aspect of the problem of divine lonesomeness (which would have to consist of identifying what could legitimately serve as an object of divine consciousness prior to creating anything distinct from itself), the second aspect of the problem of divine lonesomeness would still remain.

With these prefatory remarks in view, I find it necessary to ask in response to Glenn's question, a question of my own:

*If the believer claims that his god is the object of his own consciousness in the context discussed (i.e., prior to creating anything distinct from itself, where said god is supposed to have created everything that is distinct from itself), how is this any different than affirming the existence of a consciousness conscious only of itself?*

Rand points out the relevant fact that

A consciousness conscious of nothing but itself is a contradiction in terms: before it could identify itself as consciousness, it had to be conscious of something. (*Atlas Shrugged*)

So the question for the theist affirming the existence of a creator-deity and consequently implying the scenario described above, would at minimum have to identify what his god could have been conscious of prior to creating anything distinct from itself, as well as the means by which it is supposedly conscious of it. Traditionally theism, in the west at any rate, describes its god in terms of consciousness: it is "personal," it is aware, it knows, it speaks, it remembers, it makes decisions, it judges, it has emotions (anger, for instance), it has desires (a will, for instance), it plans, it watches, etc. All these functions entail a consciousness very much like we know it as human beings (indeed, many thinkers, including Rand as well, have pointed out that God is essentially a selective projection of attributes of human consciousness; for instance, see [here](#)). As we probe deeper into this matter, it appears more and more that a starting point of utter subjectivism seems unavoidable here for our lonesome deity, and by extension for the believer's worldview.

Now obviously a human being or other biological organism in the same kind of lonesome situation (if such could exist) would not necessarily have this problem. If for instance I were the only thing existing the universe, I could, at least theoretically, be conscious of myself, for consciousness is only one of my attributes. I'm not a disembodied or bodiless consciousness, like an immaterial deity is apparently supposed to be. I could be aware of my hand, for instance, or my foot, or my belly, each of which is a part of my self. (Of course, I wouldn't be conscious of these things very long if I suddenly found myself existing all by my lonesome; without air, food, water, warmth, etc., I wouldn't be alive for a brief moment and then I'd die, and then all that would exist would be my dead body.) Also, as a biological organism, I have the physical provisions necessary for being conscious of these various parts of myself, namely sensory organs and receptors, a nervous system and a cerebral cortex to which sensory signals are delivered, etc. For instance, I have functioning eyes, and therefore I can see. By seeing things, I have awareness of them. If I didn't have eyes, or if I had eyes that didn't work, I wouldn't be able to see anything, and thus I'd not have awareness of objects in visual form. The same with my other senses. If we eliminate all our senses, by what means could we have awareness of anything? By *no means*? How is this a viable answer?

Now the theist might come back and say that his god has attributes other than only its consciousness, attributes that are distinct from its consciousness, and these other attributes would provide themselves as the objects of its consciousness in its lonesome state. This is a common rejoinder to the problem of lonesomeness. But what are these other alleged attributes that are distinct from its consciousness? Most typically, the theist will say that his god is aware of its own being. But what does that mean? This is certainly not sufficient to undo the implications already present in theistic descriptions suggesting that their god is a pure consciousness, without a body ("incorporeal"), without anything specific to point to as an attribute existing independently of its consciousness (such as body parts in the case of biological organisms). In fact, such a reply seems to be an attempt to cover the probable fact that the theist himself doesn't really get the point of the problem of lonesomeness and offers a last-ditch effort to put up a smokescreen by retreating into the utterly vague.

### The Case of Patrick Toner

Patrick Toner, of Wake Forest University, takes a similar, slightly more developed approach in his defense against the problem of theistic lonesomeness. He writes:

Think about the nature of consciousness. Consciousness is not an entity: it's a faculty of an entity. It is not a substance like a human being: it is, instead, something that human beings (and perhaps other kinds of things) *have*. Like walking or digesting, consciousness "has no existence or possibility apart from the creature" that is conscious. (I take it that Rand would agree with the assertion, even though - again - this is not the reason she offers for asserting that it's impossible for consciousness alone to exist [cf. Peikoff 1991, 13].) That is to say, of course, you can't have a consciousness with nothing but itself to be conscious of: the existence of a consciousness - any consciousness - implies the existence of a thing that is conscious. Now, with that point made, one can easily see that any consciousness will necessarily have something other than itself to be conscious of: namely, at the very least, the *thing* that it is the consciousness of (the thing to which the consciousness belongs). The theist need have no problem with this, but can gladly grant that the existence of a Divine consciousness implies the existence of a Divine being, and that the Divine consciousness can therefore assuredly be conscious at least of God. Thus, theism does not conflict with Rand's views on consciousness. ("Objectivist Atheology," *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies*, Spring 2007, Vol. 8, No. 2, p. 213)

I note that Toner's statement here seems to agree, at least in part, with [Robert Bumbalough's objection](#) to the use of the concept 'substance' to describe the god of Christianity (as many Christians have done), especially given the typical Christian apologetic stipulation that consciousness is non-physical. Here Toner states explicitly that "[c]onsciousness... is not a substance like a human being." Human beings, of course, on the Objectivist model, are integrations of consciousness and matter. This is quite unlike what the god of Christianity is supposed to be, as it is supposed to be immaterial, incorporeal, bodiless, in fact non-biological. Now, according to Toner, consciousness is merely an attribute, not an entity as such. How convenient! And yet, as Objectivists, we already know this. (In fact, it is refreshing to see a theist come out of the closet and affirm explicitly that consciousness is not an entity. It is frequently unclear when dealing with theists whether or not they understand this. I think the source of the confusion for believers on this point is the Christian notion of a "soul" which is separate from the "flesh," where the soul (associated with the individual's consciousness) is treated as a distinctly existing entity in its own right. The Christian doctrine of the soul is in large part responsible for a most unscientific and irrational understanding of man's nature.)

Toner is also correct in comparing consciousness to other biological actions, e.g., "walking or digesting," for consciousness is essentially a species of biological action. When we perceive, infer, judge, remember, emote, we are engaged in a type of *action* that is conscious in nature. The question at this point is: *what* is performing the action that is conscious in nature? In the case of human beings and other biological organisms which possess consciousness, answering this question is not problematic. For we can point to the organism as a whole, along with its brain and nervous system in particular, as the performer of the action in question.

But in the case of a so-called "immaterial" being, which would have no brain or nervous system or anything apparently comparable to these, this question becomes problematic. I'd even say it is unanswerable at this point. In this way, we can already see that affirming consciousness in such a context amounts to a [stolen concept](#), for the preconditions of consciousness (e.g., a brain, a nervous system, sensory organs, etc.) are being denied in the case of the Christian god. So while the Objectivist would agree that "the existence of a consciousness - any consciousness - implies the existence of a thing that is conscious," it's not at all clear that this could at all be compatible with the divine mind of theism. Indeed, since a supposedly incorporeal being would by virtue of such description lack a body, the truism that Toner states is not compatible with theism. Objectivism agrees with Toner's statement because consciousness is an *attribute* of certain biological organisms. But theism's god is not supposed to be a biological organism, so the problem arises with no solution.

This is where Toner's attempt to avoid the problem of divine lonesomeness runs into further problems of its own, and nothing he offers in his critique seems to anticipate the obvious question: *of what was the divine conscious prior to creating anything distinct from itself?* Saying that it was conscious of itself, or of its own "Being" as some Christians I've personally interacted with have said, is not sufficient for the above reasons. If the god is supposed to be a bodiless conscious being, how is this different from saying that it is a purely conscious being, and therefore that when it is said to be conscious of itself, it is really being said that it is consciousness being conscious only of itself? A bodiless consciousness has no body, so it could not be conscious of its own hands or feet or heartbeat or intestinal activity, etc., for it is stated explicitly that it lacks these things to begin with. Toner's own treatment of this matter gives us little confidence to suppose that theists can give any plausible answer to it:

The trouble with this kind of objection is that it ignores the most important point: the fact that God has no body *already* sharply distinguishes his mode of knowing from ours. Since it is not, and cannot be, part of the notion of God that he knows through sensation, this implies that his lack of a body wouldn't keep him from knowing himself: he would *have to* have other ways of knowing. But this doesn't mean that God (i.e., God's

consciousness) cannot be aware of God (i.e., the bearer of God's consciousness). It simply means the way of becoming aware is different: which is pretty much what you'd expect! (Ibid., pp. 214-215)

This is painfully unhelpful, and quite frankly I'm startled that Toner would even judge such statements sufficiently worthy to insert into his critique of Objectivism at this point. He's essentially saying that we should not expect his god's consciousness to be limited in the way that human and animal consciousness is limited, simply because it's different. This is the "it's just different!" defense that juvenile theists are so well known for. And Toner is right in indicating that this is something we'd expect, precisely because there really is no viable answer to the problem of divine lonesomeness. It is at this point that Toner begins shifting the issue, from the first aspect of the problem of divine lonesomeness (what could possibly serve as the object of the divine consciousness prior to creating anything distinct from itself?), to its second aspect (by what means could an incorporeal, bodiless being be conscious of anything?), without dealing with the first at all adequately. Before I examine Toner's treatment of this second aspect, I note that Toner finds it necessary to reject the doctrine of divine simplicity in order to avoid the damage caused by the first aspect of the problem of divine lonesomeness (see his footnote 3, p. 231). I have seen other defenders of theism make the same move.

Toner says that his god "would *have to* have other ways of knowing," that is, other than by sensory input. As is commonplace with theists, he gives no indication as to what these "other ways" might include. And even if one were to accept this contentless retort (perhaps by [imagining](#) that there is some alternative without having any genuine idea of what it might be), it would only pertain to part of the problem of divine lonesomeness, namely the *means* by which his god supposedly has consciousness, and not at all persuasively. It would not address the question of *what* it would be conscious of. At this point Toner is quickly but subtly shifting away from this latter issue, hoping that by focusing on the former issue - the epistemology of his god's knowledge - will keep us off balance. Rightly suspecting that no Objectivist would find anything he's given so far at all persuasive, Toner quotes Peikoff at this point, who writes:

"Spiritual" means pertaining to consciousness, and consciousness is a faculty of certain living organisms, their faculty of perceiving that which exists. A consciousness transcending nature would be a faculty transcending organism and object. So far from being all-knowing, such a thing would have neither means nor content of perception; it would be nonconscious. (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, p. 32)

In response to this, Toner writes:

Certainly, Peikoff is correct in saying that our only direct experience of consciousness is of our own. It is quite true that we are living organisms, and our consciousness is a faculty we possess. It's also true that our consciousness is a faculty of perceiving that which exists. It is, however, indefensible to extrapolate from these facts to the impossibility of an analogous faculty of knowing existing in a non-bodily being. For while I grant (in fact, I insist) that *for human beings*, all knowledge originates in the senses, I do not grant that this licenses the inference that *all knowledge* originates in the senses. If there were a good reason to think there is a non-physical, yet intelligent, being, then there would be a good reason to think that not all consciousness is necessarily just like ours in its method of acquiring knowledge. Thinking of a consciousness that is not exactly like ours does not clash with the preconditions of thought: there is nothing self-defeating or contradictory about it. (Op cit., p. 215)

Much of what Toner writes here expresses agreement with Peikoff, but he hastens to put that all aside. Essentially, Toner is simply saying, "That's true in the case of human consciousness, but that doesn't matter in the case of God's consciousness," and then proceeds to affirm what is under dispute. We already know and expect that theists think their god is different from human beings and other biological organisms; in my analysis above I've been quite willing to take this into account. His defense at this point boils down to, "Yeah, God doesn't have a body, He doesn't have senses, He doesn't have a nervous system or a brain or sensory organs, *but He knows anyway!*" I guess I'm just not seeing the persuasive force of this formidable apologetic.

What's curious here is that Toner considers the consciousness of his god to be "analogous" to human consciousness in some way, but he gives us no reason to suppose there's any truth to this. In what way is anything which theists call "supernatural" analogous to that which is natural, biological, and dependent upon physical processes, such as human consciousness is? Whatever it is that Toner calls 'consciousness' in the case of his god, it allegedly obtains without sensory organs, receptor cells, ganglionic connections, an entire nervous system, brain activity and the such, as we find in every case of consciousness in nature. And unlike human beings, saddled as they are with a consciousness which needs to develop as they develop, a supernatural consciousness can be one which possesses all knowledge for all eternity, never needing to learn, never making errors, it is able to wish things into existence, such as entire universes, or alter them at will, such as water into wine, etc. The theistic wonderbeing smacks all the elements of an

imaginative concoction, a fantasy based on a world-renouncing projection. And yet it is “analogous” to human consciousness?

Perhaps it is only analogous in name only, since the same word is being used to denote the attribute we find in biological organisms, such as human beings and other animals, and whatever it is that the theist’s god is supposed to have (or be). It is as if one were to say, “Of course man is conscious,” and Toner should reply, “My God is too!” but beyond this no actual similarity is to be found. We may ask, “How is your bodiless, incorporeal god conscious?” and Toner gives us no reason to suppose his response could be any more substantive than, “No how!”

Toner calls it “indefensible to extrapolate” from facts which we know are true, to conclusions which those facts could only suggest: that consciousness requires (a) a means of perceiving and (b) something distinct from its own perceiving to serve as its initial object(s). Toner could not be more explicit in declaring his license to ignore facts that we discover and validate about consciousness when he writes:

what we can conclude from our knowledge of our own cognition is that human knowledge necessarily rests on sensory data. This provides no argument to the conclusion that no consciousness of any kind could possibly rest on a different kind of data. (Ibid., pp. 215-216)

At this point, had Toner any tangible evidence to support the position that consciousness is possible without not only sensory data, but also sensory organs, receptors, a nervous system, a brain, etc., we might expect him to produce some of it. But of course, he does not do this. Instead, his defense simply consists of bald denials which appear to have no better basis than what he may merely be imagining, for he gives us no indication how we could distinguish what he calls a consciousness without body, without sense organs, without a nervous system, etc., from what may simply be a fantasy. This is why most Objectivist philosophers pay so little attention to theistic apologists, as when the going gets rough, the defenders of the religious worldview bail out without any parachute on their own. For it is quite easy to lose patience with defenses as unserious as the kind we find with most apologetic arguments, which, if allowed to proceed to their final conclusion, ultimately reduce to a most desperate formula, such as “that may be the case with things we find in nature, but that does not constitute a refutation of the imaginary alternative I have in mind.” It is because the alternatives which theists have in mind have their basis in imagination, that their failure to produce legitimate evidence on behalf of their position is to be expected.

As with other theists, Toner’s god is the ultimate exception to everything we find true about reality through our examination of nature. This is the essential hallmark of [supernaturalism](#): facts can be ignored because facts are of this world and thus have no bearing on what “the supernatural” is like. Everything we discover about consciousness from actually existing specimens open to rational investigation does not apply in the case of a supernatural consciousness. If the consciousness of biological organisms which we find here on earth require sensory organs, a nervous system, a brain, etc., that’s fine so far as biological organisms are concerned. But the theist’s god is exempt from these, per his stipulation, because it is not biological. At what point do we recognize that we’ve crossed over from the real into the imaginary? The theist’s own objections give us no confidence that he even knows there’s a difference.

### **Left Behind: Man’s Ways of Knowing**

It is important at this point to note that Toner fails to identify any epistemological process by which one could come to the conclusion that such a consciousness as he gives to his god could be real. In one of his quotes above, he states:

If there were a good reason to think there is a non-physical, yet intelligent, being, then there would be a good reason to think that not all consciousness is necessarily just like ours in its method of acquiring knowledge. (Ibid., p. 215)

So far as I can tell, Toner never identifies what he considers to be “a good reason to think that there is a non-physical, yet intelligent being,” a la a god like that found in Christianity, but I doubt he’s suppressing evidence here. Why believe that such a consciousness, which is, contrary to what Toner himself states, fundamentally *dissimilar* to any conscious we find in nature (including human consciousness), actually exists? What is the basis for believing the claim that such a thing exists, and how do we distinguish this basis from something that may in fact be merely imaginary in nature? We must keep in mind at this point that not only is the consciousness of Toner’s god supposed to exist without a body and any apparently legitimate object distinct from itself, it also is supposed to enjoy precisely the opposite orientation to its objects that any consciousness we find in nature (including human consciousness) has. For in the case of human beings, the objects of our awareness do not conform to the content of our awareness. That is, the object of consciousness holds metaphysical primacy over the subject of consciousness.

That's the primacy of existence principle: things are what they are, regardless of what we believe about them, think about them, know about them, wish about them, pretend about them, ignore about them, etc. Wishing doesn't make it so, because the objects of consciousness have metaphysical primacy in the subject-object relationship. But in the case of Toner's god, its consciousness is not so restricted. On the contrary, its [wishes](#) hold metaphysical primacy over all objects in its awareness, for not only did it allegedly create those objects, it can revise their identity at will. (For a direct discussion of this metaphysical antithesis, see my blog [Confessions of a Vantillian Subjectivist](#).)

Above we saw that Toner insists "*that for human beings*, all knowledge originates in the senses." But how do his claims about a consciousness with no body, no sense organs, no nervous system, no brain, qualify as legitimate knowledge? How do they reduce to the level of sensory input? Toner never walks us through this, and yet, it is crucial to the internal coherence of his overall position. Whatever our conclusions may be, our path towards validating them must comport with the basic nature of our consciousness and its concomitant constraints. As I asked in [The Axioms and the Primacy of Existence](#),

...what inputs inform the theist's concept of consciousness beyond his own firsthand experience such that he thinks it is meaningful to suppose that there exists a consciousness possessing the exact opposite relationship that his consciousness has with its own objects? What gives his concept of consciousness such latitude? What units has he discovered and integrated into his concept of consciousness which allows him to affirm two contradictory metaphysics? We know already that the *method* by which he informs his concept of consciousness must be consistent with the *nature* of his consciousness, for he has no alternative to using his own consciousness in developing and securing the knowledge he seeks to hold. So this rules out his own use of the primacy of consciousness as a means of arriving at a point where he can reasonably affirm the primacy of consciousness. For instance, since the primacy of existence applies to his own conscious interaction with the world around him, he cannot reasonably adopt a method of affirming the primacy of consciousness which reduces to the assumption that reality conforms to his conscious operations. Not only would this be fallaciously circular, it would short-circuit the nature of his own consciousness and invalidate any conclusion he wants to draw. He cannot, for instance, rationally say that the primacy of consciousness is valid because he wants it to be valid, for his consciousness does not have the power to alter reality; his wants and wishes are ineffectual.

In the case of human identity and the knowledge we can reliably acquire, we have no alternative but to adhere to the primacy of existence principle. So if we affirm a claim as legitimate knowledge of reality, as a true understanding of actually existing things, then the method by which we came to that knowledge must itself adhere to the primacy of existence principle. We cannot, for instance, say "Mermaids exist because it would make me feel better if they did." Who would be persuaded by such an argument? Only those who reject the primacy of existence principle. So the question for Toner is twofold:

- (1) What method do we use to secure the claim that the consciousness-possessing deity he describes and hopes to defend is real as legitimate knowledge of reality? and
- (2) Does that method adhere with the primacy of existence principle?

Toner does not identify the method by which he allegedly knows that a consciousness exempt from everything we know about consciousness is biological organisms really does exist. So unfortunately he leaves these two questions completely unattended. Taken in context, all this suggests that Toner's god is really nothing more than imaginary, and that our leg is being pulled.

### The God Who Could Not Hear

When Jesus is made to say "Who hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Mt. 13:9), I can only suppose he is excluding the god of heaven, because as an immaterial, bodiless being, it would have no ears to hear anything. The theist will insist, however, that his god still hears, even though it does not have ears, or tympanic membrane, or cochlea, or auditory nerves, etc. How does it hear? No how. It "just" hears in spite of lacking these things. In fact, it hears in the absence of sound waves, just as surely as the voice of James MacDonald's god, as it "stood in a spaceless, ageless, timeless chasm of nothing in eternity past and... SPOKE," echoed throughout the void out of which it pulled the universe, like a rabbit out of a hat. The same god hears your thoughts, the preachers tell us, even though thoughts do not create sound waves - certainly not any that would reach beyond the limits of the universe. But their god listens and hears these things anyway. The explanation for this is really no further than the believer's ability to imagine, for in fact that is exactly what he is demanding that we do: imagine that his god exists and can hear our thoughts. An imaginary being can do anything, even if it does not have the kinds of attributes and properties we have to do similar things. Why? Because an imaginary being does whatever its imaginer wants it to do. Besides,

explanations for these things are moot. The important thing is that the believer believes that the all-hearing, all-seeing voyeuristic deity is real, and that he fears him. All efforts to validate the questionable assumptions brought out here are to serve this end: that the believer be crippled with fear, for this is "the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7).

Christians typically respond to these kinds of criticisms in a rather thoughtless, dismissive and unpersuasive manner, even though they will insist until the cows come home that their god is not imaginary. They agree that their god is not biological, that it does not have a body, that it does not have a brain, a nervous system, sensory organs and such, but they insist that their god is still conscious. In fact, it's an omni-consciousness, conscious of everything everywhere all of the time for all eternity. It has no eyes, but it "sees" all anyway. And even though apologists never explain how this could be (they only give weak, evasive responses, like Toner's), they apparently have no qualms asserting it to be the case and typically try to shift the burden by insisting that the non-believer prove that their god could not see everything. As we read between the lines of the apologists' attempts to address questions like this, what we really find is something along the lines of: "Prove my fantasy is not true outside the universe." Needless to say, this is not a very productive approach to validating one's worldview.

### The Attack of the Burden-Shifters

The theist, then, can be predicted then to insist that the non-believer take on certain challenges in order even to pose the kinds of questions I've asked here, such as proving that consciousness as such requires or depends on sensory input, sense organs, a nervous system, a brain, etc. Never mind the fact that this is what we find in the case of all biological organisms which possess some level of consciousness. Specimens from nature do not count, because the believer's "truths" pertain to a realm beyond nature, a realm, incidentally, which the believer has a very hard time distinguishing from the fantasies of his imagination. In an attempt to feign gravitas on the part of his position, the theist may very well point to such phenomena as thinking, logical inference, predication, and other conceptual applications as examples of conscious activities, assuming that these operations do not require sensory input. And even though it has already been shown (with at least one theist explicitly agreeing) that the Christian god, given its description as omniscient and infallible, would not possess knowledge in the form of concepts (see my blog [Would an Omniscient Mind have Knowledge in Conceptual Form?](#) and my interactions with Peter Pike's responses [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)), theists still assume that their god's consciousness handles its alleged content in a manner similar to ours (i.e., conceptually). And yet, concepts are formed on the basis of sensory input. So why suppose so cavalierly that the conscious operations here do not require sensory input? The theist taking this approach seems to believe that, if a conscious operation is not itself identical to sensation in nature, then it does not involve the senses and/or does not require or depend on sensory input. But this would be a non sequitur implicating the theist's ignorance of how the mind works. This is crass example of how casually theists retail in stolen concepts. Again, the conscious activities mentioned not only need to have an object (Thinking *about what?* Logical inference *about what?* Predication *about what?* Etc.), they also require that the conscious agent in question have awareness of that object, and this requires having a means of awareness. Of what does the consciousness in question think, and by what means does it have awareness of what it thinks? In these two aspects, we recognize that consciousness depends on something prior to itself, both in terms of the object of consciousness, and the means of consciousness. (I would also argue that there is a third aspect in which consciousness depends on something prior to itself, and that is its purpose. Animals possess consciousness for a purpose, namely for their ability to live. Development of this point can wait until a later occasion.)

### In Conclusion: The Reprise of Divine Solipsism

Given the problem of divine lonesomeness and theism's inability to provide any substantive answer to it, we are right to point out that Christian theism, which posits a supernatural creator which is needed to have created everything that is distinct from itself, begins with a starting point of divine solipsism, which is, according to a rational worldview, the ultimate expression of subjectivism. Few apologists explicitly admit theism's unavoidable solipsistic implications, probably because few apologists really give any serious thought probing the issues involved, and also of course because they resist any move which might appear concessionary. Christian apologist Mike Warren came the closest that I can remember when he wrote to the [Van Til List](#) the following message:

The Christian view is solipsistic in the sense that there is no other autonomous mind except God's. All other minds exist because of God's ex nihilo creation of them, and thus are completely dependent on Him for their existence and functioning. The only universe that exists is the one that springs from the divine mind. ([RE: An anti-theist's attempted refutation of presuppositional apologetics](#), Feb. 29, 2004)

It is hard to find any clearer endorsement of [subjectivism](#) than we find in a worldview which claims that the universe “springs from” some form of consciousness. And yet we so frequently find defenders of such positions referring to their opponents as necessarily espousing a subjective worldview.

So to answer Glenn’s question, there is in fact something illegitimate about positing a consciousness which allegedly existed prior to anything distinct from itself for the reasons described here. Theists give no good explanation of what their god could have been aware of prior to creating anything distinct from itself, nor can they identify any means by which it could possibly be conscious. Their descriptions cripple their own conceptions by cutting them off at the ankles, thus resulting in blatant stolen concepts and obliterating their own worldview’s own fundamentals as a meager bonus. As in the case with their responses to other successful criticisms of Christianity, its defenders can be expected to come back with an armful of sneering ridicule, acerbic condescension and overheated attitude without producing anything remotely approaching knowledge that you can bank on.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Divine Lonesomeness](#), [stolen concepts](#)

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

#### 1 Comments:

[ryan.miller](#) said...

Hi Dawson,

This is my first visit to your blog and I think I may be hooked. I have a comment/question though regarding the issue of divine lonesomeness that I want to get your opinion on. Suppose for the sake of argument that consciousness can exist outside of a physical body like ours. I don't find this very coherent, either, but let's ignore this because I'd like you to elaborate a bit more on what you outline as the first problem with divine lonesomeness, namely, what could possibly be the object of consciousness before the creation of anything outside of God. If we're allowing that disembodied consciousness can exist, could a theist state that, in addition, an infinitely complex disembodied mind exists on which the consciousness could reflect? For instance, rather than consciousness being the only object of itself (admittedly illogical), could a "mind of God," say, prior to creation, contain certain thoughts about the details of an infinite number of possible universes that it might or might not create, and perhaps it is these infinite number of ideas that the mind is conscious of? Given a disembodied, nonphysical mind, it seems that their could conceivably be aspects of it, just like our human minds, that the consciousness could be focused on and therefore could serve as the necessary objects. I could be misunderstanding you, however, so I invite you to please comment. Thanks!

[July 28, 2008 11:16 PM](#)

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