

Tuesday, March 20, 2012

Can a Worldview “Provide” the “Preconditions of Intelligibility”? - Part III

What Are the Preconditions of Intelligibility?

If intelligibility is the capacity of some thing to be an object of awareness and be identified and integrated into the sum of one's knowledge without contradiction, then what can we say about the *preconditions* of this ability?

I would wager that we can say quite a bit, and everything we can say about them - it will be seen - vies against the presuppositionalist claim that the Christian *worldview* “provides the necessary preconditions for intelligibility.”

But let's ask the question: what is needed for a thing to be an object of awareness and be identified and integrated into the sum of one's knowledge without contradiction?

I would say the following five points would at minimum need to be in place for intelligibility to be possible:

First, the object needs to *exist*. So at minimum, there must be things which can potentially be objects of awareness.

Second, the object needs to have specific (measurable) characteristics which can be perceived and identified. So in addition to the object existing, the object must have *identity*.

Third, there must be an agent possessing the faculty of consciousness so that the thing could be an object of awareness. So in addition to the object existing and having identity, there must be a conscious subject which has (or at least could have) awareness of the object.

Fourth, the subject which has awareness of the object must have a cognitive means of identifying the objects of its awareness in a form that it can retain mentally. In other words, the subject which is aware of the object must have the ability to form concepts based on perceptual input.

Finally, the subject must be able to integrate what it identifies into a broader conceptual sum without contradicting any element or the totality of that sum. In other words, the subject must have the capacity for rational integration, it must have *reason*.

The specific preconditions which I propose here satisfy the factors required by the definition that I have proposed by taking into account each essential element of the concept ‘intelligibility’, both metaphysically and epistemologically, and in their proper relationship to one another. The first three preconditions are metaphysical in nature, while the final two are epistemological in nature. It must be borne in mind that epistemology does not underwrite metaphysics - exactly the opposite is the case: metaphysics is preconditional to and determinative of epistemology. Hence the metaphysical preconditions appear first in my list.

It's also important to note, so far as comparative worldview analysis is concerned, how tightly the points which I have identified as preconditions for intelligibility mirror Objectivism's distinctive fundamentals and non-negotiables. Notice how the first three elements in my list of preconditions correspond to the Objectivist axioms:

The Axiom of Existence: The axiom ‘existence exists’, unique to Objectivism, is the explicit recognition in conceptual form of the fact that there is a reality, that things exist. While many of Objectivism's detractors spit and stammer against this axiom (see for example [here](#)), often when confronted with corrections of their misunderstandings (and *dis*understandings), those same detractors shrug their shoulders and say in effect, “Yeah, okay, existence exists. So what?” The issue here is not *only* whether or not the axiom is *true* - and such reactions issued once one is painted into

a corner concede the fact that the axiom of existence is true - but also whether or not this recognition is *perceptually self-evident* and *conceptually irreducible*. Since the fact identified by the axiom of existence - namely the fact that things exist - is indeed *perceptually self-evident* (indeed, if one perceives anything at all, he exists, his perceptual faculties exist, and the objects he's perceiving exist), and since the axiom 'existence exists' is informed by a single concept ('existence') and its immediate verbal cognate ('exists'), and that concept is in fact *conceptually irreducible*, then we have a genuine philosophical axiom here whose truth must be assumed even to deny or reject it. And the relevance of this axiom to the question of what are the preconditions of intelligibility should be obvious: for an object of perception to be *intelligible*, it must *exist*. Indeed, it must exist simply to be perceived in the first place. If it doesn't exist, what justifies calling it "intelligible"? Blank out. The Axiom of Identity: The axiom of identity is the explicit recognition of the fact that a thing is itself, that to exist is to be something *specific*, that

a thing is—what it is; its characteristics constitute its identity. An existent apart from its characteristics, would be an existent apart from its identity, which means: a nothing, a non-existent. (Leonard Peikoff, "The Analytic-Synthetic Dichotomy," *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, p. 142)

A thing is what it is. Or: A is A. When we *think* or *talk about* an object, we are thinking or talking about *an object*. We are talking about something that has an identity. And the relevance of the axiom of identity to the question of what are the preconditions of intelligibility should be obvious: for something to be intelligible; it must have identity; it must have characteristics which distinguish it from "the nothing of non-existence" (Ayn Rand, "Galt's Speech, *For the New Intellectual*, p. 125); it must have a nature. If it has no identity, no characteristics, no attributes, what justifies calling it "intelligible"? Blank out.

The Axiom of Consciousness: The axiom of consciousness is the explicit recognition of the fact that to perceive an object, one must possess consciousness, that consciousness exists (and thus has identity), that consciousness is distinct from its objects. Since they are *recognitions*, the first two axioms, existence and identity, can only secure the third: the axiom of consciousness. Recognizing something to be the case is an act of consciousness.

Existence exists—and the act of grasping that statement implies two corollary axioms: that something exists which one perceives and that one exists possessing consciousness, consciousness being the faculty of perceiving that which exists. (Ayn Rand, *Ibid.*, p. 124)

And the relevance of the axiom of consciousness to the question of what are the preconditions for intelligibility should be obvious: if something is "intelligible," *to whom* is it intelligible? If there is no consciousness-bearing agent to identify and integrate an object into its sum of knowledge, then the question of what the preconditions of intelligibility are is moot, indeed inapplicable.

Now it is possible that a thinker - possibly even a Christian believer - will seek to discredit or undermine the axioms somehow. She may resort to the unfruitful reaction of "So what?" - in which case she would be implicitly conceding the truth of the axioms, and reacting to them as though they had no value as fundamentals in the realm of thought. Or, she may in fact seek to *deny* their truth outright. "No," she may say, "it's not true that existence exists! There's no existing!"

I've seen many attempts to discredit the Objectivist axioms, and though the move is fundamentally self-defeating, anti-objective thinkers often have a tendency to ignore the self-destructive implications of their own efforts. But in case there might be any lingering question on the truth of the axioms, Dr. Leonard Peikoff illustrates just how futile a denial of the axioms would be in the following mock dialogue between a person defending the axioms (A) and a person who "disagrees" with them (B):

A. "Your objection to the self-evident has no validity. There is no such thing as disagreement. People agree about everything."

B. "That's absurd. People disagree constantly, about all kinds of things."

A. "How can they? There's nothing to disagree about, no subject matter. After all, nothing exists."

B. "Nonsense. All kinds of things exist. You know that as well as I do."

A. "That's one. You must accept the existence axiom even to utter the term 'disagreement'. But, to continue, I still claim that disagreement is unreal. How can people disagree, since they are unconscious beings who are unable to hold ideas at all?"

B. "Of course people hold ideas. They *are* conscious beings - you know that."

A. "There's another axiom. But even so, why is disagreement about ideas a problem? Why should it suggest that one or more of the parties is mistaken? Perhaps all of the people who disagree about the very same point are equally, objectively right?"

B. "That's impossible. If two ideas contradict each other, they can't both be right. Contradictions can't exist in reality. After all, things are what they are. A is A." (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, pp. 9-10)

Here the anti-Objectivist originally sought to dismiss the truth of the Objectivist fundamentals, but ended up appealing precisely to their truth in order to rescue himself from the blatant absurdity of denying their truth. One must retreat from a position of absurdity in order to salvage his position from the corrosive ravages that affirmed absurdities will wreak on one's overall view. And the most direct way to do that is to affirm the truth, in spite of what he has just previously affirmed, as Peikoff's sample dialogue models.

Before proceeding with the last two elements in my list of proposed preconditions for intelligibility, it's important to stop and recognize something general about them: the axioms of existence, identity and consciousness denote facts which are *not* the product of conscious activity. Consciousness does not put existence into being; consciousness does not assign objects their identities; and consciousness does not spring itself into existence. The subject *perceives* and *identifies* its objects, it does not "create" them or give them their natures. This can only mean that the facts denoted by the axioms obtain *independently of anyone's beliefs*, regardless of what those beliefs may be. Consider the following:

- An individual (e.g., a Christian) may say that he *believes* that there is no existence; but existence does not stop existing because someone attempts to govern his consciousness in such a manner (and of course he would need to exist in order to make such a statement).

- Similarly, an individual (e.g., a Christian) can try to believe that the objects around him have no identity, or that he has the ability to revise the identity of the objects he perceives at will, but those objects will not stop being what they are or conform to his wishes in spite of themselves. And his own actions in relation to those objects will give away the fact that he really doesn't believe such nonsense, even though he affirms it.

- The same is the case with one's own consciousness: an individual (e.g., a Christian) might believe or try to believe that his consciousness can do things which in fact it cannot do (think of biblical heroes and fortune-tellers, for instance), but his consciousness will continue to be what it is and have the identity it has regardless of what he believes or tries to con himself into believing.

So rather than saying that these preconditions of intelligibility are something which a worldview (i.e., "a set of... *beliefs*") "provides," we should recognize - to the contrary - that they in fact are *preconditional* to the formation of *any* belief, any *set* of beliefs, any *system* of beliefs, any worldview *as such*. No "worldview" *provides* these preconditions; they exist *independent* of any conscious activity, including the activity of *believing*. They do not need any *providing* in the first place. Rather, they simply exist. Indeed, we see here that Objectivism's principle of [the primacy of existence](#) is the corrective needed to expose this hidden flaw commonly found in the presuppositionalist program.

So in this regard, it is simply a matter of blatant *falsehood* when the presuppositionalist claims that her Christian worldview "*provides* the necessary preconditions for intelligibility."

Now let's move on to the final two preconditions which I have identified, namely the facts that the knowing subject must have the cognitive means necessary for *identifying* objects and that the capacity to *integrate* them rationally into a larger retained sum. Here we are talking about man's ability to *form concepts* from

what he perceives. This means we're on the turf of *epistemology*, and *providing* an epistemology is indeed the responsibility of a philosophy, a worldview. Since the concept of intelligibility points toward a worldview's need for epistemology, some rudimentary aspects of epistemology have a place in defining the preconditions of intelligibility.

Specifically, to inform an account of how a knowing subject identifies and integrates the objects of his awareness in conceptual form, a worldview needs a *theory of concepts*. So to the extent that a worldview has a theory of concepts to begin with, it could be argued (supposing that its concept theory is in fact sound) that such a worldview provides at least a portion of the necessary preconditions for intelligibility, namely the final two points which I have proposed in my list. If a worldview has no theory of concepts to begin with, then it is simply out of the running: it has *nothing* to offer on the matter, and can be safely excused from further consideration as a viable candidate.

Now given this, as we saw, we should not expect Christianity qua "worldview" to "provide" existence, identity and consciousness, the three foremost preconditions for intelligibility, for they are metaphysical and therefore pre-cognitive. It's already been established that it is simply wrong to say that the Christian worldview "provides" the necessary preconditions of intelligibility, at least so far as these metaphysical preconditions are concerned.

But what about the necessary preconditions for intelligibility which are epistemological in nature? Is it possible that the Christian worldview fulfills the epistemological preconditions for intelligibility in this regard? To do so, the Christian worldview would need a theory of concepts. Unfortunately, there is no such thing as a Christian theory of concepts. In fact, *Christianity has no theory of concepts to begin with*. To get an understanding of concepts, where would a Christian turn? Would he turn to some passage in the Christian bible? He could try, but such an attempt would be in vain. The bible nowhere lays out a theory of concepts: it does not explain their nature, how they are formed, how they relate to the objects they subsume, how a concept is distinguished from other concepts, how concepts are integrated with other concepts, how they are defined, etc. One could search the bible for years and never make progress in answering even one of these questions, since there's simply no content in the bible which informs a theory of concepts.

Since Christianity, then, does not put into place the fundamental metaphysical facts which need to be in place before the notion of Christianity could ever arise (e.g., the facts that existence exists, that a thing is itself, that consciousness is the faculty of acquiring awareness of objects), and since Christianity fails to provide a theory of concepts (it has no such theory to begin with), it's simply a fact that the Christian worldview does not *and cannot* "provide the necessary preconditions of intelligibility." That's the solemn truth of the matter, and this is precisely what I've demonstrated with the foregoing.

On the other hand, Objectivism not only explicitly identifies the fundamental metaphysical facts that I have identified as preconditions for intelligibility in the form of unchallengeable axioms, Objectivism also has its own theory of concepts which accounts for man's ability to identify, integrate and retain the objects of his awareness in a non-contradictory, summary manner. Ayn Rand offers the following elegant analysis to encapsulate the matter:

It is only conceptual awareness that can grasp and hold the total of its experience—extrospectively, the continuity of existence; introspectively, the continuity of consciousness—and thus enable its possessor to project his course long-range. It is by means of axiomatic concepts that man grasps and holds this continuity, bringing it into his conscious awareness and *knowledge*. 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. Axiomatic concepts are the foundation of *objectivity*. ("Axiomatic Concepts," *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, p. 57)

So when it comes to the preconditions for intelligibility, we find that Objectivism comports best with their reality and their relation to the human mind. If the Christian apologist is sincere in his concern for the preconditions for intelligibility, he needs to abandon Christianity immediately and consider what Objectivism has to say on the matter. If he does not do this, then how can his expressed concern for the preconditions for intelligibility be at all sincere? Blank out.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Epistemology](#), [Knowledge](#), [Preconditions of Intelligibility](#)

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [4:00 PM](#)