

Thursday, January 01, 2009

## Do Objectivists Try to "Define God out of Existence"?

In the comments section of my blog [The Inherent Subjectivism of God-belief](#), David Parker made some interesting comments which provide me an opportunity to make some important points.

David wrote:

I really don't have a problem saying that if the Christian God exists, He does so with a subjective relationship to all of the objects He created.

At least David seems to get the argument which I presented in [my blog](#). That's good! Logically, then, David should have no problem with the assessment that his theism conceives of the world subjectively, for this is a direct outcome of theism. As [Paul Manata once conceded](#), "reality is subjective" because it's "based on the divine mind." This statement invites problems of its own, of course, since it can only suggest that the "divine mind" on which "reality" is "based" could itself not be part of reality, which would mean that it's not real.

Also, as I pointed out in [the same blog](#), there are three principal expressions of the primacy of consciousness: the personal, the social and the cosmic (this latter category would include the theistic notion of a invisible supernatural über-consciousness). In the end, however, not only are all three variants of the same metaphysical perspective, the two latter variants (the social and the cosmic versions of the primacy of consciousness) ultimately reduce to the former - the personal version. That's because the notion in question must originate somewhere, and we always find that it originates with human individuals, such as those who claim to have some means of knowledge other than reason by which they "know" what they claim. So while theists may affirm the cosmic version of the primacy of consciousness in the claims they make about their god, those claims are ultimately based on the presupposition, in one form or another, that one's own consciousness holds metaphysical primacy over reality.

David wrote:

My problem is when Objectivists insist that what is true of human consciousness must necessarily be true of divine consciousness.

Just to be clear, this is not *the Objectivist's* problem; it's *David's* problem. Also, another point of clarification is necessary here. Objectivists do not affirm the existence of "divine consciousness," so they do not make the claim that "what is true of human consciousness must necessarily be true of divine consciousness." Since the notion of "divine consciousness" represents a total departure from the realm of existence (as I pointed out above, even Paul Manata's quoted statement indicates this), the concepts 'true' and 'false' do not legitimately apply. In the fake environment of the imagination, the believer can claim anything he wants is the case, for his imagination, which he enacts volitionally, calls the shots in that environment. For instance, in the case of theism, the theist can imagine a consciousness which creates its objects ex nihilo, assigns them their natures, revises them, causes them to act, etc., all at will. He can imagine a consciousness to whose intentions reality conforms itself. For the Objectivist, what the theist imagines is ultimately neither here nor there, since it's all imaginary. Objectivists typically are not going to say, for example, that the theist needs to adhere to the primacy of existence in his imaginary scenarios.

When it comes to validating his god-belief claims, however, the theist himself cannot get around the primacy of existence, which he invokes, knowingly or not, any time he makes a truth claim. Truth necessarily presupposes the primacy of existence, for to say that some state of affairs is true is implicitly to say that it is the case whether anyone recognizes it or not, that it is the case independent of anyone's consciousness. To claim otherwise is to say that truth has no objective basis. And to acknowledge the primacy of existence in one's own relationship to reality while affirming the existence a consciousness which holds metaphysical primacy over reality, would only undercut any statement he makes about reality, since he is positing the existence of another consciousness, one presumably outside his own control, which could revise reality at will and without advance notice. At best, he could only make tentative assessments of reality, and these would only be as reliable as a game

of chance. Typically, however, theists posture their claims with far more assuredness than their duplicitous metaphysical presuppositions could possibly allow. Either way, however, the theist makes use of a principle (the primacy of existence) while affirming the existence of something which allegedly operates on a contradictory notion (the primacy of consciousness). He is in effect borrowing from an objective orientation in order to affirm something imagined to enjoy a subjective orientation, which results in a contradiction at the most fundamental level of cognition. What justifies such contradiction? Blank out.

David quoted Ayn Rand:

... the basic metaphysical issue that lies at the root of any system of philosophy [is] the primacy of existence or the primacy of consciousness... The primacy of existence (of reality) is the axiom that existence exists, i.e., that the universe exists independent of consciousness (of any consciousness), that things are what they are, that they possess a specific nature, an identity. The epistemological corollary is the axiom that consciousness is the faculty of perceiving that which exists - and that man gains knowledge of reality by looking outward. The rejection of these axioms represents a reversal: the primacy of consciousness - the notion that the universe has no independent existence, that it is the product of a consciousness (either human or divine or both). The epistemological corollary is the notion that man gains knowledge of reality by looking inward (either at his own consciousness or at the revelations it [allegedly] receives from another, superior consciousness). *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, (New York: Signet, 1984), pp. 23-34.

David then quoted Eric Johnson's [review of chapter one](#) of Leonard Peikoff's book *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*:

Since the nature (identity) of consciousness is to be aware of reality, existence is prior to, necessary for, and not subject to the control of, consciousness. As a rephrasing of more basic axioms, the principle could be said as "It is....whether you want it to be or not.". In essence, the point is that consciousness, in and of itself (barring physical action) does not change existence.

David then stated:

Now we can both agree that with respect to humans, there is strong evidence that our consciousness cannot alter the identify of any of its objects without physical action.

Indeed, there is *overwhelming* evidence for this, and after studying the issue for over 16 years, I have yet to see *any* evidence to the contrary. I am wholly convinced that the primacy of existence is absolute, exceptionless, undefeatable. The theist may say that's fine for me, but supposes that there are justifiable reasons for affirming the primacy of consciousness, even in the case of his god. Unfortunately, the very idea of a position having "justifiable reasons" itself assumes the primacy of existence, for it makes "an objective claim on our credence, and not as a truth created by him who utters it" (David Kelley, *The Evidence of the Senses*, p. 34). In essence, one would have to assume the truth of the primacy of existence in order to deny it or affirm something which allegedly defies it. The result would be a self-contradictory metaphysical viewpoint, a very poor basis for a worldview, a theory of truth, an understanding of logic, a system of values, etc.

Also, it should be pointed out that the primacy of existence does not apply only to human consciousness. The primacy of existence applies in the case of non-human animal consciousness as well. In fact, in every instance of consciousness we find in nature, the primacy of existence obtains. When a cat, a horse, a chipmunk or wolverine dies, for instance, thus no longer being conscious of the world, the world does not vanish out of existence; it goes on. Existence still exists. However, there's nothing that will stop someone from *imagining* that a consciousness "outside of nature" enjoys the opposite relationship, if he's so inclined. Unfortunately for such individuals, I have already shown how [supernaturalism](#) finds its basis in imagination and is consequently inherently subjective as well.

David continued:

But what evidence is there that this applies with respect to a divine consciousness?

Either this question is utterly irrelevant, or it's both question-begging and fallaciously complex. First, if by "divine consciousness" one means what Rand understood by this term - essentially something imaginary ("an isolation of actual characteristics of man combined with the projection of impossible, irrational characteristics which do not

arise from reality” - *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, p. 148) - then obviously the question of “what evidence is there that this applies with respect to divine consciousness” would be completely moot. If Rand is correct in her assessment of the notion of “a divine consciousness” (and I’m fully convinced she is), the Objectivist position that the universe is not the product of *any* consciousness - “either human or divine or both” - is unimpeachably secured.

On the other hand, if by “a divine consciousness” one has in mind something that he believes actually exists - as theists claim to believe - then David’s question is epistemically premature, for it assumes the truth of what is in question, namely the claim that “a divine consciousness” exists. In fact, David’s question seems to assume the existence of “a divine consciousness” without any attempt to establish it. In earlier discussions with David, [he has pointed to arguments](#) intended to establish the existence of such a thing (namely Alvin Plantinga’s [Two Dozen \(Or So\) Theistic Arguments](#) which is a set of “lecture notes” that are in places so rough that they are sometimes almost incoherent). Unfortunately, none of these arguments deal with the issue of metaphysical primacy, so they are fundamentally disadvantaged when it comes to Objectivist challenges to theism. For instance, none of Plantinga’s arguments make any attempt to reconcile the acceptance of two opposing (i.e., contradictory) metaphysical orientations, the objective (in the case of human consciousness) and the subjective (in the case of “a divine consciousness”). It’s quite possible, in fact, that theists may think there’s no need to reconcile such contradictions, even though for the theist they occur at the very foundation of his worldview. That’s probably because they haven’t given this issue much if any thought.

At any rate, before we can ask “what evidence is there that [the primacy of existence] applies with respect to a divine consciousness,” we must first ask: what evidence is there for such a thing in the first place? For if it is not possible to establish *as an objective fact* the existence of “a divine consciousness” in the first place, then the question of what orientation said consciousness has between itself as a subject and any objects of its awareness would be, again, completely moot. Thus David’s question is fallaciously complex, for it essentially requires us to assume that “a divine consciousness” exists in order to gather evidences pertaining to what its conscious orientation might possibly be.

Now, I know of no actually existing “divine consciousness.” I’ve heard claims about such things throughout my life, and for a while (in my misguided youth) I even tried to believe some of them. In the end, however, I made an explicit decision to be honest, and in so doing I had to confront the fact that my god-belief rested on the props of the imaginary through and through. I realized that religion captivates the believer unwittingly by invading his imagination and affecting his emotional life, thus seizing control his cognition. As a result, I eventually came to realize that theistic apologists seem wholly unable to explain how one can reliably distinguish between what they call “God” and what may really only be imaginary. This is because, as believers, their cognition has been hijacked by a series of mind-game devices which sabotage their ability to make such distinctions consistently in the first place. At one time this was my affliction, but the choice to be honest coupled with a worldview which is firmly grounded in the primacy of existence showed me the way back to reality. It’s no wonder to me why theists have such resentment for Objectivism.

Sadly, even when it is shown to theists that their god-belief is inherently subjective, they still insist that their imaginary deity exists all the same. But notice the conundrum in which the theist finds himself here. To affirm the existence of such a thing would performatively assume the truth of the primacy of existence. In effect, he is saying that his god exists whether or not anyone acknowledges its existence. I.e., he is saying that it exists independent of anyone’s conscious intensions. Thus he makes use of the primacy of existence. But then notice the nature of what he is claiming: that there exists a consciousness which enjoys precisely the opposite relationship with its objects as that which the theist’s own pronouncements performatively assume. He gives no indication of what could possibly justify such a move, but it’s clear that, to be consistent, any justification he could give would have to adhere to the primacy of existence, since he has already acknowledged that the primacy of existence applies in the case of his own conscious relationship to the world. Theists at this point typically throw their arms up and say, “Well, I have no problem with God having a subjective relationship to all the objects he’s created.” But that’s not an argument, nor is it a justification. It’s simply an autobiographical admission to intellectual default on the matter. He’s tacitly saying that, yes, there is an irresolvable contradiction here, but finds it acceptable.

David asked:

Do Objectivists just assume this and move on?

Objectivists do not believe there is such a thing in reality as “a divine consciousness” in the first place. So I doubt any of them would assume that the primacy of existence applies to “a divine consciousness,” since there is no such thing.

David then stated:

If so, then this still looks like defining God out of existence to me. Especially when one argues that God's existence is metaphysically impossible precisely because of violating said axiom.

Well, since (as I pointed out above) Objectivists are not assuming that the primacy of existence applies to “a divine consciousness” (they recognize that theism is committed to the primacy of consciousness, which is why they reject it), then the condition on which David's conclusion here depends, does not obtain. Objectivists do not “define God out of existence,” nor are they “setting out” to do so. It's not the case that Objectivists start out with the assumption that there is a god and then try to gerrymander their terms so that denial of its existence is plausible or justified. To accuse Objectivists of “defining God out of existence” not only construes (uncharitably, I might add) Objectivists as ungrateful housekeepers shooing a fly out of their home, it also mischaracterizes Objectivist epistemology. Objectivists see no good reason to suppose a god *does* exist, and they also see many reasons why the notion of a god is contrary to objective reality (such as [the inherent subjectivism of theism](#), which I have soundly established and which David seems to accept, given his initial statement above).

I suspect David's charge also hinges on an unfamiliarity with the Objectivist conception of possibility. While some worldviews adopt the ‘conceivability model’ of possibility (which essentially equates “possible” with “imaginable”), Objectivism holds to the *objective* model of possibility. (For details, see Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, pp. 175-179.) Quite simply, on the objective view, there is no justification for the claim that “a divine consciousness” is metaphysically possible. It's already been shown that theism is inherently *subjective*, which means theism *rules itself out* of any objective consideration. So it's not an act of “defining God out of existence,” but rather a consistently rational integration of the relevant data, an impeccably logical conclusion, which tells us that “a divine consciousness” is metaphysically impossible. Our conclusion is fully consistent with the primacy of existence, which we know to be true (as David concedes, “with respect to humans”), in both content (facts gleaned from reality) and methodology (by an objective process).

Meanwhile, the theist is unable to produce any validation for affirming the primacy of consciousness in his god-belief which is compatible with the primacy of existence as the proper orientation of his own consciousness. Notice, for instance, that David acknowledges the truth of the primacy of existence “with respect to humans,” which would presumably include David himself. So if it's the case that the *objects* of David's consciousness do not conform to his conscious intensions, then we can reasonably suppose that *truth* does not conform to David's conscious intensions either (unless of course David is willing to admit that, *on his worldview*, truth has no objective basis, which would be impossible to reconcile with his admission that the primacy of existence applies “with respect to humans”). Consequently, David's epistemology, if it is to produce reliable results, would itself have to adhere to the primacy of existence every step of the way in all his thinking. For instance, he would not be able reasonably to say his god-belief claims are true *because he wants them to be true* any more than he could reasonably say that reality conforms to his wishing. So how does he infer the existence of a consciousness which holds metaphysical primacy over its objects? Or does he infer it at all? This is unclear to me. When [asked to identify his starting point](#), David responded with the statement “The Bible is the Word of God,” which could only mean that he assumes his god's existence from the very outset. Where David objects to Objectivists for allegedly “defining God out of existence,” one could quite consider the attempt to bundle one's god-belief into his starting point as, to quote [Justin Hall](#), “a case of defining god *into* existence.” (Emphasis added)

An even greater irony which lurks behind David's charge that Objectivists aim to “define God out of existence,” has to do with the pervasiveness of the primacy of existence in human cognition. Suppose for a moment that Objectivists *do* try to “define God out of existence.” What would David have against this? Could it be that it would violate the primacy of existence? Think about it: the objection that one may be “defining God out of existence” charges the accused with presuming that reality will conform to his conscious intensions. Essentially, he's saying that the accused doesn't want to acknowledge the existence of something and is consequently trying to “define it out of existence” on an *ad hoc* basis, as if reality would somehow snap into obedience and adjust itself accordingly. Now obviously, if one were to proceed on such a basis, as if reality conformed to one's consciousness, he would be defying the primacy of existence. *But what could someone who worships a consciousness which defies*

*the primacy of existence possibly have against defiance of the primacy of existence?*

For theists, the question boils down to: on what basis can we affirm a position which, like theism, assumes the metaphysical primacy of consciousness? Can we affirm this on the basis of the primacy of existence? While it is the case that we need the primacy of existence to affirm any statement as true of reality, the problem here is that the primacy of existence and the primacy of consciousness are contradictory to each other. The presence of assumptions granting metaphysical primacy to consciousness would cancel out any thoughts attempting to ground themselves on the primacy of existence. In attempting such a compromise, one would short-circuit his own thinking by undercutting any claim to objectivity. So this wouldn't work. Could we affirm such a position on the basis of the primacy of consciousness? But we already know that the primacy of existence applies in human cognition. Unfortunately, the theist is stuck here. There is no escape.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Christian god](#), [imagination](#), [Metaphysics](#), [Primacy of Existence](#)

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

**58 Comments:**

[Burgess Laughlin](#) said...

Mr. Bethrick,

Thank you for writing this weblog. I have begun reading it only within this last year. You have accumulated a vast amount of knowledge, particularly in the pathology of theism.

I hope that you will write and publish a book essentializing what you have learned and presenting it in a structured way in a single volume. That would be a challenge to write, but a pleasure to read.

[January 02, 2009 6:35 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hello Burgess,

Thank you for stopping by and posting your encouraging comments. I do appreciate it!

I would like to note that, as I re-read my blog this morning, I did make a few minor edits. Some were sorely needed. Hopefully my interaction with David's comments is even clearer now than before.

As to your mention of publishing a book, it's been on my mind for quite some time (years, in fact). I have tons of material which I have not posted on my blog, enough for a dozen books probably. The problem is two-fold, maybe three-fold. First, I would need a lot of time for editing that material. Then I would need financial resources to support my family in the meantime. Lastly, I'd need to find a good publisher! In the end, however, I'm wondering how successful a venture it would be for me. While a book would give me a chance to argue my verdicts in print, I have my suspicions that it would not sell very well. Maybe I'm wrong on this, and I would love to be wrong on this, but that would be my concern.

Then again, the internet affords a great opportunity for me to get the word out. It is an amazing invention, the internet. Imagine what Aristotle would have done with hyperlinks! On that note, I took the liberty of checking out [your website](#), and it is very interesting!!! Where've you been all this time????

Regards,  
Dawson

[January 02, 2009 9:23 AM](#)

[Burgess Laughlin](#) said...

1. "I took the liberty of checking out your [website](#), and it is very interesting!!! Where've you been all this time?"

Apparently in the same place you have been: quietly working away in a corner somewhere!

I have added your name to my very select weblog roll (left side). I am always looking for individuals who dare to specialize in their activism.

2. "As to your mention of publishing a book, it's been on my mind for quite some time (years, in fact). I have tons of material . . . . The problem is two-fold, maybe three-fold. First, I would need a lot of time for editing that material."

There is another approach--more intense mentally but much less time-consuming: define your purpose, subject, theme, and audience, then essentialize what you *already* know.

There is no editing at this stage. (Ayn Rand, *The Art of Nonfiction*, contains excellent suggestions for focused writing in general and book-writing in particular.) I am a retired editor; I have three published books and another coming in 2010. The next one will be self-published. If you want suggestions, please ask.

[January 02, 2009 10:12 AM](#)

[Burgess Laughlin](#) said...

(cont.)

3. "Then I would need financial resources to support my family in the meantime."

I don't know the details of your situation, but I would suggest that if you are well organized and/or have guidance from more experienced book writers, then you will have time to write a book even if you do it part-time.

If you are convinced you need full-time, which is a reasonable concern, you might start by approaching ARI, the Anthem Foundation or similar groups. You might make a book proposal to them. I don't know. This is only a suggested route among other alternatives.

4. "Lastly, I'd need to find a good publisher!"

What do you mean by "good"? If the book fills a need, it will sell at least modestly with little more than word of mouth. (You can increase the pressure in the pipelines, so to speak, by quietly promoting the book yourself.)

5. "In the end, however, I'm wondering how successful a venture it would be for me. While a book would give me a chance to argue my verdicts in print, I have my suspicions that it would not sell very well."

What are your standards of success? Quantity--or getting the book into "strong hands"--that is, individuals who can *use* the book as a foundation for their own endeavors.

Suggestion: Try a death-bed experiment, if you haven't already. Imagine you are 85 years old. You know you will die within a few days from an incurable medical problem. You are looking back on your life.

What do you see? Did you accomplish all the highest goals in your hierarchy of values? Do you have regret that you didn't write at least one book?

Best wishes in difficult times.

[January 02, 2009 10:27 AM](#)

[Burgess Laughlin](#) said...

Two last points:

6. This post might interest you: [central purpose in life](#).

7. One problem I wrestled with in my life (I am 64) was an implicit false dichotomy: (1) Do not attempt a certain book; or (2) Do the book in a way that will sell millions of copies and be the best piece of writing in the history of Western Civilization.

I am slow, but I finally realized that I should follow my highest values in the best way I can. If others can do better, let them.

In my case, I write books that I would like to find--and can't. Could someone else have done them better? Yes--but the fact is, they didn't do them at all, much less better.

An academic once growled at me for producing a book that "an academic should have done." I looked at him and asked him how long he thought I would have had to wait before an academic wrote such a book. He thought about it and said, sheepishly: "Forever."

[January 02, 2009 10:41 AM](#)

[Harold](#) said...

Yes, if you wrote such a book I'd buy it. In fact, I'm on my way to pick up OPAR and IOE right now. I think a book going to the heart of the issue (reason vs mysticism or objectivism vs subjectivism) would have been a lot more effective than the spate of atheist books that came out a few years ago.

[January 03, 2009 1:19 PM](#)

[Justin Hall](#) said...

Harold, agreed, I am disappointed with Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins, they should not quit there day jobs:). It just goes to show you that you can be an atheist for all the wrong reasons.

[January 03, 2009 4:15 PM](#)

[Harold](#) said...

Well, that's right. And remember, in Harris's case he's also a mystic. Incredible. To be fair to Dr. Dawkins though, he wrote a good book, "The Ancestor's Tale"; audio clips of which are available on his [website](#). It seems as though he's very effective in getting children interested in science as well, and that's very important. So his is a good day job ;-)

I'm somewhat ambivalent though about the effect these guys have had on this whole issue. I mean it's good that they're "raising consciousness" and getting people to realize that atheists are out there and can offer good arguments against *theism*, but on the other hand, what are the offering in it's place?

[January 03, 2009 7:27 PM](#)

[Dr Funkenstein](#) said...

This is slightly off the main thrust of your post (which I thought did a very good job of highlighting the mental gymnastics and illogical viewpoints theism requires its adherents to commit to), but I've seen that Plantinga article that you link to before - some of it seems to have no point whatsoever, eg parts such as this:

*Lewis speaks of the nostalgia that often engulfs us upon beholding a splendid land or seascape; these somehow speak to us of their maker. Not sure just what the argument is; but suspect there is one there.*

So Plantinga has no idea what Lewis' argument is (if indeed there is one, which certainly doesn't seem obvious to me), but thinks it worth mentioning as a defense of theism?

Some of the other parts interested me also

*Reply: (1) is it in fact plausible to think that human beings, for example, have arisen through the sorts of mechanisms (random genetic mutation and natural selection) in the time that according to contemporary science that has been available?*

This is simply argument of the form 'it seems difficult for me to believe/understand, therefore it's not true'

*The chief problem: most of the paths one might think of from the condition of not having eyes, for example, to the condition of having them will not work; each mutation along the way has to be adaptive, or appropriately connected with something adaptive.*

This is incorrect as well, since most mutations are thought to be selectively neutral/near neutral, and in some instances the % of positive mutations can actually be quite high (upwards of 10%) in a population eg in this experiment here:

<http://www.pnas.org/content/98/20/11388.abstract>.

A mathematical model of eye evolution has also been provided in a paper by Nilsson and Pelger demonstrating that using reasonable assumptions from known mutation rates etc, it is conceivable that a functional eye can evolve in less than 1 million years - to the best of my knowledge, despite being repeatedly asked to do so, creationists and ID proponents (which are the same thing really) have yet to refute them.

*(2) There does not appear to be any decent naturalistic account of the origin of life, or of language.*

1000 years ago there was no cell theory, nor was it widely accepted that organic disorders rather than invisible demons cause mental illness. 300 years ago the majority of the Western world thought the Earth to be in the region of a few 1000 years old - now of course we have a large number of vital industries, such as the oil business, based on findings that have emerged from the work of uniformitarian geology that places the age of the Earth at approximately 4.6 billion years old. 100 years ago, the hereditary material (DNA) of living organisms was not known. 50 years ago some diseases now known to be caused by prion proteins were not understood properly.

Even assuming for argument there is absolutely nothing known regarding a natural cause of the origin of life, why does he assume

- a. this is an argument for theism given 'naturalism's' extensive track record of eventually providing answers to similar sorts of problems
- b. Theism provides a label, not an explanation, for any of these ie 'Dunno, God just did it'

*(E) The Argument from physical constants*

This is also fallacious - recent research by a physicist called Fred Adams has shown that by varying multiple physical constants, rather than just one (as has commonly been done in the past, and which I think Plantinga's argument here is likely based on), it is not especially unlikely that the conditions for life to arise can emerge. Secondly, events with widely unlikely a priori probabilities happen every day - the series of events required for the specific people posting on this combox at the start of January 2009 is so unlikely to have happened, prior to it actually doing so, as to be almost impossible - yet here we are. Miraculous!

Plantinga seems to get namechecked a lot by theists, but much of his reasoning (in what admittedly is described as a rough series of lecture notes) seems to be fairly suspect throughout the article.

[January 04, 2009 2:47 AM](#)

[Justin Hall](#) said...



I remember reading an article by Plantinga in which he espoused, I won't say argued, that Christians were under no moral obligation to be rational. I would be hard pressed to find another point that would underscore the fundamental difference in my way of thinking vs the theists. It kind of says it all. Basically Plantinga is saying "I have no valid reason to believe this nonsense and I don't need one either, but oh I'd like you to abandon your mind as well".

[January 04, 2009 3:07 AM](#)

[Burgess Laughlin](#) said...

Alvin Plantinga and other advocates of theism have been mentioned in this thread. A question arises for me, as part of a long-term project:

To those of you who follow the debates between Christian theists and atheists or advocates of ID versus evolutionary theory, who would you say is the most influential *contemporary* proponent of faith as a means of "knowing"?

C. S. Lewis? Alvin Plantinga? Ronald Nash? Others?

(By "contemporary," I mean someone who is alive today or has died within the last 50 years [two generations].)

[January 04, 2009 7:43 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Everyone,

Thanks for all your great comments! I'm really enjoying the discussion, unfortunately it's been a really busy weekend for me so far, and today promises to be no different as we have guests coming this afternoon. There's so much I've wanted to say, but will have to settle now for a big "Thanks!" for your thoughtful comments, along with some initial comments on Burgess' question and the comments about Plantinga's apologetic.

In regard to Burgess' question, "who would you say is the most influential *contemporary* proponent of faith as a means of 'knowing'?:

This is an interesting question, partly because the way it is asked probably wouldn't get a lot of takers from the Christian apologetics community. From what I have seen, few apologists explicitly advocate faith as a means of knowing per se. This would be too dicey. Most try to camouflage their apologetic as a rational defense, and say very little if anything about faith and its epistemological implications. The meaning of faith per se seems to vary from reading to reading, even from the same apologist or apologetic camp. Either way, few apologists would rest their case on a bare appeal to faith. Having said that, however, there's so many apologists for Christianity that it's also hard to say who's been the most influential in recent decades. William Lane Craig, of course, is a very high profile apologist who does a lot of public debates. He typically champions the cosmological argument ("the universe had a cause, and that cause is God") and the moral argument, etc. CS Lewis, though he's been dead for quite some time now (d. 1963), still exerts significant influence, often as a kind of 'father figure' for certain kinds of arguments (e.g., "the argument from reason"). It's been a while since I've read any of Lewis' books, but for the most part I found his reasoning torturously superficial. But superficiality seems to impress a lot of minds nonetheless... Folks like Gary Habermas, NT Wright and Craig Blomberg are hailed as champs on the historical apologetics front, focusing on arguments intended to establish the historicity of the NT documents. Plantinga is also very widely influential, not only with his 'evolutionary argument against naturalism', but also for his so-called "Reformed Epistemology" (see my response to Justin below). The presuppositionalists -Cornelius Van Til (d. 1985), Greg Bahnsen (d. 1995), John Frame (still alive) et al. - are also very influential, especially in association among strains of Christianity influenced by Calvin. I see this school of apologetics as a kind of last retreat, since many apologists I've encountered, after everything else in their arsenal fails, tend to hide behind "arguments" like "How do you account for the laws of logic?" or "How do you account for the uniformity of nature?" These aren't arguments at all, just ways of trying to discredit opponents.

Justin said: "I remember reading an article by Plantinga in which he espoused, I wont say argued, that Christians were under no moral obligation to be rational."

Right. This camp ("Reformed Epistemology") claims that "belief in God" is what they call a "properly basic belief," or something along these lines. The words of apologist Kelly James Clark shed some light on how this thinking apparently goes:

Since the Enlightenment, there has been a demand to expose all of our beliefs to the searching criticism of reason. If a belief is unsupported by the evidence, it is irrational to believe it. It is the position of Reformed Epistemology (likely the position that Calvin held) that belief in God, like belief in other persons, does not require the support of evidence or argument in order for it to be rational. This view has been defended by some of the world's most prominent philosophers, including Alvin Plantinga, leader of the recent revival in Christian philosophy.... The claim that belief in God is rational without the support of evidence or argument is startling for many an atheist or theist. Most atheist intellectuals feel comfort in their disbelief in God because they judge that there is little or no evidence for God's existence. Many theistic thinkers, however, in particular Roman Catholics and some recent Protestant evangelicals, insist that belief in God requires evidence and that such a demand should and can be met. So the claim that a person does not need evidence in order to rationally believe in God runs against the grain for atheist thinkers and has raised the ire of many theists. In spite of the vitriolic response to Reformed epistemology, I believe it is eminently defensible... Calvin contends that people are accountable to God for their unbelief not because they have failed to submit to a convincing proof, but because they have suppressed the truth that God has implanted in their minds. It is natural to suppose that if God created us with cognitive faculties that by and large reliably produce beliefs without the need for evidence, he would likewise provide us with a cognitive faculty that produces belief in him without the need for evidence. (*Five Views on Apologetics*, pp. 267-268)

One can get a good feel for this camp's approach by reading the entirety of Clark's discussion of "Reformed Epistemology" apologetics in this source, but these comments are probably enough. In my copy of the book, in the margins next to the very last sentence, I had written at one point "sounds like a gland." This view almost makes "belief" into a kind of secretion, or "glandular squirting" as Rand would call it. But even glands need input from some source. Reformed Epistemologists would probably say that the input which their "cognitive faculty" uses to generate "properly basic belief in God" comes from the almighty itself... And round and round we go, like a dog chasing its tail...

Okay, I have to get some shopping done! Hope to touch back with you all later.

Regards,  
Dawson

[January 04, 2009 9:49 AM](#)

[Harold](#) said...

*"It is the position of Reformed Epistemology (likely the position that Calvin held) that belief in God, like belief in other persons, does not require the support of evidence or argument in order for it to be rational."*

Well, that just about cuts it. In some of your earlier postings you referred to a pastor who said you "knew too much". Is that full story recounted anywhere? Thanks,

[January 16, 2009 8:05 PM](#)

[Burgess Laughlin](#) said...

Dawson, perhaps someone you know would like to take advantage of an opportunity I am offering. I am looking for a reviewer for one chapter of a forthcoming book. The subject of the chapter is primarily Aquinas and secondarily Bonaventure. The chapter is 65 pp. in manuscript (including footnotes and bibliography for the chapter). I am offering \$700 for a review.

The reviewer should generally know the milieu in which Aquinas and Bonaventure lived and should have at least a

general knowledge of the lives and philosophy of Aquinas and Bonaventure--at least enough knowledge to catch "howlers" that I might have overlooked in presenting what I think are the facts. I am looking for a content review only, though all suggestions are welcome.

You can contact me at [burgesslaughlin@macforcego.com](mailto:burgesslaughlin@macforcego.com)

[January 18, 2009 8:00 AM](#)

[breakerslion](#) said...

Hi Dawson,

If you ever do write a book, I will buy it. You have given me so much meaningful content that I feel like I already owe you the price of a publication.

I don't often comment here because your posts give me so much to think about. This time, a couple of things struck me that I'm hoping you might comment on.

"Truth necessarily presupposes the primacy of existence, for to say that some state of affairs is true is implicitly to say that it is the case whether anyone recognizes it or not, that it is the case independent of anyone's consciousness."

If I say I dream in color, that is a true statement. It requires that I recognize it, and it's dependent on my conscious recognition.

"For instance, he would not be able reasonably to say his god-belief claims are true because he wants them to be true any more than he could reasonably say that reality conforms to his wishing."

Is not the belief in the efficacy of prayer the belief that reality can be rearranged somehow to conform to the theist's wishing? Not that I would consider this reasonable, but some theists can construct a line of reasoning satisfactory to themselves, can they not? I guess what I'm saying is, ultimately, is "what is reasonable" inherently subjective?

[January 19, 2009 6:27 PM](#)

[RLE](#) said...

Dawson,

Thought you might find this of interest.

[http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick\\_philosopher/](http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick_philosopher/)

[January 20, 2009 4:18 PM](#)

[david](#) said...

Dawson,

Hope all is well. Still getting settled in Denver, but thought you might find these articles interesting:

[http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick\\_philosopher/2009/01/existence-god-and-the-randians.html](http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick_philosopher/2009/01/existence-god-and-the-randians.html)

[http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick\\_philosopher/2009/01/rand-and-existence-again.html](http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick_philosopher/2009/01/rand-and-existence-again.html)

[http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick\\_philosopher/2009/01/in-all-fairness-to-ayn-rand-and-the-ran](http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick_philosopher/2009/01/in-all-fairness-to-ayn-rand-and-the-ran)

[dians-.html](#)

[http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick\\_philosopher/2009/01/modal-confusion-in-randpeikoff.html](http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick_philosopher/2009/01/modal-confusion-in-randpeikoff.html)

[http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick\\_philosopher/2009/01/is-ayn-rand-a-good-philosopher-rand-on-the-primacy-of-existence.html](http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick_philosopher/2009/01/is-ayn-rand-a-good-philosopher-rand-on-the-primacy-of-existence.html)

[January 20, 2009 10:52 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Harold,

You asked: "In some of your earlier postings you referred to a pastor who said you 'knew too much'. Is that full story recounted anywhere?"

No.

Burgess,

Regarding your question, I have sent you private e-mail.

Breakerslion,

You stated: "If I say I dream in color, that is a true statement. It requires that I recognize it, and it's dependent on my conscious recognition."

There are two things to keep in mind here. One is the *\*statement\** of recognition that you make (which depends on your consciousness in the sense that you need to be conscious in order to make it), the other is the *\*fact\** which it denotes (which is the case whether or not you made any statements about your dream). Your dream had the character it had, regardless of any later statements about it. This is why it's so frustrating when we forget our dreams.

Breakerslion: "Is not the belief in the efficacy of prayer the belief that reality can be rearranged somehow to conform to the theist's wishing?"

I would think so. And the agency by which reality is supposed to be so rearranged is a "divine *will*," i.e., by some action of supernatural consciousness which is somehow persuaded by the prayer of the faithful to alter the current state of affairs on their behalf. The New Testament makes it clear at many points that the believer is to expect results by petitioning his god through prayer. I've known many Christians, among them pastors and other leaders as well, who have made prayers expressly for the purpose of changing the state of affairs they find themselves in. It could be a frustrating co-worker, a failing marriage, a drug-addicted child, or an illness. All these things and more I have seen believers pray to have their god change. But apologists for Christianity often seem to denigrate this view of prayer, at least before non-believers (probably because of the embarrassment which the doctrine of prayer creates for believers). They might say things like "God doesn't do parlor tricks." But statements like this can be taken to imply that many of the miracles in the NT - especially the kinds that many believers today pray for, like restoring vision to the blind, curing diseases, etc. - are "parlor tricks." Were the miracles that Jesus performs in the New Testament "parlor tricks"?

Regards,

Dawson

[January 22, 2009 11:31 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

David posted several links to Bill Vallicella's recent blog entries about Rand and Peikoff. These blog entries are apparently attempts to interact with and criticize Objectivism. Why is it that every time I read some new criticism of Objectivism, its content indicates that its author has apparently only recently heard about Objectivism and is trying to tear it down before ever really understanding it? In the case of Vallicella's objections, what is called for is not refutation per se, but drastically needed correction. For the criticisms he makes rely on some rather elementary blunders in his understanding of the source quotes he cites.

In [the first blog to which David linked](#), Vallicella takes what is clearly a positional statement by Peikoff and tries to interact with it as if it were intended as a formal argument against the existence of "God." I don't see that Peikoff is presenting an argument to prove that there is no god; I'm quite confident that Peikoff would agree with me that he has no onus to prove that the non-existent does not exist. If "God" does not exist, it doesn't exist. Period. There's no need to prove that it does not exist. What Peikoff is pointing out is how the very notion of something "beyond existence" is contrary to rational thought. Perhaps this is what irks Vallicella. Where he is tripped up is that he's critiquing Peikoff for something he did not (and did not intend to) present in the quoted passage. A fuller understanding of Objectivism, which Vallicella obviously lacks, will make it clear why theism and other forms of subjectivism should be rejected. But Vallicella is too anxious to claim a kill to go and learn about what he's talking about before he sets out to kill it.

In [the next blog](#), Vallicella begins by quoting someone named "Ocham" on the meaning (or purported incoherence) of 'existence exists', and states that "neither [Dominic "Bnonn"] Tennant nor 'Ocham' understand what Rand is saying." But does Vallicella? He considers two alternatives as to what "existence exists" might mean. The first is:

**a) That in virtue of which existing things exist itself exists. For example, if one thought of existence as a property of existing things, and one were a realist about properties, then it would make sense for that person to say that existence exists. He would mean by it that the property of existence exists.**

Rand was very clear that she did not mean this. Of this we can be sure, for in her book *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, she wrote: "Existence and identity are *not attributes* of existents, they *are* the existents" (p. 56). Existence is not one property among others belonging to an existent.

The other alternative which Vallicella considers is as follows:

**(b) Existing things exist. Instead of taking 'existence' as denoting that in virtue of which existing things exist, one could take it as a term that applies to whatever exists. Accordingly, existence is whatever exists. To say that existence exists would then mean that existing things exist, or whatever exists exists. But then the dictum would be a tautology. Of course existing things exist, what else would they be 'doing'? Breathing things breath. Running things run. Whatever is in orbit is in orbit.**

This is certainly more in line with what Rand means by "existence exists." Again quoting from *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*: "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 ever exist" (ibid.). Peikoff confirms this rendering when he writes:

**We start with the irreducible fact and concept of existence - that which is... The first thing to say about that which is is simply: it is. As Parmenides in ancient Greece formulated the principle: what is, is. Or, in Ayn Rand's words: *existence exists*. ("Existence" here is a collective noun, denoting the sum of existents.) (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, p. 4)**

In response to this second alternative, Vallicella says (as if this were a deficiency): "But then the dictum would be a tautology." Of course it's a tautology! Just like the standard expression of the law of identity: A is A. In his essay on *The Analytic-Synthetic Dichotomy*, Peikoff points out that all truths are in a sense tautological (cf. *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, p. 100). Vallicella also indicates that the axiom "existence exists," on the interpretation considered in the second alternative, is true. And yes, the Objectivist axiom of existence is true.

What Vallicella states next makes it clear that he has no deep understanding of Objectivism whatsoever. For in spite of the statements which I have quoted from both Rand and Peikoff which endorse the second interpretation which Vallicella considers, he writes:

From Rand's texts it is clear that she intends neither the (a) nor the (b) construal.

Why does Vallicella make this blunder? The answer to that question is in what he stated next:

What she is trying to say is something non-tautological: that the things that exist *exist* and have the attributes they have independently of us. [Here](#) we read, "The primacy of existence (of reality) is the axiom that existence exists, *i.e.*, that the universe exists independent of consciousness (of any consciousness), that things are what they are, that they possess a specific nature, an *identity*." Rand is advancing a version of metaphysical realism. Existence EXISTS! (Pound the lectern, stamp the foot, flare the nostrils.)

Those who are unfamiliar with Objectivism are liable to suppose that Vallicella has scored a major point here against Objectivism. In fact, however, he has confused the axiom of existence with the principle of the primacy of existence. They are related, but they are not one and the same. Paul Manata made a very similar error when he tried to take down Objectivism (see my blog [The Axioms and the Primacy of Existence](#)). The axiom of existence is the recognition that existence exists, that what is, is. This axiom necessarily implies two corollary axioms: the axiom of identity (to exist is to be something, A is A), and the axiom of consciousness (consciousness is consciousness of some object). One would have to be conscious in order to recognize that things exist. So just recognizing that things exist validates the axiom of consciousness.

Now we have a relationship to consider, namely the things which we are aware of, and our awareness of those things. Existence exists, and consciousness is conscious of existence. Or if you like, there is the object(s) of consciousness, and there is the subject of consciousness. It is in respect to this relationship that the principle of the primacy of existence identifies the proper orientation between the subject of consciousness and its objects. It states that the objects of consciousness exist and are what they are independent of the subject of consciousness. This is the *objective* orientation of the subject-object relationship, since the *objects* of consciousness hold metaphysical primacy over the subject of consciousness. Even David himself has acknowledged that this is the proper orientation in the subject-object relationship, at least in the case of human consciousness. (He's still holding out, apparently, for a consciousness which enjoys the *subjective* orientation to manifest itself outside his own imagination.)

Now Rand distinguished between these two poles of the subject-object relationship using the concepts 'consciousness' and 'existence' respectively. She was not wrong to do this, but many outsiders (especially those who are in too big a hurry to refute Objectivism to sit down and actually get a firsthand understanding of what it teaches) are easily tripped up by her use of these terms. This is why Vallicella says that "The problem, of course, is that Rand chose to express herself in an inept and idiosyncratic way using the ambiguous sentence, 'Existence exists'." I really don't see why anyone would find this problematic though. I understand it quite clearly. Why doesn't Vallicella? The problem seems to be his, not Rand's.

His problems do not end with "merely infelicity of expression" however. Vallicella says that the primacy of existence (he calls it "the thesis of metaphysical realism") cannot be reached "by either inferring it from or conflating it with the Law of Identity." For one thing, it's clear that Rand is not trying to *infer* the primacy of existence from some prior truths, for not only does she categorize this recognition as axiomatic, all truths presuppose the primacy of existence. Now it's not clear what Vallicella may mean by "conflating it with the Law of Identity," but just try to conceive of the law of identity if the primacy of existence were not true and the alternative to it, the primacy of consciousness, were true. If anything exists, it would not exist independent of consciousness, it would depend on consciousness, not only for the fact that it exists, but also for every attribute making it up. No object of consciousness would have any inherent identity of its own; it would be whatever the subject intends it to be at any point in time (supposing 'time' could even make sense in such a nightmarish realm). Vallicella clarifies his case at this point: "My point is not that metaphysical realism is false; my point is that denying it is not equivalent to denying the Law of Identity." But has he really made this point? Not that I can see. But why Vallicella is so anxious about making this point is not clear. The concern should be whether or not the Objectivist axioms and the primacy of existence are true. I do not see that Vallicella has shown that they are not true. If he does not show them to be untrue, then he cannot claim to have refuted Objectivism. Far from it in fact.

Vallicella then quotes a passage from Rand's novel *Atlas Shrugged*, and huffs:

So the disasters of the 20th century originated in the evasion by people like Hitler and Stalin of the fact that A is A! This is just silly.

Notice that Vallicella does not offer an argument here. He does ask a couple questions after this, but questions are not arguments. To address them, Vallicella may want to read Peikoff's book *The Ominous Parallels* after getting a better understanding of what Objectivism teaches.

Vallicella's final argument in this blog is against the recognition that "there is no alternative to existence." For reasons that are not clear, Vallicella thinks he needs to contest this as well. To do so, he relies on the necessary-contingent dichotomy, which of course Objectivism rightfully rejects. Curiously Vallicella does indicate some awareness of this fact in one of the blogs David linked to, but he does not seem to integrate it into his critique. Too bad.

In [the next blog](#) which David linked to, Vallicella acknowledges that "there are professional philosophers who take Rand's work seriously." And much to his chagrin, he's right. He cites for instance the members on the steering committee of [The Ayn Rand Society](#). But in spite of this acknowledged fact, Vallicella still drools with animosity towards Rand, opining about her "professional respectability." No, Rand was no academic. She was an outsider. She was first and foremost a businesswoman, specifically a novelist, and one of the 20th century's most outspoken defenders of capitalism. These are all big strikes against Rand from the academic establishment's point of view. So the jeering that Vallicella repeats here is nothing new.

In [the next installment](#) Vallicella raises an objection against a brief passage from Peikoff's above-mentioned essay "The Analytic-Synthetic Dichotomy." Here Vallicella accuses Peikoff of "the modal fallacy of confusing the *necessitas consequentiae* with the *necessitas consequentiis*, the necessity of the *consequence* with the necessity of the *consequent*," specifically in regard to Peikoff's view that propositions denoting man-made facts are necessarily true (since man-made facts are still facts) even though "some *facts* are not necessary." Vallicella is tripped up by this because he's looking at the matter from a perspective which accepts the necessary-contingent dichotomy from the very beginning (as is common practice in Anal Phil). There is no modal confusion on Peikoff's part here, since once a man-made fact is a fact, it is a fact - i.e., there's no going back and undoing them. A statement identifying said fact cannot be false, which means it is necessarily true. It's clear that Vallicella has not absorbed Peikoff's broader points very well, and several of the commentators posting in response to Vallicella's blog entry try to explain this to him. The rejoinders offered in response to those comments do not suggest that Vallicella's understanding has improved.

In [the final blog](#) to which David linked, Vallicella tackles the primacy of existence. He writes: "[Rand] thinks that to say that x is self-identical is to say something about x's mode of existence, namely, that x exists independently of any consciousness. If this were true, a mere law of logic would entail not only the nonexistence of God, but also the necessary nonexistence (i.e., the impossibility) of God."

Well, we can't have that! (That's about the extent of that "argument".) In fact, however, the expression "mode of existence" is not Objectivist locution. It belongs to Anal Phil, which Objectivists are wise to reject, due to its implicit commitment to the primacy of consciousness. I have defended the primacy of existence in several articles on my blog. Vallicella is correct to recognize the fatal implications this undefeatable principle has for theism.

Vallicella continues: "What's more, it amounts to a solving by logical fiat of the problem of the external world."

If in fact Rand is trying to solve a problem (real or unreal) "by logical fiat," why would anyone who doesn't accept the primacy of existence have a problem with her doing this? Does Vallicella really understand the issue he's discussing? His next statement gives us a clue on this:

He writes: "If Rand were right, one would be able to prove that an object of perception exists apart from its being perceived by simply pointing out that it is self-identical. Yonder mountain, qua object of perception, is of course self-identical; but that scarcely proves that it exists independently of my consciousness [sic] of it."

Apparently Vallicella missed the part about the primacy of existence being *axiomatic*. As an axiom, it is not subject to proof; proof presupposes its truth. We *recognize* that the objects we perceive exist independent of our awareness of them; we do not have to *prove* that they do. When I look in my wallet and see two one-dollar bills, that's what's in there whether I want to accept it or what I would prefer that there were two one-hundred-dollar

bills in there instead. Existence exists independent of consciousness. Why would anyone object to this recognition?

Then Vallicella gives us this whopper: "In sum, Rand is attempting to squeeze controversial metaphysical assertions out of a mere logical axiom. It can't be done."

Vallicella says "it can't be done." Is this because he wishes it this way (i.e., the primacy of consciousness)? Or, is it because some state of affairs which obtains independent of anyone's wishing, misperceptions, doubts, insistence, etc. (i.e., the primacy of existence)? If it's the former, then why should anyone accept it? If it's the latter, does he realize that he's making use of the very principle he's trying to undermine?

In a way, statements like these, coming from theists, are quite reassuring. It tells me that Objectivism is right to challenge theism on the basis of metaphysical primacy. While some theists insist that theism is compatible with the primacy of existence (e.g., Patrick Toner), others try to make exception to the primacy of existence for their god (e.g., "My problem is when Objectivists insist that what is true of human consciousness must necessarily be true of divine consciousness") or deny the primacy of existence altogether. There seems to be no uniform response from theists on this matter. It cuts and divides them against themselves, and they typically don't even know it.

So David, did you have any thoughts in response to my present blog? It was, after all, directed in reply to statements of your own.

Regards,  
Dawson

[January 22, 2009 11:37 PM](#)

[john](#) said...

Hi Dawson,

I agree it is very encouraging that direct assault at the level of metaphysical truth exposes Platonists' game and Objectivism's strength. We should keep undermining at the base.

I have been responding to Dr. Vallicella in those linked blog pages at that very level.

Isn't it curious that they swing madly from the charge "Rand's metaphysics is trivial" (the typical 'it is only tautological' and 'you can't deduce anything from it and induction is a fallacy') to: "She packs too many assumptive claims into it."

I know why: it is the God thing. As you pointed out above, they don't make faith claims. They want to stake the position without having to resort to faith. They believe that the existence of God is non-controversial and a priori everything, and that "philosophy" considers that a fait accompli.

Well, thank you Mr. Kant. You know that claim that Jesus died for the sins of all men, including those in the future? Well Kant sacrificed by writing those enormous journeys to nowhere for the job security of Analytic Philosophy.

Your blog is powerful, glad to see your relentless pursuit of those trying to rest on Kant's shoulders.

John Donohue  
Pasadena, CA

[January 23, 2009 10:41 PM](#)

[J](#) said...

*""The problem, of course, is that Rand chose to express herself in an inept and idiosyncratic way using the ambiguous sentence, 'Existence exists'."*



Yes. Rand and the Objectivists did reduce many philosophical problems to simple assumptions. Though one might agree with the implied "external realism," there's a lot more to it, as vallicelli points out (tho' I don't agree with MavPhil on many things, and would agree the MavP's a bit of a Platonist): we can say a CPU exists. A turkey sandwich exists (at least until devoured). The pacific ocean exists, or a large mass of sea water/H2O which we term the pacific ocean exists.

But when saying "existence exists" you are not doing the same thing as saying a "CPU exists," or "there is the CPU," semantically speaking. "There is existence" doesn't even make much sense, except by fleshing it out.

"Existence exists" is itself a metaphysical claim: tho' rather naive. One, existence is a word: not a thing like a CPU. Rand wants to say via this axiom (if axiom it be) something like, "our perceptions correspond to an external reality, which is independent of our our minds." That introduces some problems, doesn't it. First off, you are at least subject to your own visual parameters: were you blind, existence would be quite different. If you had like the eyes of a preying mantis, and were 20 feet tall, life would be quite different: so at least perception is subject to human's neurological and biological innateness, and also to your own subjective perceptions, and indeed to environmental and cultural factors (including different languages).

That may seem trivial, but that presents a problem to "objectivism" how do you determine whether your perceptions, or Rand's or anyone's are the same, or mostly the same? And how does a perception fit into an equation or logical argument: one can insist, we all perceive the same world, but that claim requires a lot more work than simply insisting on it. Newton saw the sun differently than his chambermaid did.

Making an existence claim also is a mental act: which is itself not perceivable. It's sort of the problem locke has when trying to account for how knowledge of various common ideas or concepts--say quantity, mathematics, or even logic come about. An existence generalization itself (the backwards E in predicate logic) was learned: where did we find that backwards E? Where was Pi to be located back in Pythagoras' day? A great deal of mental work was required, and abstractions, and then translations into language and symbols (unless like the MavP you consider floating in some timeless platonic abode). The objectivists generally complete overlook those abstractions (and indeed the possibility of a priori truths) and the problems of knowledge acquisition. It's not so much Misss Rand's conclusions that many object to: it's the makeshift way she and her groupies reached them.

[January 24, 2009 7:36 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

J wrote: "Rand and the Objectivists did reduce many philosophical problems to simple assumptions."

Such as?

J wrote: "But when saying 'existence exists' you are not doing the same thing as saying a 'CPU exists', or 'there is the CPU', semantically speaking."

Actually, we are doing the same thing: we are affirming existence. When we say that a CPU exists, we are affirming its existence. When we say 'existence exists', we are affirming existence on a much broader scale. The concept 'existence' is the widest of all concepts, because it includes everything which exists, not just the CPU on your desk, but every CPU that exists, has existed and will exist, as well as anything else that exists, has existed and will exist. This is what Objectivism means by this statement.

J wrote: "'There is existence' doesn't even make much sense, except by fleshing it out."

How does affirming the existence of everything that exists no make sense? This objection essentially reduces to the claim that using concepts to denote groups of objects does not make sense. But the objection itself makes use of concepts in just such a way. It is self-refuting.

J wrote: "'Existence exists' is itself a metaphysical claim: tho' rather naive. One, existence is a word: not a thing like a CPU."

One could say the same thing about any symbol we use to denote objects which exist, including the symbol 'CPU'. You're confusing the symbol for what it denotes. When Objectivists say 'existence exists', they are not saying that the word "existence" exists. On the contrary, just as when one says a CPU exists he affirms the existence of something specific, when Objectivists say 'existence exists' they are affirming the existence of everything that exists.

J wrote: "Rand wants to say via this axiom (if axiom it be) something like, 'our perceptions correspond to an external reality, which is independent of our our minds'."

No, that is not what Rand meant by the axiom of existence. The nature of our perceptions is a later discovery, well after we make fundamental recognitions, such as the fact that existence exists.

J wrote: "That introduces some problems, doesn't it. First off, you are at least subject to your own visual parameters: were you blind, existence would be quite different."

Actually, existence would be same. What would be different is the form in which one is aware of it. A blind person would not be aware of existence visually. But if he can feel, hear, touch and taste, he would still be aware of the same thing. If I look at a pizza, and then put it to my tongue and taste it, I am perceiving the same thing. What I see and what I am tasting are not two different objects, they are the same object, and the two different sense modalities give me awareness of the same object in different forms.

J wrote: "If you had like the eyes of a preying mantis, and were 20 feet tall, life would be quite different: so at least perception is subject to human's neurological and biological innateness, and also to your own subjective perceptions, and indeed to environmental and cultural factors (including different languages)."

Perception, whether it is that of a human being or a praying mantis, is objective. Perception has a causal nature, one which is not subject to volition. A blind man cannot choose to see a pizza, and I cannot choose to see a pizza in place of a bowl of oatmeal. You might want to read David Kelley's *The Evidence of the Senses* (LSU, 1986) to get a better understanding of the issues you're discussing.

J wrote: "That may seem trivial, but that presents a problem to 'objectivism' how do you determine whether your perceptions, or Rand's or anyone's are the same, or mostly the same?"

Why would we need to? I doubt Rand perceived many of the things I've perceived, and I'm quite certain I did not perceive many of the things that Rand perceived. I do not make the claim that my perceptions are identical to anyone else's. But concepts overcome this, because they are open-ended. Rand perceived buildings, and I've perceived buildings. The buildings she perceived are different from the ones I've perceived, but because we have the concept 'building' to refer to similar things generally, this is not a problem. So the "problem" you seem to have in mind here is overcome on the conceptual level of cognition.

J wrote: "And how does a perception fit into an equation or logical argument: one can insist, we all perceive the same world, but that claim requires a lot more work than simply insisting on it. Newton saw the sun differently than his chambermaid did."

Perceptions won't fit into equations unless they are first integrated into conceptual form. But since we have a theory of concepts, this hurdle has been overcome. Newton and his chambermaid actually perceived the same object when they looked up at the sun. The difference between them was the difference in the contextual sum of knowledge into which they integrated that and any other perception they experienced.

J wrote: "Making an existence claim also is a mental act: which is itself not perceivable. It's sort of the problem Locke has when trying to account for how knowledge of various common ideas or concepts--say quantity, mathematics, or even logic come about."

Locke would have benefited well from Rand's theory of concepts. So would everyone else.

J wrote: "The objectivists generally completely overlook those abstractions (and indeed the possibility of a priori truths) and the problems of knowledge acquisition. It's not so much Miss Rand's conclusions that many object to:

it's the makeshift way she and her groupies reached them.”

I see. They don't like the way she reached her conclusions because she did not appeal to so-called “a priori truths”? That's actually good news for Objectivists.

Regards,  
Dawson

[January 24, 2009 2:01 PM](#)

[J](#) said...

Here's another tactic, somewhat Popperian (I bet even Aynnie read a bit of Karl Popper):

If some type of knowledge-claims cannot be in principle falsified (modified, refuted, revised), then it is dogma. Popper held that was the difference between science and religion, whether tradition, or mystical. I suggest Objectivism, while not completely irrational, tends to dogma rather than scientific knowledge. A few objectivists do mention Newton and other scientists, but on the whole it seems more like a type of ersatz religion than science (or philosophy, really).

[January 24, 2009 4:51 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

J wrote: "I suggest Objectivism, while not completely irrational, tends to dogma rather than scientific knowledge. A few objectivists do mention Newton and other scientists, but on the whole it seems more like a type of ersatz religion than science (or philosophy, really)."

You might try another "tactic," such as actually getting familiar with Objectivism and what it teaches, from its primary sources. To say that Objectivism "tends to dogma" or that "it seems like a type of ersatz religion" suggests that you're getting your information about Objectivism from secondhand sources that are themselves poorly informed about Objectivism and dogmatically antagonistic to it.

Keep in mind that the only alternative to Objectivism, is some form of subjectivism.

Regards,  
Dawson

[January 24, 2009 5:36 PM](#)

[J](#) said...

Your response misses the point, as usual. I've read Peikoff's material quite closely, and read the Fountainhead back in the day. Have you read, say, Bertrand Russell's Principles of Mathematics, or Wittgenstein's Tractatus, or Einstein, or Hilbert's axioms, or Quine's "On What there is," and "Two dogmas of Empiricism," or Popper's Open society? I mean, relying on Ayn Rand, a screenwriter, and her disciples, including the Mysterious Mr Peikoff for your philosophy (and ideology as a whole) seems a bit naive doesn't it?

Rand didn't invent the wheel: in fact i just re-perused some of Peikoff's material, and he affirms the Tabula Rasa! Wow. So Rand was a crypto-Locke, and thus all the points contra-empiricism (ie Hume's points on induction) still apply. That said, I actually agree to empirical realism--the world exists independently of our minds and senses--and even to naturalist ontology (with reservations), but one doesn't just say it's True, but *proves* it.

Moreover, in this age of the CPU, Rand's pep talks seem rather outdated, as is her laissez faire at-any-cost economics (yes, say grazi to Randian econ for the Lending crisis, and Bailout, really; that resulted from de-reg across the board. Then given "Greed Rules" a Randian shouldn't really mind. Aynnie really wanted to bring back the Czar, methinks ).

[January 24, 2009 5:50 PM](#)

[RLE](#) said...

Dawson-

"when Objectivists say 'existence exists' they are affirming the existence of everything that exists. "

(1) There cannot be such a *thing* as "existence", not even a concept.

i) It would be analogous to saying "world exists" or "matter exist".

ii) These are universal concepts that can't have meaning given your hyper-empiricism. They are non-sense words in your philosophy.

iii) You don't look out your front door and see "**world, matter, or existence**". All you can see is "a" tree, "a" car, "a" person, etc

(2) Objectivism is not "off the hook" with its radical empiricism either. In other words, it can't answer skepticism better than any other philosophy can, in fact it leaves one in a state of skepticism!

i) Given that you don't have eyes in the back of your head, once you perceive an object with your eyes and then look away does it still exist without looking back at it? How can you be certain?

ii) To say "existence exists" would beg the question. Because at best all you can be certain exist on this scheme of things is one exist"tent" at a time, that is being perceived at that very instance. You are a nominalist.

(3) You have fallen into Berkeley's trap of idealism-*esse est percipi*

At least that's how it appears to me

[January 24, 2009 5:54 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

J wrote: "I've read Peikoff's material quite closely, and read the Fountainhead back in the day."

The objections you raised above indicate that you did not understand what you read very well, for there were some key points that were in sore need of correction.

J wrote: "Have you read, say, Bertrand Russell's Principles of Mathematics, or Wittgenstein's Tractatus, or Einstein, or Hilbert's axioms, or Quine's "On What there is," and "Two dogmas of Empiricism," or Popper's Open society?"

I've read lots of things, some of the authors you mention here, plus many others. So what? I still think Objectivism is true.

J wrote: "Rand didn't invent the wheel:"

I don't know anyone who has claimed that Rand did invent the wheel. So what relevance is this?

J wrote: "in fact i just re-perused some of Peikoff's material, and he affirms the Tabula Rasa!"

You're just discovering this now? I thought you said you had read Peikoff's material "quite closely."

J wrote: "So Rand was a crypto-Locke,"

A "crypto-Locke"?

J wrote: "and thus all the points contra-empiricism (ie Hume's points on induction) still apply."

Clearly you do not know what you're talking about. Hume's points on induction were a logical outcome of his faulty premises, namely that knowledge begins with sensations (wrong), that perceptions are selectively pieced together (wrong), that concepts are arbitrary (wrong), that causality is event-based (wrong), etc. See Kelley's "Universals and Induction" - you'll see how the Aristotelian view of causality and Rand's theory of concepts corrects Hume's mistakes in this area. It's actually a very fascinating topic.

As for the rest of your screed, it's not worth responding to.

Regards,  
Dawson

[January 24, 2009 6:20 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

RLE wrote: "(1) There cannot be such a *thing* as "existence", not even a concept."

Why not? Did you see the part about existence being a collective noun denoting the sum of all existents?

RLE wrote: "(i) It would be analogous to saying 'world exists' or 'matter exist'."

What's wrong with that?

RLE wrote: "(ii) These are universal concepts that can't have meaning given your hyper-empiricism. They are non-sense words in your philosophy."

"Hyper-empiricism"? You apparently don't know what you're talking about.

RLE: "(iii) You don't look out your front door and see '*world, matter, or existence*'."

How do you know what I see or don't see? I see existence all around me, even before I look out my front door.

RLE wrote: "All you can see is 'a' tree, 'a' car, 'a' person, etc."

I do see these, and more. All are existence.

RLE wrote: "(2) Objectivism is not 'off the hook' with its radical empiricism either."

What "radical empiricism"?

RLE wrote: "In other words, it can't answer skepticism better than any other philosophy can, in fact it leaves one in a state of skepticism!"

You're confused. You might want to check out the brief dialogue I quoted from Peikoff in [this blog](#).

RLE wrote: "(i) Given that you don't have eyes in the back of your head, once you perceive an object with your eyes and then look away does it still exist without looking back at it? How can you be certain?"

It depends on what it is. If it's a sandwich on my neighbor's plate, it may in fact be gone after I have turned away.

RLE wrote: "(ii) To say 'existence exists' would beg the question."

It can't beg the question, since it's not the conclusion of an argument.

RLE wrote: "Because at best all you can be certain exist on this scheme of things is one existant" at a time, that is being perceived at that very instance."

Where does Objectivism teach this?

RLE wrote: "You are a nominalist."

Wrong. Read *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*.

RLE wrote: "(3) You have fallen into Berkeley's trap of idealism-*esse est percipi*"

How so? We reject any expression of the primacy of consciousness, and we have a theory of concepts. You might want to familiarize yourself with what Objectivism teaches before trying to critique it.

Regards,  
Dawson

[January 24, 2009 6:23 PM](#)

[J](#) said...

*Hume....namely that knowledge begins with sensations (wrong),*

Care to prove that? In fact, Peikoff admits that, ala his points via the tabula rasa.

Alas you don't even understand the non-innateness of the tabula rasa (which implies....knowledge begins with sensations). It's not Berkeley the Randian empiricists have to deal with, but Humean empiricism (for starters). You deny a priori truths, AND you deny "a posteriori" truths? (and Hume's point on empiricism "no ideas without antecedent impressions") . So you are the skeptics.

[January 24, 2009 6:52 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

J asked: "Care to prove that?"

Knowledge begins with perception, not sensation. Our physiology automatically integrates sensations into percepts, so we begin at the perceptual level of cognition. I thought you had studied Peikoff closely?

J wrote: "In fact, Peikoff admits that, ala his points via the tabula rasa."

Can you show where Peikoff says we start with sensations as opposed to perception? If you've studied Objectivism, you'd know the difference.

J wrote: "Alas you don't even understand the non-innateness of the tabula rasa (which implies....knowledge begins with sensations)."

Perhaps now you know better?

J wrote: "It's not Berkeley the Randian empiricists have to deal with, but Humean empiricism (for starters)."

What specifically do you think we need to "deal with," and why? Do you know that it has not already been dealt with?

J wrote: "You deny a priori truths, AND you deny 'a posteriori' truths?"

We do not deny a posteriori truths; all truths are a posteriori.

Again, it's clear you have not understood Objectivism very well, if in fact you have read any of its primary

sources.

Regards,  
Dawson

[January 24, 2009 7:27 PM](#)

[Justin Hall](#) said...

Man I leave for a while and look what fun I miss. Dawson there has been great entertainment value in watching these two thrash around with there straw-men arguments. I look forward to what comes next.

Oh and a point raised earlier, "So the disasters of the 20th century originated in the evasion by people like Hitler and Stalin of the fact that A is A! This is just silly". Well Hitler did choose to ignore the fact that our rights are moral principles derived from the fact that we are conscious beings who's actions are not automatic, thus requiring a guide to action. The Jews of Germany and all the other victims of his reign were no different then the Germans in this regard. So in other words they had just as much a right to live as the Germans. Another whopper of a failure to accept A is A is when he launched an attack on the Soviet Union, a country with 2 and a half times Germany's population and twice the industrial might, all the while still fighting a war with Britain that was not going so well. Yeah I would say he had a problem with A being A. I have as of late been coming to the conclusion that the root of all evil is in fact a failure to acknowledge that A is A.

[January 24, 2009 10:41 PM](#)

[john](#) said...

Dawson,

Well, I got too close to the edge of the black hole over at Vallicella et al and have now delightfully been banned.  
[http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick\\_philosopher/2009/01/ayn-rand-on-necessity-and-contingency.html](http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick_philosopher/2009/01/ayn-rand-on-necessity-and-contingency.html)

The challenge was that the onus is on the APs/Kantians to justify their schisms, not for Objectivism to conform to them. That apparently was the final straw.

I can't locate an email address for you, so I'll ask here in the forum: I have a final parting closure letter for the guy. It is firm, not smarmy but confrontive. May I post it here (I am posting it in various Objectivist locations with permission)? You can delete it if objectionable.

John Donohue  
Pasadena, CA

[January 24, 2009 11:19 PM](#)

[john](#) said...

By the way, Mr. Vallicella has proffered a brand new ploy at presupposing God's existence.  
[http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick\\_philosopher/2009/01/why-god-cannot-be-the-creator-of-the-universe.html](http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick_philosopher/2009/01/why-god-cannot-be-the-creator-of-the-universe.html)

He scrounged around until he found a split second when Dr. Peikoff was using irony to point out the absurdity of asking the void question "could God have created existence", then Vallicella pointed to it as if Leonard had seriously assumed the existence of God. He then proposed a (i think) serious challenge to his posse to ask if the point Leonard, sans irony, was making about God's various powers was a good argument or not. Incredibly, one Analytic Philosopher actually posted a long chain of AP mumbo jumbo in an attempt to chew on the subject, and others are now critiquing the argument.

Just astonishing.

You have to admit, however, the ingenious gambit. Vallicella is obviously an advanced player. His enormous capacity to avoid all actual engagement of his root position is matched by his offensive trickery. Notice how subtle this is:

"Peikoff is arguing that God cannot be the creator of the universe because..... [blah blah blah]"

This is not accurate. In fact, Peikoff has just claimed that there is absolutely no basis for God whatever; THAT is what he is arguing. Peikoff followed with a chain of rhetorical postulates exemplifying how attempting to argue or discuss God only goes to expose the absurdity. So Vallicella lifts that one chunk of a formulation out of Peikoff, safe that he can put it in quotations, and crudely pastes it in place on his blog to very quietly insinuate that Peikoff has assumed God (not to mention to smuggle in at the very least the presupposition that existence was created) and is just speculating on His capabilities. Then, notice the title of this page: "Why God Cannot be the Creator of the Universe" which is an attempt to hold the focus on 'well let's argue what God can or cannot do, as this Peikoff guy did' and take the focus off the real issue: that the notion of God is void altogether, in the first place.

In my opinion, the Kantian position is as bankrupt as ever. There is nothing new over there. It is just Kant. However, the enormous hubris of their fallacious Appeal To Authority (they sit totally astride the belief that AP IS philosophy) combined with centuries of deploying the Kantian apparatus is not to be underestimated. I mean, we only have reality, science and Ayn Rand on our side.

John Donohue  
Pasadena, CA

[January 25, 2009 1:07 AM](#)

[J](#) said...

*Knowledge begins with perception, not sensation.*

That's according to Guru Rand--not according to empiricism (or empirical psychology). Blind men don't do geometry (or invent it), Later with much work, a blind person might learn of geometrical relations somehow, say via braille: regardless there's sensation involved--vision, for one. Or touching, via braille, in the few cases a blind person learns geometry (or physics, etc.), or listening via the ears. That's sensation.

So, as Hume says: knowledge begins with sensation--he calls it impressions. "no ideas (ie thoughts and concepts--knowledge) without antecedent impressions." Perception follows sensation (though often closely related, and often used synonymously), and is a more cognitive act.

Hume's schema is not perfect (tho often misread), but far more reasoned and thought out (even if his conclusions are not comforting to many) than Guru Rand's system. Objectivists are really faced with the same problems that Hume was (proving we have various types of knowledge of the external world), but simply ignore them via superficial generalizations: yo, existence exists

[January 25, 2009 2:55 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

John wrote: "I can't locate an email address for you, so I'll ask here in the forum: I have a final parting closure letter for the guy. It is firm, not smarmy but confrontive. May I post it here (I am posting it in various Objectivist locations with permission)?"

Be my guest, John! Let 'er rip! I look forward to reading it.

Oh, and congrats on getting banned over at "maverick philosopher." See it as a trophy of sorts.

Regards,  
Dawson



[January 25, 2009 10:49 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

I wrote: *Knowledge begins with perception, not sensation.*

J responded: "That's according to Guru Rand--not according to empiricism (or empirical psychology)."

Objectivists are not Humean empiricists, J. Again you stand corrected. There is a significant distinction between the level of sensations and the level of perceptions. I thought you had read Peikoff closely?

J wrote: "Blind men don't do geometry (or invent it),"

No blind men do geometry? Not one? Really?

J wrote: "Later with much work, a blind person might learn of geometrical relations somehow, say via braille: regardless there's sensation involved--vision, for one."

Sure sensation is involved. No one said it isn't. Perception integrates individual sensations into percepts, so that we have awareness of entities qua entities, rather than awareness of momentary, passing sensations. Our vision is not merely sensation, it is perception. When you see a book, a car, a tree or a man, you have awareness of these objects as distinct entities, not as a collection of unrelated sensations.

J wrote: "Or touching, via braille, in the few cases a blind person learns geometry (or physics, etc.), or listening via the ears. That's sensation."

Actually, it's perception. The blind man who reads Braille can distinguish each letter pattern from the next, perceiving each one as a distinct entity, not as a mere passing series of unrelated sensations. If that were the case, Braille would be useless. Indeed, Braille confirms my point rather than serves as a counterexample to it. Again, if you had familiarity with Objectivism as you had claimed, you should not need this explained to you.

J wrote: "So, as Hume says: knowledge begins with sensation--he calls it impressions. 'no ideas (ie thoughts and concepts--knowledge) without antecedent impressions'. Perception follows sensation (though often closely related, and often used synonymously), and is a more cognitive act."

That's true: Hume did say we begin with sensations, as I had pointed out earlier. Where Hume erred is in thinking that perception is a volitional faculty, that we selectively piece together individual sensations to assemble percepts of entities. That's not true. Perception is not volitional, it is automatic. We don't consciously piece together individual sensations to give us awareness of entities qua entities; this is a built-in pre-conceptual operation. Again, I suggest you take a look at Kelley's *The Evidence of the Senses* for some more intelligence on the matter.

J wrote: "Hume's schema is not perfect (tho often misread), but far more reasoned and thought out (even if his conclusions are not comforting to many) than Guru Rand's system."

It is, eh? Why did Hume get so many things wrong then? And why did it take Rand to correct him?

J wrote: "Objectivists are really faced with the same problems that Hume was (proving we have various types of knowledge of the external world), but simply ignore them via superficial generalizations: yo, existence exists"

J, it's getting old having to correct you over and over and over again. Do you have any points to make that are truly tenable?

Regards,  
Dawson

[January 25, 2009 10:53 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

By the way, John, my e-mail address is:

sortion@hotmail.com

Feel free any time!

Regards,  
Dawson

[January 25, 2009 10:58 AM](#)

[john](#) said...

re:

[http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick\\_philosopher/2009/01/ayn-rand-on-necessity-and-contingency.html](http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick_philosopher/2009/01/ayn-rand-on-necessity-and-contingency.html)

This is my closure "Dear Bill letter." Thanks to Dawson for permission to post here.

1.25.2009

Dear Bill Vallicella,

Hilariously, you have now blocked me from posting at your website/blog. Your reasons are laughable. The laughs just deepen as you and your followers chide Objectivism's supposed dogmatism from inside the solid iron straight-jacket of your system.

I learned a lot from this encounter about how easy it is to expose the insane, ingrown emptiness of Analytic Philosophy. Your people went ballistic and absurd immediately on the arrival of smart Objectivists. They acted shamefully. So did you. Ridicule, bluster and standing on your orthodoxy are not arguments, and you already know the names of the fallacies in play.

While you were more cool and actually posted a few things that vaguely smacked of both understanding Ayn Rand and responding in a fair discussion, you still avoided addressing my real challenges. Then, finally, yesterday I made it too blatant and you could not avoid. Your post in response is full of holes. I'd love to drive a bulldozer right through, but alas you now decline my posts.

You avoid facing that your position is bankrupt. You cannot prove the existence of God, the 'supernatural' and any/all other a priori faith beliefs, and the entire Kantian system exists only to hide that fact. It exists to hide the root axiomatic beliefs of the radical skeptic, as well, but this encounter was obviously with apologies for God. You are probably aware that my arguments have been and would continue to narrow focus on that. Hence the ban.

Ayn Rand had an insight full of pathos in her novels. Yes, her millions-best-seller-decade-after-decade novels (oh shame\*). To paraphrase: 'If you are living in fear your enemy is potent, secure and vast, too formidable for you, imagine your surprise when on confronting you find its just a scared little rat scurrying around in the corner.'

By the way, certain Objectivists [I speak only for myself specifically] are gathering forces to be ready in case the APs make another attempt to vandalize the Wikipedia posting on Ayn Rand. Those already in place at least stopped the AP sneak attack in the introduction, and eventually we will get a reversal to the normal article.

Adios. Irony intended.

John Donohue  
Pasadena, CA

\*The outrageous sales record of Ayn Rand's books is not meant to be an argument to refute Presuppositionalism;

read Mr. Dawson's blog or email me for that refutation. The sales comment is happily admitted to be merely a joyful indulgence in rubbing it in.

[January 25, 2009 11:50 AM](#)

[john](#) said...

By the way, the "Analysis" of an absurd proposition dishonestly attributed to Dr. Peikoff has really accelerated. It is just jaw-dropping astonishing.

[http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick\\_philosopher/2009/01/why-god-cannot-be-the-creator-of-the-universe.html](http://maverickphilosopher.typepad.com/maverick_philosopher/2009/01/why-god-cannot-be-the-creator-of-the-universe.html)

I previously said 'there was nothing new over there' but may have to retract.

I think they surpass the achievements of the Mediaevals in their toils to ascertain the number of angels that can fit on the head of a pin.

John Donohue  
Pasadena, CA

[January 25, 2009 12:10 PM](#)

[john](#) said...

Okay, now to ask Mr. Dawson....

Hume famously declares induction to be a fallacy. I've also recently seen that Subjectivists completely bury the issue of concept formation (because that would have to admit induction) and deploy various methods of getting the definitions in.

For instance "divine revelation." Okay, lets let that one drift for the moment!

Of course, sliding all definitions into a priori status by the wrangling of the various Kantian schisms is the other gambit. But the outright brazen claim that induction is fallacious, expounded by Hume, kicked up by Popper (Popper not only rejects induction, he apparently says science does not actually use it. He must not be aware of context)....how can they get away with it, since all of science requires concepts/definitions to be proven through induction, embedded in context?

(if you have already responded to this, please just link the page in your writings so I can look at that first.)

John Donohue  
Pasadena, CA

[January 25, 2009 12:26 PM](#)

[J](#) said...

*J wrote: "Objectivists are really faced with the same problems that Hume was (proving we have various types of knowledge of the external world), but simply ignore them via superficial generalizations: yo, existence exists"*

*J, it's getting old having to correct you over and over and over again. Do you have any points to make that are truly tenable?*

You're not correcting anyone, merely chanting the Objectivist dogma. I don't think you understand the point--though if all your "philosophy" comes from Rand, you don't really understand philosophical disputation.

Sensations and perceptions are not quantifiable, or even observable. When a witness sees a crime--say a robbery-- his visual senses receive it, and he in some sense perceives it. Yet we have no access to his perception:

you can't read minds. He might call the cops, he might not.

It seems that humans have a certain commonality of perception, but saying that is not philosophy: the claim needs backing and evidence. By simply insisting on "existents" you are nearly as dogmatic as the theists. Hume, unlike Rand, acknowledges the problem: there's no easy way to prove (ie via logic, or mathematics, or even science) that our perceptions correspond to an external reality: yes we can posit, agree to that--but that is not proof. (and psychological research also shows a certain relativism in regards to perception. Read Milgram's study on obedience, and similar research).

There's an "agency" issue as well to perception, especially in regards to skill. A good samaritan might see an injured person, and make the wrong diagnosis, say in regards to a broken bone. A doctor would on the other hand do the right thing. so again, the good samaritan and the Doctor have different perceptions of the same event. In fact the law recognizes that.

[January 25, 2009 1:02 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

J wrote: "Hume, unlike Rand, acknowledges the problem: there's no easy way to prove (ie via logic, or mathematics, or even science) that our perceptions correspond to an external reality: yes we can posit, agree to that--but that is not proof."

Why would anyone need to "prove" that our perceptions correspond to an external reality? Even the notion "external reality" is somewhat misleading, suggesting that consciousness is not part of reality. Consciousness is part of reality. Perception is perception of objects. Do you think that the objects you perceive are not real? How could you perceive them if they were not real? Your dilemma also misconstrues the purpose of proof. The purpose of proof is to trace conclusions ultimately back to the perceptual level of cognition, for that is the given that we start with. We don't have to "prove" that perceptions "correspond to external reality" any more than we need to prove that digestion is digestion of food. There's plenty of scientific research which explains the causality of perception, so this is not at all a problem. It was for Hume, but certainly not for Objectivists.

J wrote: "There's an 'agency' issue as well to perception, especially in regards to skill. A good samaritan might see an injured person, and make the wrong diagnosis, say in regards to a broken bone. A doctor would on the other hand do the right thing. so again, the good samaritan and the Doctor have different perceptions of the same event. In fact the law recognizes that."

The scenario you describe actually shifts the issue from perception to identification. The former is pre-conceptual, the latter is conceptual. That introduces a whole new ball game, and that's where Rand's theory of concepts comes into play.

Again, you're only showing what you do not know about Objectivism. If you think you're making points, it's not against Objectivism.

Regards,  
Dawson

[January 25, 2009 1:16 PM](#)

[J](#) said...

*Why would anyone need to "prove" that our perceptions correspond to an external reality? Even the notion "external reality" is somewhat misleading, suggesting that consciousness is not part of reality.*

That's a philosophical problem. Not parlor chat at the Chez Aynnie. Better to prove it, or attempt to prove it, rather than assume it as a point of faith: besides, it's sort of important. Say in regards to economics (as well as psychology), which depends on the so-called rational man standard. There's evidence that the standard does not hold: many people are not rational, even at level of say consumer choices--they make irrational choices, which are not in their best interest, depending on marketing, or different contexts, etc. So, the econ. texts are not

accurate--nor is the Objectivist who insists on rationality. Twersky wrote on this issue.

For that matter, given different ways of perceiving the world (ie say inner city hood, vs. oh, wealthy westsider), then people would probably view the world, differently, right? They have been conditioned differently. In fact social psychology deals with that problem.

[January 25, 2009 1:31 PM](#)

[J](#) said...

*Perception is perception of objects. Do you think that the objects you perceive are not real?*

What about reading say history of WWI or WWII: what is being perceived there? We perceive some words and sentences, and then match the sentences to ..what? Our abstractions of history, or concepts if you like of what happened. But no way to prove (or verify really) that the writtten history matches the facts (a point Bertrand Russell often made via knowledge by acquaintance, and knowledge by description).

So there are not direct referents (or existents, in randSpeak) when reading a history book (or really say Moby Dick either). Not quite the same as perceiving say the caviar next to the aquavit at the Objectivist soiree, is it. Ta ta

[January 25, 2009 1:41 PM](#)

[Justin Hall](#) said...

J

there is an element of argument from authority when dealing with history, we grand authority status to historians and such. However this is a way of for the sake of expediency of glossing over the inductive arguments in support of history. There are archaeological sites all over modern Russia on the sites of battles eye witnesses have recorded, there are actual government documents, tho not so much in the Russian's case. There is equipment still in existence today and theres our current geo political situation all best explained if in fact WWII took place and took place in the manor recorded. Think of it as multiple lines of argumentation that do not contradict each other and all arrive at the same conclusion. Thus the simplest inductive answer in good old Occam fashion is WWII happened. Objectivism makes a clear distinction between the perceptually self event and the inductive. They represent two forms of knowledge. However if induction is a fallacy aka Hume, then I guess I cant say anything about anything except whats right in front of my face at the moment I say it :)

By the way, thanks to all involved in this thread, I have been motivated to reread what I know of Hume and am gaining a better in depth understanding of his philosophy.

[January 25, 2009 2:27 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

J wrote: "Not parlor chat at the Chez Aynnie."

Are comments like this really necessary? They do not add to your points, do they?

J wrote: "Better to prove it, or attempt to prove it, rather than assume it as a point of faith:"

Proof and accepting something on faith are not exhaustive. There are such things as axiomatic truths. The validity of the senses is an axiom; there is no need to "prove" that they are valid. Any proof presupposes their validity. This is basic rational philosophy 101 stuff.

J wrote: "So, the econ. texts are not accurate--nor is the Objectivist who insists on rationality."

I see. So you instead insist on irrationality?

J wrote: "For that matter, given different ways of perceiving the world (ie say inner city hood, vs. oh, wealthy westsider), then people would probably view the world, differently, right? They have been conditioned differently."

Sounds like some cheap collectivist ideology to me. Try treating human individuals as individuals for a change.

Regards,  
Dawson

[January 25, 2009 3:19 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

John wrote: "But the outright brazen claim that induction is fallacious, expounded by Hume, kicked up by Popper (Popper not only rejects induction, he apparently says science does not actually use it. He must not be aware of context)"

The claim that induction is fallacious, suspiciously looks like the conclusion of an inductive argument. It is essentially saying that all instances of inductive reasoning are fallacious. But if induction is in fact fallacious, why should we trust this conclusion? I suspect that the confusion behind such claims can be traced back to a faulty understanding of concepts. Conceptual integration provides the human mind with a working model for inductive generalization.

I discuss induction in the comments section of [Presuppositionalism and the Argument from Ignorance](#). You'll see that the theist who engages me on the matter there was not very open to considering a new perspective on the matter. His loss.

Regards,  
Dawson

[January 25, 2009 3:22 PM](#)

[Justin Hall](#) said...

This post has been removed by the author.

[January 26, 2009 10:06 AM](#)

[Justin Hall](#) said...

Concerning the claim that all induction is a fallacy.

Dawson, could not the defenders of Hume claim that its a deductive argument instead that concludes with all induction is a fallacy. Thus avoiding the fallacy of begging the question. I am not saying this is the case however it occurred to me that this line of argumentation might be tried.

I deleted my earlier post because it would challenge the best of us to decipher its grammar:)

[January 26, 2009 10:15 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hi Justin,

I would think that they could try to establish such a conclusion deductively. They could try virtually anything I suppose. But what would the premises of such a deduction be? And how did they establish those premises? The conclusion "induction is fallacious" seems very generalized, such that it allows for no exceptions. I.e., "all instances of inductive inference are fallacious." If that is what is being argued, I'd like to see how such a

conclusion can be reached without using induction at any point in its contextual support. In that case, while they may try to deploy a deductive argument to establish the conclusion that induction is fallacious, it seems that this would simply push the question back a step, into an examination of said argument's premises.

I'm open to considering that at root of such pronouncements, there lies some confusion about the nature of induction in the first place. Bnonn Tennant seems to think induction is informally fallacious, while Clarkian presuppositionalists claim that it is formally fallacious. These are two very different claims. But from what I have seen, neither party seems to have a very good grasp of the conceptual basis of induction, and that is the key to a fuller understanding of induction. It may also be due to a rather Procrustean interpretation of validity. For instance, Tennant supported his claim about induction being fallacious by simply quoting an encyclopedia (of all things) which says induction is "a type of nonvalid inference or argument." The quoted text does not give any argument for this conclusion. I guess for Tennant, whichever text he prefers is infallible. Then again, he told John Donohue that "existence exists" is "not actually true." So for him, there is no existence. No wonder he has chosen not to interact with [my blog](#). He also said that "there's no certainty in [Objectivism]." This overlooks the fact that we begin with certainties. The mock dialogue which I quoted from Peikoff's OPAR in [my blog](#) shows that one cannot deny the axioms without assuming or resting on their truth. But I digress.

Hope that helps, but maybe it just generates more questions?

Regards,  
Dawson

[January 26, 2009 11:08 AM](#)

[Justin Hall](#) said...

thank you, that clarifies the issue somewhat and gives me something to further research. I admit I am hazing on what distinguishes between formal and informal fallacies so I have to read up on that. Would it be fair to say that ultimately all deduction is a form of or based on prior induction. For as you pointed out the premises have to be validated and that no matter how far removed must start with perception of something, in other words existence.

[January 26, 2009 12:32 PM](#)

[Justin Hall](#) said...

er hazy, not hazing,:) dusted off my Irving M. Copi Introduction to Logic. well gives me something to do. Thanks again

[January 26, 2009 12:36 PM](#)

[john](#) said...

I am looking into the role of Popper here. He is addicted to the usual Kantian schisms, it seems. He throws a tremendous number of things into the category of only being open to a priori truth.

I found this to be useful:

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/popper/>

Section 3 on demarcation is the interesting matter.

So his tack is: out with induction altogether. Make the claim that even science does not actually engage induction. But unlike the complete skeptic Hume, instead, toss in his famous new term "falsifiability" and say that all science can do is "somehow" come up with hypotheses and then test them over and over again with deduction. Then there is further despair on even validating the point at which falsifiability is reached. Popper says the propositions cannot be arrived at logically, you need intuition, and even Einstein is trotted out to declare his disbelief in induction.

I think to sum up, rather than fix induction by grasping context and bounds and proper rational concept formation,

this is some other faint grasping at a thin and poor explanation of how science goes about its business. It certainly is congruent with the postmodern attack, under which all things are arbitrary power constructs, with just the faintest nod to the remote echo of some tiny universality in the really hard sciences, and 'we will eventually show that to be subjective too.'

I can only put so much energy into understanding the Kantian apparatus. It hurts my brain.

John Donohue  
Pasadena, CA

[January 26, 2009 1:33 PM](#)

[john](#) said...

notice here:

<http://skepchick.org/skepticsguide/index.php?topic=15985.15>

These guys keep claim we old school people don't "get it" that induction is dead. And they bring up the swan example.

I like the swan example, too, because it illustrates Objectivist concept formation in contextual knowledge. Hopefully i can find time tonight to write that up. I've wanted to for a long time.

John Donohue

[January 26, 2009 2:04 PM](#)

[madmax](#) said...

John,

Harry Binswanger has commented on the swan arguments for denying induction for HBL. It has been some time since I read his answer to it though. I think it comes down to a rational theory of concept formation but in brief, a white swan does not destroy induction, it just means that our previous definition of swans needs to be modified in light of new knowledge.

Also, Binswanger has engaged the Maverick Philosopher. He posted his response on HBL. His approach seems to be a polite one. I think HB just wants to show that Rand was a serious philosophical thinker and possibly reach one or two people. I respect Binswanger and he knows his stuff, but I doubt he'll convince anyone at MP's site. The committed skeptic and Kantians are, IMO, unreachable.

Lastly, fascinating stuff about Karl Popper. So many people, especially in the sciences worship Popper. They think he was a great defender of science. But, as I understand him, he was a great destroyer of science as he basically helped in further undercutting induction and unleashing skepticism.

So many science oriented types I know or read will make statements like "you can never prove a hypothesis, you can only disprove a hypothesis." My guess is that Popper's entire system consists of stolen concepts, package deals, and other logical fallacies. I hope an Objectivist philosopher writes a good dissection of Popper one day.

[January 27, 2009 3:11 PM](#)

[john](#) said...

Madmax,

Good information.

Yes, I see the Binswanger post over there and I made some comments on it at [Gus Van Horn](#) this morning. I am 100% behind Harry, but that is way too polite! He should at least strive to beat me in 'quickest to be banned by



Kantians! [just kidding]

Affirmed on the swan illustration. The reason I feel it is a good candidate for rebuttal is that it illustrates the finite! The finite with certainty inside the context. Because Presuppositionalist want either God or Radical Skepticism at the root, they consider anything short of infinite perfection in certainty cheap, stupid and useless. And amateurish. Beneath them.

Anyone who needs infinite perfection in cognition without context and bounds has not accepted objective reality; they have not fully incarnated.

I completely agree with you on Popper. He has too much popularity for an ordinary Kantian with a new wrinkle (falsifiability). He is an enabler of post-modernism. I think he is popular because of his political/social beliefs and that gets him fans of his 'epistemology.' Someone should take him on. (Maybe our host the esteemed Incinerator?)

Well, I don't have time to work on my swan idea for a few days, nor another idea I call the "Rewind Illusion" about Gould's thought experiment as a red herring. Practical life is in my path until the weekend, I fear.

John Donohue  
Pasadena, CA

[January 27, 2009 4:13 PM](#)

[madmax](#) said...

"Anyone who needs infinite perfection in cognition without context and bounds has not accepted objective reality; they have not fully incarnated."

Awesome line. I'm definitely stealing that one!

"I completely agree with you on Popper. He has too much popularity for an ordinary Kantian with a new wrinkle (falsifiability). He is an enabler of post-modernism. I think he is popular because of his political/social beliefs and that gets him fans of his 'epistemology.'"

He most definitely is an enabler of post-modernism. Essentially all Leftists love Karl Popper. That in itself tells you something. As for his political beliefs, his "open society" seems to be something Leftists would love. Its not "doctrinaire" or "ideological" but "open". Who could be against things that are "open"? Some would say that Popper was advocating Classical Liberalism but I think he gave a great boost to the defenders of the mixed economy welfare state.

Popper's most popular student, George Soros, makes this argument all the time. He says that Laissez-Faire is just like Communism or Fascism: its "too ideological", too wedded to principles. And of course Popper proved that principles and induction don't exist. So we need to find a middle-of-the road way like the semi-managed economy or the semi-welfare state. Soros bases all this on Popper's epistemology.

Popper is in my opinion the greatest carrier of the disease of Kantianism in the 20th century. I would love for our great Incinerator himself to turn his laser beams on Popper at some point in the future if he was so inclined. I would do it myself, but I am just not strong enough on matters epistemological. As you say, practical life gets in the way of me ever really getting into depth on these complicated philosophical subjects.

[January 27, 2009 4:33 PM](#)

[john](#) said...

Thanks and have it with that line! I have to give credit to a guy who first introduced me to the concept of "imperfect incarnation" (people too scared to actually arrive here in existence on existence's terms). He was an entrepreneur, the owner of a gourmet food store on Martha's Vineyard, back in 1977. I'll never forget that day. Since then I've just AynRandized it.

The cool thing is you can use the word "incarnation" without the supernatural. These people just stop their individuation at some point short of the Fourth Plane of Development (Montessori) and turn it over to God.

Meanwhile, don't get me started on Soros. He is a conscious collectivist. MM I am sure you know about his famous article in Atlantic, but for anyone else reading this, here are the links, complete with credit for Popper:

[Link](#)

[Link](#)

John Donohue

[January 27, 2009 6:36 PM](#)