

## Dodging the Subject-Object Relationship

Robert from [Debunking Christianity](#) recently left a most interesting comment to my blog [Stolen Concepts and Intellectual Parasitism](#). In his comment he related his exchange between himself and a Christian in which he (Robert, a non-Christian) spelled out a carefully constructed syllogism against the claim that a creator god exists. The argument that he repeats from his exchange with the Christian defender is clearly influenced by Objectivist thinking, and he also quotes the Christian's reaction to that argument. Robert's argument proceeds as follows:

1. To believe that a theistic creator deity exists and is responsible for reality, the believer must imagine their deity was in some timeless fashion akin to "before" existence alone in a timeless, non-spatial, void without anything. That is alone as a consciousness, conscious of nothing or only itself without time, space, energy, location, dimensions, fields, concepts, knowledge, symbols, perceptions, physical natural law, logic or matter. Believers imagine that their deity was a primordial, immaterial, non-spatial, consciousness that wished existence to instantiate.
2. Consciousness is an irreducible primary.
3. Consciousness at the most common denominative rung on the ladder of complexity consists of awareness of existence.
4. Consciousness of consciousness necessarily requires primary consciousness to first obtain as awareness of existence.
5. Prior to existence there could not have been anything to be aware of.
6. Without anything to be aware of, there could not have been any awareness.
7. Without awareness there could not have been any consciousness.
8. From 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 there could not have been a primordial consciousness prior to existence.
9. Creator gods are defined as primordial consciousness.
10. From 8 and 9 Creator gods cannot exist.

First some comments in response to Robert's argument.

In response to the first premise, he is correct in pointing out that belief that a creator-god exists and created the universe (or reality, the world, or what have you), requires at a base minimum that the believer retreat into his imagination. Just as the believer imagines that his consciousness will survive his death and be transported to a magic kingdom beyond the grave, he also imagines that the deity which created and resides within that magic kingdom also created the universe in which human beings exist and the mechanism, whatever it may be, by which the human soul supposedly traverses from the side of life to the side of death and the alleged realm to which death is thought to serve as a doorway. Robert is also correct in pointing out that the believer relies on his imagination when developing the image of his god in his mind, for it is within his imagination that the believer assembles a mental picture of what his god is like given the descriptive inputs supplied by his religious devotional program. In the case of Christianity, the source of this devotional program is, of course, the Old and New Testaments of the bible. The remaining essence of Robert's first premise is remarkably similar to Anton Thorn's [argument](#) that creator-theism inevitably results in what he calls the fallacy of pure self-reference. This fallacy is committed when a statement refers exclusively to its own referring (Thorn's examples is the statement "This statement is true," wherein the statement referenced is the given statement itself). The same fallacy is committed, Thorn rightly claims, when a form of consciousness is affirmed while prohibiting it from having awareness of anything other than itself. The quotation that Thorn cites from Binswanger is most topical:

Consciousness cannot be purely self-contained. That applies to any specific act of consciousness just as it does to consciousness as a whole. A statement cannot refer only to itself. More precisely, It cannot refer only to

itself qua statement; a statement cannot refer *only* to its own referring. Its own referring to *what*?

It should be easy to spot the “blank out” here. What is denied in such instances is an *object* of consciousness, as if consciousness could exist all by its lonesome, without anything to be conscious of, inhabiting a completely empty void in which no other existent could provide itself as an object to the consciousness in question. The implication here should be obvious: a consciousness which is alleged to have created everything distinct from itself would have had nothing to be conscious of prior to creating anything distinct of itself. Both Thorn and Robert are correct in pointing out that such a scenario would require us to accept a fallacy here. And of course, theists are at a loss as to why one should do this.

Proceeding through Robert’s syllogism, he points out some basic facts about the nature of consciousness which are irrefutable. They are: that consciousness is *irreducible* (premise 2); that essential to consciousness is that it is consciousness of something that exists (premise 3); and that *introspective awareness cannot be primary*, that consciousness can be its own object only if it is a secondary object (premise 4). This latter position does not deny the authenticity of introspection; it simply points out that introspective investigation of conscious activity always involves some object independent of consciousness. For instance, if I think about how I came to the conclusion that running with scissors in one’s hands is dangerous, I could be aware of my own conscious activity only after I was aware of something in the world, something independent of myself, something independent of my awareness. Prior to being able to do this, my senses were active, giving me perceptual awareness of things like scissors and organisms capable of holding and running with them, consequently giving me the option of considering such activity and evaluating it, or ignoring it and going on with some other activity.

Robert’s premise 5 introduces the idea of “prior to existence,” which literally refers to nothing. The reason why premise 5 is important, is because of the absurdity which is implicated by the position to which Robert is responding: if one holds that existence was created by a consciousness, this could only mean that prior to creating existence nothing existed, not even the consciousness which allegedly did the creating. Moreover, if nothing exists (as would be implied by the view that existence was created), then there’d be nothing for consciousness to be aware of. To affirm that existence is a creation of some conscious activity, then, errs in at least two ways: first, it errs by affirming the existence of a conscious being while requiring that nothing exists; and second, it errs by affirming consciousness without anything to be conscious of, which is a contradiction in terms.

Premise 6 simply makes explicit what is already implicit in the foregoing: that the affirmation of a consciousness without anything to be conscious of is self-contradictory. In other words, if there are no objects for a conscious to be aware of, on what basis could one affirm the reality of a consciousness? Blank out. To ignore this kind of question is to ignore the nature of consciousness as such, which means: to ignore the nature of one’s own consciousness, which means: to indulge a fundamental evasion. Premise 7 has a tautological quality to it. It essentially says that if there is no consciousness, there is no consciousness of anything.

Premise 8 wraps up the truths of the prior five premises and draws the inevitable implication that “there could not have been a primordial consciousness prior to existence.” By “primordial consciousness” Robert means something like the Christian means by a supernatural consciousness which is alleged to have created the universe (premise 9). Where ‘universe’ refers to the sum total of everything that exists, then obviously there could be no consciousness outside the universe (or “prior” to the universe, assuming the universe did not at one time exist), for the reasons given up to this point.

Christians may attempt to rebut this argument in a variety of ways, and can be expected to give it their best effort since the argument targets the very fundamentals of god-belief. Robert clipped a portion of one response he got from a Christian, and as one would expect, it’s a valiant effort, but at the end of the day it is quite weak:

*my point is 1) I can have the capacity to be aware of things without actually being aware of anything.*

*We need to make a distinction here:*

*A) Consciousness is having the capacity to be aware of things and*

*B) Consciousness is being aware of things. You sound like you accept B. I accept A.*

*And my second point is 2) Even if B were true, God could be aware of himself. One can be introspectively aware of themselves, their feelings, their thoughts, their character, etc. There is no contradiction there.*

*And my third point 3) Even if B were true, God the Father could be aware of God the Son. ...snip...*

Robert then asked me to comment on how one might best respond to the Christian's points here.

When engaging mystics like the Christian whom Robert engaged, one may find it helpful to focus on the issue by refining the terminology. Thinkers untutored in Objectivism are frequently confused by the sheer breadth of concepts like 'consciousness' and 'existence'. The issue of metaphysical primacy pertains specifically to the relationship between the subject of consciousness and any object(s) that it perceives, observes or considers. I've observed even institutional philosophers (e.g., Parrish, Toner, etc.) get tripped up on this point; the sheer breadth of these concepts seems to lend themselves to a wide variety of interpretations, many of which are not at all what Objectivism has in mind. While the statement "existence exists independent of consciousness" is certainly true as Objectivism understands it, non-Objectivists tend to be lost by it, and I think this is the case not only because non-Objectivists are not in the habit of thinking in terms of essentials (just look at what passes as definitions in their views), but also because these concepts are so wide ('existence' of course being the widest of all concepts). Consequently, what is typically missed by non-Objectivists who participate in such discussions is the question of the relationship between the subject of awareness and the object of awareness. It is this distinction - between the subject and the objects of consciousness - and the relationship between the two, which need to be brought to the surface, for it is precisely here where Christians and other mystics depart from reality. In his comment, Robert referenced Anton Thorn's essay [The Issue of Metaphysical Primacy](#), which is a good place to start for those who are interested in expanding their understanding of this fundamental topic.

Robert's Christian interlocutor seems to have the desire to make the debate revolve around whether consciousness is best conceived as "having the capacity to be aware of things" or as "being aware of things." He seems oblivious to the fact that by introducing this distinction he accomplishes nothing more than delaying the inevitable. For one, the statement that "consciousness is *having* the capacity to be aware of things" would make more sense on a non-supernaturalistic viewpoint. What possesses "the capacity to be aware of things" if not certain biological organisms? And by what means do they have such capacity if not by a central nervous system, a brain, sensory organs, etc.? This would tend to rule out a so-called "immaterial" or "non-physical" being from possessing the capacity denoted here, because on this view consciousness is a capacity of an entity, not an entity in its own right (and I agree: consciousness is an *attribute* of an entity, not an independently existing entity). Perhaps what the Christian meant here was that consciousness is "the capacity to be aware of things," which is at least slightly less problematic for his position, but it is still very much compatible with the Objectivist view. This would seem to have in mind generally the ability to be aware of things. One could say in this respect that mammals are conscious organisms, i.e., they have the ability to be aware of things.

But even then (here comes the inevitable part), when this ability is exercised, it is still awareness *of things*, i.e., *of objects*, and thus a relationship between consciousness and its objects pertains, and it is this relationship, specifically the orientation of this relationship, which the issue of metaphysical primacy isolates and identifies. Objectively speaking, one would not affirm the ability to be aware and qualify this as the ability to be aware of *nothing*, just as, again objectively speaking, one would not affirm that one is aware but is aware of nothing. When a conscious being is aware, it is always aware of *something*, of *some object(s)*. If the Christian disputes this (and many whom I've encountered have), and affirm that consciousness could very well be awareness of nothing (or the capacity to be aware of nothing), this would render consciousness on such an account completely inert and contentless. Even as a capacity, it would be of no consequence whatsoever. So the distinction which the Christian introduces here gains him nothing, and strikes me as a blatant red herring. From what Robert quoted from his exchange, the Christian doesn't even offer any argument for the alternative he prefers.

When the Christian says "I can have the capacity to be aware of things without actually being aware of anything," what could he be describing if not simply a state of unconscious? When we are asleep, for instance, we still have the *ability* or *capacity* to be aware (because we are still alive and our sensory organs, nervous system and brain are still intact), but that ability or capacity is not being exercised. The Christian apparently thinks this point is key to evading Robert's argument. But what does it gain him? He's simply ducking for cover at this point.

The Christian then announces that, even if consciousness is awareness of things (i.e., of objects), then "God could be aware of himself." By this I take him to mean that his god "could be aware of himself" if there's nothing else to be aware of, since the context here is the question of what objects a creator-god, as a conscious being, could have in its awareness prior to creating anything distinct from itself (since every existent distinct from the Christian god is said to have been created by that same god, and it was allegedly conscious prior to creating anything distinct from itself).

The notion of being aware of oneself at the exclusion of anything else, strikes me as utterly fantastic and nonsensical, as a debating point thrown out simply to be contrary or salvage an otherwise untenable position. To say, for instance, that the Christian god, prior to creating any objects distinct from itself, was yet conscious of itself (and thereby conscious only of itself), is to concede that it was not conscious of anything else. The Christian backs himself into a corner by his own dogmatic stipulations. Not only does this acknowledge, albeit in roundabout fashion, that it does not make sense to speak of consciousness without anything to be conscious of, that the subject does in fact require an object.

But when the Christian god is said to be conscious of itself in this respect, prior to creating anything distinct from itself, existing all alone in an utterly empty void, what exactly is it conscious of? Again, we have what in human beings amounts to secondary conscious (introspection, awareness directed inward into its own operations), treated as if it were sufficient as primary consciousness. What exactly serves as the object of consciousness in this case? The Christian may say that his god's *thoughts* are its objects. But again, as we saw above, this simply delays the inevitable: *thoughts of what?* The Christian may say his god's thoughts are thoughts of what it plans to do. Plans to do about what? Round and round and round we go, without the Christian ever making good on the subject-object relationship.

Incidentally, to affirm that, prior to "the beginning" which the Genesis account references, the Christian god was aware only of itself and of nothing else (for there were no other objects yet to be aware of), simply confirms the point that it has no independent standard (something Christian apologists seem willing to affirm), which can only mean that its subjective whim prevails over all else. To call such a being "rational" and its decrees "objective" would commit the fallacy of the stolen concept, because both concepts are premised on the primacy of existence (i.e., of objects which exist independent of consciousness), and yet are applied in a context whose stipulations prohibit all legitimate objectivity whatsoever.

There is also the issue of epistemology which should not be overlooked or discounted. When the believer makes claims like "God the Father could be aware of God the Son," by what means of knowledge could anyone know this to be the case? How does this kind of statement refer to reality? To understand such claims as legitimate knowledge of reality, we would need to understand how it reduces to the perceptual level, which is where our awareness of reality begins. (Those who deny that knowledge of reality begins at the perceptual level of awareness are simply announcing that whatever it is they call knowledge, it is not knowledge of reality.) If claims like "God the Father could be aware of God the Son" are admitted to have any basis in perception, the Christian has no recourse but to appeal to the storybook of the bible as the source of this so-called knowledge. And as we know from reading any storybook, the content of such sources simply excites and inspires the imagination, and what is imagined on the basis of reading stories like those found in the bible, or *The Wizard of Oz*, or *Alice in Wonderland*, can seem real to the reader if his energy is invested in the hope that what he is imagining is real. Social pressure and repetition are of course very effective here, which is why church attendance is so highly stressed in most Christian circles.

In my blog [The Axioms and the Primacy of Existence](#), one of my major points was that our epistemology needs to be compatible with the primacy of existence, since the truth of the primacy of existence is undeniable in human cognition. Believers are often found saying things like "God is real even if you don't believe in Him" or "God's existence is true no matter who denies it." Notice how these statements attempt to make use of the primacy of existence principle, how they borrow from the fundamentals of a worldview fundamentally opposed to the one they're intended to defend. They are essentially saying that something is the case (in this case, "God's existence") independent of anyone's conscious activity - e.g., whether anyone knows it, believes it, wishes otherwise, is disturbed by it, etc. How often do we hear people saying "wishing doesn't make it so"? I've seen even believers making this statement, a statement whose truth can be rightly taken for granted precisely because existence exists independent of consciousness, because of the primacy of objects in the subject-object relationship. Ask the believer who insists that you submit to his indoctrination, whether he thinks his god exists because he *wants* it to exist. He will likely insist that this is not what he has in mind. So even here, he seems implicitly willing, at this point of the conversation anyway, to conform his epistemology to the truth of the primacy of existence principle, even though he has no explicit understanding of this principle. As the discussion proceeds and it turns out that he appeals to divine revelation and the god he claims is real is said to have all kinds of magical powers of consciousness that we nowhere find in nature, we are essentially observing how quickly he abandons the principle which moments before he was invoking. I'm reminded of James 1:8 where it characterizes the "double-minded man" as being "unstable in all he does." Just as the believer is encouraged to put his treasure on the other side of death, he also reserves for himself the permission to draw from that imaginary source and call it knowledge. What in fact he is doing is mistaking the imaginary for the real, and abandoning the primacy of existence principle is crucial to such pretense. For the Christian, the primacy of existence principle is true one minute, but happily jettisoned the next. And typically, the believer himself does not recognize this.

by Dawson Bethrick

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

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [10:00 AM](#)

## 2 Comments:

[Robert\\_B](#) said...

Hello Dawson: I apologize for the tardiness of this reply.

I had an epiphany regarding the primacy of consciousness fallacy. Rene Descartes famed "Cogito ergo sum" ("I think, therefore I am") is false. One cannot go from the premise "I think." To the conclusion "I am." Descartes needed an additional premise, "'Whatever has the property of thinking, exists.'" But the method of doubt rejects the additional premise. It can be argued that the first premise, "I think", presupposes as an enthymeme, the proffered premise. The method of doubt, however, assumes that thinking is a property of the mediator. This contradiction renders the "Cogito" fallacious. But it does raise an interesting point relative to the atheist-theist debate regarding the primacy of consciousness fallacy.

When it is pointed out to the believer that consciousness presupposes an enthymeme that existence exists and that consciousness is awareness of existence, they reply that their God existed as pure consciousness aware only of itself prior to the alleged first creative act. This is the primacy of consciousness fallacy and is deeply rooted in several other errors that results in the epistemological reversal of the subject of thought-object of thought relationship. In considering the enabling of the subject-object reversal, it is instructive to examine the related fallacies and theistic claim at issue.

Expressed as a modus ponens syllogism, the Principle of Instantiation reads thus.

If X is instantiated, then X exists with properties.  
X is instantiated.  
X exists with properties

In order to claim that its God could have existed as a consciousness alone that was conscious of only itself, theism makes the following modus ponens argument.

If G thinks, then G exists with properties.  
G thinks.  
G exists with properties.

This argument is very much like the Principle of Instantiation and can be derived by substituting "X is instantiated" with "G thinks". The key here is for theist to validate the substitution.

In the "Affirming the Consequent" fallacy the argument is of the form "P implies Q, Q is true, therefore P is true." In notation:

If P then Q  
Q  
Therefore P.

In order to feel secure towards a subject-object reversal, theism must validate the above mentioned perversion of the Principle of Instantiation. To do this it starts by presupposing an "Affirming the Consequent" to the effect:

If thinking obtains, then whatever thinks exists,  
Whatever thinks exists.  
Thinking obtains.

This fallacy is packaged with the question begging ad hoc assertion that "God exists." into a presupposed

enthymeme that is used to validate the substitution of “G thinks” into the Principle of Instantiation.

In this manner the reversal of subject of thought for object of thought as related to the fantasy of God is accomplished and the theist is non the wiser.

[June 27, 2008 3:03 PM](#)

[Evan](#) said...

May I suggest 2 books by Dr. Antonio Damasio. The first is Descartes' Error in which he eviscerates cogito ergo sum from a neuroscientific point of view.

The second is The Feeling of What Happens which discusses the fact that consciousness requires a body and discusses neurological cases in which the connection severing the conscious areas of the brain to the bulk of the body cause profound alterations in emotion and consciousness.

Damasio is also fairly rigorous about definitions of consciousness and sheds some light on the differences between awareness, alertness, consciousness and self-consciousness as well as extended self-consciousness (something I see as somewhat similar to the German concept of wirklichgeschichtischesbewusstsein).

[July 08, 2008 2:11 PM](#)

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