

Saturday, September 30, 2006

Frame's Summary of Van Til's OMA

In his lecture outline [The Thought of Cornelius Van Til](#), John Frame gives an informal overview of Van Til's reasoning for thinking that the Christian doctrine of the "trinity" is needed in order to solve the problem of universals. Here we have, from one of the master apologist's own star pupil's, a denuded rendition of the so-called "one-many argument," a variant of the "transcendental argument for the existence of God." In the brief sketch that Frame provides, we can spot several major misconceptions about the nature of abstraction, so much so that it reads essentially as a primer on how *not* to treat concepts.

Frame's lecture outline itself is quite long - spanning some 36 pages on my downloaded version. The section which appears below can be found on page 10 - under the sub-heading 4. Trinity of section V. Metaphysics of Knowledge . It consists of the following:

d. The Trinity and the One-and-Many

- (i) We cannot identify particulars and distinguish them from one another, without uniting them by universal terms.
- (ii) But the universal terms exclude particularities ("dog" and "Fido"). So they cannot explain all particularities.
- (iii) We cannot define the universals, either, except by means of particularities. But particularities, individuals, are not universal; so whence comes universality?
- (iv) So there are no pure particulars or pure universals.

(A) But if every universal is relative to particulars, how can it serve as an explanatory principle? Insofar as it is particular, it requires further explanation.

(B) And if every particular is defined by universals, how can it be distinguished from them so as to be explained by them?

(v) VT: the Trinity explains this situation.

(A) God is both perfectly particular and perfectly universal, many and one.

(B) The world is made in his likeness.

(C) The correlativity of one and many in the world is like the correlativity of these in God; hence there is mystery.

(D) Van Til's "solution" does not give us pure universals or pure particulars, or the kind of exhaustive knowledge that these would bring us. Rather, it calls us to trust that he has a perfect understanding, both of himself, and of his world.

Frame's basic procedure here has a simple two-step formula: first the nature of the problem (as Van Til-Frame conceive it) is presented, then the "solution" (namely the triune god of Christianity) is presented. In presenting the problem (premises i-iv), two of the premises (i & iii) are concerned with what we "cannot" do, and the remaining premises (ii & iv) provide us with a glimpse of the presuppositionalist understanding of the nature of universals and their relationship to particulars. In proposing Christianity's notion of the trinity as the solution to the problem outlined in premises i-iv, certain vague and dubious statements are provided to support the view that the problem of universals requires the Christian god to solve it, even though it is apparently stipulated that "mystery" rather than understanding is the final outcome so far as man is concerned.

In my analysis below I will show how the way in which the problem is conceived suffers from its own debilitating problems, thus calling into grave question the position that a theistic solution is required. Also, I will show how the solution that presuppositionalism proposes is arbitrary and thus useless.

The Problems with Van Til's Understanding of the Problem

To expose the fundamental errors of the Vantillian conception of the nature of universals, let us review the premises that Frame presents in outlining the problem as presuppositionalism conceives of it.

Premise (i):

We cannot identify particulars and distinguish them from one another, without uniting them by universal terms.

This is wrong. A child's initial verbal identifications are of particulars which he names *specifically*, either by *proper names* (e.g., Jack, Bill, Alice, Fido, etc.) or by *titles* (such as 'Mommy', 'Daddy', 'Uncle', etc.) which are used in the same manner as proper names (i.e., to name something *specific* rather than a *class* of entities united under one term). By use of proper names and titles, both of which are not universalistic, one can both identify particulars and distinguish between one and another. A child, for instance, can perceive his mother and his little brother, and he can distinguish between them by calling the one Mommy and the other by using his first name Jack. A child does not begin his task of identifying the objects around him with fully constituted concepts already in place. So I would have to contest what Frame states here rather strongly. Even as adults, we can identify and distinguish particulars from one another by use of proper names as opposed to universal terms. In fact, we use universal terms (that is, concepts) in order to treat a group of particulars as a *group*. And even when we use concepts to distinguish between particulars which those concepts subsume, we find that we must use qualifiers which isolate one particular from another or group of like objects. For instance, I might say "*this* book as opposed to *that* book" to identify and distinguish particulars. So even when we use universal terms to refer to specific particulars, we have to modify them. It is disappointing that Van Til-Frame could be so off on this point. And yet this is where the presuppositionalist starts his argument!

Premise (ii):

But the universal terms exclude particularities ("dog" and "Fido"). So they cannot explain all particularities.

This is wrong. Universal terms, if they are formed properly, *include* all particularities subsumed under the class of objects which they name. The concept 'dog' for instance includes specific animals such as Fido, Spot, Bowser, etc., as well as sub-classes, such as dachshund, beagle, golden retriever, etc. This is because the concept 'dog', when unqualified by context-specific modifiers (e.g., adjectives, adjectival phrases and clauses, specific context, etc.), includes in its scope of reference *all* dogs (and all kinds of dogs) past, present and future. Also, it is unclear what Frame has in mind when he wants to conclude (on the basis of this erroneous assumption or otherwise) that "universal terms... cannot explain all particularities." The purpose of concepts ("universal terms") is not to *explain* the objects which they name, but to enable a thinker to treat a whole class of objects, regardless of however many there might be, as a unit. These classes in turn can be used in informing explanations, but by themselves they are not intended to serve as explanations.

Premise (iii):

We cannot define the universals, either, except by means of particularities. But particularities, individuals, are not universal; so whence comes universality?

This is wrong: We *can* - and *do* - define universals in terms of *other universals* (save in the case of axiomatic concepts). Of course, to understand the purpose of definitions and the way in which they are properly formulated (for instance, there is a difference between a definition and a description), one needs a good understanding of *concepts* (I've asked Christians, to no avail, where such understanding might be found in the bible), and as part of the theory of concepts the recognition that essence is *epistemological* (religious philosophy tends to treat essences as if they were *metaphysical*). According to an *objective* theory of concepts, *essence* is a property of *concepts*, not of particular entities which exist independent of our consciousness of them. This theory holds that

the essence of a concept is that fundamental characteristic(s) of its units on which the greatest number of other characteristics depend, and which distinguishes these units from all other existents within the field of man's knowledge. Thus the essence of a concept is determined *contextually* and may be altered with the growth of man's knowledge. (Ayn Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, p. 52.)

In defining a concept, the concern is to identify the nature of the units it subsumes and "to distinguish a concept from all other concepts and thus keep its units differentiated from all other existents." (Ibid., p. 40.) Thus it is appropriate to identify the essential characteristic which the units subsumed under a concept have in common, and doing this requires (except in the case of axiomatic concepts) the use of other concepts. How could we formulate a definition for the concept 'lemon', for instance, without using the concept 'fruit'?

It is encouraging to see Frame asking the question "whence comes universality?" for he will not find the answers to such questions in the bible. When it comes to such issues, religion provides no answers and leaves its adherents epistemologically stranded in the Dark Ages. The implication of presuppositionalism is that this is such a stumper question that we're all supposed to throw up our hands in bewilderment exclaiming "I donno!" and thus point to the Christian god as the "explanation."

From the foregoing, Frame seems to draw as a sub-conclusion his Premise (iv):

So there are no pure particulars or pure universals.

It is not clear what this statement is supposed to mean or how it is supposed to follow from what Frame has stated up to this point. What is a "pure particular" as opposed to something that is not a "pure particular"? Similarly, what is a "pure universal" as opposed to something that is not a "pure universal"? Is a rock a "pure particular" or something other than a "pure particular"? Is the concept 'rock' a "pure universal" or something other than a "pure universal"? It's not apparent what these expressions could possibly mean, and I wonder if Frame explains them anywhere. Perhaps Frame simply does not understand what distinguishes a particular from a universal, or maybe he hopes his readers don't. Any specific rock, like the one I dug up in my garden last week, is a particular object, not a partially particular object, not a quasi-particular object, not a half-particular, half-non-particular object. Also, the unqualified concept 'rock' applies to *all* rocks, and in this sense, that is in the sense of *referential scope*, it is wholly universal. So again, it's not clear what Frame means here, but I admit that it's quite difficult to shake the impression that he's simply trying to muddy the waters to make them appear deep.

Frame offers the following two points, either as somehow supporting the sub-conclusion that "there are no pure particulars or pure universals," or at any rate as implications to be reckoned with:

(A) But if every universal is relative to particulars, how can it serve as an explanatory principle? Insofar as it is particular, it requires further explanation.

(B) And if every particular is defined by universals, how can it be distinguished from them so as to be explained by them?

Here we see Frame repeating the notion that universals are intended to *explain* the particulars which they name. But as I pointed out above, this is not their purpose. The purpose of concepts is to provide man's consciousness with the economical means he needs in order to expand his consciousness beyond the perceptual level. Concepts accomplish this task by providing him a conscious means of treating all members of a class of entities, attributes, actions, qualities, relationships, etc., as a single unit, thus equipping his mind with a kind of mental shorthand which can be used in referencing an open-ended range of units both perceived and unperceived, whether they exist in the present, in the past or in the future. The concept 'man', for instance, is not intended to "explain" either one man or all men; rather, its purpose is to allow the human mind to treat *all men* - regardless of their number or individual attributes - as a unit unto its own.

Moreover, it is unclear what Frame means by universals being "relative to particulars." Objectively formed concepts are based ultimately on the objects which we perceive firsthand. Thus the tie between our *knowledge*, which takes the form of concepts, and the *reality* to which our knowledge relates, is a faculty which in fact has an *objective* nature. That is, perception is not informed *volitionally*; we do not get to *choose* what we perceive. We perceive *what* we perceive, whether we like it or not. It is in this sense - i.e., in the sense that perception is not an invention of consciousness - that it has an objective nature. Our volition comes into play when we make the choice to think or to evade thinking. We also make choices when it comes to forming concepts as well, whether to integrate the objects we perceive into mental units, or to remain stranded at the perceptual level (cf. concrete-bound), attempting to identify each particular object with its own specific title, and never graduating beyond the mentality of a toddler.

Next Frame asks a question which turns on the assumption that particulars are "defined by universals." This, too, is mistaken. We define *concepts*, not the specific entities or attributes which they name. We are not *defining* the particular entities or attributes that we name when we include them in a larger, mental unit that includes similar entities or attributes; these things do not *need* us to define them, since they exist independent of consciousness. To exist already means to be something specific, so the notion of "defining a particular" makes no sense: an entity is distinct from other entities, not by virtue of some conscious act of defining it, but by virtue of the fact that it exists. Definition, on the other hand, is the final step in concept-formation, and pertains to entity classes and other abstractions residing on the higher rungs of the conceptual hierarchy. An objective conceptual theory, then, must be consistent with an objective metaphysical orientation.

(Related to this is the common error among theists and other thinkers who treat *meaning* as if it were metaphysical. On the contrary, meaning is *epistemological*, that is, having to do with the content of our concepts, their relationship to the objects to which they refer, and the statements we build from them. Just as definition is a property of (properly formed) concepts rather than of particular entities which exist in the universe, the concept 'meaning' applies to visual and verbal symbols we use to represent concepts in our thought and communication. Another common error is to confuse the concept 'meaning' with other concepts, such as purpose or significance.)

Frame's concern at this point is in distinguishing particulars from universals. In fact, this constitutes an insuperable problem for theists, and it is interesting that Frame even comes so far as to pose the question in the first place. The reason why distinguishing particulars from universals is problematic for theists is the same reason why Vantillian apologists so habitually confuse "presuppositions" with metaphysical conditions. The problem originates in the blurring of the subject-object relationship, a bad habit which lies at the very core of the religious view of the world. By reversing the orientation of the subject-object relationship, thereby granting metaphysical primacy to the subject side of the relationship (cf. an omnipotent consciousness which creates existence and can manipulate the nature of entities *at will*), theism starts off on the wrong footing from the very get-go, booby-trapping the cognitive operations of those who accept its false premises, thus fatally undermining truth and every valid concept in one fell swoop at the very beginning of the philosophical enterprise. Basing philosophy on the recognition that the primacy of existence is absolute and incontrovertible, a genuinely rational philosophy avoids these kinds of problems. By recognizing the proper orientation of a subject to its objects, the primacy of existence consistently acknowledges the distinction between the metaphysical (the world of concrete particulars which exist independent of consciousness) and the epistemological (the means by which man's consciousness identifies and integrates what he perceives into open-ended classes or mental units).

Frame, of course, wants to point to the Christian god as the "solution" to these alleged problems (which, it should now be clear, are the result of dramatic misconceptions). Isn't it nifty how apologists always find the solution to problems in the god they imagine?

An Arbitrary Solution to an Arbitrarily Conceived Problem

When apologists point to the Christian god as the solution to philosophical problems associated with universals, we need to keep in mind the fact that claims about invisible magic beings are ultimately untestable and incapable of being validated, essentially because they are at root arbitrary. An arbitrary claim is one which constitutes a fundamental departure from reality. One can claim anything he wants about an entity that no one can perceive; how is one to confirm what he says about it? How is one to disconfirm whatever he says about it? How can one reliably distinguish between what a theist claims and what he is only imagining? Theists of every stripe and creed will insist that they are not merely imagining, emphatically asserting that what they claim is not only actually true, but also *binding* on all human beings.

With these points in mind, consider the Vantillian "solution" to the problem of universals as presuppositionalism characterizes it.

Claim:

God is both perfectly particular and perfectly universal, many and one.

Statements like this ultimately come to us on an "I'll take your word for it" basis; they are claims which are intended to be accepted uncritically on the speaker's say so, not examined for their sensibility. There is no way to look out at reality and observe something which confirms the claim that Frame states here.

That having been said, one can understand the idea of something being both particular and universal from an *objective* standpoint. (This of course rules out *subjective* worldviews which premise reality on the intentions of an invisible magic being.) For instance, Objectivism's very starting point - 'existence exists' - subsumes *every particular* and *applies universally*, literally *all particulars in a single plenum*, the ultimate many in the one. Existence is *particular* in the sense that to exist is to be something specific, i.e., particular. Existence is *universal* in the sense that anywhere you go in the universe, you'll find something that exists. We can say this because 'universe' means *the sum total of all that exists*. Thus *by definition* existence exists *everywhere* in the universe. Also, the axiomatic concept 'existence' is a universal including every entity and attribute that exists (by virtue of the fact that those entities and attributes *exist*), and the axiom 'existence exists' applies universally (e.g., there is no place in the universe where this is not true). So as rational thinkers, Objectivists begin with a fully informed one-and-many that is perfect in the sense that there are no exceptions in reality to which its fundamental truth does not apply.

But can any of this be said about the Christian god? Again, one can claim anything about something that resides only in one's imagination, for in this fake environment it is very easy for the arbitrary to serve as one's guide and standard. If one is determined not to be constrained by facts and reason, what is to serve as a barrier to his concoctions? Since theism constitutes a fundamental departure from facts and reason, effectively severing the mind of the believer from

the reality in which he lives, we know that a theistic worldview's pronouncements cannot be true. Does it make sense to claim that a *single entity* is *both* particular and universal? If these concepts are formed on the basis of imaginative fabrication as opposed to objective inputs, why not? After all, doesn't Bugs Bunny look quite at home in his [cartoon universe](#), a universe where a master designer has final say on what exists and what happens?

Claim:

The world is made in his likeness.

Affirmations such as this indicate that those who want to stand by them do not fully grasp what it is they are saying. For one thing, the subjectivist implications are difficult to miss. It is essentially saying that the world is a product of *conscious activity* - that a *subject* created it, that the world is a product of the unconstrainable *wishing* of a cosmic, omnipotent consciousness. What could possibly serve as evidence for such a position? Theists have throughout history attempted to concoct some way of finally substantiating such claims, but from what I have examined they all fail to deal with the question at hand: *How can consciousness hold metaphysical primacy over its objects?* Theists have to assume the opposite, in effect borrowing from a non-Christian viewpoint, to assert and defend such a view as truth, since the concept 'truth' is squarely premised on the principle that the entities we perceive exist independent of a person's *wishing*. On Christianity's premise of granting primacy to a subject of consciousness, one has no *objective* basis to make any truth claims. He has basically pulled the rug out from underneath himself.

To investigate the Christian claim that the world was "made" in the likeness of the Christian deity further, we can compare what the world is like to the claims theists make about their god, and see if in fact there is any "likeness" which obtains between the two in some way. But this exercise will certainly spell death for such theistic views. For this likeness would have to be borne out on a general level in order to be significant enough to give any credibility to such a claim, and yet it is precisely on the level of general characteristics that such a likeness simply does not exist. For instance, observe the fundamental antinomies between Christianity's "God" and the world in which we exist:

- ? "God" is said to be *infinite*, but the world is *not infinite*
- ? "God" is said to be *immaterial*, but the world is *not immaterial*
- ? "God" is said to be *supernatural*, but the world is *not supernatural*
- ? "God" is said to be *incorruptible*, but the world is *not incorruptible*
- ? "God" is said to be *perfect*, but the world is *not perfect*
- ? "God" is said to be *immutable*, but the world is *not immutable*
- ? "God" is said to be *divine*, but the world is *not divine*

With such dramatically contrastive opposites as these (and others could be cited, e.g., the Christian god is said to be both omniscient and infallible, but the world is neither of these, etc.), the notion that the one was made in the likeness of the other is quite far-fetched, to say the least. Where is the "likeness"? The world is full of deficiencies. Theists themselves, in their attempts to argue for their god, regularly point to the world as a ever changing place of "constant flux," while their god is said to be the diametric opposite of this. Given these fundamentally divisive incongruities, how can one say it was "created" by a "perfect creator"? How can one say that this world, made of dirt and rock and other crude elements which break down and reform into new shapes and relationships, is in any way "like" the god of Christianity? Is the god of Christianity like a barren desert, an overgrown jungle, or an inhospitable polar ice cap? That's what we find in the world. At best, the Vantillian can claim some highly abstract "likeness" - one which allows him to ignore these vast and pervasive dissimilarities, and settle in his mind that this abstract "something" - again a phenomenon which cannot be reliably distinguished from his imagination - connects this world to the supernatural consciousness he wants to worship.

Frame wants to say that

(C) The correlativity of one and many in the world is like the correlativity of these in God; hence there is mystery.

But as should be clear now, the correlativity between concepts and the objects they identify and integrate has nothing to do with the Christian god. Indeed, it is a mathematic relationship, akin to the relationship between a variable term in an equation and an integer which can stand in its place. With an objective understanding of concepts,

there is no mystery here. In fact, if all that Christianity can do in the end when attempting to offer a solution to the problem of universals amounts to throwing up one's hands and saying "it's all a mystery!" what good is that solution? It gets one no further than where he started.

Frame concludes his summary of Van Til's apologetic use of the problem of universals with the following:

(D) Van Til's "solution" does not give us pure universals or pure particulars, or the kind of exhaustive knowledge that these would bring us. Rather, it calls us to trust that he has a perfect understanding, both of himself, and of his world.

Van Til's "solution" brings us no closer to an understanding of how the human mind forms concepts than if presuppositionalists simply took a vow of silence. Indeed, a genuine understanding of how the mind works is not something they want men to have. On the contrary, so long as their minds remain mysterious to themselves, men will be in a better position to be seduced and controlled by those who seek to catch them in their nets. Van Til's "solution" calls for "trusting" in an invisible magic being, precisely because it offers no enlightenment to begin with. Those who are enlightened do not need to put their trust blindly in the hands of an invisible magic being which refuses to show itself, hold a rational dialogue with those who are supposed to be willing to sacrifice their very lives for it, or simply allow human beings to live for their own sake. Van Til's "solution" requires us to accept religious sloganeering in place of critical thought. It is not intended to be *understood*, it is intended to be accepted *unquestioningly*. If it is such a worthy solution, why doesn't Van Til-Frame offer something better?

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [8:00 PM](#)

18 Comments:

[beepbeepitsme](#) said...

I have never quite understood how the idea of an "absolute" (free from imperfection; complete; perfect) can be reconciled with the idea of the trinity (3 in one), and I don't think many christians who believe in the trinity can either.

[October 05, 2006 11:47 PM](#)

[James Anderson](#) said...

Dawson,

I appreciate this lengthy, serious interaction with a Van Tilian presuppositionalist. (Well, mostly serious; I've never understood why you feel the need to pepper your writing with playground pejoratives like "invisible magical beings", which add nothing to your analysis.) A number of things could be said by way of response, but I'll restrict myself to one observation.

Your critique apparently takes for granted a conceptualist view of universals. (I say "takes for granted" because of your introductory remark about Frame mistreating the issue of *concepts*, even though Frame refers only to universals and not to concepts; the two terms are not synonymous, even on a conceptualist position.) For example, at several points you treat the terms 'universal' and 'concept' as interchangeable. Now, conceptualism has a respectable philosophical pedigree, but I think it poses serious problems for your other philosophical commitments.

In your view, I take it, universals are identical (or reducible) to concepts; specifically, *human* concepts. (We don't want any "invisible magical being" to get a foot in the door, right?) So the fact that the ball is round, that it possesses the property of *roundness*, is ultimately grounded in the application of our concept of *roundness* to the ball. Insofar as there are such things as properties, they are not mind-independent; if they exist at all, then they are purely conceptual.

The problem, however, is that your conceptualism implies that reality is dependent on human consciousness. Facts, such as the fact that the ball is round, are ultimately the product of human thought. If there were no human consciousness, then strictly speaking the ball would not be round -- indeed, it would possess no properties at all (since there would be no concepts applied to it). On your view, then, *the way the world really is* turns out to be a product

of our minds.

But surely this anti-realism is quite at odds with Rand's strident commitment to metaphysical realism. What is the foundational tenet of Objectivism if not the view that reality is objective and *not* dependent on what we think about it or how we happen to conceive it? If ball is 'really' round, yet the roundness of the ball consists in nothing more than our application of certain concepts to it, then the 'reality' of the ball is dependent on our thoughts about it; in which case, Objectivism is false. Similar considerations apply to *all* property attributions.

If Objectivism is to be retained, you'll have to shift your understanding of universals either toward nominalism or toward realism. Nominalism would bring back all the problems that conceptualism is supposed to solve, so that's unappealing. Realism would be the better option: universals (such as properties) really exist and do so independent of human thought. The trouble is, you seem to have closed the door to realism about universals by championing a hard-nosed empiricism: "One can claim anything he wants about an entity that no one can perceive; how is one to confirm what he says about it? How is one to disconfirm whatever he says about it?" On the realist view, universals exist but are not *perceivable* entities (one can perceive a round ball, but not roundness *per se*). So apparently you can no more countenance the existence of mind-independent universals than the existence of God.

Of course, if you want to retain your conceptualist intuitions without jettisoning your commitment to metaphysical realism, you could always adopt *theistic conceptual realism* (as recently defended by Greg Welty, among others). Unfortunately, the 'theistic' component of TCR is not an optional accessory. :)

[October 18, 2006 5:43 AM](#)

[groundfighter76](#) said...

Nicely said, James.

[October 18, 2006 10:38 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

James,

Welcome to my blog! It's nice to hear from you again. I hope you and your family are doing well.

Thanks so much for your thoughts in response to my posting on Van Til-Frame. I will consider your points and, if time allows, put together my reaction to them on my blog. Judging from what you have stated, this should make a nice addition!

By the way, the Objectivist theory of concepts is not the same as the conceptualist view of universals. That may not be apparent to you if you are not very familiar with the Objectivist theory. If time allows, I will try to touch on this in my response. But even from what you do say in your comment above, it's not clear why you might think I'm taking the conceptualist view of universals for granted. For as you yourself point out, the terms 'universal' and 'concept' are not synonymous on the conceptualist view, and yet you say that I treat them synonymously.

Anyway, this will all have to wait until the weekend.

Regards,
Dawson

[October 18, 2006 8:55 PM](#)

[James Anderson](#) said...

Dawson,

A couple of clarifications.

1. No doubt I have a lot to learn about Objectivism, but I am aware that the Objectivist theory of concepts is not the same as the conceptualist view of universals. I don't believe I implied otherwise. My point is simply that your critique of Frame *assumes* a conceptualist view of universals, for the reasons I indicated.

2. I didn't say that you treat the terms 'universal' and 'concept' as *synonymous*; I said that you treat them as *interchangeable*. In other words, whether or not you think they carry the same *sense*, you seem to believe that the terms are co-referential.

Here's an example from your post:

"Here we see Frame repeating the notion that **universals** are intended to *explain* the particulars which they name. But as I pointed out above, this is not **their** purpose. The purpose of **concepts** is . . ."

If you're able to post something by way of reply, it would be helpful if you could make clear your view on the ontological status of universals (and how that correlates with the way you've used terms in your post).

[October 19, 2006 12:50 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

James,

"1. No doubt I have a lot to learn about Objectivism, but I am aware that the Objectivist theory of concepts is not the same as the conceptualist view of universals. I don't believe I implied otherwise. My point is simply that your critique of Frame assumes a conceptualist view of universals, for the reasons I indicated."

The theory of concepts that my critique assumes is the Objectivist theory, not the conceptualist theory. It's still unclear how you got the impression that I was assuming the conceptualist view.

"2. I didn't say that you treat the terms 'universal' and 'concept' as synonymous; I said that you treat them as interchangeable. In other words, whether or not you think they carry the same sense, you seem to believe that the terms are co-referential."

You must have in mind some distinction between your use of 'synonymous' and your use of 'interchangeable' that has escaped me. At any rate, some time ago (I'm guessing over a year ago now) I contacted Dr. Kelley about this very point (along with some others), as Objectivism tends to think of concepts when other philosophies use the term 'universal' (as a noun). Dr. Kelley basically confirmed what I was thinking, namely that "nothing in the world apart from us is literally and intrinsically universal" (his words). This probably makes a lot of academics bristle, which typically does not cause much concern for Objectivists as there's an enormous context native to Objectivism with which most academics are probably not very familiar. One important point is that essence according to Objectivism is epistemological, not metaphysical. Also, universality is a property of concepts (because they subsume an open-ended range of units), not of things existing in the world. However, this should not be taken to mean that concepts, because of their universality, have nothing to do with the units they subsume. The universality of a concept is a product of a process of abstraction which is used to form it in the first place. Rand outlines this process in her book *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology* (ITOE). Other sources can be named which have developed her theory since its publication, but ITOE is still the best place to start. Overall, my concern for Van Til-Frame is that they do not have a very good understanding of concepts at all. Like many academics, Van Til-Frame discount the active role which the human mind takes on in forming concepts from what they perceive. Another point which I find striking is the purpose they seem to think conceptual thought is intended to satisfy. I can provide quotes for all this if you like, but time is pretty short this morning. The upshot is that it's not surprising to find them pointing to "mystery" when all is said and done. But "mystery" is not knowledge, nor is throwing up one's arms and exclaiming "it's all a mystery!" very enlightening. It brings us no closer to an understanding of the process under discussion, and I suspect that's intentional.

I wrote: "Here we see Frame repeating the notion that universals are intended to explain the particulars which they name. But as I pointed out above, this is not their purpose. The purpose of concepts is . . ."

Even on the realist assumptions that Van Til-Frame have adopted, it's unclear to me how either of them can think that the purpose of universals is to "explain" particulars. And yes, to the degree that I think the term "universal" (as a noun) is meaningful, it could only mean what Objectivism means by concept, since universality is a property of concepts, not of the concretes that we perceive or name. Hopefully this will be clearer when I correct some of the mistakes in your response. But I'm also hoping to generate more questions as well.

James: "If you're able to post something by way of reply, it would be helpful if you could make clear your view on the ontological status of universals (and how that correlates with the way you've used terms in your post)."

Briefly, if by "universal" (noun) we mean the product of abstraction, then really you're asking me what the ontological status of concepts is. Concepts are epistemological, not metaphysical (or ontological; Objectivism tends to see these two terms as synonymous as well). They are how the mind economizes its ability to retain what it has perceived, and as such they are a method by which the conscious mind manages its inputs.

Hope that helps!

Regards,
Dawson

[October 19, 2006 6:09 AM](#)

[Paul Manata](#) said...

Definitions and Analysis:

Concepts: A concept is the mental intergration of two or more units which are isolated by a process of abstraction and united by a specific definition. -The Psycho Epistemology of Art, cited in The Ayn Rand Lexicon, p.88

or, another one:

A concept is a mental intergration of two or more units possessing the same distinguishing characteristics with their particluar measurments ommitted. -ITO, 21

Also, Dawson's claim the the problem of universals is an *epistemological* one is *precisely* why philosophers have agreed that Rand simply did not understand the classic problem of universals - which is *metaphysical.* But you can't gte rid of the metaphysical question by shifting questions, it's not that easy. We should also note that the latter definition I gave implies the *metaphycial* problem of universals, i.e., "**two* units" can have "the *same* characteristics."

Lastly, here's Rand's take on the problem:

"The issue of concepts (known as the problem of universals) is philosophy's central issue. IOE, p.1

At any rate, those are some definitions so one understands the other.

We should all agree, though, that by *redefining* the problem of universals, and (granting this for arguments sake) solved the *new* problem, that does not make the *old* and *different* problem go away.

Therefore, as even Dawson even points out himself, the Objectivist take on universalsi is *radically different* than the tradtional question - which was Van Til's and Frame's question - and so we should all be able to see now that Dawson has pickedf on van Til and Frame for answering a *different question* then Objectivism is trying to answer.

In other words, Dawson's post was one big smoke and mirrors session, complete with attacking Frame on an issue Frame was not talking about. If, as Dawson admits, when most philosophers speak of the problem of universals they are speaking about a metaphysical problem then Dawson should have answered Frame *on these grounds* and not pretended that Frame was ignorant on the problem of universals which, when translated, turns out to be the unique ghetto language and problems of the Objectivists.

Now, this doesn't refute Dawson's position, James can do that if he wants to, this was just meant to point out a fatal flaw in Dawson's blog entry - it didn't even address the problem *Frame* was getting at.

best,

PM

[October 19, 2006 8:59 AM](#)

[Paul Manata](#) said...

Dawson: "Concepts are epistemological, not metaphysical (or ontological; Objectivism tends to see these two terms as

synonymous as well). They are how the mind economizes its ability to retain what it has perceived, and as such they are a method by which the conscious mind manages its inputs."

Paul: Do concepts exist? Are they real? If so, they have an ontological status; even if it means they are neurons inside grey matter.

So, could you answer James' question: i.e., what is the ontological status of a concept. If it does not have one, then they do not exist.

[October 19, 2006 9:04 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Paul: "Also, Dawson's claim the the problem of universals is an *epistemological* one is *precisely* why philosophers have agreed that Rand simply did not understand the classic problem of universals - which is *metaphysical.*"

It's funny how philosophers are suddenly all so unanimous on so many issues whenever Paul Manata shows up. ;) Turn your head for a second and they all start bickering and squabbling again. But when Paul pokes his head in the door, they're all nodding in unison. How do you do it, Paul? Telepathic mind-control? Or, did they all sign a consent form and elect you to be their collective spokesman? Perhaps you have the impression that philosophers think your thoughts after you? This is just too much fun!

Paul: "But you can't get rid of the metaphysical question by shifting questions, it's not that easy. We should also note that the latter definition I gave implies the *metaphysical* problem of universals, i.e., '*two* units' can have 'the *same* characteristics'."

I realize that there have been some thinkers who have become more concerned about "the ontological status of universals" (or concepts, or what have you), than they are about the original issue behind the problem, which was how "the one" and "the many" are related, which is an epistemological question. In either case, we're not going to gain any further understanding of either the nature of our minds or how they operate if we consign the problem to "mystery" or throw our hands up and say "[Duh, I donno! Must be God did it!](#)" Certainly the issue deserves more seriousness than this. Don't you think?

Paul: "Lastly, here's Rand's take on the problem: 'The issue of concepts (known as the problem of universals) is philosophy's central issue.' IOE, p.1"

Yes, and she also wrote that "the fate of human societies, of knowledge, of science, of progress and every human life, depends on" how the problem is addressed (Ibid., p. 3). I would also say that related to this is how the problem is conceived as well. The point is that Rand sees this as a very important issue, far more important than bickering about things like "what's the ontological status of universals." Rather, her concern was how consistently one's theory of concepts is with the principle of objectivity. In James' response to me, he seems to think that the theory of concepts that I have "taken for granted" entails or leads to metaphysical subjectivism. He does not show anything that I or any Objectivist has said to suggest this suspicion; rather, he says that I have assumed a conceptualist view of universals (which is not true) because I use the terms 'universal' and 'concept' interchangeably, even though "the two terms are not synonymous, even on a conceptualist position." Meanwhile, he admits that he has "a lot to learn about Objectivism" (and there's nothing wrong with this; I encourage him to learn) and acknowledges on top of this that "the Objectivist theory of concepts is not the same as the conceptualist view of universals." Can it be that my critique in fact assumes the Objectivist theory of concepts rather than the conceptualist view of universals, and James is just not familiar enough with the former to recognize the acute differences between the two? Or, Paul, do you assume that James is infallible on this issue, even after admitting his unfamiliarity?

James, if you're reading, can you settle this point: Are you, or are you not, infallible?

Paul: "We should all agree, though, that by *redefining* the problem of universals, and (granting this for arguments sake) solved the *new* problem, that does not make the *old* and *different* problem go away."

But what was the original problem? I think the real issue at the heart of the matter is the relationship between "the one" and "the many," as this is more central to the operation of the human mind in its cognitive activity and its implications for philosophy in general. You may find that the early thinkers who first attempted to tackle the issue concluded that "universals" are mind-independent phenomenon precisely because they did not understand how the mind performs the process of abstraction. And modern-day thinkers, having accepted their predecessors' premises

(especially the very manner in which they framed the issue to begin with) or portions thereof uncritically, have just assumed that the question is one of ontology, essentially leaving epistemology out in the cold (or worse). Regardless, apologists have now come along and seized on the matter in order to assimilate it into their religious defenses and thus make it point to their god. But does this enshrinement of "mystery" really lead one to understanding how his mind works? Not at all.

Paul: "So, could you answer James' question: i.e., what is the ontological status of a concept. If it does not have one, then they do not exist."

As Rand's definition (which you quoted) makes clear, concepts are mental, i.e., the cognitive activity of a conscious mind that has the ability to perform the process of abstraction.

Regards,
Dawson

[October 19, 2006 9:05 PM](#)

[Paul Manata](#) said...

Thanks Dawson!

I'm sure you'll get a whole buch of Ph.D.'s to post here!

At any rate:

Dawson: "As Rand's definition (which you quoted) makes clear, concepts are mental, i.e., the cognitive activity of a conscious mind that has the ability to perform the process of abstraction."

Paul: Right, and what is "mental?" What is a "mind?" Is it that custard-like stuff inside your head? So the ontological status of concept is custard-like?

Before we move on, do I have it right? Or, do you believe that the mind is immaterial, like an "invisible friend" that floats on top of our brains?

Dawson: "It's funny how philosophers are suddenly all so unanimous on so many issues whenever Paul Manata shows up. ;) Turn your head for a second and they all start bickering and squabbling again. But when Paul pokes his head in the door, they're all nodding in unison. How do you do it, Paul? Telepathic mind-control?"

Paul: I know of know philosopher, other than Rand, who construes this problem other than metaphysically.

Scott Ryan does a nice job discussing how far out in left field the Objectivists are on this question - see his "Objectivism and The Corruption of Rationality." So, philosophers are united when both Ryan and I show up (as well as the 10 other guys he cites in his book) :-)

Dawson: "Yes, and she also wrote that "the fate of human societies, of knowledge, of science, of progress and every human life, depends on" how the problem is addressed (Ibid., p. 3)."

Paul: So she was a false prophet ;-)

At any rate, our beliefs are aimed at survival, not truth. Reemember, you're an evolutionist. Mother nature doesn't care about Rand and her opinions. We will survive if we get our genes into the next generation. Indeed, on your evolutionary assumptions, it doesn't matter if a belief is aimed at truth, all that matters is that our beliefs get our body parts in the right place to survive.

It's also interesting to ask why the process of evolution would create beings who debate the problem of universals, what survival value is there in our debating, Dawson? Indeed, why even blog? Is "blogging" necessary for our survival?

However, I'll sit back and wait for your answer to James, though I don't know if he'll respond as long as your refer to him as the "infallible one" and, as he said, "pepper your posts in playground pejectives. Perhaps this is all strategic? Your "style" keeps away any heavy hitters and just attracts the bottom feeders like me! :-)

as always,

PM

[October 19, 2006 10:57 PM](#)

[James Anderson](#) said...

Dawson,

We're both busy people, so I'm going to stick to the point.

I don't dispute that your critique presupposes Rand's theory of concepts. I'm sure it does. But that's not germane to the criticism I've raised. My objection is simply this: your critique presupposes a conceptualist view of universals, whether you acknowledge it or not, but this presupposition conflicts with your Objectivist commitment to metaphysical realism. Your theory of concept *formation* is neither here nor there. As such, your remarks about my understanding of this theory are merely a red herring. My criticism concerns your position on the nature of universals, not your position on the origin of concepts.

You deny that you've assumed a conceptualist view of universals. Yet you also deny (following Kelley, apparently) that there are any mind-independent universals, adding that "to the degree that I think the term 'universal' (as a noun) is meaningful, it could only mean what Objectivism means by concept". From this (and the quotes I provided earlier) I can only conclude that you believe universals *just are* concepts. But this is precisely a conceptualist view of universals. You can eschew the label all you like, but you have adopted a conceptualist position nonetheless.

Now, as I pointed out in my original comment, this introduces problems for your commitment to metaphysical realism. If properties (which are paradigmatic universals) are merely human concepts, then the truth of propositions such as *the ball is round* ultimately depends on human conceptualisation. The features we perceive in the external world (such as the roundness of the ball) are not mind-independent after all; 'reality' is a product of human consciousness, since the features exemplified by objects 'out there' do not inhere in the objects themselves but exist only in our minds. Indeed, it makes little sense to speak of an 'external world' on this view, insofar as such a world is thought of as an inventory of distinct objects that exemplify different properties (roundness, solidity, opacity, etc.) in a mind-independent fashion.

Ask yourself this simple question: In your view, is the ball round because (a) it exemplifies the property of *roundness* independent of any mental activity on our part or (b) because we apply the concept of *roundness* to it? If you opt for (a), then you're really a closet realist (about universals). If you opt for (b), then you face a conflict with your Objectivist commitment to metaphysical realism. (If you reject both (a) and (b) then, as I said before, it would move things forward if you could state your alternative and relate it to your prior use of the terms 'universal' and 'concept'.)

Ironically enough, your theory of concept formation (insofar as I can discern it from what you've written here) seems to presuppose realism about universals, because you speak of concept formation as a process of *abstraction*. Abstraction grounded in *what* exactly? From what is our concept of *roundness* abstracted? A series of concrete particulars (balls, etc.) that exemplify, prior to our perception of them, a common property (roundness)? If that's the case, then you're a realist after all. I simply invite you to come out of the closet; there's no shame in it. :) But as I noted earlier, a realist view of universals (properties, relations, etc.) commits you to the existence of unperceivable entities, despite your apparent distaste for the idea.

[October 20, 2006 5:53 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Paul: "what is 'mental'?"

By 'mental' and 'mind' I'm referring to the cognitive activity of human consciousness.

Paul: "Is it that custard-like stuff inside your head? So the ontological status of concept is custard-like?"

I don't think (nor do I think anything I have stated indicates) that the mind is "custard-like."

Paul: "Or, do you believe that the mind is immaterial,"

I don't know what "immaterial" means. All I know is what it doesn't mean. As I have stated before, I do not know how I would go about proving that the mind is not composed of a material that we do not yet understand.

Paul: "like an 'invisible friend' that floats on top of our brains?"

Do you mean [imaginary friend](#)? That would be a stolen concept, for imagination is a function of a mind.

I asked: "It's funny how philosophers are suddenly all so unanimous on so many issues whenever Paul Manata shows up. ;) Turn your head for a second and they all start bickering and squabbling again. But when Paul pokes his head in the door, they're all nodding in unison. How do you do it, Paul? Telepathic mind-control?"

Paul: "I know of know philosopher, other than Rand, who construes this problem other than metaphysically."

So, Paul, what conclusion shall we draw from your confessed ignorance here? That you are not very well read on the subject, or "Rand was just wrong on everything, that wicked bitch!?" Really, Paul, what relevance does your knowledge (and particularly, your lack of knowledge) have to do with anything?

And I still wonder what accounts for the entire philosophical community snapping into perfect alignment whenever you show up. It really is phenomenal.

Paul: "Scott Ryan does a nice job discussing how far out in left field the Objectivists are on this question - see his 'Objectivism and The Corruption of Rationality'. So, philosophers are united when both Ryan and I show up (as well as the 10 other guys he cites in his book) :-)"

Then why not leave it at that, Paul? You found someone who agrees with you (at least when it comes to discrediting Rand and all those stupid Objectivists). But keep any disagreements between Ryan and yourself under your skirt, right? What does Ryan say about a "triune god"? What does he say about a resurrected man-deity? What does he say about Calvin's *Institutes*?

Paul: "At any rate, our beliefs are aimed at survival, not truth."

This suggests a dichotomy which I would not accept. I don't know how survival would be possible if I tried to ignore the fact that poisons are harmful to my body and that running without watching where I'm going could lead me over a cliff or into the path of an oncoming bus.

Paul: "Remember, you're an evolutionist. Mother nature doesn't care about Rand and her opinions. We will survive if we get our genes into the next generation. Indeed, on your evolutionary assumptions, it doesn't matter if a belief is aimed at truth, all that matters is that our beliefs get our body parts in the right place to survive."

Where did I affirm a view like this? Is this rendition supposed to make me say "Yeah, you're right, rational philosophy is for inert pebbles. I'm going to devote my life to worshipping Wod!?"

Paul: "It's also interesting to ask why the process of evolution would create beings who debate the problem of universals, what survival value is there in our debating, Dawson?"

Actually, questions like this are appropriately directed to those who insist there's a perfect creator behind everything in the universe. If Paul Manata was designed and created by a perfect creator, why does he have so many persisting defects? How can we say Paul Manata's creator is "perfect" when Paul Manata exhibits no perfections at all? Indeed, if there were an eternal, indestructible and perfect being, why would it create in the first place? Why would it even move or act in any way? Why would it have consciousness? It wouldn't need to know anything. It wouldn't need to perceive anything (in fact, there'd be nothing else to perceive until it created something), etc., etc., etc.

Paul: "Indeed, why even blog? Is 'blogging' necessary for our survival?"

Who said that blogging is "necessary" for anything? I do it for fun and grins. But I survived for a long time before I even knew what blogging is. So did my ancestors.

Paul: "However, I'll sit back and wait for your answer to James,"

Okay. As I promised, I will try to get around to it this weekend. But I'm finally getting my piano moved out of my garage and into my upstairs music room this evening, and I haven't practiced in over a month (which is achingly long for me), so my time is probably going to be well divided. But I'll try!

Paul: "though I don't know if he'll respond as long as your refer to him as the 'infallible one' and, as he said, "pepper your posts in playground pejoratives. Perhaps this is all strategic? Your 'style' keeps away any heavy hitters and just attracts the bottom feeders like me! :-)"

I plan to post a separate blog entry aimed at giving James the information he presently seems to lack so that he will come to understand why I think the expression "invisible magic being" is not only appropriate, but also useful. I do not think it is pejorative; at any rate, no more so than bible-believers calling a non-believers "fool" simply because he doesn't believe in an invisible magic being. (D'oh! There I did it again!) But I don't see either you or James expressing concern over Psalm 14:1.

Also, I do not believe I referred to James as "the infallible one." If you scroll up, you'll recall that I posed a question to you: "do you assume that James is infallible on this issue, even after admitting his unfamiliarity?" I do not see that you answered, and since I did not expect to get a straight answer from you on this (as is typical with you), I posed the following question to James himself: "James, if you're reading, can you settle this point: Are you, or are you not, infallible?" I am still awaiting an answer. Now I really doubt that James Anderson is so thin-skinned that he'll stop coming to this part of town just because I asked him a question of this nature.

Lastly, if my style "keeps away any heavy hitters," and you think James Anderson is a "heavy hitter," why do you think he came around in the first place? In fact, if my blog "just attracts the bottom feeders," then it seems you're insinuating that James Anderson is a "bottom feeder," for it attracted him on two recent occasions (scroll above). Though there have been some commentators who have occasioned my blog that fit the description "bottom feeder," I try to treat my commentators as guests and would strongly resist calling them "bottom feeders." So just so you know, I have not called either you or James a "bottom feeder."

In fact, Paul, it seems that James may have scurried off after you showed up. He and I were doing just fine without you.

Regards,
Dawson

[October 20, 2006 6:08 AM](#)

[Paul Manata](#) said...

Hi Dawson,

Dawson: "By 'mental' and 'mind' I'm referring to the cognitive activity of human consciousness."

Paul: But it is physical, correct? This 'activity' is physical.

Dawson: "I don't think (nor do I think anything I have stated indicates) that the mind is "custard-like.""

Paul: Most scientists tell us that the brain has a "custard-like" consistency to it. If the mind is physical, and located in the brain, then you think the mind has a custard like consistency. So, that's the ontology of concepts, right?

Dawson: "I don't know what "immaterial" means. All I know is what it doesn't mean. As I have stated before, I do not know how I would go about proving that the mind is not composed of a material that we do not yet understand."

Paul: Things can be defined by negation. And, if the mind is *not* physical, then the mind is not composed of matter.

One could go around proving is variously:

i) Intentionality

ii) First-person subjective access.

iii) Identity through time.

iv) Having beliefs caused by things such as forces of inference rather than physical causation.

v) Beliefs

vi) Thoughts.

vii) Modal conceivability arguments.

viii) indirectly refuting materialism.

ix) etc

I said: "At any rate, our beliefs are aimed at survival, not truth."

Dawson: This suggests a dichotomy which I would not accept. I don't know how survival would be possible if I tried to ignore the fact that poisons are harmful to my body and that running without watching where I'm going could lead me over a cliff or into the path of an oncoming bus.

Paul: Easy, you could still survive with false or irrational beliefs. For example, you could see a man-eating tiger, form the belief that a marathon in the other direction was going to start, this belief causes you to turn and run, this belief has survival value, and this belief is false. I can come up with the same type of scenarios with poison, oncoming buses, and falling off cliffs.

This is all not new. For example, your materialist friends Paul and Pat Church; and have said things like this:

"Boiled down to its essentials, a nervous system that enables the organism to succeed in...feeding, fleeing, fighting, and reproducing. The principle [sic] chore of nervous systems is to get the body parts where they should be in order that the organism may survive. Improvements in their sensorimotor control confer an evolutionary advantage: a fancier style of representing is advantageous so long as it is geared to the organism's way of life and enhances the organism's chances for survival. Truth, whatever that is, takes the hindmost." (Praticia Churchland, "Epistemology in the Age of Neuroscience," *Journal of Philosophy* 84 (October 1987): 548. Cited in, "C. S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea," Victor Reppert, IVP, 2002, pp. 76-77).

and Darwin himself noted this:

"With me, the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would any one trust in the convictions of a monkey's mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?"

So, I can't see any reason to trust our minds with the compilation of two of Dawson's philosophies - Objectivism and Evolutionism. The mind is a material activity in a custard-like soup and it evolved with the purposes of having beliefs allow for survival, truth and rationality take the hindmost.

I said: "Remember, you're an evolutionist. Mother nature doesn't care about Rand and her opinions. We will survive if we get our genes into the next generation. Indeed, on your evolutionary assumptions, it doesn't matter if a belief is aimed at truth, all that matters is that our beliefs get our body parts in the right place to survive."

Dawson: "Where did I affirm a view like this? Is this rendition supposed to make me say "Yeah, you're right, rational philosophy is for inert pebbles. I'm going to devote my life to worshipping Wod!""?"

Paul: When you affirmed evolution. And if you caught the critique, your "philosophy looks anything but rational.

Dawson: "Actually, questions like this are appropriately directed to those who insist there's a perfect creator behind everything in the universe. "

Paul: Actually that's what's called the tu quoque fallacy.

Dawson: "Who said that blogging is "necessary" for anything? I do it for fun and grins. But I survived for a long time before I even knew what blogging is. So did my ancestors."

Paul: It's not, so I'm trying to find out why we "evolved" the habit?

Dawson: "Lastly, if my style "keeps away any heavy hitters," and you think James Anderson is a "heavy hitter," why do you think he came around in the first place? In fact, if my blog "just attracts the bottom feeders," then it seems you're insinuating that James Anderson is a "bottom feeder," for it attracted him on two recent occasions (scroll above). Though there have been some commentators who have occasioned my blog that fit the description "bottom feeder," I try to treat my commentators as guests and would strongly resist calling them "bottom feeders." So just so you know, I have not called either you or James a "bottom feeder."

Paul: Perhaps a "bottom feeder" sent him the link?

At any rate, it was obvious that I was cutting down myself and not any of your guests, your attempts to turn this into me calling them names is shameful.

Dawson: "In fact, Paul, it seems that James may have scurried off after you showed up. He and I were doing just fine without you."

Paul: No, I think he's waiting for you to post your main entry. At any rate, he did post something after I posted.

Why the attitude? Have I offended you in this combox? I've tried to be cordial.

I thought we were good ever since our last email dialogue.

best,

PM

[October 20, 2006 8:36 AM](#)

[Brother Blark](#) said...

go get 'em Discomfiter!

That bahnsen_burner fellow is a FOOL...philosophers like us agree!

[October 20, 2006 12:16 PM](#)

[Daniel Morgan](#) said...

It is only with great care and with great attention to detail that philosophers have worked on these questions of abstract ontology, and I think nominalism, conceptualism, and realism, with respect to abstractions, are perhaps the most subtle of explananda. As a really good example, and something I familiarized myself with just recently, there is a "conceptual natural realism" and a "conceptual intensional realism" (see [Logic and Ontology](#), sections 6-8, pp. 139-46), which take into account the sort of "double existence" paradox of saying that concepts (such as the properties of objects, upon which logic depends) depend on a mind, but obviously the properties of objects pre-exist minds, and minds themselves are necessarily part of the explanandum.

And so what philosophers try to do is take these properties and tie them to naturalism — that objects have physical properties that are not in any way contingent upon concepts, and also tie these properties to conceptualism, in saying that abstractions like universals (redness) do not have an existence, but describe properties which do.

And in the end, is an atheist committed to explaining everything? Or is the atheist not free in saying, "There are concepts we agree on. I am not sure that these concepts have a real existence, or if they are just part of our language (nominalism), or if they do exist in some abstract form (Platonism)." However, we agree that they exist, at least for the purposes of this debate, and since we agree on the conventionality, we can use them in discussion.

The reductio approach only works if the theist has some "ammo" to use against you, because you make the problem of

universals directly tied to the debate at hand.

In the end, as Dawson pointed out, the presup is left with, at best, an argument from ignorance for the existence of their "invisible magic being" ;)

[October 22, 2006 10:16 AM](#)

[Daniel Morgan](#) said...

I would also add one thing in response to James Anderson.

James said:

Now, as I pointed out in my original comment, this introduces problems for your commitment to metaphysical realism. If properties (which are paradigmatic universals) are merely human concepts, then the truth of propositions such as the ball is round ultimately depends on human conceptualisation. The features we perceive in the external world (such as the roundness of the ball) are not mind-independent after all; 'reality' is a product of human consciousness, since the features exemplified by objects 'out there' do not inhere in the objects themselves but exist only in our minds. Indeed, it makes little sense to speak of an 'external world' on this view, insofar as such a world is thought of as an inventory of distinct objects that exemplify different properties (roundness, solidity, opacity, etc.) in a mind-independent fashion.

I am sure James is familiar with Kant, who pointed out that we cannot know "the thing in itself" -- this includes what we might call "mind-independent properties". This is from a philosopher who strongly advocated transcendental reasoning, but whose ultimate conclusion, in CoPR, [was](#):

SS9 I:

In phenomena, we commonly, indeed, distinguish that which essentially belongs to the intuition of them, and is valid for the sensuous faculty of every human being, from that which belongs to the same intuition accidentally, as valid not for the sensuous faculty in general, but for a particular state or organization of this or that sense. Accordingly, we are accustomed to say that the former is a cognition which represents the object itself, whilst the latter presents only a particular appearance or phenomenon thereof. This distinction, however, is only empirical. If we stop here (as is usual), and do not regard the empirical intuition as itself a mere phenomenon (as we ought to do), in which nothing that can appertain to a thing in itself is to be found, our transcendental distinction is lost, and we believe that we cognize objects as things in themselves, although in the whole range of the sensuous world, investigate the nature of its objects as profoundly as we may, we have to do with nothing but phenomena...

SS9 II:

In confirmation of this theory of the ideality of the external as well as internal sense, consequently of all objects of sense, as mere phenomena, we may especially remark that all in our cognition that belongs to intuition contains nothing more than mere relations. (The feelings of pain and pleasure, and the will, which are not cognitions, are excepted.) The relations, to wit, of place in an intuition (extension), change of place (motion), and laws according to which this change is determined (moving forces). That, however, which is present in this or that place, or any operation going on, or result taking place in the things themselves, with the exception of change of place, is not given to us by intuition. Now by means of mere relations, a thing cannot be known in itself; and it may therefore be fairly concluded, that, as through the external sense nothing but mere representations of relations are given us, the said external sense in its representation can contain only the relation of the object to the subject, but not the essential nature of the object as a thing in itself. [emphasis mine]

It seems that Kant undercuts James' arguments here regarding the existence of mind-independent properties.

[October 23, 2006 5:08 AM](#)

[James Anderson](#) said...

Daniel,

Thanks for chiming in. Some quick comments in response:

1. Kant doesn't deny the existence of mind-independent entities; on the contrary, his position assumes it. So I'm not sure what to make of your closing statement.

2. You've reproduced Kant's conclusion, but not his arguments for that conclusion. So there's really nothing here for me to engage with. Or am I supposed to accept Kant's conclusion merely on his authority? Is this what passes for 'free thought' these days? ;)

3. Kant's position is arguably self-defeating. If we cannot know anything about noumena *qua* noumena, then we cannot know that they are mind-independent, unknowable, etc. In short, one can only posit the existence of noumena, and their real distinction from phenomena, on the assumption that we can have *some* justified beliefs about noumena. For more on this, see chapter 1 of Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief*.

4. I fail to see how any of this helps out Dawson. As an Objectivist, Dawson is committed to the existence of consciousness-independent objects with consciousness-independent properties (attributes, features, qualities, etc. -- however one wants to characterise them). So if Kant (on your reading) is right, then Rand is wrong. Needless to say, Rand was no fan of Kant. With defenders like you, Dawson hardly needs critics! ;)

Frankly, I'm more sympathetic to Rand's metaphysical realism than to Kant's transcendental idealism. But then, adherence to metaphysical realism isn't exactly an Objectivist distinctive. Moreover, I'm not the one with the burden of reconciling Objectivism with conceptualism about universals.

5. As for your first comment, I'm at a loss to see how any of your remarks are supposed to help Dawson out of his hole. But perhaps that wasn't your point; in which case, I'm afraid your point wasn't very clear. :)

[October 23, 2006 1:10 PM](#)

[Daniel Morgan](#) said...

James,

Sorry for the lack of clarity. What I was trying to do is go to someone who I thought held your view -- that "human-only" conceptualism fails, as you described in your comment above. Let me address that comment in my attempt to clarify the point I was trying to make:

In your view, I take it, universals are identical (or reducible) to concepts; specifically, human concepts. (We don't want any "invisible magical being" to get a foot in the door, right?) So the fact that the ball is round, that it possesses the property of roundness, is ultimately grounded in the application of our concept of roundness to the ball. Insofar as there are such things as properties, they are not mind-independent; if they exist at all, then they are purely conceptual.

What I would say (I have physicalist leanings, but am not dogmatic about it) is that the properties of objects in the universe are described on the basis of human perception. Those properties are known through a layer of our perception, and this "layer", when not present, does not **remove** the properties of the objects themselves -- and we can not say with certainty whether or not the layer distorts these properties or transmits them "as they are". Now, if the properties were nothing, as Kant pointed out, then there would be nothing for our perception to *perceive*. That is, the substance, or properties, of objects *exist*. That is a brute fact. I know that Dawson agrees with me here.

The question of whether or not "roundness" exists, as a concept, is irrelevant to the question of whether the object exists, and whether the "layer" of human perception in any way affects "the thing in itself." I would argue, **no**, and I believe anyone with sanity would as well. So...whether we exist or not, whether we perceive objects or not, they exist, and they have properties; whether those properties, as we know them, are "as they are" from some external frame of reference is of little interest.

That is to say, the truth value of the claim: "to humans the ball is round, but their sense perception is skewed; to alien X the ball is square, and their sense perception is reliable," or something like that, is both of no concern and unverifiable, which I believe you admitted below.

The problem, however, is that your conceptualism implies that reality is dependent on human consciousness. Facts, such as the fact that the ball is round, are ultimately the product of human thought.

The ball exists.

The ball has properties which are mind-independent ("the thing in itself") that we can only know through our perceptions, our "concepts" of those properties.

If humans do not exist, the concepts do not exist, but the objects exist and their properties still exist.

Why is that wrong?

If there were no human consciousness, then strictly speaking the ball would not be round -- indeed, it would possess no properties at all (since there would be no concepts applied to it). On your view, then, the way the world really is turns out to be a product of our minds.

Now this is transcendental idealism, it seems. You are saying that we *create* these properties, rather than **perceiving** that which already exists. If the substance, upon which our perceptions work, did not exist, there would not be an object to perceive, unless you think that we create objects, and create properties, with our minds. If we only observe/perceive them, and they translate through our faculties and the "veil of perception" to be something like "roundness", then certainly, "roundness" itself doesn't exist if we do not, but the object still does, and its properties still do.

If Objectivism is to be retained, you'll have to shift your understanding of universals either toward nominalism or toward realism.

There are other solutions, as I indicated in my first comment.

Realism would be the better option: universals (such as properties) really exist and do so independent of human thought.

Then in the scenario I outlined above, I have chosen this option -- the objects and their properties exist, we perceive them and form concepts to describe them: conceptualism.

On the realist view, universals exist but are not perceivable entities (one can perceive a round ball, but not roundness per se).

Exactly. The concept "roundness" does not exist, but objects with properties that human beings perceive and describe as "round" do. We have no ultimate way to verify even the veracity of our perceptions, but we all take their reliability for granted.

So apparently you can no more countenance the existence of mind-independent universals than the existence of God.

I think that, given Kant's conclusions below and my own attempt to use them to ask you how your position makes sense, this is probably the best point to press you on. Are you saying that "roundness" itself exists inside of God's mind? And that the reason objects have the property "round" is because God willed it such? So every object in the universe, and its properties, are basically metaphysical dreams of God? And yet you accuse Dawson of idealism?

What I have yet to hear you explain is how objects and properties cannot exist without our cognizing them? Why can there not be "the thing in itself"?

Of course, if you want to retain your conceptualist intuitions without jettisoning your commitment to metaphysical realism, you could always adopt theistic conceptual realism (as recently defended by Greg Welty, among others). Unfortunately, the 'theistic' component of TCR is not an optional accessory. :)

Perhaps you can enlighten me on these last few paragraphs as to why one would want to deny the primacy of the existence of objects, and their properties, which give us an objective and foundational universe to live in; and do this in order to adopt a dream-like, metaphysically subjective universe that Dawson has accurately described elsewhere as a cartoon?

How is it that your "account" of roundness (that it exists in the mind of God, and somehow gets instantiated as a property of all things in our universe which humans perceive as round) is superior to the primacy of existence and identity?

I would try to say it like this:

X exists in a mind-independent fashion.

X has properties we can call P, which are "the thing in itself", that are indirectly accessible to us; what we know of X are our perceptions of P, P'.

P result from the physical existence of X and are not *necessarily* universal -- matter and energy interconvert and

change.

P' are capable of being categorized, generalized, and abstracted into universals by human beings - U.

U's do not have an empirical, tangible, or verifiable existence outside of human minds.

The existence of U does not affect P' -- the ability of a human being to perceive the color "red" is not changed by the concept "redness".

The existence of P' does not affect the existence of P -- human perception of "red" does not (in theory) alter the properties of X, P.

P is thus foundation to, and primary to P'.

Feel free to point out something if I'm just dense. That is entirely possible.

[October 23, 2006 3:03 PM](#)