

Thursday, October 27, 2011

Has the Primacy of Existence Been Refuted?

Theists who are aware of Objectivism are right to be concerned with the devastating implications which the principle of the primacy of existence has for their religious worldview. So it should come as no surprise when Christian apologists try to find some way of destroying the primacy of existence.

Once such attempt was recently executed by Christian apologist Dustin Segers, who posts under the moniker “Dusman” on various blogs. Segers’ comments can be found in [this episode](#) of a podcast program called [Fundamentally Flawed](#). In this blog I will examine Segers’ four-point attempt to refute the primacy of existence.

This will not be the first time that I have interacted with comments made by Segers. In fact, Segers and I discussed various issues relevant to the “belief vs. unbelief” debate back in 2006 on the Unchained Radio discussion forum, which are apparently no longer posted on the web. My transcript of our discussion has been available on my website [here](#) for several years now. Astute readers who examine that record will notice that, back then, Segers was not familiar with the philosophical distinctives of Objectivism. It will be borne out in my present analysis of his attempt to take down the primacy of existence, that he has not grown in understanding of Objectivism in the intervening years.

In the [Fundamentally Flawed podcast](#), Segers begins his criticism of the primacy of existence at about the 17:10 mark. I have transcribed his comments here:

[Begin: 17:10]...what this is getting to is the primacy of existence, which is the fundamental objection given by Objectivist atheism. And it basically says this. It says uh uh that a consciousness conscious of nothing but itself is a contradiction in terms. Before it - meaning the I, the self - could identify itself as consciousness, it - the I - in other words, the self - had to be conscious of something.

The problem is that that’s false. One of the first things that a conscious mind is conscious of is itself. So the argument fails to show a contradiction.

The second thing is it’s self-refuting. Because when Ayn Rand made that argument, she refutes her own primacy of existence by presupposing the primacy of her own consciousness in order to argue against the primacy of consciousness.

And thirdly it begs the question. She’s assuming her own conclusion implicitly in her premise. She’s basically saying a consciousness that isn’t conscious of anything but itself is a contradiction in terms because it isn’t conscious of anything.

Fourthly, it’s also self-refuting because it makes the same mistake that logical positivism made in the middle of the 20th century because it claims a priori that the only way we can know things is through the five senses when that proposition isn’t known through the five senses.

So there are four refutations of this argument that we don’t necessarily have to have a primacy of consciousness in order to make sense of existence. [End: 18:46]

Those who have a solid grasp of Objectivism will see right off that Segers seems quite unclear on just what the primacy of existence holds. Specifically it appears he’s confusing the principle of the primacy of existence with the principle of the secondary objectivity of consciousness - i.e., the principle that the notion of a consciousness conscious of nothing but itself is contradictory. The two are not the same, and I will make this clear below. The result is that Segers produces no arguments at all against the primacy of existence. Beyond that he makes several errors while trying to interact with the latter principle, with which he does attempt to interact.

First, let us clarify the distinction between the principle of the primacy of existence on the one hand, and the

principle of the secondary objectivity of consciousness on the other.

The primacy of existence has to do with the *relationship* between consciousness and its objects. It specifically holds that *the objects of consciousness exist independent of the activity by which a subject is conscious of those objects*. This is not identical to the view that consciousness conscious only itself is a contradiction.

I have already written extensively about the primacy of existence - what it is and how it defeats theism. Readers who are unfamiliar with it can see the following entries on my blog:

[How Theism Violates the Primacy of Existence](#)

[The Inherent Subjectivism of God-belief](#)

[The Axioms and the Primacy of Existence](#)

[Theism and Subjective Metaphysics](#)

[Confessions of a Vantillian Subjectivist](#)

Readers may also find the following articles on [my website](#) helpful:

[The Primacy of Existence: A Validation](#)

[The Argument from Metaphysical Primacy: A Debate](#)

It should be clear from listening to Segers' comments that he says nothing about the proper relationship between consciousness and its objects, and thus offers no criticisms whatsoever of the primacy of existence.

To be sure, however, the principle of the secondary objectivity of consciousness, which is what Segers' comments actually pertain to, does in fact pose its own challenges to the theistic worldview. I have already shown how this is a problem for theism here:

[Before the Beginning: The Problem of Divine Lonesomeness](#)

Attentive readers of this last entry will note that my framing of the problem of divine lonesomeness assumes the truth of the Objectivist view that consciousness conscious of nothing but itself is a contradiction in terms. It does not set out to vindicate this premise since to date all theists I know of who have interacted with Objectivism have readily granted it. For instance, the late John Robbins (hailing from the "Clarkian" camp of presuppositionalists) makes use of this premise in order to argue against *tabula rasa* in [this article](#) (showing that he does not understand what is meant by *tabula rasa* very well). Also, Patrick Toner, in [his critique of Objectivist atheology](#), grants the truth of this premise without question (see specifically pp. 212-213).

Given these and other precedents which I have seen over the years, I was a bit surprised when Segers set out to disprove the view that the notion of a consciousness conscious only of itself is self-contradictory. It's puzzling to find such fundamental conflict between individuals who we're supposed to believe are guided by an infallible supernatural source.

On a broader note in this regard, Segers provides no indication that he genuinely understands the point Rand was making. He recites what the principle of the secondary objectivity of consciousness states, but he does not seem to have given the matter much consideration. Indeed, we already saw that he's confused the secondary objectivity of consciousness with the primacy of existence. Unfortunately, it seems he's denied himself a chance to learn a fundamental truth about consciousness and philosophy. This is a consequence of a zeal to protect a confessional investment at all costs - apologists tend to leap before they look, and the outcomes are often rather embarrassing. For instance, Segers seems not to have considered the physiological preconditions which make conscious possible (as a theist, he likely denies that consciousness has such preconditions in the first place), nor does he seem to grasp the absurd implications of the alternative to Rand's thesis - i.e., a consciousness in a void. The fundamental reason why the notion that a

consciousness that has only itself as its sole object is inherently contradictory, never seems to dawn on Segers.

Let me say a few words then about the nature of consciousness and how it secures the principle of the secondary objectivity of consciousness. This will help readers better understand what this principle holds and why Segers' attempted refutation of it fails.

The principle of the secondary objectivity of consciousness holds that consciousness can in fact be its own object (where 'object' denotes something one is aware of), *but only after it has content other than itself*. Objectivism recognizes that consciousness is not an independently existing entity, but in fact a particular type of *activity* performed by a biological organism. I have already posted a discussion of mine in which I defend the view that consciousness is in fact biological (see my blog [The Biological Nature of Consciousness](#)). Speaking on the nature of consciousness as it pertains to philosophy, Rand wrote:

Awareness is not a passive state, but an active process. On the lower levels of awareness, a complex neurological process is required to enable man to experience a sensation and to integrate sensations into percepts; that process is automatic and non-volitional: man is aware of its results, but not of the process itself. On the higher, conceptual level, the process is psychological, conscious and volitional. In either case, awareness is achieved and maintained by continuous action.

Directly or indirectly, every phenomenon of consciousness is derived from one's awareness of the external world. Some object, i.e., some content, is involved in every state of awareness. Extrospection is a process of cognition directed outward—a process of apprehending some existent(s) of the external world. Introspection is a process of cognition directed inward—a process of apprehending one's own psychological actions in regard to some existent(s) of the external world, such actions as thinking, feeling, reminiscing, etc. It is only in relation to the external world that the various actions of a consciousness can be experienced, grasped, defined or communicated. Awareness is awareness of something. A content-less state of consciousness is a contradiction in terms. (*Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, p. 37)

Various scientific experiments have vindicated this view (for instance, in his three-part lecture *The Metaphysics of Consciousness*, philosopher Harry Binswanger discusses various scientific experiments, some of which he himself participated in, which explored the physiological aspects of consciousness). Consciousness at its lower levels consists of physical action, such as the response of the retina to light, while on the cognitive activity at the conceptual level is also a type of activity. Consciousness at all levels is active in nature.

The axiom of consciousness holds that consciousness is consciousness *of something* - i.e., that *consciousness always involves an object*. This is a first-level recognition which one grasps when he focuses his awareness on his conscious activity: whenever he is consciousness, there will always be something he is conscious *of*. *What* he is conscious *of* is known in Objectivism as the *object* of his consciousness. Where there is no object, there is no consciousness.

To be an object of consciousness, the object first has to exist. One cannot be conscious of something that does not exist (save of course in the confines of his imagination). And just as one cannot be conscious of a thing unless it exists, one cannot be conscious of an *activity* until it happens. Since consciousness is essentially an *action* performed by an organism, the action of consciousness would need to happen before it could be available as an object of any consciousness, including its own. In other words, an organism cannot be conscious of its own consciousness until it has performed those actions by which it is conscious of something; before this, it's simply not available as an object to be conscious of.

This is true for the three basic levels of consciousness which man possesses, namely the level of sensation, of perception, and of conceptualization. One could not be conscious of one's own sensations until he has sensed something; only then could his sensory activity be available as an object of his own consciousness. Similarly with perception: one could not be conscious of one's own perception until he has perceived something; only then could his perceptual activity be available as an object of his own consciousness. Lastly, one could not be conscious of one's own conceptualization until he has conceptualized something; only then could his conceptual activity be available as an object of his own consciousness.

So there are three fundamental facts about the nature of consciousness to consider here:

1. Consciousness requires an object.
2. Consciousness is essentially active in nature.
3. Consciousness cannot be its own object unless it exists, which means: until it *happens*.

It is for these reasons, as explained above, that conscious can in fact be an object of itself, but only as a *secondary* object - it must have an object distinct from its own activity before its own activity can itself be an object of its own activity. Thus Objectivism is correct in affirming that the notion of a consciousness conscious *only* of itself is a contradiction in terms: it would constitute an affirmation of consciousness while ignoring the nature of consciousness. Thus the notion commits the fallacy of the stolen concept.

Notice something else which is often overlooked. When we think about our own conscious activity, the conscious activity about which we're thinking is always in relation ultimately to some object other than itself. Take for example any instance in which you thought about your conscious activity. I'm thinking now about the time I was planning a trip to Hong Kong. The object of my present thinking is my planning of a trip to Hong Kong. My planning activity was itself a conscious activity, but notice that it had an object independent of that activity - namely Hong Kong and the various constraints involved in traveling there. In fact, I cannot think of any instance of conscious activity which did not have an object independent of that activity. If Segers or anyone else can think of one, I would have to ask: what would qualify that activity as *conscious* activity rather than, say, *vegetative* activity? Here's where you will find a lot of blanking out among those who still want to say Objectivism is wrong on this point.

So, to put the matter in a nutshell and hopefully bring it home for those who may still be having a hard time understanding this, we can safely say: it is perfectly fine to speak of consciousness, and in so doing, consciousness is an object of our speaking - i.e., it is an object of consciousness at that point. But since consciousness requires an object, the very idea of *consciousness of consciousness* forces the question: Consciousness of consciousness *of what*? To answer this by saying "consciousness of consciousness of *itself*" is essentially to say: "Consciousness of consciousness of consciousness," which in turn forces the obvious question: Consciousness of consciousness of consciousness *of what*? To continue lengthening the chain by adding more instances of "of consciousness" to answer this question, is to confess that one really has no answer, but insists on there not being any object independent of consciousness itself. At which point we can wonder why, but it couldn't be important - no evasion of reality ever is.

Now that the Objectivist position has been more fully elucidated, and its affirmation of the principle of the secondary objectivity of consciousness validated, let us examine Segers' attempts to vindicate the view that the notion of a consciousness conscious *only* of itself is non-contradictory.

His first objection is as follows:

The problem is that that's false. One of the first things that a conscious mind is conscious of is itself. So the argument fails to show a contradiction.

Segers flatly declares the Objectivist principle of the secondary objectivity of consciousness "false," but provides no proof for this. He asserts that "one of the first things that a conscious mind is conscious of is itself," but he provides no support for this whatsoever. Indeed, in order to overturn the Objectivist view, he would have to do more than show that one's own mind is merely *one* of the first things that one is conscious, but rather that it is in fact *the* first thing it is conscious of. And no, imaginative scenarios which posit unrealistic hypotheses of what "could" happen in some "possible world" (i.e., in some *imaginary* realm) will not do here. Objectivism holds to the primacy of facts, not imagination, so it is facts that will need to be brought to bear against Objectivism if one is going to be able to mount an internal critique here.

In cross-examining Segers' claim that "one of the first things that a conscious mind is conscious of is itself," my first question in response to this is: *How does he know this*? Of course, Segers does not anticipate such a question, for he provides no indication of how he could know it. But indeed, how could one know that the first object one is aware of when he begins his awareness as such, is his own mind? What content would be there? What exactly is it that he would be aware of at this stage of experience? Segers apparently does not

object to the view that consciousness does in fact require an object - that consciousness is consciousness of *something* (which means the issue of metaphysical primacy - i.e., the question of the proper orientation in the relationship between consciousness and its objects - is unavoidable and inevitable). But has he considered *how* a mind might have awareness of itself, especially before it's been conscious of something independent of itself? By what means would a nascent conscious mind be conscious of itself? Segers does not say. How could there be a mind there unless it had accrued content in the first place, and thus could be identified as a repository of knowledge, memories, projections, inferences, and the such? Segers is so anxious to declare Objectivism false that he doesn't dare consider the issues in an adult manner. Perhaps he senses that if he did, he'd find only good reasons to concede to Objectivism here, and he clearly doesn't want to do that.

What's noteworthy here is Segers' acknowledgement, embedded in his statement, that there is in fact a sequence of stages in the conscious process. This is clear when he says "one of the *first* things that a conscious mind is conscious of...." Segers does not seem to be challenging the premise that a consciousness *starts* in some way. That this premise even seems intuitively true on the face of it is due to the fact that consciousness is *active* in nature, as we saw affirmed by Rand above.

When an organism first begins its life, it is initially conscious of that with which it first comes into sensory contact. This wouldn't be a "mind." It couldn't, even on the Christian's view, since "mind" is not something that one can be aware of through the senses. The Christian will likely want to contend against the view that an organism will first be conscious of things by means of sensation, for if he concedes this premise, then he must concede any objection against the position that consciousness conscious only of itself is a contradiction in terms. But since this would only prove fatal to theism in the long run (again, see my blog on [the problem of divine lonesomeness](#)), the Christian is pleased to depart from the realm of fact and fantasize alternatives.

But let's consider the mind that is conscious *only of itself*, and of nothing else. Let us ask: What would qualify a consciousness conscious only of itself as a consciousness in the first place? What would it be conscious of? Of its own consciousness? Consciousness of *what*? Blank out. Segers calls it a "mind." So let us ask then: what *content* would this mind have at this initial stage of experience? If it has any content, what would be the nature of that content? If that content is distinct from the mind's own conscious activity, then Segers needs to rethink his objection (of course, we've already seen reasons why he should do so). What would be the source or origin of that content? If Segers is right, then it could not have gotten that content through some prior conscious contact with something, for the nature of Segers' objection requires that this would not have taken place. Either the mind of which a consciousness is allegedly first aware has content - and thus requires an explanation of where that content came from and how it got there - or it has no content, in which case it needs to be explained what exactly this consciousness is supposedly conscious of, and how it qualifies as a "mind." Neither option holds any promise of surviving scrutiny, for either alternative ends up committing the fallacy of the stolen concept: a mind that begins with content already in place would be a mind that could not have acquired its content by any objective means - for it did not "acquire" its content through conscious activity. Alternatively, a mind that begins with no content cannot qualify as a mind, for it would have no content to be mindful of.

Let us turn now to Segers next objection to the principle of the secondary objectivity of consciousness:

The second thing is it's self-refuting. Because when Ayn Rand made that argument, she refutes her own primacy of existence by presupposing the primacy of her own consciousness in order to argue against the primacy of consciousness.

Segers charges that, in formulating the view that consciousness conscious only of itself is a contradiction in terms, that she was somehow "presupposing the primacy of her own consciousness." But Segers does not show where Rand did this, nor quote her words in order to show that his charge against her is at all accurate.

Contrary to what Segers asserts, it is not possible for Rand to be "presupposing the primacy of her own consciousness" with respect to the present matter, for she is simply identifying facts that she's observed. Identifying the facts that one observes does not imply that one is "presupposing the primacy of [one's] own consciousness." Rand would happily acknowledge, as consistency with her metaphysics would require, that the facts she was identifying obtained independent of her preferences, feelings, ignorance, limitations of

understanding, imagination, desires, memories, etc., i.e., that their factuality did not depend on her own conscious activity in regard to them. The only way that Rand could be legitimately accused of “presupposing the primacy of her own consciousness” would be if in fact Rand argued as though the facts of reality were what she wanted them to be, that the facts conformed to her conscious dictates, that she had the power to command reality to obey her will. Rand certainly was not arguing on the basis of the assuming that the facts obey her consciousness, and no one - including Segers - has shown that she was. Segers doesn't even try to!

What's more, Segers has already shown that he does not have an informed grasp of the issue of metaphysical primacy to begin with, for, as I showed above, he has confused the secondary objectivity of consciousness with the primacy of existence itself. Besides, if Segers were right that the primacy of existence is false, and therefore the primacy of consciousness were right, then why would Rand be wrong in assuming the primacy of her own consciousness? Segers might say that in doing so she was being inconsistent with her own metaphysical premises. But the burden would be upon Segers to show that this would be a problem if the primacy of existence were false, as he has asserted. Any attempt to show that inconsistency is somehow a defect in one's view would necessarily assume the truth of the primacy of existence (Segers surely wouldn't be saying it's a defect because he *wants* it to be so, would he?), which would simply undermine his own objection.

In fact, Segers' does not realize how his own criticism depends on Rand being right, or how the success of his criticism would only mean that Rand would be correct in saying whatever she says regardless of why she said it. This is the beauty of Rand's argument: to argue against it both assumes the truth of her position, and also implies that there could be no legitimate gripe against what she says if her opponents were correct. It is this kind of self-securing position that makes presuppositionalists green with envy when it comes to Objectivism.

But Segers does not stop there. His next objection proceeds as follows:

And thirdly it begs the question. She's assuming her own conclusion implicitly in her premise. She's basically saying a consciousness that isn't conscious of anything but itself is a contradiction in terms because it isn't conscious of anything.

In order to show that Rand begs the question with regard to either the primacy of existence (the actual primacy of existence, which Segers does not even criticize) or the secondary objectivity of consciousness, Segers would have to restate the allegedly question-begging argument that Rand supposedly gave on behalf of either position, using her own words (and not those manufactured for the purpose of finding fault), and show that their respective conclusions depend on premises which assumed the truth of those conclusions. Segers has not done this. If in fact she did do this, and Segers were aware of it, it would be puzzling for him not to support his charge with documentary evidence.

In the case of the primacy of existence, Rand held this recognition to be *axiomatic* (cf. *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 24). If Rand is correct that the primacy of existence is in fact axiomatic, she could affirm it on the basis of its axiomatic nature alone, and thus she would not need to infer it as a conclusion from a prior set of premises. In other words, Rand was in fact *not* begging the question when she affirmed the primacy of existence, any more than one is “begging the question” when one sees a tree before him and says, “that's a tree.” An axiom is not a conclusion in a proof; it is not something that one needs to argue *to*. Quite simply, then, since Rand did not need to argue on behalf of the primacy of existence, there is simply no opportunity for her to beg the question in the first place. Had Segers more familiarity with Objectivism (i.e., if he knew what he was talking about), he would know this much. Thus his very charge against Rand here shows that he's acting on the basis of ignorance, not knowledge.

In her novel *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand characterized an axiom as follows:

An axiom is a statement that identifies the base of knowledge and of any further statement pertaining to that knowledge, a statement necessarily contained in all others, whether any particular speaker chooses to identify it or not. An axiom is a proposition that defeats its opponents by the fact that they have to accept it and use it in the process of any attempt to deny it.

The fact that existence holds metaphysical primacy over consciousness is foundational to knowledge. It is the principle which makes reason possible. Reason operates by gathering facts, identifying them conceptually and

integrating them in a logical hierarchy. For this to be possible, one must acknowledge the objectivity of facts at the outset - i.e., that facts are what they are independent of one's own conscious activity, whether it be one's own preferences, fantasies, emotions, wishing, resentment, etc. It is the primacy of existence which underwrites the recognition that *wishing doesn't make it so*. Consequently, to deny the primacy of existence is tantamount to affirming that *wishing does make it so*. Thus it should not come as any surprise when theists seek to undermine the primacy of existence - it's devastating to their god-belief!

But what about the secondary objectivity of consciousness? Did Rand beg the question in any argument that she might have put forth on behalf of establishing this truth? Again, Segers does not quote Rand and show us where Rand actually did beg the question, or commit any other informal fallacy for that matter. Rand simply put two and two together and came up with four. She started with the axiom of consciousness - namely the recognition that consciousness is consciousness of something - and noted the fact that consciousness is essentially a type of action. Moreover, since one cannot be aware of an action until it happens, conscious activity in regard to some object independent of itself must take place before consciousness itself could be available as an object of itself. As such the principle of the secondary objectivity of consciousness is essentially the product of an integration of immediately available facts, namely those which I have just identified.

Piecing together what Segers says to arrive at what he thinks Rand's supposed argument for the secondary objectivity of consciousness, I think it's clear that he thinks the premise that "consciousness isn't conscious of anything" somehow figures into Rand's thinking (for Segers explicitly identifies this as the offending premise in what he takes to be a question-begging argument). But clearly Rand did not think that "consciousness isn't conscious of anything." She couldn't be more explicit: "Some object, i.e., some content, is involved in every state of awareness" (*Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, p. 37). For Rand, contrary to Segers' construal, consciousness is consciousness of *something*. Rand herself offered support for this view by pointing out that "before [a consciousness] could identify itself as consciousness, it had to be conscious of something [other than itself]" ("Galt's Speech," *Atlas Shrugged*). And even though Segers quotes this statement in his recitation of Rand's position, he has failed to integrate it into the broader view which Rand is affirming. Indeed, he has replaced it with a premise of his own making ("consciousness isn't conscious of anything") which Rand nowhere ever affirmed.

My exploration of the secondary objectivity of consciousness above vindicates Rand's discovery that a consciousness would need to have awareness of some object distinct from its own activity before that activity could itself be an object of its awareness. As we saw, the axiomatic recognition that *consciousness requires an object* is key to this discovery about consciousness. Another key discovery is the fact that consciousness is essentially a type of *activity*, and as such, it cannot be an object of consciousness *until it happens*. So Rand does not beg the question here either, for she is not attempting to *prove* that "a consciousness conscious of nothing but itself is a contradiction in terms" from some a set of premises which conceptually reduces to this conclusion.

But I must say that, in terms of presuppositionalism itself, I'm often taken aback by the charge of begging the question from this brand of apologist. Indeed, one can detect among them a fickle attitude towards circularity in argumentation. It almost seems that presuppositionalists think circularity is acceptable when it occurs in their own arguments, but objectionable when it (supposedly) occurs in arguments offered by non-theists. It is clear from what Segers states here, for instance, that he finds the instance of circularity in an argument (even if it doesn't actually exist) to be an instance of fallacy.

No less than the renowned popularizer of presuppositional apologetics Greg Bahnsen sought explicitly to excuse instances of circularity in one's reasoning. In a footnote in his major opus on Vantillian apologetics, Bahnsen wrote:

'Circularity' in one's philosophical system is just another name for 'consistency' in outlook throughout one's system. That is, one's starting point and final conclusion cohere with each other. (*Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 170.n42.)

Segers himself has weighed in on this matter, essentially agreeing with Bahnsen. In an entry on [his blog](#) devoted to the question [Is Circular Reasoning Always Fallacious?](#) Segers clearly affirms that there are times when circular reasoning is *not* fallacious, and even holds that "Circular reasoning is unavoidable to some

degree when proving one's ultimate standard." (If you're thinking, "My, that's rich!" - you're not alone, but it will have to wait for a future blog entry all its own.) Segers goes on to say that the Christian god "uses a non-fallacious type of circular reasoning when He makes an oath," and believes that "clearly some degree of circular reasoning is necessary when proving one's ultimate authority." On this view, a Blarko-believer's argument for the existence of Blarko the WonderBeing which contains premises assuming Blarko's existence, cannot be dismissed on the basis that it commits an informal fallacy!

Segers elaborates on the matter as follows:

...all circles aren't necessarily fallacious. Begging the question is often considered a fallacy because it is usually arbitrary. But it can be non-arbitrary if it goes beyond a simple circle (i.e., the Bible is true because it says so) and uses additional information to support its conclusion. If the ultimate authority is first assumed and you find out later you have good reasons for it because without it you cannot make sense out of anything, then its perfectly legitimate to reason in a circle.

And here I thought circular reasoning was objectionable because it seeks to bypass legitimate rules of inference! I suppose the question at this point becomes: How does one determine when begging the question "goes beyond a simple circle"? How - and when - does the use of "additional information to support its conclusion" divest a question-begging argument of its offending fallacy?

With Segers' enlightening comments in mind, we can now ask: If Rand in fact begged the question in favor of the principle of the secondary objectivity of consciousness, why suppose it's the fallacious kind of begging the question, and not the non-fallacious kind of begging the question that Segers finds perfectly acceptable, even "unavoidable"?

The upshot for Segers' third objection then is:

(1) he's not accurately represented Rand's rationale for affirming the principle of the secondary objectivity of consciousness in justifying his charge that she begged the question in defense of it;

(2) he has not shown that Rand actually committed anything which his own analysis of circularity considers fallacious (i.e., he has not shown that any part of Rand's position on the matter is "arbitrary" - whatever this concept could mean or be objectionable in the context of Christianity); and

(3) he has not shown that the facts which can be brought to bear on the matter do not themselves "go... beyond a simple circle."

By Segers' own criteria regarding question-begging arguments, even if he could legitimately *establish* that Rand begged the question (and he can't), one could legitimately (on Segers' own assumptions) say: "Well and good!" and not be bothered by the matter. For Segers has handed us an "excuse," something which his own apologetic method loves to claim, in a display of feigned triumph, that men are universally without.

Segers' then gives his final objection:

Fourthly, it's also self-refuting because it makes the same mistake that logical positivism made in the middle of the 20th century because it claims a priori that the only way we can know things is through the five senses when that proposition isn't known through the five senses.

Objectivism is not logical positivism. Nor does Objectivism inherit the errors and fallacies to which the logical positivists committed themselves. It really doesn't matter how many different sense modalities man has. Say he had fourteen sense modalities instead of five. The same principle would still apply: he would still have awareness of objects *by some means*, and those means would be sensory in nature. Such a consciousness, if it also had the ability to form concepts as man in fact does, would still be able to formulate conceptual knowledge from the basis of sense perception, as man in fact does, and there's no reason to suppose that it would be able to make *discoveries* about the nature of knowledge it thus forms. Man possesses five sense modalities, and he has the ability to form concepts from perceptual input. He also has the ability to discover facts about the nature of knowledge thus formed, by means of introspection. Such discoveries are performed firsthand as part of experience, and the knowledge formed from identifying the objects discovered in that experience and integrated according to an objective process (namely

concept-formation, a process of abstraction, as laid out in Rand's *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*), would be a *posteriori* knowledge, not a *priori* knowledge.

If man has the ability to form knowledge *conceptually*, then the knowledge he thus forms and the process by which he forms it can themselves be objects of his awareness, too. Remember that an object is *what* a consciousness is conscious *of*. This can be a particular concrete (such as a rock, a chair, a person, etc.), a process (such as the earth orbiting the sun, tying one's shoe, writing a letter, forming concepts, etc.), an abstraction (such as the concept 'man', the concept 'freedom', etc.), a proposition, etc. So why cannot the sum of his knowledge be an object of his conscious activity? Why cannot the *nature* of his knowledge be the object of his probing inquiry? The theist might say, "But you don't have awareness of your knowledge and its nature by means of sensation!" which is well and good. But then again, we don't claim to in the first place. So what value has the theist added by interjecting this?

Of course, when we speak about the general nature of knowledge, one issue which should be clarified at the outset is: Knowledge *of what*? Just as consciousness needs an object, so does knowledge. For the Objectivist, knowledge is knowledge *of reality* acquired through an objective process. For the theist, "knowledge" is really a blurring of the distinction between reality and imagination while granting primacy to the imagination and confusing its products with reality. It lacks an objective process, and cannot develop by means of an objective process.

One of the inestimably valuable philosophical advantages which Objectivism has over a theistic worldview, such as Christianity, is the fact that Objectivism has a theory of concepts. Indeed, it is the *objective* theory of concepts, and this theory explains in step-by-step fashion how the human mind generates conceptual knowledge from perceptual input.

If we are capable of tracking the course of the development of our knowledge, and even discovering the proper methods by which knowledge is discovered and validated, why would it be so objectionable to formulate general truths which denote what we have discovered about knowledge? If we understand that knowledge is knowledge *of reality*, that there is a distinction between reality and imagination (the primacy of existence, wishing doesn't make it so, etc.), and that the proper methodology by which we develop our knowledge of reality begins with objective input from reality (i.e., via the senses) and proceeds by means of a process of abstraction (as analyzed by the objective theory of concepts) by which we form concepts on the basis of perceptual input, why would the general recognition that (legitimate) knowledge of reality is *ultimately* based on sensory input? Obviously this is not an *a priori* declaration, but in fact an inescapable fact which we discover as we explore the nature of knowledge beginning at its roots.

Critics of Objectivism often make the mistake of assuming that, since Objectivism recognizes that knowledge of reality *begins* with sense perception, that Objectivism must therefore hold that *all* knowledge is therefore confined to the perceptual level of awareness. This is a most superficial non sequitur, and ignores the enormous data that Objectivism brings to bear in enlightening our understanding of the conceptual level of awareness. Quite simply, Objectivists do not claim to know that all knowledge is *ultimately* based in sense perception because they *perceived* this to be the case by means of the senses. We have the conceptual level of consciousness, and we have the objective theory of concepts to validate this recognition. It would be a most futile effort to attempt a refutation of this, as the Objectivist demolition of skepticism has shown (see for instance David Kelley's *The Evidence of the Senses* which demonstrates how skeptical arguments against the senses crumble into a debris field of stolen concepts).

Presuppositionalists, however, adhere to a worldview which has no theory of concepts to begin with (you certainly won't find such a theory in the bible), so they are in the dark when it comes to understanding the relationship between the conceptual level of consciousness and sense perception. It is in this systemic darkness to which their religious worldview holds them hostage that they generate superficial objections which trade illicitly on mischaracterizing their non-Christian targets.

So contrary to Segers' accusation here, Objectivism does not argue on some *a priori* basis that "the only way we can know things is through the five senses." We do not have to prove that man must be the way that he is any more than we have to prove that he couldn't have been otherwise. All we need to do is discover what actually is the case, and this includes understanding his nature as a living organism possessing a consciousness capable of conceptual integration as well as the nature of knowledge produced by such means.

Imaginary alternatives have no philosophical value, nor do they need to be treated as though they did have philosophical value.

In conclusion, we can see without a doubt that Segers' efforts to refute the primacy of existence fail. For one thing, he never interacts with the primacy of existence in the first place. He has confused a different principle for it and, while proceeding to fire off objections to that other principle, believes he is in fact refuting the primacy of existence when in fact he isn't. He ends up attacking the principle of the secondary objectivity of consciousness and leaves the primacy of existence completely intact.

Meanwhile, the four objections which Segers brings against the principle of the secondary objectivity of consciousness also fail. To summarize:

- His first objection is that this principle is "false" because "one of the first things a conscious mind is conscious of is itself." This amounts to simply a flat denial with no argumentation, no evidential support to validate his counter-claim, and an announcement that he has in fact not seriously explored the matter intelligently.

- His second objection is that Rand defied the very principle she affirmed "by presupposing the primacy of her own consciousness in order to argue against the primacy of consciousness." Unfortunately, Segers nowhere shows where Rand actually did this, and I contend that he won't be able to because this charge is in fact not true. Even worse, it's not clear that Segers would even recognize when someone was proclaiming something on the primacy of one's own consciousness, for his comments on the matter reveal that he simply does not grasp what the issue of metaphysical primacy pertains to in the first place.

- Segers' third objection is that Rand begged the question in her argument for the principle of the secondary objectivity of consciousness. But this fails because Segers does not even interact with the rationale Rand herself gives (and which Segers himself restates in his quote of Rand) on behalf of this principle. In place of Rand's own stated reason for her position, Segers inserts a different premise - one which she in fact did not affirm - in order to raise the objection that she begged the question. I provide ample support for the position which Rand affirmed to buttress her own, so it should be clear that the recognition that a consciousness must be conscious of something other than itself before it could have itself as an object does not rest on informal fallacy. I also question why a presuppositionalist like Segers would find a question-begging argument objectionable in the first place, since presuppositionalism infamously excuses such arguments.

- Segers' final objection is that Rand's position must be an instance of *a priori* knowledge when Objectivism rejects the very notion of *a priori* knowledge. While it is true that Objectivism rejects the very notion of *a priori* knowledge, the principle of the secondary objectivity of consciousness is not affirmed, nor need it be affirmed, as being known *a priori*. I have provided a number of factors which together guarantee this principle as knowledge known through experience, i.e., *a posteriori* and not *a priori*.

So now that the principle of the secondary objectivity of consciousness has been soundly vindicated, the theist must now wrestle with its implications for theism. As I noted at the beginning of this blog, I have brought these out in an earlier posting, [Before the Beginning: The Problem of Divine Lonesomeness](#). Also, for information on how the primacy of existence (a principle which Segers does not in fact even touch) has fatal implications for theism, I direct readers to the several links to blog entries of mine which elaborate on the topic.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Consciousness](#), [Divine Lonesomeness](#), [Primacy of Existence](#), [Secondary Objectivity](#)

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