

Friday, February 05, 2010

## How Theism Violates the Primacy of Existence

### Introduction

Recognizing the antithesis between the primacy of existence and the primacy of consciousness is a virtue for which only Objectivism seems prepared to equip a person, while other philosophies tend to ignore or evade the matter. Objectivism is the only philosophy that I know of which not only identifies the primacy of existence explicitly as a fundamental philosophical concern, but which also purposefully develops its metaphysics, epistemology, morality and politics in a manner consistent with the primacy of existence as an ultimate guiding principle.

Occasionally I am asked, by atheists and theists alike, why I would say that theism violates the primacy of existence. That theism does in fact violate the primacy of existence is so obvious to me that it is puzzling that anyone would need to have it explained. But then I realize that, for many years now, I've understood the issue of metaphysical primacy and its implications for theism and every other position under the sun, and not everyone else benefits from this understanding. It is this understanding that I wish to share with my readers.

To understand why theism violates the primacy of existence, we must first understand what is meant by the primacy of existence. And in order to appreciate fully what the primacy of existence means, we must understand the issue of metaphysical primacy.

### The Issue of Metaphysical Primacy

The issue of metaphysical primacy has to do with the relationship between consciousness and its objects. Since all philosophy involves consciousness relating to objects (either real or imagined), the issue of metaphysical primacy bears on all philosophical principles, viewpoints and initiatives. Because consciousness is involved throughout the establishment and development of philosophical principles, the relationship between consciousness and its objects is not some sidebar distraction or marginal curiosity of trivial interest. Ignoring the relationship between consciousness is not an option for serious thinkers, especially once the question of the *proper* orientation of this relationship has been raised.

Essentially, the issue of metaphysical primacy asks:

*What holds metaphysical primacy in the relationship between a consciousness and its objects: the subject of consciousness, or the objects of consciousness?*

For a moment, some may entertain the notion that this question is fallaciously complex, perhaps supposing that it assumes a false dichotomy. Why suppose that either the subject of consciousness or its objects must hold metaphysical primacy? Can't both be metaphysical equals? Can't both the subject of consciousness and its objects enjoy metaphysical primacy, just as two individuals taking a test can both score 100% on it?

Such questions may imply that the subject of consciousness and its objects are locked in some sort of contest, with one side vying against the other, and that the issue of metaphysical primacy is an attempt to pick a winner among the two contestants arbitrarily. Either that, or they simply ignore the root of the matter that the issue of metaphysical primacy is getting at, namely *identifying* the proper *relationship* between a subject and its objects.

It is an undeniable fact that a subject is distinct from the objects of its awareness: a subject and its objects are not one and the same - the two are engaged in a *relationship*. Consciousness is consciousness *of* an object. Also, a subject does not switch sides with the objects of its awareness, as if they could trade places at will and reverse the natural orientation between the one and the other. When you perceive a rock, a chair, or the Golden Gate Bridge, you cannot suddenly become that rock or chair or bridge and look back at yourself as a perceiver. Consciousness is consciousness *of* an object(s), and the orientation between consciousness and its object(s) is *uni-directional*, and there's no

reversing this orientation. A person cannot transfer his consciousness to his objects, such that he becomes the object of his consciousness, and the subject of his consciousness is now what used to be its object. The relationship between a subject and its objects is *contextually static*.

Additionally, the relationship between a subject and its objects is not a relationship of equals. The subject is distinct from its objects, and the subject has certain abilities and capacities which its objects qua objects do not have in the context of their relationship together, even if some of those objects happen to be other conscious individuals (i.e., other persons). When you perceive a mountain or pair of scissors, it is *you* as the *subject* who is perceiving these objects. In the context of this relationship, the subject *attends* to its objects.

Another option, chosen (albeit implicitly) by most philosophies, is to suppose that the *subject* of consciousness holds metaphysical primacy over its objects. This is known as the *primacy of consciousness*, or as the *primacy of the subject* metaphysics, since it grants metaphysical primacy to the *subject* of consciousness over its objects. This is the view that the *objects* of consciousness *conform* to the *subject* of consciousness, that the *subject* of consciousness holds the “upper hand” in its relationship with the objects of its awareness. The primacy of consciousness entails that the objects of one’s awareness *depend* in some way on the subject of awareness, either for their very existence (e.g., the subject of consciousness *creates* them, either from existing material or “ex nihilo”), for their identity (e.g., the subject of consciousness *makes* its objects of its awareness *what* they are), and/or for their capacity to act (e.g., the subject of consciousness *controls* what its objects do or can do). An attempt to apply the primacy of consciousness *consistently* would involve all three aspects, holding that objects are created by an act of consciousness, that their identities are assigned to them based on choices made by the creating consciousness, and that the abilities or “potentialities” possessed by objects are given to those objects by a ruling consciousness. (Sound familiar?)

The final option (as if it were avertible) is the *primacy of existence*. Where the primacy of consciousness holds that the *subject* of consciousness calls all the shots with respect to the existence, identity and/or causal potentiality of its objects, the primacy of existence is the recognition that existence *exists independent of consciousness*, that the objects of one’s consciousness are what they are independent of conscious activity, that the task of consciousness is neither to create the objects of its awareness, assign identities to them, nor dictate what they can or cannot do, but to *perceive* and *identify* its objects. While the primacy of consciousness holds that the objects *conform* to consciousness, the primacy of existence is the recognition that objects do *not* conform to consciousness. The primacy of existence is the recognition that the objects of one’s awareness exist *independent* of one’s awareness of them, that the things one perceives are what they are regardless of what he would *prefer* or *wish* them to be.

I agree entirely with Porter when he states:

I think the primacy of existence is the most important issue in philosophy. I think it’s the real axiom of Objectivism. (*Ayn Rand’s Theory of Knowledge*, p. 198)

The difference between the primacy of existence and the primacy of consciousness, is the difference between *objectivity* and *subjectivism*. The primacy of existence is the recognition that the *objects* of consciousness exist and are what they are independent of the conscious activity by which the *subject* is aware of them, and thus represents the *objective* orientation between a subject and its objects. The primacy of consciousness is essentially a fantasy which seeks to reverse the proper orientation between a subject and its objects, attributing to the *subject* the power to conform its objects to its intentions, either for their very existence (the subject “creates” its own objects), for their natures (the subject “assigns” its objects their identity), and/or for their activity (the subject “controls” what its objects do). This represents the *subjective* orientation between a subject and its objects.

### Theism and Metaphysical Primacy

One of my readers asked the following:

I understand the primacy of existence as objects of consciousness hold primacy over the subjects and the primacy of consciousness affirming the opposite. But I do not see the problem in affirming that existence exists, existence has metaphysical primacy and that God exists. Where lies the violation in asserting that existence exists and so does God?

Questions such as this suggest to me that the one posing it either does not really grasp what the issue of metaphysical primacy deals with, or that he is not integrating what the issue of metaphysical primacy addresses with what theism

entails.

Even though many theists do not explicitly identify consciousness as one of the primary characteristics which they attribute to their god (many defenders of theism gravitate to higher abstractions when speaking of their god, such as aseity, coterminicity of their god's being with its self-consciousness, immutability, infinity, unity, etc.), it is clear from what they say about their god that they do in fact hold it to be a *conscious* being. In fact, they typically tend to take the assumption that their god is conscious completely for granted, for it is vital to just about everything else they claim about their god. According to what theists say, their god knows, sees, judges, gets angry, expresses joy, loves, commands, plans, determines, experiences pleasure, wishes, etc. All these actions are actions requiring consciousness. Indeed, it would be quite unusual if a theist were to affirm a god which performs all these actions but which is not at the same time conscious of anything. Christian apologists of the Vantillian tradition emphatically dismiss rival religions for not consistently embracing what they call a "personal" deity, i.e., a deity which is self-aware. A non-conscious deity would be what they call an "impersonal" being (cf. John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, p. 34f).

Since theism entails belief in a deity which is *conscious*, the question raised by the issue of metaphysical primacy has us focus on the relationship between the deity as a conscious subject, and any objects it is said to be conscious of (either by perception or by some other means). When we consider the orientation which theism attributes to the relationship between its god as a conscious subject and any objects it is said to be conscious of, the question becomes:

*Does this relationship resemble the primacy of existence, or the primacy of consciousness?*

Simply stating that the deity in question possesses consciousness, is not enough to answer this question. We need more information. We need to know more about what theists say about their god. Statements like the following indicate in no uncertain way the orientation which theists have in mind for their god in its relationship as a subject of consciousness to any objects it is supposedly aware of:

Christianity holds that God is the creator of every fact... *God's thought is placed back of every fact.* (Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic-Evidences*, p. 88; quoted in Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 378)

God wills, that is, creates the universe. God wills, that is, by his providence controls the course of development of the created universe and brings it to its climax. (Cornelius Van Til, "Apologetics," 1959)

We now know that the world exists simply because God wills it. (Cornelius Van Til, "The Election of All Men in Christ," *The Great Debate Today*, 1970)

Fact: God willed the universe into being. Fact: He willed the universe into being by simply speaking it into existence instantaneously. References: Psalm 33:6,9 Psalm 148:5 Hebrews 11:3 Thought: He did not have to speak in order to create, but He did. God could have just thought the universe into being. Instead, He spoke it into being. He used His word to create. ([Lesson 6: The Seven Days of Creation: A Deeper Study of Gen. 1:1 to 2:3](#))

God is Creator of everything, this vast universe. All was created by His Word. He spoke it into being. It is written: (Genesis 1:3) And God said... and it was so. His Word is powerful... God's Word spoke the universe into being. His Word is powerful beyond our comprehension. (Terrell Smith, [What Do Christians Believe?](#))

All things came into being through the will of God. It was God's pleasure that the universe and everything in it be created. (Mike Scott, [Can you explain why God created the universe?](#))

God's will is the final and exclusively determinative power of whatsoever comes to pass. The nature of any created thing is what it is because of an act of determination in relation to it on the part of God. (Jack Cottrell, [Sovereignty and Free Will](#))

God is active in history by definition of who He is, He has created everything and is present with it, controls it, and exercises authority over it to reveal Himself to the praise of His glorious grace. Every fact, and therefore every fact of history, is a fact created by Christ for Christ. (Chris Bolt, "Redemption in Apologetics," *The Portable Presuppositionalist*, p. 180)

Every fact is what it is because God has said it is what it is. (Ibid., p. 162)

Clearly, not only is the “God” characterized by these and similar statements supposed to be a *conscious* being (possessing a *will*, capable of *thought*, able to *speak*, etc.), these descriptions unmistakably grant metaphysical primacy to the consciousness of “God” over any objects it is said to be aware of. It “creates” its objects by simply *willing* them into existence, its “thought” is “placed back of every fact,” its intentions “control” everything it is conscious of, etc.

**“Dude, Where’s the Violation?”**

I’ll show you.

Since any claim about reality implicitly affirms the primacy of existence (the recognition that existence exists independent of consciousness), any assertion that a god exists performatively contradicts itself by virtue of its implicit affirmation of the primacy of existence on the one hand (as a precondition for intelligibly making any statement about reality) and the primacy of consciousness on the other (as the fundamental orientation entailed by theism in the subject-object relationship).

In response to the question “Where lies the violation in asserting that existence exists and so does God?”, recall the point I made in my blog [The Axioms and the Primacy of Existence](#), namely that the axiom of existence (“existence exists”) is “not the only axiom, that it is not a recognition that remains isolated from other recognitions.” To say “existence exists” implies the axiom of consciousness, for one would have to be conscious in order to say this. Affirming both the axiom of existence and the axiom of consciousness in turn implicitly affirms the primacy of existence: *Existence exists independent of consciousness.*

So in making the statement “existence exists and so does God,” one is in fact declaring “existence exists independent of consciousness, and so does this consciousness upon which existence depends,” which is a direct self-contradiction. It affirms on the one hand, explicitly, that existence exists independent of consciousness (of *any* consciousness), and on the other - in the very same breath - it affirms the existence of a consciousness *on which existence depends*. For as we saw in the quotes above, “God” is characterized as a consciousness which *creates* all existence distinct from itself *by an act of will*. Thus not only does this position affirm a contradiction at the level of metaphysical primacy, it also leads to the irresolvable [problem of divine lonesomeness](#).

Theists who resist this criticism can test it for themselves. Let them ask themselves the following question:

*When you affirm that your god exists, are you presupposing that your god exists independent of your own consciousness? Or, are you saying that your god exists only as a feature of your own psychology, as a figment of your imagination, that the existence of “God” ultimately depends on your own consciousness?*

Typically theists can be expected to affirm the former of the two: that their god is an independently existing being, that its existence does not depend on the theist’s or any other “creature’s” awareness, knowledge, feelings, imagination, that it has its own will and makes its own choices, etc. In this way, theists are making use of the primacy of existence in the very affirmation of their god’s existence: they are attempting to make a statement about reality which supposedly obtains independent of their own conscious activity. Thus they implicitly assume the primacy of existence by simply affirming the alleged truth of their god-belief.

But *what is it* that they are affirming? They are affirming the existence of a consciousness upon which existence depends. In other words, in the very content of the god-belief claims which they assert, they are affirming the primacy of consciousness - the very opposite of the primacy of existence, a principle which they need in order to make their god-belief claims sensible by any measure.

In this way, theists are directly contradicting themselves whenever they affirm their god’s existence. They implicitly affirm the primacy of existence in the very act of asserting their god-belief claims, and they expressly affirm the primacy of consciousness in the very *content* of their god-belief claims.

## **The Book of Evasions**

In an exchange between myself and presuppositionalist Chris Bolt (see the comments section of my blog [Can the Water](#)

[in My Drinking Glass Turn into Merlot?](#)), I had asked him if he disputes the truth of the Objectivist axioms, which I listed specifically for him to see.

In contemplating the axiom of existence, Bolt stated:

Do I believe that something exists? Yes, God exists, for example.

When I wrote in my blog [Chris Bolt on Hume and Induction](#) in response to Bolt's statement, pointing out that

just by saying 'God exists,' Bolt performatively contradicts himself. He makes use of the primacy of existence while affirming a claim which denies the primacy of existence.

Bolt responded in a comment accusing me of "begging the question with respect to the truth of the Objectivist worldview."

But Bolt is mistaken here. As I explained, I am simply being *consistent* with the Objectivist worldview, noting that "the only alternative to Objectivism, is some sort of *subjectivism*." I cited presuppositionalism's own champion, Greg Bahnsen, to help him understand. Bahnsen states:

"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. 170n.42)

I do not expect that Bolt would disagree here, and in his comments, he expressed no disagreement with this so far as I could see. Certainly I don't think he would think that I should be inconsistent with my position. Indeed, if I had stated that Bolt was *not* performatively contradicting himself when he says "God exists," he could then legitimately accuse me of being inconsistent with my worldview's fundamentals. But in stating this recognition, I am in no way "begging the question," as should be clear from the points which I have presented above.

Bolt did give a reason why he thinks I am wrong to point out the self-contradiction in the claim "God exists." Indeed, he stated that my objection

takes the 'primacy of existence' and attempts to apply it to a foreign worldview.

But this, too, is mistaken. Bolt seeks to evade my critique of theism from the primacy of existence by arguing that the concept of the primacy of existence is "foreign" to Christianity. While it is true that the primacy of existence is "foreign" to Christian thought (indeed, this is a significant admission on Bolt's part), this fact by itself does nothing to diminish the pertinence of my critique. Even Bolt must realize that consciousness is real and that there is a relationship between consciousness and its objects, regardless of the specifics of one's particular belief system. A belief system is something one holds in his consciousness. So just by acknowledging that one has a belief system, he is admitting to the fact that he possesses the faculty of consciousness.

As we saw above, the issue of metaphysical primacy seeks to identify the proper orientation between the subject of consciousness and its objects. Unless Bolt denies the reality of consciousness, he must surely recognize that there is a relationship between consciousness and its objects, since consciousness is consciousness *of* some thing, whether he believes in a god or not. Belief in the Christian god - since it requires consciousness (belief being an activity performed by consciousness) - does not exempt one's consciousness from its need for an object, nor does it provide an escape from the fact that consciousness implies a relationship between itself and its objects.

So the "you're arguing from a foreign worldview" objection fails, since there is no such thing as a consciousness without anything to be conscious of. As Ayn Rand pointed out:

a consciousness with nothing to be conscious of is a contradiction in terms. (*Atlas Shrugged*, [Galt's Speech](#))

Unless Mr. Bolt wants to embrace a contradiction in terms, he must acknowledge that consciousness naturally has an object. And if he acknowledges that consciousness has an object, then he must acknowledge that there is a relationship between consciousness and its object - that consciousness is consciousness *of* an object. And if he acknowledges this, he must acknowledge that there is a proper orientation between consciousness and its objects, that since consciousness is consciousness *of* an object, the object of consciousness holds metaphysical primacy over

consciousness: it is what it is *independent of conscious activity*. A rock is what it is independent of one's knowledge of it; an event occurred even if someone does not know about it; a person is who he is regardless of how others judge him. Even a Christian would say that his god exists even if no one believes in it, wouldn't he?

That's the primacy of existence. By supposing that something exists and is what it is even if people don't believe it, an individual is informing his supposition with the primacy of existence.

There is no escape from this, because there is no escape in human cognition from the facts that consciousness is consciousness of an object and that there is a relationship between consciousness and its objects. The "foreign worldview" retort is a dodge that simply does not and cannot succeed. To invoke it is to assume the truth of the primacy of existence: it is an attempt to identify the state of affairs as they are supposed to exist independent of anyone's wishing, emotions, protestations, errors in judgment, evasions, etc. The retort itself makes use of the very principle it is trying to dismiss.

Bolt also stated:

Perhaps more importantly, there is no explanation here of how affirming that God exists denies the primacy of existence.

Apparently Bolt had not availed himself to any of the items in the reading list which I provide below (all of which had been written and posted either to [my blog](#) or to [my website](#) well before he made his comment). He also now has the points which I made above to help him understand.

#### Related reading:

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

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

[Theism and Subjective Metaphysics](#)

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

[A Reply to Tenant on Theistic Foundationalism vs. the Objectivist Axioms](#)

[Dodging the Subject-Object Relationship](#)

[Confessions of a Vantillian Subjectivist](#)

[God and Square Circles](#)

[Bahnsen on "Knowing the Supernatural"](#)

[The Cartoon Universe of Christianity](#)

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

by Dawson Bethrick

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

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [11:15 PM](#)

#### 26 Comments:

[C.L. Bolt](#) said...

You saved me some work! It is a bit late. After I read it again I will have some questions for further clarity. I am not

sure when I will get back to read it again though.

[February 06, 2010 1:08 AM](#)

[Robert Bumbalough](#) said...

Hello Mr Bethrick; I hope you and your's are well and prospering.

As I read through your latest piece, I will post my comments.

You wrote: *Consciousness is consciousness of an object(s)*...

Those who oppose Objectivism will predicate that any A=A statement is a tautology and thus unnecessary because it is obvious. However, Peikoff pointed out that all true statements are of the form X is some or all aspects of what it is, or X is X. Thus all true statements are tautologies. They are evident because the subject of thought, i.e.: the consciousness, perceives the X, i.e.: the object of thought. The objection that A=A tautologies, or consciousness is consciousness, are unnecessary is an evasion and a red herring, and instead of rebutting the Objectivist case such contentions actually support metaphysical primacy of existence because to be obvious, something must be perceived. To be perceived, there must be a dichotomy between that which does the perceiving, the subject of thought, and that which is perceived, the object of thought.

More later.

Best Wishes for your continued success

[February 06, 2010 7:53 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hi Robert,

It's good to hear from you again, thanks for your comments.

Yes, you're right - many have sought to dismiss the axioms because of their tautological nature. And you're also right to point out what Peikoff notes: that all truths are in fact tautological. I would say that tautologies \*whose reference is to reality\* are necessarily true, because they make a statement of identity. If tautologies are "unnecessary" because they state things that are "obvious," then we can do away with things like "2+2=4" and "(19+51)-(8\*2)= 54" and "A squared plus B squared equals C squared." These are all tautologies known as "equations." If a philosopher thinks these are "unnecessary" and "obvious" and should be abandoned, let him make his \*feelings\* known. Many "philosophers" are self-eliminating in this manner.

Besides, why is it wrong to point out the obvious, especially when so many philosophies have sought to evade the obvious?

I would not say, however, that "to be perceived, there must be a \*dichotomy\* between that which does the perceiving... and that which is perceived," but rather that there is a \*relationship\* between the subject and the object. The issue of metaphysical primacy recognizes that there is a relationship here, one that is fundamental to all cognition (and therefore to all philosophical inquiry), and the primacy of existence identifies the proper orientation in that relationship.

Regards,  
Dawson

[February 06, 2010 9:05 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hi Chris,

Thanks for surfing on. As you contemplate what I have written, the primary questions I'd ask you to consider are the following:

*When you affirm that your god exists, are you presupposing that your god exists independent of your own consciousness? Or, are you saying that your god exists only as a feature of your own psychology, as a figment of your imagination, that the existence of "God" ultimately depends on your own consciousness?*

Your thoughts?

Regards,  
Dawson

[February 06, 2010 9:07 AM](#)

[Robert Bumbalough](#) said...

Further to my previous comment:

Mr Bethrick wrote regarding Mr. Bolt: *Even Bolt must realize that consciousness is real and that there is a relationship between consciousness and its objects,...*

The Objectivist Axiom of Consciousness causes or has caused some people including myself confusion. However, that confusion is alleviated by integrating the fact that the first Axiom (Existence exists.), is the broadest of concepts encompassing all that is including actions. However, all actions including consciousness, presuppose something that exists to do the action as noted by Ms Rand when she wrote:

*They proclaim that there are no entities, that nothing exists but motion, and blank out the fact that motion presupposes the thing which moves, that without the concept of entity, there can be no such concept as "motion." ~ Galt's Speech.*

Thus consciousness presupposes existence, and the predicate that God exists then forms a stolen concept fallacy. Dr Nathaniel Branden wrote about stolen concept fallacies at [http://www.nathanielbranden.com/catalog/articles\\_essays/the\\_stolen\\_concept.html](http://www.nathanielbranden.com/catalog/articles_essays/the_stolen_concept.html)

Best wishes

[February 06, 2010 9:16 AM](#)

[Robert Bumbalough](#) said...

Hey Thanks Mr Bethrick

Its good to hear from you. May I post a link to your blog to my twitter followers? I got 1470 real people who follow my musings on the Forex markets, Objectivism and atheism. Some would enjoy reading you.

Thanks for pointing out that I used the word dichotomy incorrectly. The denotative meaning from dictionary.com states

di·chot·o·my  
/da?'k?t?mi/ Show Spelled Pronunciation [dahy-kot-uh-mee]  
-noun, plural -mies.

1. division into two parts, kinds, etc.; subdivision into halves or pairs.
2. division into two mutually exclusive, opposed, or contradictory groups: a dichotomy between thought and action.
3. Botany. a mode of branching by constant forking, as in some stems, in veins of leaves, etc.
4. Astronomy. the phase of the moon or of an inferior planet when half of its disk is visible.



The third and fourth meanings can be dismissed in the current context. My use of the word was incorrect because division into two parts is not characteristic of consciousness as it is an irreducible primary. This despite that our brains are composed of multiple cerebral systems that have distinctive independent evolutionary lineages. The brain works as a gestalt to produce our consciousness. This alone is sufficient to show theistic belief is unwarranted.

It's time for me to take my dogs to the park as they are reminding me even now. Once again many thanks.

Robert aka FX\_Infidel on twitter

[February 06, 2010 9:30 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Good points, Robert. Yes, consciousness presupposes existence in three primary ways: 1) by its nature as inherently relational (consciousness \*of\* an object); 2) as an active product of something which exists (i.e., the organism which possesses consciousness); and 3) it has a purpose, namely to help an organism survive (try surviving without being consciousness of anything).

But pointing out the primacy of existence annoys those who wish to evade it. I'm reminded of Porter's comment about the primacy of existence:

**"It hasn't been explicitly articulated [until Rand] so philosophers feel no discomfort in straddling it. But, like Ayn Rand's axiomatic concepts, they have to assume it in every assertion. Even when denying it as well."** (ARTK, p. 199)

In my experience, raising the issue of metaphysical primacy in a debate with a theist (especially presuppositionalists) tends to draw silence from Objectivism's opponents. It's a weapon of mass destruction against theistic worldviews, and as such, it's precisely what presuppositionalists \*wish\* they had in their apologetic arsenal, but don't.

Regards,  
Dawson

[February 06, 2010 10:53 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

By the way, Robert, I forgot to mention: Yes, you are certainly welcome to post links to my blog on your site. I would be happy to welcome new readers.

Regards,  
Dawson

[February 06, 2010 12:48 PM](#)

[Justin](#) said...

Dawson,

Since I surrendered my life to Jesus Christ, I've noticed the impressive number of blogs and videos dedicated to atheists and their pursuit to declare that God cannot be effectively explained or rationalized in any manner. Before this time, I simply did not pay any attention to the effort. During my meanderings from Christian web page to Christian web page, stumbling across a site with an atheistic theme is inevitable. I'm curious as to why the majority of atheists seem to spend so much free time devoted to proving a point that we (Christians) do not have a clue about our faith and why we believe. Why is the concern even there? Why are Christians and the Bible most often centered in the scope?

It is clearly obvious that you are very well read and have an extensive knowledge on various forms of thought from multiple view points. Why don't you place your efforts elsewhere, somewhere that might be of some lasting benefit to others? What does this never ending debate gain you? I have the same question for the Christians that persist in this same manner, although I somewhat understand considering the validity of our discourse concerning the eternal destination of a person that chooses to reject the one true living God of the Bible.

It is my hope that these well crafted arguments do not add to your pride, resulting in the hardening of your heart. It is my hope that God will manifest Himself in your life in such a manner that His reality is undeniable. It is my hope that you will one day believe that the Lord Jesus died for you and was resurrected because of His perfect love for you. I will truly be praying that these words reach you well and that you are able to give them consideration.

-Justin

[February 08, 2010 3:09 PM](#)

[C.L. Bolt](#) said...

"Why don't you place your efforts elsewhere, somewhere that might be of some lasting benefit to others? What does this never ending debate gain you? I have the same question for the Christians that persist in this same manner..."

The reason the debate is "never ending" is because there are ever those who contradict the truth in this life. Scripture does not allow the Christian to turn a deaf ear and blind eye toward these people. Jesus and the Apostles were constantly engaged in debate of some sort; one cannot read the New Testament and get around this. See Acts 17 for an example. Further, Scripture obligates us to involve ourselves in this manner. See 1 Peter 3.15 for an example. Your first question implies that such practices have no lasting benefit for others, but this is not the case. If you do not have reasons for why you believe what you do, or if you are in some sense unable to answer those who contradict the truth that is fine, but do not come down on others for doing what they are supposed to be doing.

[February 09, 2010 12:01 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hello Justin,

Thank you for your comments.

Unlike Chris Bolt, who believes that he is obligated to engage in debate, I see it as a choice which one makes freely. And in fact, very little debate seems to take place once I come onto the scene. More on that below. Let me stress this: Christians defend their worldview as a response to "duty." By contrast, I write in pursuit of *value*.

You asked: "Why is the concern even there? Why are Christians and the Bible most often centered in the scope?"

This is a very good question, my answer to which could occupy at least a blog post of its own. But let me just make a few remarks here. For one, I enjoy penning out and defending my verdicts. It is a most profound pleasure for me. Also, I write what I know, what I have learned, what I have discovered. I write first of all because it helps me understand why I hold the principles I do. But why Christianity? My writing actually targets more than just Christianity - the truths which I argue for and endorse can easily be applied to other forms of mysticism. But Christianity occupies my efforts for several reasons. One, I know Christianity, both as an insider as well as an Objectivist. I don't know much about biochemical engineering, so I wouldn't choose that as my subject matter. Two, Christianity has had an enormous influence on western culture, and it is my culture just as much as it is any Christian's. History tells us what happens when a worldview like Christianity seizes control of a culture. It's not pretty. I cannot in good conscience sit on my hands while I know how devastating an effect Christianity can have on our culture, on our lives, on our future, if people who know better, like myself, don't do anything about it. It's my own form of activism.

You asked: "Why don't you place your efforts elsewhere, somewhere that might be of some lasting benefit to others?"

I do not know what lasting benefit others may take away from reading something I have written. I doubt you know as well. However, many have written to me, both in public comments as well as in private correspondence, to thank me for my work. I am deeply gratified by this. However, "benefiting others" is not my primary concern. I do not write for others, so much as I write for myself. For it is in my *self* that I live, move and have my being. I write to have my say, and having my say brings me great happiness, immeasurable pleasure, and a very deep sense of reward unlike virtually anything else I have ever done (performing my own music live is a close second). So please make a note of this: my writing is a purely *selfish* activity for me, and I am very proud of my work. (Do you think one should occupy his time with something he's not proud of?)

You asked “What does this never ending debate gain you?”

Actually, very few seem willing to debate me, even after I have engaged them or interacted with their position statements. I almost get the impression that, once I’ve had my say on a topic, debate seems to cease. Take Chris Bolt for example. I’ve asked him simply to address a couple questions which I posed in my blog above. He should have no difficulty answering them. But for some reason, he remains silent. Meanwhile, he tells us that his bible instructs - indeed “obligates” - him to engage non-believers in debate. Don’t you find that odd?

Anyway, I hope these meager comments help shed some light on my motivations.

Regards,  
Dawson

[February 09, 2010 8:25 PM](#)

[C.L. Bolt](#) said...

My position is not reducible to Kantian duty ethics. When I affirm that my God exists, I am presupposing (odd word there but that is okay) that God exists but not doing so independently of my own consciousness since consciousness is necessary for affirmation. God does exist independently of my own consciousness.

[February 10, 2010 12:20 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Chris: “My position is not reducible to Kantian duty ethics.”

No one said anything about Kant or your position reducing to Kant’s. You believe you have a duty to obey your god. You believe that your primary moral imperative is to obey your god’s commandments. This is a type of duty-based ethics, however you choose to slice it. Duty-based ethics was around long before Kant. He simply sought to rarefy it.

On the Christian worldview, morality is all about subordinating one’s mind to the control of another mind. This is the root of the sacrificial ethics modeled by Christ on the cross. It is also the same operative ethical premise found in any collectivist state: the individual is expected to sacrifice himself, either to the politicians, to his neighbors, or to the “greater good,” etc.

For some additional thoughts on morality, see my blog [Hitler vs. Mother Theresa: Antithesis or Symbiosis?](#)

Chris: “When I affirm that my God exists, I am presupposing (odd word there but that is okay) that God exists but not doing so independently of my own consciousness since consciousness is necessary for affirmation.”

Of course: affirmation is a type of conscious activity. You must be conscious in order to affirm anything.

Chris: “God does exist independently of my own consciousness.”

See, I was right. You *do* make use of the primacy of existence principle when you affirm your god-belief. But this probably had to be pointed out to you as Christianity does not make this fact explicit. Nor is Christian theology consistent with this metaphysics. When it gets to the Christian god, does the universe exist independent of its consciousness? No, it doesn’t. First, according to the Christian myth, the universe was *created* by your god’s consciousness. The Christian god essentially commanded it into existence. On this view, the existence of the universe is a consequence of some conscious activity performed by your god. So here we have a metaphysics in which existence depends on consciousness.

How about the identity of the things which exist in the universe? This too is ultimately dependent on someone’s consciousness. Not only did the Christian god, according to Christianity, create all the things which exist in the universe, it gave them their identities as well. *What* they are depends on some action of consciousness. Again, more primacy of consciousness.

How about the actions which those entities perform? This too, according to what the Christian worldview teaches, is another expression of the primacy of consciousness. As Van Til puts it, "God controls whatsoever comes to pass" (*The Defense of the Faith*, p. 160). How does the Christian do this? By means of conscious activity: it chooses, it plans, it thinks, it commands, and all objects distinct from its consciousness conform to the contents of its consciousness.

As I explained in my blog, the primacy of consciousness is the metaphysics of subjectivism. When confronted with this analysis, Christian apologist Paul Manata had no alternative but to make the following concession to my case: "in theism, there's a sense in which reality is subjective - based on the divine mind" (see my blog [Theism and Subjective Metaphysics](#)). If your worldview in any way teaches that reality, the universe, the world, etc., depends or is based on the conscious activity of some mind (either real or imagined), your worldview is premised on metaphysical subjectivism.

So, Chris, you make use of the primacy of existence in affirming *that* your god exists (by intending to mean that it exists independent of your consciousness), while asserting the primacy of consciousness in the *content* of what you are affirming. Consequently, your metaphysical assumptions are systemically in direct conflict with themselves.

Regards,  
Dawson

[February 10, 2010 7:11 AM](#)

[C.L. Bolt](#) said...

One of your readers wrote, "I understand the primacy of existence as objects of consciousness hold primacy over the subjects and the primacy of consciousness affirming the opposite. But I do not see the problem in affirming that existence exists, existence has metaphysical primacy and that God exists. Where lies the violation in asserting that existence exists and so does God?"

You responded, "Questions such as this suggest to me that the one posing it either does not really grasp what the issue of metaphysical primacy deals with, or that he is not integrating what the issue of metaphysical primacy addresses with what theism entails."

I do not see where you address where the reader has gone wrong in his or her understanding of metaphysical primacy or its relation to theism. The reader is asking about the existence of God, and you go on to write about what it means to say that God is conscious. While this is true, God exists. Where do you answer the question that your reader posed to you concerning the \*existence\* of God?

[February 10, 2010 6:43 PM](#)

[C.L. Bolt](#) said...

Actually I just noticed that your reader wrote the issue out backwards, but my question should still apply.

Also, how does the fact that consciousness itself exists play into this?

[February 10, 2010 6:54 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Chris: "I do not see where you address where the reader has gone wrong in his or her understanding of metaphysical primacy or its relation to theism."

I address this in my paragraph which begins with the following statement:

***So in making the statement "existence exists and so does God," one is in fact declaring "existence exists independent of consciousness, and so does this consciousness upon which existence depends," which is a direct self-contradiction.***

The primacy of existence holds that existence exists independent of consciousness. Affirming that a god exists

translates to affirming that there exists a consciousness upon which existence depends. Essentially it's saying: existence exists independent of consciousness *and* existence depends on consciousness.

Chris: "The reader is asking about the existence of God,"

Actually, the reader is asking why *affirming* both the primacy of existence *and* the existence of a god is problematic. The very notion of a god assumes the primacy of consciousness, which contradicts the primacy of existence.

Chris: "Also, how does the fact that consciousness itself exists play into this?"

It's not clear to me what you're asking here. Can you restate? Or did anything I say above answer your question?

Regards,  
Dawson

[February 10, 2010 8:26 PM](#)

[Clint Wells](#) said...

Hi Dawson -

I just wanted to take a moment to say thank you for this tremendous blog. Over the last year I have come to reject Christianity, a faith I held (reformed persuasion) for nearly ten years. This has been a difficult but immeasurably satisfying endeavor. It's difficult here in the south. It's been a harrowing experience personally with my family and friends as well as professionally as a musician.

Because of my career in music I had a fairly well read blog and reputation within a lot of Christian circles. This has provided many opportunities to informally debate Christians. Your writing has been an extremely informative and reliable resource. I'm particularly debating some presuppositionalist seminary students and have referred to your blog several times as an aid in articulating a rebuttal to their claims.

Sorry to dump this here. I briefly searched for a personal e-mail address and could not find one.

Clint Wells

[February 10, 2010 8:45 PM](#)

[C.L. Bolt](#) said...

"Affirming that a god exists translates to affirming that there exists a consciousness upon which existence depends."

In what way is the existence of God dependent upon consciousness?

I think what I am trying to get at with the other question is how any view could ever affirm the primacy of consciousness since consciousness itself exists. I think I understand that this is precisely what you are saying - no view can, \*consistently\* - but how can an inconsistency even be brought to bear upon the discussion when consciousness itself is existence? In other words, in affirming the primacy of consciousness one is in actuality affirming the primacy of existence since consciousness exists. Thus in charging a view with holding to the primacy of consciousness the adherent may simply respond, "But consciousness exists." Does this make sense?

[February 10, 2010 8:50 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Part 1:

Chris: "In what way is the existence of God dependent upon consciousness?"

I don't think there is a god in the first place. So your question seems confused to me.

You hold that the existence of the universe depends on your god's conscious activity, do you not? You believe it created the universe, gave everything in the universe its identity, and controls everything that happens in the universe by means of its will - i.e., by some conscious activity. Right? So by affirming the existence of your god, you are affirming the primacy of consciousness.

Also, I would not say that "the existence of God [is] dependent upon consciousness," but rather that the *notion* of "God" is dependent on consciousness (specifically, as a concoction of the believer's imagination).

Chris: "I think what I am trying to get at with the other question is how any view could ever affirm the primacy of consciousness since consciousness itself exists. I think I understand that this is precisely what you are saying - no view can, \*consistently\*"

Right - to affirm a position as truly representing reality is to make use of the primacy of existence principle. To say "X is the case," one implicitly means "X is the case *independent of anyone's wishes, denials, ignorance, preferences, temper tantrums, etc.*" So in affirming a position which reduces to the primacy of consciousness (such as theism does), is to make use of a principle in affirming its (alleged) truth while assuming another principle which contradicts that principle in its content. The result is a performative inconsistency at the most fundamental level of cognition. By its nature, it cannot be true since it is self-undermining.

Chris: "but how can an inconsistency even be brought to bear upon the discussion when consciousness itself is existence?"

Careful here. The concepts 'consciousness' and 'existence' do not refer to the same unit classes. The concept 'existence' is much, much wider than the concept 'consciousness'. The concept 'existence' includes things which possess consciousness (such as human beings, mammals, reptiles, etc.) as well as things which do not possess consciousness (such as rocks, trees, rivers, clouds, rubber bands, automobiles, etc.).

Chris: "In other words, in affirming the primacy of consciousness one is in actuality affirming the primacy of existence since consciousness exists."

Not exactly. In affirming a position which assumes or reduces to the primacy of consciousness, one is *making use* of the primacy of existence, but he's probably not aware of it, since his worldview does not make the issue of metaphysical primacy an explicit point of teaching. Christianity is a case in point. Where, for instance, does either Noah, Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Obadiah, Jesus or Saul of Tarsus ever weigh in on the issue of metaphysical primacy? Nowhere that I can see.

[continued]

[February 10, 2010 9:18 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Part 2

Chris: "Thus in charging a view with holding to the primacy of consciousness the adherent may simply respond, 'But consciousness exists.' Does this make sense?"

The adherent can say whatever he wants. Simply saying "But consciousness exists" does not address the issue, since the fact that consciousness exists is not under dispute. Objectivism, for instance, which affirms the primacy of existence and rejects the primacy of consciousness, explicitly identifies the fact that consciousness exists as one of its primary axioms. By charging a position with assuming or holding the primacy of consciousness, one is not denying the fact that consciousness exists.

Rather, when Objectivists point out that a position assumes or holds the primacy of consciousness, they are pointing out that the position has reversed the proper orientation between a subject and its objects in some manner.

To help one theist grasp this point in the case of his god-belief, I asked the following two questions (cf. [here](#)):

1. Is your god conscious?
2. If yes, what is the orientation between the Christian god as a subject of consciousness and the objects of its consciousness?

Unfortunately, he ended up resisting a little more and then fleeing the conversation after I addressed his further concerns.

Regards,  
Dawson

[February 10, 2010 9:20 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hello Clint,

Welcome to my blog, and thank you for your nice comment. Congratulations on your Declaration of Independence! Please know that I am not just trying to be cozy when I say that I can relate to what you say. My emancipation ultimately resulted from a single choice: to be honest to myself. I realized that while I was trying to go along with the Christian worldview, I was being terribly dishonest to myself. I invite all Christians to consider making this choice, but I realize that it can be emotionally painful to make the first step. It's difficult to understand that there's a most enriching reward to be gained. Even harder when your worldview teaches you that personal gain is wicked.

You can e-mail me at: [sortion at hotmail dot com](mailto:sortion@hotmail.com).

Regards,  
Dawson

[February 10, 2010 9:28 PM](#)

[C.L. Bolt](#) said...

"You hold that the existence of the universe depends on your god's conscious activity, do you not?"

I do.

"You believe it created the universe, gave everything in the universe its identity, and controls everything that happens in the universe by means of its will - i.e., by some conscious activity. Right?"

Right.

"So by affirming the existence of your god, you are affirming the primacy of consciousness."

If God were to exist how would it follow that his consciousness is that upon which the existence of God depends? ("...so does this consciousness upon which existence depends...")

[February 10, 2010 10:05 PM](#)

[NAL](#) said...

Maybe the concepts should be called the "primacy of consciousness" and the "primacy of existence of everything except consciousness." But that just doesn't roll off the tongue.

In order to achieve metaphysical primacy, the two concepts must be disjoint. I think the "primacy of existence of everything except consciousness" is implicit in the concept of "primacy of existence".

Anyway, a good point that I had not considered.

[February 11, 2010 5:26 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Chris,

Look at what you just affirmed - that the existence of the universe depends on your god's conscious activity. That's existence depending on consciousness. Do you not see how your god's "sovereignty" and "control" of everything in the universe constitutes an expression of the primacy of consciousness? Does not your god's will (a form of consciousness) call all the shots always, everywhere and in every thing? Is anything distinct from your god's consciousness independent of its will, its "plan," its intentions? Isn't everything subject to its will? What holds metaphysical primacy in the relationship between your god as a consciousness and everything in its scope of awareness: your god as conscious subject, or the objects it is said to have created? Everything Christians say about their god points to their god as the one holding metaphysical primacy, and all its objects conforming to its will. That's the primacy of consciousness, Chris.

In terms of the subject-object relationship, this entails that the objects of consciousness depend on and conform to the subject of consciousness. Your god (the subject of its own consciousness) creates, orders, and controls all the objects of its consciousness. This means: in the subject-object relationship in which your god participates as a subject, the subject (your god) holds metaphysical primacy over the objects of its consciousness. In other words, consciousness holds metaphysical primacy. The existence, identity and causal potentiality of all objects distinct from the subject depends on consciousness. This is metaphysical subjectivism to a T, since the \*subject\* holds metaphysical primacy over its objects, not the other way around.

Are you really having trouble seeing this?

Consider this question: do you believe that your god (as a subject of consciousness) has the same orientation with respect to the objects of its consciousness, that you have as a subject with respect to the objects of your consciousness?

I strongly doubt that you do.

Now you may be saying (as many theists have said before), that your god's existence itself does not depend on anyone's consciousness. This can only mean that the Christian worldview consists of inconsistent metaphysics: in the case of your god, it exists independent of consciousness (since presumably it did not create itself by an act of consciousness, and neither did anything else), while everything distinct from your god was created by an act of consciousness.

Christian apologist Drew Lewis attempted to defend Christianity from my critique in a similar manner, insisting that "God exists objectively and based on no subjective cause. He didn't create Himself." At the same time, he affirms: "I do believe that whatever else exists is created by Him."

In response to this, I [explained](#):

***the objection here is that Christian god-belief is not subjective because it holds that the Christian god did not create itself. Now it's well and good that a system of god-belief holds that its god did not create itself. Unfortunately, this does not sanitize god-belief from its inherent subjectivism. The Objectivist argument which I defend is not that god-belief is subjective because its god allegedly created itself. Rather, the argument is that god-belief is subjective because it ascribes metaphysical primacy to a subject (e.g., "God's will") over any and all of its objects, regardless of whether or not that subject is said to have created itself. That is where the root of subjectivism lies in the Christian worldview: in the relationship between its god as a subject and any objects distinct from itself.***

If what you're trying to get at is what Drew Lewis already tried to get at, it's already been taken care of.

Any other questions?

Regards,  
Dawson



[February 11, 2010 5:41 AM](#)

[C.L. Bolt](#) said...

I will have to read the exchange between you and Drew Lewis. I think something like that is what I was asking but I need to read it when I am not so tired. :)

Here's an easy one in the meantime: What about those cases where it seems that we do in some sense use "mind over matter" so to speak? We "create" something or "sustain" something, etc.?

[February 11, 2010 9:06 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Chris: "I will have to read the exchange between you and Drew Lewis. I think something like that is what I was asking but I need to read it when I am not so tired. :)"

Yes, get some rest. Then when you have some time, read through [this blog](#), and note the exchange between myself and Drew Lewis in the comments section. (This was back when blogger allowed more than 4096 characters... Those were the days!) Lewis had a hard time understanding the goal of my argument, even though I had stated it very clearly. It's in the title of the blog itself, so he must not have been reading very carefully. He tried to accuse me of several fallacies, but neither charge was sustainable.

Lewis apparently thought I was trying to assemble an argument which concludes "therefore, God does not exist." But no such arguments are needed. No one needs to prove that the non-existent does not exist. I would not need to prove that God does not exist any more than I would have to prove that square circles do not exist, and essentially for the same reason (see [here](#)). There's simply no reason to take such an internally confused, self-contradictory notion so seriously.

Rather, I was simply explaining why theism is inherently subjective. If theism is inherently subjective, then there's no need to wrestle with theism's particular claims - the whole shebang goes out the door. In the final analysis, it is all a fantasy.

Chris: "What about those cases where it seems that we do in some sense use 'mind over matter' so to speak?"

I'm not aware of any actual instances of this which in fact violate the primacy of existence. Do you know of any, or have something specific in mind?

Chris: "We 'create' something or 'sustain' something, etc.?"

I have never created or sustained the existence of something by means of conscious activity (such as wishing, hoping, commanding, speaking, etc.). Have you? If anyone has this ability, I'd really like to see it demonstrated. Indeed, I think everyone in the whole world would find it very fascinating, to say the least.

Regards,  
Dawson

[February 12, 2010 5:51 AM](#)

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