

Friday, June 26, 2009

## Is Existence Merely an Attribute?

In his essay [Logic Presupposes the Existence of God](#), Peter Pike seeks to distinguish his position from that endorsed by Objectivist philosophy. He writes:

Contrary to Ayn Rand, it is not true that “existence exists” however. Existence is an attribute that describes some other *thing*. That is, whether material or immaterial, objects that exist have the attribute of *existence*. Existence itself cannot exist, for it is not an object but an attribute of objects. Existence, therefore, presupposes objects.

Pike should not worry that anyone who is familiar with Objectivism might mistake his position for Rand's. Unlike Pike's view (as seen [here](#)), Objectivism does not affirm the reality of *imaginary* things.

I have seen statements similar to this before (see for instance [here](#)). Non-Objectivists often insist that existence is simply one attribute among many possessed by things which do in fact exist. In the present case, the reason which Pike provides for saying that “existence cannot exist,” is that existence is an attribute: “existence cannot exist,” *because* it is an attribute. Logically, this can only imply that attributes as such do not really exist, for this is the reason given for why existence cannot exist: since for Pike existence is a type of attribute, consequently it “cannot exist, for it is... an attribute of objects.” Given Pike's reasoning, it would not make sense to say that attributes exist on the one hand, but on the other that existence cannot exist *because* it is an attribute. His reasoning requires that attributes (as a category *broader than* and *including* existence) “cannot exist.” Only by assuming all this can Pike say that “it is not true that ‘existence exists’.” But if “existence is an attribute that describes some other *thing*,” he cannot logically say that this “other *thing*” exists, for then he would be contradicting himself. Unfortunately, from here, the problems only get worse.

On the view that existence is merely an attribute of objects, for instance, the pen on my desk is an object consisting of the attributes of mass, material make-up, length, color, shape, texture, etc., plus this other stuff called ‘existence’. But while none of these attributes exist (since Pike's position requires that they do not), the object possessing them can exist only so long as it includes along with all these other attributes the attribute of existence (which itself does not exist, since “existence cannot exist”). Presumably an object may have all the attributes needed for it to be a pen, and yet lack the attribute of existence, and therefore it would not really exist (except perhaps [immaterially](#), as a figment of imagination).

Also, apparently on this view, only objects exist, not their attributes. So when I look at the pen on my desk which possesses the attributes of mass, length, color, shape, texture, even existence, none of these attributes exist, even though I perceive them. The object which I perceive can of course be divided into attributes, but those attributes don't really exist; isolating the attributes which objects possess may be an enjoyable academic pastime, but since attributes do not really exist, such an exercise must be entirely frivolous, having no practical value. Moreover, since “existence... presupposes objects,” it is questionable to say that any object which I perceive exists, for on this rendering objects are apparently considered to be *independent* of existence (since “existence... presupposes objects”). So on this view it would presumably be wrong to say that any object I perceive exists as well.

To say that these other attributes (e.g., mass, material make-up, color, shape, etc.) exist, would only compound the problems we've already run into here. For one thing, it would go against the very reason which Pike gives for saying that “existence cannot exist,” namely that (on his view) existence is merely an attribute, which (as we saw above) can only imply that attributes as such do not exist. Additionally, if this reasoning is rescinded in order to make allowance for attributes to exist, then either Pike would have to admit that existence does in fact exist (even if only as an attribute), or find some other way as yet unstated by Pike for supposing that “existence cannot exist.” Moreover, if the attribute of existence (which does not exist) is needed for things to exist, then these other attributes would in and of themselves need the attribute of existence (which, again, does not exist) in order to exist. But this seems entirely impossible, given the stipulations of Pike's position.

To salvage his position from this growing list of absurdities, Pike would have to revise it so significantly that it would bear little if any resemblance to what he originally stated above. As it stands, however, this all seems so problematic and unnecessary that it makes me wonder why any thinker might find it attractive in the first place. There is of course the epistemological question of knowing whether or not an object has the attribute of existence, especially if it is held to be the case that “existence cannot exist.” How can you tell that an object has an attribute which “cannot exist”? To suppose that an object possesses an attribute, is to confer existence to that attribute. But if it is said that the attribute in question “cannot exist,” then there seems no exit from the resulting philosophical muddle here.

Of course, Pike is correct in pointing out that this is not Ayn Rand’s position. Indeed, far from it. Rand recognized that the concept ‘existence’ is the widest of all concepts, in that it includes (i.e., *denotes*) everything which exists. Of course, appreciating these facts and their significance for the present matter is really only possible with at least some understanding of the objective theory of concepts. Since Christianity does not seem to have any native theory of concepts (let alone an *objective* theory of concepts), Pike’s confusion on these points is not at all surprising. But hope is not all lost, for there is a way out of the muddle which results from the position he endorses.

Specifically, it is important to keep in mind that, for Rand, a concept is a mental integration of multiple units, and that “the units involved may be any aspect of reality: entities, attributes, actions, qualities, relationships, etc.” (*Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, p. 10). Objectivism holds that “existence and identity are *not attributes* of existents, they *are* the existents,” and this is because “the units of the concepts ‘existence’ and ‘identity’ are every entity, attribute, action, event or phenomenon (including consciousness) that exists, has ever existed or will exist” (Ibid., p. 56). We do this with other concepts, such as the concept ‘man’: the concept ‘man’ includes *every* man who exists, who has ever existed and who will exist, given the open-endedness of its denotation, i.e., given its [universality](#). So why can’t we do the same with the concept ‘existence’? Why cannot the concept ‘existence’ include everything that exists? Why cannot Rand say “existence exists” and thereby essentially mean that all the units which the concept ‘existence’ includes do in fact exist? Not only have I seen no good reason to suppose Rand’s view, understood in its proper context, is philosophically illegitimate, it’s quite unclear to me why anyone would think such a position is controversial, let alone prefer the muddle which results from the view that “existence cannot exist, for it is not an object but an attribute of objects.”

Perhaps it is simply too difficult for thinkers who believe that existence does not (or “cannot”) exist (or that even the objects which they perceive do not exist, as Pike’s view logically requires in the final analysis) to grasp any of this. After all, on their view, what does exist? For someone to say that “existence cannot exist” can, in the end, only mean that *nothing* exists, whether or not this is what he intended to say. Sometimes people say things without really examining what it is they’re affirming, without grasping the implications of the point they are trying to make, or understanding the ramifications of denying the position they’re hoping to discredit. This is one reason why the Objectivist axioms are so powerful: one has to assume their truth, even if only implicitly, in the very act of denying them. And in so doing, they’re simply contradicting themselves while confirming the position they hope to discredit (see for instance [here](#)). Consequently, insistence on such denials does not at all bode well for one’s position. Then again, if the position in question is fundamentally bankrupt from the very start (as is the case with [theism](#)), then such self-refuting absurdities are to be expected.

I’m glad these aren’t my problems!

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Axioms](#), [Metaphysics](#)

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [6:00 AM](#)

#### 4 Comments:

[Justin Hall](#) said...

My brain hurts from trying to follow Mr Pike’s tortured logic. Dawson please don’t put me thru anymore of that:) Perhaps for a follow up he will demonstrate that square is round, up is down, and trying to defend the irrational at all costs has no consequences.

[June 26, 2009 3:13 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Amazing, isn't it? I had to read that paragraph from Pike's essay a couple times just to make sure I wasn't missing something.

Regards,  
Dawson

[June 26, 2009 4:54 PM](#)

[apoorva](#) said...

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[June 27, 2009 1:55 PM](#)

[Justin Hall](#) said...

apoorva, just what does an Apple iPhone have to do with the discussion at hand. If you feel compelled to spam us in the future, perhaps you should try the iQuit.

[June 27, 2009 6:38 PM](#)