

Wednesday, June 24, 2009

## Is the “Immaterial” Actually Imaginary?

Peter Pike has, over the years, published several articles on various personal websites of his, trying to make the case in one way or another that logic somehow proves the existence of a god. This seems to be an important component of Pike’s apologetic. For instance, in my [Contra Pike files](#), which chronicles my interactions with Pike back in 2003, you will find Pike (under the moniker “CogentThesis”) making statements like the following:

My argument has been that God is the source of logic... What I mean is that God's existence demands that logic be valid... Thus, in my system, God is axiomatic in order for logic to work... Logic is part of the character of God--it is one of His attributes.

You get the idea.

Of his several papers bent on proving some fundamental association between a god and logic, I can find only [one of them online now](#) (however, he has several blogs on the topic; see for instance [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)). As for the case which Pike lays out in [this one](#) from his current [personal site](#), I’m reminded overall of one of the premises in [an argument which William Lane Craig](#) gave for the universe having a beginning. With numerous digressions and “bunny trails,” as Pike adequately calls them, it is not always easy to know where exactly he’s going with what he presents.

In the opening of [his paper](#), however, Pike does make what appears to be a most startling admission, particularly coming from a Christian apologist. It is when he is discussing what the concept ‘existence’ means that Pike makes the following statement:

When something “exists” it *is*. Note that this does not mean that we are dealing with *physical* or *material* existence. Indeed, immaterial existence also exists. (For evidence of this, imagine a red ball. The red ball you have imagined does not have any physical existence; it exists immaterially. Granted, one can argue that the immaterial existence is *based* on a material brain, but the ball that is imagined is not material. It does not exist physically anywhere.)

Christians are often anxious to make it known to the world that they believe in the existence of what they call “the immaterial.” Here Pike makes sure to clarify that, according to his view, “immaterial existence also exists.” What does he mean by this? The “evidence” which Pike cites for the existence of “immaterial existence” says it all: he makes it clear that the “evidence” for “immaterial existence” is something one *imagines*. If you imagine a red ball, for instance, it “does not have any physical existence,” but Pike assures us that it does in fact exist, and that “it exists immaterially.”

Did you get that? According to Pike, when you *imagine* a ball, that ball really does exist, and what’s more, “it exists immaterially.” Apparently Pike believes that people can make things exist *just by imagining them*. Perhaps this is supposed to be a human version of *creation ex nihilo*: you imagine a ball, and *Poof!* it exists. The reason why we don’t see the ball we imagined into existence, is because “it exists immaterially,” and whatever is “immaterial” is not accessible to the senses, just as things which we imagine are not accessible to the senses.

Now isn’t it curious how Pike chooses to cite something *imaginary* not only as an *example* of something that is “immaterial,” but also as *evidence* that “immaterial existence” really does exist?

It is unmistakable that Christians typically consider their god as something that qualifies as “immaterial existence.” But significantly, Pike clearly equates “immaterial existence” with things that are *imaginary*. Typically, however, Christians want everyone else to believe that their god is actually *real*, and *not* imaginary, and by so insisting they implicitly acknowledge that there is in fact a fundamental distinction between the real on the one hand, and the imaginary on the other. For Pike, however, this distinction has been erased altogether, a move which is far more consistent with theism’s subjective basis than the usual denials we see from theists. I have asked elsewhere on my

blog for theists to explain how one can reliably distinguish between what they call “God” and what they may merely be imagining. Unfortunately, theists usually offer no response here, and when they do it has not been helpful to their position at all.

Now it is important to note, when asking about things that exist, that it is a fair question to ask *where* that alleged something exists, particularly if its location is not immediately discernable. If I tell my neighbor that I own a BMW, for instance, but he only sees me time and time again driving a Ford everyday, and has never seen a BMW in my driveway, he very well might wonder where I’m hiding my BMW. And in such a case, there would be nothing fallacious about asking such a question.

But the theist might likely stop me here and again point to his god’s “immaterial” nature as reason to say that such questions simply do not apply in the case of his god. Apparently we’re supposed to believe that his god exists everywhere (it is “omnipresent,” which is presumably not the case with all “immaterial existence”). Unfortunately, in regard to this we really have nothing other than his claim to go on. Then of course there are likely going to be qualifications for this. For instance, does his god exist in the hearts of evil men? Proverbs 15:29 seems to answer this in the negative: “The LORD is far from the wicked.” And if it is maintained that there are in fact evil men in the universe (which, according to Christianity, not only exists, but was also created by said god), then it seems that the claim that the Christian god exists everywhere is mistaken.

Regardless, it would be easy for any person to claim that something which is merely *imaginary* exists everywhere, or everywhere except in the hearts of those he considers wicked. I can, for instance, claim that Blarko exists everywhere, and even give as the reason why no one sees Blarko is because Blarko is an example of “immaterial existence,” so it would be foolish to expect to be able to see Blarko (aren’t those unbelievers in Blarko stupid?). But in spite of such explanations, it’s still the case that Blarko is only something that I have imagined. And this is significant in my view, for in my view there is a fundamental distinction between the real and the imaginary.

Now if the theist has difficulty distinguishing between the real and the imaginary, that seems to be a major problem. If he has difficulty explaining how the rest of us can reliably distinguish between what he calls “God” and what he is simply imagining, he could face insurmountable challenges when it comes to his proselytizing efforts. This is why evangelists always have better chances of success by going after those who are unclear on the nature of objectivity.

It is also interesting to see how Pike explains what he means by the word “God”. In [the same article](#), he writes:

By “God” we mean an eternal, self-existent, necessary and immaterial being who is transcendent, omnipotent, and immutable. Other attributes may, perhaps, fit in as well, but I think it is sufficient for the task to limit ourselves to these attributes.

I find this description most curious because I would have thought that a theist would consider the attribute of *consciousness* to be of such fundamental importance to the nature of his god, that he would hardly fail to mention it among the attributes he considers important enough to list. I don’t think that any of the attributes which Pike does list necessarily implies or presupposes consciousness. But perhaps Pike might disagree here. Either way, since things which we imagine serve as “evidence” for “immaterial existence,” I can certainly imagine a being which possesses the attributes which Pike lists, but which at the same time lacks any faculty of consciousness whatsoever, just as easily as I can imagine that it is conscious. One can, after all, pretty much imagine just about anything, including the Christian god. In fact, however, it seems that Christians like to distinguish Christian theism from certain eastern religions precisely because of their alleged enshrinement of what they consider “impersonal” gods. Then again, Pike does point out that his argument “does not necessitate the existence of the Christian God at all,” allowing that “other forms of theism may... fit the argument as well,” so long as they have the attributes which Pike does list. I’m trying to think, however, of any version of theism which affirms a god which lacks consciousness, and I’m afraid I can’t think of any off the top of my head. Rather, it seems that Pike’s failure to include the attribute of consciousness in the list of those which distinguish what he means by “God,” is an oversight on his part rather than a calculated omission. And if it is an oversight, what does this say about Pike’s god-belief?

Regardless, the incoherence of such Christian babble ultimately finds its source, not only in the bible, but in the believer’s desire to take the bible seriously as an authority on philosophical matters. I have pointed out before that the bible, which is at the center of the Christian religion, exploits the believer’s imagination. As I explained in [one of my responses to commenter Vytautas](#):

...like Harry Potter novels, the bible describes things that we never see in reality, things which we can only imagine by ignoring what we know about reality (such as that young boys can fly on broomsticks or men can walk on unfrozen water, etc.).

Vytautas was anxious to distinguish the bible from Harry Potter novels by pointing out that:

The Bible claims to be the word of God unlike Harry Potter or other fiction novels, and it gives an explanation of how we can be saved from the wrath to come.

But such statements of faith miss the point that the biblical idea of “the wrath to come” (which is invoked in order to cause fear in the bible’s readers) is itself something which could only be imaginary. Even if it is something that one believes will happen one day, it hasn’t happened yet, and can only be imagined until it does happen. So even the Christian must admit that it *is* imaginary. If it is not imaginary, then it must have already taken place, and to that the non-believer can rightly say “Big whoopee!”

Moreover, Oxford University mathematician and defender of Christianity [Dr. John Lennox](#) agrees with my basic point that “the bible describes things we never see, things which we can only imagine,” when he tells us early on in a talk of his that

...one of the wonders of God’s creation of the human mind, is its ability to imagine. And parts of the bible are written so that we can imagine the realities that stand fundamental to our faith. And what better book, than the book of Revelation, to do precisely that? ([Using Scripture to Engage the Mind and Imagination](#); underlining added.)

It is always encouraging to see Christian apologists, like John Lennox and Peter Pike, admitting in one way or another that their imagination plays a significant role in their god-belief. Here Lennox admits that “the realities that stand fundamental” to the Christian faith are something one must *imagine* based on the storytelling material found in the bible. This is something I’ve been pointing out for a long time. I must admit that it is gratifying to find apologists confirming my verdicts with their incidental affirmations.

Is the “immaterial” actually *imaginary*? It certainly seems so.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [imagination](#), [Metaphysics](#), [The “Immaterial”](#)

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [11:00 AM](#)

## 8 Comments:

[Admin](#) said...

“Did you get that? According to Pike, when you imagine a ball, that ball really does exist, and what’s more, “it exists materially.””

Pike seems to be insisting that the ball exists immaterially, not materially. A typo?

(Apologies for my confusing username, silly blogspot system).

[June 25, 2009 3:49 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Thanks for pointing that out, Admin. Yes, it was a typo. It is supposed to be (as Pike stated) “exists *immaterially*.” I thought I had fixed that yesterday but must have missed it. It makes a big difference of course!

Regards,

Dawson

[June 25, 2009 8:32 AM](#)

[Justin Hall](#) said...

Mr Bethrick you have really made it clear to me just how much imagination plays a central role in Christian thinking. The more I reflected on it, the more I came to a startling realization. They are acting like children, carrying on about there imaginary sky buddy. I just feel compelled to shout "Oh for your own sakes, please just grow up already. No one cares about you play time fantasies, we have real concerns, our jobs, our health, our families if we have them. Real concerns about real things and sitting in church prying isn't going to help so much as one iota. So go be immature somewhere else!!"

Oh by the way, I keep imagining I have \$40,000 in my back pocket, but every time I look there is just some lint.

[June 25, 2009 1:40 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hi Justin,

Good to hear from you.

You wrote: "They are acting like children, carrying on about there imaginary sky buddy."

Exactly. I remember visiting my dad back in 2004 or so, when the Catholic Church was getting all the negative press about its pedophile priests. We had the evening news on as we were sitting down for dinner together, and a scene flashed across the TV screen showing a bunch of priests in all their costumes, wearing funny hats and swinging their smoking balls, etc. I pointed to the screen and exclaimed, "Look! They're playing! They're playing!" My dad, who thinks the Catholic Church is bullshit but has never fully abandoned the religion of his upbringing, couldn't help but start to giggle as well. Those grown men just looked so ridiculous. What a great memory! HA!

Of course, it wouldn't be such an alarming thing if these people did not hold the kind of power and their ideas didn't have such influence as they do in the world. It's because of this that their absurdities need to be exposed.

Justin: "Oh by the way, I keep imagining I have \$40,000 in my back pocket, but every time I look there is just some lint."

Maybe that \$40,000 is actually \$80,000, and it does exist, only it exists *immaterially*. That's apparently what Mr. Pike would have us believe. Unfortunately, I don't think that will go over quite so well when it comes time to pay the mortgage or buy some groceries. Those dratted secular spoil sports!

By the way, for what it's worth, I did find another of Pike's websites, lo and behold. It's located here: [Calvindude](#). I had thought the "Calvindude" site was just his [blog](#). I guess I'm not up on all things Petrine!

Oh, and I'll have something else up from Pike's article on logic tomorrow. I think you'll enjoy it quite a bit!

Regards,  
Dawson

[June 25, 2009 3:18 PM](#)

[rhiggs](#) said...

Excellent article. The next time I'm in a debate with a presupper I must ask them to define 'immaterial' to see if they use an example like the imaginary red ball.

Thanks.

[July 02, 2009 3:05 PM](#)

[rhiggs](#) said...

Oh and a question...

Is there a blog history anywhere to see *all* your previous posts?

[July 02, 2009 3:11 PM](#)

[rhiggs](#) said...

Never mind. Found the archive on the home page. It disappears when you go to a specific post.

Duh!

I need to get some sleep...!

[July 02, 2009 3:14 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hi Rhiggs,

Welcome to my blog.

I have two ways you can access my past blog entries. Perhaps the one you found is the PDF archive on my website:

[IP Archives](#)

In addition to that, I post a jump page every March (on my blog's anniversary) to the blogs posted over the previous year:

[Incinerating Presuppositionalism: Year One](#)

[Incinerating Presuppositionalism: Year Two](#)

[Incinerating Presuppositionalism: Year Three](#)

[Incinerating Presuppositionalism: Year Four](#)

Additionally, I try to label all my blogs with at least one keyword. So if you enjoyed one blog, you can check the labels attached to it to find related entries.

It's all there for you and everyone else.

Enjoy!

Dawson

[July 02, 2009 4:20 PM](#)