

Metaphysical Subjectivism and Christianity's Cartoon Universe, Pt. 1

Steve Hays continues to nitpick at the cartoon universe analogy in an attempt to exonerate Christianity and even to impute it to an atheistic conception of the world. [In a recent response](#) on this topic, Steve sought to raise controversy by setting my words against those of Anton Thorn, who has also shone a light on Christianity's subjectivist foundations. He writes:

This is how Anton Thorn, Dawson's fellow Randian, defines metaphysical subjectivism:

Metaphysical subjectivism, which is the view that the knowing subject creates its objects by an act of consciousness, essentially that existence finds its source in a form of consciousness.

http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Sparta/1019/AFE/Metaphysical_Primary.htm

And this is how Bethrick redefines metaphysical subjectivism:

Metaphysical subjectivism - the view that reality conforms to someone's intentions.

Why does Bethrick redefine and radically scale back the definition of Thorn? Because Bethrick finds himself in a quandary. For he is attempting to impute to Christianity two contradictory descriptions. On the one hand, he wants to say that Christianity espouses a cartoonish worldview. But the problem with this analogy is that even if Christian theism were analogous to a cartoonish worldview, a cartoonish worldview is disanalogous to metaphysical subjectivism. And that is because, as defined by Thorn, metaphysical subjectivism is an ontological thesis according to which reality is constituted by mental acts—by acts of consciousness. But, needless to say, a cartoon is not constituted by mental acts. A cartoonist lacks the power to create a cartoon by a mental fiat. Instead, a cartoonist must employ a physical medium of some sort to create a cartoon. So Bethrick is confronted with a choice: he can either try to salvage his cartoon analogy by sacrificing the imputation of metaphysical subjectivism, or else he can try to salvage the imputation of metaphysical realism by sacrificing his cartoon analogy. Clinging to his cartoon analogy, he chooses to jettison the imputation of metaphysical subjectivism to Christian theism. This he does through a face-saving redefinition. He swamps out an ontological theory for an epistemic theory. This involves the far weaker thesis that the artifact corresponds to the subjective intent of the agent, rather than the far more ambitious claim that the artifact is instantiated by the subjective intent of the agent.

Yes, that very well may be the definition of 'metaphysical subjectivism' that Thorn gives in the article that Steve cited. But we should note that it is not at all unusual for a term to have more than one definition, even ones that are closely related. In fact, elsewhere Thorn presents a conception of metaphysical subjectivism which is right in line with how I have used the term:

All of these notions tell us that the Christian view of reality is essentially that reality is a creation of consciousness, that reality conforms to conscious intentions. This is a view of reality which is called *metaphysical subjectivism*, and it springs directly from the primacy of consciousness view of reality. ([TAG and the Fallacy of the Stolen Concept](#))

Since it's common for a term to have more than one definition, and Thorn himself uses this term in a manner that is directly in line with how I have used it, I see no problem here. But even if that were not sufficient, I gave my own definition of 'metaphysical subjectivism' as follows:

Metaphysical subjectivism is the genus of various versions of the fundamental orientation to reality which affirms that the objects of consciousness conform to the dictates of consciousness. This orientation is properly called "subjectivism" because it grants to the *subject* power over its *object(s)*. (In the case of Christian teaching, this power is said to be *absolute* in the case of the Christian god.) It essentially holds that the world of objects (e.g., the universe) finds its source in a form of consciousness, or that they obey the dictates that originate in consciousness. ([The Argument from Metaphysical Primacy: A Debate](#))

On the conception that I offered here, metaphysical subjectivism is a genus or broader category distinguished from metaphysical objectivism by virtue of its assumption of the primacy of consciousness in the subject-object relationship, while specific positions which grant metaphysical primacy, such as the view that consciousness creates its own objects or can revise their nature at will, etc., are species thereof. What unites these specific positions is

their allegiance to the primacy of consciousness - i.e., the primacy of the subject over the object. There's no "radical scaling back," no "backing away," no "shell game" or other synonym for "face-saving" retreat going on here at all as Steve has alleged. As I pointed out before, Steve is simply broadcasting the fact that he has ventured into an area of his own ignorance. There's nothing wrong with being ignorant per se, but Steve is trying to speak as if he had familiarity where in fact it is painfully obvious he does not. This explains why he frequently finds himself confused.

The two definitions which are confusing Steve are the following:

“the view that the knowing subject creates its objects by an act of consciousness, essentially that existence finds its source in a form of consciousness.”

“the view that reality conforms to someone’s intentions”

It should be obvious to anyone who gives this some careful thought, that the common denominator to both of these definitions is the primacy of the subject metaphysics, a fundamental platform which characterizes worldviews such as Christianity. My statement above, that “metaphysical subjectivism is the genus of various versions of the fundamental orientation to reality which affirms that the objects of consciousness conform to the dictates of consciousness,” adequately applies to both statements. Both grant primacy to the subject in the subject-object relationship (subjectivism), and both pertain to the metaphysical relationship between subject and object, where the object either has its origin in consciousness, or is at any rate obedient to the dictates of consciousness. Thus, whether the view in question holds that an object first needs to be created by a super consciousness that one imagines in order to be controlled by it, or that the object already exists but can in any event be controlled by such a consciousness, the term metaphysical subjectivism still applies since both views back out to the primacy of consciousness, which is the essential fundamental of subjectivism. A subject which creates its objects is typically thought to have the power to conform those objects to its intentions. That is the power that Christianity claims on behalf of its god. Quite a fantasy, I must say.

Steve says that “a cartoonish worldview is disanalogous to metaphysical subjectivism.” However, I don’t think I ever said that the cartoon universe premise is *analogous* to metaphysical subjectivism. Rather, I hold that the cartoon universe premise is an *expression* of metaphysical subjectivism. That is, the view that the universe and its objects owe their existence, nature, form, shape, activity and relationship to other objects to the dictates of a personal will, clearly assumes the primacy of the subject in the subject-object relationship. That Christianity asserts that the universe was created by a conscious agent through an act of its will, only confirms that Christianity grants metaphysical primacy to the will of that conscious entity over any object it is said to have created. The affirmation of such a view is a sufficient condition to suspect that the cartoon universe premise may be in operation, for a universe so created may also be thought to be *under its control*, just as the fictional realm of a cartoon is under the control of the cartoonist who creates it. In the case of Christianity, both conditions exist: it teaches that the Christian god created the universe by an act of will, and it teaches that this god “controls whatsoever comes to pass” within it by will. Does not the Christian god *determine* what exists and happens in the universe it allegedly created? Does not the cartoonist similarly *determine* what appears and happens in the fake realm of his cartoon? Are cartoons not creations? Does not Christianity affirm that the universe is a creation?

Steve’s contention against the cartoon universe analogy trades on an equivocation at this point. He says that “a cartoon is not constituted by mental acts.” But this of course depends on what specifically we mean by ‘cartoon’ here. If, on one hand, by ‘cartoon’ we mean the physical materials that the cartoonist uses to create the images he imagines, then of course, it’s already been agreed that the cartoonist did not wish these into existence. And at no point does the cartoon universe analogy claim or require that they were. But if, on the other hand, by ‘cartoon’ we mean the fictional realm which the cartoonist conceives and puts into graphic form which others can perceive, then obviously the cartoonist’s own will and imagination (“forms of consciousness”) play a determinative role here: what exists and happens in that created realm is determined by the cartoonist. Indeed, contrary to what Steve has stated, the things compared in an analogy need not be *identical*, and the fact that cartoonists do not wish the materials they use to create cartoons into existence in no way cancels out the similarities between the fictional realm of a cartoon and the universe as Christianity characterizes it, the very similarities which the analogy exposes.

A cartoon in this sense - i.e., the fictitious world which a cartoonist creates - is analogous to the universe as Christianity characterizes it in two aspects:

One: the fictional realm of a cartoon (corresponding to Christianity’s created universe) is a creation of the cartoonist’s imagination (a form of consciousness): he *conceives* the setting (it could be in a factory, in a desert, in outer space, etc. - it’s his choice) and the participants (they could look like humans, they could be walking and talking animals, aliens, etc. - it’s his choice).

Two: the images which make up the fictional realm of the cartoon (corresponding to the objects which exist in Christianity's created universe) *behave* just as the cartoonist wants them to behave. Like a master puppeteer able to *control* many puppets at once, the cartoonist can have his characters do whatever he wants them to do as he moves his story according to his plan. They can walk through walls, leap over tall buildings, bend railroad tracks in their bare hands, walk on water, defy gravity, produce large objects (such as automobiles or school busses) from trouser pockets, etc. - it's his choice.

Notice the following similarities:

Just as the cartoonist chooses to create the fictional realm of his cartoon, so the Christian god is said to have chosen to create the universe. The fictional realm of the cartoon is there because of someone's *choosing*, and the universe is said to be here because of the Christian god's *choosing*. In both cases, personal volition got everything started.

Just as the cartoonist chooses what images will appear in the fictional realm he creates in his cartoon, the Christian god is said to have chosen which objects will exist in the universe it creates. In both cases, the content of the created realm follows as a result of the choices of the agent doing the creating.

Just as the cartoonist chooses which events will take place in the fictional realm of the cartoon he creates, the Christian god chooses which events will take place in the universe. In both cases, the events and the sequence in which they unfold follow as a result of the agent doing the choosing.

Just as the cartoonist "controls whatsoever comes to pass" in the fictional realm of his cartoons, the Christian god "controls whatsoever comes to pass" in the universe it allegedly created. In both cases, everything that exists and happens is under the guiding control of the agent doing the choosing.

The *similarities* between the fictional realm of a cartoon and the universe as Christianity characterizes it, are striking. And since an analogy is a "resemblance in some particulars between things otherwise unlike: SIMILARITY" ([Merriam-Webster](#)), we have unmistakably an analogy which connects at several levels. At each level the analogy highlights the similarities between the fictional realm of a cartoon on the one hand, and the universe as Christianity characterizes it on the other, in terms of their being sourced in a form of consciousness which authors the nature of their respective content and "controls whatsoever comes to pass" in their respective realms. Consequently, the dilemma that Steve says I face in defending the cartoon universe analogy, is merely a figment of his imagination, and the fact that he affirms what he has imagined as reality simply confirms his allegiance to a cartoonish conception of the universe. The only real difference is that the Christian typically recognizes that the fictional realm of a cartoon is in fact fictional, while failing to acknowledge that his worldview is also built on a fiction.

Now the Christian may object, saying that metaphysical subjectivism does not apply to Christianity because the objects of *his* consciousness do not obey *his own* wishes. I have seen Christians attempt to raise so weak an objection before. And of course, it is true that the objects they perceive do not obey his wishes. But on the Christian view, this is only the case because the Christian god has wished it to be, for on the Christian view "God controls whatsoever comes to pass." So in the end, what is, is what the supreme being *wants* it to be, according to Christianity. Why? Because on the Christian worldview, the universe is analogous to a cartoon: its contents do whatever the master determiner wants them to do.

So on both counts, Christianity clearly and unashamedly endorses metaphysical subjectivism. It holds that the universe finds its source in a personal will, and it holds that the objects in the universe conform to what that personal will desires. The things that exist in the universe exist because someone *wanted* them to exist; they have the nature that they have only because that someone *wanted* them to have the nature they have; and they act in the way they act only because that someone *wanted* them to act the way they act.

Out of all human artifacts, a cartoon comes closest to modeling such a bizarre view of reality, far closer than the clay that a potter molds in his hands. The objects that appear in the cartoon appear only because the cartoonist *wants* them to appear there. The objects in the cartoon have the form and characteristics they have only because the cartoonist *wanted* them to have the form and characteristics they have. And the objects in the cartoon act the way they do only because the cartoonist *wanted* them to act the way they do. Where the Christian worldview affirms the *primacy of wanting* as the primary determinant in the universe as a truth, a cartoon graphically models the *primacy of wanting* as the primary determinant as a spectacle of entertainment.

If 'metaphysical subjectivism' is to be reserved exclusively to "the view that the knowing subject creates its objects

by an act of consciousness," then it obviously applies to Christianity, for it affirms that the universe was created by an act of consciousness. But this is only part of the Christian picture of things. Christianity does not affirm the general view of deism, namely that a divine consciousness created the universe and then moved on, allowing the universe to operate in an autonomous manner on its own built-in principles. On the contrary, Christianity affirms that its god "controls whatsoever comes to pass" in the universe, that *every event*, from molecular activity to worldwide movements, from every baby's first words to the landing of a spacecraft on the surface of the moon, from the dislodging of a grain of sand from a riverbed to the shifting of the tectonic plates, is being personally directed by this supernatural conscious being. This god sets the rules, determining when they apply and when they do not apply, according to its will. Thus if metaphysical subjectivism includes the view that the objects of consciousness conform to the knowing subject, it again applies to the Christian view in its cartoonish view of the universe.

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [3:00 AM](#)

1 Comments:

[Jim](#) said...

So what?

Though the view in Christian circles that the universe in some sense subsists in "the mind of God" is passe, why do you continually confute the concept of "metaphysical subjectivism" when applied to God as the subject and the particulars of the universe as the object/objects with what would constitute a true pejorative - that of a relativistic worldview.

You cannot seriously claim that (even if I grant you) the Christian worldview holds that the will of God (alone) "creates its objects by an act of consciousness," that the Kantian conception that reality somehow conforms to what we (each of us individually) perceive would remotely follow.

That would be an equivocation not even worthy of the most ardent Randoid.

[July 09, 2006 6:11 PM](#)