

Friday, September 03, 2010

My Squabble with Andrew

In the comments section of my blog [A Critique of Sye Ten Bruggencates' www.proofthatgodexists.com](http://www.proofthatgodexists.com), a commenter by the name of Andrew Louis has been trying, in a most confused and uninformed manner, to challenge certain positions of mine. In responding to Andrew, I have repeatedly had to correct numerous careless mistakes and basic blunders on his part as he attempts to interact with me. In a comment which he had deleted after posting it, Andrew said of himself:

I tend to follow the philosophical traditions paved by Hagel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Dewey, Rorty, and Robert Brandom. So I'm a card carrying neo-pragmatist. As such I'm simply interested in how far down your thinking goes here. [sic]

Throughout the exchange, Andrew has stated that he "could give a rip less about certainty," says that "epistemology is a dead end road," has confused the representationalist theory of perception with a representationalist theory of truth, mistaken the realist theory of perception for Platonic realism, refuses to answer questions (such as what he means by "absolute certainty"), resists my recommendation to examine Objectivism from its primary sources, and overall seems unable or unwilling to integrate my corrections and other points that I've made in order to better understand my position.

I have gone many rounds with Andrew, trying patiently to help him along in his understanding, and also trying to understand for myself with more precision exactly what his objections against Objectivism might be. Upon my return Friday evening (3 Sept.) from a day with my family, I came back to no less than eight fresh comments from Andrew. Since (a) Blogger has a word limit on comments, (b) the comments on the original blog have already exceeded 100 in number (which is very long for my blog), and c) as I am constantly reminded by my detractors, I'm a wordy son of a bitch, I've decided to reply to Andrew's latest barrage of blather in a fresh post.

Andrew writes: "Dawson, for the record, if you can't properly articulate an objectivist theory of truth in some coherent way, I see no reason to look into it more (as you'd suggest I do)."

Andrew has in mind my earlier recommendation that he examine Objectivism from its primary sources. I made this recommendation on the slim gamble that he might actually be interested in Objectivism and may sincerely want to learn about its teachings. Apparently he's expected me to present a comprehensive thesis about the Objectivist understanding of truth - complete to his liking (a liking which is apparently influenced by everyone from "Hagel" and "Nietzsche" to Heidegger and Rorty) - in the comments section of a blog post. Andrew is a fine one to talk about properly articulating a position "in some coherent way," given his all-over-the-place meandering of topics and continual carelessness on even basic issues. Andrew is free to do as he chooses. He is free to hold Objectivism in contempt, and even blame me for it. I'm quite willing to concede that Objectivism may not be his cup of tea.

Andrew writes: "The fact remains that the language you're using is consistent with what I've been saying,"

The problem is not that the *language* that I'm using is consistent with what Andrew has been saying. Both Andrew and I have been communicating in English, so I would expect on the broad level some common ground here. The problem is Andrew's persisting carelessness in attempting to deal with issues with which he's obviously not very familiar, and what may in fact be a simple attitude problem (as some other commenters have pointed out). I grant that Andrew is intelligent, but he seems to suffer from a learning deficiency of sorts, and perhaps an attending piqued frustration complex which impedes his ability to grasp what others are saying.

Andrew continues: "and now you've resigned yourself to saying that "I just don't get it" (essentially),"

While I did not exactly say this, I'm wondering what conclusion Andrew expects me to draw when he continues

to make the same mistakes that I've already corrected.

Andrew writes: "because you just can't speak to what your actual theory of truth even is."

Andrew writes this, even though I had stated quite clearly prior to this that *truth is a property of identification* and that *identification is a mental activity which involves a consciousness' interaction with the objects of its awareness*. Had Andrew questions about this conception of truth, I'd expect him to have posed them in subsequent comments. But he seems not even to have read it, for not only has he not inquired on it, he now says that I "can't speak to what [my] actual theory of truth even is." Of course, Andrew never did come out and ask "Dawson, what exactly is your theory of truth?" Rather, he has posed more pointed questions, such as "do you hold to the idea of 'absolute truths', i.e. truths that exist independently, exist not in relation to other things, not relative to other things, and are true for every possible circumstance," apparently hoping to elicit some answer that fits his pre-set repertoire of debating tactics.

Andrew tried to clarify his earlier statements about "representation": "When I use representation, I'm talking NOT about the relationship between object and perception per se, I'm talking about the relationship between TRUTH and what we say we're perceiving."

And that's why I emphasized the importance of the Objectivist theory of concepts, since before we have truth, we need to identify and integrate what we perceive in conceptual form. When we perceive a rock, for instance, we do not say "that rock is true" or "that rock is not true." Truth pertains to propositions, specifically propositions which identify some aspect of reality. Propositions are composed of concepts, so to relate truth to what we perceive, we need at least some discussion of how the mind moves from perception to statements about what we perceive. That's where concept theory comes in. But this seems to have gone right over Andrew's head.

Andrew writes: "And TRUTH, as we know it, is contained within the language practices that we have, the things we say, the facts we present etc.."

If truth is involved in our language practices, then this only confirms my previous point: that we need to have at least rudimentary understanding of the nature of concepts, for it is by means of concepts that we identify and integrate what we perceive, and it is concepts for which language is a code of visual/auditory symbols. Again, I tried to bring all these points to Andrew's attention, but it's all apparently gone right past him, as if he hadn't even read anything I had written in response to his queries.

Andrew writes: "The only manner with which you've addressed any of my objections is the same manner with which Sye addresses his, and that is to be a bully that just keeps re-asserting his prime axiom, and that is, that this thing of yours just is, with no real reason at all to accept it."

While I have not had the pleasure of observing Sye addressing Andrew's objections (I'm reminded of late night B movies involving alien women and mud wrestling), I don't think Andrew's statement here is very fair. For one, I've given Andrew the benefit of the doubt (perhaps wrongly) that he is seriously interested in learning more about my position. I've been patient to step him through some of Objectivism's fundamentals (it's clear he's never studied it for himself), correct many of his basic blunders (I've had to restrain myself here), and relate the issues he's raised to the role of the axioms in grounding knowledge. None of this is the action of a "bully," and my responses to Andrew's objections cannot honestly be likened to "just keeps re-asserting his prime axiom," nor can Andrew honestly say that there's no reason to accept the axioms - for instance, as I pointed out, they identify in the broadest possible terms the fact that there is a reality, that the objects which exist in reality are what they are independent of consciousness, and that consciousness is consciousness of some object(s). There are some reasons right there (as if they needed to be pointed out). In addition, in discussions throughout the comments section, I've noted the fact that denying the axioms is self-refuting, which is a confirming reason. I've also pointed out that the axioms are conceptually irreducible, which confirms their status as axioms - they are the bedrock of knowledge, assuming no prior knowledge. (Knowledge *of what*? *Whose* knowledge?) Again, either Andrew's been reading but is not able to integrate any of these points, or he's ignoring them - perhaps deliberately - and proceeding to raise questions which in fact many of these points do in fact address already.

When Andrew wrote: “But you’re still adhereing (which is the point) and you still have not accounted for that adhering.”

I responded to him, asking: “How do you know this, Andrew? Are you certain that I’ve not accounted for the adhering that I’ve spoken about?”

Andrew then replied: “That response is Sye TenB 101, for those who have debated with Sye.”

Sye checked out of the discussion a long time ago, choosing not to interact with my critique of his “proof.” In the comments discussion, Andrew and I have been debating, or at least discussing. And the response I threw back in his face is Andrew Louis 101. Observe:

Consider Andrew’s 1 Sept. comment, in response to my points about the nature of universality, he replied “Really? How do you know that?”

Similarly, in a later comment of Andrew’s which he apparently deleted, he wrote: “You are saying that existence is in itself, self evident. BUT, how do you know that? ... how do you know that ‘A’ cannot be both ‘A’ and ‘/A’ at the same time? If you say it’s self evident, that it’s an axiom, or axiomatic I can simply ask, ‘How do you know that?’.”

In one of his 2 Sept. comments, Andrew wrote: “How do you know that the ‘coded’ sound that funnels from the mouth amounts to anything like an adherence to anything?”

He states that this question (“How do you know that?”) is “Sye TenB 101,” and refers to Sye’s debating tactics as that of “a bully,” also calling this question “pure intellectual dishonesty.” If it’s dishonest and bullyish when Sye or I ask it, why isn’t it also dishonest and bullyish when Andrew asks it?

Apparently Andrew doesn’t think that I should be allowed to ask the same kind of questions he expects me to drop everything and answer to the satisfaction of his nebulous, unstated standards. But I do reserve the right to ask questions of my interlocutors. And I don’t think I was being dishonest when posed my questions above.

Recall that Andrew had written: “But you’re still adhereing (which is the point) and you still have not accounted for that adhering.”

He’s saying that I’m doing something and not accounting for what I’m doing. So he has accused me of some failing. I just want to know how he knows that I’ve done this. It’s noteworthy (if not telling) that he not only resists addressing the question, but takes umbrage to it, as if he should be able to make assertions about someone else’s alleged failure to account for something without anyone questioning how he might know this.

But I’m not throwing this question back in Andrew’s face just to be an annoyance, or to throw him off, as perhaps Sye or other apologists would do. Rather, I want to know - given all the corrections I’ve had to make of Andrew’s statements, his persistent carelessness with the issues, and his obvious unfamiliarity with even the fundamentals of Objectivism - how he can still come back and declare that I’m doing something without having accounted for it. Also, such questions would provide Andrew the opportunity to show us what he knows about how one acquires and validates knowledge, which is a core issue to the discussion. So it’s a live question, one which he’s apparently unwilling to address.

And yes, he has asserted his charges as incontestable certainties (that he becomes so incensed when his accusations are questioned indicates that he doesn’t think they should be doubted), which makes me wonder - given his multiple inquires about how I know something and his repeated insistence that he “[doesn’t] care... about certainty” - how he can know what he claims with such apparent certainty.

Andrew wrote: “Let’s take language for example. You’ve explicitly stated that what you’re perceiving is actual things in themselves.”

Andrew wants to “take language for example,” but then inquires about my position on perception. (I’m just trying to follow him here; he doesn’t make it easy.)

I don't know where Andrew thinks I've "explicitly stated" that the objects I perceive are "actual things in themselves." Can he show me where I've "explicitly stated" this? Or is he assuming I said this when perhaps I really haven't?

(Let me give you a hint here, Andrew: "Thing-in-itself" ("Ding an sich") is a Kantian idea. Objectivists are not Kantians.)

Andrew: "If that's true, then it follows (no matter how you make the connections) that truth (what we speak as a matter of fact) are representations, or adherences of/to those perceptions of things in themselves."

In one of my replies to Andrew from last night, I posed a question to him point blank: "What exactly do you mean by 'truth'?" Andrew has not answered this question.

But his above question makes me curious: Is it the case that he defines "truth" as a "representation"? Or does he define it in some other way? What is a "representation" as Andrew is using it here?

I ask these questions because Andrew comes across as continually trying to find fault with my position while never really demonstrating that he's grasped either it or the many corrections I've had to make on his attempts to interpret my position. I stated that truth is a property of identification. Rand defines truth very generally as "a recognition of reality" (*Atlas Shrugged*) - not a "representation" of reality. Andrew seems to be trying to assess my position by measuring it against a conception of truth which my position may in fact reject. (I say "may" here because I suspect this is the case, but it remains to be confirmed based on further clarification on Andrew's part as to what he actually has in mind.)

Andrew asked: "If you say that-that actually isn't true, then on what basis can you assert that what you're perceiving is actually a thing in itself?"

Again, "thing in itself" is a Kantian idea which Objectivism rejects. But let's trim that off Andrew's question to make it read as follows: "on what basis can you assert that what you're perceiving is actually a thing?"

To explore this, let us ask a more fundamental question: What does it mean to perceive? Does it make sense to say that when we perceive, we perceive *nothing*? Is there such a thing, on Andrew's view, as consciousness without anything to be conscious of?

Objectivism emphatically rejects the view that there's such a thing as consciousness without anything to be conscious of. On the contrary, Objectivism recognizes that consciousness always has an object. (I know, Andrew's going to ask "How do you know?" which is really code for "Prove it" - but since this recognition is axiomatic, the fact that it is an axiom answers both challenges. Of course, if Andrew thinks there's such a thing as consciousness without anything to be conscious of, I invite him to explain his view on this.)

So, since perception is a type of conscious activity, and consciousness is consciousness *of an object*, perception is always perception *of an object*. (Recall how upset Andrew got when I had earlier written "perception is perception of an object" - continually demonstrating his failure to recognize the prepositional phrase "of an object" included in this statement? I had to make this point explicit because it was clear to me that he had not been grasping it.) So if I'm perceiving, I must be perceiving *something*. I must be perceiving *an object*.

Now Andrew asks: "on what basis can you assert that what you're perceiving is actually a thing in itself" - which implies a Kantian view which Objectivism rejects. If we slash off the Kantian presupposition and ask instead: "on what basis can you assert that what you're perceiving is actually a thing?" I can remind him of the axiom of consciousness (consciousness is consciousness *of something**, perception - which is a conscious activity - is perception *of some thing**) and also point out the fact that the concept 'thing' (a concept which Andrew's question uses) is very broad, very open-ended, and includes any object that I might perceive. If I'm perceiving, then I must be perceiving an object, and if I'm perceiving an object, there's no offense in using the concept 'thing' to denote that object, be it a book, a tree, a house, my wife, a stack of waffles, etc.

I don't know why any of this could be so difficult for anyone. But given Andrew's performance to date, I'm not confident that this is going to help him very much.

Andrew: "Again, I'm sure you'll just re-assert your prime axiom again, in which case, 'yawn'."

If the axioms are true and they play a significant role in addressing Andrew's questions, why shouldn't I remind you of them? In his yawning drowsiness, Andrew seems constantly willing to ignore them.

Andrew did post a few more comments beyond what I've responded to here. But it is late, and much of what Andrew writes in those posts is mind-numbing in that addressing them requires more corrective labor on my part. I've had a long day, and this will have to do for the time being. But it should be clear so from the above that it appears more and more that Andrew is not very serious in grasping my position, but anxious to somehow find a flaw in it. Some people have the uncanny ability to see only what they want to see.

by Dawson Bethrick

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