

Paul's "Necessary Propositions"

In his [lengthy and often tortuously confused diatribe](#) against me, Christian apologist Paul Manata tried to make hay out of the issue of so-called "necessary propositions." He tried to raise this issue in [previous correspondence](#), stating "I don't see how necessary propositions would exist without a mind," as if I had affirmed that there could be any propositions without a mind to form them. I corrected him by explaining that propositions are functions of a consciousness, and this seems to be problematic for Paul given his commitment to the analytic-synthetic dichotomy.

Paul [had written](#):

Dawson has made this claim: "Propositions are functions of a consciousness." And so the problem here is what to do with necessary propositions? Granting Dawson's claim that propositions are functions of consciousness, it would appear that he'd need to have a necessary consciousness that exists in all possible worlds.

And [I responded](#):

Wrong. For one, I reject the necessary-contingent dichotomy that the conception rooting Paul's alleged problem takes for granted.

Paul [then replied](#):

And why does Dawson reject this, he doesn't tell us. Maybe we're supposed to be scared because he abruptly says, "Wrong?" Maybe it's because he authoritatively tells us "I reject the necessity-contingent dichotomy?" Who knows?

I did not elaborate on why I reject the necessary-contingent dichotomy because a) I thought Paul was already familiar with Objectivism and simply needed to be reminded of this (see below), and b) the purpose of [my blog](#) was not to restate what has already been well stated (again, see below). But for my readers' sake, let me briefly explain. I reject the necessary-contingent dichotomy that is unquestioningly embraced in most philosophical circles *because I think it's false*. Why would I embrace something I think is false? Blank out. Why do I think it's false? Because it assumes a false understanding of concepts. Specifically the necessary-contingent dichotomy confuses concepts with their definitions, a confusion which the objective theory of concepts avoids. The dichotomy in question arises because of this confusion and could not arise without it.

Paul then stated:

I know that Peikoff wrote on the "analytic/synthetic dichotomy," but that's not the only kind of "necessary-contingent dichotomy" there is.

Paul acknowledges that Peikoff has written on the topic (see his comprehensive essay "The Analytic-Synthetic Dichotomy" in *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, pp. 88-121), but he demonstrates that he's not familiar with Peikoff's criticism of the issue in question. I quote Peikoff:

Objectivism rejects the theory of the analytic-synthetic dichotomy as false - in principle, at root, and *in every one of its variants*. (ITOE, p. 94; emphasis added)

In his essay, Peikoff focuses on numerous expressions of this insidious idea, and explains why they are false. They are false because they assume a false theory of concepts. And it should already be apparent that Paul will not be able to counteract this by running to the bible, for it does not present a theory of concepts, nor does basing a theory of concepts on the musings of an imaginary deity bring any value to the matter.

Paul continued:

Furthermore, as usual, Rand and other Objectivists only serve to show how ignorant they really are of philosophy when they make the claims they do.

Rejecting bad ideas does not mean one is ignorant of philosophy. In fact, it is because of knowledge that we can have good reasons to reject bad ideas. But rather than take the time and effort he needs in order to understand the criticisms that Peikoff raises or offer any intelligent input on the matter, Paul wants to turn this into an opportunity

to ridicule me. Observe:

My guess is that Dawson will play the fool as well. But, again, we don't know because he tried to bully us rather than argue.

I suppose no matter what I have to say, Paul is going to want to call me a fool regardless. And look how much effort and time he spends trying (however poorly) to refute someone he wants to call a fool. Why not just call me a fool, and leave it at that? Again, does Paul really consider what he's saying? And he says I'm trying to bully my readers? Does Paul feel bullied? To my recollection, no one else has complained about this. Paul can call people who don't believe in his invisible magic being "fools" (and disparaging names like "baboon," "monkey," "hack," etc.) any time he likes, but when they take time to carefully explain why they think theism is false or interact with his defenses, he feels bullied. This is most interesting.

Paul continues:

What does it mean to say Dawson rejects necessary and contingent propositions? Does he mean to tell us that $2+2=4$ is not necessary, or is? Does he mean to tell us that his wearing a green shirt on Friday is not contingent [sic], or is? Does he mean to say that both of these are necessary, or both are contingent? He never tells us.

I reject the artificial dichotomizing of propositions into two mutually opposed types because I reject the theory of concepts that this procedure assumes. In my view, to qualify something as "necessary" is only contextually meaningful when considering purposes, and purposes vary from situation to situation, context to context, and often depend on the needs of the moment rather than on "eternal considerations" under which the notion of "necessary propositions" poses. I realize that this is anathema to the proponents of the necessary-contingent and related dichotomies, because they (whether they realize it or not) hold to the intrinsic view of concepts (or to nominalist borrowings from the same). It holds that "necessity" is intrinsic to (some) propositions, and implies that "propositions" (like "universals") "exist" in some nether dimension independent of human cognition. Dig down to find out why, and you'll find a heap of arbitrary notions and unjustifiable assumptions holding it all up.

Propositions are not irreducible primaries. They are composed of concepts, and without concepts there would be no propositions. Concept-formation is a *volitional* process; nothing in reality forces us to undertake it. When we look out at the world, we see concrete entities, not "propositions." We form propositions to identify what we conceive, remember, project, etc., but only after we have formed concepts which identify the entities, attributes, actions, etc. Nothing forces us to do this, we do this because we *choose* to do this. If the content of any given proposition is valid concepts denoting data we have gathered from objects we have discovered (i.e., facts), and its purpose is to denote those facts, then that proposition would be describing fact(s). Must the proposition "existence exists" describe a fact? It does denote a basic fact, but not because the proposition itself "must" do so. It does because of a human epistemological need, a need which we have as a result of our desire for knowledge, and knowledge requires a starting point. The proposition itself has no needs of its own to satisfy, as if it were going to be starved if we do not feed it something, or as if it had the ability to condemn us to an eternity of torment if we do sacrifice burnt offerings to it. It is true that $2+2=4$, but readers will see below that whether or not propositions are true is the issue to which I tried to direct the discussion. Moreover, wearing a green shirt as opposed to a red one on Friday is not propositional. It is a physical state of affairs, since the person wearing the shirt and the shirt itself are physical, not propositional. On such matters, Objectivism does recognize the distinction between "The Metaphysical Versus the Man-Made" (see Rand's essay of this title in her book *Philosophy: Who Needs It*).

I had written:

Also, the concern here should be for truth, not some vague notion called "necessary propositions" which could mean anything and nothing.

Paul responded:

55. Despite the hand-waving, this is just stupid.

55. The question is, are there any propositions that, because of their specific content, must describe facts.

I'm not sure which point 55 Paul wanted me to address (perhaps Paul really does have a [problem counting?](#)), but I have answers for both of them.

In the case of the first point, it seems that Paul is saying that my concern for whether or not a proposition is *true* constitutes "hand-waving" and is "just stupid." This is a most autobiographical Kodak moment in Paul's diatribe.

Each reader should pause to consider it.

In the case of the second point, Paul wants me to weigh in on the question, “are there any propositions that, because of their content, must describe facts.” There are numerous ways to answer this legitimately, but none of them lead to positive outcomes for Paul’s theism. What comes to mind initially is a statement from the above-mentioned essay by Peikoff. He writes:

In the realm of propositions, there is only one basic epistemological distinction: *truth vs. falsehood*, and only one fundamental issue: By what method is truth discovered and validated? To plant a dichotomy at the base of human knowledge - to claim that there are opposite *methods* of validation and opposite *types* of truth - is a procedure without grounds or justification.

(ITOE, p. 101)

So again, I think the important issue in considering the value of any proposition is whether or not it is true. But when I raised this concern, Paul pooh-poohed it, calling it “stupid.”

But for those who put their stock in the analytic-synthetic dichotomy and its nefarious offspring, Paul’s question points to the self-contradiction inherent in this jumble of confusion. On the dichotomy-laden view that Paul’s question assumes, any “facts” which a “proposition” might describe could only be contingent, and therefore not “necessary.” For instance, it may be a “fact” that man breathes air. But this is not “necessary” in all “possible worlds.” Those who put stock in the notion of testing claims against the standard of “possible worlds” would have to agree that there is a “possible world” in which man breathes sulfuric acid. So a proposition describing man’s need for air to breathe could not be a “necessary proposition.” Facts, according to the view assumed by Paul’s beloved dichotomy, “could have been otherwise,” as the saying goes. So Paul may be seduced into thinking that at least some “propositions..., because of their specific content, must describe facts,” but all is for naught on this view, for “facts” can vary according to whim, both the philosopher’s and the Christian god’s. Paul’s personal idol Cornelius Van Til makes this explicitly clear:

According to the doctrine of the Reformed faith all the facts of nature and of history are what they are, do what they do and undergo what they undergo, in according with the one comprehensive counsel of God. All that may be known by man is already known by God. And it is already known by God because it is controlled by God. (*The Defense of the Faith*, p. 99)

On this view, man’s need to breathe air instead of sulfuric acid, is up to “the one comprehensive counsel of God.” And who knows what this might be? Does Paul have the inside scoop on what his god plans? We should be careful here, because each believer tends to transpose his own will for his alleged god’s will at one point or another, as I explained in [an earlier response to Paul](#). I had written:

Paul thinks that he can say that his god does not wish, because Paul determines what his god is and is not, what his god can and cannot do. The reason why Christians have so many internal disagreements is because one Christian will imagine his god one way, while another Christian imagines his god another way, and never shall the two meet.

Amazingly, the Christian’s god seems to want to have things just as they are and continue to be in reality. Isn’t that amazing? It must take a lot of talent to imagine a deity which has “counseled” to have things just as they are in this world.

So the “necessary propositions” issue may not be the land of promise that Paul had initially hoped it to be.

Paul asks:

Why doesn’t he understand what a “necessary proposition” is? Is he that backwards?

Yes, I must really be “that backwards.” This is what Paul was after all the time: not to teach or inform, but to ridicule and name-call. This is what we can expect from presuppositionalists when their elusive argument is shown to be ineffective. It goes sort of like this:

Presuppositionalist: God exists because without Him, you couldn’t argue your way out of a paper bag.

Atheist: Really? How do you reckon?

Presuppositionalist: Because of the impossibility of the contrary. For instance, how do you account for necessary

propositions?

Atheist: [Duh, I donno](#). I'm not sure there is such a thing as a "necessary proposition" to begin with.

Presuppositionalist: You bafoon! Are you really that backwards? The question is, are there any propositions that, because of their specific content, must describe facts?

Atheist: Really, I was just wondering why you believe a god exists in the first place when it's so obvious that such a belief has its basis in the believer's imagination.

Presuppositionalist: I'm telling you why, you goof ball!

Atheist: Please, try to compose yourself. I was hoping we could have a civil discussion.

Presuppositionalist: How can civility be possible when you rebel against the preconditions of civility!!?

Atheist: Well, I'm trying my best to have a civil discussion with you. One of the preconditions of a civil discussion is the willingness of both parties to consider the other's viewpoint. But that's just it, you don't seem to be able to present your viewpoint.

Presuppositionalist: I've already sliced and diced your viewpoint, you monkey!

Atheist: Why don't you just tell me where you began and how you ended up believing that your god exists? Can you do that?

Presuppositionalist: I began with God's word, baboon!

Atheist: Well, that explains everything then. No wonder you believe this stuff. You began by swallowing it all hook, line and sinker. I know Muslims who do this with the Koran, and Buddhists who do this with Buddhist teachings.

Presuppositionalist: The Koranic god is self-refuting. Buddhist teachings are a jumble of absurdities!

Atheist: And now you should have a good idea of why I don't believe in your god either.

Presuppositionalist: Why you stupid, ignorant fool! Don't you realize that without God, you couldn't argue your way out of a paper bag?

Atheist: Well, you did say this at the beginning, but so far you've made no progress in supporting this statement. Instead, you seem anxious to insult me rather than teach me what you might know. I'm willing to consider what you have to say, but you trash every opportunity I extend to you.

Presuppositionalist: You're just trying to get the hoi polloi and all the teenagers to think you're "hot stuff"!

Atheist: I see. I wasn't aware that I had their attention. Regardless, aren't you going to threaten me with hellfire and brimstone? That's what the old churchmen used to do.

That's about the sum of it. We learn nothing from Paul other than that he's easily frustrated and that his feelings are easily hurt when someone doesn't believe in his invisible magic being on his say so.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Knowledge](#), [Paul Manata](#)

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

3 Comments:

[Frank Walton](#) said...

YAWN

[December 24, 2006 9:23 PM](#)

[Lui](#) said...

A smug "yawn" coming from someone who thinks that the Bible trumps evolution. Weird.

[December 25, 2006 1:23 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Go back to sleep, Frank. You never liked being awake anyway.

[December 27, 2006 3:44 PM](#)

[Post a Comment](#)