

Saturday, February 25, 2012

Reaction to My Critique of Anderson and Welty's "The Lord of Non-Contradiction"

It's not very common to find Christian apologists acknowledging my critiques of theistic apologetics (let alone actually interacting with them). So when it does happen, and I learn about it, my interest is piqued. Typically theistic apologists ignore my writings, suggesting that even if they are aware of them and have taken some time to examine any of them, they are left only with a blank stare and perhaps some sneering reaction against me personally. There are occasions when apologists confronted with my critiques of theistic defenses will indicate that they'll examine the matter more deeply at some unspecified future time, but fail to deliver on such promises. I'm reminded of several occasions when Chris Bolt, for example, would promise to look further into the matter at some unspecified future time.

In response to my [blog in which I correct numerous errors on the part of John Robbins](#), for instance, Bolt replied with a comment saying "I will try to give it a better read when I have more time." On [another occasion](#), Bolt commented: "I must hand it to you Dawson, you are very thorough. :) I do plan to continue to read your work as time allows." But Bolt never seems to come back with any increase in his understanding.

There's also the time when Christian apologist Dustin Segers not only stated that he would do "further research" on the primacy of existence after I had corrected his perverse attempts to refute it, but also deleted the post on his blog where he had published his attempted refutation of the primacy of existence. (For a synopsis of these events, see [here](#).) From what I can tell, Segers has never made good on this promise. In fact, he has since removed comments from his blog altogether. (Segers' blog can be accessed [here](#).)

The net result of the intellectual default on the part of theistic apologists is that my position and my criticisms against theism all go unrefuted. That's fine with me. After all, I don't think my position can be refuted, and I think theists recognize this deep down. That's why they tend to avoid my blog.

But there has been a little reaction to my prefatory critique of Anderson and Welty's paper [The Lord of Non-Contradiction](#). A commenter over at [James Anderson's blog](#) asked for Anderson's reaction to my criticism. The commenter, commenting under the moniker "above," posted a link to my blog and wrote:

Hello James,

Your article The Lord of Non-Contradiction is very interesting and insightful. I recently run across another blog where someone allegedly tried to undermine your argument along with providing an anti-presuppositionalist account for himself... I was wondering if you responded to this guy in any of your work, either on his criticism of your article or his attack on presuppositionalism. I would be really interested to read any response you might have.

Let me briefly recap the criticisms I have so far published of Anderson and Welty's argument:

1. Anderson and Welty's argument integrally depends on the necessary-contingent dichotomy, but this dichotomy is false, which can only mean that the argument itself is faulty. I point out that the necessary-contingent dichotomy is false precisely because it rests on a false theory of concepts, and I cited Leonard Peikoff's essay arguing this fact.
2. Anderson and Welty's argument makes numerous vague appeals to "intuitions" without explanation or clarification of what this could mean. I give several reasons why this is a liability for their argument.
3. Presuppositionalist [Brian Knapp points out](#) that Anderson and Welty's argument "is not transcendental in nature" and fails to "challenge" the non-believer's "autonomy." This seems to vie against the tagline on Anderson's [own original blog](#) (where he first posted a link to his paper "The Lord of Non-Contradiction"), which

reads: “Faltering Attempts to Think God’s Thoughts After Him.” (Anderson has since moved his blog to a new address, and has curiously abandoned this tagline.)

In the comments section of my blog entry critiquing Anderson and Welty’s argument, I offered two additional criticisms:

4. Anderson and Welty’s failure to answer the question, which they themselves raise in their paper, “What is truth?” Instead of offering any enlightening remarks which would “shed much light on what truths or propositions are,” Anderson and Welty seem to be content with what they style “a useful term of art.”

5. Anderson and Welty characterize “propositions” as “the primary bearers of truth-value,” but offer no argument for this. They assert that “propositions are regarded as primary truth-bearers because while sentences (i.e., linguistic tokens) can have truth-values by virtue of expressing propositions, propositions do not have truth-values by virtue of anything else.” In response to this, I pointed out that propositions are composed of concepts, and that propositions are therefore not conceptually irreducible. I point out that concepts, rather than propositions, are the primary bearers of truth, and that truth is an aspect of identification. This is in keeping with Ayn Rand’s recognition that “Definitions are the guardians of rationality, the first line of defense against the chaos of mental disintegration” (“Art and Cognition,” *The Romantic Manifesto*, 77). This is because definition is the final step in concept-formation. Peikoff points out that “the truth of a proposition depends not only on its relation to the facts of the case, but also on the truth of the definitions of its constituent concepts” (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, p. 100). This latter point seems at least somewhat compatible with Anderson’s own point that while propositions are “truth-bearers,” facts are “truth-makers” (see Anderson’s blog entry [Are the Laws of Logic Propositions?](#)).

And though I have further criticisms of Anderson and Welty’s argument that I have not posted on my blog, there’s already some food for thought to consider here for those who might want to put stock in their argument. If any of my points are rationally sustainable, then I’d say that Anderson and Welty’s argument is fatally compromised.

My critique of Anderson and Welty’s argument can be strengthened even further by pursuing the implications of my fifth point above - namely that propositions are not the primary bearers of truth, but are in fact composed of concepts, which can only mean that it is not true that “propositions do not have truth-values by virtue of anything else,” as Anderson and Welty have asserted. Since concepts are more fundamental than propositions, a proposition can only have truth-value by virtue of the truth-value of the concepts which happen to inform it.

But if propositions are in fact composed of concepts, then we’re ready to seal the coffin on Anderson and Welty’s argument for good. I have already argued that [an omniscient mind would not have its knowledge in conceptual form](#). And although he found the relevance of my argument puzzling, Christian apologist Peter Pike attempted to interact with this argument, but endorsed its conclusion, [affirming outright that](#) “God’s knowledge... is not conceptual.” If propositions are composed of concepts, while the Christian god’s own knowledge is not conceptual in nature, it’s hard to see how any knowledge characterized as “propositional” in nature could imply the Christian god.

A more general point to be reminded of is the fact that Anderson and Welty’s argument leaves us where all other theistic arguments leave us: with no alternative but to *imagine* the god whose existence they claim to have proven. Even if we accept all the flimsy premises of their argument, we still have nothing but our imagination to “apprehend” the god they claim to worship and serve. At the end of the day, their argument makes their god no more real than Allah, Zeus, or even Lord Krishna himself. I still must *imagine* it if I’m going to consider it at all. I’m guessing that those who want the law of non-contradiction to be managed by a “lord” or “king” will have no trouble finding ways to ignore this unsettling fact.

In response to the comments which “above” had posted on his blog, Anderson stated:

I have interacted with Dawson Bethrick before, but that was many years ago.

This is true. Anderson and I have had a few brief exchanges. Back in 2004, I contacted Anderson directly in response to a paper he had published showcasing several theistic arguments by Alvin Plantinga and Cornelius

Van Til. On another occasion, in 2006, Anderson left several comments in response to my blog [Frame's Summary of Van Til's OMA](#), in which he misconstrued my position as affirming the view that “*the way the world really is* turns out to be a product of our minds.” (I have sorted out Anderson's confusions and corrected his misunderstandings in my paper [A Reply to Anderson: On Realism, Conceptualism and the Objectivist Theory of Concepts](#). To my knowledge, Anderson has not interacted with this.)

Anderson continued:

I did not find our exchanges very profitable (and my guess is he'd say the same).

On the contrary, I value my interactions with Anderson very highly. I've enjoyed my correspondence with him (and would love his kind permission to publish it in full on my webpage [Katholon.com](#)), and I appreciate the opportunity his comments on my blog have afforded me in clarifying and vindicating my position. My interactions with Anderson have in fact served to confirm the truth of my worldview, which is probably why he does not find our exchanges “very profitable” (for his position, they haven't been profitable at all).

Anderson wrote:

He's firmly wedded to Ayn Rand's philosophy, which I find hard to take seriously (go [here](#) to read some pretty devastating criticisms of Rand).

It is evident to me that Anderson does not take Objectivism seriously, and apparently does not want to give it much of a hearing to begin with. Indeed, he doesn't even seem very willing to examine it firsthand. Consider what Anderson is telling us he does not take seriously:

- the view that reality exists independent of conscious activity (cf. *wishing doesn't make it so*)
- the view that a thing is what it is independent of consciousness
- the view that reality is fundamentally distinct from what we *imagine*
- the view that facts hold epistemological primacy in all legitimate knowledge
- the view that reason is man's only means of acquiring and validating knowledge
- the view that moral values have a biological basis
- the view that man has a right to exist for his own sake
- etc.

Because Objectivism rejects any expression and variant of the primacy of consciousness metaphysics, it therefore rejects supernaturalism (see for example [here](#)). This can only mean that Objectivism rules out the claim that Christianity is true (see for instance [here](#)). Objectivism rejects Christianity for the same reason it rejects any form of supernaturalism: like other forms of supernaturalism, Christianity is premised on the primacy of consciousness metaphysics (and explicitly so), which means any claim that Christianity is true is ultimately self-contradictory (see [here](#)). But instead of directly interacting with the Objectivist philosophy, Anderson recommends articles on Objectivism at Bill “the Maverick Philosopher” Vallicella's blog. I have to say I'm a bit embarrassed for Anderson here, as Vallicella's objections to Objectivism are not only weak, but indicative of a conspicuously poor understanding of Objectivism. (I have documented many of the stark deficiencies of Vallicella's criticisms of Objectivism on my website. See my paper [The “Maverick Philosopher” on Objectivism](#).) In steering his readers to Vallicella's blog entries on Objectivism, Anderson is sending them down a path of more ignorance. I'm guessing that Anderson himself does not realize this, otherwise I don't expect that he would endorse such errors himself.

I would warn readers that Vallicella's writings about Rand and Objectivism are often colored with a condescending, derisive attitude of “How dare you!” Rand was not an academic philosopher, but she wrote on philosophical topics and in fact developed her own approach to philosophy which does not defer to academics as though they were monolithic in their views or infallible in their verdicts. Many academics (the less intellectually mature ones, at any rate) will take umbrage at what they perceive in Rand as reckless defiance, nose-thumbing

insolence, and unconstrained radicalism. Often it is the case that academics are recoiling against Rand's endorsement of reason, laissez-faire capitalism, individual rights and her intransigent denunciations of communism, socialism, fascism, racism and all other expressions of collectivism. And of course, theists are reacting against Rand's atheism. Since Rand and her philosophy are non-theistic, she must be condemned, even if her philosophy is true.

Anderson continued:

Dawson, on the other hand, doesn't take contemporary analytic philosophy very seriously (or at least he didn't when we interacted way back when). So it's difficult for us to have a useful philosophical discussion.

I have always found the methodology of analytic philosophy suspicious, and Dr. David Kelley (who earned a Ph.D. in philosophy at Princeton University) confirmed the legitimacy of my suspicions when in a lecture for the Institute for Objectivist Studies some years ago, he outlined several of its distinctive features, arguing that

implicit in analytic philosophy's methods is a commitment to the primacy of consciousness, a commitment evident in the way many philosophers elevate formal logic and linguistic theory over the data of the senses. This commitment to the primacy of consciousness also results in a tendency to explore arbitrary thought experiments and to stipulate arbitrary definitions, as well as in the widespread overuse of formal deduction and the concomitant lack of attention to induction. And the commitment is evident, too, in the belief common among analytic philosophers that it is meaningful to speak about the "logical possibility" of "other worlds," that is, other realities. Only the primacy of consciousness, which holds that language and thought can exist prior to or apart from any awareness of reality, can explain the use of all these methods.

A review of [my interaction with Bill "The Maverick Philosopher" Vallicella's criticisms of Objectivism](#) will indicate what you might expect from someone who employs the methods of analytic philosophy to argue his way to preferred conclusions and justify rash dismissals. It's a sad sight to behold, and makes me question the maturity level of such thinkers.

Anderson elaborated on this:

To take one example, I think that any philosophy which rejects the distinction between necessary truths and contingent truths (note: rejects the distinction itself as incoherent, not merely the claim that there are both kinds of truths) has fallen at the first hurdle. If we can't even agree on that elementary logical distinction, where do we go from there? If Objectivists like Dawson have to reject the necessary-contingent distinction altogether in order to refute our argument, well, so much the worse for Objectivism, I say.

This is misleading, to say the least. I do not "reject the necessary-contingent distinction altogether *in order to* refute [Anderson and Welty's] argument." I rejected it long before their argument came over the horizon, and independently of my criticisms of theistic arguments. Anderson's characterization here suggests that I happened upon his argument, checked it out, and then sought last minute for some way to reject its conclusion, focusing at the eleventh hour on the necessary-contingent distinction as some means of "escape." There is nothing to just justify this characterization. Objectivism's rejection of the necessary-contingent dichotomy has a long-standing pedigree, with Peikoff's full analysis of the issue being first published in May 1967. Indeed, I note in [my treatment of criticisms of Objectivism](#) by "The Maverick Philosopher" (I always get a laugh out of that moniker!) that Objectivism rejects the necessary-contingent dichotomy. This is nothing new for me.

I also think it's misleading to characterize the necessary-contingent dichotomy as a distinction that is "elementary," implying that it is somehow fundamental. It's not, and I'd be surprised if any philosopher seriously thinks it is fundamental. If it is considered to be fundamental, it's probably been accepted at face value simply because other philosophers have already taken it for granted. But this would be a poor basis upon which to infer its alleged fundamentality. Indeed, as I have already indicated in [my initial reaction to Anderson and Welty's paper](#), Objectivism rejects the necessary-contingent dichotomy because it rests on a false theory of concepts. That it rests on a theory of concepts to begin with, only indicates that this "logical distinction" cannot be either "elementary" or fundamental.

Contrary to what Anderson states, I'd say that any argument which hinges on a false dichotomy is one which "has fallen at the first hurdle." If Anderson and Welty's argument can not proceed without the necessary-contingent dichotomy, then we are justified in rejecting their conclusions if there are good grounds to reject the necessary-contingent dichotomy. Objectivism provides those grounds, and though I've seen numerous challenges to Objectivism's analysis of the necessary-contingent dichotomy, I've never seen one that can prevail over rational scrutiny. If Objectivism has the rational principles which a philosophy needs to slash off an entire category of false ideas, so much the better for Objectivism.

Anderson continues:

All this to say, I'm not too concerned about Dawson's critique of our article because the constituency for which we're writing (in this case, contemporary analytic philosophers) don't take his philosophical outlook very seriously in the first place.

In other words, the audience which Anderson and Welty intend for their argument is an audience which already accepts the premises of their argument. Perhaps it's also intended only for those who already accept their conclusion as well. Anderson seems to be saying: "If you don't accept the premises of the argument, well, we weren't writing for you in the first place. If you accept the primacy of existence (cf. the fact that wishing doesn't make it so), the fact that concepts are more fundamental than propositions, and reject false dichotomies, we aren't going to take your philosophical outlook very seriously anyway, and thus won't be too concerned with your critiques of our argument."

Really, that's no skin off my back. But it does leave a person like myself in the advantage, for I have interacted with Anderson and Welty's argument, but they have not interacted with my criticisms of their argument. So in that regard, who's ahead?

Anderson says he does not intend his remarks to be taken "as an insult, although it may sound like one." Rather, "it's just offered here as an explanation for why you won't find me engaging at length with his critique." From what I can tell, Anderson hasn't engaged my critique *at all*. And no, this does not come across as an insult. It's actually what I've come to expect from theists.

The commenter stated:

I have to admit I found his criticisms rather inept but I wanted to cross-reference that with you in case I was not giving him the benefit of the doubt. Like you said, it was hard to take him seriously and I wondered if I was being unfair. It seems like I wasn't after all.

This statement gives me the impression that the commenter was only interested in psychological validation from Anderson by way of the latter's confirmation that my criticisms should not be handled too closely - i.e., dismissed with innuendo and slur instead of examined with critical care and concern for intellectual legitimacy. Perhaps the commenter wanted someone he considers as an authority figure to calm his anxiety that maybe the "Lord of non-contradiction" isn't all it's been touted to be. I get this impression primarily from the commenter's statements due to their lack of content to inform his findings in regard to my criticisms of Anderson and Welty's paper. He says he "found [my] criticisms rather inept," but provides no indication of how he arrived at this assessment. What is "inept" about questioning an argument's premises and rejecting false ideas?

The commenter also wrote:

His facination [sic] with ibjectivism [sic] is indeed strange.

Indeed, it seems so strange, perhaps even perverse, in some individuals' minds, when a person embraces a philosophy which teaches that reality is absolute, that there is a fundamental distinction between what is real and what is imaginary, that knowledge is conceptual in nature, that man's means of acquiring and validating knowledge is something called *reason*, that morality is about achieving and protecting one's own *values* (as opposed to some "duty" imposed by some mystical source to *sacrifice* them), that man has a right to exist for his own sake, that it is better for men to abide by the principle of "my best effort for your best effort" in their transactions with each other, etc. Indeed, how bizarre!

All this confirms a truth I've been aware of for a long time now, namely that *the only alternative to Objectivism is some form of subjectivism*.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Anal Phil](#), [Logic](#), [Theistic Arguments](#)

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [9:00 PM](#)