

## Rick Warden's Critique of Objectivism

A Christian named Rick Warden who has attempted to commandeer the comments section of my blog [refuting Sye Ten Bruggencate's "proof" for the existence of a god](#), posted his objections to the philosophy of Objectivism.

While the objections which Rick raises against Objectivism are superficial and reflect a profound unfamiliarity with what Objectivism actually teaches, his mistakes are common among theistic apologists attempting to debate non-believers on the topic of logic.

Rick openly admits that he is "still in the learning mode regarding Objectivism" - i.e., he acknowledges his own unfamiliarity with what Objectivism teaches. But this does not stop him from running roughshod into battle even though he's completely unarmed. In spite of acknowledging his ignorance of Objectivism, he thinks he's already found a bunch of fallacies in Objectivism.

I will examine Rick's criticisms below. We will find that, as with so many critics of "non-Christian thought," Rick has a talent for making a lot of errors in the space of just a few statements.

Rick writes:

I would be interested to know your criticisms on this response to your premise from an article:

Okay. Bring it on.

Quoting from my blog [How Theism Violates the Primacy of Existence](#):

It is an undeniable fact that a subject is distinct from the objects of its awareness: a subject and its objects are not one and the same - the two are engaged in a *relationship*.

Rick asked:

Is it really 'an undeniable fact'?

Rationally speaking, yes, it is. Whenever an individual perceives and/or consider any object, his action of perceiving and/or considering that object is distinct from the object he's perceiving and/or considering. On what rational basis could anyone deny this? Even in denying it, he would be instantiating the very distinction he's denying.

Rick wrote:

As far as we may surmise, pure, unadulterated logic does not submit into an absolute metaphysical subject/object dualism explanation.

It's not clear what Rick is trying to say here. He introduces the notion of dualism, which has many meanings and connotations in the history of philosophy. Greater precision of expression is recommended here if Rick has a point he wants to get across.

At any rate, *logic* does have a metaphysical basis, and it is not consciousness in isolation from any object it's conscious of. Rather, the metaphysical basis of logic is the subject-object relationship - i.e., the subject of consciousness *engaged in awareness of some object(s)*. A subject's awareness of some object(s) is a metaphysical fact - i.e., objective, since this awareness itself is not the product of conscious intentions. When we sense things, we have no choice over the fact that we sense or what it is we are sensing. Anyone who has experienced pain realizes this, at least implicitly: when one feels pain, he cannot choose not to feel it. If we could, we wouldn't need painkillers or anesthesia, nor would we be so reluctant to go to the dentist.

Rick wrote:

Ask an objectivist: “In terms of human perception, is logic considered a subject or an object?”

The question, as I understand it, seems rather incoherent. Why specifically “in terms of human perception” here? We do not *perceive* logic; logic is *conceptual*. Also, logic itself is *not* the subject of consciousness: the concept ‘logic’ does not denote a conscious being. Subjects (in the sense that I use it in the passage quoted from my blog above) are conscious beings. I, Dawson Bethrick, am a subject; the reader who is reading this is a subject. Logic, on the other hand, is a set of abstract principles which regulate identification; identification is an activity performed by a conscious subject.

But without doubt, logic can be an *object* of awareness, but I would not say of perceptual awareness. We don’t see, feel or touch logic. Logic does not make noises, nor does it produce an odor. But we can think about logic, we can examine logic, we can write about logic, we can talk about logic, we can marvel at logic. When we do any of these things, logic is the object of our awareness. So logic can be an object of our awareness, just as it is in this very sentence - since I’m talking about logic.

Rick wrote:

If the objectivist says logic is a ‘subject’, then it is considered a part of the mind.

Actually, if one were to say that logic is a subject, he’d be saying (as I have used the terms) that logic is a conscious being in its own right. I don’t think this is the case, and I don’t see why anyone would think this. This would be an instance of personifying an inanimate object.

Rick continued:

Logic, from a utilitarian view, is a tool, an aspect of reasoning. Without a mind, logic would have no use whatsoever. This implies, from a materialist perspective, it should be a cart the horse of reason pulls. But objectivists have a problem here. While Logic is used personally, as a tool for subjective reasoning, it is not ONLY personal, it consists of universal laws, it endures from one generation to the next, as do known ‘external’ natural laws.

Let’s keep in mind what specifically it is we’re talking about when we talk about *logic*. “Logic is the art or skill of non-contradictory identification” (Ayn Rand, “Philosophical Detection,” *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 15). Logic’s very purpose is to guide man’s ability to *identify* and *integrate* what he perceives. This is entirely in keeping with the proper understanding of the nature of *reason*:

Reason is the faculty that identifies and integrates the material provided by man’s senses. (Ayn Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 20)

Reason integrates man’s perceptions by means of forming abstractions or conceptions, thus raising man’s knowledge from the perceptual level, which he shares with animals, to the *conceptual* level, which he alone can reach. The method which reason employs in this process is logic—and logic is the art of *non-contradictory identification*. (Ayn Rand, “Faith and Force: Destroyers of the Modern World,” *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 62)

Only biological organisms (specifically *human beings*) identify and integrate what they perceive conceptually, and since logic is the method which regulates this process, it is man who needs logic (as he does not *automatically* identify and integrate what he perceives). Essentially, logic is to epistemology what a code of values is to morality. Since the process of identifying and integrating what we perceive is a *volitional* operation, we need a structured set of guidelines to guide our cognitive choices. Only where a conceptual consciousness is concerned, is logic even going to be a consideration.

Rocks do not need logic; rivers do not need logic; a pile of leaves does not need logic; shooting stars do not need logic. Given this context, then, it is definitely true that “without a mind, logic would [be of] no use whatsoever.”

Now it is true that logic as a set of principles guiding human thought endures from one generation to the next. To put it short, logic is the same for everyone. But this fact does not undermine the Objectivist position or its understanding of logic. “Logic has a single law, the Law of Identity, and its various corollaries” (“Philosophical Detection,” *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 15). The law of identity does not change, either from place to place, or person to person, or generation to generation. It is rooted directly on the one fact that everything in the universe has in common, namely the fact of *existence*: if something exists, it is what it is.

Moreover, on the Objectivist view, logic is *conceptual* in nature (see [here](#)), and human beings possess consciousnesses capable of the conceptual level of cognition. It is the *open-endedness* or “universality” of concepts, given their the process by which they are formed (i.e., by abstraction, specifically the operation known as *measurement-omission*), which gives logic its universal applicability. This is why a good theory of concepts is indispensable to understanding the issues which Rick has raised. Logic certainly does in fact depend on human minds, but not on their whims, rather on their essential nature as conscious subjects in a relationship with the objects of their awareness, i.e., [the primacy of existence](#). Logic owes its stability, immutability and universality of applicability to its conceptual nature and its foundation on the law of identity.

That the nature of *concepts* is the key here can be demonstrated with a simple example, the concept ‘man’. We form the concept ‘man’ on the basis of just a few perceptual inputs - in fact, only two are really required. “A concept is a mental integration of two or more units possessing the same distinguishing characteristic(s), with their particular measurements omitted” (Ayn Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, p. 13). Based on those few perceptually given samples, say Jones and Smith, we omit the specific measurements of each - Jones is 6’2” tall, portly, bearded, wears glasses, dressed in a white coat, is a doctor, is 53 years old, speaks four languages, etc., while Smith is 5’8” tall, slender, clean-shaven, wears a three-piece suit, is a company CEO, is 48 years old, speaks English and a little pig Latin, etc. - and integrate them into a single mental unit - the concept ‘man’. Because of measurement-omission, we can integrate more “units” - i.e., other men - into the same concept, as we discover them. There is no quantitative limit to integration; the concept ‘man’ is open-ended - i.e., “universal” - in that it includes *every* man who exists, who has existed and who will ever exist. It is a universal classification.

Notice how this allows for us to communicate with each other. You have formed the concept ‘man’ based on specific individuals whom you have encountered over your life, and I have formed the concept ‘man’ based on the specific individuals whom I have encountered over my life. Unless we grow up in the same small town, the specific individuals in your encounter set are going to be entirely different from those in my encounter set. However, since we have both formed the *concept* ‘man’ by essentially the same process - i.e., by a process of abstraction, we can each have an idea of what the other is talking about when we speak of men.

The same is the case with the concepts which inform the principles of logic. Since they too are concepts formed by the same process, they have their analogues in every mind which has performed that process to form them, just as you and I both had sufficiently similar concepts of ‘man’ already formed in our knowledge base. Of course, it can get tricky as we form abstractions on the basis of previously formed abstractions, as we now start developing a hierarchical structure, and the need for uniform *definitions* becomes crucial. This is where the objective theory of concepts proves its worth. “The final step in concept-formation is definition. This step is essential to every concept except axiomatic concepts and concepts denoting sensations” (Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, p. 96) In other words, until we’ve secured our concepts with proper definitions, our work in forming them is not finished. “A definition is a statement that identifies the nature of the units subsumed under a concept” (Ayn Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, p. 40). It is often in the realm of *definitions* where thinkers encounter their greatest point of conflict with each other. This is why I urge my theistic interlocutors to make their definitions clear. They frequently have a hard time doing this, and I think a major reason why is that they simply do not have a good grasp of concepts.

Let me re-emphasize the broader point: Since existence holds metaphysical primacy, logic will always have its proper anchor: the law of identity, regardless of *who* is using it. Since existence exists independent of consciousness, and consciousness is consciousness *of objects*, there is a proper orientation between the subject of consciousness (the human thinker) and its objects (anything he perceives and/or considers). That orientation is identified by the primacy of existence: the objects of consciousness are what they are independent of the conscious activity by which the subject is aware of them.

So the answer to the supposed conundrum which Rick raises here, is supplied by Objectivism's axioms, the primacy of existence, and its theory of concepts.

Also, a couple of other cautionary corrections for Rick here:

1. Objectivism is not a form of Utilitarianism.
2. Objectivism is not materialism.

Rick wrote:

If the objectivist says logic is an 'object', then it is presumed to be a part of the 'external' world and they have another problem.

This is a non sequitur. Logic indeed can be an object of consciousness (just as it is in the case of this discussion - it is one of the objects under our consideration), but it does not follow from this that logic is "part of the 'external' world" exclusively. We do have the capacity for introspection, in which case our own consciousness can become an object to itself. When I introspect, I am aware of my own conscious activity, and that conscious activity of which I am aware, is the object of my introspective awareness. When I see a ball (an object in "external reality"), I am *perceiving* it; when I think about my perceiving the ball, my perception of the ball becomes what is properly understood as a *secondary* object of my consciousness (since I had to perceive the ball *first* in order for my perception of the ball to be an object of my awareness).

Similarly with logic. Logic is a set of principles, informed by concepts, which regulates proper identification of objects, and it too can be an object of our awareness. An object, mind you, as I use it in the passage which Rick quoted from [my blog](#), is anything one perceives and/or considers. It can be an extramental entity (such as a ball), or some conscious activity (such as my awareness of the ball).

So, the problem which Rick raises here does not afflict Objectivism.

Rick wrote:

No one has ever perceived logic, or its effects, with his or her senses and thus cannot 'objectively' account for its existence.

This is another non sequitur. It's likely a consequence ignoring not only the conceptual nature of logic, but also our capacity for introspection.

Since, as I pointed out above, we can introspect, we do have the capacity to identify the process by which we form concepts. And here's why: since this process of forming concepts does have identity (e.g., it works one way and not others), and we can become aware of it (by means of introspection), we can objectively identify it (by adhering to the primacy of existence). So yes, we can objectively account for it, but only if we maintain fidelity to the primacy of existence and have a good understanding of concepts. (Christianity provides for neither, which is why you think these are problems for non-Christians.)

Rick: "If the objectivist says gravity is similar because it is not seen but known by its effects, it seems to be a weak corollary."

But the Objectivist did not say this. Next?

Rick: "What does this imply metaphysically?"

The Objectivist is beyond implications at this point, because he has the primacy of existence - i.e., he has *explicitly* identified the proper relationship between a consciousness and its objects.

Rick: "Therefore, if there is a question of which has primacy metaphysically, logic does."

The issue of metaphysical primacy has to do with the proper relationship between a consciousness (i.e., a subject) and its objects. I already explained why logic is not the subject - it's not a conscious entity. And yes, we saw how logic can be an object. But it's only *one* of many objects, and it could only be a secondary object at best (since we need to introspect to become aware of it). So it would not do to say that logic specifically has metaphysical primacy; this would be too narrow, and it would fail to identify the proper relationship between consciousness and its objects in terms of *essentials* - i.e., consciousness and existence. Indeed, the concept 'logic' is not conceptually irreducible, and since the issue of metaphysical primacy must be settled at the axiomatic level of cognition, we must address it in terms of axiomatic concepts.

Rick: "If the existence of logic refutes the assumed metaphysical subject/object duality and logic metaphysically predominates over reason, then an absolute subject/object duality, strictly based on human reasoning, should not be considered a metaphysically reliable premise."

The existence of logic does not refute the primacy of existence. On the contrary, the primacy of existence makes it possible (since the primacy of existence is its fundamental basis) and necessary (since the human mind in the effort to identify its objects is fallible).

Rick raised another criticism:

The Primacy of Existence theory supposedly disproves Theism because it assumes a single world view cannot entertain both a primacy of existence example (man) and a primacy of consciousness example (God). But there is a third possibility, based on the existence of logic, that something may, in fact, be independent of- and indefinable by the apparent subjective and object duality.

Let's see if any of this this successfully applies to Objectivism.

Essentially, Rick's objection amounts to the view that the primacy of existence and the primacy of consciousness are not jointly exhaustive, that "there is a third possibility" that is allegedly an alternative to the primacy of existence and the primacy of consciousness.

An argument has already been developed in anticipation of this kind of claim, and can be found here: [Are the Primacy of Existence and Primacy of Consciousness Exhaustive Metaphysics?](#) While I would phrase certain statements in this essay differently if I were writing it myself, the overall gist of this paper brings the point home rather well. The following point is noteworthy when considering Rick's speculative proposal:

Of course, if you're a believer in the Primacy of Consciousness, you might think that there are things other than consciousness and existence, because your consciousness could create [i.e., *imagine*] them. In this case, you could advocate the Primacy of Something Else, although this would be highly illogical, in that you've already presupposed that your consciousness has created these new things, and that, presumably, they are existents. But besides, the Primacy of Consciousness is false.

Notice that, not only does Rick propose his alternative to the primacy of existence and the primacy of consciousness in a tentative manner (he casts it as a "possibility... that something may..." rather than an actually existing and defensible alternative), but also that he does not present any argument for his claim. In fact, his whole effort to evade the choice between the primacy of existence and the primacy of consciousness indicates that he does not understand the issue of metaphysical primacy to begin with. This is extremely common among theistic critics of Objectivism.

Also notice that, after reading [my argument](#), Rick does not come out and endorse the primacy of consciousness, which I argue to be the underlying premise of theism. This is not unexpected. Theists typically try to distance themselves from explicitly endorsing the primacy of consciousness metaphysics once its failings have been pointed out to them. And yet, like other theistic critics of Objectivism who are reluctant to admit the subjective underpinnings of their worldview, Rick does not explain how his theism could survive without it; he does not explain how one could believe in a universe-creating, reality-ruling god without assuming the primacy of consciousness.

Given what he does write in response to my argument (Rick interacts with very little of it), it's clear that Rick's reading of it is faulty. This is evidenced by the fact that he wants to introduce a "third alternative" to the

jointly exhaustive orientations identified by the issue of metaphysical primacy. For one thing, Rick does not seem to grasp that the issue of metaphysical primacy pertains to the relationship between a consciousness (the subject) and its objects (what the subject is conscious of). This is why there are only two perspectives to consider in weighing the issue of metaphysical primacy: the primacy of the *objects* of consciousness (i.e., the primacy of existence, the *objective* position) vs. the primacy of the *subject* (i.e., the primacy of consciousness, the *subjective* position). We are limited to these two alternatives because a consciousness and its objects are the only parties to the relationship.

Also, since the relationship between a subject and its objects is not a relationship between equals (an object and the activity by which the subject has awareness of it are not the same; the actions which produce awareness are performed by the subject, even those actions which are involuntary), it cannot be the case that *both* the subject and its objects jointly share metaphysical primacy. This would ignore the nature of consciousness as a faculty which must discover the nature of its objects as it seeks to identify them. Man is not omniscient, nor does he begin his awareness of the world with exhaustive knowledge of the objects which he will eventually encounter in his conscious experience.

So there can be no “third option,” as Rick would like to believe.

Another tragic mistake of Rick’s is his attempt to base the possibility of a “third possibility” on “the existence of logic.” Recall that logic is “the art or skill of non-contradictory identification.” If logic in fact exists, it can only imply that those consciousnesses which make use of it, do so because knowledge of the identity of the objects they encounter is not an automatically given, but a goal which they must pursue by incorporating logic as a method which regulates identification. In other words, logic necessarily presupposes the primacy of existence by virtue of its role in the cognitive process: to ensure the conformity of man’s mind to reality as he develops his knowledge beyond the level of perceptually self-evident facts.

That Rick thinks this “third possibility” (alternative) to the primacy of existence and the primacy of consciousness “may, in fact, be independent of- and indefinable by the apparent subjective and object duality, ” could only signify its irrelevance to the subject-object relationship, if in fact such an animal were accepted as a reality. Indeed, Rick offers no reason to suppose that his “third possibility” would at all be relevant, let alone tell us what exactly it is he has in mind. Perhaps he has his god in mind here, but this would be most odd since he characterizes it as a “possibility” which is “based on the existence of logic,” which would make logic’s existence prior to and independent of his god’s existence. It is hard to see how such a view could avoid the charge of heresy within the Christian religion.

In conclusion, Rick’s criticisms of Objectivism fall flat on their face. In presenting them he demonstrates that he is not sufficiently familiar with Objectivism to critique it intelligently, and makes numerous blunders as a result. Given Rick’s lack of familiarity with Objectivism, he is in no position to raise defensible objections against its view of logic, the primacy of existence, or its arguments against theism. And as I have shown above, it is his own mistakes which supply the thrust to his criticisms.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Christian Psychopathy](#), [Logic](#), [Objectivism](#), [Primacy of Existence](#)

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