

Friday, June 13, 2008

## Stolen Concepts and Intellectual Parasitism

A visitor to my blog once suggested that Christianity comprises a long tradition of concept-stealing, and cited as examples the pagan mystery religions from ancient times (e.g., the eucharist, the virgin birth, a dying and rising savior, etc.), the adoption of non-Christian holidays (e.g., Easter, Christmas), even modern scientific advancements (such as hospitals) that are claimed as the byproduct of Christian intellectualism. I was taken aback by this comment because it demonstrated to me that even frequent readers of my blog may not have a good understanding of what is happening when one commits the fallacy of the stolen concept. For although the fallacy of the stolen concept is an error that is fundamental to the Christian worldview, these are not examples of concept-stealing (though the reasoning behind some of them may involve stolen concepts). There are important distinctions between the fallacy of the stolen concept on the one hand, and cultural hijacking and intellectual parasitism on the other. These distinctions can be missed due to unfamiliarity with the nature of the error committed by stolen concepts.

### The Fallacy of the Stolen Concept

A stolen concept is not characterized by making use (either real or apparent) of a tradition of a worldview to which one does not ascribe. An non-Christian, for instance, is not committing the fallacy of the stolen concept if he gives out gifts to friends and loved ones every December 25. Similarly, I would not be committing the fallacy of the stolen concept by attending a Passover feast with one of my Jewish friends. On the contrary, the fallacy of the stolen concept is a cognitive fallacy involving specifically a breach of the knowledge hierarchy. It's an insidious type of error which usually goes unnoticed, unless it's so explicit that it's difficult to miss. The fallacy of the stolen concept occurs when one makes use of a concept while denying or ignoring its genetic roots. An obvious example would be when someone affirms the validity of geometry while insisting that numbers are meaningless. As a mathematical science, geometry assumes that numbers are conceptually valid, that numbers have meaning. But how could something which assumes the meaningfulness of numbers be valid if numbers really are meaningless? One of the primary genetic roots, then, of the concept 'geometry' is the validity of numbers. So the fallacy of the stolen concept occurs if we make use of the concept 'geometry' while denying the meaningfulness of numbers.

Other clearly detectable examples of the fallacy of the stolen concept which may be encountered in the theist-atheist debate would include the following:

- **“Consciousness does not exist, and here's why I think that”**: This statement commits the fallacy of the stolen concept because it assumes the actuality of thinking while denying consciousness, the faculty one needs in order to think in the first place. In fact, the fallacy occurs in two distinct ways. It occurs conceptually, because the concept 'consciousness' is a conceptual root of the concept 'to think', and yet it is being denied in the statement. It also occurs genetically, for the faculty of consciousness is the genetic root of the act of thinking.
- **“Your consciousness is invalid unless you believe that God exists”**: This statement obviously commits the fallacy of the stolen concept because it requires that one perform a conscious function (believing) in order to validate one's consciousness. But if one's consciousness is invalid to begin with, how could he use it to believe anything? And if he accepts the premise that the use of his consciousness is required in order to validate it, how could any believe he holds be true? Blank out. Just by perceiving any object, one's consciousness is a fact. This is why Objectivism holds that the validity of consciousness is axiomatic. Any view which denies this ends up committing the fallacy of the stolen concept.
- **“Existence cannot be ultimate for it is an impersonal starting point, and the impersonal cannot account for the personal”**: One who affirms this kind of statement has a very poor understanding of why knowledge requires a starting point, and seems to think that the undesirable consequences of a certain position are sufficient to invalidate that position. The only alternative to existence is non-existence, but the proponent of the view expressed here wants to posit something that exists prior to existence, one answering to the descriptor “personal.” What is essential to “personal” if not conscious activity? Thus the view affirmed here seeks to place consciousness prior to existence, alleging that this consciousness “accounts for” existence as such. This view clearly commits the fallacy of the stolen concept by affirming consciousness before or outside

existence, which is a contradiction in terms. It affirms the existence of a consciousness, and yet it affirms this existence “prior to existence.” The result is conceptually absurd, and yet it is on this basis that some would label contrary views absurd.

Most commonly accepted instances of stolen concepts, however, are not so obvious or easily identified, at least to those who have little understanding of the nature of abstractions and the process of conceptual reduction. On this point I’m in deep agreement with Peikoff when he writes:

The reason stolen concepts are so prevalent is that most people (and most philosophers) have no idea of the “roots” of a concept. In practice, they treat every concept as a primary, i.e., as a first-level abstraction; thus they tear the concept from any place in a hierarchy and thereby detach it from reality. Thereafter, its use is governed by caprice or unthinking habit, with no objective guidelines for the mind to follow. The result is confusion, contradiction, and the conversion of language into verbiage. (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, p. 136.)

Knowledge is conceptual in nature, and concepts are formed ultimately on the basis of perceptual input, or on the basis of previously formed concepts (which were formed ultimately on the basis of perceptual input). Knowledge is thus hierarchical: higher levels of knowledge rest on the truth of lower levels of knowledge. For instance, the mathematical science of geometry depends on the truth of basic number theory. Without basic number theory, there could be no science of geometry. One commits the fallacy of the stolen concept, then, if, for example, he affirms the validity of geometry as a mathematical science, but denies the truth of basic number theory. How could the calculation of the volume of a cone, for instance, be intelligible if the units of measure represented numerically could not figure in that calculation, because their quantification was impossible? Blank out.

So how does Christianity commit the fallacy of the stolen concept then? Obviously, it does not explicitly affirm a higher level abstraction (such as geometry) while explicitly denying its genetic roots (like basic number theory). Or does it? Numerous Objectivist philosophers have pointed that Christianity does in fact commit the fallacy of the stolen concept at the most fundamental level of cognition. However, it may not be so readily apparent to thinkers who are unfamiliar with the kind of error that makes stolen concepts fallacious.

Even broader than simply Christianity, theism in general commits the fallacy of the stolen concept by reversing the proper orientation of the subject-object relationship. It must be borne in mind that, since consciousness is consciousness of something, a subject by virtue of its nature qua subject presupposes the existence of some object(s) for it to be aware of. Theism commits the fallacy of the stolen concept by granting metaphysical primacy to the subject in the subject-object relationship. It does this most explicitly in its notion of a god, but it does this elsewhere as well. In terms of essentials, Christianity’s notion of a god amounts to affirming consciousness prior to any independently existing objects. Taking into consideration its full implications, Christianity basically asserts the existence of consciousness without anything to be conscious of, which is a contradiction in terms. In the actual world (as opposed to the [imaginary realm](#) of the theistic believer), the objects of consciousness hold metaphysical primacy over the subject of consciousness: objects are what they are independent of any consciousness which perceives or considers them. All rational activity presupposes this orientation in the subject-object relationship, and rational philosophy is firmly and explicitly built on this fundamental premise. To deny it is to affirm the reality of consciousness while denying its inherent need for objects to complete the relationship which distinguishes conscious experience from other phenomena.

The Christian god is said to be a conscious being which created the universe by an act of will. In other words, it [wished](#), and this caused the universe of objects to come into being. On this view, the universe, defined as the sum totality of everything that exists, is a creation of consciousness. The consciousness in question here is clearly thought to hold metaphysical primacy over everything else. Christianity’s assumption of the primacy of consciousness is unmistakable. It’s also inexcusable. The primacy of consciousness means the primacy of the subject in the subject-object relationship. On such a paradigm, the objects conform to the subject, for the subject holds metaphysical primacy over its objects. This is the opposite of the principle of objectivity; in fact, it is the very essence of subjectivism, and Christianity’s embrace of subjectivism is explicit. (See for instance my blog [Confessions of a Vantillian Subjectivist](#).)

The very notion of a bodiless consciousness commits the fallacy of the stolen concept by affirming consciousness while denying the biological processes which make consciousness possible. While the ancient primitives who first imagined a deity beyond the objects they perceived, lacked any scientific understanding of the brain, the nervous system, the organs of the senses, etc., which make consciousness possible in biological organisms, today’s theists do not have this excuse. When this fact is pointed out, theists often try to challenge it by insisting that the non-believer prove that consciousness is strictly biological. This maneuver, however, misses several important

points. For one, it fails to take into account that all demonstrable examples of consciousness found in reality belong to biological organisms, be they cats, fish, horses, deer, orangutans, or human beings. Also, it fails to take into account how one forms the concept 'consciousness' in the first place. It is not up to the non-believer to prove that there can be no such thing as a consciousness without some biological organism which can host it. Rather, it is up to the asserter of such a view to explain how the concept 'consciousness' can be formed so as to allow for such assertions. For instance, what units does the believer discover and integrate into his concept of consciousness such that it allows for such notions? (The same type of error is found in attempts to evade the primacy of existence principle by allowing that existence may hold in the case of human consciousness, while affirming the existence of some non-human consciousness to which objects conform; for more on this, see my blog [The Axioms and the Primacy of Existence](#).) And how does he distinguish what he calls a consciousness without a body from something he is simply imagining? Typically defenders of theism never consider these kinds of questions, let alone have ready answers to them. Instead, their goal is to deflect such considerations by insisting that the burden of proof is on those who do not accept their unsupported claims in the first place. So much effort can be found on the part of theists to cover their commitment to stolen concepts.

Christian apologists commit the fallacy of the stolen concept when they claim that their epistemological starting point is "the Word of God," i.e., the entirety of the bible. For instance, Bahnsen asserts that "the true starting point of thought cannot be other than God and His revealed word" (Bahnsen, *Always Ready*, p. 73) Elsewhere he asserts that "God's mind is epistemologically the standard of truth - thus being the 'ultimate' starting point." (Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 100n.33) But none of this is conceptually irreducible.

To say that "God" is one's proper epistemological starting point likewise commits the fallacy of the stolen concept, for - because even according to Christianity itself, it is supposed to be imperceptible - it could not (even if we supposed it exists) number among the objects of which man is aware directly. Even if the believer claims that we all know his god directly (following Rom. 1:18f), he cannot identify any objective means by which one could have awareness of his god, let alone explain how one can reliably distinguish between what he calls "God" and what he may simply be [imagining](#). If the believer says "God exists" is his starting point, we simply ask where he got the concept 'exists'. He must have already formed this concept in order to apply it to his god, thus indicating that he in fact does have knowledge that is even more fundamental than his claim that his god exists. As Porter rightly points out, "anybody can deny the validity of 'God', but nobody can deny the validity of 'existence'." (*Ayn Rand's Theory of Knowledge*, p. 176) As far as fundamentality is concerned, the Christian notion of god, for instance, is so packed with notions and assumptions that it could not possibly constitute a conceptually irreducible primary. What is "God"? According to Christianity, it is, along with many other things, the creator of the universe, the uncaused cause, a trinity, a sovereign being worthy of man's devotion and sacrifice, the controller of history, etc., etc. None of these roles, descriptors or definitions are conceptually irreducible, and yet they are all supposedly needed in order to know what the Christian god is and to affirm its existence.

Moreover, the bible, beginning with the first verse of the first chapter of the book of Genesis and ending with the last verse of the last chapter of the book of Revelation, is an enormous sum of mystical stories, genealogies, accounts, hymns, poetry, letters, etc. The claim that the bible (either in part or in toto) is true, rests on many prior assumptions, and errs by failing to recognize the hierarchical structure of knowledge. Like other pieces of literature, the bible is composed of a long series of statements and propositions, each of which in turn is itself composed of a string of concepts. There are very few axiomatic concepts in human thought; the rest are definable in terms of prior concepts. This is particularly the case with the higher abstractions. In other words, most concepts, because they can (and must) be defined in terms of prior concepts (concepts resting on lower tiers of the knowledge hierarchy), are reducible to other concepts. And if concepts are not irreducible, then surely the statements and propositions consisting of such concepts are not irreducible. Even more, a chapter in a book which is constituted by a string of propositions, is far from conceptually irreducible. So the bible (i.e., "God's word") is not conceptually irreducible, and thus could not be one's starting point. To call it one's starting point is to deny the entire conceptual strata assumed by the thousands of concepts which make up its content, which means: such a claim commits the fallacy of the stolen concept. It would be better if the believer sit down and honestly think about what his true starting point might be. But apologetics provides a mechanism by which his true starting point will forever remain obscured to him. This is why presuppositionalism is such a farce: rather than identifying one's philosophical fundamentals in a clear, concise and explicit manner, the presuppositional apologetic shrouds its underlying assumptions in a haze of verbiage, subterfuge and gimmickry, while demanding that any rival position satisfy challenges which the Christian worldview could never attempt to tackle without tacitly borrowing from fundamentally anti-Christian perspectives about the world.

The idea that the bible is the proper epistemological starting point isn't even really biblical. The bible itself never enumerates which books properly belong within it, nor does it come out and say that it should be one's starting

point. On the contrary, the bible is explicit on what should be one's starting point. According to Proverbs 1:7, fear is "the beginning of knowledge." But this constitutes yet another stolen concept, for it seeks to place an emotion prior to any knowledge, and yet emotions presuppose at least some knowledge. If X is one's starting point to knowledge, then X could not assume knowledge prior to itself. But how could one have fear of something and not have at least some knowledge to give that fear its content? Indeed, if one can validly say that "the fear of God is the beginning of knowledge," one could with equal validity say that "the love for Blarke is the beginning of knowledge." Both are "equally valid" because both equally lack any objective basis and both turn the knowledge hierarchy on its head. Either way you slice it, fear is certainly not man's epistemological starting point. Perception is, and those who contest this fact simply mire themselves down in a flood of stolen concepts.

Believers witnessing for their faith commit the fallacy of the stolen concept quite regularly without realizing it. Take for example the claim "God exists whether anyone believes it or not." One will see this kind of claim (in various renditions) in encounters with defenders of the religious worldview quite frequently. Without realizing it, the religious witness making this kind of claim is making use of the primacy of existence, the principle which recognizes the fact that reality exists independent of consciousness, that things are what they are regardless of thoughts, wishes, ignorance, emotions, memories, etc. And yet this principle is being applied to religious claims which assert the existence of a consciousness which allegedly has precisely the very power that is denied to every other consciousness. On the Christian view, there exists a supernatural being whose consciousness has the power to create, shape and revise anything in reality. Bahnsen makes this unmistakably clear: "The believer understands that truth fundamentally is whatever conforms to the mind of God" (*Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 163). "God is the creator of every fact," says Van Til (*Christian Theistic Evidences*, p. 88; quoted in Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, p. 378.) If one affirms that truth is "whatever conforms to the mind of God," and "God is the creator of every fact," this can only mean that he cannot consistently hold to the fundamental principle underlying the claim that something is the case "whether anyone believes it or not." For he has made allowance for the primacy of the subject in the subject-object relationship by affirming a consciousness with abilities that no consciousness we find in the world possesses. Such a being would enjoy precisely the exact opposite orientation between itself as a subject and anything in its awareness that man and other biological organisms have. So the witness is borrowing a principle that is fundamentally alien to the worldview he proclaims in order to defend it. This can only mean that it is indefensible on its own terms. It constitutes a stolen concept because he enlists the help of a position (the primacy of existence) to defend a position which fundamentally denies that position (by affirming the primacy of consciousness).

### Intellectual Parasitism

Now the cultural borrowings mentioned at the beginning of this blog are components of Christianity's parasitic campaign of intellectual assimilation. Christianity's goal of mass assimilation is the cultural outworking of its ethics of the unearned, which has its primary locus at the level of the individual. In Christianity's moral theory, the believer is expected to accept unearned guilt (which he "inherited" from the original transgressors Adam and Eve by virtue of being born human) and to prize unearned forgiveness ("mercy" in the form of the "free gift" of "salvation" and "redemption", neither of which he can "earn" through his own effort or on his own merit). By granting justification to the pursuit and acceptance of the unearned in morality, Christianity has no principle basis for restraining new iterations of this vice in other areas of human endeavor. Given its self-righteous claim to the unearned, Christianity's lust for cultural assimilation is inevitable.

On the broader societal level, Christianity seeks to absorb entire cultures as well as individual minds or souls. Its appetite for assimilation is insatiable as it creates in its leaders a hunger to devour both achievers and their achievements, using underachievers and non-achievers as their instruments. Those who resist Christianity are to be destroyed, typically by turning them into non-persons through personal demoralization and public character assassination (burning at the stake is no longer allowed in the west), while those achievements which challenge Christianity's doctrines must be reinterpreted so as to neutralize their damaging effect, or stigmatized through repetitive castigation (consider how vocal Christianity's defenders are in reaction to the scientific theory of evolution). When Christianity moves into a new populace (think of Vladimir I's autocratic baptismal of Kievan Rus in 988 AD), rival religious traditions are the first to be absorbed, because this netted the largest numbers of a culture's population. An entire culture can be a tempting catch - and also a handy tool - for enterprising fishermen. In just two or three generations, entire traditions could be recast with Christian accoutrements, and the new generation, having never clearly understood the original meaning of the assimilated tradition in the first place, accepted the traditions in their new Christian guise as originally Christian. For instance, in Europe Christianity absorbed pagan traditions like Yule, while effacing the personalities and lore associated with those traditions and replacing them with its own, such as the nativity scene inspired by the gospel stories.

In modern apologetics, Christianity's compulsion for cultural assimilation has created entire crusades to assimilate all of academia, to convert entire university faculties as well as their subject matter, teachers and students from their secular basis to a specifically Christian monstrosity. They focus on the humanities, the philosophy departments particularly, but by no means exclusively. Van Til made this ambition crystal clear when he announced:

Why am I so much interested in the foundations of science? It is (a) because with [Abraham] Kuyper I believe that God requires of us that we claim every realm of being for him, and (b) because with Kuyper I believe that unless we press the crown rights of our King in every realm we shall not long retain them in any realm. (*The Defense of the Faith*, 1st ed., pp. 279-280; quoted in Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 26.)

For Van Til, it's all or nothing, and his worldview guarantees him that the ends justify the means. Non-Christians do all the enterprising work, the experimenting, the analyzing, the fact-checking, the risk-taking, the heavy-lifting, etc., and Christians come along afterwards, survey the results through the filter of their arbitrary religious views, and claim them on behalf of the magic kingdom. You almost expect them to show up on horseback in plate armor. That was how it happened in the olden days, before the Declaration of Independence. Today they serve up a piping hot dish of circuitous casuistry, sophisticated fallacies, deceptive tactics, and the promulgation of divisionary prejudices all found throughout a vast and growing apologetics literature that is prone to repeating itself over and over and over again (as if by ceaselessly chanting a mantra, one will eventually begin to believe it). In many cases one will find an attempt to make the achievements of men appear possible only on the basis of Christian theism in the first place. Often the attempt is as simplistic as mere association. Isaac Newton, for instance, was a professing Christian; because of this his achievements in mathematics and science are thought by many to be logically related to Christian teaching somehow.

Is this an unfair assessment? Not at all. Apologist John Frame also openly admits the intellectual grand larceny which he promotes as an integral part of the Christian worldview:

On the basis of Christian theism, we can use the knowledge discovered by unbelieving scientists, while observing the problems into which their unbelief has led them. (*Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*, p. 335)

Since Christianity represents a full assault on reason and man's intellect, its adherents have no choice but to look to the achievements of non-Christian thinkers. They certainly have no intellectual claim to scientific achievements, this much is clear. Science is strictly a this-worldly concern, and Christianity teaches its adherents to put their heart in a magic kingdom beyond the grave and not to be concerned with the cares of this world. Even in the case of scientists, for instance, who profess faith in the Christian god, any achievements they may make in the field of science are made in spite of their Christian beliefs, not because of them. This is because Christian beliefs, as we have seen, are integrally mired in stolen concepts and other conceptual errors which inhibit the mind in its pursuit of knowledge and truth. It is only by compartmentalizing religious beliefs so as to segregate them from one's activities in the real world, that these scientists are able to do anything, even drive an automobile.

Frame makes it clear that, so long as the believer can benefit from "the knowledge discovered by unbelieving scientists," that knowledge is useful to the believer. And that's fine as far as it goes. But if the believer should make use of that knowledge, he is compelled by his confessional commitment to discredit its source. Making use of such knowledge demands of the believer a colossal feat of compartmentalization, for now he must rationalize his use of knowledge while maintaining that the method by which it was acquired - cf. "the wisdom of this world [which] is foolishness with God" (I Cor. 3:19) and "hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (Col. 2:8) - is to be avoided for its satanic associations.

Notice how the pursuit of the unearned is intimately intertwined not only within presuppositionalism's methodology, but also in its ambitions. This is most clearly evident in presuppositionalism's deployment of pat slogans which are intended to bring any discussion with its opponents to a screeching halt. For instance, the presuppositionalist will claim that his god exists "because of the impossibility of the contrary." Does he ever establish this alleged "impossibility of the contrary"? No, he does not, but he insists that it be accepted as a justified premise within his "argument" for his god's existence. If the apologist himself believes it, he believes it for no clear reason.

The pursuit of the unearned is also evident in the emphasis on canned interrogative tactics rather than genuine

arguments. We've all seen them before. Apologists will bully their opponents with questions like "how do you account for universal statements when you have only a finite mind?" or "how do you account for immaterial entities in a material-only worldview?" The goal of posing a series of questions and challenges to the non-believer in rapid-fire succession, as many presuppositionalists are wont to do, is not to acquire new knowledge from the non-believer; the presuppositionalist has already concluded that the non-believer is incapable of acquiring and validating knowledge in the first place. The apologist dispenses his playbook of readymade questions and over-worn challenges for the purpose of alleviating himself of his burden to defend his god-belief claims in any cogent manner and overwhelming his non-believing opponent with fabricated burdens which are specifically intended to be unanswerable, even though it is typically the apologist who wants the non-believer to accept Christianity's religious claims, and not the other way around. The effect of all this suggests that the apologist hopes to break the non-believer down in the interest of extracting the confession "[Duh, I donno, must be God did it!](#)"

All these are expressions of the Christian's love affair with the unearned. The non-believer is expected to accept unearned burdens (e.g., he may not identify himself as a "materialist" but the apologist insists that he defend materialism nonetheless), while believers reserve for themselves a free, undeserved pass when it comes to substantiating their bizarre and otherworldly claims. Surprisingly, it really irks them when their gimmicks are exposed.

Frequently, however, when some of the more astute apologists do try to contrive arguments for the existence of their god, we are presented with a swarm of issues that are so complex and full of subtle ambiguities that most people couldn't follow them very well at all, let alone be persuaded by them that a god exists. The average pew-sitter, for instance, surely did not convert to Christianity because he is convinced that Christianity's conception of a triune god somehow solves the problem of universals. Such arguments are ultimately intended to bamboozle by means of bewilderment, hoping to exploit the non-believer by steamrolling him with the impression that the apologist is so intelligent that he must be right. (The use of Latinate phrases is a favorite device for this.) The apologist appears to be presenting what looks like a logical case, but upon deeper examination his premises point to nothing. It is all part of an elaborate bluff designed to shield the apologist's own evasions from detection and exposure. It seeks to do this by putting the non-believer on the run, pressuring him psychologically either to renounce his non-belief, or flee from the apologist in defeat. More often than not, however, it is the apologist who flees the debate, particularly when he finds a non-believer who's happy to engage him and examine any argument (or pseudo-argument) he might present on behalf of his god-belief. When the slogans and jargon fail to cast their spell on spoilsport atheists, the apologist typically grows frustrated, either lashing out with condescending invectives, or abandoning the discussion altogether so that he can seek out other fish that will be easier to catch in his flimsy net.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [assimilation](#), [pursuit of the unearned](#), [stolen concepts](#)

*posted by Bahnsen Burner at [6:00 AM](#)*

#### 7 Comments:

[Keith](#) said...

Your best one yet - and I've read nearly all of them.

Regards,  
-K

[June 14, 2008 12:48 PM](#)

[Robert\\_B](#) said...

Greetings Dawson:

Recently I had a message exchange with a Christian. I made the following argument, and he responded with the italicized comment.

1. To believe that a theistic creator deity exists and is responsible for reality, the believer must imagine their deity was in some timeless fashion akin to "before" existence alone in a timeless, non-spatial, void without anything. That is alone as a consciousness, conscious of nothing or only itself without time, space, energy, location, dimensions, fields, concepts, knowledge, symbols, perceptions, physical natural law, logic or matter. Believers imagine that their deity was a primordial, immaterial, non-spatial, consciousness that wished existence to instantiate.
2. Consciousness is an irreducible primary.
3. Consciousness at the most common denominative rung on the ladder of complexity consists of awareness of existence.
4. Consciousness of consciousness necessarily requires primary consciousness to first obtain as awareness of existence.
5. Prior to existence there could not have been anything to be aware of.
6. Without anything to be aware of, there could not have been any awareness.
7. Without awareness there could not have been any consciousness.
8. From 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 there could not have been a primordial consciousness prior to existence.
9. Creator gods are defined as primordial consciousness.
10. From 8 and 9 Creator gods cannot exist.

Following are the Christians comments.

*my point is 1) I can have the capacity to be aware of things without actually being aware of anything.*

*We need to make a distinction here:*

*A) Consciousness is having the capacity to be aware of things and*

*B) Consciousness is being aware of things. You sound like you accept B. I accept A.*

*And my second point is 2) Even if B were true, God could be aware of himself. One can be introspectively aware of themselves, their feelings, their thoughts, their character, etc. There is no contradiction there.*

*And my third point 3) Even if B were true, God the Father could be aware of God the Son. ...snip...*

In responding to this person, I pointed out that all the standard definitions of consciousness easily found online either directly assert or presuppose consciousness is awareness. I wrote a very lame reply in addition to the dictionary reference.

"To be conscious is to be aware of external reality. Meta-consciousness necessarily must rest upon a foundation of awareness of reality. If there is no reality, there can be no consciousness. The fallacy you are making is know as asserting the primacy of consciousness."

I then referred the person to Anton Thorn's "Metaphysical Primacy of Existence" essay.

My point in all of this is to ask how an objectivist may most correctly respond to those who assert consciousness can be something other than awareness of existence? Such assertions are the foundation of primacy of consciousness thinking. I suspect you've written on this subject many times, which of your past essays would you recommend to educated the interested reader on how to respond to Christians such as the person I recently corresponded with?

[June 19, 2008 10:33 AM](#)

[Robert\\_B](#) said...

When the Christian wrote:

"I can have the capacity to be aware of things without actually being aware of anything."

I should have responded that when an organism is unconscious due to anesthesia, illness, or injury, it still has its sensory organs, but it is still unaware of existence when it is unconscious. This is consistent with consciousness being awareness of existence.

A thought experiment wherein I am surgically altered by having my several sensory cortices removed. In that state my sensory organs would still be functional, but I would be completely deprived of sensory input. In that case, I would still be alive and conscious. The reason for my continued consciousness would be that I am a biological being. My brain that hosts me as a living process would still be in existence despite the surgical alteration. My consciousness is dependent upon the existence of my brain. If my brain is sufficiently damaged or destroyed, the neural process that is me will cease, and I will no longer exist.

The objection that "have the capacity to be aware of things without actually being aware of anything." has no merit regarding the question of a disembodied and immaterial primordial consciousness because such a fantasy would have no physicality or sensory perception.

The Christian's second objection that

"Consciousness is having the capacity to be aware of things" has no weight because sensory perception alone has no capacity to be aware. Senses report perceptions to the consciousness, but senses are not in themselves conscious. My biological consciousness is a very complex gestalt of many cerebral systems working together. Separated from each other, my neural systems would not be conscious in and of themselves. The Christian's assertion is an example of the stolen concept. He asserted the concept of consciousness and attributed it to something that cannot be conscious. Meanwhile he denied that consciousness, to be conscious, must be aware of existence.

The Christian's third objection gets to the meat of his obstinate refusal to acknowledge reality. He wrote:

"God could be aware of himself. One can be introspectively aware of themselves, their feelings, their thoughts, their character, etc. There is no contradiction there."

This is a further example of the stolen concept because it, as Dawson's argument cinches it,

"The very notion of a bodiless consciousness commits the fallacy of the stolen concept by affirming consciousness while denying the biological processes which make consciousness possible."

A disembodied mind would not be like my thought experiment above. There is no physical reality in which a mental process can operate in this fantasy scenario. With no mental content, no sensory perception, no awareness, no physical reality how could there be a consciousness? (Rand was fond of saying "blank out" at places such as this. I'm torn between honoring her memory by doing likewise or saying something else.) The solution for the Christian was to steal the concept of existence, ascribe it to his fantasy, deny existence has always existed and call it "There is no contradiction there."

His fourth objection to consciousness is awareness entailed bleating about "God the Father could be aware of God the Son...".

This is just a multiplication of his third stolen concept applied to the doctrine of the trinity. For the same reasons this assertion is likewise a fallacy. But the trinity is itself an additional fallacy. I wrote to the Christian about the trinity this:

"To trinitarian Christians, God the Father is not at all a separate god from God the Son and the Holy Spirit, the other divine persons. Trinitarian Christians describe these three persons as a Trinity. This means that they always exist as three distinct "persons" (Greek hypostases), but they are one God, each having full identity as God himself (a single "substance"), a single "divine nature" and power, and a single "divine will"."



This is absurd nonsense; it is a clear violation of the Law of Identity, A=A. One being, God-a single substance, cannot have three separate minds-centers of consciousness, nor can one being have three separate wills-centers of initiation of action. The doctrine of the Trinity is clearly impossible."

I should have elaborated by noting that Christianity commits a stolen concept fallacy by asserting the doctrine of the trinity. "One substance" is a stolen concept since the entity is said to be immaterial, non-corporeal, transcendent and supernatural. The later qualities all reject the idea of substance, for substance must be something physical.

The idea that the entity is of one substance and has multiple attributes is itself a stolen concept. By definition the god substance is perfect, implying unity of nature. To accredit multiple minds and wills with an infinite diversity of action to a unitary nature is to steal the concept of instantiation while denying physicality of that which is instantiated.

Thanks Dawson. Your essay here helped clear up some questions I had about these things.

Of late I've been attacking the Christian's personal religious experience. They believe because of what they mistakenly think is the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. If I can discredit that personal experience by showing how they are committing blasphemy, lying for their god, or expressing heresy, then I can write something like: "What your doing is not at all what would be expected if your religious experience were to be real. If there was an actual spiritual presence integrated into your central emotional-intellectual core , then it would influence you to not blaspheme, lie, or do heresy. But what your are doing is exactly what is expected if your religion was man made and the product of your imagination."

I know this will not cause the Christian to deconvert on the spot, but she will go away with some doubt. She'll go online and ask for advise from other Christians on some message board. They will respond and she'll feel better. She will go to Sunday school and talk about what was written to her, those folks will overplay their hands and she'll go away just a little bit more skeptical. An the next time she debates some infidel online, she'll be a little bit more likely to open her mind and give the counter apologetics credence.

Thanks for your blog Dawson. I'm learning some stuff.

[June 20, 2008 10:07 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hi Robert,

I enjoyed your initial comment here so much that I devoted a whole new blog entry to it. See here: [Dodging the Subject-Object Relationship](#).

I haven't reviewed your more recent comment yet, but hope to do so later today. Now it's off to do some errands and get ready for lunch.

Regards,  
Dawson

[June 21, 2008 10:12 AM](#)

[Glenn](#) said...

You appear to assume that there would be something illegitimate in a believer thinking that God was both subject and object, and that his being an object is logically prior to his being a subject, but that both are eternal.

You may have a reason for making this assumption, but that reason does not appear to have been spelt out. Would you care to elaborate? Thanks.

[July 05, 2008 5:08 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Hello Glenn,

Pardon my absence - I've been traveling on business this week. I've been slowly working on a response to your question, and it's gotten more involved than I had originally intended. I hope to be finished with it and will post it as a new blog article once it's ready. In the meantime, you might want to check out these two items, one from me:

[Dodging the Subject-Object Relationship](#)

and the other by Anton Thorn:

[Letter #6 to a Young Atheologist](#)

Thorn's article is really the first I've seen which delves into this matter. In his piece, he argues that the notion of a pre-creation deity, like the Christian god before "the beginning" we read about in the book of Genesis, cannot escape what he calls the fallacy of pure self-reference. I think this is an incontrovertible argument, and I've yet to see a sufficient theistic response to it. In my upcoming blog, I will review one attempt to overcome the basic problem which Thorn drags out into the light.

Until then...

Regards,  
Dawson

[July 10, 2008 8:25 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Glenn,

Okay, my blog is finished and was posted last night:

[Before the Beginning: The Problem of Divine Lonesomeness](#)

It's a bit of a longer read, so get a cup of coffee and a donut, and enjoy!

Let me know if you have any further questions.

Regards,  
Dawson

[July 12, 2008 9:18 AM](#)

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