

Theism and Subjective Metaphysics

Below I continue my examination of Paul Manata's [lengthy diatribe against me](#). In this post I will survey some of Paul's "more substantive" points which were intended to exonerate Christianity from the charge of subjectivism. Those who are familiar with my criticisms of Christianity already know that one of my primary contentions against any religious worldview is that it assumes a subjective metaphysics, particularly in its assertion of a supernatural subject to which the objects of the universe conform. Here we will see that efforts to overcome this criticism are doomed to failure.

I wrote:

I've seen many Objectivist assemble arguments against theism, many of them pointing to the metaphysical subjectivism inherent in theism as its own defeater.

Paul responded:

Ah yes, Dawson' (in)famous argument from metaphysical subjectivism. Let's address it. Bethrick wants to capitalize on the common undersanding people have of "subjectivism." Sometimes it's taken to mean "relativism." Now, if reality were dependant on multiple human minds, then we'd have relativism.

It is important to understand the distinction and relationship of the various types of subjectivism. In his lecture series *The Primacy of Consciousness Versus the Objectivist Ethics*, Bernstein identifies three general categories of primacy of consciousness. They are the personal, the social, and the cosmic or supernatural. The personal primacy of consciousness holds that reality conforms to one's own conscious druthers. This is the orientation assumed by the solipsist. (But see also: [Confessions of a Vantillian Subjectivist](#).)

The social primacy of consciousness is the subjectivism of the collectivist. He holds the view that reality conforms to the consciousnesses of a group of individuals, whether it is all human beings or some subset of them, such as a race, or those sharing a certain belief system (cf. "the elect," etc.). The cosmic or supernatural primacy of consciousness is the subjectivism assumed by religious god-belief. On this view, man's mind is essentially impotent, unable to do anything by itself. But a supernatural personality, which according to the believer's imagination exists beyond the universe, is omnipotent, and reality conforms to its every whim (only the believer typically prefers to call it a "plan" or some other term to give it some implication of principle and structure). All three share the same basic essential: the primacy of consciousness. All three are invalid for the same reason, namely that they reverse the proper orientation between subject and object.

Of course, either view is held by an individual, and as such, the personal primacy of consciousness is always implied to some degree. In the case of the social or cosmic primacy of consciousness, for instance, the view held by the individual essentially says that reality conforms to collective or supernatural will *because he wants it to*. This is why it is important to ask apologists who become frustrated with non-believers in the midst of debate, whether or not they think we should believer their religious claims on their say so. Typically they will deny that this is what they expect, and hasten to replace their own say so with what they say belongs to their god: "No, don't believe because I say so, believe because God says so!" This simply removes the issue back one step as the believer tries to disguise his assumption of the personal primacy of consciousness with the authority of an imaginary deity.

Then Paul conceded that the theistic view of reality is ultimately subjective:

But in theism, there's a sense in which reality is subjective - based on the divine mind

What more need I say? Paul has finally come to admit that the theistic view of reality is subjective in nature. Note how obvious an error it is to assume that "reality is... based on [a] mind." Is that mind not also supposed to be real? If so, then how can reality be based on it? If not, then how can reality be based on it? Either way, the theist comes up all blanks.

In spite of this admission, Paul wants to add a qualification to dilute it:

but it's still objective for us humans.

Qualifications like this simply demonstrate that theists have no consistent metaphysic to begin with. Paul is

essentially saying that reality is both subjective and objective, as if the orientation between subject and object could be redirected by the flipping of a switch, or as if one could strike a compromise between the two and integrate them into a non-contradictory worldview. The problem is that the assumption that the orientation between subject and object can be redirected at will itself reduces to subjectivism, and that subjective and objective metaphysics cannot be integrated without contradiction. What happens when one tries to mix food with poison? One can still swallow it, but it will no longer be fit for human life.

According to theism (as Paul has clearly admitted), reality is ultimately subjective, and that's all there is to say. It's not "objective" for anyone, for everything must ultimately conform to the dictates of a consciousness. Theistic creationism essentially teaches that the universe came into being as a result of supernatural wishing. You cannot get any more subjective than this. Any "objectivity" that the theist wants to claim, is borrowed from a rival worldview, one which holds diametrically opposite foundations and principles. And even within the Christian worldview, to whatever extent it might ostensibly seem to "make sense" to claim objectivity in regard to some method or assessment, it is always subject to being overturned by the whims of the ruling consciousness. Every believer can be made a liar by the turn of the deity's tail. Objectivity simply does not apply, for the preconditions of objectivity simply do not exist in such a universe. In theism, reality is comparable to silly putty: ever-pliant, conforming to whatever shape is desired. We should not forget the implications that metaphysical subjectivism has in epistemology. Knowledge on such a view ultimately reduces to sheer imagination. That is why tokens such as faith, prayer, belief unto salvation, et al., are so common in religious worldviews. They follow naturally from the subjective metaphysics of religious doctrines.

Paul writes:

There are some respects which reality is the product of human consciousness. For example, Dawson's mind causes blog posts to appear in the world.

This is so wrong-headed it's childish. My consciousness does not cause blog posts to appear in the world. My physical actions do. Without a functioning computer hooked up to the internet and without my fingers busily typing away and pointing and clicking hyperlinks, etc., I would not be able to post even one word on my blog. My mind does not put the blog on the internet, my actions, along with the electronic mechanics of my computer and www.blogger.com, do.

Just last week I was editing a post on blogger.com when a storm outside caused the power to fail temporarily. I lost the edits that I had been making. My wishing was not sufficient to prevent this, nor was my wishing able to restore those edits once the power came back on. If my consciousness causes posts to appear in the world, my wishing should have been sufficient to do all this. But reality does not conform to consciousness. On the contrary, to get the job done, I had to start over, physically going through each paragraph again to review what was written and make any edits that needed to be made.

Paul writes:

The meaning of these posts is dependant upon consciousness. No consciousness, no meaning. If meaning is real, then it is subject to the primacy of consciousness. If it's not real, then Bethrick lives in a relativistic universe. We make up our own meaning and there is no meaning that is the meaning.

This is quite convoluted. Meaning is the domain of concepts, and concepts are formed from objective inputs according to an objective method. Concepts are not formed by consciousness in an input-free void, without the benefit of objects which supply them with content. On the contrary, concepts are informed by the data we gather from the objects of our awareness. Consequently the meaning of any post is dependent on the subject-object relationship. This is why the principle of objectivity (i.e., *object* primacy) is so important. Without it, meaning would not be possible. Objectivity is the principle application of the primacy of existence metaphysics to knowledge and the choices we make. So contrary to what Paul insinuates, if meaning is real, it must depend on the primacy of existence orientation in the subject-object relationship. If consciousness did not have an object to consider and use as a guide for knowledge, there could be no meaning. Meaningfulness is not possible without both a subject *and an object*. In a theistic realm, meaning is ultimately subject to an invisible magic being's whims: its wants are the only standard, the only guide, the only criterion which generates and informs any meaning, to the degree that meaning is even possible at that point. This is quite ironic, for many Christian apologists often make the topic of "meaning" a debating point, insisting that there would be no meaning whatsoever if their invisible magic being did not exist. Ravi Zacharias, for instance, asserts that

In a world without God there is no essential meaning or sanctity to humanity. ([No Meaning from Matter](#))

Unfortunately for the theist, he cannot say that the meaning that his god allegedly creates is objective in character, for the objects on which it would base any meaning would themselves be meaningless creations. Granting the Christian mythology for argument's sake, the objects that the Christian god creates would be merely empty vessels whose identity would be assigned according to its pleasure (cf. Ps. 115:3) and revisable at will (cf. doctrine of miracles). Van Til confirms this explicitly:

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 accord 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 Protestant Doctrine of Scripture*, p. 57; quoted in Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 106)

So the things that the theist would claim as objects of his god's awareness, would not be objects as we know them. In the non-cartoon universe of atheism, the objects of our consciousness are what they are independent of consciousness, and the task of consciousness is to perceive them and identify their nature. But in the cartoon universe of theism, the objects of the Christian god's consciousness could not be said to be what they are independent of consciousness. Its consciousness creates its objects and assigns their nature by divine fiat (cf. Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 26). So there is no objectivity in the theistic worldview after all. All is subjective whim, all is arbitrary. Indeed, to call theism arbitrary is a redundancy.

Paul wrote:

The Christian position is that an eternally existing and conscious God creates everything distinct from him (including you, the universe, and me).

This reduces to the fallacy of pure self-reference. For details, see [here](#). Some apologists have suggested that the only way around this criticism is to compromise the doctrine of divine simplicity by asserting that the Christian god has "parts" which can serve as objects of its consciousness. Thus to overcome a fallacy, an arbitrary worldview will have to double cross some of its stated positions.

Paul wrote:

Note that this position entails that: [a] some existence is not the result of consciousness (since God does not create himself). Thus, the Christian position is not metaphysical subjectivism, the idea that all existence finds its source in a form of consciousness. [b] Our consciousness is a result of existence (God's existence), thus satisfying the central impulse of metaphysical objectivism.

Notice that Paul is trying (again!) to make Christianity square with the primacy of existence principle, while earlier [he argued](#) that it has no basis. Why would he now try to make his position cohere with something he earlier indicated to be baseless? At any rate, [a] simply concedes the whole shebang to Objectivism, for it acknowledges the inescapability of the primacy of existence. But [a] is not sufficient to rid a position of its metaphysical subjectivism. The metaphysical subjectivism is still there. According to Christianity, it's here with us, in the universe of finite objects, the created reality made of pliant silly putty, the cartoon universe in which "God controls whatsoever comes to pass." Christianity teaches that the whole universe was created by an act of divine will, i.e., that the entire universe finds its source in a form of consciousness, and that all the objects therein conform to its intentions. This teaching grants metaphysical primacy to the subject over its objects, and is thus sufficient to convict Christianity of metaphysical subjectivism. Contrary to what Paul insinuates here, a position does not need to affirm that "all existence finds its source in a form of consciousness" to commit itself to metaphysical subjectivism. A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump. The issue is the orientation between a subject and its objects. The assertion that any external object directly depends on and/or conforms to the will of a consciousness for its existence and or nature entails metaphysical subjectivism. This is all over Christianity. It can be found in Christian ontology (e.g., "creationism," "miracles," etc.), epistemology (e.g., faith in revelations), morality (e.g., divine commandments, pietism, self-denial and self-sacrifice, etc.), social theory (e.g., Christian collectivism, the "body of Christ," etc.).

[b] gives Christian teachings the short shrift by downplaying the divine sovereignty of the Christian god. The objects that the Christian god are not, according to Christian teaching, a result of merely the existence of said god, as if their creation were automatic, unintentional or accidental. Rather, Christianity holds that they are a deliberate result of its will, i.e., its conscious activity.

God's 'thought content' actively makes these things so (i.e., actively makes the truth). (Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 227n.152).

Accordingly, the Christian god wishes, and POOF! Whatever it wishes magically comes to pass. Then to make matters

even worse, once the Christian god got around to creating human beings, Christianity's doctrines can only mean that they are *puppets*, like characters in a cartoon, since "God controls whatsoever comes to pass." This same god

controls all events and outcomes (even those that come about by human choice and activity) and is far more capable and powerful than modern machines. (*Van Til's Apologetic*, p. 489n.43)

So [b] takes for granted something that is not logically compatible with Christian teaching, namely the assumption that human beings are actually conscious. On the contrary, according to what Christianity teaches, human beings are nothing more than mere puppets dangling on a string and being moved about to and fro according to an all-sovereign plan instigated by an all-sovereign invisible magic being long before they even existed. Puppets are not alive. They are not conscious organisms. Ironically, given its commitment to sheer determinism (which follows naturally from the primacy of consciousness metaphysics), Christianity's view of man cannot break past the gravitational pull of mere Hobbesian mechanism.

Additionally, [b] would also imply:

- 1) a lack of consistent metaphysics (Paul wants to flip-flop back and forth between the subjective and the objective orientation),
- 2) the inability of the Christian god serving as the standard of man's knowledge - for man's standard needs to be consistent with the nature of his consciousness and the orientation it has with its objects (see [here](#)), and
- 3) fatal implications for the notion that man was created in the image of this god viz. rationality, for man's rationality is premised on the primacy of existence, while the Christian god enjoys the primacy of consciousness.

Needless to say, Paul's defenses are falling down pretty hard. Let's see what else he said.

Paul wrote:

Since Christianity does not claim that all existence is the result of consciousness - because God doesn't create Himself, He's not a "result" - then Christianity claims that some existence is the result of consciousness.

If the Christian god did not create itself, then its nature is not something it ever intended. Its nature is a mere cosmic accident, a fluke, a product of chance. This is the implication of presuppositionalism's own kind of reasoning:

If the mind of God does not sovereignly determine the relationship of every event to every other event according to His wise plan, then the way things are in the world and what happens there are random and indeterminate. (Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 110n.64)

The gist of this kind of reasoning is clear enough: if something is not under the control of the Christian god, then it must be "random and indeterminate." Since, as Paul explicitly states, this same god did not create itself, its existence and the nature it has could not be a "result" of its own intentions. So it's "just by chance" that it is what it is. No overseeing consciousness can be said to have been responsible for ensuring the Christian god's nature is rational or coherent. The Christian doctrine of god falls by presuppositionalism's own sword.

Paul asked:

Now, does Bethrick hold to: (a) all existence is the result of a consciousness; (b) some existence is the result of consciousness, (c) no existence is the result of consciousness?

My view is that there is always a distinction between an object and the cognitive faculty by which one is aware of it. Cognition does not create the objects it perceives, nor does it dictate what their nature is. In other words, my worldview holds that the objects of cognition always hold metaphysical primacy over the subject of cognition. Hence "Objectivism." Christianity, however, gives us the notion of a god, "an isolation of actual characteristics of man combined with the projection of impossible, irrational characteristics which do not arise from reality - such as omnipotence and omniscience." (ITOE, p. 148) This being allegedly possesses a consciousness which has the power to wish entire universes into existence and manipulate the identity of any object it chooses. The result is a blurring between subject and object, a reversal of metaphysical primacy, and a worldview built on stolen concepts and choking in floating abstractions.

Paul writes:

If he holds to (a) then he's a metaphysical subjectivist. Christianity holds to (b) and since Bethrick thinks Christianity holds to metaphysical subjectivism Bethrick can't hold to (b). That leaves (c). Bethrick must maintain that no existence is the result of consciousness. So, since thoughts exist they must not be the result or creation of consciousness. So, we have eternally existing thoughts.

Again, my view is that the objects of consciousness are distinct from the process by which we are conscious of them, that the objects are what they are independent of consciousness, that our consciousness does not create its own objects but rather perceives and/or considers them. My position has been unflinchingly consistent on this: reality is not a creation of consciousness, nor does reality conform to the dictates of consciousness.

Paul somehow thinks that thoughts or ideas constitute a counter-example to this, but in fact they do not. Thinking is the action of a consciousness capable of conceptualized cognition. Since consciousness is an active faculty, no new existence is "created" when consciousness performs its functions. It is the nature of consciousness to act. When a man thinks, nothing new in the universe comes into existence. It simply doesn't work that way. His consciousness already existed, and he did not create his own consciousness by an act of his consciousness. Again, consciousness is axiomatic.

Paul asked:

Just how, exactly, does Bethrick's position deny "invisible magic beings?"

By consistently embracing the primacy of existence metaphysics and avoiding the fallacies inherent in believing that invisible magic beings and other constructs of the imagination are real.

We have seen time and time again that Paul's efforts to criticize my position continue to fail as he body-slams himself into the wall of rational philosophy. Full of self-inflicted cuts and bruises, he has been unable to cohere his god-belief with the primacy of existence, which we need as the basis of rationality. And he has been unable to undermine the primacy of existence as the foundation of a rational philosophy. Is this the best that presuppositionalism has to offer? If so, it's in big trouble.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [cartoon universe of theism](#), [Metaphysics](#), [Paul Manata](#), [Primacy of Existence](#)

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

1 Comments:

[Rich](#) said...

Again, very interesting. Thanks.

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