

## Objectivist Atheology<sup>1</sup>

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In this paper, I will examine the Objectivist case against the existence of God. When I say “the Objectivist case,” I mean the case made by Ayn Rand, as found in her own writings, and as explained and defended in the work of Leonard Peikoff. As Peikoff writes, “Every argument commonly offered for the notion of God leads to a contradiction of the axiomatic concepts of philosophy. At every point, the notion clashes with the facts of reality and with the preconditions of thought” (1991, 32). So the claims that seem to form the heart of the Objectivist case against God are that the notion of God clashes with (1) the preconditions of thought and (2) the facts of reality.

The first three sections of this paper take up the first claim. I will argue that belief in God simply does not clash with the preconditions of thought—even if we grant the Objectivist all of the preconditions she asks for. In the fourth section, after trying to specify just what it means to say that the notion of God clashes with the facts of reality, I argue that Objectivists have not shown that there is such a clash. The final section briefly considers a couple of projected objections to my arguments.

This paper does not aim to “refute” the Objectivist metaphysics. Even if it were granted that my arguments are wholly successful, Objectivism’s central axioms would remain altogether untouched, since the paper proceeds on the assumption that those axioms are true. (While in another context I might challenge certain Objectivist claims, I wish to avoid that as far as possible here.) Nor does the paper aim to demonstrate either that God exists, or that it is reasonable to believe that God exists.<sup>2</sup> I affirm both of these claims, but one needn’t affirm either to accept the arguments in this paper. What I

aim to show, rather, is simply that the Objectivist atheology is thoroughly insufficient as it stands.

## I

The central question in establishing whether the notion of God clashes with the preconditions of thought is whether theism involves accepting what Rand calls the primacy of consciousness, and rejecting what she calls the primacy of existence. (In the eyes of the Objectivist, showing that theism entails the primacy of consciousness is a sufficient refutation of theism, for the primacy of consciousness view is taken to be perhaps the gravest philosophical error [Rand 1982, 24].) A second question is whether the notion of God involves other incoherent ideas: whether, for example, the very notion of omnipotence violates any axioms or correlates of axioms. I will take up these questions in order. But before I consider whether the theist is committed to the primacy of consciousness, I first have to consider the notion of consciousness itself in Objectivist thought. Accordingly, section one will examine that notion. In section two, I will argue that theism entails neither acceptance of the primacy of consciousness nor rejection of the primacy of existence. In the third section, I will consider whether the supposed attributes of God are incoherent.

So we turn first to the relation of consciousness itself to theism. Here's part of what Peikoff calls Rand's crucial passage on the matter:

If nothing exists, there can be no consciousness: a consciousness with nothing to be conscious of is a contradiction in terms. A consciousness conscious of nothing but itself is a contradiction in terms: before it could identify itself as consciousness, it had to be conscious of something. (Rand 1957, 492; cited in Peikoff 1991, 6)

The first claim—if nothing exists, there can be no consciousness—taken in isolation, is obviously true. If nothing exists, then there is nothing, and, a fortiori, no consciousness. But what follows that first claim suggests that Rand isn't making the obviously true point that if nothing exists, then consciousness doesn't exist. What follows suggests that her point is that it is impossible that nothing *other than*

*consciousness* exists. I will grant that more substantive point, as well. So I shall accept, with Rand, that in order for there to be any consciousness, something must exist in addition to that consciousness.

Rand says that this follows from the fact that consciousness must have some object other than itself. But it follows from something else, as well—something that Rand, to my knowledge, doesn't take note of. She says that consciousness always has to be consciousness *of*. That's right. But there are two ways in which consciousness is consciousness *of*. It's consciousness of *some object* (the thing perceived). But it's also the consciousness *of* some object (the thing that *has* the consciousness—the conscious thing). She focuses on the former, but it seems to me the latter is really more fundamental.

Think about the nature of consciousness. Consciousness is not an entity: it's a faculty of an entity. It is not a substance like a human being: it is, instead, something that human beings (and perhaps other kinds of things) *have*. Like walking or digesting, consciousness "has no existence or possibility apart from the creature" that is conscious. (I take it that Rand would agree with the assertion, even though—again—this is not the reason she offers for asserting that it's impossible for consciousness alone to exist [cf. Peikoff 1991, 13].) That is to say, *of course*, you can't have a consciousness with nothing but itself to be conscious of: the existence of a consciousness—any consciousness—implies the existence of a thing that is conscious. Now, with that point made, one can easily see that any consciousness will necessarily have something other than itself to be conscious of: namely, at the very least, the *thing* that it is the consciousness of (the thing to which the consciousness belongs). The theist need have no problem with this, but can gladly grant that the existence of a Divine consciousness implies the existence of a Divine being, and that the Divine consciousness can therefore assuredly be conscious at least of God.<sup>3</sup> Thus, theism does not conflict with Rand's views on consciousness.

This point needs to be developed more fully, but I also need to consider a different interpretation of what Rand's point in the crucial passage may have been. Possibly, what Rand meant is that it is impossible for there to be a consciousness that is aware of nothing other than the thing to which it belongs. If this is what she meant to say, then my point above can't help the theist, because it's already

been ruled out by Rand. However, the claim is false, as I will now show.

Turn for a moment to St. Thomas Aquinas's view on the intellect.<sup>4</sup> He held that the human intellect can know itself only through reflection on its acts of knowing:

But as in this life our intellect has material and sensible things for its proper natural object, as stated above (I, 84, 7), it understands itself according as it is made actual by the species abstracted from sensible things, through the light of the active intellect, which not only actuates the intelligible things themselves, but also, by their instrumentality, actuates the passive intellect. Therefore the intellect knows itself not by its essence, but by its act. (Aquinas, I, 87, 1)

The thrust here is entirely consistent with Rand's thought: human consciousness is such that it needs to encounter some object(s) other than itself in order to be aware of *anything*, for it cannot know itself except through knowing sensible things. But this view is quite consistent with the possibility of the human knower knowing in the absence of any substance other than himself (if, per impossibile, such a situation were to arise). For he could see, say, his own hand, which would provide the sensible species for his intellect to act on. (And even if he couldn't see, because there was no light, he could sense his body in other ways than sight). This shows that it is not impossible for consciousness to know nothing except the thing to which it belongs.

It remains an open question whether this helps in the case of God. A fairly obvious distinction between God and a human knower is that God is supposed to lack a body, so he has no hand (or whatever) to become aware of. Without anything to sense, how can God become aware? The trouble with this kind of objection is that it ignores the most important point: the fact that God has no body *already* sharply distinguishes his mode of knowing from ours. Since it is not, and cannot be, part of the notion of God that he knows through sensation, this implies that his lack of a body wouldn't keep him from knowing himself: he would *have to* have other ways of knowing. But this doesn't mean that God (i.e., God's consciousness)

cannot be aware of God (i.e., the bearer of God's consciousness). It simply means the way of becoming aware is different: which is pretty much what you'd expect!

The Objectivist, to be sure, is not likely to be satisfied with this. Peikoff has insisted that the very notion of God as purely spiritual—a consciousness without a body—is incoherent. He writes:

“Spiritual” means pertaining to consciousness, and consciousness is a faculty of certain living organisms, their faculty of perceiving that which exists. A consciousness transcending nature would be a faculty transcending organism and object. So far from being all-knowing, such a thing would have neither means nor content of perception; it would be nonconscious. (1991, 32)

Certainly, Peikoff is correct in saying that our only direct experience of consciousness is of our own. It is quite true that we are living organisms, and our consciousness is a faculty we possess. It's also true that our consciousness is a faculty of perceiving that which exists. It is, however, indefensible to extrapolate from these facts to the impossibility of an analogous faculty of knowing existing in a non-bodily being. For while I grant (in fact, I insist) that *for human beings*, all knowledge originates in the senses, I do not grant that this licenses the inference that *all knowledge* originates in the senses.<sup>5</sup> If there were a good reason to think there is a non-physical, yet intelligent, being, then there would be good reason to think that not all consciousness is necessarily just like ours in its method of acquiring knowledge. Thinking of a consciousness that is not exactly like ours does not clash with the preconditions of thought: there is nothing self-defeating or contradictory about it.

Perhaps I am too hasty. Peikoff writes: “[I]f knowledge does rest on sensory data, then it does so *necessarily*, and again no alternative can even be imagined, not if one keeps in mind the identity of all the relevant entities and processes” (27). But this passage only supports my case. Provided we keep in mind the identity of the relevant entities and processes, what we can conclude from our knowledge of our own cognition is that *human* knowledge necessarily rests on sensory data. This provides no argument to the conclusion that no

consciousness of any kind could possibly rest on a different kind of data.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Rand's description of the "Conceptual Common Denominator" (a term of art that she deploys in her theory of concepts) of the concept of consciousness is that it involves two aspects: "the content of awareness, and the action of consciousness in regard to that content"(1990, 30).<sup>7</sup> This conceptual common denominator can clearly be applied to God's consciousness: God is aware of things (initially, perhaps, just himself), and his awareness is an act—*pure* act, in fact. It is not at all clear, then, why God could not be conscious, and yet have a consciousness that rests on a different kind of data—say, data drawn from his faculty of omniscience—than our consciousness rests on. The considerations Peikoff offers against the possibility of a conscious non-physical being are flawed. So as a disproof of God, the considerations fail.

Thus far, I have shown that the very nature of consciousness itself does not rule out God's existence: that there is nothing contradictory in the notion of God existing and knowing himself in the absence of any *other* objects. This is not even close to showing that the existence of God doesn't entail the primacy of consciousness, however. I turn to that next.

## II

The canonical formulation of the primacy of consciousness is that "the universe has no independent existence, that it is the product of a consciousness (either human or divine or both)" (Rand 1982, 24). Here is a vital preliminary question to ask about this claim: what does "universe" refer to?

Rand says that the primacy of consciousness is the "reversal" of the primacy of existence, which "is the axiom that existence exists, i.e., that the universe exists independent of consciousness (of *any* consciousness), that things are what they are, that they possess a specific nature, an *identity*" (24).<sup>8</sup> It is clear that when Rand speaks of the universe, she is speaking of *anything* that exists. For this is all she can get from the axiom that existence exists: that anything that exists, exists independent of consciousness, is what it is, and possesses a specific nature. Peikoff says with admirable clarity: "This axiom does not tell us anything about the nature of existents; it merely underscores the fact that they exist" (1991, 4). Rand herself writes: "The

concept ‘existence’ does not indicate what existents it subsumes: it merely underscores the primary fact that they *exist*” (1990, 59).<sup>9</sup>

Despite these assurances, it seems on occasion that Rand and Peikoff want to deny the possibility of there being certain kinds of objects, based directly on this notion of existence. For example, Peikoff says:

What is meant by “the supernatural”? Supposedly, a realm that transcends nature. What is nature? Nature is existence—the sum of that which is. It is usually called “nature” when we think of it as a system of interconnected, interacting entities governed by law. So “nature” really means the universe of entities acting and interacting in accordance with their identities. What then is “super-nature”? Something beyond the universe, beyond entities, beyond identity. It would have to be: a form of existence beyond existence—a kind of entity beyond anything man knows about entities—a something which contradicts everything man knows about the identity of that which is. In short, a contradiction of every metaphysical essential.<sup>10</sup> (in Binswanger 1986, 490)

One gleans from this passage the very strong sense that Peikoff wants to cast any thought of a non-physical being into the outer darkness.<sup>11</sup> But this passage is far too quick on the draw. Consider, for example, Rand’s contention that “Reality is that which exists; the unreal does not exist” (Rand 1957, 943). But theists think supernatural beings are real, which just is to say they think they exist. That is, the supernatural realm isn’t “beyond existence,” according to those who believe in it: it exists just as truly as the dogs and cows around us. Peikoff says that Objectivists “reject every ‘spiritual’ dimension, force, Form, Idea, entity, power or whatnot *alleged to transcend existence*” (1991, 33; my emphasis). Theists can give their hearty “amen” to this, since God is not thought to “transcend existence” but to *exist*.<sup>12</sup>

As a theist, then, I do not recognize the “super-nature” that Peikoff talks about as having anything to do with my own beliefs. I believe in supernatural things. And what I mean when I say that is that I believe *they exist*—and that they do have their own natures—and that they do interact with the things of the world. In short, it

would be quite accurate to describe the supernatural entities I believe in as forming a part of a universe of entities acting and interacting in accordance with their identities. So, speaking in Rand's terms, they are indeed parts of the universe, and not supernatural at all. As such, my belief in them does not (so far) commit me to a rejection of the primacy of existence.

Look at the axiom again: it is the claim that "existence exists, i.e., that the universe exists independent of consciousness (of *any* consciousness), that things are what they are, that they possess a specific nature, an *identity*." The acceptance of supernatural beings—properly understood—does not commit one to the rejection of the claims that things are what they are, or that they have a specific nature. Nor does it commit one to the idea that there are nonexistent objects. So far, theism and the primacy of existence go together perfectly well. The sticking point will seem to be with the claim that the universe exists independent of any consciousness. So what I argue next is that theism does not conflict with this claim either. I do so by means of a thought experiment.

Imagine you are a theist of a relatively orthodox bent. So you think that God—as conceived of by such paradigmatic theistic philosophers as St. Thomas Aquinas—exists. You also think that God's free creation of the world has not been going on for an infinite duration: there was, so to speak, a "first moment" of creation, perhaps fifteen billion years ago.<sup>13</sup> Now consider God "prior" to the creation of the world. There was just Him. And he was conscious, of course. His being conscious implies what most theists would assert anyway, which is that he existed, and was self-identical. Most importantly, it is part of this theistic picture that God absolutely was *not* a creation of himself. This picture entirely eschews the notion that God's consciousness preexisted God's being, or that God's consciousness is responsible for bringing about God's being. God's consciousness is in no way prior to his being.

According to what we've already said about the term "the universe," it is clear that at this point, the universe consisted solely of God. And God, according to our experiment, is necessarily conscious. But this doesn't violate the axiom of the primacy of existence, for on this picture, the being of God is clearly independent of the consciousness of God, in the relevant sense. That is, the sense of

“independence” in question here is *causal* independence, as Rand’s definition of the primacy of consciousness makes clear. Look at that again: “the universe has no independent existence, that it is the *product of a consciousness* (either human or divine or both)” (my emphasis). But God’s being is not the product of any consciousness, including his own. So asserting that God exists—once we’re clear about what that means—is not at all tantamount to accepting the primacy of consciousness and is, in fact, perfectly consistent with asserting the primacy of existence, for, *in the relevant sense*, God’s existence is independent of his consciousness.<sup>14</sup> There is no hint, in this experiment, that God’s consciousness produces, or in any way determines, God’s being.

Notice that this thought experiment certainly does not “Reify the Zero,” a move which Rand considered fallacious. She says that it “consists of regarding ‘nothing’ as a *thing*, as a special, different kind of *existent*” (1990, 60). I am in no way reifying zero. I am reifying God, who I am describing, accurately (given the supposition the experiment asks you to make), as the *whole* of existence, and *not* as nonexistent. Further, notice that in this thought experiment I am not running afoul of Peikoff’s dictum that “Fantasy is not a form of cognition” (“The Analytic-Synthetic Dichotomy,” in Rand 1990, 116). I am not trying to prove anything whatsoever about the way the world is. I am responding to Peikoff’s conceptual claim in the only way such a claim can be responded to: namely, by showing that there is no conceptual problem after all. Peikoff’s claim, because of the kind of claim it is, has to be rebutted via thought experiment.

Now, Rand strongly distinguishes the “man-made”—that is, anything that is the product of volition—from the “metaphysically given.” She writes:

[N]ature, i.e., the universe as a whole, cannot be created or annihilated, . . . cannot come into or go out of existence. . . . Nature is the *metaphysically given*—i.e., the nature of nature is outside the power of any volition. . . . The metaphysically given is, was, will be, and had to be. Nothing made by man *had to be*: it was made by choice. . . . Any natural phenomenon, i.e., any event which occurs without human participation, is the metaphysically given, and could not have occurred

differently or failed to occur; any phenomenon involving human action is the man-made, and could have been different. (Rand 1982, 25–29)

This distinction between the metaphysically given and the man-made helps draw out two further consequences of the thought experiment above. First, the theist asserts that, of course, God's existence is metaphysically given. As we just saw, Rand insists on the point that the universe as a whole—i.e., the metaphysically given—cannot be either created or destroyed. The theist agrees, for the universe as a whole contains (and at one point consisted solely of) God, who cannot be created or destroyed.

Second, remember that in our experiment, we said that God freely created the (rest of the) universe.<sup>15</sup> So, according to this picture, the (rest of the) universe is not metaphysically given, but is rather the product of volition. It's not man-made, of course. But it is based on the exercise of volition: it's "person-made." This is a vital point. In the thought experiment, there is no violation of the primacy of existence, for the things the theist says exist because of consciousness (namely, the whole universe except God) *are* the results of consciousness: recognizing what *is*, in fact, person-made as dependent on a consciousness simply isn't a violation of the primacy of existence or an endorsement of the primacy of consciousness.

Note further that once the (rest of the) universe is here, we cannot pretend it is not here, or that it is not what it is. That is, the things that God has made are what they are, and possess a specific identity. It is no part of orthodox natural theology to suggest that things have no natures. Indeed, the medieval Catholic doctors, nearly to a man, were tremendously strong essentialists. This brings us to a vital point. In Aquinas, among others, we find a deep concord with Rand's philosophy. The latter, of course, utterly rejected the "epistemological corollary" of the primacy of consciousness—namely, the view that "man gains knowledge of reality by looking inward (either at his own consciousness or at the revelations it receives from another, superior consciousness)" (24). But so did the former. Nothing could be further from the mind of a philosopher such as St. Thomas than this epistemological claim. Aquinas believes that knowledge comes through the senses, and that the proper object of

the human intellect is the essences of material things. He holds that the world is intelligible, and that we gain knowledge of it by looking out at it. In short, he unhesitatingly endorses what Rand calls the epistemological corollary of the primacy of existence, which is the claim that “consciousness is the faculty of perceiving that which exists —and that man gains knowledge of reality by looking outward” (24). But his epistemological view fits perfectly with his metaphysical view: since God makes beings *with natures of their own*, the way for us to learn about things (including God) is to look outward at the things God made. Things are what they are; they reveal what they are through their activities; and we come to know them through our senses.<sup>16</sup>

This point is worth lingering on. It is vital to see that the fact that an object is person-made rather than metaphysically given doesn't strip it of its intrinsic nature. This can be shown quite convincingly. Consider: my children are man-made. This, Objectivists have to affirm simply in virtue of the definition of the man-made, together with the fact that there were free choices involved in the production of my children. (Because the examples used in the Objectivist literature of man-made facts tend to be quite different from the one I am using here, I do not know whether the point that my children are man-made is likely to be controversial among Objectivists, or accepted as obvious. Thus, I insert the following brief argument to explain why I insist on the point.) Peikoff writes: “fact is ‘necessary’ if its nonexistence would involve a contradiction. . . . Given the nature of existence, this is the status of every (metaphysically given) fact” (1991, 24). But clearly, that I have children is something *chosen* by me (and by my wife). My having no children is not at all contradictory. Thus, my children are not necessary, which is to say they are not metaphysically given. They exist due to volition: they are man-made.

But being man-made isn't something special about my children. *All* human beings exist as the result of choices made by other people —all except the first human being, that is. That first human (or the first group of humans, if more than one appeared at roughly the same time) wasn't man-made, since she could not possibly have been the result of volition: there were no earlier humans that played a part in producing her. So her existence was necessary. But her children were man-made, since they were the product of her volition.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, if we line this first person up with any other people, we would

not be able to discern *any* difference between her and the rest of the people in the line. Indeed, there would *be* no intrinsic difference. And yet this first person was (speaking from Rand's perspective) metaphysically given, while none of the others is. The natures are identical, regardless of whether they are person-made or metaphysically given.<sup>18</sup> For precisely this reason, I say that the mere fact that the (rest of the) universe is person-made rather than metaphysically given tells us nothing about whether it is arbitrary or natureless. Once it exists, like anything else, it is what it is.

Further, while it may be self-evident that existence exists, the preceding argument shows that it is *not* self-evident whether any particular object is metaphysically given or man-made. We simply can't tell, by examining our line of people, which one is the metaphysically given one: being metaphysically given doesn't confer a special glow to an object. This truth holds just as surely when we talk about the (rest of the) universe as a whole, as when we talk about our line of people. The (rest of the) universe has no special glow that tells us for sure that it's metaphysically given. Thus, by affirming that the (rest of the) universe is person-made, the theist doesn't deny any self-evident truths.

Even if all that I've said so far is granted, one might think theism still entails the primacy of consciousness because the theist asserts that God creates the (rest of the) universe through some mental act. In other words, it may appear that theists must endorse a claim condemned by Objectivists—namely, that “the function of consciousness is not perception, but creation of that which is” (18). So the fact that God creates the (rest of the) universe might be held to be sufficient for theism to entail the primacy of consciousness. I have been taking it that the Objectivist's most serious objection against theism is that theism entails that God creates *all* existence, and I have shown the error in this objection. But now the claim I am considering is that it is equally incoherent to suggest that God can create *any* existence. That this is an error can be shown in two ways.

First, as I argued above, those things that are, in fact, the product of volition *do* depend causally on consciousness for their existence. My children, because they are man-made, depend on my consciousness for their existence. When I affirm this, I do not commit myself to the primacy of consciousness. Similarly, one does not necessarily

accept the primacy of consciousness in affirming that God creates. Of course, one might point out that I did not create my children *ex nihilo*, as God is said to have done with the (rest of the) universe: I create my children, perhaps, but not the matter from which they are made. This is indeed an important difference between my powers to create, and God's alleged power to create. But *if* there is a problem for the theist here, it is with the notion of creation *ex nihilo*, and not with the idea that some things depend on God for their existence. The claim that creation *ex nihilo* is incoherent is a different objection than the claim that theism entails the primacy of consciousness. In this section, I'm concerned only with the latter objection. (I'll briefly discuss the former in the next section.)

Second, and more fundamentally, the challenge rests on a confusion—essentially the same confusion that we considered at the end of section I. The confusion is in the supposition that creation is an *act of consciousness*. This, I deny. When an artist plans out a painting and then paints it, there are clearly conscious acts involved in this production. But the “creation” of the painting is not an act of consciousness. It's an act of the agent—the painter—which involves his consciousness and many of his other faculties, such as his sense perception and his fine motor skills. Similarly, creation *ex nihilo* is thought to be an act of the Divine agent. Affirming creation *ex nihilo* is no more to affirm that God's consciousness made the (rest of the) universe than affirming that Raphael painted “The School of Athens” is to affirm that Raphael's consciousness painted “The School of Athens.” *Raphael* paints, and *God*, according to the theist, creates. Both are conscious beings. Both use their consciousness in performing any volitional act. And in neither case is there any violation of the primacy of existence.

Some may imagine that this whole section has been one long example of the fallacy of “rewriting reality.” Those who commit this fallacy “regard metaphysically given facts as nonabsolute and, therefore, feel free to imagine an alternative to them” (27). There are two problems with this charge. First, as I pointed out in response to the suggestion that my thought experiment uses fantasy as a form of cognition, the fact is that Peikoff and Rand have made claims about the coherence of certain ideas. To demonstrate that their conceptual claims are false, I clearly have to resort to thought experiment (short

of producing God himself, which would settle the issue much more quickly). Second, and more importantly, what is under dispute here is the question of *what counts* as metaphysically given. For Rand or Peikoff to insist that the material universe is metaphysically given, and that anyone who suggests otherwise is rewriting reality, is for them to beg the question in a particularly obvious way. It does not follow from the primacy of existence that the (rest of the) universe is metaphysically given, so they do not get a free pass to decree that it is.

The claim that the (rest of the) universe is created by God simply does not violate the primacy of existence. Correspondingly, the claim that God exists does not entail the primacy of consciousness. This is the most important step in the argument of this paper, and it has, I think, been adequately demonstrated. But, of course, that doesn't show yet that theism doesn't violate *any* of the preconditions of thought.

### III

So far, I've argued that the notion of God does not conflict with one precondition of thought—the axiom that existence exists, and the attending doctrine of the primacy of existence. But Peikoff alleges other serious problems for the notion of God—other places where accepting this notion violates the preconditions of thought. In this section, I will quickly run through these alleged problems. Please keep in mind the vital point that I am not trying to show that the theistic replies I give are compelling. I am only trying to show that there is not the kind of incoherence in these notions that Objectivists say there is—or at least that they haven't shown that there is any incoherence in the notions. Whether there's any reason at all to accept the alternatives I offer is a further question, and one that I ask you to put on the back burner for now.

We have already covered one of the problems Objectivists urge against the notion of God—namely, the supposed problem with a conscious, yet non-physical being. So I will begin this section with the problem of miracles, about which Peikoff says: “A miracle is an action not possible to the entities involved by their nature; it would be a violation of identity” (32). It is far from clear, however, that this characterization of the miraculous is the right way to go. To take one famous example of an alleged miracle, consider the case of Shadrach,

Mesach and Abednego in the fiery furnace of King Nebuchadnezzar, as recounted in Daniel 3. The three young men were cast into a furnace because they refused to worship Nebuchadnezzar's idol. The flames were so hot that they killed a number of the guards, but the young men emerged unscathed. Clearly, coming out of a fiery furnace unscathed is not possible to human beings by their nature. But why should we look to the *young men* for the causal explanation of the miracle? For example, if I can't throw a baseball 127 feet, three and 3/8 inches, then I can't possibly throw out a base runner trying to steal second from my position behind home plate. But for my Dad to grab the ball and throw it for me—while violating certain rules of baseball, no doubt—is no violation of the law of identity, even though it is surely unexpected. Similarly, in the furnace case, perhaps God erected a barrier around the young men that kept the flames, smoke and heat at bay. There is no violation of the law of identity here, although, of course, such intervention is quite unexpected.

Is God infinite? Peikoff argues that God can't be, because to say something is infinite is to say it has no determinate quantity, and a being of no determinate quantity is impossible. This is a puzzling saying, however, since the notion of quantity doesn't apply to God, who is, by hypothesis, non-physical, and thus non-extended. Francisco Suarez (2004, 16) explains:

We call this being infinite without any qualification, not in quantity of mass, but in excellence of perfection. . . . Hence, just as Augustine . . . says: "It is not one thing for God to be and another to be great, but for Him to be is the same as to be great," so we can say it is nothing else for God to be infinite than to be being itself, or being by essence, embracing in Himself whatever perfection can be possessed by any being.

I don't claim that by citing this venerable source, I have shown that this conception of infinity is coherent, or that it's the right one to use when one talks of God. All I claim to have shown is that Peikoff's argument fails. He has not shown that the notion of God violates the preconditions of thought on this score: he is saying that God cannot exemplify a form of infinity that theists never thought he

did exemplify.

The next supposed problem is with omnipotence. Peikoff says: “Nothing and no one can alter the metaphysically given” (1991, 31). This is true, of course, since we’re taking the metaphysically given to be necessary. But on the supposition of theism, as we’ve seen, the (rest of the) universe is *not* the metaphysically given. And even though its constituents have their own stable natures, and act according to them, God can intervene and—according to *his* own (free) nature—act in ways that “violate” the usual run of things.

Turning to the next item, Peikoff asks whether God is the designer of the universe, and answers “Not if A is A. The alternative to ‘design’ is not ‘chance.’ It is causality” (31). But this is confused. Causality is not an *alternative* to design. It is *presupposed* by the claim that God creates and designs. I don’t see any conceptual conflict here between Objectivist views and theistic views.<sup>19</sup>

The last item on our list is the notion of creation itself. Peikoff asks if God created the universe, and answers “Not if existence has primacy over consciousness” (31). I have already shown that this kind of claim rests on a confusion.

But this isn’t the only place in the Objectivist corpus where the question of creation arises. Rand (1982, 25) writes: “‘Creation’ does not (and metaphysically cannot) mean the power to bring something into existence out of nothing.” One would like to see a contention like this supported, rather than simply stated. The scholastics spilled much ink on the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, and if one wants to show that the notion is incoherent, one will need to deal with that literature.<sup>20</sup> A simple wave of the hand will not suffice. One might reply that the notion can be very easily shown to be incoherent. I suspect that was what Peikoff was doing when he wrote: “There can be no creation of something out of nothing. There is no nothing” (in Binswanger 1986, 187). True, there is no nothing. This is something the theist certainly agrees with, and, indeed, insists on. There is God—who is very decisively not nothing—and he creates everything *else* out of nothing. It seems to me that the only cogent objection to creation *ex nihilo* that could be framed on the basis of Objectivist principles is that the doctrine entails the primacy of consciousness. But we’ve already seen that it doesn’t.

This discussion has been quick, of course. I do not pretend to

have settled these issues definitively. Far from it. I hope, however, to have shown that the Objectivist claim that theism violates the preconditions of thought is not sufficiently established. Their arguments are generally launched against straw men, rather than against the best of what theists can offer in explanation of their views.

#### IV

Now we face the question of whether the notion of God violates the “facts of reality.” The question of this section is not whether the notion of God is incoherent. That question is, for now, behind us. I understand the claim that the notion of God violates the facts of reality to boil down to the claim that reality could not possibly give us any reason to affirm the existence of God, because it’s impossible to reason from the limited things around us to an infinite being. Here is an important passage:

Any attempt to defend or define the supernatural must necessarily collapse in fallacies. There is no logic that will lead one from the facts of this world to a realm contradicting them; there is no concept formed by observation of nature that will serve to characterize its antithesis. Inference from the natural can lead only to *more of the natural*, i.e., to limited, finite entities acting in accordance with their identities. Such entities do not fulfill the requirements of “God” or even of “poltergeist.” As far as reason and logic are concerned, existence exists, and *only* existence exists. (Peikoff 1991, 32)

In this passage, we have a number of claims mixed in together. Some of the claims have to do with what we’ve already discussed in earlier sections. The notion that supernatural beings would not act in accordance with their identities, for example, has already been shown to be false, as has the claim that the existence of the supernatural would violate the axiom that existence exists. If we strip the passage of such false claims, then what we’re left with, if I may paraphrase, is something like this:

Any attempt to defend or define the supernatural must necessarily collapse in fallacies. There is no logic that will

lead one from the facts of this world to a realm contradicting them. Inference from the natural can lead only to *more of the natural*, i.e., to limited, finite entities. Such entities do not fulfill the requirements of “God.”

Now, assuming that sections I through III have been marginally successful, such a claim can no longer be made so lightly. The “problem” is no longer that there is something incoherent in the notion of God. The “problem” now is said to be that there is no way to argue from limited beings to an infinite being. It is in this sense that I am interpreting the claim that the notion of a supernatural realm “contradicts the facts of the world.” So, again, I am not focusing on the alleged incoherence of the notion of the supernatural. I am, instead, focusing on the epistemological claim that reality could not possibly give us any reason to believe in God, because it’s impossible to reason from the limited things around us to an infinite being. This is the most charitable and straightforward interpretation of the relevant passages that I can muster.

The trouble with this claim, however, is that it has been the contention of every philosopher who ever defended any form of cosmological argument that one not only *can* make such a move, but one *ought to*. Just insisting that they’re all wrong is hardly satisfactory. So how does one evaluate the dueling claims of the Objectivists and the cosmological arguers? Well, if you’ve successfully shown that theism violates the preconditions of thought, then you can dismiss the claims made by cosmological arguers as patently false without bothering to take them seriously. But once that sort of a priori objection to cosmological arguments is lost—the objection being that they *have to be* in error somewhere because they lead to a conclusion that violates the preconditions of thought—then one has to take rather a more serious look at the arguments.<sup>21</sup> Objectivists cannot simply assert their side as though it were obviously true, especially since their dismissive approach to “the supernatural” is based on their persistent misrepresentations of what that realm is claimed to be. Further, they cannot simply insist that the (rest of the) universe needs—in fact, admits—no causal explanation on the grounds that it is metaphysically given, without blatantly begging the question against the theist. Still less can theistic claims simply be dismissed as

“arbitrary” (as defined by Peikoff in his 1991, 164), since theists, in fact, have a huge array of tremendously impressive arguments to muster in support of their position.

Theism is anything but arbitrary, even if there may be some theists who believe in God without the benefit of propositional evidence. So if we wish to evaluate whether the notion of God violates the facts of reality, in the sense in which I mean that, then we have to get into the business of carefully studying the theistic arguments and the atheistic counter-arguments.

## V

There are two objections that might immediately occur to Objectivists on reading what I’ve said in the previous sections. One is simply a mistake that I mention in hopes that I can prevent readers from making it. The other is a fair point that I need to address to close out the arguments of my paper. Let me start with the mistake.

Someone might think that I have been demanding that Objectivists take on the burden of proof in the discussion: that I am asking them to “prove a negative.” I hope, however, that it is clear I am not asking Objectivists to “prove that [theism] is not so” (cf. Peikoff 1991, 167–68). That’s not my point. I am saying, first, that the arguments they have in fact mustered to try to prove that God does not exist have failed, and second, that there are many interesting arguments in support of the claim that God exists—many reasons to think that it is reasonable to believe in God, many reasons to think that God exists. Objectivists have not, to my knowledge, seriously engaged this literature, perhaps because they think the case against God based on the primacy of existence is so compelling. Since I’ve shown that case is not compelling, I am further urging that Objectivists should engage the literature more carefully. I am not asking them to prove that God does not exist. I am only asking them to enter into a serious and respectful philosophical dialogue on the merit of the various theistic arguments. Asking an atheist to rebut seemingly strong arguments in support of theism is quite a different thing from asking the atheist to prove that atheism is true. I am doing only the former here.

Now I turn to a better objection. Some might say that the work of engaging these arguments has already been done, though not by

Rand and Peikoff themselves.<sup>22</sup> There are already lots of objections to the theistic arguments out there, and lots of ways to show that the very notion of God is incoherent—the objection goes—so even with the loss of the primacy of existence argument against God, we are still obliged to disbelieve (169). There is no way for me to really satisfactorily handle this objection, short of writing a book that attempts to rebut all the rebuttals. Such a book would not fit very comfortably within the confines of this paper. So I'll offer a less satisfying reply.

The fact is that some responses to theistic arguments that have been embraced by Objectivists are seriously confused or misleading. There are, for example, many gross errors in George Smith's book.<sup>23</sup> As I said above, I cannot demonstrate this point adequately without writing a very lengthy discourse on the matter, which I do not intend to do here. But I invite those who find it doubtful to investigate the claim on their own. There has been some excellent work done in natural theology since the time Smith's book was published.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, there have been much better and more responsible critiques of theism published since Smith's book was published.<sup>25</sup> See how Smith's work stacks up.

Objectivists who wish to continue to reject the proposition that God exists have an obligation to keep up with the best that can be said in defense of that proposition, lest they themselves fall into the realm of the arbitrary. They need to face the evidence squarely. Here, they may follow the lead of Rand herself, who in places clearly endorsed the importance of withholding judgment on issues one is not well-informed about. For example, she neither supported nor opposed the theory of evolution, since she wasn't "a student" of it (Rand 1982, 45). It would be very gratifying to see those who now carry on her work admitting that they are "not students" of the theistic arguments and counterarguments, and withholding their judgment on the question until they remedy that.

## **Conclusion**

Obviously, I have not shown—since I have not tried to show—that one can reasonably arrive at belief in the existence of God based on the facts of reality. Nor have I shown—since I have not tried to show—that Objectivists are wrong to say that one cannot reasonably arrive at such a belief. I take myself to have shown only that the

Objectivists have not adequately established their atheistic views. If they wish to do so, then there is more work for them ahead. If this paper has been successful, it will have been provocative enough to push Objectivists to reply.

## Notes

1. I thank an anonymous referee for this journal for helpful comments on this paper. I'm also grateful to Ashby Nixon, my student, whose questions prompted me to write this paper, and who read and commented on an early draft.

2. Still less do I try to defend any specifically religious beliefs in this paper. It should be obvious that accepting theism does not entail accepting any religion at all. (And, of course, one can be religious without believing that God exists.) Consequently, the question of whether the acceptance of some particular religious faith is compatible in any way with Objectivist principles falls outside the scope of this paper.

3. It may be thought that the doctrine of Divine Simplicity, endorsed by Aquinas, undermines this move. I doubt that, although I will not attempt to argue for my view here. I don't need to, since even if it were true that Divine Simplicity is inconsistent with what I said above, it would be no objection to my arguments in this paper. Many theists reject Divine Simplicity (cf. Plantinga 1980).

4. It is, I take it, well known that Objectivism is quite similar to Thomism in many respects, since both schools are strongly Aristotelian. The comparison of Rand's views on consciousness with the views of some Thomists has been drawn, for example, by George Smith in his 1991, 198–200. See also 191.

5. Naturally, much of our knowledge of ourselves is gained through reflection (or introspection), rather than through sensation. But what we reflect *on* is, first and foremost our acts of knowledge, which have as their proper object the essences of material things. We come to knowledge of our soul—that it is immaterial, for example—through understanding what it would have to be like in order to do what it does, and we “see” it doing what it does when we go about our lives.

6. Here is a similar objection. Smith writes:

[C]onsider what is entailed by knowledge. . . . [T]wo elements—acquisition and verification—are essential to the concept of knowledge as we understand it. Knowledge must come from somewhere, and it must be verified by some means. When the Christian claims that God is omniscient, however, he wishes to exclude acquisition and verification from God's knowledge. . . . But if this is the case . . . God's “knowledge” is totally different from man's knowledge. We are once again dealing with a difference in kind rather than degree. The “knowledge” of God is unintelligible and unknowable. (Smith 1979, 75–76)

In the present context, this objection has no force. (I do wish to stress that I have taken the objection out of its context. Smith did not present it as a way to prove that the notion of God violates the preconditions of thought. I am dealing with it here

because it is similar enough to what Peikoff has written on the matter that I think it deserves treatment.) First, the fact that God's knowledge would have to be different in kind from ours is no surprise to theists, and no problem. (It is for this reason that the medieval philosophers developed such careful theories of analogy. For a nice discussion of medieval thought on analogy, see Ashworth 2004. For a more contemporary consideration, see Ross 1981.) Second, even if it were either a surprise or a problem, it would be, at most, an epistemological problem. That is, even if we worry that God's "knowledge" is different in kind from human knowledge, and consequently unknowable, this simply gives us *no* reason to think such a thing is impossible. Should we believe there is non-embodied consciousness? That's one question. Is the very idea of a conscious, but non-embodied being incoherent? That's another question entirely, and it's the only question that matters at this point in the dialectic. And we have been given no reason to think the answer is in the affirmative.

7. Notice that there isn't any mention here of acquisition and verification.

8. Peikoff (1991, 19) says that the axiom of existence ("existence exists") is distinct from the primacy of existence, though the latter is implicit in the former. The above text doesn't seem to make that distinction, but I trust that Peikoff bases his claims on conversation with Rand.

9. On this point, it is also instructive to consult Rand 1990, 245–49.

10. There is a parallel passage in Peikoff 1991, 31.

11. I do not know of a better way to put this, although I worry that it is misleading, since Peikoff (1991, 33–36) seems to deny that human consciousness is physical. As such, he obviously doesn't reject the very notion of a non-physical thing (or, rather, faculty of a thing). But at any rate, he certainly rejects the notion of a purely non-physical being—for consciousness is inseparable from matter, and, he seems to think, may ultimately be reduced to it. So please understand that when I speak of Peikoff rejecting non-physical beings, I mean purely non-physical beings, such that they are not dependent on matter for their existence.

12. There are theists who will say things like "God is beyond existence," or other such puzzling things. There may or may not be some sense to this approach, but it is *not* part and parcel of theism. For a nice discussion of what it means to talk about God as subsistent existence, see Miller 2002.

13. I insert this condition to make the case as challenging to the theist as possible. One might, of course, be a theist and believe the material universe has always existed. (This claim does *not* conflict with the argument I present below in note 20, for reasons that aren't important enough for present purposes to go into.)

14. Allan Gotthelf (2000, 50) says that, on Rand's view, existence *precedes* consciousness. If that were true, and if the kind of precedence in question were temporal, then that would conflict with theism. However, as we just saw, Rand's own claim is not that there is temporal precedence. (Gotthelf doesn't speak of temporal precedence, either. He simply speaks of precedence, and I suspect he means ontological priority rather than temporal priority. But here, I'm simply reading that passage in the one way in which it might be taken as conflicting with what I've argued in the text.) And even if that were her claim, there is no good reason to think it is a true one. Why shouldn't existence and consciousness be co-eternal? Nothing in the Objectivist axioms rules that out, at any rate.

15. I will henceforth adopt the convention of referring to the created universe—the universe minus God—as the (rest of the) universe. This may be slightly annoying to the reader, and for that, I apologize. But it is vital to keep in mind that according to the picture under discussion here, God is the metaphysically given part of the universe, and thereby is part of the universe, but is importantly different from the rest of it.

16. For excellent presentations of Thomistic realism, one would be well advised to consult the work of Etienne Gilson, who very ably defended a position he called Methodical Realism through a long controversy in the 1930s. See his 1986 and 1990. I also find Wilhemsen 1956 very helpful.

17. Of course, if this first person conceived her children as a result of being forced into sex by a humanesque male that didn't yet have the human power of volition, then her children could conceivably be thought of as metaphysically given, like her, rather than man-made. But this is not relevant to the real point I'm making, which is not that there can be only one metaphysically given person, but that however many there may have been, they are not intrinsically different from the people who are man-made.

18. On Rand's views, natures are epistemological rather than metaphysical (Rand 1990, 52), so strictly speaking she may reject what I claim in the text, insisting that no two people share the *same* nature. Be that as it may, it seems obvious enough that the first person and later, man-made persons fall under the same concept. This is all my argument needs. It doesn't depend on interpreting natures in a realist manner.

19. Gottelf (2000, 49) discusses this briefly and makes the point more cogently than Peikoff had. He argues that the inference to design, based on a rejection of the possibility that the complex creatures around us arose by change, overlooks the alternative of their arising by nature. I think this is what Peikoff was trying to say, but said poorly. Still, there is no conflict between Gottelf's claims and those of the theist. The theist merely points out that things *having* such natures itself invites explanation. And even if the Objectivist thinks that trying to offer such an explanation is futile, the point for our purposes here is that saying that God creates beings with certain natures, and those beings then act in accordance with them, is in no way to deny causality or identity. Put another way: claiming God designed things here in the world is *not* incoherent. I'm not trying to show that the design argument is a good reason to believe in God. I'm simply showing that there is nothing in what Peikoff or Gottelf says that shows that the notion of God violates the preconditions of thought.

20. A good place to start would be with Francisco Suarez's "Disputation on Creation," found in his 2002. Not only does Suarez provide a clear argument in defense of the claim that creation is coherent, he also anticipates and responds to an objection that Objectivists actually raise—namely: Why not just start with the supposition that matter itself is uncreated? The first argument, in brief, is that action qua action does not imply a patient (a thing acted upon). Action qua action implies only the existence of an agent, and the existence of an effect. But this is compatible with creation *ex nihilo*, which admits both an agent (God) and an effect (what he creates). There is no patient (some preexisting matter) that God—like the Platonic demiurge—shapes into things. But it's no part of the concept of action that there

be a preexisting patient. So there's no incoherence.

The response to the objection runs like this (I quote Freddoso's explanation):

Suppose that matter is eternal and uncreated, having its existence *ex se*. Then as such it either lacks every form or has some form. Even though, given Suarez's own account of primary matter, the first alternative is possible, it is nevertheless highly improbable. [Aquinas would argue that the first alternative is not merely improbable, but impossible. I would agree with him, and I take it Objectivists would as well, since Suarez comes perilously close to affirming that unformed matter exists without being anything at all, and thus denying the axiom of identity. I don't think he actually denies it, since he believes there is some essence of matter in itself, but this is a dark saying at best.] But if the second alternative is true, then it is the whole matter/form composite that has its existence *ex se*—in which case the substance in question is incorruptible and, for this reason, its matter is incapable of entering as an essential component into the composition of other substances. One immediate consequence is that if all matter were formed from eternity, then the generation and corruption of genuine substances would be impossible. But generation and corruption is obviously possible. Therefore, it is not the case that matter has its existence *ex se*. (Suarez 2002, lxxv-lxxvi)

The argument relies on the Aristotelian account of substance, according to which no genuine substance (as opposed to a mere mixture to the senses, or aggregate) can have substances as parts. Rand doesn't seem to accept the Aristotelian account of substance presupposed in this argument, but she should accept it. (For an excellent presentation and defense of the Aristotelian theory of mixture, see Nys 1942, 161–262. I also defend the view in the context of contemporary debates in analytic metaphysics in Toner n.d. For Rand's view of substance, see Rand 1990, 264–74. She seems to think that substances can have substances as parts, although her view is not entirely clear to me.)

21. For a recent discussion of some relevant matters, see Pruss 2006.

22. Here I think in particular of George Smith's 1979. Scott Ryan, in his 2003, says that this book, though not part of the official Objectivist corpus, has long been loved by Objectivists, and might almost be counted as a primary source.

23. One such item, selected more or less at random, is Smith's gross misinterpretation of the teaching of St. Paul at Romans 3 (1979, 165). Smith charges St. Paul with advocating spreading the Gospel via dishonest means if necessary, when the passage makes it admirably clear that he completely repudiates such means. (This is why he says "their condemnation is just.")

24. I've already mentioned a few entrants into the philosophy of religion literature. Here are a few more: Swinburne 2004; Miller 1992; Craig 1979; Plantinga 1974; Alston 1991; Jordan 1994; and Plantinga 2000. This list could be extended to virtually any length, but I shall stop there.

25. Particularly, I am thinking of Sobel 2003.

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