

God and Objectivism: A Critique of Objectivist Philosophy of Religion

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Ayn Rand is well known for her atheism. Writing primarily from the 1930s through the 1970s, she expressed disdain for the whole concept of God, and of religion and the supernatural in general. This was in a manner consistent with the mainstream philosophy of the time. To be sure, much of the mainstream rejection of God was based on concepts like Logical Positivism, Linguistic Analysis, or Verificationism. Though Rand rejected these philosophies, and for good reasons, she agreed with them on the question of the lack of viability of theism.

An interesting development is that since that period, there has been a revival of philosophical interest in theism, and in philosophy of religion in general. Writes the atheist philosopher Quentin Smith:

The secularization of mainstream academia began to unravel quickly upon the publication of [Alvin] Plantinga's influential book on realist theism, *God and Other Minds*, in 1967.

Naturalists passively watched as realist versions of theism, most influenced by Plantinga's writings, began to sweep through the philosophical community, until today perhaps one-quarter or one-third of philosophy professors are theists, with most being orthodox Christians.

If each naturalist who does not specialize in the philosophy of religion . . . were locked in a room with theists who do

specialize in philosophy of religion, and if the ensuing debates were refereed by a naturalist who had a specialization in the philosophy of religion, the naturalist referee could at most hope the outcome would be “no definite conclusion can be drawn regarding the rationality of faith,” although I expect the most probable outcome is that the naturalist, wanting to be a fair and objective referee, would have to conclude that the theists definitely had the upper hand in every single argument or debate.¹ (Smith 2001, 196, 200)

To paraphrase Smith’s argument, philosophical theism has undergone a renaissance in recent decades. Much is being written on such subjects as arguments for the existence of God or the coherence of theism, and the quality of much of the writing is high.

Though Rand is not able to respond to such developments, her contemporary philosophical heirs are. How have they reacted to the resurrection of philosophical theism? It appears they have not reacted at all. Indeed, they hardly seem to be cognizant of these developments. For the most part, little seems to have changed within official or semi-official Objectivism. They raise the same old arguments, as though the issue had been settled long ago and the only remaining task is to repeat the arguments to a new audience. At least this seems to be the case with what they have published.

Of course, this does not necessarily show Objectivists do not have answers to contemporary arguments. One might argue that what they have written has demonstrated that theism is a corpse, and that no amount of contemporary philosophic theorizing can revive it. But even if this were true, it should be shown rather than merely assumed. To speak relevantly to contemporary philosophical trends, Objectivists need to keep up with what is going on in mainstream philosophy of religion.

In spite of Rand’s challenge to contemporary mainstream philosophy, metaphysically, Objectivism is a version of philosophical naturalism, a widely held view today. This philosophical position holds that the physical cosmos—atoms, molecules, stars and galaxies—is all that exists. It was famously summed up by Carl Sagan (1980, 4) when he wrote: “The Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be.”²

It is clear that Rand and Objectivists hold that the most fundamental reality is physical objects. For them to assert otherwise would be to embrace some form of dualism—perhaps substance dualism in the case of persons, which is something that Rand emphatically rejected. To be fair, Objectivists do not deny the existence and importance of “spiritual” qualities. Objectivists argue strongly against any sort of reductive materialism such as behaviorism or eliminativism. But, for Objectivists, material entities are the ultimate reality and conscious beings somehow supervene upon this underlying reality.³ Thus, the existence of any sort of supernatural entity, such as God, is ruled out.

I will examine what Objectivists, both old and new, have written about God and subject it to critical analysis. My conclusion will be that Objectivists have not only failed to keep up with the work of contemporary philosophers of religion, but that their work is marred by logical fallacies, especially begging the question. Philosophical naturalism is assumed rather than proved. Objectivists have failed to support the atheism Rand so vigorously espoused. Since Objectivists claim theirs is a philosophy of reason, the failure to support such a central tenet undermines the whole project of their philosophy. The rest of this paper will attempt to support these claims.

In this paper, I will concentrate on the God of classical theism, the God that most theistic philosophers in the Western tradition have supported, and the God that is worshiped in the Judeo-Christian tradition. However, Objectivists reject the notion of any supernatural god. For most purposes, this will not matter: many of the objections that have been lodged against the God of classical theism can be used against other god concepts. So, I will say God instead of god and mean the classical concept of deity, unless there is some relevant distinction to be made.

What is the basic case Rand and her followers use to argue against God? Rand argued there was no evidence for the existence of God; therefore one could only believe in his existence by “faith.” But theists cannot legitimately believe in God by “faith.” By “faith,” Rand meant arbitrary belief—a belief without warrant or justification. She also argued that the concept of God was incoherent, that is, that the idea of God was not a consistent one. Since nothing contradictory can exist, God cannot exist. Thus, according to Rand, not only is

there at present no successful argument for God's existence, there cannot be one. She claimed it was irrational and even immoral to believe in God.

Given the truth of these contentions, Rand's case against God would be conclusive, and today's Objectivists' restatement of the old arguments justified. After all, if one has demonstrated the falsity of some proposition *P* beyond doubt, there is generally no point in refuting those who assert that *P* must be true.

The contentions, however, are untrue. I will argue that Rand and other Objectivists have failed to show the concept of God is incoherent and failed to show there can be no sound argument for God's existence. To show this, I will first present a brief overview of the general situation and then go into a detailed point-by-point refutation of Objectivist arguments on theism.

The General Situation

One argument Objectivists have used against God is that God is supposed to be unknowable. Rand (1961, 149) herself wrote, "God is that which no human mind can know, they say—and proceed to demand that you consider it knowledge." Similarly, William Thomas (n.d.a.) asserts, "The supernatural is supposed to be beyond human comprehension, to exist in no particular way, to affect our reality miraculously, beyond all physical laws." Finally, Leonard Peikoff writes:

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 . . . (Peikoff 1976, lecture 2; excerpted in Binswanger 1986, 490)

And:

Existence exists, and only existence exists. Existence is a primary; it is uncreated, indestructible, eternal. So if you are to postulate something beyond existence—some supernatural realm—you must do it by openly defying reason, dispensing with definitions, proofs, arguments and saying flatly, “To hell with argument, I have faith.” (Peikoff 1976, lecture 2; excerpted in Binswanger 1986, 42)

There are two major points involved in the above statements. God, it alleges, is something that is by definition unknowable. The second point is that the reason God is unknowable is he is not part of “nature,” not governed by physical laws, and therefore something without identity. And, of course, something without identity cannot exist, which is why Peikoff states the supernatural would have to be existence beyond existence, a notion that has no meaning.

Regarding the first point, it should be noted that Rand, Thomas, and Peikoff do not cite anyone in reference to God and the supernatural as being unknowable. Rand, Thomas, and Peikoff seem to take this for granted, as if it were universally agreed upon. In truth, there are many who have taken this position. The Gnostics, Plotinus, and many mystics have held to this “concept” of God. In modern times, it still has defenders (see, for example, Clouser 1991, 180–95 and Messer 1993). I think the notion of an absolutely “unknowable God” (or anything else) is incoherent (Parrish 2001, 71–80). Indeed, I think it is an amazingly bad idea. But this is not the only God concept on the market. There are many theists or “supernaturalists” (God being the most important case of an alleged supernatural being) who do not think that concepts of God or of other supernatural objects are unknowable. This group includes such theists as Richard Swinburne (1991; 1993) and Alvin Plantinga (1980), for example. Among other things, God has been defined as being omnipotent (basically, being able to do everything logically possible compatible with his nature), omniscient (knowing the truth of all propositions), and necessary (existing in all possible worlds).

Of course, theists generally do not deny that God is incomprehensible: that he can never be completely comprehended and that there will always be things about him that we will never understand. But this is quite a different position from saying that God is com-

pletely unknowable.

So on the face of it, the Objectivists may have refuted one “concept” of God (if the idea that God is completely unknowable can be considered a concept), but not all concepts of God. In arguing that all theists hold to the concept of God’s unknowability, they are setting up a strawman. This brings us to the second point.

A Simple Argument

I will formally state a simple argument I think at least roughly captures the essence of Rand’s, Peikoff’s, and Thomas’s statements, to show their basic structure and aforementioned weakness:

- (1) The physical universe is all that exists, the interconnected reality of entities acting and interacting in accordance with their natures.
- (2) Any supernatural “entities” would have no identities and hence be “outside” of existence. What has no identity cannot be known.
- (3) Therefore, any supernatural entities would be nonexistent, have no natures or identities, and be unknowable. The whole concept is therefore impossible.

When using the word “Nature,” what Objectivists seem to have in mind is the physical cosmos or that which is studied by physics and the related sciences. Stated this way, there are a couple of ways a “supernaturalist” could respond. First, he should deny (1). Indeed, the supernaturalist has to deny (1), because if (1) is true his position is false. He needs to simply deny “Nature” is all there is, the only thing that exists. In the face of such denial, the whole argument collapses. In effect, by saying that Nature is all that exists, Objectivists are begging the question and dogmatically assuming the truth of their own naturalist position. The supernaturalist only need reject the dogma to debunk the argument. As we shall see, this question-begging kind of argument is used over and over again.

Also, the supernaturalist should deny (2), Thomas’s statement that there can be no supernatural because anything supernatural would be beyond physical laws and have no identity. How does he know, *a priori*, that there cannot be nonphysical laws or natures that govern the

activity of supernatural entities? If this is so, there is no reason *a priori* why a supernatural entity could not have a nature. Again, Objectivists are stating a position without argument, depending upon a premise their opponents need not and should not accept. This particular subject will be further discussed below.

What might Rand, Peikoff, and Thomas say in response to this counter-argument? What they would have to do is defend the premise (1). They would have to show Nature to be the only thing that exists. If they could do that, both the supernaturalist response to it and to (2) would fail. So now I will turn my attention to Peikoff's more extended critique of God, with some reference to other Objectivists. I will argue that they fail completely to support (1), or any other antitheistic argument.

In his work *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, Peikoff (1991) gives a series of brief arguments against the coherence of theism, and hence of rational belief in theism. He writes: "The idea of the 'supernatural' is an assault on everything man knows about reality. It is a contradiction of every essential of a rational metaphysics. It represents a rejection of the basic axioms of philosophy (or, in the case of primitive men, a failure to grasp them)" (31). Specifically, what errors do supernaturalists supposedly commit? The first is the concept of God as the Creator.

God as the Creator of the Universe

Peikoff asks: "Is God the creator of the universe? Not if existence has primacy over consciousness" (31). Earlier in the same book he writes:

The concept of "existence" is the widest of all concepts. It subsumes everything—every entity, action, attribute, relationship (including every state of consciousness)—everything which is, was, or will be. (5)

Therefore, "existence," at least in this context, encompasses everything that will ever exist. When Objectivists use the phrase "existence exists," what they are really saying is everything that does exist exists. This is unquestionably true, though being a tautology, it doesn't tell one much. Consciousness, on the other hand, is one of

the things that exist. Consciousness, for Objectivists, “is the faculty of perceiving that which exists” (Rand 1961, 124). We have here two foundational concepts: existence, which is shorthand for all that exists; and consciousness, which is the faculty by which human beings (and other sentient beings) perceive reality. It should be noted again, as Peikoff himself writes, that consciousness is one of the things that exist.

How does one, then, come to the argument that God cannot be the creator of the material universe if existence is prior to consciousness? Peikoff does not spell out his argument in any detail, but what follows is what I believe to have been his logic. Formally put, the argument might go like this:

- (4) Consciousness is the faculty by which sentient beings perceive reality—one cannot be conscious without being conscious of something.
- (5) Existence precedes consciousness. This is because existence could exist without consciousness and because consciousness is a form of existence. Finally, consciousness is the perception of other existing things and is therefore dependent upon them. The things perceived could exist without being perceived, but consciousness cannot exist without perceiving something.
- (6) Thus, consciousness perceives existence, it cannot create it.
- (7) God is conscious.
- (8) If God were the creator of existence, then consciousness, (i.e., God’s consciousness) would be the creator of existence, and thus precede existence.
- (9) But by (6), this is impossible.
- (10) So, God cannot be the creator of existence (i.e., the physical cosmos).

The division of reality between “existence” and “consciousness” makes the argument misleading. If I make a sandwich, it is not my consciousness that makes the sandwich but me, though of course my consciousness is an important component of the act. Similarly, if God created the universe, then it was not his consciousness that

created it, but rather God, including his consciousness (Nyquist 2001, 191). A theist does not have to say that “existence” is dependent upon consciousness, but rather on a being, God, who possesses consciousness. Peikoff begs the question by equating human consciousness with divine consciousness. Different types of consciousness have different abilities. Human beings can understand calculus or write music (some of them, anyway), while a frog’s or a cat’s consciousness does not allow them to do so. God is by definition a very different being than human beings; God’s consciousness is vastly greater than that of human beings. How can one know *a priori* that God does not have the ability to create things, parts of “existence,” *ex nihilo*? Does humans’ inability to create entities via their consciousness mean God is limited in the same way? To argue otherwise would be similar to saying that since cats cannot write symphonies, human beings must not be able to either. At the least, Peikoff must offer some argument to support his conclusion. Simply stating the position doesn’t do the job.

Finally, there is ambiguity in (7). God is defined as conscious, which is certainly true in the classical concept of God and many others. But there is a difference between *being conscious* and *consciousness*. Stating that God is conscious does not automatically commit one to the view that God is nothing more than consciousness (which in Peikoff’s terminology would mean that he is nothing but perceiving). This distinction has important consequences. For if consciousness is one of God’s attributes, then it cannot be ruled out *a priori* that he can create, on the basis that “existence” is ontologically prior to “consciousness.”

Rand herself made a similar but more detailed argument. She wrote:

The primacy of existence (of reality) 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*. The epistemological corollary is the axiom that consciousness is the faculty of perceiving that which exists—and that man gains knowledge of reality by looking outward. The rejection of these axioms represents a reversal: the primary of

consciousness—the notion that the universe has no independent existence, that it is the product of a consciousness (either human or divine or both). (“The Metaphysical versus the Man-Made,” in Rand 1982, 29)

Rand’s argument is also based on an ambiguity. Rand contrasts consciousness (perceiving existence) with the things perceived. She presents as a conceptual truth that perceiving is dependent upon the thing perceived. At the same time, however, she contrasts consciousness (being aware) with the nonconscious things one can be aware of. In this second sense, it is not a conceptual truth that entities that have awareness are dependent upon objects that cannot be aware. It is not true, as a matter of logic or definition, that the existence of nonconscious objects is ontologically independent of conscious ones. Physicalism has to be argued for and not just assumed. Rand’s argument depends upon conflating these two contrasts. Her argument depends upon an ambiguity, and is therefore fallacious.

Rand and Peikoff might reply that if there were no nonconscious objects, there could be no conscious ones, because to be conscious, one has to be conscious of something. Again, this begs the question. While it is true that to be conscious is to be conscious of something, this does not automatically mean that all conscious objects are ontologically subordinate to nonconscious ones. This is especially true regarding God. In the classical conception of God, he is eternally and essentially aware of everything, i.e., numbers, propositions, universals, the universe he created, the universes he could have created, and even in some sense the universes he could not create. Even had God not created any universe at all, there still would be plenty of “things” for him to be aware of.

Rand and Peikoff could object to this argument with the following line of reasoning: that the meaning of the word “universe” precludes the concept of a creator. Rand wrote:

To grasp the axiom that existence exists, means to grasp the fact that nature, i.e., the universe as a whole, cannot be created or annihilated, that it cannot come into or go out of existence. Whether its basic constituent elements are atoms, or subatomic particles, or yet some undiscovered forms of

energy, it is not ruled by a consciousness or by will or by chance, but by the Law of Identity. All the countless forms, motions, combinations and dissolutions of elements within the universe—from a floating speck of dust to the formation of a galaxy to the emergence of life—are caused and determined by the identities of the elements involved. Nature is the *metaphysically given*—i.e., the nature of nature is outside the power of any volition. (30)

Similarly, Peikoff writes: “The universe is the total of that which exists—not merely the earth or the stars of the galaxies, but everything. Obviously then there can be no such thing as the ‘cause’ of the universe” (Peikoff 1976, lecture 2; excerpted in Binswanger 1986, 517). We have already seen a similar argument involving the word “nature.”

There are a number of arguments involved in the above two quotations. One—that the universe and all of the objects in it are determined by the Law of Identity, will be considered in the next section. Here I want to discuss the claim that there can be no cause of the universe because the universe is the totality of that which exists. This is subject to a couple of interpretations.

If one defines the universe as the totality of that which exists, then obviously nothing can be the cause of it, because by definition nothing else exists that could cause it. The problem arises from the definition of the word “universe.” One can legitimately use the word “universe” in more than one way. One way is the way the Objectivists do. But another way to define the universe as the totality of interconnected physical objects that are subject (in some sense) to the laws of nature; or what I call the physical cosmos. Defined as such, if God existed, then he would not be part of the universe. It is the disparity between these two meanings that causes a problem here.

If the universe is to be defined as Rand and Peikoff do—as the totality of that which exists, then God cannot be the cause of the universe. But by this definition the point is of little interest. Based on this premise, God would either not exist or he would be part of the universe. Stated differently, if the Objectivists claim God cannot be the cause of the universe because the universe is the only thing that exists, and if they mean by “universe” the physical cosmos I men-

tioned above, they are begging the question. They are defining “universe” as both the physical cosmos and as the only thing that exists, in which case God is ruled out *a priori* simply by the definition given to the word “universe.”

On the other hand, if the word “universe” is simply shorthand for everything that exists, then there is no reason to say God does not exist. Rather, if he does exist, he is part of the universe. This definition gives no cause to deny that one part of the “universe,” i.e., God, is the cause of another part of the “universe,” i.e., the physical cosmos. Again, either both Rand and Peikoff are begging the question or their argument is irrelevant to the question of God’s creation of the physical cosmos. I am not here trying to prove that God did create the physical cosmos, just arguing that Objectivists have not shown that he has not.

David Kelley adds a different twist to the argument against God as creator of the physical cosmos. He writes that “there is no reason to think that the existence of this world requires an explanation by anything outside of itself. While individual things in the natural world come and go, as a result of specific causes within that world, it does not follow that the world itself must have a cause” (Kelley n.d.).

There are at least two problems with this argument. First, many have argued that contemporary science shows there was a beginning of the universe. If the universe had a beginning, then intuitively at least, it seems it must have had a cause. Some additional confusion surrounds Kelley’s statement. If I make a sandwich, or a bird makes a nest, or a mother gives birth to a daughter, then what happens is that some pre-existing materials are transformed by an agent into something else. For example, I take the bread and the peanut butter and transform them into a peanut butter sandwich. I am therefore the efficient cause of the sandwich.

But I do not cause the matter of which the sandwich is composed to come into existence, nor do I sustain it in its existence. Causation within the physical cosmos is really a form of transformation. An X causes a Y kind of thing to become a Z kind of thing. This transformation does not explain why the particular lump of matter, as differentiated from some material object composed of matter, which started out a Y and became a Z, exists or continues in existence. To explain this, one must either (a) posit a cause outside the physical

cosmos or conclude that things in the universe exist and continue to exist (b) for no reason at all or (c) necessarily. Or (d) one must say that some inanimate matter causes other inanimate matter to come into existence and remain in existence. But (d) reduces to either (b) or (c); (b) if the matter causes other matter to exist contingently, (c) if necessarily. Of these, I think only (c) is compatible with Objectivist commitments. I shall address this below. For now, let me merely point out that Kelley's response does not answer the argument that the physical cosmos must have had a cause.

Other problems with Rand's and other Objectivists' arguments in the passages above will be dealt with below.

God as Designer of the Universe

Let me move onto Peikoff's next point. This is "Is God the designer of the universe? Not if A is A . The alternative to 'design' is not 'chance.' It is causality" (Peikoff 1991, 31).

Again, Peikoff's position is stated very concisely, but this conciseness necessitates a thorough analysis.

Prima facie, Peikoff's statement about God as designer is puzzling. Why does thinking God is the designer of the universe contradict the axiom that A is A ? Suppose I design a machine. I would think of the plan, gather materials, and then put it together. In no way would I contradict A 's being A . So, why should God's designing do so? The answer I believe Peikoff would give is the following: If I built a machine, then I would not *give* the constituents of the machine their own natures. I would rather *use* their natures toward some desirable end.

In contradistinction, I think what Peikoff means is that for God to have been the designer of the universe, he would have to have given the basic entities their natures. He would most likely argue this to be a logical impossibility. For, to be given a nature, the entities concerned would have to exist. But, if they already had natures, they could not be given new ones. Peikoff would argue God could not, for example, change an electron into a proton, because that would be contradicting its nature as an electron. As such, God could not change them; he could only work with what already existed.

I will make three responses to this argument. First, granting Peikoff's point, one could still legitimately think of God as a designer.

As I would arrange materials I had neither created nor given a nature in order to construct a machine, God could have arranged materials to build, for example, a solar system with a habitable planet in it. This would be a more limited concept of God, but Peikoff's argument does not seem to me to rule this out *a priori*. And one could still consider such a God to be a designer of sorts.

Second and more fundamental is this: Why could God not have created a different universe with different fundamental entities in it? Of course, Rand and Peikoff think the universe was uncreated and therefore infinitely old. In this conception, it never had nor could have had a beginning. Again, Rand (1982, 30) wrote: "To grasp the axiom that existence exists, means to grasp the fact that nature, i.e., the universe as a whole, cannot be created or annihilated, that it cannot come into or go out of existence." The question is why would this be true?

It is true that the law of conservation of energy—that energy does not go out of or come into existence—is a fundamental law of physics, but physics is not metaphysics. The question is why it is logically impossible for matter or energy to be created or annihilated? Rand does not give any argument; rather, she merely makes an assertion. To simply state "existence exists," i.e., that the totality of existing things exists at some time t , does not entail existing things that cannot come into or go out of existence. An argument is needed. (It should be noted that if Objectivists were to hold that the physical universe did have a beginning, then this would mean that things can come into existence without a cause, which seems to go against some of their philosophical commitments, as the following discussion should make clear.)

One response Rand might give is that she was speaking of the totality of existence at every time that it exists. And, she might say, since "existence" never began and will never end, it always exists, and therefore cannot come into or go out of existence. The problem with this argument is that it would be blatantly question-begging. She would be saying existence could not come into or go out of existence because it had always existed. But the real question is: why should one think that it has always existed?

Another argument would be since everything requires a cause to come into existence, and if "existence" is everything, there could be

no cause outside of it for its coming into being. There are two problems with this reasoning. First, as I argued above, this does not *a priori* rule out the possibility of one part of “existence,” i.e., God, causing another part of existence, the material cosmos, to come into being. Second, it leaves unanswered the position, which some have seriously proposed, that things can come into being without a cause. To simply say this is impossible does not show why it is impossible. Though the position intuitively may seem very plausible or even obviously true, this by itself does not show why it is true.

An alternate way of looking at the problem is this: suppose, as Objectivists do, that all that exists is the physical cosmos, and that it has always existed and always will exist. Consider some arbitrary time t . At t , “existence,” i.e., the cosmos, has a particular state S . This is to say that at t , all the entities that exist, exist in some particular manner and have certain relations to each other. For example, today I am typing at my computer, and the Eiffel Tower is a certain shape, size and distance from me, as is the Andromeda galaxy. The question, then, is why does the cosmos exist in state S at t , rather than all of the other states that are conceivable, such as my being home in bed sleeping rather than at work on my computer?

The answer Objectivists would give to this would be that S at t is caused by Situation S' at time t' , where t' is the instant immediately prior to t , and S' the situation that the cosmos exists in at t' . Given S' at t' , and the laws of physics, or the nature of all the entities that exist, S at t will of necessity come to be. In other words, S' at t' is a necessary and sufficient cause of S at t . Granting this, an argument can be constructed to show that the world cannot come into existence or go out of existence. For if S exists at t , then S' had to exist at t' , and the same can be said for every other state and time. And, if the laws of the cosmos and the natures of entities are such that they are invariable, then also necessarily, any time t' with S' will be followed by some other situation at the next immediately following moment. Given all this, one could argue that the cosmos never had a beginning and will never have an end.

There are, however, problems with this view. One is that it demands a strong view of the logical necessity of existing entities to maintain it, in spite of good reasons for thinking such a view is untenable. By logical necessity, I mean if something is logically

necessary, then it cannot possibly be different than it is, because this would entail a contradiction. This is sometimes called metaphysical necessity or broadly logical necessity. It is a logically necessary truth that $2 + 2 = 4$. The reason why is clear: when broken down both $2 + 2$ and 4 are the same as $1 + 1 + 1 + 1$, so they are logically equivalent. If the entities of the cosmos exist in the manner they do based on logical necessity, then it would be contradictory for things to be otherwise. It would be impossible, for example, that the pencil on my desk at the present time be half an inch to the right of where it is, with the same impossibility that $2 + 2 = 5$.

Peikoff and other Objectivists seem to have this view. Writes Peikoff:

The view that facts are contingent—that the way things actually are is only one among a number of alternative possibilities, that things could have been different metaphysically—represents a failure to grasp the Law of Identity. Since things are what they are, since everything that exists possesses a specific identity, nothing in reality can occur causelessly or by chance. The nature of an entity determines what it can do and, in any given set of circumstances, dictates what it *will* do. The Law of Causality is entailed by the Law of Identity. Entities follow certain laws of action in consequence of their identity, and have no alternative to doing so. (“The Analytic-Synthetic Dichotomy,” in Rand 1990, 108–9)

Peikoff (1991, 24) elsewhere writes: “‘Necessity’ in the present sense is not a datum over and above existents; it is an identification of existents from a special perspective. ‘Necessary’ names existents considered as governed by the law of identity. ‘To be,’ accordingly, *is* ‘to be necessary.’”

There are very serious problems with this view. I will argue it is both demonstrably false and incompatible with another Objectivist doctrine, that of free will. I will first attempt to demonstrate the inconsistency with the definition of free will that Objectivists espouse.

Objectivists hold that human beings have libertarian free will. There are at least two aspects of this: agent causation and contra-causal choice. As I think that they are physicalists of a sort,⁴ I believe

Objectivists have a problem with agent causation, but I will not make that argument here. What I will show is that libertarian contra-causal free will is inconsistent with the doctrine explicated above, that everything that exists and happens is logically necessary. The libertarian theory of free will holds that, ultimately, free choice is indeterminate; in a situation where a free choice is to be made, more than one can be chosen. To quote Nathaniel Branden (1963, 17):

That which man does, declare the advocates of determinism, he *had* to do—that which he believes, he *had* to believe—if he focuses his mind, he *had* to—if he evades the effort of focusing, he *had* to—if he is guided solely by reason, he *had* to be—if he is ruled by feeling or whim, he *had* to be—*he couldn't help it.*

But if this were true, no *knowledge* would be possible to man. No theory could claim greater plausibility than any other—including the theory of psychological determinism.

There are other points within the Objectivist doctrine of free will that I will not discuss. My purpose is to show that, according to Objectivist doctrine, human free will is genuinely indeterminate. And, if so, then genuinely different choices could have been made, and the universe could have been different. If Smith has libertarian free will at some time *t*, e.g., to either go to Chicago or Detroit, the future universe will be different depending on the decision he makes, and, e.g., he will either be in Chicago or Detroit. So, every time someone makes a genuinely indeterminate decision, there is a potential for a different universe. As this is the case, it is not true that everything in the universe exists in the manner that it does necessarily. Because of this concept of free will, there is real contingency in the universe in Objectivist doctrine. Things could have been different than they are. Of course, Peikoff would respond that when he wrote about the necessity of things acting the way they do, he was not speaking of human free will. In this case, the inconsistency would only be apparent and not real. However, it should be noted that this still means that there are other possible worlds, e.g., worlds where Peikoff chose to be a musician rather than a philosopher.

There is another reason the universe could have been different and contingent. Suppose there is some subatomic particle that is the ultimate form of matter. Suppose further there are exactly 10^{100} of these particles in existence. Each particle has a nature, and thus, according to Peikoff, acts necessarily according to that nature. Apparently, the nature of existence of every particle would be eternal according to Objectivist theory; coming into or going out of existence is impossible.

The important concept here is that it seems arbitrary that there are exactly 10^{100} particles in the cosmos. Even granting they cannot be created or destroyed, there is no way to account for why this number of particles is necessary. The argument to necessity from identity applies only to each individual particle, not to the number of particles as a whole. Why could there not have been $10^{100} + 1$ particles existing eternally, or $10^{100} - 1$? If either of those was the case, the universe would have been somewhat different for all eternity, in which case a different possible “world” would have been obtained. Given this, the same could be said for any other number of these particles. Or it seems there could have been some other kind of fundamental particle than the ones that actually exist. Given Objectivist theories about identity, and that there are exactly 10^{100} particles, the situation must stay this way forever. But there are other possible worlds or universes in which things would be different. Given the same number of particles, they might have been arranged differently for all eternity. None of these scenarios seems inconsistent or logically contradictory. And if they are not, then one cannot hold that any converses are logically necessary.

The conclusion to be drawn from the above example is that, contrary to Peikoff, even granting Objectivist doctrines about identity and causality, the universe seems contingent. If this is so, it threatens to undercut the other doctrines. For example, if there could have been a different number of fundamental particles, then the ones that actually do exist seem to have contingent existence. They might as easily have not existed at all. They do not have necessary existence, for that which might not have existed cannot be necessary. In which case, the argument for why the universe and the particles or matter in it cannot come into or go out of existence has no force. Rather, since their existence is contingent, it did not have to be, the question

becomes why they exist at all and remain in existence.

There is a greater shortcoming still in Objectivists' support of their claim that the universe is necessarily self-existing. I will argue their position is inconsistent and cannot be maintained. The problem arises from the use of the concept of identity, specifically, the Objectivist position on the analytic-synthetic dichotomy. Peikoff has given an explication and defense of Objectivist thought on this matter. He starts by defining the analytic-synthetic dichotomy, contrasting different propositions such as: man being a rational animal as opposed to man having two eyes, and ice being solid as opposed to ice floating on water. He writes: "The *first* proposition in each of these pairs, it is said, can be validated *merely by an analysis of the meaning of its constituent concepts* (thus, these are called '*analytic*' truths). . . . A 'synthetic' proposition is defined as one which *cannot* be validated merely by an analysis of the meanings or definitions of its constituent concepts" ("The Analytic-Synthetic Dichotomy," in Rand 1990, 90–91).

This distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions is one that is customarily given. Analytic propositions can be seen to be true by their definitions, for their denials are self-contradictory. On the other hand, additional information is needed to determine the truth or falsity of synthetic propositions. Concerning synthetic propositions, Peikoff writes: "To deny such truths are to maintain a *falsehood*, but *not a self-contradiction*" (91). He goes on to write: "Analytic truths are *necessary*; no matter what region of space or time or what period of time one considers, such propositions *must* hold true. . . . Synthetic truths, however, are declared *not* to be necessary; they are called '*contingent*.' This means: . . . such propositions *happen to be true*—but they do not *have to be true*" (92).

These definitions are not uncontroversial. Some have defined the same concepts in different ways. For example, there are the propositions "[N]othing can be colored entirely red and entirely green at the same time, or everything that is colored has temporal extension" (Parrish 2001, 222). These seem to be synthetic truths, and necessarily true, but their truth is not simply known from the definitions of 'red' and 'green,' 'color' or 'temporal.' That is, the concept of the color green, for example, does not contain the concept of temporal, but necessarily anything colored green has temporal extension.

Additional information is needed.

Regardless, Peikoff proceeds to list other differences between analytic and synthetic propositions. One such difference is that analytic propositions are known to be true independently of sense experience, while synthetic truths are dependent upon our experience of them for verification; another difference is that analytic propositions do not tell us anything about external reality, while synthetic propositions do (222). After listing the differences between analytic and synthetic propositions, Peikoff begins his critique by asserting that “Objectivism rejects the theory of the analytic-synthetic dichotomy as false—in principle, at root and in every one of its variants” (Peikoff, “The Analytic-Synthetic Dichotomy,” in Rand 1990, 94). He asks: “The critical question is: *What is included in ‘the meaning of a concept.’?* Does a concept mean the *existents* which it subsumes, including *all* their characteristics? Or does it mean only certain aspects of these existents . . .” (94). Peikoff notes it is the latter that underlies the analytic-synthetic dichotomy and after this introduces the Objectivist theory of concepts.

Peikoff believes a concept is formed when one isolates, on the basis of perception, the similarities among a group of entities and integrates them into a new concept via the process of omitting particular measurements of the relevant similarities. A concept therefore consists of “*the units—the existents—which it integrates, including all the characteristics of these units*” (98). For Objectivists, “concepts mean *existents*, not arbitrarily selected portions of existents” (98). This means that all of an existent’s properties are part of its concept. Peikoff writes: “*Metaphysically*, an entity is: all of the things which it is. Each of its characteristics has the same metaphysical status . . .” (98). He then writes that one cannot legitimately distinguish analytic from synthetic propositions because all the properties of a thing are included in its concept, and thus are based upon the Laws of Identity and Noncontradiction.

As an aside, I do not think that this means that Objectivists would deny that it is possible to separate important properties from non-important ones. To use an example given by a reader of this paper, a dachshund is essentially a mammal while not essentially a thing with a runny nose, because one cannot be a dachshund without being a mammal while one can be a dachshund without being a thing

with a runny nose. Still, what Peikoff seems to mean is that, given the Law of Identity and the history of the universe, the dachshund could not have been other than it is at that time.

It is possible that I am misunderstanding Peikoff here. It may seem difficult to believe that he thinks that every single property an animal has, for example, is part of its concept. Perhaps what he really meant to say is that a concept integrates all the shared properties that the animals have, not every single one, or some similar theory. If this is the case, then Peikoff has expressed himself quite poorly.

Peikoff goes on to emphasize that this analysis applies to every statement and every object. Every object is composed of all the characteristics it possesses, and therefore cannot lack any of the properties it does have and still be the kind of thing it is. Peikoff asserts: “If one wishes to use the term ‘tautology’ in this context, then *all* truths are ‘tautological’” (100). Because of this, he writes:

In one sense, *no* truths are “analytic.” No proposition can be validated merely by “conceptual analysis”; the content of the concept—i.e., the characteristics of the existents it integrates—must be discovered and validated by observation, before any “analysis” is possible. In another sense, *all* truths are “analytic.” When some characteristic of an entity *has* been discovered, the proposition ascribing it to the entity will be seen to be “logically true” . . . (101)

Moving onto the issues of contingency and necessity, Peikoff writes that in the time before Kant it was common to appeal to “intellectual intuition” as a means to determine whether some fact was necessary. This stance is based on the belief that human beings have a strange and inexplicable capacity to grasp necessities, things that had to be (107). Elsewhere, I have argued the basis for believing that some truths are necessary and others contingent is not intuition per se, but rather the law of noncontradiction, and that our intuition is really our ability to grasp this fact in concrete situations. For example, the statement that all cubes have 12 edges is a necessary truth because any attempt to describe a cube with a different number of edges will generate a contradiction at some point—though the way we often come to this awareness is through intuition rather than actual

demonstration. That a particular cube is red is contingent, however, as a cube can be painted another color. Concerning intellect and intuition, it is a fact that human beings have the ability to recognize modal truth. A theist has no problem ascribing this ability to humans because he believes God created human beings with the ability to recognize necessity and contingency.⁵

After stating there is no contingency and everything happens necessarily due to the Law of Identity, Peikoff writes: “Metaphysically, all facts are inherent in the identities of the entities that exist; i.e., all facts are ‘necessary’ . . . The concept of ‘necessity,’ in a metaphysical context, is superfluous” (109). Furthermore, “The fundamental error in all such doctrines is the failure to grasp that *existence is a self-sufficient primary*. It is not a product of a supernatural dimension, or of anything else. There is nothing antecedent to existence, nothing apart from it—and no alternative to it” (109).

The above quotation is ambiguous because the word ‘existence,’ when used in the type of statements made by Peikoff, can mean two different things. ‘Existence’ can either mean everything that exists or it can be used as a description differentiating instantiated from uninstantiated entities, such as George Bush and Batman. If when Peikoff says existence is a self-sufficient primary he means ‘the physical cosmos,’ he is involved in question-begging, as was argued in the section on God as the cause of the universe above.

If ‘existence’ is used as a description, then Peikoff is still engaged in question-begging. It is unquestionably true that if the alternative to existence is nonexistence, then the alternative to existence is nothing. This argument, however, is dependent upon an ambiguity in the word ‘nothing.’ There is a difference between stating ‘the alternative to existence is nothing’ and ‘the alternative to existence is nonexistence.’ The first statement implies there is no alternative to existence; the second means the alternative to existence is not to exist. Peikoff’s argument depends upon the first interpretation, but the fact that the alternative to existence is nonexistence does not entail the first alternative—that there is no alternative to existence. The mere fact that certain things, or even the physical universe as a whole, exists, does not imply that ‘existence’ cannot cease to exist. Nor does it imply the universe had to exist, nor that some things in existence are dependent upon other things that exist.

Even though it should be accepted that there is nothing apart from or antecedent to existence, this hardly implies that God does not exist—since if he exists he is one of the existents. If Peikoff means by existence ‘physical existence,’ then he is question-begging, for it is not self-evident or a conceptual truth that existence is necessarily physical. Peikoff must argue in support of this point. But he offers no defense of this thesis, save that nonphysical things could have no identity and thus would be unknowable, as was shown above in the section “The General Situation.” Indeed, the position seems false. For example, in classical theism, it is part of God’s identity to be sovereign, omniscient, omnipotent, etc., and uniquely so. If nonphysical entities can have an identity, then there is no reason *a priori* they cannot be known. Again, Peikoff would have to show that it is impossible for nonphysical entities to have identities; this cannot simply be defined as being true and carry any weight of argument.

In summary, Peikoff thinks a violation of the laws of nature would entail a contradiction. He writes: “[A]s we have seen, the laws of nature are inherent in the identities of the entities that exist” (115). Because entities’ natures are inherent in their identities, and because identities are the foundation of the law of noncontradiction, they must behave in the manner they do, necessarily.

The basic argument that Peikoff uses is this:

- (11) Every entity that exists necessarily has a specific nature.
- (12) An entity’s nature consists of all the properties the entity has. Thus, if the entity is of type *G*, then as part of its nature it will have properties *a, b, c, . . . n*. Collectively, these properties make up the entity’s nature.
- (13) If an entity *F* fails to possess one of the properties that entities of type *G* have, say *c*, then it will fail to be a *G*.
- (14) Therefore, it is logically necessary that for an entity *F* to be a *G*, it must have all the requisite properties.
- (15) Therefore, if *F* is a *G*, it is logically necessary that it have all the properties an entity of type *G* must have, i.e., *a, b, c, . . . n*.
- (16) Therefore, it is logically impossible for *F* to fail to possess any of these properties, because it is a *G*.
- (17) Therefore, all entities act out of logical necessity in

everything they do, because of the nature they possess.

This theory has some rather odd consequences. Statement (12), that in order for an entity to have a nature it must have all of the properties that entities of that type possess, is arguable. If an entity, for example, a proton, changed its strong nuclear force by some fraction of one percent but remained the same in all other respects, it seems reasonable to think it would still be a proton. But in this interpretation of Objectivist theory, a proton that deviated in this manner would not be proton. Again, in Objectivist theory, a nature is all of the properties that an entity possesses. This means if I had one less cell in my body than I currently have, I would be a different person, and the human race would be a different species. In this situation, there would have been a different set of properties in the human race. Again, as Peikoff argued, Objectivists believe *all* of an entity's or type's properties are necessary to the entity or type. While the implications seem absurd, this seems to be entailed by Peikoff's statement.

However, the major criticism I will make is this: the move from (15) to (16) is a classic case of the De Dicto-De Re fallacy. In this context, a De Dicto-De Re fallacy may be described as follows. Suppose I say, "Necessarily, the number of planets is greater than seven." Assume there are eight planets. If I mean that the number of planets, e.g., eight, is necessarily greater than seven, then what I say is necessarily true. Eight is necessarily greater than seven. This is the De Re interpretation. On the other hand, if what I mean is that there could not be fewer than seven actual planets, that it is logically impossible, for example, that in 10 million years a star could not come close to our solar system and pull three of the planets along with it, then it seems I have said something false. The cosmic catastrophe scenario described above certainly seems logically possible. This is the De Dicto interpretation. It all depends upon whether I am talking about the number of planets as a number, or the number as descriptive of the entire group of planets.

Similarly, if one says every individual proton must act like a proton because of its nature, then this is true by one interpretation and false by another. If a proton is a proton, then it will act like a proton, because otherwise it would not be a proton. But this does not

mean every entity that is a proton must always act like a proton acts, but rather if the entity stopped behaving like a proton, it would cease to be a proton. If type G entities are defined as having properties a, b, c, \dots, n , then necessarily, anything that fails to behave or exist in the manner prescribed by the definition will fail to be a G . Yet this does not mean that any entity F , which is purportedly a G but fails somehow to behave or exist in the manner prescribed by being a G , is somehow breaking the Law of Identity. It only means F is not really a G , strictly defined. Suppose some entity F , which was purportedly a G at some time t , began behaving for a short time in manner c' rather than c , where c is the manner in which all entities of type G are by nature supposed to behave. According to Objectivist theory, this is a logical impossibility, as it would break the Law of Identity. But all this really shows is that F , instead of being a G , is really a G' , which, though similar to G , is another type of entity. Or, if one prefers, F stopped being a G and started being a G' . If a man is a 'sitting man,' he obviously cannot stand up and remain a 'sitting man.' But this hardly means sitting men can never stand up. The objection that 'man' is a type while 'sitting man' is not begs the question. What stops an entity from being one type at one time and another type at another time? Objectivists then have two options. They can either say if an entity fails to follow the rigid definition for some type, it is not of that type, or they can expand on the definition of what that type is. For example, if a cat started barking and chasing cars, one could simply expand the definition of cat. But a potentially infinite expansion of concepts leaves no non-arbitrary way to draw a line between different concepts. This is not to deny that there are borderline cases. There is no clear answer here on which way Objectivists should choose, but in either case, the argument that things necessarily are what they are because of identity fails.

For Objectivists, the nature of some type of entity G is exhaustively exemplified by the manners in which all entities of type G exist and behave. Accordingly, their natures can only be discovered empirically. Therefore, the basic unit is the individual entity. If some entity F is really of type G , then it will only act in a manner consistent with being a G . If some entity thought to be an F acts inconsistently with what was thought to be proper G behavior, then the Objectivist has a dilemma. He can either change the definition of what it means

to be a *G* or he can decide that *F* is not a *G*. The Objectivist theory is of no help in this situation. For each individual entity, there is no such thing as a 'nature' apart from the properties the entity has. As such, the entity is prevented by the laws of logic to act in a given manner if and only if behaving in that manner would contradict one of the entity's other properties (e.g., if something tried to be solid and liquid at the same time).

To illustrate, let us imagine that there are protons and protons'. Protons' are just like protons, except they have a nuclear force 1% greater than that of protons. This seems to be possible, as there is no contradiction generated by the concept of a proton'. The question now is why some particular proton *P* could not change from a proton to a proton' for no reason at all, that is, as a brute fact? There seems to be nothing in the physical nature of *P* in particular, or in the nature of protons in general, to prevent this change. The nature of protons is simply the sum of all the physical properties protons possess; there is no necessity by which a proton's nature must remain unchanged. So, if there is to be ontological stability, if individual protons like *P* are not to change from protons to protons', there must be some other property that would prevent this. Obviously, this property could not be a physical property. It would have to be an abstract property similar to "Necessarily a proton cannot change to being a proton' without a cause." If this property is a property of protons, then it cannot be false, for by definition it is necessarily true. But necessary truths must have contradictions entailed by their denials, and there seems to be no contradiction generated by denying that "Necessarily, protons cannot switch into protons' without a cause." Thus, this statement is necessarily false and there is no reason intrinsic to a proton why it could not become a proton' for no reason. This analysis could be carried out with many different properties in many different objects. Thus, within physical, concrete objects there is no basis for ontological stability.

There are two other points to consider. First, we have seen there could be proton-like entities (PLE) that are very similar to protons in some respects, but significantly different in others. For example, there could be entities that are just like protons except their nuclear force is 1% stronger, as with *P* above. And, of course, there are myriad other examples, with different properties at different strengths.

As long as there is no internal inconsistency, these hypothetical variations are all logically possible. The possibilities for PLE are virtually endless.

Based on Peikoff's essay on the analytic-synthetic dichotomy, it seems that Objectivists believe all properties are essential properties, that is, an entity must have the properties that it has. As I have written elsewhere, I call this view the necessary nature view. If any PLE actually existed, according to the necessary nature view, its nature would be as necessary to it as the proton's nature is to protons. According to Objectivists, the nature of an entity can only be discovered by empirical examination. Therefore, if consistent, the existence of PLE is as possible as the existence of protons. Indeed, protons would only be one of a huge number of PLE. So why do only protons exist? Based on the grounds of logical possibility, all objects have an equal chance of existing. Yet, the only PLE we know are protons. The Objectivist theory entails that PLE are all one kind for no reason. Of all the possible PLE that could exist, they argue only protons do. This is a matter of chance, which from a logical point of view is extremely improbable.

Second, there could be PLE that have all the properties of protons until the year 2010, at which time their properties could change to those possessed by electrons. At the present time, they would be indistinguishable from protons. Again, there are a vast number of such possible PLE, e.g., one changes $C1$ at time $t1$, another changes $C2$ at time $t2$, etc. All are consistent with the present data, and empirically there is no reason to think the PLE will remain unchanged.⁶ According to Objectivist theory, the nature of things can only be determined through observation; *a priori* there is no reason to prefer proton stability to proton instability. In this case, induction would become worthless. The probability of the future being like the past would be extremely small, for the possibility of change would be far greater than the possibility of stability—which is absurd. Yet, in both of the above arguments, entities necessarily act in accordance with their natures. Peikoff doesn't provide any reason to think ontological stability can be based on the natures of entities, which are necessary. Even if the natures of entities are necessary, this by itself does not explain why the universe is stable. The necessary nature view provides no reason all entities of one type should always be the

same, why all PLE should have the same properties, or why the properties of entities should not vary over time and space.

Objectivists need to show the entailed logical contradiction in some property C having a strength that is different from its normal strength. For example, if the strong nuclear force of a proton were C' instead of C , this would have to entail an inconsistency with the rest of the proton's properties. This seems impossible. Indeed, Objectivists need to be able to show this kind of variance is inconsistent for every property of every entity. As Objectivists hope to establish ontological stability with their necessary nature theory, this failure is important. Because it fails, Objectivism fails to provide any reason the universe is not chaotic. Further, it relies on a De Dicto-De Re fallacy that if something has a nature, then it cannot have a different nature on pain of logical contradiction.

The same kind of argument can be made for the existence of entities over time. According to Objectivist theory, a proton necessarily has a certain nature and therefore has the properties it has necessarily, yet it is not the nature of a proton to exist necessarily. There are a finite number of protons in existence (as Peikoff would agree). Let us call this finite number N . It is not necessarily true that there are N many protons. For according to Objectivism, the necessity of the proton lies in the nature of the proton, and the nature of the proton does not say how many exist. That is, based on the nature of protons, one might be able to deduce the strength of its nuclear force, but one cannot deduce that any exist. Therefore, it is a brute fact that there are exactly N protons in existence. As this is a brute fact, there might have been some other number of protons in existence, or none at all. As protons did not have to exist, and in fact can be transmuted into other things, protons do not have necessary existence. Thus, the fact that a proton exists is a contingent fact. Since it is a contingent fact, it does not have to exist, or remain in existence. In essence, then, a proton would have no reason for continuing to exist over time. In which case, its continued existence becomes inexplicable. The same reasoning applies to any other physical entity.

The same problem arises when it is stated that it is not the proton, but the matter of which it is made that is necessary. If such matter exists, it can take on many different natures, e.g., protons,

electrons, photons, etc. As all of these are contingent, it is hard to see why any of their natures can confer necessary existence on the matter. If, on the other hand, it is the matter that exists necessarily, then there is necessarily the amount of matter in the universe that there is. If this matter exists necessarily, it could not have been otherwise. But there is no contradiction entailed in conceiving of a different amount of matter. The problem lingers with the statement that even though a lump of matter did not have to exist, once it does, it must remain in existence. Why is any particular lump of matter necessarily existent? Why, logically, must it remain in existence? Again, there is no contradiction in thinking it could cease to exist. If this is true, then Objectivism cannot provide an answer as to why the universe is ontologically orderly. Objectivists, with their theory of necessary natures, have not escaped from brute fact, that the cosmos is the result of chance.

The conclusion of these arguments is that, contrary to their confident assertions, Objectivists have not provided a way of ensuring ontological stability, i.e., a way of showing why the universe is not chaotic. There is nothing necessary about what existents exist, why they remain in existence, and why they act in accordance with stable laws. Because of this, Objectivist ontology and cosmology fail.

All of the above is a long and complex way of illustrating a point made simply by Nyquist (2001, 195):

All that Rand's axiom of identity asserts is that everything has a specific nature. But it fails to assert what sort of nature everything actually has. And so if I were to assert that the nature of everything is to interact on the grounds of pure chance instead of on those of cause and effect, neither Rand nor any of her followers could refute me on the basis of their axiom of identity.

His point is that the fact that entities have identities, and therefore have natures, by itself does nothing to show why the universe is not random. Why can it not be the case that some entities' natures are to act in a random or chaotic manner? The mere fact that an entity has an identity does nothing to show this to be impossible.

Indeed, there is one last problem I will mention here. This is the

much discussed Anthropic Principle, which is that the laws and constants of nature seem to be such that intelligent life can exist. This is sometimes known as the “Fine-Tuning Argument.” The vast majority of possible laws and constants are such that had they been real, no life, or at least no intelligent life would be possible. The theist can explain this easily. What would Objectivists say to this, that we just got really lucky?⁷ Atheists have given a number of responses to the fine-tuning argument. A response to this issue from Objectivists would be interesting.

To sum up this section, Peikoff and other Objectivists give no sound arguments that God cannot be the designer of the universe. Indeed, their own theory of orderliness in the universe seems sadly wanting.

God’s Omnipotence

Peikoff moves from attacking God’s relationship to the cosmos to attacking the coherence of the concept of God itself. In this case, however, it is difficult to see what Peikoff’s argument is. He writes: “Is God ‘omnipotent’? Nothing and no one can alter the metaphysically given” (Peikoff 1991, 31).

Actually, few theists would dispute what Peikoff writes—that God cannot alter the metaphysically given. Even God cannot make it so that blue is a number rather than a color, or that seven is an even number, or that people can be taller than themselves, or that water is not H₂O. All of these are necessary truths that God cannot alter. Some philosophers say that these are merely verbal issues rather than metaphysical ones. Either way, they are truths that even God cannot alter, because they involve a contradiction. Since a simple definition of omnipotence is the ability to accomplish anything that it is logically possible to accomplish, that God cannot perform the above listed tasks is not a threat to his omnipotence.

I suspect, however, this is not what Peikoff is really saying. I think he is suggesting that as entities have a specific nature, they must always act in accordance with that nature, and God cannot alter this. For example, the pencil lying on my desk has the nature of being affected by gravity. It cannot just start flying through the room. One miracle would be that God can cause the pencil to start flying through the room. Since this would violate the pencil’s nature, God cannot do

it, and therefore God cannot work miracles.

In fact, this seems to be a rather odd argument. It is certainly possible for me to start the pencil flying through the room, by throwing it. And if I can do, must not God also be able to? God is by definition much more powerful than I am, so why would I have the power to do something God cannot?

Peikoff might respond that I can affect the pencil because I am a physical being, and thus my body can interact with the pencil in various ways via the laws of physics. God, on the other hand, is not a physical being, and thus, it might be argued, God cannot interact with the pencil via the laws of physics. We will see this same basic objection in the last of Peikoff's antitheistic arguments below.

There are at least two responses that could be given to the above argument. The first is simply that, under the theistic worldview, God would be the creator and designer of all other entities and certainly has the power to control what he created. The objection that only physical entities can affect other physical entities is question-begging, because it assumes to be true what is at stake in this debate. The second is, thus: why could it not be the nature of some entity, such as my pencil, to be affected when God wills it to do something? That is to say, if my pencil has a nature such that it is affected by the gravitational fields of other physical bodies, why could it not have a nature such that it is affected by God's willing? The denial of this possibility is another case of question-begging. This would especially be the case if, as theists believe, God is the creator of all other entities.

The point of this argument is that Peikoff gives us no good reason to deny that God can be omnipotent. Again, we encounter the situation of Objectivists making their case by simply defining their position as being true.

God's Infinity

Peikoff attacks the doctrine of God being infinite on the grounds that to be infinite something would have to be indefinite, and everything that exists has to be definite or specific in size. He writes:

“Infinite” does not mean large; it means larger than *any* specific quantity, i.e., of *no* specific quantity. An infinite quantity would be a quantity without identity. But A is A.

Every entity, accordingly, is finite; it is limited in the number of its qualities and in their extent; this applies to the universe as well. As Aristotle was the first to observe, the concept of “infinity” denotes merely a potentiality of indefinite addition or subdivision. . . . The *actual* is always finite. (31–32)

However, there is more than one concept of infinity. One concept is that which Peikoff mentions. But there are others, including that of infinity being an actual existence that has no end. In the case of God, for example, his infinity is usually meant as shorthand for the “omnis,” e.g., omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, etc. (Craig 1990a, 154). What is meant by omniscience, for example, is simply that God knows the truth of all propositions. Since there are an infinite number of propositions, God’s knowledge is therefore infinite. This alone offers a different way of thinking about infinity than Peikoff relates. There are an infinite number of propositions because there are an actual, existing number of truths. Taking numbers themselves as an example, there are an infinite number of truths regarding them: it is true for every even number that the next highest number is odd. That is, it is true that the number higher than two is an odd number, the number higher than four is an odd number, etc. Defined correctly, Peikoff’s argument against infinity fails.

Further, Objectivism has a problem with infinity. Objectivists believe the universe never came into existence. Logically, then, it never had a beginning and must have an infinite past. Is Objectivism then refuted because it argues infinities cannot exist? Peikoff might respond by arguing that the past can be infinite because it does not now exist. This is to say, Peikoff might argue that a problem with an infinite number of entities only arises when the infinite number of entities is supposed to exist at the same time. This answer misses the point. If the material cosmos never had a beginning, and is thus infinite in extent, then there is a completed and therefore actual infinite. For example, divide the entire past into days. If the past is infinite, then an infinite number of days had to precede the present. Each of these days would have been actual, not merely potential. Given this, it is false to say, as Peikoff does, that the past is merely the potential for unending division or addition. Given the Objectivist

belief system, there has to have been an actual infinite. And if there is one actual infinite, it cannot be ruled out that there could be others, such as an infinite God.

It should be noted that there is an ongoing controversy over the possibility of an infinitely old universe. Craig (1979) and others have argued that the existence of an infinite past of the physical cosmos is a logical impossibility. Craig and his allies have argued both from philosophy and science that the universe, the physical cosmos, did not and could not have always existed, but must have had a beginning. This is no place to explore this controversy, but I will note that if Craig is correct, Objectivist cosmology is impossible.⁸

In summary, nothing that Peikoff or any other Objectivist has written has shown the concept of an omnipotent God is incoherent. As is the case with the other arguments they make, they simply assume the truth of their own views on some matter, show that the view they oppose contradicts their own, and dismiss the opposition as having been refuted. Even apart from the fact that Objectivist views are flawed, this whole manner of argumentation should not convince anyone who is not already convinced.

God and Miracles

“Can God perform miracles? . . . A miracle is an action not possible to the entities involved by their nature; it would be a violation of identity” (Peikoff 1991, 32). The answer to this charge will be brief, as much of what needs to be said was said in the section on omnipotence. As I stated earlier, if God is the creator and designer of other things, he can control them. By the theistic view, God gives entities the natures they have, and he can change them if he wishes. But there is another response to give. It is against the nature of a pencil to fly across the room of its own volition, but it will do so if someone causes it to. Now, if I can throw a pencil across a room, then it seems God, who is omnipotent, must be able to do the same thing. In both cases, it is not flying across the room that is against the pencil’s nature, it is doing so by itself. Given force from the outside, from me or from God, it will do so, and it is not against its nature to do so. In other words, miracles do not necessarily “violate” an entity’s nature; they rather show what can happen when some unusual, nonphysical force is applied to it.

God as Spirit

Here, Peikoff 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” (32). This is question-begging. Peikoff writes that spirituality is related to consciousness, and that consciousness is a faculty of perceiving that which exists. But consciousness is more than that. It is not limited to the perception of what exists. Consciousness also involves the will and emotions. It has to do with abstract thought, wherein one can think of numbers and other entities (whatever their ontological status might be) that are not sensorily perceived. It has to do with imagination, by which one can think of things that do not and cannot exist. (I don’t think Rand would disagree here; she has an “expansive” view of consciousness. See Sciabarra 1995, 160, 166–68ff.) So, even if it were true that God did not have a means of perceiving physical objects, that by itself does not mean he must be unconscious.

Peikoff’s assertion that God would be an entity that transcended organism and object, and therefore would be unable to perceive, is likewise a non-sequitur. Why does transcending organism and object render knowledge impossible? In traditional theology, God knows all concrete entities because he created them and sustains them in existence. They are not independent of him and have not existence apart from his will. Therefore, he does not have to “perceive” them to know them. To say otherwise, as Peikoff does, is to beg the question in favor of naturalism and physicalism. Peikoff argues that God cannot know physical entities because he is not a physical entity himself. This is merely an assertion that theism is false, disguised as the conclusion of an argument. To support his stance, Peikoff must attempt to show how the theistic notion of God on this point is incoherent, and this he has not done. Again, Peikoff’s argument is question-begging and collapses when examined.

God as Contradictory to the Axiomatic Concepts of Philosophy

“Every argument commonly offered for the notion of God leads

to a contradiction of the axiomatic concepts of philosophy” (32).

This is the synopsis of Peikoff’s argument, and is a very broad statement. As far as I can see, neither Peikoff nor any other Objectivist makes any sound attempt to support it. Every argument he or other Objectivists have offered turns out to be question-begging. In other words, they dogmatically assume the truth of Objectivism and its philosophical theories, measure theism against these theories and then declare it wanting. In fact, a theist has responses to every one of Peikoff’s and the other Objectivists’ attacks. It is not my purpose to investigate whether these responses are ultimately successful (though I think that they are), but rather to show that if Peikoff and other Objectivists want to try to dismiss the concept of God, they need to do more work.

In philosophy, the strength with which a position is held should be congruent with the strength of the reasons for believing it. If one has strong reasons for thinking Q is true, and no strong reasons to think that it is false, then one has the right to assert it with a great deal of confidence. If, on the other hand, one has only weak reasons for thinking that Q is true, then one ought to be more modest in asserting Q ’s truth. To my knowledge, Objectivists have not put forth any strong arguments to show theism is incoherent. They have no reason, therefore, to think it is incoherent.

The Burden of Proof

My last point will cover God and the burden of proof (Parsons 1989). Answering the question of why Objectivists are atheists rather than agnostics, William Thomas (n.d.b.) writes, “You seem to be saying that because we are not omniscient, we cannot disprove that there is a God as the religions speak of one. . . . [T]his is simply demanding that the atheist prove a negative. You don’t do that for gremlins in your house every night, and with good reason. No more should we do it for God.”

The above quotation illustrates the Objectivist attitude toward God—that belief in God is the same as the belief in gremlins haunting your house. If we were to ask someone if he thought it possible that gremlins were haunting his house every night, we would surely think it quite odd if he responded that, even though he had no evidence that the gremlins existed, he was uncertain, because it was broadly logically

possible that they might. However, when applied to God, this analogy begs the question for the following reasons.

First, it assumes there is no more reason to believe in God than there is to believe in gremlins. This seems to be taken for granted by Objectivists, but certainly not by everyone else. Many people think there are good reasons to believe in God; e.g., effects have causes and so the universe must have a cause; something orderly and complicated but not self-explanatory must have a designer, and the universe is orderly and complicated and not self-explanatory, among other reasons. These arguments are controversial, of course, but they're not starting with the nothing that Objectivists think they are.⁹ On the other hand, few think there are good reasons to believe in nightly gremlins in their houses. Further, nearly everyone believes the concept of the existence of gremlins to be absurd, while many, including some who are not theists, do not consider belief in God to be absurd. The point is that Thomas assumes without argument that God is on the same level of plausibility as gremlins. This may seem the case to him, but certainly does not to most people.

Second, Thomas and other Objectivists are begging the question in a more fundamental manner. Many atheists other than Objectivists have made the same basic argument, which I will outline here.¹⁰ I think that the following argument—based on Occam's Razor, which states that entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity—is what Objectivists have in mind.

(18) In any case where, all other things being equal, x argues for the existence of more entities than y , the burden of proof is on x .

(19) Both atheists and theists agree that the material cosmos exists.

(20) The theist also believes in the existence of another entity, i.e., God.

(21) Since it is the theist who postulates the existence of an additional entity, then from Occam's Razor, the burden of proof is on the theist.

(22) If the theist fails in that proof, he is irrational to believe in God. No similar burden of proof is on the atheist.

One problem with the above argument is (18), with the clause “all other things being equal.” The atheist-naturalist and the classical theist believe in different conceptions of the physical cosmos. From a theoretical point of view, these conceptions are of quite different “entities.” For example, the atheist cosmos is cosmologically ultimate, exists independently, and in some theories (like Objectivism) has existed for an infinite amount of time. The theist’s cosmos, on the other hand, is cosmologically secondary, exists dependently upon God, and usually is thought to have had a temporal beginning. In some versions of naturalism, the cosmos has its reason for existence within itself. With other naturalistic theories, the cosmos exists as a brute fact, for no reason. The theistic cosmos exists because it was created and is sustained in existence by God. According to the naturalistic theory, reality is ultimately unconscious and impersonal; the theistic theory considers reality conscious and personal. Thus, from a theoretical point of view, the concepts of the cosmos are radically different.

Occam’s Razor only takes effect when all other considerations are equal. Suppose your house is robbed and several things are stolen. The police come up with several theories of how it was done. One theory suggests there was one thief; another suggests two. The “one thief” theory is the simpler of the two, as it involves fewer entities. If it is the case that one thief could have carried all the stolen goods, then that is the preferred theory. To maintain that there were two thieves would be multiplying entities needlessly.

But suppose it was the case that some heavy things, like the couch, were stolen. Two thieves could have carried them, or possibly one thief could have rigged up some sort of pulley system to move the couch. Given this situation, it is not obvious which of the two theories is simpler. The question becomes almost meaningless, since what is meant by ‘simpler’ is not clear.

Similarly, in the case of naturalism and theism, it is difficult to say which is simpler. Is naturalism simpler in that it has one less entity, God, or is theism simpler because the history of the cosmos is infinitely shorter than in many versions of naturalism and hence has fewer entities? And does the fact that in theism the physical universe is ontologically dependent and in naturalism it is ontologically independent make the two theories incommensurable regarding

simplicity? Again, the answer is not obvious, and therefore Occam's Razor becomes almost useless.

What we therefore have is not a situation in which the burden of proof is on one theory, namely theism. Rather, we have a situation to explain, the existence of the physical cosmos, and two theories by which to do so. Objectivist naturalism suggests the cosmos is simply in eternal existence, uncreated and independent, with its ultimate constituent being some form of matter/energy. Classical theism maintains the cosmos is the creation of God, a personal, conscious being, who is ontologically necessary, while the physical cosmos is dependent.

My conclusion is that on this level, neither view is to be preferred *a priori*. Naturalism is not the default position that may be assumed without argument. Rather, the situation is that we have the physical cosmos to be accounted for, and two rival theories that give radically different explanations. Given this, it is simply question-begging by which one can assume naturalism to be true, and proceed to lay the onus of proof on theism. Both theories must be rationally supported. The atheist ploy of presenting naturalism without evidence and then demanding the theist prove his theory to the atheist's satisfaction is bogus. There is no default position with respect to worldviews.

Conclusion

In summary, to my knowledge, every Objectivist objection to theism or supernaturalism is fallacious. What has basically been done is that Objectivists have assumed certain philosophical positions to be true, compared them to theism, seen that they conflict, and then dismissed theism as false. Rarely are responses that theists could make considered.

As I noted at the beginning of the paper, Philosophy of Religion has made great strides the last few decades. If Objectivists want their views to be heard in this discipline as elsewhere, they have a lot of work to do.

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for an anonymous reviewer for his/her suggestions, most of which are incorporated. Any remaining errors are my responsibility alone.

Notes

1. Some recent books that defend theism are the following: Alston 1991; Copan and Moser 2003; Collins (forthcoming); Craig 1979; Davis 1997; Foster 2004; Miller 1992; Parrish 2001; Ross 1969; Sennett and Groutius 2005; and Swinburne 1991. Some recent books that defend atheism include: Drange 1998; Gale 1991; Le Poidevin 1996; Mackie 1985; Martin 1990; Martin and Monnier 2003; and Sobel 2004. Some recent debates on the subject include: Craig and Sinnott-Armstrong 2003; Craig and Smith 1995; Flew and Miethe 1991; Moreland and Nielsen 1990; Smart and Haldane 1996.

2. It has often been pointed out that Sagan did not come to such a conclusion by looking through a telescope. Like Objectivists, Sagan's belief in the metaphysical ultimacy of the physical cosmos is a philosophical commitment that he brings to the data. It should also be noted that this is not the only definition of naturalism. For an alternative, see Rea 2002.

3. Here, I use "supervene" in a standard sense, such as Jaegwon Kim uses it. All it means is that the mental is dependent on the physical in the sense that if some physical object (like a brain) exists in the manner that it does, then necessarily the mental (like certain thoughts) will also exist in the manner that it does. Does this entail epiphenomenalism? I think so, but not everyone agrees; in any case, I am not saying that Objectivists are Epiphenomenalists.

4. I find it difficult to ascertain exactly what Objectivists believe about the mind and the body. They reject substance dualism, yet also reject any sort of reductionism. It seems to me that their view of the mind-body relation is a sort of nonreductive physicalism. In this view, what really exists is matter—specifically, the brain, and the mind supervenes on, or is realized by the brain. This means that the mind does not exist apart from the brain, but cannot be reduced to it, by which it is meant that it cannot be totally explained in terms of the physical makeup of the brain. Writes William Thomas (n.d.a) on the mind-body relation:

What we call the mind is the set of capacities to be aware, to perceive the world, to think about it, to feel, to value, to make choices. How do these capacities arise? In many respects, the answer to that question must come from science, not philosophy. But everything we know indicates that they are the product of biological evolution and that they depend on our physical sense organs and brain, as well as on the many other support structures that the body provides.

Even the above, is not all that clear and could be interpreted in terms of either property dualism or nonreductive physicalism. I think that the latter fits in better with the overall picture of reality that Objectivists espouse. Actually, the mind-body problem is another area in which Objectivists need to work. On reductionism, see Jones 2000 and Kim 2002. For a defense of physicalism, see Melnyk 2003. For recent critiques of physicalism, see, for example, Chalmers 1996 and Lund 1994. For

debate on the issues, see also Gillett and Loewer 2001.

5. It might be asked: Does the belief that God created human beings with a certain cognitive power constitute an adequate reason for concluding that human beings in fact possess that power? I think so. If God (in whatever manner) created human beings, and God is, as classical theism maintains, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, then it seems that God would not have created human beings so that their mental faculties systematically misled them in significant ways. This is an old Cartesian argument. At any rate, it seems at least plausible that if the God of classical theism created us, then our mental faculties would be such that under normal circumstances we could trust them.

6. One of the inspirations for this discussion comes from Nelson Goodman, to whom I was first exposed in graduate school.

7. There is a large literature on the Anthropic Principle. For some expositions and defenses of the principle, see Davies 1987; Barrow and Tipler 1988; Corey 1993; Swinburne 1991, 300–22; Ross 2001; Craig 1990b; and Barr 2003, 65–164. See also Collins (forthcoming). For critiques, see Drange 1998, 379–86; Drange 2000a; and Stenger 2000. For a response to Drange, see Parrish 1999; Drange 2000b; and Parrish 2000. See also Stenger 1988. Most of the volume 7, no. 2, 2005 issue of *Philosophia Christi* is devoted to the Fine-Tuning argument and related matters.

8. Rand (1997, 698) said “‘Cosmology’ has to be thrown out of philosophy.” However, because of some of her ontology, such as her belief that “existence,” i.e., the material cosmos, cannot come into or go out of existence, she is committed to theories that have cosmological implications. For if it is true that the physical cosmos cannot come into existence from nothing, then some of the standard theories of the Big Bang are false. I don’t think Rand can avoid this.

9. This was pointed out by an anonymous reviewer.

10. For a similar example, see Johnson 1983.

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