

Philosophy of Religion

Discussion

Rejoinder to Adam Reed, “Not Even False: A Commentary on Parrish and Toner” (Spring 2008)

God-Talk and the Arbitrary¹

Patrick Toner

Adam Reed (2008) claims I misunderstand the Objectivist argument against God. I take Rand and Peikoff to hold that God-talk² is incoherent, but Reed says that’s not their real view: “. . . Objectivists do not claim that theistic notions are incoherent . . . but rather that these notions have no evidence for them or against them, so that they are arbitrary . . .” (371). But Reed’s claim is demonstrably false. Peikoff (1991, 166) writes:

[C]onsider the claim that there is an infinite, omnipotent creator of the universe. If this claim is viewed as a product of faith or fantasy, apart from any relation to evidence, it has no cognitive standing. If one wishes, however, one can relate this claim to an established context, as I did in the opening chapter: one can demonstrate that the idea of God contradicts all the fundamentals of a rational philosophy. Thanks to such a process of integration, what was initially arbitrary attains cognitive status—in this instance, a falsehood.³

Now, if Peikoff’s purported proofs of the incoherence of God-talk fail, then—provided it is viewed as a product of faith or fantasy—God-talk would be arbitrary. But it isn’t always the product of faith and fantasy. Indeed, there are many apparently strong arguments for God’s existence. Hence, if Peikoff’s attempts at demonstrating the

incoherence of God-talk fail, the Objectivist incurs a burden of proof *if she wishes to claim that God talk is arbitrary*: that burden, of course, is to show that the theistic arguments (*all* of them) fail to provide *any evidence* for God's existence.⁴ That's a tall order.

So a great deal hangs on whether Peikoff has shown God-talk to be incoherent. In my original paper, I argued he has not. I used an extended thought experiment as the centerpiece of this argument. Reed thinks my thought experiment is an abject failure. Instead of combining concepts or elements already known to be possible, he says, I pretended there is objective evidence for what is, in fact, the arbitrary claim that God exists, thereby begging the question.

But my thought experiment isn't any more question-begging than the passages I used it to argue against. Consider: Peikoff and Rand hold that God-talk is incoherent. In order to make that claim, they considered theistic claims, and tried to determine whether anything untoward follows from them. For example, Peikoff says that orthodox theism⁵ entails the primacy of consciousness: "Is God the creator of the universe? Not if existence has primacy over consciousness" (31). But to make this claim, he had to *use* the concept of God: he *hypothetically* took it up, and looked to see if the primacy of consciousness followed upon its acceptance.⁶

Well, my thought experiment hypothetically took up the *same* concept (God) and performed exactly the *same* act (seeing whether it entails the primacy of consciousness). If Peikoff can perform such thought experiments, then I don't see how an Objectivist can complain when I repay the favor.

To be fair, I should not have written "Imagine you are a theist" in introducing the thought experiment. Reed latched onto that formulation as though it were important, and I expect other readers may have done the same. That formulation *wasn't* important: but since it wasn't, I shouldn't have used it at all. One needn't think of oneself as a theist to perform the thought experiment. One must simply consider what God's existence would entail. However, aside from this apparently misleading way of setting up the thought experiment, there was nothing at all illegitimate about it. Further, I borrowed neither the term 'thought experiment,' nor its use, from theoretical physics. Thought experiments are standard philosophical practice: so standard that Peikoff and Rand engage in them (though

perhaps not using that name for them). As I pointed out in my original paper, I was responding in the only way possible to Peikoff's claim that God-talk is incoherent: by showing that there is no incoherence.

The preceding provides a sufficient response to Reed's animadversions on intuition, as well. But to be fully explicit: Reed says that my paper is an appeal to intuition, and he believes intuition has little place in philosophy. But my paper is not an appeal to intuition—or, if it is, then so are Peikoff's and Rand's arguments that God-talk is incoherent.

Reed also objects that my claim that there are many impressive theistic arguments is the only link (and a tenuous one at that) between my paper and any attempt to actually ground theism in genuine evidence. But, as I said more than once, I was not attempting to show that God exists, or that it is reasonable to believe that God exists, so I was under no obligation to produce a case in support of theism. Instead, I intended to show—and take myself to have succeeded in showing—that the Objectivist case *against* God is insufficient. (I am emboldened to claim success because Reed says that by begging the question by setting up my thought experiment, I was able to “demolish” the claims of Peikoff and Rand. But I didn't beg the question. Therefore, I take it, the demolition was a success.)

There is just one more thing that needs some attention. In his paper, Reed deals briefly with some recent arguments that purport to provide evidence for God's existence, and seems to think that, on the basis of that treatment, he has rebutted my above-mentioned claim that there are good arguments in support of theism.

I'm not going to defend the arguments Reed considered, or offer additional arguments that he hasn't considered: I've said several times that it is not my intention here to try to show that God exists, or to show that it is reasonable to believe in God. This is not reticence. That kind of literature is out there, waiting—still waiting—to be read by Objectivists, and doesn't need to be replicated here. So instead of allowing the conversation to stray into territory I have already declared out of bounds, I will simply point out that none of the arguments Reed deals with is from the literature I cited. In other words, he has left what I consider the best recent literature out of his discussion entirely.⁷ This prompts me to end by once again express-

ing my deep desire that Objectivists take care to become “students” of theistic arguments before trumpeting so boldly that none of them are any good.⁸

Notes

1. I am grateful to the editor for the chance to reply to Adam Reed’s paper. Thanks also to Stephen Parrish for comments on a draft of this reply. It is worth pointing out that our initial papers were written entirely independently, and submitted to this journal at roughly the same time wholly coincidentally (or, as one might think, Providentially).

2. I’ll use the phrase “God-talk” here simply as a convenient locution. It may be more accurate, I take it, to say that Objectivists hold the *concepts* are incoherent than that the propositions used to express them are incoherent. But if the concepts are incoherent, then surely the propositions that express those concepts are incoherent in a derivative sense. So I think I’m safe speaking as I do.

3. Note that Peikoff is clearly not merely claiming that some *arguments* for God’s existence are incoherent. Rather, he claims that the *idea of God* is incoherent. Hence, Reed’s note 6 doesn’t help him out. I should also say that the section to which Peikoff refers in the quotation above—roughly, pages 31–32—treats theistic arguments interchangeably with theistic claims. For example, Peikoff says the argument from design is incoherent. But then the very next thing he says is that the claim that God is omnipotent is incoherent. The *claim* that God is omnipotent is not an *argument* for God’s existence: hence, in trying to show that the claim that God is omnipotent violates the sanctity of the metaphysically given, Peikoff is clearly saying that *claim* (not that *argument*, for it’s *not* an argument) is incoherent. I’m surprised to be differing with an Objectivist on this point: it seems quite straightforward.

4. Obviously, if Reed (or any other Objectivist) wishes to claim simply that he has *never seen* any evidence at all for believing in God, he’s more than entitled to do so, and takes on absolutely no burden of proof in so doing. That claim is a wholly uninteresting fact about *him*, not about the evidence or lack of it for God’s existence, and hence it has no bearing whatsoever on the question of whether there is any evidence for theism. I’m not saying Reed needs to provide evidence to support his non-belief. I’m saying—and said very clearly in my original paper—that in order to make the claim that there is no such evidence, the Objectivist takes on a rather significant burden: evaluating all the available purported evidence, and showing that it is not really evidence. (Given, of course, that God-talk has not been shown to be incoherent. If God-talk has been shown to be incoherent, then one needn’t independently evaluate the alleged evidence for it. But, as I showed in my paper, Objectivists haven’t shown that God-talk is incoherent. And further, even if they had, Reed *denies* they have, and so, *of course*, he can’t invoke the alleged incoherence of God-talk to buttress his claims about there being no evidence for God.)

5. I specify orthodox theism here, as in the original paper, since it’s possible to be a theist of sorts, and yet not believe that God is the creator of the (rest of the) universe. Aristotle occupies precisely this position.

6. This is more or less the methodology explained by Rand in 1982, 16.

7. It appears that Reed has simply not bothered to even read the literature I cited. For example, right at the outset of his paper, he asserted (without evidence, and hence arbitrarily) that “a ‘god’ has never been reliably observed.” But in my paper, I cited a book by William Alston (1991) that argues God *has been* perceived. Perhaps Alston is wrong and can be refuted. But by simply ignoring the argument, Reed has hardly offered a refutation.

8. A tangential point: Reed seems to have taken me to think that the best arguments for theism are the newest ones. That’s not at all the case: the best case for theism is found in the work of St. Thomas Aquinas. If I conveyed another impression, it was unintentional.

References

- Alston, William. 1991. *Perceiving God*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Peikoff, Leonard. 1991. *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*. New York: Dutton.
- Rand, Ayn. 1982. *Philosophy: Who Needs It?*. New York: Signet (paperback).
- Reed, Adam. 2008. Not even false: A commentary on Parrish and Toner. *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 9, no. 2 (Spring): 361–94.
- Toner, Patrick. 2007. Objectivist atheology. *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* 8, no. 2 (Spring): 211–36.