

Philosophy of Religion

Discussion

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

What’s Good for the Goose and Related Matters

Stephen E. Parrish

In his article “Not Even False: A Commentary on Parrish and Toner,” Adam Reed (2008) attempts to restate the Objectivist position in Philosophy of Religion from criticisms made by Patrick Toner and myself. The title of the paper implies two things: first that our critiques do not even rise to the level of being false and second that Reed’s paper is basically a commentary on ours. I will critique the first point below. The second point, that Reed’s paper is a commentary on our essays, is an overstatement, at least in regards to my essay. In fact, Reed ignores most of my paper, only touching on a few points.

As Reed admits, Objectivists have not written much in Philosophy of Religion—which was one of the points that I made. He writes, regarding Toner’s essay, “Toner is also faced with the lack of a single, systematic treatment of the ‘god question’ in the Objectivist literature, so that all that Toner has to work with is an occasional tangential comment in books and articles directed at other questions” (362). This is true, and is also what I had to deal with. It was one of the purposes of my paper to get Objectivists to face up to the fact that this is an unsatisfactory situation, especially for a philosophy that claims to be a total system of life and reality as Objectivism does.

In my first paper, I attempted to show several things. These included the following: that work in the Philosophy of Religion has advanced a great deal in the last few decades and that there has been

a revival of philosophical theism; that Objectivists have almost entirely ignored this; that the few Objectivist works in this area are multiply fallacious, and that especially, they commit the fallacy of question-begging repeatedly (Parrish 2007).

I shall argue several points in this present paper also. First, I argue that Reed's arguments about arbitrary concepts do not meet my original criticisms, and that Objectivist metaphysics has a problem with arbitrary concepts also. Second, I argue that the Objectivist axioms do not establish what Objectivism needs them to do. Third, I argue that Objectivism necessarily has a broader cosmology than Reed thinks, and that it has metaphysical implications. Fourth, I argue that several of the points that Reed makes against various theistic arguments are themselves fallacious. Finally, I will respond to Reed's argument on Occam's razor and Objectivism.

Although I cannot touch on every point that Reed makes, I will nevertheless argue that he has failed to vindicate the Objectivist position. I will not touch any of the criticisms made specifically about Toner's essay, as I am quite confident that Toner can defend himself.

God as an Arbitrary Concept

The first argument of Reed's that I will examine is the following: that God is an arbitrary concept and is therefore "not even false," as Reed himself puts it. He writes:

Rand and Peikoff do not dismiss most arguments for "God," as is usually done in attempts to invalidate an argument in the context of non-Objectivist philosophies, for being *incoherent*. Instead, the reasoning for "God" is shown to be *arbitrary*, in the sense of not being traceable to the only way there is for information *about reality* to come *from reality* and enter the mind: the evidence of the senses. Theistic arguments are only *indirectly* incoherent, because it is incoherent to use a concept without first validating it by induction from evidence. (Reed 2008, 361–62)

What this seems to mean is that before we can validate the concept of God, we must first have a valid argument that God exists, but that before we can have an argument that God exists, we must

first have the concept of God validated. In short, to use A we must first prove B , but before we can use B , we must prove A . Theism is thus rejected a priori.

Before moving on, I want to answer a criticism made against me by Reed. This is that, when Reed states,

Some of Parrish's arguments depend on inserting an element contrary to Objectivism into some Objectivist comment, or prepending or appending it to an Objectivist comment, without identifying his objection as contrary to Objectivism, and then "demonstrating" the contradiction in the resulting chimera—which Parrish presents as a supposed defect, not of the chimera he has created, but of the Objectivist argument. This procedure begins on page 171, where Parrish takes the idea of "the God of classical theism" and, without bothering to validate it by Rand's criterion as a concept, combines it with various Objectivist arguments. (363)

This whole statement is confused for a number of reasons. From what I can make out of the above statement, Reed seems to think that either I should have tried, as he says, "to argue against Rand's criterion, or against Rand's theory of concepts" (363). What I think he means by this, in other words, is that I would first have to show that the concept of the God of classical theism is non-arbitrary or argue that arbitrary concepts are still worthy of investigation. I think Reed gets this backwards, as I shall argue below. For me to have "validated" God as a concept before criticizing Objectivist philosophy of religion would mean that I would have accepted the Objectivist position beforehand and that I could not therefore criticize Objectivist philosophy of religion without having shown, in that paper, that God exists. If this were accepted as a general principle, it would make for some odd papers. Finally, I already have "validated" the concept of God in my book *God and Necessity*, where I offer a sound argument for God's existence (Parrish 2001).

If one accepts Reed's criterion, not only would I have misunderstood Objectivism but apparently also Peikoff would have too. The reason that I say this is because, if one reads the relevant section of Peikoff's book that I spent a large part of my critique on, namely

pages 4–36, and especially 31–34, one will see that Peikoff is not arguing against theism because it is allegedly an arbitrary concept, but because he thinks that it clashes with the fundamental axioms of Objectivism. In this section, Peikoff argues from the basic axioms of Objectivism: existence, consciousness, and identity, and the resulting rejection of “idealism and materialism.” Following this is an attack on the concept of God, which attempts to show it is inconsistent with these axioms. It is this section, and specifically Peikoff’s anti-theistic arguments presented there, that I engage—not the argument that God is an arbitrary concept.

Peikoff argues that the attributes of God as commonly understood—e.g., omniscience, omnipotence, etc.—are contradictory to the axioms of Objectivist philosophy, and that these axioms are necessary to any coherent thought. To do so, he shows that he understands at least to some extent, the concepts involved—they are not unintelligible *bliks*. For example, when Peikoff argues that God cannot be the creator of the universe because “Existence” is prior to consciousness, he is showing that he understands what the concept of being a creator is. This is an attempt to show incoherence the old-fashioned way, by arguing that the concepts involved contain contradictions. Though I believe and have argued that Peikoff’s arguments fail, if the concepts involved are intelligible enough for Peikoff to criticize, they are also coherent enough for me to criticize Peikoff’s criticisms.

In order to be able to see whether there is evidence for the existence of something one must be able to understand what that thing is. And thus, before one comes to the conclusion that there is no evidence for, say, some “blik,” the concept of blik must be understood—and is therefore a meaningful concept. Further, since in most cases one cannot rule out the possibility that some evidence will arise for the existence of a particular entity, its concept must still be meaningful (as long as it is not self-contradictory).

Next, in the section where Reed deals with “intelligent design” arguments (Reed 2008, 380–81), he says that there is still a place where there is room for a “god of the gaps” argument.¹ Reed seems to think that the chances of there being a non-naturalist explanation of the relevant phenomena are extremely dim and he thinks that a naturalistic explanation will be shortly forthcoming. Still, however remote, design has a chance, and this being the case, it is epistemically

possible that there is evidence here for God's existence, and therefore God is not an arbitrary concept. Additionally, Reed has not refuted all the arguments for the existence of God. (Though of course in the space he had, one could not expect him to look at every theistic argument.)

If the concepts of God and his existence are arbitrary and therefore "not even false," the same could be said of Objectivist metaphysics. As I argue at length in my paper, Objectivist axioms cannot, when properly understood, account for why things exist and stay in existence, or why there is order rather than chaos. There can be no strictly "scientific" explanation of why these are the case, as they involve ontological concepts such as being and contingency. Objectivist metaphysics holds, among other things, that ultimate reality is non-conscious, and that the physical cosmos has to have always existed in some form and is therefore infinitely old, and that the fundamental physical "stuff," whatever it ultimately is, is ontologically self-existent. In my paper, I argued that these do not necessarily follow from the Objectivist axioms.

Perhaps Reed's larger point is simply this: that the human mind, in order to safeguard cognition, must not consider arbitrary concepts. He writes:

A philosopher more technical than Rand would have used a more technical expression, but *mind-destroyer* (Rand 1990, 305) is an accurate description of what *accepting the arbitrary as knowledge* does to cognition. Our faculty of cognition requires, among other things, an information processing system. . . . The human mind's only defense against destruction by non-knowledge is to exercise cognitive hygiene: either explicitly identify all arbitrary claims in one's mind, or refuse to accept arbitrary ideas into one's mind in the first place. (Reed 2008, 368–69)

This is rather strange, especially the part about not letting arbitrary concepts into one's mind in the first place. Non-sensory ideas usually don't come to us with little tags on them saying arbitrary or not-arbitrary. One can often only tell that there is a reason for thinking that something exists by examining the concept of that thing.

If one, after examination, finds that there is no reason to think that that concept is instantiated, then one may tag it as being arbitrary. But one would still have that concept in mind. Suppose that I were to propose an argument to Reed that attempts to show that God does exist. Unless he wants to dogmatically reject even thinking about the issue, he should examine it, in which case he must withhold judgment on whether it is arbitrary or not. Only after he has excogitated a refutation could he dismiss the concept of God as arbitrary, and by then he already has the concept. Besides, there is a large difference between simply having an arbitrary concept and accepting it as knowledge.

Though I can see Reed's point about not having one's mind cluttered with useless concepts (this is one reason that I don't watch much TV), I don't think that his position is adequate. Suppose that I have some arbitrary concept—of a being that I have no reason to think exists. Even if it is true that I would be better off jettisoning it from my mind (and assuming that I can really do this), this does not tell us whether it is a possible concept or not. In various cases, it is at least epistemically possible that its referent does exist, and evidence may arise in the future that it does.

By Reed's standard, what Objectivism ends up being here is a kind of verificationism. Verificationism is the philosophy that only that which can be verified by the senses is meaningful (Honderich 2005, 944). It was a popular philosophy back in the last century, but most philosophers have abandoned it, taking up a realist position that things can exist in a certain manner whether or not we have a reason to think that they do. Ironically, and against their own intentions, Objectivists seem here to accept theories that, taken to their logical conclusion, reject the real, mind-independent existence of things. After all, it can be argued that we do not really have evidence either way that there is at least one sentient species in the Andromeda galaxy. So what should we believe? Is it that because we have no evidence that there is one, it is an arbitrary belief, and thus to be dismissed, not even considered as a possibility? But it is only by thinking of such a concept, that we might come up with a method for finding out whether one such sentient species exists.

Reed (2008, 370) states: "Without evidence that there is a 'God,' or that a convention of gremlins is studying Hegel's *Logic* on the

planet Venus, a reasonable person will not spend any of his time, or any of his intellectual or existential resources on thinking or acting as though such things were to be even considered as possible.” Besides the fact that Reed is here insinuating that the concept of God is as silly as that of Venusian Gremlins reading Hegel without having an argument for this, his point is mistaken.² This is because while there is no reason to believe in the Gremlins, God is one of the quite limited options as to why reality exists as it does. And until Objectivists have shown that their own solution is a satisfactory one, which they have not, God cannot be dismissed. At worst, theism would be a theory that had to be examined, but was then dropped as inadequate. This is one reason that I wrote above that abduction, which is argument to the best explanation, is more fundamental than induction.

God and the Objectivist Axioms

Contrary to what Reed alleges, I do not combine Objectivist concepts with non-Objectivist ones and then illicitly argue to the falsity of Objectivism. Rather, I subject Objectivist theories and arguments to logical analysis, and the laws of logic are necessary to all thought.

To illustrate this, I will argue that if one reads the relevant portions of Peikoff's book, one will see that his main argument against the coherence of God, idealism, and the supernatural is that any such concept would be, by Objectivist axioms, outside of “existence,” and therefore would not have any identity, and would therefore be meaningless. Also, Peikoff argues that by its very nature, consciousness cannot be the cause of existence, which in this context can therefore only mean non-conscious reality.

Objectivists regard their philosophy as being built on a number of axioms that they consider undeniable. These are existence, consciousness, and identity. I have already commented on these in my paper, so my exposition here will be brief. Objectivists argue that “existence exists” is an axiom. I have no argument against this here, as long as it is recognized that all that is legitimately being said is something like “something exists,” or that “everything that exists, exists.” I also agree that consciousness exists, and that our finite consciousness does not create “existence,” where existence is defined

as that which is external to our minds. And everything has to exist as something, that is, everything exists in a definite manner. If some entity has, as part of its nature, some causal powers, it will be able to exert causation in the right circumstances.

The problems start when various conclusions are drawn from these. Part of what I argued in my paper is that they draw much more out of their axioms than they are logically entitled to. For example, Peikoff writes, “Existence, this principle declares, comes first. Things are what they are independent of consciousness—of anyone’s perceptions, images, ideas, feelings. Consciousness, by contrast, is a dependent. Its function is not to create or control existence, but to be a spectator: to look out, to perceive, to grasp that which is” (Peikoff 1991, 18). So, according to Peikoff here “existence is primary,” and consciousness is essentially passive, and therefore consciousness cannot be the cause of existence. By this definition of the terms, Peikoff has defined God out of existence, and naturalism as being true. Or in other words, he establishes the primacy of the impersonal over the personal by definition. But the argument rests upon confusions, and puts forth a definition of consciousness that I don’t think Peikoff really accepts.

For example, as I argue (Parrish 2007, 176–77), it is inaccurate to say that God is “consciousness.” Rather, God as classically defined in Western thought is an intrinsically and necessarily conscious *being*; possessing, among many other properties, omnipotence, omniscience, necessity, and aseity.³ To argue that God cannot have created the world because consciousness is dependent upon, and cannot create, “existence,” is to subtly misstate the theistic position. The theist instead holds that God, a necessarily existing personal conscious being possessing omnipotence, is the cause of the universe—not that some bare free-floating consciousness existing apart from a subject is the cause of the universe. Consciousness and perception are necessarily that of a subject, a self. It is a subject, or in our case, a human being that *has* consciousness. The same holds true for God.⁴

Rand (1990, 29) defined consciousness as being “the faculty of awareness—the faculty of perceiving that which exists.” But there is more to consciousness than just that—there is also knowing, deducing, feeling, and willing. Persons can do many other things with their consciousness than just passively perceive. Neither Rand nor Peikoff

would really deny this. All of these conscious states belong to a subject, a person (or animal), an agent, which does the knowing, deducing, willing, and feeling. There is thus an active role of consciousness. But by here defining theism as idealism and idealism in turn, as the doctrine that consciousness is ultimate and consists merely of perceiving, Peikoff misstates what consciousness in totality is. The argument against “idealism and theism” thus rests on confusion.

By defining existence in contradistinction to consciousness, and holding that consciousness is intrinsically a passive faculty, what is being said is that by definition physical reality is ultimate—which is removing God by fiat. Physical reality does not depend for its existence upon our consciousness. This does not show that it could not depend upon God—since he is by definition a quite different kind of being than we are, and has a different form of consciousness.

Also, physical reality can in fact sometimes be caused to exist in a certain manner by consciousness. For example, I consciously chose to be here typing on my computer rather than staying in bed, and this makes the physical world a somewhat different place than it otherwise would have been. The only way to deny this is to say that consciousness has no effect on physical reality, and is thus epiphenomenal. I don't think this is what Objectivists really want to say; they agree that man's mind can affect the physical environment. Of course the way that we cause things is quite different from God's creating the universe; but again God is a quite different, and much greater, being than we are.

In short, the section of Peikoff's book to which Reed appeals argues against God in the way that I described in my paper—that God is contrary to Objectivist axioms, and therefore cannot exist. My argument was and is that Objectivists establish their axioms and then load them with concepts that cannot be legitimately derived from the fundamental bare-bones axioms themselves, and thus subtly beg the question against theism.

Cosmology

Reed (2008, 364) argues that “Objectivism does not have a cosmology, and does not deal, as a system of philosophy, with questions about the existence of specific entities whose existence is

not axiomatic. Thus, the existence or nonexistence of a hypothetical existent such as a ‘god’ is not, in the context of Objectivism, a philosophical question but a scientific one.”

My response is that this is a serious error, albeit one that follows from the way that Objectivists attempt to establish their position, and that it also has serious lamentable consequences. First, as I argue (Parrish 2007, 200–1), Objectivists do have at least a minimal cosmology in that they hold that necessarily, existence as a whole cannot come into or go out of existence, along with holding that “existence” (physical entities, whatever they ultimately are) is prior to consciousness. This commits them to an eternally existent non-conscious universe from which consciousness somehow arose. Second, as I also argue at length, contrary to what Objectivists maintain, the mere fact that some entity exists, and exists as a particular kind of thing, in no way necessitates that that entity will continue to exist, or exist as that kind of entity (181–98).

The question of God is primarily a metaphysical question, not a scientific one. Although I agree that science can provide data on which one can reason about the existence of God, even here the final argumentation is metaphysical, for it deals with fundamental concepts that science may presuppose but does not use in its normal activities. This is an important point, and it should be seen why Objectivists make this move. Because they accept certain axioms, and then derive more from them than they are logically entitled to, they think that therefore they have a complete metaphysical system. But they do not. (In truth, I think that neither Rand nor Peikoff would think that the existence of God is a purely scientific question.⁵)

The mere fact that “existence” exists does not tell us the following: why does “existence” exist?; why does it remain in existence?; and why is it orderly and why does it remain so, and so on. It also does not answer the question as to how it is possible that consciousness came into existence and exists in a physical universe—or, more specifically, how conscious persons can exist. More is needed. And we must look to metaphysics, not science, for the answers to these and other questions. The reasons should be clear: science can describe how things are and, given the existence of certain kinds of entities with certain causal powers, why they act in the manner that they do. But by its nature, science cannot answer

metaphysical questions. To answer these sorts of questions, which are really questions of being, we must turn to metaphysics—especially the study of being known as ontology.

Second, as mentioned above, Reed wrongly seems to think that induction is the fundamental investigative principle regarding the God concept.

There really aren't that many conceivable reasons why the physical universe exists in the manner that it does. One of these is that it exists ultimately for no reason, which I call Brute Fact Theory. The other is that it exists out of its own inner necessity, which I call Necessary Universe Theory. The third and final answer is that there is some other being(s) that is the cause of the universe existing in the manner that it does, which I call Necessary Deity Theory. To save a lot of argumentation, I will refer to my book, *God and Necessity*, for a full discussion (Parrish 2001). The upshot is that to give a sufficient accounting as to why the universe exists in the manner that it does, there must be a necessary being, one that does exist out of its own inner necessity—and that only the classical concept of God is a coherent concept of such a necessary being.

Objectivism falls under the category of Necessary Universe Theory. This can be seen, among other places, where Peikoff (1991, 28) writes:

As with the doctrine of the primacy of consciousness, so with the idea of “possible universes”: it has been taken over uncritically from religion by more secular thinkers, including even those who call themselves atheists and naturalists. The result is an entire profession, today's philosophers, who routinely degrade the actual, calling it a realm of mere “brute” or “contingent”—i.e., unintelligible and rewritable—facts. The lesson such philosophers teach their students is not to adhere to reality, but to brush it aside and fantasize alternatives.

Peikoff's mention of possible universes, by which he means what other philosophers call possible worlds, is not a clear statement of what is usually meant. By possible world, what philosophers mean is reality as it could have been. This does not mean that reality is

rewritable or that we can alter it at our whims. Only one possible world can be the actual one. All of the other ones cannot be, though they could have been. As I wrote above, Objectivists believe that the world that is, is the only one that could have been. But as I argue, they have no good reason for thinking that this is the case (Parrish 2007, 185–86).⁶

Necessarily, since there is only one reality, there is only one way that reality exists. Therefore, reality is the way that it is, and cannot be other than it is, as this would entail a contradiction. But this does not by itself mean that reality *had* to be this way, that other possible worlds could not have been actual. It just means that they aren't. Just because some entity *E* exists in form *F*, does not mean that it could not have existed in form *G*. It only means that if it is *F*, then it cannot simultaneously be not-*F*. Peikoff here is committing a De Dicto-De Re fallacy, which I explain in my paper (192). Finally, thinking of possible worlds is not “brushing aside” reality. Rather, most contemporary philosophers think it is an excellent tool for understanding such notions as necessity, possibility, and impossibility.⁷

Objectivists reject the standard concepts of logical possibility. On Objectivist theory, the fact that the universe exists in the state it does at time *t*1 is the necessary result of its existing in the state it existed in at time *t*0, and the same for every other time. To put it another way, given the state of the universe at *t*0, it follows with logical necessity that it will have a certain state at *t*1, thus explaining the universe's state at every time. A problem with this is that it can give no explanation as to why this series of entities and states exists rather than another series of entities and states for all time. That our universe exists rather than another is, thus, a brute fact—which undercuts the logical necessity.

Granting my argument in my first paper that the Objectivist case for a necessary universe fails, and that the universe cannot exist out of its own inner necessity (187–97), there are only two remaining possibilities, that of Brute Fact and of Necessary Deity.⁸ Peikoff rightly rejects Brute Fact, but this leaves only Necessary Deity, which of course he would also reject. But these are the only possibilities, and they must be decided between abductively.

Peikoff is right about one point. This is that the majority of philosophers today accept some version of Brute Fact Theory. And

I agree that such a theory is impossible. For example, atheist philosopher Quentin Smith (1986, 181–82) wrote:

The world-whole is miraculous in that at each moment it realizes one of two possibilities, even though it is not necessary for it to realize this possibility rather than another one. At each moment the world could either *happen or not happen*, and I marvel that the world happens, and continues to happen, and avoids the possibility of not happening. At each moment, the world-whole stands before the abyss of nothingness, but it does not vanish into this abyss; it continues, and in so continuing it overcomes again and again the possibility of nonexisting. It is miraculous that the other possibility, the possibility of plunging into nothingness, is not realized, for this is *equally as possible* as the possibility that it is realized.

Perhaps realizing that by so writing, he was giving away the store to theism, Smith has recently defended the concept of a self-caused universe (2008, 1–10). Briefly, he argues that reality is composed of instantaneous universe states, or IUS, which happen one after another. So IUS1 is followed by IUS2, given the laws of nature as they are. Thus, he argues, the physical universe is self-explaining. The problem with this is that the question immediately arises, are the laws of physics logically contingent or logically necessary? Seeing that they can be denied without contradiction, they are contingent. For example, the speed of light is about 186,282 mps. But there seems to be no contradiction in thinking that the speed of light is 200,000 mps. (Indeed, some have speculated that the speed of light has changed over time, though this is highly controversial.) So Smith's new theory fails because it fails to explain the thing that most needs explaining, which is why the laws of nature remain the same over time, though they are logically contingent.⁹ Here I agree with Peikoff: it is impossible to obtain order from Brute Fact.

So we are back to the same problem: There are only two naturalistic ontological theories as to why the physical universe exists in the manner that it does, and both fail. Of course, I do not think that the laws of nature are going to change, or that physical objects

will start vanishing into nothingness. Rather, the problem is: how do we explain the constancy of the contingent laws and entities of nature? My argument is that Objectivism cannot explain this, nor can any other naturalistic theory, whereas classical theism can, because it has as ultimate reality an omniscient, rational God. According to classical theism, because God is rational and good, he never acts in an irrational manner, which is why the universe is orderly.

Theistic Arguments

In this section, I want to examine some of Reed's criticisms of various theistic arguments. I am quite happy that he has deigned to do so in his paper, though I disagree with him at many points. One of the reasons that I wrote my original paper was to encourage Objectivists to engage in what is going on in contemporary philosophy of religion.

Indeed, Reed examines some interesting arguments, and makes some interesting comments. However, I do not have the space to examine all of them, and so will limit my comments to a couple of examples. One of these is the Anthropic Principle. Reed (2008) writes:

The Anthropic Principle refers to the fact that the fundamental constants of physics all have values compatible with the existence of carbon-based life. If those constants had sufficiently different values, carbon-based life, including intelligent life, would not be possible. The argument for "God" from the Anthropic Principle is that because we do not know why the constants have the values that they have, it must be that those constants could have had different values . . . (385)

Reed's argument against this is the following:

There is no evidence for the belief that the physical constants could have had values different from what they are. Since the physical constants have the same values in all the contexts in which they have been measured, the most reasonable presumption is that they have those values in other contexts

as well.¹⁰ (385)

This is fallacious. The “evidence” for the belief that the physical constants could have been different is simply that the values could be different without entailing any contradictions. This procedure is not infallible, as there may be contradictions we don’t notice, but still it gives us reason to think that some situation is possible. E.g., there seems to be no contradiction in conceiving that the force of gravity, for example, could be twice as large as it actually is. This being the case, it is logically possible that the strength of gravity could have been different from what it actually is. If one insisted, one could say that that would not be gravity, but some other factor, say, gravity2. In that case, the question becomes why is there gravity, rather than gravity2 or something else? Scientists working in this area often consider what the universe would be like were the fundamental constants of nature different from what they are.

Again, the fact that the values we see in the universe are all the same, and therefore it would be reasonable to think that they would be the same in other situations, is not a solution as to why they are that way. Rather, that it is one of the problems to be solved. Since there could have been, without any contradiction, different values, why are they the same all over the universe at all times?

Finally, Reed writes:

Yet even if someone were to discover evidence that the values of the physical constants resulted from a single instance of a random physical-constant-setting process or event, this still would not constitute evidence of divine intervention to rig the result in favor of carbon-based life. Every random process has a result, and that result, however unlikely it may have been *a priori*, is the actual result that happened in reality. If the result had been different, we would not be here to know it. Since we are here, and the constants are what they are, then if the physical constants were the result of a random process, they still are nothing more than a random result. . . . If the physical constants had happened to get set to values different enough to make life and knowledge impossible, the universe would still exist. But

we would not be here to know that it exists. (385–86)

Reed's argument here is very weak, for two reasons. First, I think that he is misunderstanding the nature of the probability involved here, and second, he is committing what might be called the weak anthropic fallacy.

What he seems to be saying is that yes, it may have been improbable that a random process would have the result we see, but any result would be random and improbable. Therefore, there is no more improbability to the constants in the universe that we see, and any other. So we should not be surprised by the constants that we have. If this is what he means, then he is misunderstanding the nature of improbability that the anthropic argument uses, and the difference between things that are very improbable but not surprising, and that which is improbable and surprising. (If it isn't what he means, other people have made this error, and it might be good to explain it.)

To illustrate, consider the following situation. Suppose that there were a sports stadium that had exactly one hundred thousand seats. One Saturday afternoon there is a football game, and every seat is filled. Let us suppose (unrealistically) that each seat is filled at random, that is, they all have the same price and are open to whoever sits in them first. Given this situation, each pattern or combination of seats in which this specific seat has this specific person in it is equally probable, or improbable. Therefore, we do not find it surprising at all that the specific person-seat match pattern is the one that is actual, even though the a priori odds against any particular one pattern obtaining are astronomical. This is because, given the situation, necessarily one highly improbable situation will obtain.

But suppose that the situation was such that the seating was alphabetical. That is, suppose that the seats were all numbered 1 to 100,000. In seat one was Aaron Abbott, while seat number 100,000 had Zelda Zylstra, and every seat in between was similarly alphabetically arranged. In one sense this arrangement is no more unlikely than any other. But in another sense, it is extremely surprisingly unlikely. Indeed, if this were the case, one would think that it was not and could not be random, that it had to be planned.

Similarly if, as perhaps most cosmologists believe, there are countless values of universal constants that do not allow for life to

exist, and only a comparative few values that do, we are certainly entitled to at least consider the possibility that this was not the result of a random process. The point here is not that all arguments from design are sound, but that this objection fails.

The second argument is even weaker. This is that there is no surprise in us finding that we live in a physical universe that allows life, because if it didn't we wouldn't be here to notice it. In response to arguments like this one, Richard Swinburne (1991, 313) gives the following parable:

On a certain occasion the firing squad aim their rifles at the prisoner to be executed. There are twelve expert marksmen in the firing squad, and they fire twelve rounds each. However, on this occasion all 144 shots miss. The prisoner laughs and comments that the event is not something requiring any explanation because if the marksmen had not missed, he would not be here to observe them not doing so. But of course the prisoner's comment is absurd; the marksmen all having missed is indeed something requiring explanation, and so too is what goes with it—the prisoner being alive to observe it.

I believe that the point Swinburne makes is sound. Similarly, it is totally beside the point to argue that however improbable it might be, the existence of the universe that we live in needs no explanation—because after all, if we weren't here we couldn't ask the question. Thus, Reed's argument fails, and the problem is unsolved. This is why, in what I have read, the majority of nontheists think that a response to the anthropic argument is to posit the existence of multiple universes. But whatever the cogency of that response (and I believe that it fails), it is an argument that Reed does not make.

Reed makes the same mistake when he criticizes an argument made by Alvin Plantinga on the evolution of the faculty of knowledge. This is where Reed (2008, 387) writes: "Yet even if the evolution of capacity for knowledge had been somehow a matter of chance, and improbable, one can hardly argue from its result that evolution was rigged. If a brain capable of knowledge had never evolved, then no matter how likely such a result might have been *a priori*, no animal

living afterward would have been able to identify the process, or its outcome, or anything at all.” It should be apparent that here Reed commits the same fallacy that he does in the argument above. Just because if some x were not the case, that we would not exist to know that it is not the case, that by itself hardly explains why x is the case.

There is much more that could be said about Reed’s criticism of theistic arguments. One point is that he has not covered all of them, and hardly could be expected too, in such a short space. I just wish to note that some of his responses to the arguments he addresses, such on free will and cosmology, are speculative and controversial.

Occam’s and Rand’s Razor

There is one last topic that I wish to cover. This is Reed’s attack on my use of Occam’s razor. In my paper, I criticize an argument sometimes made against theism. My critique was not aimed at Objectivists in particular, but atheists in general. If one looks at the source Reed cites, the term “Occam’s Razor” does not appear. Reed is basically accusing me of deliberately distorting the Objectivist version of Occam’s razor, but there is no indication that Rand intended her Razor to replace Occam’s.¹¹

Reed writes that, according to Objectivism, “Concepts are not to be multiplied beyond necessity” (382). This is an odd argument. If one looks at the section of Rand’s writings where she put forth her “razor,” you will see that she is writing about concepts, so she had no reason to write about any other razor. Also, just because Rand said that concepts should not be multiplied beyond necessity does not mean that she thought it okay to multiply anything else beyond necessity. If P entails Q , it doesn’t follow that if not P then not Q .

Does Reed really think that there is no problem in multiplying entities (as opposed to concepts)? Suppose that Reed’s house is robbed, and all 100 of his copies of *Atlas Shrugged* are stolen. This can be easily explained by supposing that there was one robber. But if Objectivism is not opposed to multiplying entities, why could one not with equal validity suppose that there were 999 robbers? Does Reed really wish to say that, because Objectivism limits multiplying things only to concepts, we can thus multiply entities needlessly as much as we want?

Or, if we stick strictly to concepts, then is the concept of God as

opposed to eternal, necessarily existing material entities a multiplication of concepts? Again, I do not see why. What we have instead is two incommensurable sets of concepts, which was one of the points that I was making. So frankly, I don't see how Reed's criticism can succeed—or, for that matter, is even relevant.

Conclusion

There is a great deal more in Reed's essay that deserves to be discussed, and I realize that I have given only a cursory examination of the points here, but space is limited. To sum up then, I will say that Reed's counterargument fails. He ignores most of my paper, including the sections with my critique of Objectivist metaphysics. He wrongly interprets Peikoff's case against theism, and therefore also my response. He fails to adequately defend Objectivist cosmology. He does say some interesting things about some theistic arguments, but also commits errors in reasoning, and hardly shows that there are no sound arguments for God's existence. Finally, his use of Rand's razor does nothing to undermine my argument using Occam's razor.

Reed ends with the following statement:

Parrish (2007) and Toner (2007) argue against Objectivism's rejection of theistic claims. Their arguments, however, are based on nothing but misuse of intuition, and indirect appeals to alleged evidence—which turns out to consist of middle-school fallacies, and of attempts to deduce a god from some temporary gap in scientific knowledge. Their arguments are, as Wolfgang Pauli said of earlier attempts to argue from arbitrary hypotheses, *not even false*. (390–91)

I deny that I committed any middle-school fallacies, or any other kind for that matter. At least Reed has not shown that I do. What is apparent from the above passage is the fact that, with my paper at least (and I think with Toner's as well), Reed has not only failed to grapple with the substance of the arguments, but he fails to successfully defend his own philosophy. On the principle that "What is good for the goose is good for the gander," I could say that Objectivist metaphysics is not even false (though I don't; I merely think it is false). Further, Reed inaccurately states that I try to deduce a "god"

from some temporary gap in the scientific knowledge, while I don't argue for God's existence in my paper. Where I do so argue (Parrish 2001), in fact, I use ontology. And, as I have also shown, Reed commits some fallacies of his own.

In spite of the above, I hope that the conversation between Objectivists and their critics on philosophy of religion can continue.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank an anonymous reader for several suggestions.

Notes

1. There is a large literature on the subject of intelligent design. Whatever else might be said about it, I do not think that the argument is always an argument from gaps. For an interesting discussion on the issue, see Ratzsch 2001.

2. Although it is a rather charming example. I think that this is one arbitrary concept that I will keep.

3. By "aseity" what is basically meant is that God is independent, not dependent on anything else for his existence or attributes.

4. This is an interesting issue. For a study of human selves that is relevant to the divine self, see Lund 2005.

5. As was noted by an anonymous reader.

6. On logical necessity, see, for example: Loux 1979; Parrish 2001; and Plantinga 1974, 2003.

7. See Foster 2004; Loux 1979; Plantinga 1974.

8. Parrish 2001, 175–279. There I label Objectivist metaphysics a weak version of the Necessary Universe theory.

9. Peikoff of course denies that it is possible that the laws of nature be other than they are. See my critique in Parrish 2007, 184–97. As a note, I argue in Parrish 2001, that God's essential properties are necessary, as is his existence, and God is therefore stable. He stands over the rest of reality, i.e., is transcendent to the universe rather than being a spatio-temporal object.

10. I agree that the fundamental constants and values of nature are the same. The question is: why is this so?

11. I would like to thank Patrick Toner for this insight.

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