

The Open-Question Argument and Objectivist Epistemology

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Abstract

The open-question argument (OQA) is an argument in meta-ethics that is used against ethical naturalism, the thesis that moral properties are identical to natural properties. This argument has been rightfully criticized, and one notable criticism is that it overlooks the sense-reference distinction, viz. the distinction between the concept that a term refers to and the sense in which it is being used. Ayn Rand's Objectivism rejects the sense-reference distinction, and this paper will present an argument that uses the OQA to argue against the underlying epistemological assumptions of Objectivism.

1 Objectivism and the Analytic-Synthetic Distinction

Leonard Peikoff in "The Analytic-Synthetic Dichotomy" wrote that Objectivism rejects the analytic-synthetic distinction, and presented the following argument for it:

What, then, is the meaning of the concept "man"? "Man" means a certain type of entity, a rational animal, including *all* the characteristics of this entity (anatomical, physiological, psychological, etc., as well as the relations of these characteristics to those other entities) — all the characteristics already known, and all those ever to be discovered. Whatever is true of the entity, is meant by the concept.

It follows that there are no grounds on which to distinguish "analytic" from "synthetic" propositions. Whether one states that "A man is a rational animal," or that "A man has only two eyes" — in both cases, the predicated characteristics are true of man and are, therefore, included in the concept "man." The meaning of the first statement is: "A certain type of entity, including all its characteristics (among which are rationality and animality) is: a rational animal." The meaning of the second is: "A certain type of entity, including all its characteristics (among which is the possession of only two eyes) has: only two eyes." Each of these statements is an instance of the Law of Identity; each is a "tautology"; to deny either is to contradict the meaning of the concept "man," and thus to endorse a self-contradiction.

A similar type of analysis is applicable to *every* true statement. Every truth about a given existent(s) reduces, in basic pattern, to: "X is: one or more of the things which it is." The predicate in such a case states some characteristic(s) of the subject; but since it *is* a characteristic of the subject, the *concept(s)* designating the subject in fact includes the predicate from the outset. If one wishes to use the term "tautology" in this context, then *all* truths are "tautological." (And, by the same reasoning, all falsehoods are self-contradictions.)

When making a statement about an existent, one has, ultimately, only two alternatives: "X (which means X, the existent, including all its characteristics) *is* what it is" — or: "X *is not* what it is." The choice between truth and falsehood is the choice between "tautology" (in the sense explained) and self-contradiction. [2]

The idea here is that a proposition like "No human has walked on Mars" is analytically true, since, due to the fact that no humans have ever walked on Mars, having done so would be contrary to the concept of a human, thus it is definitionally true. Huemer noted that the success of this argument relies on the absence of the sense-reference distinction, since it assumes that, since all true statements are true in virtue of the references of their subjects and predicates, all true statements are so analytically, but analytic statements are true in virtue of the *senses* of the words in question, rather than their references. [1] This implicit rejection of the sense-reference distinction is what renders Objectivism vulnerable to the open-question argument.

2 The Open-Question Argument

The open-question argument, when used against ethical naturalism, can be formulated as follows:

1. If goodness were identical to *some natural property*, then the question “Is *some natural property* good?” would be meaningless.
2. But the question “Is *some natural property* good?” is not meaningless—it is an open question.
3. So, goodness is not identical to *some natural property*.

Premise 1 was justified on the basis that, if goodness really were identical to a natural property, then the answer to the question of if that property is good would be trivial—yes—it would be akin to asking “Is the color red red?” A common objection to this line of reasoning is that *some natural property* and *goodness* do have the same referent, but different senses, so the question is not meaningless—like “Is H_2O water?” is not. [4]

Objectivism entails that all truths are analytically true, which is to say that they are true in virtue of definition. Premise 1 of the OQA can be generalized to include all questions of definition, rather than only identity:

- 1*. If X is a property that Y holds by definition, then the question “Does Y hold X?” is meaningless.

For instance, asking “I know John is vegan, but does he eat meat?” is meaningless, or, using G. E. Moore’s terminology, a closed question. Now, we can replace X and Y with two examples:

- 1**. If not having walked on Mars is a property that humans hold by definition, then the question “Has that human walked on Mars?” is meaningless.

Virtually no philosophical system will posit that not having walked on Mars is definitionally true of humans, except for Objectivism, so we can formulate a full version of this argument as follows:

1. If not having walked on Mars is a property that humans hold by definition, then the question “Has that human walked on Mars?” is meaningless. (Premise)
2. But the question “Has that human walked on Mars?” is not meaningless. (Premise)
3. So, not having walked on Mars is not a property that humans hold by definition. (1, 2)
4. If Objectivism is true, then not having walked on Mars is a property that humans hold by definition. (Premise)
5. So, Objectivism is false. (3, 4)

3 Objectivism and Analytic/Synthetic Identity of Sets

This section will look at a different implication of the argument above, that could potentially result in a conclusion that Objectivists will likely find significantly unpalatable. To do this, we will consider two sets: S consists of all humans, and S' consists of all humans that have not walked on Mars. These sets are synthetically equal—they have the same cardinality and elements, and are so due to reasons not in virtue of the definitions of the sets. However, Objectivism does not posit that the synthetic identity of sets is even possible, so we can establish a more elaborate argument, using the same Premises 1, 2, and 3 as the argument above:

1. If not having walked on Mars is a property that humans hold by definition, then the question “Has that human walked on Mars?” is meaningless. (Premise)
2. But the question “Has that human walked on Mars?” is not meaningless. (Premise)
3. So, not having walked on Mars is not a property that humans hold by definition. (1, 2)
4. If not having walked on Mars is not a property that humans hold by definition, then S and S' are not analytically identical. (Premise)

5. So, S and S' are not analytically identical. (3, 4)
6. If Objectivism is true, if two sets are not analytically identical, then they are not identical. (Premise)
7. So, if Objectivism is true, S and S' are not identical. (5, 6)
8. If two sets have the same cardinality and same elements, then they are identical. (Premise)
9. S and S' have the same cardinality and same elements. (Premise)
10. So, S and S' are identical. (8, 9)
11. So, if Objectivism is true, two identical sets are not identical. (7, 10, \perp)
12. So, Objectivism is false. (11, by *reductio*)

This argument is a *reductio ad absurdum*, viz. an argument that A is false, because $A \rightarrow (B \wedge \neg B)$, and this violates the principle of non-contradiction. The argument above demonstrates that if Objectivism were true, the principle of non-contradiction would be violated. This conclusion, to Objectivists, is akin to blasphemy, since it would mean their theory could be refuted by the principle that the first section of the most comprehensive defense of Objectivism is named after, and it appears this is in fact the case. [3]

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Bibliography

- [1] Michael Huemer. Why i am not an objectivist. 2018.
- [2] Leonard Peikoff. The analytic-synthetic dichotomy. 1990.
- [3] Ayn Rand. *Atlas Shrugged*. Random House, 1957.
- [4] Michael Ridge. Moral non-naturalism. 2003.