

THE BENEFITS AND HAZARDS OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF AYN RAND

A PERSONAL STATEMENT

Abstract: For eighteen years I was a close associate of novelist-philosopher Ayn Rand whose books, notably *"The Fountainhead"* and *"Atlas Shrugged,"* inspired a philosophical movement known as objectivism. This philosophy places its central emphasis on reason, individualism, enlightened self-interest, political freedom—and a heroic vision of life's possibilities. Following an explosive parting of the ways with Ayn Rand in 1968, I have been asked many times about the nature of our differences. This article is my first public answer to that question. Although agreeing with many of the values of *The Objectivist* philosophy and vision, I discuss the consequences of the absence of an adequate psychology to support this intellectual structure—focusing in particular on the destructive moralism of Rand and many of her followers, a moralism that subtly encourages repression, self-alienation, and guilt. I offer an explanation of the immense appeal of Ayn Rand's philosophy, particularly to the young, and suggest some cautionary observations concerning its adaptation to one's own life.

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BACKGROUND

I was fourteen years old when I read Ayn Rand's novel *"The Fountainhead"* for the first time. It was the most thrilling and emotionally powerful reading experience of my life. The only rival to that event might be the experience, some years later, of reading *"Atlas Shrugged"* in manuscript.

I wrote Miss Rand a letter in 1949 when I was studying psychology at UCLA and she was living in San Fernando Valley and was writing *"Atlas Shrugged"*. The purpose of my letter was to ask her a number of philosophical questions suggested to me by *"The Fountainhead"* and by her earlier novel, *We The Living*. The letter intrigued her; I was invited to her home for a personal meeting in March, 1950, a month before I turned twenty.

By that time anyone could read any sentence in *"The Fountainhead"* and I could recite the essence of the sentence immediately preceding as well as the sentence immediately following. I had absorbed that book more completely than anything else in my life.

I told Miss Rand that I felt that she had, in effect, brought me up, long distance, through *"The Fountainhead."* That book was the most important

companion of my adolescent years. We became friends and were associated for eighteen years—often in daily contact. I remember, in the first year of our relationship, when I was twenty years old, that my biggest expense—at a time when I was on a very modest allowance—was my phone bill. Typically we would talk philosophy on the telephone three or four nights a week, two or three hours at a time. In those days, thirty or forty dollars a month for toll calls from Los Angeles to the Valley was a lot of money.

Our relationship went through many stages over the next eighteen years. It came to an end in the summer of 1968. There was an explosive parting of the ways. I intend to write about that break one day, but I shall not concern myself with it here.

From 1958 to 1968, through the Nathaniel Branden Institute in New York City, I lectured on her philosophy and offered courses on her philosophy via tape transcription in some eighty other cities throughout North America. My first book, published in 1962, was *Who Is Ayn Rand?* It was a study of her life and work.

Following the break, I moved to Los Angeles, and in my public lectures in Los Angeles and elsewhere through the country I encountered many people, admirers of Miss Rand, students of objectivism, who wanted to talk to me about their own experiences with objectivism as they struggled to apply Rand's teachings to their own lives. Perhaps because of my break with her, they now felt freer to speak openly to me than they would have in the past. Of course they talked of the many benefits they had derived from Rand's work. But, they also disclosed much suffering, conflict, guilt, and confusion. At first my almost reflexive response was to think that they had somehow failed to understand objectivism adequately. But as time went by and I saw the magnitude of the problem, I realized that answer was not good enough—and that I needed to take a fresh look at what the philosophy of Ayn Rand was saying to people.

This conviction was reinforced by many men and women who came to me for psychotherapy who were admirers of Ayn Rand. Here again I was exposed to problems relating to objectivism that cried out for an explanation.

Later as I conducted more lectures and seminars, I met literally thousands of people around the country who described themselves as students of objectivism and admirers of Ayn Rand's books, and while I saw the great benefits and values her work offered to their lives, I also saw the dark side, the difficulties, the feelings of guilt, confusion and self-alienation that clearly seemed related, in some way, to the impact of Ayn Rand's work. Perhaps the evidence had always been there—I think it was—only now I was freer to see it because of my own growth and emancipation.

In discussing Rand's philosophy, there are certain difficulties. One is the task of separating her basic ideas from her own style of presentation. She could be abrasive, she could make sweeping generalizations that needed explanations that she did not provide; she made very little effort to understand someone else's intellectual context and to build a bridge from their context to hers.

A further difficulty lies in the fact that she was a novelist and chose principally to present her philosophy in fiction, the important exceptions

being, of course, her monograph, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, and a number of collections of her nonfiction essays, such as *The Virtue of Selfishness*. There are some wonderful benefits to be derived from dramatizing one's ideas in a novel, but there are also hazards. A novel can be a superb form through which to illustrate a new code of ethics or morality because one really has the opportunity to show, concretely and specifically, what one means and what one advocates; one can dramatize one's ideas through characters, actions, and events—saying to the reader, in effect, “This is what I mean.” The problem lies in the fact that a good novelist has to consider many other elements besides philosophical exposition: drama, pace, excitement, suspense, and so forth. There is no time for the kind of qualifications—amendments, exceptions, special cases—that slow down the pace. So what we get are broad slashes, sharp-cutting strokes, which make superb reading and fantastic theatre—unless you're sixteen years old, reading this novel and feeling more excited than you've ever felt in your life, your mind and soul on fire, and taking it all in as if it were to be read like a philosophical treatise. That's not how novels are to be read. But you see the problem, especially when reading a novelist as powerful and hypnotically persuasive as Ayn Rand.

In this article, I cannot provide an overview of Rand's entire system, let alone discuss each point in detail. I want to discuss here only a few basic issues, a few broad fundamentals that strike me as particularly important in terms of their impact on her admirers.

What, in essence, does objectivism teach? What are the fundamentals of the Ayn Rand philosophy?

OBJECTIVISM TEACHES:

1. That reality is what it is, that things are what they are, independent of anyone's beliefs, feelings, judgments or opinions—that existence exists, that A is A;

2. That reason, the faculty that identifies and integrates the material provided by the various senses, is fully competent, in principle, to understand the facts of reality;

3. That any form of irrationalism, supernaturalism, or mysticism, any claim to a nonsensory, nonrational form of knowledge, is to be rejected;

4. That a rational code of ethics is possible and is derivable from an appropriate assessment of the nature of human beings as well as the nature of reality;

5. That the standard of the good is not God or the alleged needs of society but rather “Man's life,” that which is objectively required for man's or woman's life, survival, and well-being;

6. That a human being is an end in him- or herself, that each one of us has the right to exist for our own sake, neither sacrificing others to self nor self to others;

7. That the principles of justice and respect for individuality autonomy, and personal rights must replace the principle of sacrifice in human relationships;

8. That no individual—and no group—has the moral right to initiate the use of force against others;

9. That force is permissible only in retaliation and only against those who have initiated its use;

10. That the organizing principle of a moral society is respect for individual rights and that the sole appropriate function of government is to act as guardian and protector of individual rights.

So, Rand was a champion and advocate of reason, self-interest individual rights, and political and economic freedom. She advocated a total separation of state and economics, just as—and for the same reason as—we now have the separation of state and church. She took the position, and it is a position I certainly share, that just as the government has no proper voice in the religious beliefs or practices of people, provided no one else's rights are violated, so there should be freedom of production and trade between and among consenting adults.

Obviously there is a good deal more to her philosophy than this brief sketch can begin to convey but we are talking here in terms of fundamentals—and these are the core ideas at the base of everything else she wrote.

I don't know of any other philosopher who has had her ideas quite so shamelessly misrepresented in the media. I was fairly young during the early years of my association with Ayn Rand and objectivism, and seeing this phenomenon in action was a shocking and dismaying experience. Here was a philosopher who taught that the highest virtue is thinking—and she was commonly denounced as a materialist. Here was a philosopher who taught the supremacy and inviolability of individual rights—and she was accused of advocating a dog-eat-dog world. Here was the most passionate champion in the Twentieth century of the rights of the individual against the state—and her statist opponents smeared her as being a fascist.

It was not a pleasant experience, during my twenties and thirties, to know the truth of our position and to encounter the incredible distortions and misrepresentations that so commonly appeared in the press, or to be present at some event with Miss Rand and later read a summary of what happened in a magazine that bore almost no relationship to the facts of the occasion. I suppose, however, it focused and dramatized something I needed to learn about the world: how low in their priorities is the issue of truth for most people when issues are involved about which they have strong feelings. Media people are no worse than anyone else; they merely operate in a more public area.

Notwithstanding all the smears on Ayn Rand and notwithstanding all the attacks and the misrepresentations of her ideas and work, her books sold and continue to sell in the millions. She has always had an especially powerful appeal to the young. Contrary to what some commentators may have led you to believe, her most passionate admirers are not to be found among big business. They are to be found among the young. I must tell you that in all the years I was associated with her I never saw big business do a thing to assist or support Ayn Rand in any way. I would say that for most businessmen her ideas were much too daring, much too radical. She believed in laissez-faire capitalism. She believed in a free market economy, I mean, a free free market economy. An economy in which not only were you to be unencumbered by regulations but so was everyone else. No special favors, no special protections, franchises, subsidies. No governmental privileges to help you against your competitors. Often I've had the fantasy of one day writing an article entitled “Big Business Versus Capitalism.”

THE BENEFITS

Now what are some of the values that Ayn Rand offers, as a philosopher, to the many people who have been moved by her work? To begin with, she offered a comprehensive and intelligible view of the universe, a frame of reference by means of which we can understand the world. She was a

philosophical system builder who offered a systematic vision of what life on this planet is essentially about and a vision of human nature and human relationships. And the point right now is not whether she was right or wrong in all respects of that vision, but that she had a vision, a highly developed one, one that seemed to promise comprehensiveness, intelligibility, and clarity—one that promised answers to a lot of burningly important questions about life. And human beings long for that.

We humans have a need to feel we understand the world in which we live. We have a need to make sense out of our experience. We have a need for some intelligible portrait of who we are as human beings and what our lives are or should be about. In short, we have a need for a philosophical vision of reality.

But twentieth-century philosophy has almost totally backed off from the responsibility of offering such a vision or addressing itself to the kind of questions human beings struggle with in the course of their existence. Twentieth-century philosophy typically scorns system building. The problems to which it addresses itself grow smaller and smaller and more and more remote from human experience. At their philosophical conferences and conventions, philosophers explicitly acknowledge that they have nothing of practical value to offer anyone. This is not my accusation; they announce it themselves.

During the same period of history, the twentieth century, orthodox religion has lost more and more of its hold over people's minds and lives. It is perceived as more and more irrelevant. Its demise as a cultural force really began with the Renaissance and has been declining ever since.

But the need for answers persists. The need for values by which to guide our lives remains unabated. The hunger for intelligibility is as strong as it ever was. The world around us is more and more confusing, more and more frightening; the need to understand it cries out in anguish.

One evidence of this need, today, is the rise of cults, the resurgence of belief in astrology, pop mysticism, and the popularity of self-appointed gurus.

We want answers, we want to feel we understand what is going on. If philosophers are telling us, "Don't even ask, it's naive to imagine that answers are possible," and if someone at last says to us, "Look no further, I have the answers, I can tell you, I bring clarity, peace, and serenity," it can be very tempting, very appealing and sometimes some of us end up in bed with the strangest people—all because of the hunger for answers, the hunger for intelligibility.

Ayn Rand has an incredible vision to offer—in many respects a radiantly rational one. I am convinced that there are errors in that vision and elements that need to be changed, eliminated, modified, or added and amplified, but I am also convinced that there is a great deal in her vision that will stand the test of time.

Her vision is a very uplifting one, it is inspiring. It doesn't tell you your mind is impotent. It doesn't tell you that you're rotten and powerless. It doesn't tell you that your life is futile. It doesn't tell you that you are doomed. It doesn't tell you that your existence is meaningless. It tells you just the opposite.

It tells you that your main problem is that you have not learned to understand the nature of your own power and, therefore, of your own possibilities. It tells you that your mind is and can be efficacious, that you are competent to understand, that achievement is possible, and that happiness is possible. It tells you that life is not about dread and defeat and anguish

but about achievement and exaltation.

The message she has brought runs counter not only to the dominant teachings of religion and philosophy for many centuries past, but, no less important, it runs counter to the teachings of most of our parents. Our parents, who said, "So who's happy?"; who said, "Don't get too big for your britches"; who said, "Pride goeth before a fall"; who said, "Enjoy yourself while you're young, because when you grow up, life is not fun, life is grim, life is a burden"; who said, "Adventure is for the comic strips; real life is learning to make your peace with boredom"; who said, "Life is not about exaltation, life is about duty."

Then, this incredible writer, Ayn Rand, comes along and says, in effect, "Oh, really?" and then proceeds to create characters who aren't in the Middle Ages, who aren't running around in outer space, but who are of our time and of this earth—who work, struggle, pursue difficult career goals, fall in love, participate in intensely emotional relationships, and for whom life is an incredible adventure because they have made it so. Characters who struggle, who suffer, but who win—who achieve success and happiness.

So, there is a powerful message of hope in her work. A powerful affirmation of the possibilities of existence. Her work represents a glorification not only of the human potential but also of the possibilities of life on earth.

And perhaps that is why her books have had such a powerful impact on the young, on those still fighting to protect themselves against the world of adults and against the cynicism and despair of their elders, on those fighting to hang onto the conviction that they can do better, that they can rise higher, and that they can make more of their life than those who have gone before them, especially, perhaps, their parents and relatives. One cannot understand the appeal of Ayn Rand if one doesn't understand how starved people—and especially young people—are for a celebration of human efficacy and for a vision that upholds the positive possibilities of life. "The Fountainhead" in particular has served as an incredible source of inspiration for the young. "The Fountainhead" gave them courage to fight for their own lives and for their own integrity and for their own ambitions.

I remember reading letters written by soldiers in World War II who reported reading sections of the book to one another and finding in it the will to believe they would survive the horror they were enduring and come back home and create a better life for themselves. I remember reading letters from people who spoke of the courage the book gave them to quit their jobs and enter new careers, when all their friends and relatives opposed them. Or the courage to leave an unhappy marriage. Or the courage to marry someone who didn't meet with family approval. The courage to treat their own lives as important, as worth fighting for.

And what is "Atlas Shrugged" if it is not a hymn to the glories of this earth, this world, and the possibilities for happiness and achievement that exist for us here? What is "Atlas Shrugged" if it is not a celebration of the human mind and human efficacy? And isn't this just what the young so desperately need? And not just the young, but all of us? To be told that our lives belong to ourselves and that the good is to live them and that we are here not to endure and to suffer but to enjoy and to prosper—is that not an incalculably valuable gift? So these are some of the great benefits of the philosophy of Ayn Rand. Now let us turn to some of the problems.

THE HAZARDS

What I have to say will by no means be exhaustive or comprehensive,

but I do want to touch on just a few issues that strike me as especially important. I want to share with you what I have observed.

Confusing reason with “the reasonable”

I have said that Ayn Rand was a great champion of reason, a passionate champion of the human mind—and a total adversary of any form of irrationalism or any form of what she called mysticism. I say “of what she called mysticism,” because I do not really think she understood mysticism very well—I know she never studied the subject—and irrationalism and mysticism are not really synonymous, as they are treated in *Atlas Shrugged*. That gets me a little off my track, however. A discussion of mysticism outside the Randian framework will have to wait for some other occasion. I will only state for the record that I am not prepared to say, as Rand was, that anyone who might describe him- or herself as a “mystic” is to be dismissed as a crackpot or a charlatan.

Reason is at once a faculty and a process of identifying and integrating the data present or given in awareness. Reason means integration in accordance with the law of noncontradiction. If you think of it in these terms—as a process of noncontradictory integration—it’s difficult to imagine how anyone could be opposed to it.

Here is the problem: There is a difference between reason as a process and what any person or any group of people, at any time in history, may regard as “the reasonable.” This is a distinction that very few people are able to keep clear. We all exist in history, not just in some timeless vacuum, and probably none of us can entirely escape contemporary notions of “the reasonable.” It’s always important to remember that reason or rationality, on the one hand, and what people may regard as “the reasonable,” on the other hand, don’t mean the same thing.

The consequence of failing to make this distinction, and this is markedly apparent in the case of Ayn Rand, is that if someone disagrees with your notion of “the reasonable,” it can feel very appropriate to accuse him or her of being “irrational” or “against reason.”

If you read her books, or her essays in *The Objectivist*, or if you listen to her lectures, you will notice with what frequency and ease she branded any viewpoint she did not share as not merely mistaken but “irrational” or “mystical.” In other words, anything that challenged her particular model of reality was not merely wrong but “irrational” and “mystical”—to say nothing, of course, of its being “evil,” another word she loved to use with extraordinary frequency.

No doubt every thinker has to be understood, at least in part, in terms of what the thinker is reacting against, that is, the historical context in which the thinker’s work begins. Ayn Rand was born in Russia: a mystical country in the very worst sense of the word, a country that never really passed through the Age of Reason or the Enlightenment in the way that Western Europe did. Ayn Rand herself was not only a relentless rationalist, she was profoundly secular, profoundly in love with this world, in a way that I personally can only applaud. Yet the problem is that she became very quick on the draw in response to anything that even had the superficial appearance of irrationalism, by which I mean, of anything that did not fit her particular understanding of “*the reasonable*.”

With regard to science, this led to an odd kind of scientific conservatism, a suspicion of novelty, an indifference—this is only a slight exaggeration—to anything more recent than the work of Sir Isaac Newton. I remember being astonished to hear her say one day, “After all, the theory of evolution is only a hypothesis.” I asked her, “You mean you seriously doubt that more complex

life forms—including humans—evolved from less complex life forms?” She shrugged and responded, “I’m really not prepared to say,” or words to that effect. I do not mean to imply that she wanted to substitute for the theory of evolution the religious belief that we are all God’s creation; but there was definitely something about the concept of evolution that made her uncomfortable.

Like many other people, she was enormously opposed to any consideration of the possible validity of telepathy, ESP, or other psi phenomenon. The evidence that was accumulating to suggest that there was something here at least worthy of serious scientific study did not interest her; she did not feel any obligation to look into the subject; she was convinced it was all a fraud. It did not fit her model of reality. When an astronaut attempted during a flight to the moon to conduct a telepathic experiment, she commented on the effort with scorn—even the attempt to explore the subject was contemptible in her opinion. Now I have no wish to argue, in this context, for or against the reality of nonordinary forms of awareness or any other related phenomenon. That is not my point. My point is the extent to which she had a closed mind on the subject, with no interest in discovering for herself why so many distinguished scientists had become convinced that such matters are eminently worthy of study.

Another example—less controversial—involves hypnosis. I became interested in hypnosis in 1960. I began reading books on the subject and mastering the basic principles of the art. Now this generated a problem because on the one hand Ayn Rand knew, or believed she knew, that hypnosis was a fraud with no basis in reality; on the other hand, in 1960 Nathaniel Branden was the closest thing on earth to John Galt. And John Galt could hardly be dabbling in irrationalism. So this produced some very curious conversations between us. She was not yet prepared, as she was later, to announce that I was crazy, corrupt, and depraved. At the same time, she firmly believed that hypnosis was irrational nonsense. I persevered in my studies and learned that the human mind was capable of all kinds of processes beyond what I had previously believed. My efforts to reach Ayn on this subject were generally futile and I soon abandoned the attempt. And to tell the truth, during the time I was still with her, I lost some of my enthusiasm for hypnosis. I regained it after our break and that is when my serious experimenting in that field began and the real growth of my understanding of the possibilities of working with altered states of consciousness.

I could give many more examples of how Ayn Rand’s particular view of “the reasonable” became intellectually restrictive. Instead, to those of you who are her admirers, I will simply say: Do not be in a hurry to dismiss observations or data as false, irrational, or “mystical,” because they do not easily fit into your current model of reality. It may be the case that you need to expand your model. One of the functions of reason is to alert us to just such a possibility.

It would have been wonderful, given how much many of us respected and admired Ayn Rand, if she had encouraged us to develop a more open-minded attitude and to be less attached to a model of reality that might be in need of revision. But that was not her way. Quite the contrary. Other people’s model of reality might be in need of revision. Never hers. Not in any fundamental sense. Reason, she was convinced, had established that for all time. In encouraging among her followers the belief that she enjoyed a monopoly on reason and the rational, she created for herself a very special kind of power, the power to fling anyone who disagreed with her about

anything into the abyss of “the irrational”—and that was a place we were all naturally eager to avoid.

ENCOURAGING REPRESSION

Now let’s turn to another very important issue in the Randian philosophy: the relationship between reason and emotion. Emotions, Rand said again and again, are not tools of cognition. True enough, they are not. Emotions, she said, proceed from value judgments, conscious or subconscious, which they do in the sense that I wrote about in *The Psychology of Self-Esteem and The Disowned Self*. Emotions always reflect assessments of one kind or another, as others besides Rand and myself have pointed out.

We must be guided by our conscious mind, Rand insisted; we must not follow our emotions blindly. Following our emotions blindly is undesirable and dangerous: Who can argue with that? Applying the advice to be guided by our mind isn’t always as simple as it sounds. Such counsel does not adequately deal with the possibility that in a particular situation feelings might reflect a more correct assessment of reality than conscious beliefs or, to say the same thing another way, that the subconscious mind might be right while the conscious mind was mistaken. I can think of many occasions in my own life when I refused to listen to my feelings and followed instead my conscious beliefs—which happened to be wrong—with disastrous results. If I had listened to my emotions more carefully, and not been so willing to ignore and repress them, my thinking—and my life—would have advanced far more satisfactorily.

A clash between mind and emotions is a clash between two assessments, one of which is conscious, the other might not be. It is not invariably the case that the conscious assessment is superior to the subconscious one; that needs to be checked out. The point is not that we follow the voice of emotion or feeling blindly, it means only that we don’t dismiss our feelings and emotions so quickly; we try to understand what they may be telling us; we don’t simply repress, rather we try to resolve the conflict between reason and feeling. We strive for harmony, for integration. We don’t simply slash away the pieces of ourselves that don’t fit our notion of the good or the right or the rational.

The solution for people who seem over preoccupied with feelings is not the renunciation of feelings but rather greater respect for reason, thinking, and the intellect. What is needed is not a renunciation of emotion but a better balance between emotion and thinking. Thinking needs to be added to the situation, emotion does not need to be subtracted from the situation.

Admittedly there are times when we have to act on the best of our conscious knowledge, and children will pay more attention to our conscious knowledge and convictions, even when it’s hard, even when it does violence to some of our feelings—because there is not time to work the problem out. But those are, in effect, emergency situations. It’s not a way of life.

I wrote *The Disowned Self* to address myself to this problem. In a way, that book is written in code. On one level, it’s a book about the problem of self-alienation and a deeper discussion of the relationship of reason and emotion than I had offered in *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*. But on another level, it’s a book written to my former students at Nathaniel Branden Institute, an attempt to get them to rethink the ideas about the relationship of mind and emotion they might have acquired from Ayn Rand or me, and thereby I hoped to undo some of the harm I might have done in the past when I shared and advocated Rand’s views in this matter. If you read the book that I wrote with my wife Devers *The Romantic Love Question and Answer Book*,

you will find that approach carried still further.

In the days of my association with Ayn Rand, we heard over and over again the accusation that we are against feelings, against emotions. And we would say in all good faith, “What are you talking about? We celebrate human passion. All the characters in the novels have powerful emotions, powerful passions. They feel far more deeply about things than does the average person. How can you possibly say that we are against feeling and emotion?”

The critics were right. Here is my evidence: When we counsel parents, we always tell them, in effect: “Remember, your children will pay more attention to what you do than what you say. No teaching is as powerful as the teaching of the example. It isn’t the sermons you deliver that your children will remember, but the way you act and live.” Now apply that same principle to fiction, because the analogy fits perfectly. On the one hand, there are Rand’s abstract statements concerning the relationship of mind and emotion; on the other hand, there is the behavior of her characters, the way her characters deal with their feelings.

If, in page after page of “*The Fountainhead*” and “*Atlas Shrugged*,” you show someone being heroic by ruthlessly setting feelings aside, and if you show someone being rotten and depraved by, in effect, diving headlong into his feelings and emotions, and if that is one of your dominant methods of characterization, repeated again and again, then it doesn’t matter what you profess, in abstract philosophy, about the relationship of reason and emotion. You have taught people: repress, repress, repress.

If you want to know the means by which they were taught, notwithstanding all the celebrations of passion in Ayn Rand’s books, study the scenes in “*The Fountainhead*” that deal with Roark’s way of responding to his own suffering, study the ruthlessness toward their own feelings and emotions exhibited by the heroes and heroine of “*Atlas Shrugged*,” and study also consistent way in which villains are characterized in terms of following their feelings. And understand the power of role models to shape beliefs.

When admirers of Ayn Rand seek my services professionally, they often come with the secret hope, rarely acknowledged in words, that with Nathaniel Branden they will at last become the masters of repression needed to fulfill the dream of becoming an ideal objectivist. When I tell them, usually fairly early in our relationship, that one of their chief problems is that they are out of touch with their feelings and emotions, cut off from them and oblivious, and that they need to learn how to listen more to their inner signals, to listen to their emotions, they often exhibit a glazed shock and disorientation. I guess I should admit that seeing their reaction is a real pleasure to me, one of the special treats of my profession you might say, and I do hope you will understand that I am acknowledging this with complete affection and good will and without any intention of sarcasm. The truth is, seeing their confusion and dismay, that it’s hard to keep from smiling a little.

One of the first things I need to convey to them is that when they deny and disown their feelings and emotions, they really subvert and sabotage their ability to think clearly—because they cut off access to too much vital information. This is one of my central themes in *The Disowned Self*. No one can be integrated, no one can function harmoniously, no one can think clearly and effectively about the deep issues of life who is oblivious to the internal signals, manifested as feelings and emotions, rising from within the organism. My formula for this is: “Feel deeply to think clearly.” It seems, however, to take a long time—for objectivists and nonobjectivists alike—to understand that fully. Most of us have been encouraged to deny and repress

who we are, to disown our feelings, to disown important aspects of the self, almost from the day we were born. The road back to selfhood usually entails a good deal of struggle and courage.

I know a lot of men and women who, in the name of idealism, in the name of lofty beliefs, crucify their bodies, crucify their feelings, and crucify their emotional life, in order to live up to that which they call their values. Just like the followers of one religion or another who, absorbed in some particular vision of what they think human beings can be or should be, leave the human beings they actually are in a very bad place: a place of neglect and even damnation. However, and this is a theme I shall return to later, no one ever grew or evolved by disowning and damning what he or she is. We can begin to grow only after we have accepted who we are and what we are and where we are right now. And no one was ever motivated to rise to glory by the pronouncement that he or she is rotten.

It's often been observed that the Bible says many contradictory things and so if anyone tries to argue that the Bible holds a particular position, it's very easy for someone who disagrees to quote conflicting evidence. It's been said that you can prove almost anything by quoting the Bible. The situation with Ayn Rand is not entirely different. Right now someone could quote passages from "The Fountainhead" or *Atlas Shrugged* that would clearly conflict with and contradict what I am saying about the messages contained in those works. They would not be wrong, given that the works contain contradictory messages. Nathaniel Branden of 1960 could quote lots of passages to dispute at least some of the points I am making here. He did, too. That doesn't change the fact that if you really study what the story is saying, if you pay attention to what the actions of the characters are saying, and if you pay attention to the characterizations, you will find abundant evidence to support my observation that the work encourages emotional repression and self-disowning.

Notice further—and this is especially true of *Atlas Shrugged*—how rarely you find the heroes and heroine talking to each other on a simple, human level without launching into philosophical sermons, so that personal experience always ends up being subordinated to philosophical abstractions. You can find this tendency even in the love scene between Galt and Dagny in the underground tunnels of Taggart Transcontinental, where we are given a brief moment of the intimately personal between them, and then, almost immediately after sexual intimacy, Galt is talking like a philosopher again. I have reason to believe that Galt has a great many imitators around the country and it's driving spouses and partners crazy!

The effect of Rand's approach in this area, then, is very often to deepen her readers' sense of self-alienation. That was obviously not Rand's intention; nonetheless it is easy enough to show how often it has been the effect of her work on her admirers—not only self-alienation, but also alienation from the world around us. Now it is probably inevitable that any person who thinks independently will experience some sense of alienation relative to the modern world. That is not what I am talking about. I am talking about alienation exalted to the status of a high-level virtue. And how might a reader draw that inference from Ayn Rand? I will answer in the following way.

In preparation for this presentation, I re-read the opening chapter of *The Fountainhead*. It really is a great book. I noticed something in the first chapter I never noticed before. Consider these facts: The hero has just been expelled from school, he is the victim of injustice, he is misunderstood by virtually everyone, and he himself tends to find other people puzzling and incomprehensible. He is alone; he has no friends. There is no one with

whom he can share his inner life or values. So far, with the possible exception of being expelled from school, this could be a fairly accurate description of the state of the overwhelming majority of adolescents. There is one big difference: Howard Roark gives no indication of being bothered by any of it. He is serenely happy within himself. For average teenagers, this condition is agony. They read *The Fountainhead* and see this condition, not as a problem to be solved, but as a condition they must learn to be happy about—as Roark is. All done without drugs! What a wish-fulfillment that would be! What a dream come true! Don't bother learning to understand anyone. Don't bother working at making yourself better understood. Don't try to see whether you can close the gap of your alienation from others, at least from some others, just struggle for Roark's serenity—which Rand never tells you how to achieve. This is an example of how "The Fountainhead" could be at once a source of great inspiration and a source of great guilt, for all those who do not know how to reach Roark's state.

In *Atlas Shrugged*, admittedly, Rand does acknowledge that we are social beings with legitimate social needs. For many of us, our first introduction to Ayn Rand's philosophy was through *The Fountainhead*, and that book makes an impression not easily lost.

ENCOURAGING MORALIZING

Another aspect of her philosophy that I would like to talk about—one of the hazards—is the appalling moralism that Ayn Rand herself practiced and that so many of her followers also practice. I don't know of anyone other than the Church fathers in the Dark Ages who used the word "evil" quite so often as Ayn Rand.

Of all the accusations of her critics, surely the most ludicrous is the accusation that Ayn Rand encourages people to do just what they please. If there's anything in this world Ayn did not do, it was to encourage people to do what they please. If there is anything she was not, it was an advocate of hedonism.

She may have taught that "Man's Life" is the standard of morality and your own life is its purpose, but the path she advocated to the fulfillment of your life was a severely disciplined one. She left many of her readers with the clear impression that life is a tightrope and that it is all too easy to fall off into moral depravity. In other words, on the one hand she preached a morality of joy, personal happiness, and individual fulfillment; on the other hand, she was a master at scaring the hell out of you if you respected and admired her and wanted to apply her philosophy to your own life.

She used to say to me, "I don't know anything about psychology, Nathaniel." I wish I had taken her more seriously. She was right; she knew next to nothing about psychology. What neither of us understood, however, was how disastrous an omission that is in a philosopher in general and a moralist in particular. The most devastating single omission in her system and the one that causes most of the trouble for her followers is the absence of any real appreciation of human psychology and, more specifically, of developmental psychology, of how human beings evolve and become what they are and of how they can change.

So, you are left with this sort of picture of your life. You either choose to be rational or you don't. You're honest or you're not. You choose the right values or you don't. You like the kind of art Rand admires or your soul is in big trouble. For evidence of this last point, read her essays on esthetics (Rand, 1970). Her followers are left in a dreadful position: If their responses aren't "the right ones," what are they to do? How are they to change? No

answer from Ayn Rand. Here is the tragedy: Her followers' own love and admiration for her and her work become turned into the means of their self-repudiation and self-torture. I have seen a good deal of that, and it saddens me more than I can say.

Let's suppose a person has done something that he or she knows to be wrong, immoral, unjust, or unreasonable: instead of acknowledging the wrong, instead of simply regretting the action and then seeking, compassionately, to understand why the action was taken and asking where was I coming from? and what need was I trying in my own twisted way to satisfy?—instead of asking such questions, the person is encouraged to brand the behavior as evil and is given no useful advice on where to go from there. You don't teach people to be moral by teaching them self-contempt as a virtue.

Enormous importance is attached in Rand's writings to the virtue of justice. I think one of the most important things she has to say about justice is that we shouldn't think of justice only in terms of punishing the guilty but also in terms of rewarding and appreciating the good. I think her emphasis on this point is enormously important.

To look on the dark side, however, part of her vision of justice is urging you to instant contempt for anyone who deviates from reason or morality or what is defined as reason or morality. Errors of knowledge may be forgiven, she says, but not errors of morality. Even if what people are doing is wrong, even if errors of morality are involved, even if what people are doing is irrational, you do not lead people to virtue by contempt. You do not make people better by telling them they are despicable. It just doesn't work. It doesn't work when religion tries it and it doesn't work when objectivism tries it.

If someone has done something so horrendous that you want to tell him or her that the action is despicable, go ahead. If you want to tell someone he is a rotten son-of-a-bitch, go ahead. If you want to call someone a scoundrel, go ahead. I don't deny that there are times when that is a thoroughly appropriate response. What I do deny is that it is an effective strategy for inspiring moral change or improvement.

The great, glaring gap in just about all ethical systems of which I have knowledge, even when many of the particular values and virtues they advocate may be laudable, is the absence of a technology to assist people in getting there, an effective means for acquiring these values and virtues, a realistic path people can follow. That is the great missing step in most religions and philosophies. And this is where psychology comes in: One of the tasks of psychology is to provide a technology for facilitating the process of becoming a rational, moral human being.

You can tell people that it's a virtue to be rational, productive, or just, but, if they have not already arrived at that stage of awareness and development on their own, objectivism does not tell them how to get there. It does tell you you're rotten if you fail to get there.

Ayn Rand admirers come to me and say, "All of her characters are so ambitious. I'm thirty years old and I don't know what to do with my life. I don't know what I want to make of myself. I earn a living, I know I could be better than I am, I know I could be more productive or creative, and I'm not. I'm rotten. What can I do?" I've heard some version of this quite often. I've heard it a lot from some very intelligent men and women who are properly concerned they they have many capacities they are not using, and who long for something more—which is healthy and desirable, but the self-blame and self-hatred is not and it's very, very common.

The question for me is: How come you don't have the motivation to do more? How come so little seems worth doing? In what way, in what twisted way, perhaps, might you be trying to take care of yourself by your procrastination, by your inertia, by your lack of ambition? Let's try to understand what needs you're struggling to satisfy. Let's try to understand where you're coming from.

That is an approach I learned only after my break with Ayn Rand. It is very foreign to the approach I learned in my early years with her. And it's very foreign to just about every objectivist I've ever met. However, if we are to assist people to become more self-actualized, that approach is absolutely essential. We are all of us organisms trying to survive. We are all of us organisms trying in our own way to use our abilities and capacities to satisfy our needs. Sometimes the paths we choose are pretty terrible, and sometimes the consequences are pretty awful for ourselves and others. Until and unless we are willing to try to understand where people are coming from, what they are trying to accomplish, and what model of reality they're operating form—such that they don't see themselves as having better alternatives, we cannot assist anyone to reach the moral vision that objectivism holds as a possibility for human beings.

It's not quite true to say that I didn't understand this until after my break with Rand. This approach is already present in *"The Psychology of Self-Esteem,"* most of which was written during my years with her. I will say instead that I learned to practice this approach far more competently only after the break, only after I disassociated myself from her obsessive moralism and moralizing.

So here in Ayn Rand's work is an ethical philosophy with a great vision of human possibilities, but no technology to help people get there, and a lot of messages encouraging self-condemnation when they fail to get there.

Her readers come to me and they say; "Boy, it was so great. I read her books and I got rid of the guilt that the Church laid on me. I got rid of the guilt over sex. Or wanting to make money." "Why have you come to see me?," I ask. "Well, now I'm guilty about something else. I'm not as good as John Galt. Sometimes I'm not even sure I'm as good as Eddie Willers," they respond.

Rand might respond, "But these people are guilty of pretentiousness and grandiosity!" Sure they are, at least some of the time. Although when you tell people, as Rand did, that one of the marks of virtue is to value the perfection of your soul above all things, not your happiness, not your enjoyment of life, not the joyful fulfillment of your positive possibilities, but the perfection of your soul, aren't you helping to set people up for just this kind of nonsense?

A man came to me a little while ago for psychotherapy. He was involved in a love affair with a woman. He was happy with her. She was happy with him. But he had a problem; he wasn't convinced she was worthy of him—he wasn't convinced she was "enough." And why not? Because, although she worked for a living, her life was not organized around some activity comparable to building railroads. "She isn't a Dagny Taggart." The fact that he was happy with her seemed to matter less to him than the fact that she didn't live up to a certain notion of what the ideal woman was supposed to be like.

If he had said, "I'm worried about our future because, although I enjoy her right now, I don't know whether or not there's enough intellectual stimulation there," that would have been a different question entirely and a far more understandable one. What was bothering him was not his own

misgivings but a voice inside him, a voice which he identified as the voice of Ayn Rand, saying “She’s not Dagny Taggart.” When I began by gently pointing out to him that he wasn’t John Galt, it didn’t make him feel any better—it made him feel worse!

I recall a story I once read by a psychiatrist, a story about a tribe that has a rather unusual way of dealing with moral wrongdoers or lawbreakers. Such a person, when his or her infraction is discovered, is not reproached or condemned but is brought into the center of the village square—and the whole tribe gathers around. Everyone who has ever known this person since the day he or she was born steps forward, one by one, and talks about anything and everything good this person has ever been known to have done. The speakers aren’t allowed to exaggerate or make mountains out of molehills; they have to be realistic, truthful, factual. And the person just sits there, listening, as one by one people talk about all the good things this person has done in the course of his or her life. Sometimes, the process takes several days. When it’s over, the person is released and everyone goes home and there is no discussion of the offense—and there is almost no repetition of offenses (Zunin, 1970).

In the objectivist frame of reference there is the assumption, made explicit in John Galt’s speech in *Atlas Shrugged*, and dramatized throughout the novel in any number of ways, that the most natural, reasonable, appropriate response to immoral or wrong behavior is contempt and moral condemnation. Psychologists know that that response tends to increase the probability that that kind of behavior will be repeated. This is an example of what I mean by the difference between a vision of desirable behavior and the development of an appropriate psychological technology that would inspire people to practice it.

CONFLATING SACRIFICE AND BENEVOLENCE

Now let us move on to still another aspect of the Rand philosophy that entails a great contribution, on the one hand, and a serious omission, on the other. I have already stressed that in *The Objectivist* ethics a human being is regarded as an end in him- or herself and exists properly for his or her own sake, neither sacrificing self to others nor sacrificing others to self. The practice of human sacrifice is wrong, said Rand, no matter by whom it is practiced. She was an advocate of what we may call enlightened selfishness or enlightened self-interest.

Needless to say, this is a viewpoint that I support unreservedly.

I noted earlier that, when we want to understand a thinker, it’s generally useful to understand what that person may be reacting against. I believe that in desire to expose the evil of the notion that self-sacrifice is a virtue and in her indignation at the very idea of treating human beings as objects of sacrifice, she presented her case for rational self-interest or rational selfishness in a way that neglected a very important part of human experience. To be precise, she didn’t neglect it totally; but she did not deal with it adequately, did not give it the attention it deserves.

I am referring to the principle of benevolence, mutual helpfulness and mutual aid between human beings. I believe it is a virtue to support life. I believe it is a virtue to assist those who are struggling for life. I believe it is a virtue to seek to alleviate suffering. None of this entails the notion of self-sacrifice. I am not saying that we should place the interests of others above our own. I am not saying that our primary moral obligation is to alleviate the pain of others. I am not saying that we do not have the right to place our own interests first. I am saying that the principle of benevolence

and mutual aid is entirely compatible with an ethic of self-interest and more: An ethic of self-interest logically must advocate the principle of benevolence and mutual aid.

Given that we live in society, and given that misfortune or tragedy can strike any one of us, it is clearly in our self-interest to live in a world in which human beings deal with one another in a spirit of mutual benevolence and helpfulness. Could anyone seriously argue that the principle of mutual aid does not have survival value?

I am not talking about “mutual aid” coercively orchestrated by a government. I am talking about the private, voluntary actions of individual men and women functioning on their own initiative and by their own standards. By treating the issue of help to others almost entirely in the context of self-sacrifice and/or in the context of government coercion, Rand largely neglects a vast area of human experience to which neither of these considerations apply. And the consequence for too many of her followers is an obliviousness to the simple virtues of kindness, generosity, and mutual aid, all of which clearly and demonstrably have biological utility, meaning: survival value.

There are too many immature, narcissistic individuals whose thinking stops at the point of hearing that they have no obligation to sacrifice themselves to others. True enough, they don’t. Is there nothing else to be said on the subject of help to others? I think there is and I think so precisely on the basis of *The Objectivist* standard of ethics: man’s/woman’s life and well-being.

Would you believe that sometimes in therapy clients speak to me with guilt of their desire to be helpful and kind to others? I am not talking about manipulative do-gooders. I am talking about persons genuinely motivated by benevolence and good will, but who wonder whether they are “good objectivists.”

“Have I ever said that charity and help to others is wrong or undesirable?” Rand might demand. No, she hasn’t; neither has she spoken very much about their value, beyond declaring that they are not the essence of life—and of course they are not the essence of life. They are a part of life, however, and sometimes an important part of life, and it is misleading to allow for people to believe otherwise.

OVEREMPHASIZING THE ROLE OF PHILOSOPHICAL PREMISES

I have already mentioned that there is one great missing element in *The Objectivist* system, namely, a theory of psychology, or, more precisely, an understanding of psychology. Rand held the view that human beings can be understood exclusively in terms of their premises, that is, in terms of their basic philosophical beliefs, along with their free will choices. This view is grossly inadequate to the complexity of the actual facts. It is, further, a view that flies totally in the face of so much that we know today about how the mind operates.

Many factors contribute to who we become as human beings: our genes, our maturation, our unique biological potentials and limitations, our life experiences and the conclusions we draw from them, the knowledge and information available to us, and, of course, our premises or philosophical beliefs, and the thinking we choose to do or not to do. And even this list is an oversimplification. The truth, is we are far from understanding everything that goes into shaping the persons we become, and it is arrogant and stupid to imagine that we do.

Among the many unfortunate consequences of believing that we are the

product only of our premises and that our premises are chiefly the product of the thinking we have done or failed to do is a powerful inclination, on the one hand, to regard as immoral anyone who arrives at conclusions different from our own, and, on the other hand, an inclination to believe that people who voice the same beliefs as we do are people with whom we naturally have a lot in common. I remember, at Nathaniel Branden Institute, seeing people marry on the grounds of believing that a shared enthusiasm for objectivism was enough to make them compatible; I also remember the unhappiness that followed. Professing the same philosophical convictions is hardly enough to guarantee the success of a marriage and not even enough to guarantee the success of a friendship: Many other psychological factors are necessary.

Our souls are more than our philosophies—and certainly more than our conscious philosophies. Just as we need to know more than a human being's philosophical beliefs in order to understand that human being; so, we need to know more than a society's or culture's philosophical beliefs to understand the events of a given historical period. Of course, the philosophical ideas of a society or a culture play a powerful role in determining the flow of events. Other factors, however, are always involved, which one would never guess from reading Ayn Rand. One factor that many thinkers beside Ayn Rand tend to ignore in their studies of history are the psychologies or personalities of the political and military leaders.

Different people, with different psychologies or personalities, at the same moment in history might act differently—with profoundly different historical consequences. There is no time here to explore this theme in detail, beyond saying that *The Objectivist* method of historical interpretation is guilty of the same gross oversimplification that is manifest at the level of explaining individual behavior.

One of the unfortunate consequences of this over simplification is that most students of objectivism are pathetically helpless when faced with the task of carrying their ideas into the real world and seeking to implement them. They do not know what to do, most of the time. Objectivism has not prepared them. There is too much about the real world, about social and political institutions, and about human psychology, of which they have no knowledge.

ENCOURAGING DOGMATISM

Ayn always insisted that her philosophy was an integrated whole, that it was entirely self-consistent, and that one could not reasonably pick elements of her philosophy and discard others. In effect, she declared, "It's all or nothing." Now this is a rather curious view, if you think about it. What she was saying, translated into simple English, is: Everything I have to say in the field of philosophy is true, absolutely true, and therefore any departure necessarily leads you into error. Don't try to mix your irrational fantasies with my immutable truths. This insistence turned Ayn Rand's philosophy, for all practical purposes, into dogmatic religion, and many of her followers chose that path.

The true believers might respond by saying, "How can you call it dogmatic religion when we can prove every one of Ayn Rand's propositions?!" My answer to that is, "The hell you can!" Prior to our break, Ayn Rand credited me with understanding her philosophy better than any other person alive—and not merely better, but far better. I know what we were in a position to prove, I know where the gaps are. And so can anyone else—by careful, critical reading. It's not all that difficult or complicated.

This may sound like a trivial example of what I mean, but it's an example

that has always annoyed me personally. I would love to hear some loyal follower of Ayn Rand try to argue logically and rationally for her belief that no woman should aspire to be president of the United States. This was one of Rand's more embarrassing lapses. If we are to champion the independent, critical mind, then the philosophy of objectivism can hardly be exempt from judgment. Ayn Rand made mistakes. That merely proves she was human. The job of her admirers, however, is to be willing to see them and to correct them.

Sometimes, when her admirers begin to grasp their mistakes, they become enraged. They turn against everything she had to say. They feel betrayed, like children who discover that their parents are not omnipotent and omniscient. That's another hazard to which I'd like to draw your attention.

Ayn Rand might turn over in her grave to hear me say it, but she really did have the right to be wrong sometimes. No need for us to become hysterical about it or to behave like petulant eight-year-olds. Growing up means being able to see our parents realistically. Growing up relative to Ayn Rand means being able to see her realistically—to see the greatness and to see the shortcomings. If we see only the greatness and deny the shortcomings or if we see only the shortcomings and deny the greatness, we remain blind.

She has so much that is truly marvelous to offer us. So much wisdom, insight, and inspiration. So much clarification. Let us say "thank you" for that, acknowledge the errors and mistakes when we see them, and proceed on our own path—realizing that, ultimately, each of us has to make the journey alone, anyway.

CLOSING

I want to close on a more personal note. I have been asked: Would I be giving this presentation if Ayn Rand were still alive? Although I can't answer with certainty, I am inclined to say: No, I wouldn't. I am not an altruist. I do not believe in practicing self-sacrifice. In view of the disgraceful lies that she spread about me at the time of our break, in view of her efforts to destroy me, to ruin my reputation and career—which is a story I do not care to get into here—I would not have wanted to do anything that would benefit her directly while she was still alive. I am not that disinterested. I won't deny that, when she was alive, almost in spite of myself I did do a number of things that directly benefited her; they seemed necessary at the time. I wasn't too happy about doing them. One of the things that happened in consequence of her death is that I am free once again to speak comfortably and openly about what I admire in her work.

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