

## FREE RADICAL INTERVIEW WITH NATHANIEL BRANDEN

by Alec Mouhibian

At 74 years of age, Nathaniel Branden sticks out like a silver thumb. Thanks to a million-dollar smile and a rich contrast between white hair and tanned skin, his appearance is illuminating. Combine this with a brilliant gift and passion for interpersonal interaction and it is not surprising that Branden has been the Magic 8-ball of Objectivism for almost fifty years. When he answers a question, one gets the impression that he is discovering and explaining at the same time. Which certainly gives new meaning to the phrase “likes to hear himself think.” The fact that he responds with unnerved discomfort to any uninteresting question indicates that this impression is not merely due to charm.

I arrived at Dr. Branden’s Beverly Hills bearings with the goal of asking him about issues—topical and theoretical—he hadn’t publicly addressed before. Though I had originally hoped to avoid Ayn Rand as much as possible, it was perhaps inevitable that references would frequently be made to the chooser of the Chosen One.

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AM: I wanted to break the ice with something light. What, in one sentence, is the meaning of life?

NB: We are all responsible for creating the meaning of our own life...I don’t know that there is any general meaning apart from the meaning that each one of us gives to our life. Beyond that you could say, I suppose, that the meaning of life lies in the fulfillment of our faculties, of our best potentialities.

AM: I’m sure we could turn that into one sentence, somehow. What did you think of Ronald Reagan?

NB: Let me begin by saying that I think he has been a very underestimated man by his opponents. I think that his understanding and handling of our relationship with the Soviet Union was brilliant. Gorbachev himself gives Reagan credit for effectively ending the Cold War. Are there areas where I would disagree with him? Sure. He was opposed to abortion. He did not believe in total laissez-faire capitalism. He did build up our national debt enormously. But I tell you one thing he did that impressed me so much it almost wipes everything else off the mat. It’s something I found thrilling beyond words. And that was: he was in Russia, and he gave a speech in the University of Moscow. And the theme of the speech was to explain to the people there what American capitalism is. Here is the president of the United States, in a distinguished university in a country with whom we’ve had hostile relationships for decades—getting up, and in the most passionate yet totally non-belligerent way, explaining what economic freedom means, what capitalism means. It was so extraordinary in the moral clarity that he brought to his presentation that I’ll remember it, with great admiration, forever.

AM: One of the examples of Ayn Rand’s mental alienation from reality that baffles me the most is that, after supporting Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, she openly denounced Reagan. Yet it was Reagan who conspicuously embodied many of the characteristics she had wanted to see in a president: unabashed patriotism, pro-enterprise fervor, and moral clarity in regard to the Soviet Union. And he was the only one she told everybody not to

vote for.

NB: Well unfortunately there are a lot of examples one could give of this strange perspective that she had. I do think at times that she was very alienated from reality and a prisoner of her own ideology. A lot of the times I think she was brilliant and really nailed the issues properly. Occasionally she would come out with something like this that I was utterly flabbergasted by.

AM: What party are you registered with?

NB: The Libertarian Party.

AM: What do you think of the present state of the Libertarian Party?

NB: I don’t like it at all. I do not know what I am going to do this year, as far as voting goes. When the choice is Bush or Kerry, we are in very deep trouble. I have not decided what I am going to do yet.

AM: Did you support the War on Iraq?

NB: If you asked me, I would’ve said no. I would’ve said that we should concentrate on hunting down Al Qaeda people. There are no grounds to me why, if you had to pick a war with somebody, Iraq got nominated. On the other hand, if it’s true that Russia and certain other countries had given Bush information suggesting that Saddam Hussein most definitely did intend to launch something serious against America, and that should’ve proven to be true, it was the right thing to do. How it’s being handled and conducted is a different question entirely. People do not remember, however, how many tragic screw-ups there were in World War II. This idea of screwing up and not anticipating properly and making mistakes that cost lives is nothing new or peculiar to Iraq. It happened in Korea and it happened in World War II, and it certainly happened in Vietnam. Television makes us all aware of everything—saying why didn’t they know this. Why didn’t they know that?—forgetting that if we held past presidents to the same standards, they should all be impeached.

AM: So you think the reaction to the post-war situation is overblown?

NB: Americans tend to have a fantasy that everybody else at heart is just like them. And they don’t understand that there are other cultures that are totally different, such as the cultures in the Middle East. Very few people in the services are really trained for this new kind of enemy. Very few are knowledgeable concerning this enemy’s culture. They are certainly inadequately informed of what they need to know if their goal is to create a new nation. Therefore, I think there are lots to criticize, even if one says the war could be justified. I’m inclined to the side that says it wasn’t the best move we could make if the purpose was to protect our country. I would rather have seen the energy put to chasing al Qaeda terrorists around the world.

AM: The question of how to treat different cultures brings us right to Abu Ghraib. The two cells where the abuse scenes took place contained the worst criminals in the entire prison. Do you think that, given the proper context, such treatment is condonable?

NB: I think it was stupid. It accomplished nothing good for the U.S. It just allowed some people to let off steam. I look at everything from the point of view of: what is the purpose of doing this? What are you trying to

accomplish? Why do you think this will accomplish it? I never could see the sense of that kind of thing—neither morally nor practically.

AM: Even if it resulted in extracting information?

NB: I think a case could be made for that, if there was reason to believe that these people had information that could save lives. I think a case could be made for some forms of roughening up whom one deals with, but it can't be coming just out of rage or exasperation. It has to be conscious, it has to be purposeful, and it has to be grounded in reliable information.

AM: The taping thing is still a mystery to me. Could it have possibly been allowed?

NB: Well that goes to the whole issue of: they were not supervised, they were not led, and they were not adequately trained or educated in what was appropriate and what wasn't. It's frightening over there, your friends might be being killed, so you have a lot to deal with, a lot going on inside you, and you may be hoping to burn some of it out of your system through these tormenting behaviors with your prisoners.

AM: Now for a related issue, one that is as divisive among libertarians as it is at large. And that is Israel. Some libertarians believe it deserves all the financial support it gets. Other libertarians believe that it was our support of Israel that led to 9-11, that sure the Arabs hate us, but they wouldn't hate us enough to strap bombs if it weren't for our outspoken support of Israel and presence in the region. What do you think of the whole thing?

NB: Israel has always been a very good ally to the U.S. Their intelligence service is probably the best in the world. They are the only bastion of something approaching freedom in that part of the world. If we were going to support any country I could see why Israel would be a good candidate. However, I suspect there has been overdependence on the U.S.—which has been harmful to Israel. I seem likely that we have slowed down the evolution away from socialism and toward free market capitalism. Because, you know, they are a socialist state in many ways. Moreover, our financial contribution made it easier for them to continue in that role.

So the point is that there are reasons to support helping Israel and there are reasons to support hands-off. Strictly speaking, I don't see how one could defend our special help to Israel on an Objectivist/libertarian foundation. If you ask whether I think an Objectivist/libertarian philosophy would be opposed to helping Israel, I would say, "Yes, I think so." Except the paradox is that Rand was a passionate supporter of America helping Israel.

AM: And she supported foreign aid to Israel, which was the real contradiction.

NB: Well, they do a lot of the developing of our military hardware. They are a very important source of inventions and technology that translates into our military's resources. Think about this: the United States, with almost three hundred million people, has the most patents filed by citizens in one year. Number 3 is India, with a population of almost a billion. You might be interested to know that the number 2 spot is occupied by a country with a population of only 5 or 6 million people. So there could be in there the basis for making a case that it is in America's interests to secure the safety of Israel.

AM: That is interesting—I hadn't heard that statistic before. Do you have any favorite contemporary political writers?

NB: Jean Francois Revel is a brilliant, brilliant writer. I just finished his book *Anti-Americanism*. I can't recommend that book enough. Also, a book called *Liberalism and Terrorism*, by Paul Berman. That book did more to clarify what the War on Terror is really about, than anything else

I've ever read. So I would recommend that very strongly.

AM: You also mentioned that you liked Camille Paglia.

NB: Oh, yeah. I get nothing but joy from reading her. She's a very interesting writer.

AM: You said at the last TOC conference that you've come to differ with Rand on some political issues. Could you elaborate?

NB: Well, it's a subtle issue, and it goes like this: Objectivism says the sole purpose of government is to protect individual rights. I would say the primary purpose of government is to protect individual rights. And any other activities that the government may claim justification for doing must not be of an order that violates anybody's rights. For example, some national weather disaster in which certain problems can arise that the marketplace has no way to respond to quickly enough. Or diseases that travel across borders and don't respect passport laws. I will leave the door open for emergency situations that I just can't imagine being resolved in a market context. If they could be, then they should be. But the fact of emergencies should not be made as justification for violating individual rights, so as you can see, it's a very tiny difference.

I have a suspicion—I haven't read her essays in many years—that if I reread Rand today I might have differences not necessarily with her conclusions, but with the reasons she gives on her way to getting there. I don't think, for example, that the case she makes for individual rights is strong enough. I think there are things in it I could see an intelligent person questioning. Do I think she could end up answering appropriately and winning? Yes. But it's not in the text, it's in her head. For example, in "Atlas Shrugged," Galt says (and I'm paraphrasing) that since man needs his rational faculty to survive, you mustn't suppress his rational judgment. What's tricky about that is, does that mean you do what you want with his irrational judgment? Her theory of rights has to be broad enough to include the right to be irrational, but you don't see that in the way she has formulated it.

AM: So what you're saying is, by basing all of ethics on the rational nature of man, Rand's presentation ignores those who may be irrational—or nonrational.

NB: Such as babies. Or the mentally handicapped. Nobody would say that it's okay to harm them. Yet when you say that ethics only applies to rational beings, then what about irrational beings?

AM: This sort of touches upon the ultimate root of ethics, and hence of individual rights. The Objectivist ethics have an aura of complete absolutism, yet they are ultimately based on what's appropriate for man's survival. So would you agree that they are ultimately, in an individualist context, consequentialist?

NB: Assuming I understand what you mean, yes, I would.

AM: Of course, the best consequences result from a system of consistently followed principles, hence the "absolutist" element. But there are exceptions. For example, many Objectivists say that, if they fell off a building and hung onto somebody's balcony, they ought to die rather than trespass.

NB: When your principles seem to be demanding suicide, clearly it's time to check your premises. And that's where it is necessary to respect context. Philosophical principles are no substitute for thinking, yet many Objectivists act as if they were.

Ayn Rand was once asked about the following hypothetical: if your wife got sick one night and would die without a certain medication from the pharmacy, and if the pharmacy was closed, would it be permissible to

break in and take it? She said yes, so long as the repairs and medication were paid for the next day.

AM: Essentially, there should never be a choice between surviving and being ethical, so long as nobody is being truly, factually sacrificed.

NB: Exactly. Suicide can never be the only ethical choice. The idea is absurd.

AM: Still, if any hanging Objectivists fell onto my balcony, I'd shoot 'em. Now let's get psychological.

Evidence shows that people with comprehensive ideologies—regardless of what the ideology is—generally have higher self esteems and are happier than those without such worldviews. Because no worldview is totally true, what usually happens is that such people often falsely interpret things—most notoriously, the motivations of opponents—to fit their ideology. And it seems that such interpretation is integral to their self-confidence. Additionally, I can think of a number of cases in which someone has fallen out from their worldview, and been very miserable afterward, at best never retaining the spirit they had prior to their falling out. It seems that there can be a case of irrational confidence versus rational unbalance, where at a certain point along the intellectual curve, ignorance is bliss.

NB: Here's what I would say. Begin with the fact that by our nature we need to make sense out of our experience. In order to have any sense of control over our own life, we need to know that we're able to make sense out of our experience, in all of its many aspects. It's the need that religion addresses, that philosophy addresses. And if people do not have any particular set of broad beliefs about life, themselves, human relationships, they tend to live in a very short range—very shallow and narrow aspect of life. And in that sphere, they cannot enjoy a strong feeling of efficacy or control except, possibly, if they confine themselves to a very limited sphere.

I haven't written about this yet, but I'm convinced that if you have a moral code that you do your best to live up to, other things being equal, it's very positive in its consequences for your self esteem, even if the moral code is in some ways mistaken. If you conscientiously try to live it to the best of your ability, that would have a salutary effect on your self-esteem. If you violate it, it would have a negative effect on your self-esteem. But suppose you have nothing to violate, no worldview—that absence will limit your self-esteem, because you need to feel aligned with reality. You need feel that you are in appropriate contact with the real world. Now your theory of what the real world is might be right or wrong. But so long as you are able to believe that you are in contact with the real world and are acting on that knowledge, your self-esteem benefits.

Take a prisoner of war, who is a religious person. He might be able to survive that experience better than a person with no belief system, because he has a support system in his brain. Now, if you are the unusual person who's created a philosophical support system, that is fine—but most people lack that. Regardless, upsetting as it may be to orthodox Objectivists, I think you can show that in the short run and in that environment, a person who has some overarching faith has a better chance of surviving. But I wouldn't explain that all away by saying ignorance is bliss. The point is to understand what function a belief system provides. Then you can understand why an imperfect one is sometimes beneficial.

Was this responsive to your question?

AM: Yes. You've addressed the difference between those with beliefs and those without. But it's the third category that I find most interesting—those who had an ideology, but due to realizing that bits of reality didn't fit it, lost

their whole sense of grasp, resulting in a major loss of self-esteem.

NB: Thank you, I forgot to address that. That's a very interesting problem. Whether your "faith"-system is Catholicism or Communism or Objectivism, if you become disillusioned about it, the effect on your self-esteem depends in part on how you process that fact that you've fallen away from it. Meaning: do I actively seek to understand what held me to it in the first place, to get into contact with the person who once thought it was completely reasonable? And can I except that person as me at a certain point in my development, without self-castigation and without self-repudiation? Can I say: "that was me then, but now I've risen to a wider field of vision, in which I can see the limitations of that belief system as I couldn't see them in the past"? If I focus on the mistakes I made, my self-esteem drops. If I focus on the fact that nothing matters more to me than the clarity of my vision, if I'm seeing things clearer now than I was before, I'm stronger now than I was before, even if I didn't know it.

AM: But what if the problem is not so much coping with your former self, as it is retaining that feeling of efficacy? You know you are stronger, smarter—yet you simply don't feel that grasp you once had.

NB: Take my own experience. When I was an orthodox Objectivist, I did feel like I understood the world—in a way that I don't feel today. I regret the fact, but I make peace with it. It's called growing up. Sure, I liked the control, but the control was illusory. So why mourn the loss of an illusion?

You do lose something. You lose something about your sense of the world and your relationship to it. You are not going to feel like the master of reality you once felt you were. The question is: what do I do when I find out there is no Santa Clause?

AM: Yet there are those who would agree with everything you just said, yet still not see the ramifications in their self-esteem.

NB: One aspect worth mentioning is this: we often in our disillusionment overreact to what we used to believe in. We should always ask ourselves what is worth retaining from it. A lot of people are too quick to shun philosophy completely, to throw out the baby with the bathwater. I remember after the Rand-Branden split, I was in a restaurant in New York. A waiter came over and told me he had just moved to New York so he could come to NBI lectures, only to be told at the front door that it was closed. And telling me what had happened, he began to cry. A grown man, older than I was. He said, "You and Ayn Rand were like father and mother to me." It was pretty painful. But the point is: I was trying to answer this legitimate need to make sense out of the world. I thought that this did it, now I know that it doesn't. I may not know what to replace it with, but at least I know that this doesn't do it for me. That should be worth something. What's the alternative, other than to get depressed?

AM: I guess it has to do with will more than anything.

NB: Which translates, in this context, to respect for reality, for what is. I can cry in my beer all I want to, but reality doesn't care.

AM: Salty beer tastes good, though.

NB: Well, not being a beer drinker I wouldn't know. Unless it's also true of root beer.

AM: This is a related question. Have you ever encountered a person who had a high, genuine self-esteem, and lost it?

NB: I can't think of an example that I know of.

AM: Do you see this as being plausible?

NB: This is only speculation. It wouldn't surprise me that if we had decent tests to assess self-esteem, you would find a dipping-down of self-

esteem in the last third of life. Just because generally you know you lack the resources you once had, or maybe your life didn't turn out the way you wanted it to. Not like a big devastating loss, but a softening.

Exercise is important at any age, but there is one sense in which it is really important in the last third of your life. The more physically fit you feel, the less prone you are to feel that loss. But if your body is inferior to what it was ten years ago, and you make no effort to improve your condition, that can be demoralizing.

AM: Let's talk about moral judgment. This was certainly essential to Randian Objectivism, as the initial title of your memoir suggests. And much is made of the personal, judgmental nature of our current political climate. According to Rand, one's only exemption from being "evil" is ignorance. You've denounced the harsh moralizing of Rand, yet you're presumably a pretty judgmental man, who's probably made over 7,000 judgments about me already.

NB: Wait, let me check. 6,700. Mostly favorable.

AM: Either way, what is the proper role of moral judgment? At what point is one immoral?

NB: One of the mistakes that Rand makes all over the place is that after she condemns a belief or an action, she goes on to tell you the psychology of the person who did it, as if she knows. I focus my judgment on the action and not on the person. My primary interest is: do I admire or dislike this behavior. And there judgment is important for me. People often attribute all kinds of things to another person, without ever knowing where that person's coming from. Most of the time, I regard the judgment of people as a waste of time. I regard the judgment of behavior as imperative.

Now, there are some people who are so clearly evil (e.g., Saddam Hussein) that we can't imagine anything mitigating their horror. But even there, I've come to feel the following: if there is a mad animal running around, eating people, I may have to shoot him. I don't think: "oh, you rotten bad dog, you." There's nothing you can do except shoot him.

But the Saddams are only a small minority. Take the Middle East suicide bombers—especially the very young people. God knows, if I had the opportunity, I'd kill them without any hesitation. But I also know, as a psychologist, that they were raised in a culture in a world I can't even conceive of. They were propagandized about the glory of martyrdom since the age of five. Whereas Leonard Peikoff might be hell-bent on calling every one of them evil, I wouldn't. They may or may not be. All I know is: in action, one kills them, rather than getting killed by them. Lots of times, we don't know the ultimate truth about a person. And here's the point: we don't need to know.

AM: So when you do judge people, does it basically come down to the age-old criteria of honesty, decency, etc.?

NB: Yeah. Lying, breaches of integrity—those are immoral. But I try to keep judgments of that kind to a minimum. And it's pretty natural in me by now, to focus on the behavior. Let me tell a story.

I was talking with a man whom I knew for some years, and his father had died a few months earlier. His father was a very bitter, tyrannical man. His father grew up in a household where he felt hated by his family, so he brought that hatred to his own family. Now his son, whom I was talking to, was very cruel in many ways growing up. I knew that he really hadn't had a good relationship with his father. So we were having lunch together, and I said: "tell me, Sid, did you ever have a chance to clean things up with your father?" He said, "Yes, before he died we really had a chance to get close

again. He told me a lot of stories about how my grandfather was a cruel, cruel man, an aesthete who resented my father for having some physical impediment. So I really understood what where my dad was coming from. I don't hate him anymore, I hate my grandfather."

There was a pause. Then I responded, "I'd like to tell you what just happened in my head. I heard the grandfather saying to me: 'wait a minute, Sid. Let me tell you about my father.'" The moral of the story: everybody has a story.

Anytime a client comes to me complaining about their parents, I automatically think of their grandparents, whose behaviors often explain everything. That's the curse of being a psychologist: that you think of such things. It's really nicer to be able to say, "oh, what a bastard." But being aware of everybody's story, it's much tougher to get mad at people.

AM: But there is a point at which one must assume responsibility.

NB: Absolutely, but I have an answer for that. Everybody has to be responsible. That is why, if we were in a relationship, and you had a terrible father and grandfather, and I don't like the way you deal with me, I might say, "Alec, listen. I need for you to know that you're turning me off. I need for you to know that when you do such and such, it really kills my interest in being a friend of yours. Am I mad at you? No. Am I condemning you as an immoral person? No. But if you feel the need to continue doing these things, there's no place for us to go from here."

Now that's the type of conversation that would terminate a relationship. But I wouldn't feel a need to tell you that you're immoral or that you have no integrity. That's all horseshit. That's to make me right and to make me superior. That's all nonsense. I only have to know that I don't like you.

I think that's a very important clarification, especially when talking to an Objectivist. Because Rand always says, "never pass up an opportunity to pass moral judgment." Well I say: "look for an opportunity to do something more useful instead." Nobody was led to virtue by being told he was a scoundrel.

AM: Ayn Rand had a very strict, authoritarian view of humor, essentially only permitting it as a form of insulting one's enemies. But humor is one of the enjoyments of life.

NB: Of course.

AM: How have your views regarding humor differed and/or changed since then?

NB: I never shared her view of humor in the first place. I never thought about it. You know the story about the meeting between Devers and Ayn. Devers tells Ayn that I'm going to be on this TV show, to check it out. Ayn says no. They talk again. Ayn brings up the issue of the television show, and says: "He shouldn't smile so much." Devers asks why not. "Because he was being asked serious philosophical questions."

Now that is so idiotic, that is so preposterous, because I wasn't making fun of anything, I was just smiling. Good will, as is my natural state. That only shows me, at an absurd extreme, that for somebody who presents herself as a champion of the joy of living, she has very rigid rules about the path you must walk on in your pursuit of enjoyment. Of all the objections to Objectivism, none is stupider than the claim that we are a hedonistic philosophy. Man, we are as rigid as the Catholic Church in the 13th century, you know?

AM: So it's fine to make fun of yourself, right?

NB: It has my blessing. Unless you do it compulsively as a way of preventing other people from doing it. There are insecure people who do

that: they say the worst thing about their self to be beat you to the punch. But assuming we're not talking about that, an ability to have a certain sense of humor when one looks at oneself, to realize that one is unintentionally funny sometimes, is a very good thing.

AM: And by laughing at yourself, you're finding value in yourself, you're finding something else to be happy about. There's no undermining going on.

NB: Of course.

AM: So humor is only inappropriate when applied tastelessly to obviously inappropriate contexts.

NB: Sure.

AM: You've publicly repudiated your previous stance on homosexuality. You said you no longer attempt conversions with patients, and you've written a blurb for Chris Sciabbara's monograph, *Ayn Rand, Homosexuality, & Human Liberation*. That said, what do you think about the flaming issue of gay marriage?

NB: At a deep level, I don't really care about the issue one way or the other. One level up, I'm tempted to wish they would agree upon, instead of gay marriage, entering into relationship contracts that would have all the legal advantages of marriage. Because it does strike me as strange that as long as we've had a human history, marriage has been between a man and a woman. So while I understand why some want it, I can also understand why people can be against it.

Of course, so many problems we have in this world we wouldn't have in a free society. If they wanted to have a contract, they could do it and call it "marriage." Personally, I wouldn't take a position against gay marriage—I don't see the potential damage in the situation. I am troubled, however, at the redefining of marriage. Where could it lead you next? Once marriage does not mean a monogamous heterosexual relationship, why can't there be a marriage between three people? Who says that marriage has to be between people of the same species?

AM: Every libertarian-objectivist realization of all the wonders of competition granted, and all the fallacies of the critics of competition granted—in certain competitive fields (sports being the epitome) success is a zero-sum game. Your success comes from your knowledge that you beat someone else. It seems that such zero-sum mentality is inescapable, and benevolence toward your opponent must be overlooked for success to be possible. In such a case, how can one balance competitiveness and benevolence?

NB: I don't think that the competing members of a football team dislike each other. They want to win the game. I don't think there's benevolence or the lack of it—this is not about a personal relationship, but about getting the ball over the end zone. It's like saying that this afternoon my mind's not on music, it's on playing a game.

AM: So you don't really see a possible conflict there.

NB: No, because I think both sides see it in the proper context. Anyway, this was your least interesting question.

AM: There's number 6,701. Now let's go to sexual attraction. In your pre-break days, you wrote that sexual attraction is purely a matter of sharing values. But men can be attracted to women before even knowing their face, let alone values. And empirical evidence shows that sexual attraction is a mysterious, convoluted, nonrational, confusing, insane, stupid, absurd, freaking' crazy, irrational field, irreducible to objective definitions. What are your reflections on the subjective and objective nature of sexual attraction,

40 years after writing *The Psychology of Pleasure*?

NB: It's a really important question. Short term sexual relationships operate by different rules than long term ones. Sometimes you can be very sexually attracted to somebody, because you quickly pick up that there is something highly compatible in your respective sexual wiring.

One day late in life, I realized...this really sounds awful; do I want to say this? I'm talking to the press after all. I'm going to rephrase this, all right?

AM: Aw, dammit.

NB: I'm rephrasing this. I can think of many instances where a man knew almost immediately whether the person he might be finding attractive would get along sexually with him or not. And we would talk about it, because how can one know? It's very hard to articulate. But he said enough that I knew that he knew. And I'm sure that many people have had that experience, where they can't explain it but they know very quickly that "that person and I would have a very good sexual relationship." They don't know if they'd be partners for life, but they do know that it wouldn't be boring, it would be interesting, stimulating, rewarding. So values are involved, all right, but the values involved have a lot to do with what one wants out of the sexual experience. What one wants the theme of the man's behavior to be, what one wants the theme of the woman's behavior to be.

Here's an example. There was a very interesting book written a few decades ago about the sex life of powerful political figures. And they found out that an incredible number of these guys who in their own realm were tough, dominating, domineering—wanted to be completely dominated by the female in bed. They wanted a complete rest from their powerful, balls-to-the-wall political life—and they became babies. I believe that the woman who would be wired to provide that, and the man who is wired to want that, would find each other across a crowded room. They would pick it up.

When you're talking about long-term romantic love, as I did when lecturing for NBI, much more of who we are comes into play. But if you just focus on the sexual, the bar is lower. And that's perfectly fine. For a certain period of time, in a certain context, it could be a wonderful, happy experience. I don't believe that if a relationship doesn't last forever it's a failure.

I remember a friend of mine, who was 42, met a girl who was 17 or 18 years old. And they had a great romance that lasted about a year. And they remained very good friends afterward—it just wasn't the end of the game for either of them. You see, these are some really complicated issues.

AM: That's where I'm getting at. It just seems absurd to believe that all of the mysteries of attraction are objectively explicable.

NB: Well Rand wasn't entirely consistent on what she thought about these subjects. I remember once being in her apartment when Leonard was there. He had acquired a new girlfriend and Ayn asked him: is it a romance, or is it an affair, or is it an enjoyable sexual encounter? I don't remember the words verbatim, but she gave him a choice of three. She also said it in a way that implied that any answer was acceptable. And Leonard almost fell off the sofa in shock. He said, "You mean you would approve?" Ayn said, "Why not?" Anybody who had read her books would also have fainted. You're shocked, aren't you?

AM: I am.

NB: So if ever I were to publish that story, the forces of evil would say it's one more example of what a liar Nathaniel Branden is. But it happened. So there's a lot of confusion about sexuality among Objectivists.

Here's another example. A guy met a girl and they really fell for each other. He was a Ph. D., but she wasn't a professional intellectual. Not that

she wasn't intelligent, but her business wasn't ideas. And he had this idea that he has to be married to Dagny Taggart. I said, "Oh, really? Are you John Galt?" The point is: he tortured himself with this issue for months, because he really loved the girl. But about 9 months later, he broke off the relationship. I really tried to persuade him that he was making a mistake that he was going to regret for a very long time, because I knew he really loved her. But he was sacrificing that to a theory, to a fantasy inside his mind. I said for Christ's sake, look who Ayn Rand married!

If you love somebody, honor that. Don't make yourself insane if you can't explain all the reasons for it. They will surface in time.

AM: Another type of love that is inexplicable is the love one has for a baby, who is either one's own or closely related to one. It's unique to any kind of feeling. Some Objectivists have explained baby-love by the trader principle, that we love a baby because we will trade with it later. But that sounds like the punch-line to the lewdest of Jewish jokes.

NB: It is insane. I'm very aware of that over-application of the trader principle, as if that's all you need to know to understand human relationships. Good God.

AM: How would you explain such love and care?

NB: There's something about what we see in a baby. There's something about seeing a new expression of life... yesterday, or last week, or last month there was no baby. Now this thing that people call a "miracle" has happened. This new being is born. And that is a very inspiring idea, that we have the power to create life. A baby is also pure potentiality.

Now it's also true that not everybody has those reactions to babies. They're so caught up that they have no idea how to relate to a baby. Or they feel very shy around babies—insecurities of their own get in the way. But I ask: who among you, tell the truth, last time you played with a little kid—or a dog, did you think you're going to have a trade relationship with the dog later in life, for crying out loud? Because there's a good analogy there.

I wrote about the Muttnik Principle, in *The Psychology of Romantic Love*, to explain my theory of why we love dogs. As a dog-lover, when I'm looking at a dog nose to nose, the trade is happening right now. The interaction is the reward.

AM: It's so cute.

NB: Exactly. Anybody who doesn't understand that, I don't wish to speak to. My official response to such people: they can go fuck themselves.

AM: Now you're talking my language. I want to quote you something you said in your article, *The Benefits and Hazards of the Philosophy of Ayn Rand*. You wrote: "One factor that many thinkers beside Ayn Rand tend to ignore in their studies of history is 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." What did you mean, specifically?

NB: If Kerry had been president, I don't think we would have gone into Iraq.

AM: Due to his personality, not his principles?

NB: Definitely due to his personality. He's never done anything decisive in his life. No, I don't think it's his principles. His principles are a reaction of who he is as a person. Look at Jimmy Carter. He didn't represent our interests at all, when dealing with Iran, etc. If Carter were the president in the 1980s, I don't think the Soviet Union would have fallen as soon as it did. So these are examples.

AM: But how did Rand ignore that? She always judged personality.

NB: Rand tended to interpret history entirely in terms of ideas, not in terms of the personality of the leaders. Only in terms of their professed convictions. And I said that it's an under-appreciation of the importance of psychology in human action. If only their pronounced beliefs could explain their behavior, you would be able to consistently predict things in advance.

Most of the failings of Objectivism all pertain directly or indirectly to issues of psychology.

Let's say you were an Objectivist and you had a child. He's one-and-a-half. What's the first thing of a moral nature you would teach him? Impulse control. That's the first thing he has to learn. Now, let's say he's five. Do we need to tell him "your life belongs to you and the good is to live it, kid, 'cause we're worried you might fall into the clutches of altruism"? Of course not. What we teach him is how not to be stupid when he's pursuing his self-interest. Self-interest is granted, so the question isn't whether we're going to be self-interested or altruistic, but whether we're going to be intelligently self-interested or stupidly self-interested. So you are going to teach your son to think about the likely consequences of his behavior.

AM: You won't be teaching him philosophical ideas.

NB: Objectivism comes on, sometimes, as if the most important issue you have to understand is the issue of egoism versus altruism. But that's nowhere near the beginning of the process.

AM: Objectivism also seems to ignore that there is a process, by which one develops.

NB: Yes, it doesn't think developmentally at all. I didn't either, in my early years.

AM: I want to read you a passage from one of Ayn Rand's letters to Isabel Paterson.

"Incidentally, I know some very good arguments of my own in favor of the existence of God. But they're not the ones you mention and they're not the ones I've ever read advanced in any religion. They're not proofs; therefore I can't say I accept them. They are merely possibilities, like a hypothesis that could be tenable. But it wouldn't be an omnipotent God and it wouldn't be a limitless God."

In brackets, it says she never mentioned these arguments again. Did she ever mention them to you?

NB: No. I would remember it if she did.

AM: Well, there's a mystery for the ages.

Rand completely wrote-off ethnicity. And it is certainly a bogus political concept. But do you think one should completely ignore one's so-called "cultural heritage"?

NB: Why would one do that? Rand didn't seem to understand the extent to which we unconsciously absorb a great deal from the culture in which we grew up. Therefore, she didn't understand how important it is to reflect upon and understand that culture and how it will in part help you understand yourself.

Ernest Van Den Haag, a sociologist, wrote a fascinating book called *The Jewish Mystique*. I read that book, got a lot out of it, and went over to Ayn and said, "I've got to tell you something shocking." Because we never thought of ourselves as Jewish in any important way, I announced, laughing, "We are both exponents of the Jewish messianic tradition. We believe we are here on earth to be signposts pointing to the good life." What I got out of that book was how Jewish that was. The whole idea of these prophets

coming along, or however he was describing it—it fit Ayn and me to a tee. I thought that was very funny.

AM: I wanted to shift gears and ask you about something that Rand, and libertarian theorists in general, have had very little to say about: procreation. Procreation seems to be one of the few things that are essential for the survival of mankind as a species, but not essential for the survival of any individual man. And it is in man's nature, generally, to procreate. Mother Nature wants grandchildren. Is any circumstance foreseeable in which this would result in conflict, in which it could possibly become an ethical issue?

NB: There's no way you can tell people that they must procreate whether they want to or not. I don't see how that can be sold.

AM: Certainly not. But in affluent countries, native populations are receding. If affluence spreads across the world, it is plausible that in the distant future the world population would recede. (Not to mention the possibility of a disaster.) So while procreation could never be a must philosophically, do you think it could ever properly feel like an obligation?

NB: It's not impossible. I'll tell you why. We often don't think about how we relate to future generations (or for that matter, to past ones). Suppose you knew that no person is going to be born after today, that all of us will live out our lives the best we can in a normal way, but there will be no future generations. Wouldn't that affect anything we do? I think the answer is: it would affect, in the most profound way imaginable, everything we do. I think it would be a killer of ambition...I don't know what the hell we would do. But we certainly wouldn't be developing science or technology. You see, without knowing it, we're very often thinking beyond our own life span. We're not aware of it, but it's so easy to show that at some unconscious level we do. I wouldn't believe anybody, not even an Objectivist, if he says: "I don't care—it's the end, it's the end. I'll live out my life; I don't care what comes later anyway." That's nonsense. You'd have to be really disconnected to not see the truth of what I'm saying here.

And that's the news for today.

AM: Wait, I've got one more question that I have to ask.

NB: Jesus, you're like a criminal lawyer. Have you ever considered becoming a criminal?

AM: Nah, I wouldn't make a good psychotherapist. Now my final question is: we all know about the deficiencies of ARI, but what do you think the rational Objectivists, such as TOC, could be doing to be more successful? What are your criticisms of them?

NB: I think the work of TOC is valuable, although obviously sometimes I'll disagree with some position one of its people expresses.

AM: Well, in general, what do you think professional Objectivists should be doing?

NB: ARI seems to offer a heavier dose of trainings that deal specifically with understanding Objectivism. TOC doesn't seem to do that to the same extent. They offer something every summer, to be sure, but I don't think it's on the scope of what the other guys do.

AM: ARI is certainly more productive in that sense.

NB: They also have a much bigger purse, though. So at this time I do not really feel in as position to make a statement.

AM: In general, do you think Objectivists should write more books?

NB: Oh, books are more important than anything.

AM: Because then it's a permanent resource?

NB: Yeah, and the thing is, you don't see books being written by either camp. In October, there's going to be a one-day TOC seminar on success, at which I'll be giving a talk on "Self Esteem and the Challenges of Success." And nobody knows this, but the last third of my talk is going to be about the question of what TOC calls success, how they measure success, how they know whether they were more or less successful than last year. What is your reason for being? What would constitute evidence that you were succeeding? I'm interested to hear the answer to that, and I'd like to get a dialogue going in the question period about that. Because if I were to be called in as a consultant by the TOC heads, that is what I would ask.

AM: You should be called in as a consultant. Unless you are unaffordable....

NB: Oh, I wouldn't charge them for that.

AM: Well then they need to get on the ball. Dr. Branden, thank you very much for your time. It was a pleasure.