

Ayn Rand  
By Tibor Machan  
(Peter Lang, 1999. 163 pages. \$19.95)  
Reviewed by Henry C. Scuoteguazza

Ayn Rand enjoyed popularity among general readers that few other philosophers have. Yet she has been shunned or ignored among fellow philosophers. Philosophy books rarely refer to Rand and when they do it usually is in a derogatory context. Modern philosophers often dismiss Rand as being a simplistic thinker. Rand herself seemed to have conflicting desires. On one hand she wanted to be recognized as a major philosopher while on the other hand she hurled nothing but invective at her would-be colleagues.

This lack of professional respect has been slowly changing as a cadre of philosophers sympathetic to Rand, such as Chris Sciabarra, David Kelley, Douglas Den Uyl, and Douglas Rasmussen, have hammered away at the academic resistance with a steady barrage of articles and books.

Tibor Machan, Professor Emeritus at Auburn University's Department of Philosophy, has been hacking through the thickets of professional philosophy for several decades with a prolific and diverse pen. Machan defends Rand's Objectivism yet he was not officially part of her "inner circle" making him a natural candidate for writing the book *Ayn Rand*, published by Peter Lang in their *Masterworks in the Western Tradition* series. As the editors of this series say: "This series is intended to exhibit ... why certain authors, texts, and ideas are ... the core of western civilization." It is indeed remarkable that a well-respected publisher acknowledges Rand's place in the Western canon. What is even more remarkable is what Machan accomplishes. He covers Rand's philosophy, offers criticisms and compares her ideas to other

philosophers, all in 163 pages. It also is one of Machan's most lucidly written books.

Machan presents a clear and fair synopsis of her main ideas after a brief introduction to her fiction and non-fiction. Machan then explains the uniqueness of Objectivism. If you look hard enough you can find other philosophers who have held isolated positions similar to one of Rand's. There are some who state that we live in an objective reality, as Rand does. Some claim our senses can be trusted and that reason is our tool for analyzing and integrating the data provided by our senses. Still others claim we should live for our own happiness. Rand was unique in how she wove her philosophy from a common thread: the importance of reason and objectivity in living a good life.

Rand's defense of egoism stemmed from her concepts of the nature of life and value and their inter-relationship. Rand used her egoism to build her unabashed moral defense of capitalism. Instead of arguing pragmatically for a free market because it produces more and better light bulbs, bathtubs and BMW's than non-capitalist systems, Rand argued that free minds need free markets in order to produce the values we need to live. Her iconoclastic views confounded and confused both liberal and conservatives. Liberals hate her for her moral defense of capitalism while conservatives could not forgive her militant atheism.

Rand's iconoclasm extended even to the foundations of her philosophy. For instance, she did not share modern philosophers' disdain for metaphysics but proudly based her Objectivism on the premise that we live in an objective reality. She proclaimed the vital importance of axioms. As she liked to put it "A is A." Machan devotes a fair number of pages to explaining

why axioms place such a key role in her philosophy: they “figure in all awareness [and] are indispensable for any and all awareness.” They “ground human knowledge [and] serve as a guardian against error and a corrective for it.”

Her unique approach shines through even with axioms. She does not claim we know axioms by direct intuition or as innate concepts but as the result of processing empirical data and concluding there are certain irreducible aspects of reality.

Machan shows how Rand forged her philosophy from a chain of concepts, culminating in her theory of aesthetics. Oddly enough, Machan explains that she realized that “only if she first develops a rational, reality-based philosophy of human nature would there exist a foundation and context for her romantic realist fiction.” So in a way, Rand actually worked her way backward from her vision of the ideal human to the philosophical foundations.

Rand claimed Objectivism is a system, yet Machan argues “Ayn Rand developed the broad outlines and some of the details of a complete philosophy.” In other words, Objectivism has gaps and unaddressed questions. Here is a partial list of these questions. How did life emerge from inanimate matter? Is there sufficient room in Objectivism for spirituality? Is the mind a unique being in nature? What more can be said about the relationship between rational egoism and benevolence than what David Kelley discussed in *Unrugged Individualism*? Why should individuals respect the rights of others? “Is there any serious and realistic discussion ... of being a good husband or wife?” Finally, touching on an issue that I raised in my review of Kelley’s *A Life of One’s Own*, Machan notes that Rand did not

address people, such as newborns and Alzheimer's victims, who cannot support themselves. "It is not so obvious ... how caring for, say one's own unwanted severely retarded Down syndrome baby rather than abandoning it serves self-interest. Is it a matter of integrity in carrying out an (undesirable obligation generated by a voluntary act? Or is it OK to abandon the child ... since it never will be a self-supporting human being?"

This last question deals with how an ethics of self-interest would address these tough cases. My questions extend to the theory of rights: do these people have a right to a certain minimum level of survival?

These are all good questions, the answers to which will provide opportunities for Rand's supporters to expand and refine her system.

In summary, if you are interested in learning more about Objectivism or if you already know the philosophy and are interested in a friendly exposition and critique, look no further than Machan's Ayn Rand.