

The Ideas of Ayn Rand

Reviewed by Henry Scuoteguazza

Over the years few books have been written about Ayn Rand's philosophy, much to the dismay of those who admire her. So far only a handful of books have been published about her work: *Ayn Rand*, by James T. Baker, *With Charity Toward None* by William O'Neil, *Atheism, Ayn Rand and Other Heresies*, by George H. Smith, and *The Philosophic Thought of Ayn Rand*, edited by Rasmussen and Den Uyl, both objectivist academics. Nathaniel and Barbara Branden, former colleagues of Rand, each have written books about Ayn Rand with some commentary on Rand's thought, but the focus of these books was more to tell the story of Rand's life than it was to did provide an in-depth analysis of her philosophy of Objectivism. We can add Ronald F. Merrill's *The Ideas of Ayn Rand* to this rather slim library, and it is a worthy addition.

Merrill, a scientist and businessman, has been associated with Objectivism for almost three decades, including the heady days of the late 1960s when the Objectivist movement flourished. A graduate student of MIT and the University of Oregon, Merrill runs his own business and has written several business books.

He seems to have written his book with two audiences in mind: professional philosophers and fellow objectivists. For the non-objectivists Merrill provides an overview and analysis of Rand's thought and development, including both her fiction and non-fiction writing, with the goal of gaining more respect for her ideas. For the objectivists he indicates areas where Objectivism could use further work, and he points out new subjects on which Rand did not expound. He does not try to write a thesis; the book is only 191 pages long. Instead, he entices us with insights and questions for us to work out.

Merrill covers four areas of Rand's life and work: her fiction writing style, her intellectual development, her philosophy and her theme of how an individualist survives In a culture that can be unfriendly to individualists.

Rand's Fiction

Merrill tackles two subjects at the same time: Rand's fiction and her intellectual development. Indeed, it would be difficult to separate these two, since her philosophy would affect her fiction and her ideas did evolve somewhat. Merrill identifies several key characteristics which typify her style. She loved to defy conventions and to shock and surprise the reader, especially with twists in her plot that are unexpected but, in hindsight, make

perfect sense. Rand had a highly visual flair to her writing, as though she were writing her novels as screenplays. She based her characters on sound psychological insights so that they didn't do anything 'just because,' Merrill notes that Rand's interest in moral issues and motivations reflect the predominant style of the 19th century versus the focus on manners in the 18th and psychology in the 20th. Rand interwove heavy doses of philosophy into her story.

Merrill claims Nietzsche had an effect on Rand, and he analyzes her early fiction to support this. "During the first part of her career Rand's writings are clearly and explicitly Nietzschean—so much so that even her later substantial textual revisions were insufficient to conceal the evidence. It was not until the late 1930s that Rand finally broke with Nietzsche, and this break is an important theme in *The Fountainhead*." She did not accept the worst elements of Nietzsche's philosophy, which included the idea of some people being superior to others and being exempt from ordinary morality. She responded to the sense of life which was captured in his quote, "The noble soul has reverence for itself." Merrill further supports his claim by comparing the first edition of *We The Living* with the revised version. Contrary to Rand's claim that she did not make substantial changes between editions, Merrill shows how some passages in the first edition clearly reveal Nietzsche's influence.

In *The Fountainhead* Rand resolves her differences with Nietzsche: she uses the character Gail Wynand to represent the ultimate futility of the Nietzschean approach. Roark's courtroom defense of his dynamiting of the Cortlandt housing project brings the conflict between the Nietzschean and the Objectivist approaches to a head. She shows that being an individualist does not entail using people as disposable means to your ends.

However, as a resolution to the conflict between Roark and the law, Merrill feels the trial and its verdict don't carry conviction, since they rest on appealing to the common men who comprise the jury. This weakness, though, is masked by a more important development: Rand's conclusion that evil is impotent because it does not create values. This idea ultimately leads to a vital insight which Rand introduced in *Atlas Shrugged*: altruism relies on the sanction of the victim, or the policy of trying to make people feel guilty for their virtues.

It's not possible to delve in this review into all of Merrill's insights and claims. He does take issue with Rand on one major point dealing with the difference in psychology of men and women. Merrill claims that "Rand's vision of men and women reflects her uncritical acceptance of the twentieth-century cliché that human behavior has no genetic component. Accepting

that humans are born 'tabula rasa'—blank slates—she could not develop a theory of sexuality that accounted for the inherent differences between the sexes in a coherent manner." This ultimately undermines her attempt to construct a perfect man in John Galt. "[T]o be an ideal man, John Galt would have to be inherently different from a woman, he would have to be distinctively male, not just a pure intellect happening to inhabit a male body... Her concept of humanity for all its novel and perceptive insights, was incomplete."

Rand's Intellectual Development

As we mentioned above, Merrill claims Nietzsche influenced Rand's development of some of her ideas. To further support his point, Merrill notes an interesting parallel: Nietzsche considered Immanuel Kant as his arch-enemy because he saw Kant as trying to save Christian altruist morality from reason. Rand held the same position. (It is also known that the radical empiricism of David Hume wakened Kant from what Kant himself described as his "dogmatic slumber"; Kant sought to salvage some certainty from the Humean attack.)

Although Rand did not accept the worst parts of Nietzsche's ethics, Merrill holds that she did respond to his belief that moral growth entailed pain. "[S]he never lost the conviction that to grow and improve oneself is painful, that one must not be stopped by pain, and that to assist others means, in a sense, to be cruel to them, Considered in this light, Henry Cameron's brusque treatment of Howard Roark; Francisco D'Anconia's deception of Dagny; and John Galt's cruelty toward both Dagny and Hank Rearden become more comprehensible.'

The Development of Objectivism

What is it that makes her philosophy unique? Merrill answers this by moving through the philosophy starting with metaphysics and working to politics.

Metaphysics: Rand believed that an objective reality exists and that our senses accurately depict the appearance of this world. She endorsed Aristotle's laws of logic (laws of identity, non-contradiction and excluded middle) as the foundation of knowledge and as a based on the metaphysical nature of the Universe. That is, things exist, we can perceive them and, if we process this information properly, we can figure out their nature or identity. Her basic approach is similar to Aristotle's but, instead of claiming objects get their identity from some kind of essence, as Aristotle did, Rand claimed that the Universe was comprised of individual concretes, each having an identity.

Some of the recent developments in physics, particularly quantum mechanics, impinge on metaphysics. Unfortunately, since Rand did not have a strong background in the sciences, she did not have much to say directly about these issues. Her basic approach provides a foundation from which it's possible to defend the view that reality is objective.

Epistemology: The constant refrain throughout the history of philosophy has been "How do you know you know?" Merrill points out that unlike the typical approach which focuses on knowledge as proof, Rand said the goal of knowledge is to understand the world. "She was less interested in how one establishes the truth of particular propositions, than in how one develops a complete structure of interrelated knowledge. Her epistemology, then, centers on concepts, not logical inference."

One could still ask: how can we be certain of our knowledge? The issue of certainty is a vital one, yet according to Merrill, there isn't a definition of certainty anywhere in Rand's writings. "There are a number of questions along this line that Objectivists need to ask themselves. What is certainty, and why does man need it? What does it really mean to say that one is 'certain' of some conclusion? Are there different kinds of certainty? By what criterion can one decide whether some particle of knowledge is certain or tentative? What can one do with certain knowledge that one cannot do with knowledge of which one is merely pretty sure? ... The absence of a positive theory of certainty is a striking deficiency in her philosophy." Merrill goes on to admit that although Rand did not directly address this issue she justifies her view that we can know things, that we can be certain within our context of knowledge. It should also be noted that Leonard Peikoff, her intellectual heir, did address this issue in lectures.

The sciences have produced the most interesting questions for epistemology and metaphysics. The most recent contribution is Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, in which Kuhn claims all scientific change entails a "paradigm" shift, a fundamentally different way of looking at the universe, such as the shift that occurred from Newton's physics to Einstein's. Kuhn concluded, and many scientists have agreed, that science isn't objective. Again, Rand did not address this specific position but covered this in a general way, leaving it up to the reader to work out the details of applying her philosophy.

Merrill poses an interesting question to show the importance of continuing work in this area, Let's say we're considering two competing theories. Theory A is internally consistent but several experimental facts contradict it. Theory B is consistent with the facts but has internal inconsistencies. "No

better theory is currently available, but one must make a decision, and right now— to design a spacecraft, to plan a campaign against a deadly epidemic, to prevent an explosion in a refinery. One must act, and on the basis of one theory or the other.” He leaves it up to the reader to provide an answer.

Ethics: Merrill devotes much space to the discussion of ethics due to his feeling that this is the area in which Rand made the most significant contributions. From her observation that life is the source of all other values, she defended both the idea that life is an end in itself and that an ethics based on life as an end in itself entails a policy of rational self-interest. Merrill reformulates her argument for life as an end in itself to address some of the criticisms leveled at her ethics and to make her argument more rigorous. “Do humans never regard life as a means to an end? One thinks of Tony [the wet nurse’ in *Atlas Shrugged*], willing himself to live for one more minute, then one minute more, until he can find someone to carry his urgent warning to Rearden. And is life the only end-in-itself? Do humans never seek any other value for its own sake?”

He contends Rand’s chain of reasoning supporting her position will not be defensible unless she can show there is no other end in itself besides life. “At best this is going to be difficult, and probably it will be impossible. Take just one prospective counterexample: reproduction. Even with modern medicine a woman faces a noticeable risk of death in having a child. Taking into account economic and other costs, one can scarcely argue that reproduction makes a net contribution to the survival of the parents. It certainly seems plausible to assert that people value their offspring as ends in themselves, and not just means to the survival of the parents.” Merrill concludes: “Whether or not life is the only ultimate end, it is an end which is a necessary means to any and all other ends.”

If we follow this line of reasoning beyond Merrill, it would seem to require revising Rand’s position that all of our actions must directly benefit us. This seems to open the possibility of saying that it’s OK to pursue our self-interest but it may also be all right to do things that benefit others without direct benefit (or harm) to us. Whatever the case, Merrill’s suggested argument opens up interesting avenues for further development of an ethics of self-interest and for addressing areas on which Rand did not, such as ethical questions on man-woman relationships, marriage and raising children. This last one is the most challenging test of this ethics.

Finally, Merrill claims, and I agree completely, that the ethics is incomplete until it provides some “how to” on being moral, on choosing, prioritizing and pursuing values, he cites the work of psychologists Nathaniel Branden and Alexander Weinberg as attempts to provide such guidelines; there are many

others including Steven Covey's excellent *The Seven Habits of Highly, Effective People*. The point we should remember is that Rand specifically worked out a moral defense of pursuing one's own interests versus the altruist morality which says we do not have the right to pursue our own values and must sacrifice them for others.

Politics and economics: Rand saw that her ethics of individualism leads to a political system arranged to protect the rights of individuals, including their right to act in the marketplace. Hence, she advocated -- indeed, championed -- laissez-faire capitalism in an era in which defending the free market was considered gauche, and a minimal night-watchman government that protects us from force and fraud. While Merrill agrees with all of this, he claims Rand needed to work out a positive theory of the origin of government. What is government? What justifies it? Why should rational men submit to it? How does it, or should it, originate?"

Survival and beyond

Rand believed our culture is imbued with a long tradition of altruism, the ideal of self-sacrifice. She wrestled with the question of how an individualist lives in such a world. The question alone has a ring of despair and alienation in it. This may sound like an exaggeration, but at one point Rand announced that she could not muster the strength to write another novel after *Atlas* because she couldn't imagine a world worse than the present one, as though this is what had to be done in order to write a novel.

There is a touch of this attitude in Merrill as well. He feels Objectivism will make minimal progress in the academia because the entrenched elite is so hostile to the ideas. He doubts well live to see the day when Rand is taught in the university classroom with the same respect as is accorded to Plato or Kant.

In politics, Merrill does not see much substantive progress despite the Reagan years and the increased respect for libertarian ideas, because neither libertarians nor objectivists offer a positive vision of the future to which people can aspire. He makes an interesting observation on what he calls "... the final, posthumous Randian paradox": "[L]ibertarianism has failed by its success. For libertarian ideas have triumphed to a great extent -- not in the political, but in the social sphere. The moral consensus and corresponding social customs that once restricted Americans' behavior have been demolished. And this has been a major driving force for reduction of freedom in the political sphere." In other words, the increased use of drugs and associated crime has created a demand for greater, not less, government power.

Ironically, Merrill overlooks the very mechanism by which Rand became successful: by appealing directly to the intelligent layman through fiction and nonfiction. There are a lot of issues wrapped together when we consider the mechanism of cultural change. How do we communicate to and foster the growth of the American's benevolent sense of life? Furthermore, how do we feel motivated to even try to communicate our ideas if we assume we're doomed from the start because we're trapped in a hopelessly irrational world and the only refuge is to return to re-reading *Atlas Shrugged*? Is there a case for cultural optimism? (I think there is.) How can we turn the tools of the mass media to our advantage? Several people have been successful in communicating Objectivist ideas in the mass market without sacrificing their ideals. This is an area where Merrill as well as other admirers of Rand could devote their efforts.

As you can see, *The Ideas of Ayn Rand* bears a lot of fruit for further thought, discussion and, yes, even argument. But this is good. I hope he succeeds in getting philosophers to seriously consider Rand's ideas and in sparking further development of objectivism. Ideally, his work will spur other like-minded writers to venture forth with their own books.