

[To Jeremy/Tusa/Ignacio]

I haven't read *Atlas Shrugged* but have read *The Fountainhead* recently. I had always heard of Ayn Rand's commitment to rational self-interest and capitalism, and of her blueprints for conservative politics. What captured my interest over the years is how she seems to gain converts from among people who would not ordinarily lean that way. So I read *The Fountainhead*, and I do think it helped me to better understand both the appeal and the danger of buying into her ideas.

In some ways my initial reaction is probably quite the opposite of most people's. I get the impression that most people take the political/ethical philosophy quite seriously but skip over the aesthetic/artistic value. I, on the other hand, was surprised at the literary quality of *The Fountainhead* – from cubist descriptions to provocative analogies and metaphors and symbolic values, complex characters in interesting situations, etc., I found the book to have great literary merit and great cinematic potential. But in terms of politics and ethical philosophy, I find her at best naïve, at worst a danger to herself and others.

Her characters start out as complex, passionate, literary creations with real cinematic value. The problem arises when the characters come to express abstract syllogisms -- e.g., according to Rand, if we consider compassion a virtue, then we must wish others to suffer so we can express that virtue -- Toohey in *The Fountainhead* slides from being a wonderfully complex character into a silly caricature when she reduces him to this abstract principle. What's worse, the principle is patently untrue. Of course I can feel compassion for Rachael when she is sick without "wishing" her to be sick so I can express compassion. In Rand's books, my compassion would be "rigged" to be a bad thing, but in real life my compassion for Rachael is obviously not bad. We are interconnected whether we like it or not, and those rare occasions, times of loss, etc., where I've felt the flow of compassion between myself and another, are some of the most life-affirming and authentically human moments in my life. Ironically, those who try to deny our interconnections (as Rand would have us do with her stark individualism) end up leading shallower, less authentic lives, or are forced to become hypocrites (ironically, since that's what Rand was trying to avoid). To embrace Rand's abstract principles, just because they worked out fine in her novels, puts one on a very dangerous moral track.

If *Atlas Shrugged* is similar to *The Fountainhead*, it will start out rich with literary value, and then in the second half Rand will self-destruct as an artist -- i.e., she will reduce villains and heroes alike to abstract, one-dimensional principles in ethics/politics -- worse, she will reduce them to principles (such as the above) that are demonstrably false in real life. So the potentially first-rate artist deteriorates into the second-rate philosopher.

I have this hunch that when Ayn Rand was a kid, some adult admonished her (probably rightly) to quit being so selfish, and she became so enraged that she devoted her entire life to an elaborate justification of her own selfishness. The trick is that she weaves the self-serving justification into an engaging story with enough philosophical threads of real value (e.g. embrace your own integrity rather than following convention; envision the highest human potential and try to achieve it; trust your reasoning mind over other people's opinions) to make it quite appealing to a casual reader... hence the real danger she poses to the mass of uncritical readers.

To summarize, if one reads her characters as figures of compelling literary/cinematic value, and possibly as starting points for philosophical discussion, the rewards are great, but if one reads her heroes as role models to emulate in real life, one is making a big mistake.

The irony is that one of her strongest thematic points was that acting with integrity means never being a follower. And what is her biggest legacy? A worldwide organization (The Ayn Rand Institute) of people who, for the most part, uncritically hang upon everything she said.

(Later)

Yes, I perfectly agree with some components of her ethics, including tenets to embrace your own integrity rather than following convention; to envision the highest human potential and try to achieve it; to trust your reasoning mind over other people's opinions, the value of self-reliance, etc. These excellent principles come right out of 18th-century Enlightenment and Romantic traditions and have been embraced by many philosophies besides Rand's. Thus, the part of her philosophy that I appreciate most is not essentially "Randian" but just things that she shares with the many.

It is by weaving these essentially good tenets into her philosophy that she lures people into a kind of complacent agreement, but the devil is in the other details. The more controversial and the signature Randian stuff, like the ideas that selfishness is always good and compassion always bad, would be silly on the face of it were they not intermixed with the self-evidently true tenets. Those good tenets are the teaspoon of sugar that gets people to swallow the toxin.

Yes, I had thought about Ayn's Bolshevik connection in the same vein as my fantasy about some adult telling her to be less selfish. I.e., in witnessing the excesses of Bolshevism, she swung to an opposite but equally unprofitable extreme, the negative emotional investment in Bolshevism from her childhood blinding her to some of her adult weaknesses.

Think of Aristotle's ethics, wherein vice is a virtue carried to an extreme (you might recall his example that courage is a mean between extremes of cowardice and foolhardiness). One might argue that Rand carried good positive ideals to such an extreme (think Pasha/Strelnikov in *Dr. Zhivago*) that she becomes as bad as the tyranny she's fighting against. The virtue of self-reliance, e.g., is radicalized into "Never ask for help or give help under any circumstances because to do so will weaken the moral integrity of both parties." She is the kind of automobile driver that would not slow down to let you over when you're trying to change lanes because to do so would mean (1) sacrificing her own interest for no reason and (2) reinforcing weakness in the other driver by selflessly easing his path instead of letting him rise to the occasion and take his rightful position on the force of his own strength. All of this sounds great, but I'd rather somebody just let me over, and I'd do the same for them.