Rand and Philosophy (and Capitalism)

Douglas B. Rasmussen
St. John's University

I would like to continue discussing why Ayn Rand is worth studying. I agree that Rand is very audacious. She can go to the heart of a controversial matter with just a few sentences. Her analytical skills are great. However, it is with her power to convey the emotional meaning of individualism, capitalism, and liberty that she is truly unsurpassed. By "emotional" I mean having to do with values and morality. Anyone who reads Rand can come to feel both the supreme worth of the individual human being and the evil of all forms of oppression. When it comes to expressing the moral importance of the individual, of capitalism, and of liberty, there is no better writer.

Professor Machan has correctly identified Rand as a cognitivist in ethics. She is also naturalistic; that is, she appeals to human nature to understand the human good. I further agree that Rand is a "classical egoist" if we mean by those words that self-interest is determined by the facts about your nature and not merely by your wants or desires.

I would also argue, though this is not the place, that Rand makes the most sense if she is interpreted as advocating human flourishing or *eudaimonia* as the ultimate good, and not merely survival. For her human virtues are not simply means to survival. They are also constituents of the human good, what Rand calls "man's survival qua man." They have more than mere instrumental value. The human good is, in other words, partly defined by virtue, and so we are always speaking of a way of living. Human living is much more than not being dead. In the early 60's, when Rand came on the scene in ethics, she was advocating what is now called "virtue ethics." She was in some respects ahead of her time. In her work, "The Objectivist Ethics," she talks about the virtues that comprise human moral well being and rejects the consequentialist/deontological dichotomy.

Rand is, of course, an individualist, but the type of individualism she advocates is what I would call Aristotelian, not Hobbesian. I also think

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it is incorrect to call her view Nietzchean, but there is a lot of debate now about what Nietzsche is really saying. Much could be said on this matter, but not at this time. I think one should consider Rand a philosopher, and if one does that, one will not make the mistake of reading only Rand. I think one needs to read Aristotle and Aquinas. I think one needs to read Wittgenstein. I think one need to read many others.

Rand suggests that if we are true intellectuals, new intellectuals, we might be able to find a more powerful justification for the classical liberal society. Many people who have read her works have taken up this challenge in various ways.

I want to say something more about Rand's advocacy of capitalism. If the Pope in *Centesimus Annus* is giving one cheer for capitalism, and if Irving Kristol, the neo-conservative, gave two cheers for capitalism, Rand certainly is giving three cheers. She is for capitalism obviously because of the value of liberty; but she is also for capitalism for a reason that, in a very interesting way, is similar to Michael Novak's reason for endorsing capitalism.

In fact, if Michael Novak is correct, Rand's reason is similar to the current Pope's basis for endorsing capitalism. The reason for her commitment to capitalism is that it unlocks the human mind. It unleashes it. This is also, by the way, an idea implicit in Hayek's understanding of free markets. Rand, however, takes this idea even further.

Rand is tremendously impressed with what she calls the motor that runs the world. If you have read her novel, *Atlas Shrugged*, she says, "What happens if we stop the motor of the world? What happens if people who think, who produce, who create stop? What will happen to the world?" Everything that is decent and good about human life will end. It will come to a halt. The individual human mind is of fundamental moral importance, and since capitalism allows people the freedom to follow their own judgments, capitalism is of fundamental moral importance too.

This is a very different approach to justifying capitalism. Most justifications of capitalism have been of the capitalism-makes-more-and-better-bathtubs form. As former Secretary of State, James Baker said to the citizens of Albania, "Freedom works." I am for more and better bath tubs. I think we all are. That is an important fact. That is a moral vision of sorts. Yet, it is not enough, and Rand understood this. She sees the human good, the human intellect, liberty, and capitalism as intimately linked. We cannot be all that we morally and intellectually need to be without political and economic liberty, without capitalism. This makes Rand very

important when it comes to the justification of the classical liberal political vision.

I can only briefly note one other reason why Rand is important. I think Rand pushes you toward looking into deep philosophical questions. I mentioned *Atlas Shrugged* earlier. You probably know—or maybe some of you do not—that the three main parts of Atlas Shrugged have titles that correspond to the Aristotelian laws of thought: non-contradiction, excluded middle, and identity. Now what is the point of this? She is saying that the world is fundamentally intelligible, that answers are possible. That is important. Today, when relativism and subjectivism are advocated by many intellectuals, Rand is a non-compromising defender of the idea that answers are possible. We can know the truth. This is an epistemological point, and it is crucial both for our own lives and in understanding Rand's thought.

Professor Den Uyl and I have co-edited a book, *The Philosophic Thought of Ayn Rand* (University of Illinois Press, 1984). This book seriously examined and analyzed her thought. I recommend it to those who want to explore her positions more deeply.

I do not want my enthusiasm for Rand to be taken as an unqualified endorsement. I think, in many respects, she is not a complete philosopher. She failed, for example, to discuss the role of *phronesis* or practical wisdom in ethics. I think this is a large gap, and it hampers her understanding of ethical individualism. In addition, she did not sufficiently understand the complex character of "rights" and what is involved in defending them. Finally, her discussion of the "problem of universals" in her epistemology failed to consider possible sources of support for her own views—for example, Aquinas' theory of abstraction. Yet, why must one person have all the answers? Whoever said that all you do is just go to a book, open it, read it, and everything is solved. You read someone for what they make you do, for what they make you think, for what they make you feel.

If you read Rand carefully, and you pay attention to her subtleties, it is my conviction that you will be the better for it.