

## Discussion Note

# When Avoiding Scholarship is the Academic Thing to Do: Mary Midgely's Misinterpretation of Ayn Rand

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### Grounds for Exclusion

Contemporary academia is a long way from being a free marketplace of ideas. The customs of discipline, speciality, and faction closely regulate who is allowed to participate in the intellectual disputes of the day. Those deemed unworthy are preferentially ignored. When they can't be ignored, they must be dismissed - the quicker the better.

Ayn Rand conducted her entire career outside the university, and preferred to present her ideas in novels. That is already a huge strike against her; taking the popular road excites distrust (if not envy) in most academics. Some labor is needed to trace the genealogy of Rand's ideas, and her closest living relatives in academia, the neo-Aristotelians, are distinctly *déclassé*. Her rejection of altruism and advocacy of *laissez-faire* capitalism are about as welcome in most Departments of Philosophy, as calling for the disestablishment of public schools would be in Colleges of Education.

Though the grounds for blackballing, and total exclusion from academic discourse, are overwhelming, Rand can't always be ignored; novels like *The Fountainhead* were and are too widely read. Pre-emptive swipes are necessary on occasion. One of these swipes is taken by British philosopher Mary Midgely, in a little book titled *Can't We Make Moral Judgements?*<sup>1</sup> Though Midgely is a career academic, her book is not, on the face of it, an insider's exercise. Written in plain language and directed toward a lay audience, it aims to combat the tendencies Midgely sees at work in contemporary Western societies, in which "Relativism and subjectivism tend to be used together as constituting a muddled, composite kind of immoralism..."<sup>2</sup> Though her project wouldn't agitate most of her fellow moral philosophers, it's unlikely to win her popularity in other branches of the humanities.

Why, one might naively ask, aren't Mary Midgely and Ayn Rand natural allies? Rand, after all, had zero regard for subjectivism, relativism, or any kind of moral excuse-making. She would have applauded Midgely's deft dissection of cultural relativism.<sup>3</sup> And among her memorable statements is "Judge, and be prepared to be judged."<sup>4</sup>

On the contrary, *Can't We Make Moral Judgements?* has Rand marching right up front in the anti-judgment brigade. In a chapter titled "Varieties of Subjectivism," two quotations from *Anthem*<sup>5</sup> nestle hard by utterances from those other "prophets of individualism," Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre. Indeed, we're told that Rand's "influential novels convey a quite extraordinary exaltation of moral solipsism - of a willingness to live as if one were the only conscious being in the universe."<sup>6</sup>

Where on earth did Midgely get this interpretation? Her reasoning runs as follows:

1. Rand is an individualist; therefore, Rand is a psychological egoist.
2. Rand is an *American* individualist; therefore, Rand is a Social Darwinist.

### Psychological Egoism?

Midgely calls collectivists "lumpers" (those more extreme than herself regard society as an "ant's nest"). Individualists are "splitters" who wish to live in a "looser, more fragmented society." An extreme splitter would reduce society to a "collection of enlightened egoists, each of whom really cares about his or her own interest, and agrees only to co-operate with the others in cases shown by calculation to serve that interest."<sup>7</sup>

Splitters crave exemption from moral judgments by others, so nothing can obstruct their inviolate subjectivity. Attempts at rational persuasion are just as objectionable to them as coercion would be: "The wish of the splitters is to protect individuals from being subject to the judgement of others, and also from having their own judgement unduly influenced by the opinions of others."<sup>8</sup>

Having pigeonholed Rand (along with any other strong advocates of individual liberty) as an extreme splitter, Midgely professes puzzlement at all of the "positive moralizing" in Howard Roark's courtroom speech:<sup>9</sup> "[T]here is a fatal clash of aims. The ideal of a world where nobody ever listens to anybody else is at war with an irresistible desire on the writer's part to be listened to while preaching that ideal, and to shape it so that other people use their freedom in the correct way."<sup>10</sup>

What splitters must rely on, according to Midgely, is psychological egoism - the doctrine that human beings always and invariably act in their self-interest. But psychological egoism, Midgely is convinced, is false: "[T]he very fact that we are often so imprudent - the fact that we devote ourselves to all sorts of non-interested ideals, from arts and warfare to mountain-climbing and motor-racing - shows plainly that our motives are not purely self-interested, but have a most complex variety of aims."<sup>11</sup>

There have been sturdier refutations of psychological egoism. That "atomistic individualist," Thomas Hobbes, would have had no trouble encompassing the projects and concerns enumerated by Midgely within his conception of the self. For instance, the Hobbesian self is enamored of power and glory, so a devotion to the art of warfare could come quite naturally to it.<sup>12</sup>

Something, however, is much more deeply wrong here. Ayn Rand explicitly rejected psychological egoism! Psychological egoism identifies the self's interests with whatever it feels like doing at the moment; Rand considered the self's interests to be what is actually good for the self. Psychological egoism regards the pursuit of self-interest to be automatic and appetitive; Rand held that pursuing one's self-interest requires conscious thought and choice, and that identifying what is really good for you, and doing it, can at times be tremendously difficult. Psychological egoism presumes an unbridgeable gulf between the self's interests and those of other selves; Rand did not.<sup>13</sup>

What Midgely has completely missed is that Rand's view of self-interest derives ultimately from Aristotle, not Hobbes. Just as for Aristotle, the person who practices the virtues is the true "lover of self,"<sup>14</sup> so for Rand it is the person who practices the virtues who is truly furthering his or her self-interest.

Incomprehension of the Aristotelian view of the self is widespread in contemporary moral philosophy, and in moral psychology, as well.<sup>15</sup> Such incomprehension shows up in Midgely's commentary, not just in her casual assumption that individualists must be Hobbesians, but in her taken-for-granted phraseology. She, like so many others, has absorbed Immanuel Kant's diremption between prudence and morality; consequently, behaving in any but the most narrowly "self-interested" way is automatically imprudent. Whereas for Aristotelians, prudence is a virtue.<sup>16</sup>

### Social Darwinism?

Midgely's second argument is not so fundamentally important, but equally wide of the mark. She wonders whether Rand was primarily inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche or Herbert Spencer. "There is surely a great deal of Nietzsche in [Rand's ideas], notably much from the crowd-hating Nietzsche."<sup>17</sup> Indeed there is, but Midgely fails to notice Rand's rejection of key Nietzschean ideas in *The Fountainhead*. It is not Rand's hero, Howard Roark, who exemplifies the Nietzschean will to power. It is Gain Wynand, the newspaper publisher who delivers his paper, and ultimately himself, "body and soul, to the mob."<sup>18</sup> Midgely is too busy derogating Rand's characters to make any attempt to understand them: Roark is "simply a comic-book hero," and the tragic Wynand doesn't rate a mention, since "the alleged strugglers after integrity are a most unconvincing bunch."<sup>19</sup>

At any rate, a passage in Roark's courtroom speech, which in Midgely's words praises the United States of America "quite uncritically, in the spirit of a flag-waving presidential candidate,"<sup>20</sup> alerts her that something non-Nietzschean is going on. Midgely thinks she knows what it is. It must be Social Darwinism, "the extra element that distinguishes most English-speaking individualism today sharply from its Continental forerunners."<sup>21</sup>

This is a strange attribution. Rand's rejection of so-called Social Darwinism is a matter of public record: "Herbert Spencer, another champion of capitalism, chose to decide that the theory of evolution and adaptation to the environment was the key to man's morality - and declared that the moral justification of capitalism was the survival of the species, of the human *race*; that whoever was of no value to the race, had to perish; the man's morality consisted of adapting oneself to one's *social* environment, and seeking one's own happiness in the welfare of society; and that the automatic processes of evolution would eventually obliterate the distinction between selfishness and unselfishness."<sup>22</sup> Spencer is mentioned exactly once in *The Fountainhead*; it is not Howard Roark who reads him, but Gain Wynand.<sup>23</sup>

Midgely describes Social Darwinism as "The myth that glorifies commercial freedom by viewing it as a part of a huge, self-justifying cosmic evolutionary process, and exalts it as the model for all social life."<sup>24</sup> What's more, she blames Adam Smith for making

Herbert Spencer possible.<sup>25</sup> It isn't the self-justifying evolutionary process against which Midgely's animus is primarily directed; it is *laissez-faire* capitalism. "Ayn Rand seems...to see no difficulty at all in fitting her officially very demanding ideas of personal freedom into the framework of that very corporate thing, modern Western-style plutocracy."<sup>26</sup> Midgely provides no reasons for regarding "commercial freedom" as wrong; naming it suffices to condemn it.

### How Ayn Rand Metamorphosed into a Subjectivist

Midgely's overall method in *Can't We Make Moral Judgments?* makes it difficult for her to hear what Rand was saying. Her own moral conception is moderate communitarianism, emphasizing continuity of moral discourse within the linguistic community. There is more than a trace of the moral sentiment school, as well - the only moral philosopher to be quoted favorably, anywhere in the book, is Bishop Butler.<sup>27</sup> Appeals to intuition are never far away: "we all" know that our own interests are naturally in conflict with those of others; "we all" know, not only that we have duties to others, but by and large what those duties are and to whom we owe them. For Midgely, any moral philosopher who asks too many fundamental questions, wants too many reasons, or rejects too many received beliefs, is dangerous and antisocial.

Moreover, Midgely listens for moral themes in contemporary fiction with a tin ear. The noted mystery writer P.D. James often features characters who seek to deflect other people from rendering any moral judgement in their actions.<sup>28</sup> "I have the impression," Midgely comments, "that P.D. James takes these amoralist manifestos fairly seriously, and that she is anxious to get them a serious hearing by showing the people who speak them as honourable and high-principled characters."<sup>29</sup> It is hard to believe that James intended any of these characters to be especially sympathetic. For she portrays their lives as self-deluding, pathetic, wretched, and vicious. That "honourable and high-principled" character Caroline, for instance, builds a massive web of deception, including a manipulative relationship with a man she despises, to cover her ruthless service to a terrorist cell, then gives up her real lover to be killed by the leaders of the same cell - only to be summarily liquidated herself. I suspect that James' minute examinations of such people's actions and inner experience are motivated by a concern, not terribly different from Midgely's own, that they exhibit peculiarly modern moral pathologies, brought about by the loss of religious faith and traditional moral strictures. Did one of James' most ambitious novels just happen to get the title *Original Sin*?<sup>30</sup>

But neither Midgely's brand of communitarianism, nor her suspicion that those who ask too many fundamental questions are closet amoralists, can explain how a normally thoughtful moral philosopher got Rand so wrong. What's striking to a reader with the most modest knowledge of Rand's work is how *unscholarly* Midgely's presentation is. Not only are Midgely's readings of the novels obtuse; she gives no sign of having read *anything* except *Anthem* and *The Fountainhead*. Her readers would remain unaware that Rand published *Atlas Shrugged*, or the tiniest shred of nonfiction.

By the time Midgely went to work on *Can't We Make Moral Judgments?*, such essay collections as *The Virtue of Selfishness* had been in print for 25 years. And quality

secondary sources were already available, such as *The Philosophic Thought of Ayn Rand*.<sup>31</sup> Deeper delving has taken place in works published after Midgeley wrote, but there's no need to rummage through Rand's correspondence or plumb the Russian milieu from which she sprang to correct errors so elementary.

In the end, I think Midgeley deferred to some of the worst customs of her academic world. Because Ayn Rand maintained ethical and political views that Midgeley and other philosophers regard as obnoxious, she could not have made any reasons for those views worth analyzing. Because Ayn Rand was outside the mainstream, her ideas could have had no background or history worth researching. Because Ayn Rand was a novelist, she could not have written any philosophical essays worth reading. Midgeley did not try a scholarly treatment and fail. She never tried. From the start, she presumed that nothing in Rand was worth being scholarly about.

### **Beyond Unscholarly Criticism**

From a strictly intellectual standpoint, nothing more should have to be said. If you set out to refute someone you regard as a crank, you ought to be giving that crank a more careful reading than Midgeley deigned to give to Rand.<sup>32</sup>

From a sociological or institutional standpoint, much more needs to be said than there is room for in a short essay. Scholarship improves in a hurry when lapses are sure to get picked apart in the pages of academic journals. Naturally, then, it's important for those who do have a scholarly understanding of the ideas in question to respond in print to all misinterpretations, no matter how crude or poorly reasoned. But whether such responses will get past the gatekeepers at the more prestigious academic journals, and be seen by those who badly need to see them, is another matter. It's fair to say that so long as unscholarly criticism is professionally rewarded, academics will continue to practice it. Only basic changes in the customs that prevail in their workplace, and the incentives to which they are subject, will discourage academics from using bad scholarship for strategic purposes.

## Notes

1. New York: St. Martins, 1991.
2. Midgely, pp.94-95.
3. Midgely, pp.71-91.
4. Ayn Rand, "How Does One Lead a Rational Life in an Irrational Society?", in Ayn Rand (Ed.), *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (New York, 1964), p.72.
5. New York: New American Library, 1946. Midgely refers to this novel as "*The Anthem*."
6. Midgely, p.111.
7. Midgely, p.110.
8. Midgely, p.112.
9. Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), pp.710-717.
10. Midgely, p.116
11. Midgely, p.110.
12. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Ed. C.B. Macpherson; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968).
13. See *The Virtue of Selfishness*, in particular Ayn Rand, "The 'Conflicts' of Men's Interests" (pp.50-56) and Nathaniel Branden, "Isn't Everyone Selfish?" (pp.57-60).
14. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1168a 27-1169b2.
15. In philosophy, see Henry B. Veatch, "Is the Kant the Gray Eminence of Contemporary Moral Theory?", *Ethics*, 90, 218- 238 (1980); Tibor R. Machan, *Individuals and Their Rights* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1989); Douglas B. Rasmussen and Douglas J. Den Uyl, *Liberty and Nature: An Aristotelian Defense of Liberal Order* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1991); and Terence H. Irwin, "Prudence and Morality in Greek Ethics," *Ethics*, 105, 284-295 (1995). For the psychological issues, see Robert L. Campbell and John Chambers Christopher, "Moral Development Theory: A Critique of its Kantian Presuppositions," *Developmental Review*, 16 1-47 (1996), along with the commentaries and the reply contained in the same issue.
16. See Douglas J. Den Uyl, *The Virtue of Prudence* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991).
17. Midgely, p.115.
18. *The Fountainhead*, p.423. See Ronald E. Merrill, *The Ideas of Ayn Rand* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1991), pp.47-55, for an analysis of the novel as Rand's repudiation of

Nietzsche's ethics. It doesn't matter in this regard whether Rand's prior development included a distinct Nietzschean phase: Merrill argues that it did, whereas Chris M. Sciabarra, *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), pp.100-106, contends that it did not.

19. Midgely, p.115.

20. Midgely, p.117. She quotes a passage from p.715, wherein Roark refers to the United States as a country founded on the ideal of "a man's right to the pursuit of happiness. His own happiness. Not anyone else's." Will Bill Clinton or Bob Dole say any such thing in this election year?

21. Midgely, p.117.

22. Ayn Rand, "For the New Intellectual," in *For The New Intellectual: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (New York: Signet, 1961), p.37. How much first-hand knowledge of Spencer's writings this verdict was based on is unclear. A more temperate response by a philosopher of Randian sympathies is Tibor R. Machan, "Herbert Spencer: A Century Later," in Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Ethics* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1978), Vol. I, pp.9-19. Unlike Rand, Machan does regard Spencer as a genuine ethical egoist, and one of a non-Hobbesian variety, his sharpest criticisms are reversed for Spencer's determinism (cf. Rand's objection to Spencer's reliance on the "automotic processes of evolution").

23. *The Fountainhead*, p.419. When Wynand, then a teenage gang leader from Hell's Kitchen, sets out on a program of self-improvement, he begins by stealing a book from a wealthy lady on Fifth Avenue. It turns out to be by Herbert Spencer!

24. Midgely, p.117. Midgely evidently regards Spencer's ideas (and Adam Smith's) as even less worthy of scholarly attention than Rand's. On the distortive and exclusionist treatment that contemporary academics have meted out to Spencer, see George H. Smith, "Will the Real Herbert Spencer Please Stand Up?", in *Atheism, Ayn Rand, and Other Heresies* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1991), pp.239-250. Smith points out that Spencer was a Lamarckian, who believed in the inheritance of acquired characteristics, so the term "Social Darwinism" is a misnomer.

25. Midgely, p.118.

26. Midgely, p.118. When was the last time that the epithet "plutocracy" figures in any serious discourse about capitalism? Issues of substance *could* have been raised in Midgely's treatment, notably the lack in Rand's writings of an explicit "social philosophy" covering human conduct in voluntary organizations such as corporations (see, for instance, Roger Donway, "Responsibility without Duty," *IOS Journal*, 6(2), June 1996, pp.11+).

27. Midgely, p.150.

28. Midgely, pp.5-6, quotes three statements made by characters in *Devices and Desires* (New York: Knopf, 1990). Similar passages can be found in James's other novels.

29. Midgeley, p.7.

30. New York: Warner Books, 1996.

31. Edited by Douglas J. Den Uyl and Douglas B. Rasmussen (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984).

32. This particular judgment applies with equal force to some admirers of Rand's philosophy. Those who suppose that derogatory epithets are a satisfactory response to philosophical positions with which they disagree are not agents of intellectual progress. Neither are those who suppose that all would be right with the universities so long as they and their allies controlled them, and wielded the power to exclude their enemies.