

Ayn Rand as Moral & Political Philosopher

Jan Narveson

University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

"In many ways, Ayn Rand stands higher and sees farther than any other thinker of our day." So says Jack Wheeler in "Rand and Aristotle"¹ But I'm afraid I find Wheeler's assessment not credible. Despite my libertarian proclivities, I am a main-line academic philosopher, and no doubt share the tendency of most such academics to dismiss Rand as a minor personage on the conceptual scene. Her work is important because of the quite uncommon influence her novels have had on a great many nonacademic people—an influence that I agree is largely in the right kind of direction, to be sure. Those novels do reflect a philosophy, yes. But I don't think it's the formal adumbration of that philosophy that has attracted all those admirers; and, frankly, I don't think her strictly philosophical work is very good.

Take, for a main example, her basic pronouncements about "Objectivist Ethics." These have been well examined by Charles King² recently, and I have little to add. Rand's proclamation that life is necessarily an end in itself, for example, is a classic example of an exciting-sounding but actually not very interesting philosophical thesis. What is it supposed to mean? In part, perhaps, a denial of theism. Fine, I share that—but it's not as though she has contributed anything of substance to anti-theology itself. But beyond that, what does it do in the way of providing an ethical criterion for anything? Does it mean, for example, that we should do everything in our power to keep alive as long as possible, regardless? (And so, suicide is necessarily *immoral*?) One hopes not. But if not, then what? We are told that life is the "objective standard of value;" is that supposed to tell us how to lead a *better* life? No. Our general purpose in life, I take it, is to live lives as good as we can manage to live. Fine: but what *makes* a life good? "Living life to the full," "realizing our potentialities," and so on, are phrases that have been around a great deal longer than the works of Rand. But they don't help any in answering that fundamental question, and she adds nothing at all to the discussion.

Reason Papers 23 (Fall 1998): 96-100, Copyright © 1998.

Again, Rand makes much of an idea that there is a “fundamental choice” confronting living beings possessed, as we are, of consciousness and reason sufficient to appreciate the fact: the choice to live or to die. “To live is his basic act of choice,” says she about man. But in the first place, choice is scarcely ever like that. What you and I are nearly always choosing among are alternatives of much lesser moment, such as which brand of milk to buy, or where to go for vacation next year. Those are choices among options all of which, so far as we know, yield just about equal life expectancy—“life or death” just isn’t where it’s at. Only those contemplating suicide, or at least the undertaking of some venture with an extraordinary degree of risk, make the Randian choice. And in those cases, her apparently clear and unequivocal answer is simply wrong: choosing death is a live option and the answer could rationally be in favor. Consider, for instance, smokers—such as Rand herself. They often do so quite deliberately despite the known likelihood that this reduces life expectancy. In short, when we look at the matter soberly, the pronouncement that we are always *making* that “fundamental choice” is essentially silly, while the claim that when we do confront it, we will necessarily prefer life is also false.

To make any such claim at all plausible, it must be converted into the very different one that what we choose is always some hoped-for increase in the *quality* of our lives. There’s no basic objection to that: if chocolate is better than vanilla, then presumably my life if I take chocolate will be just that much better than if I had chosen vanilla. But what makes chocolate better than vanilla? *Not* that the quality of my life will be better if I choose it—for the order of explanation is *the other way around*. So here we are into the fundamental question that philosophers have grappled with down through the ages: trying to understand what the *good* life would be—and seeing the utter pointlessness of claiming that the good life is just “life.” (Here see Eric Mack, in “Rand’s Theory of Rights”³.)

Moreover, there is potential in her pronouncement for inferences from which she would shrink. In saying that all men have *values*, she seems also to be saying that they have *value*—meaning, that no matter who you may be, it is your responsibility to put a positive value on every *other* human’s life, just because it’s human. (This would no doubt be said by Rand to be part of the “objectivist” idea: that others have value is an “objective fact” about them, that we can just “see” to be so.) But if so, it surely sounds as though we ought, *prima facie*, to be altruistic in just the sorts of ways she was known to be strongly opposed to. Moreover, that is what socialists profess to believe. But if her pronouncement does not imply

that, then just what *does* it imply? By and large, these are the sort of questions that I think she simply didn't understand, and would no doubt dismiss as nit-picking or word-mongering. (That was ever her way with critics.) But they are questions that call for a clarifying response, and in the absence of which she must be said not really to *have* a theory. See, again, the aforementioned essay by Charles King, who explores the point gracefully and well.)

Rand is, I suppose, identified in the public mind with advocacy of capitalism more than anything else. Certainly it was commendable, in the intellectual atmosphere of the day, for her to be doing so—full marks for that. But is there anything special about her advocacy of it, either? I rather think not. According to Den Uyl & Rasmussen, "Capitalism,"⁴ "One of the unique features of Rand's defense of capitalism is that she neither considers capitalism a necessary evil (as do many conservatives) nor tries to defend it simply in terms of the benefits it produces (as do many economists). It is not that we must put up with the system to reap its benefits. . . . Rather, Rand defends the thesis that the very mode of human interaction called for by capitalism is the only morally justifiable way for people to socialize. Consider this passage:

"The *justification* of capitalism does not lie in the altruistic claim that it represents the best way to achieve "the common good". . . . The moral justification of capitalism lies in the fact that it is the only system consonant with man's rational nature, that it protects man's survival *qua man*, and that its ruling principle is: *justice*." (173)

Earlier, they quoted Rand as saying that individual rights are a means of subordinating society to moral law. (165)

But the problem with talking about the subordination of the individual to the group or vice versa is that groups are groups *of individuals*, this being all there are. And the trouble with denying that the justification of capitalism lies in its contribution to the common good or to community is that the community consists of those very same, rational people. The common good *is* the good of rational people *qua* rational—there isn't anything else for it to be. Now, each person rationally pursues his own good. That *allowing* each person to do that—which is equivalent to insisting that people not use violence against others in the pursuit of their ends—will contribute *to the common good* is an obvious implication. Rand agrees: we are not allowed to use force and fraud. Rand probably doesn't

think that capitalism would be right even if it led to general poverty—instead, she (quite reasonably) thinks that it *won't* lead to general poverty. Fine. But then it's pointless to insist that Rand, startlingly, defends capitalism *irrespective* of its effect on community good. What she says may sound impressive, but again, on reflection it's not.

The libertarian foundations of capitalism disallow what we would now call external diseconomies. They are diseconomies precisely because, and insofar as, they attack individuals' property rights: in dumping polluted air into your lungs, I attack what belongs to you (your lungs). Rand can't insist on the right of owners of pulp-mills to pollute rivers without restriction. If we describe measures against pollution as "protecting people from some of the downside effects of capitalism," that is conceptually a mistake. Rand in no way disagrees with the substance of that criticism. We *do* get to curtail the "free actions" of polluters—thank goodness! By what mechanisms and how much is quite another matter, and I am the first to insist that regulatory agencies are not the way to go here. But Rand contributed nothing to the detailed formulations needed to cope with these problems satisfactorily.

Summarizing her contributions, Den Uyl and Rasmussen suggest that "Rand attempts to combine . . . an Aristotelian view of man's nature . . . with a liberal political doctrine. The argument . . . is that freedom of action in society is a function of what is proper to living a good human life—indeed, what is necessary for the fulfillment of our human potential."

But to begin with, Aristotle's main contribution to ethical theory is his account of virtue, especially moral virtue; yet Rand, to my knowledge, doesn't show much sign of ever having heard of this, let alone making it a cornerstone of her theory. And a good thing too, since Aristotle was a political conservative, all ready to turn to the State to make sure that everybody conforms to his ideal of virtue. One hopes Rand wouldn't go along with that.

So what's left? We've seen that "fulfilling our potentialities" is uninteresting in any sense in which it is true, for we have potentialities for evil as well as for good, and trying to fix things up by saying that we realize the good by fulfilling our *good* potentialities is not exactly an important advance in ethical theory! Indeed, she makes no genuine advances over her predecessors, such as Locke—unless you count Locke's theological proclivities as essential to his theory (they aren't); and she is not nearly up to Hobbes, whose contribution to moral theory is very far ahead of her and rather ahead, for the most part, of Locke. Really figuring out what's going on here is a difficult conceptual job of work, which is being fruitfully

pursued by the likes of David Gauthier, David Schmidtz, Anthony de Jasay, and many other people. I don't see Rand as being in a class with these careful and insightful writers—I doubt that she'd have much of an idea what they're talking about, let alone anything useful to say about them. But when it comes to literary rhetoric, I fully grant that all of the above take a back seat to Ms. Rand.

At the risk of attracting hate letters from her loyal fans, I would suggest that Rand's philosophizing is about at the level of Karl Marx's. Both were brilliant sophomores: neither of them knew what they were getting into, and both were totally devoid of the self-discipline necessary to make anything clear and important of their intuitions. And both were terribly unsystematic; followers have to search to find snippets of pure philosophy amidst the voluminous literary or journalistic texts. Marx said quite a bit more than Rand, and got into even more semantic thickets and conceptual swamps than she. But just as we learn a great deal more from reading G. A. Cohen on Marx than from reading Marx, so we learn more from reading philosophers like Eric Mack on Rand than we do from reading Rand.

Still, in marked contrast to Marx, Rand has to her credit three literary works of merit—and in still more marked contrast, she bears no responsibility for some of the worst social catastrophes in the history of mankind.

1. In Douglas J. Den Uyl and Douglas B. Rasmussen, *The Philosophic Thought of Ayn Rand* (University of Illinois, 1986) The articles from this admirable collection to which I refer quote extensively from Rand; I am leaning on their work rather than attempting to improve on it in this respect—which I am certainly not competent to do.

2. Charles J. King, "Life and the Theory of Value: The Randian Argument Reconsidered," *Op.Cit.*, pp. 102-121.

3. *Op. Cit.*, pp. 122-164.

4. Same volume, p. 165-182.