

A VETERAN RECONNOITERS AYN RAND'S PHILOSOPHY

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Ayn Rand
Tibor R. Machan
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Tibor Machan's new book is the latest sign of accelerated growth in the academic coverage of Ayn Rand's philosophy. *Feminist Interpretations of Ayn Rand*, edited by Mimi Reisel Gladstein and Chris Matthew Sciabarra, has joined a series of volumes on Plato, Hegel, and Sartre, among others. Douglas Den Uyl's monograph, *The Fountainhead: An American Novel*, in the Twayne's Masterworks series, sits alongside critical essays on *Daisy Miller* and *War and Peace*. Now Machan's volume takes position number 5 in a series titled "Masterworks in the Western Tradition." It is intended as an overview and introduction to Rand's philosophical system.

Machan was eminently prepared to write this book. He has been actively promoting Randian ideas since the late 1960's. Because he was excommunicated during the days of the Nathaniel Branden Institute for asking the wrong questions, he never got close to Rand's inner circle and has never had to shoulder the weight of Objectivist orthodoxy. Along with Robert Poole and Manuel Klausner, he took over a new, obscure magazine called *Reason* in 1969 and nurtured it into a cultural force. He has published in every outlet from the academic philosophy journals to the dittoed page allotments of *Libertarian Connection* to the editorial columns of the daily newspapers; his output of books has grown especially prodigious over the past decade.

Readers who know a little of Machan's previous work will recognize this presentation of Rand as his most recent contribution to a continuing

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conversation. The good thing about dropping in on the conversation is that Machan has already written about virtually every issue that he discusses, and come to grips on multiple occasions with critics of the positions that he is defending. The not so good thing about showing up late is that Machan sometimes assumes that the reader was present for the last few rounds, and already knows the identity and tactics of the opposing players. Since Rand's ideas put her at odds, at one point or another, with nearly every viewpoint currently favored by some school of academic philosophers, there are times when the reader could use a scorecard.

No scorecards will be needed to track Rand's positions, however. Machan's brief introductory chapter on "Rand, the Iconoclast" summarizes her literary output, touching very lightly on the question of how good a writer Rand was.¹ Chapter One outlines the entire Randian system sharply and economically:

- * her rejection of the "prior certainty of consciousness" (the doctrine that the human mind is aware of itself before it can become aware of the external world);
- * her minimalist metaphysics, sticking to existence, identity, consciousness, and various forms of causality, and trying to keep clear of cosmology;
- * her objective, contextual epistemology;
- * her ethics of rational egoism (or is that individualist eudaimonism?);
- * her politics of individual rights and laissez-faire capitalism;
- * her esthetics, which focuses on the nature and purpose of art in human life.

Machan opts not to cover the esthetics, a reasonable decision in a short book that has to concentrate on fundamentals. In his favor, it can be said that esthetics is not essential to a philosophical system; in opposition,

however, it should be noted that Rand was herself an artist, and put forward a well-developed esthetic theory, especially in the literary realm (see Torres and Kamhi 2000).

Machan understands Rand as a broadly neo-Aristotelian philosopher. His treatment of her thinking will be perfectly recognizable to readers of *The Philosophic Thought of Ayn Rand*, the first published collection of essays by generally sympathetic academics. It will be recognizable to sectarian Randians, as well, though some of his emphases (not to mention some of his criticisms) will infuriate them. While Machan gives full credit to Chris Matthew Sciabarra's contributions (1995; Gladstein and Sciabarra 1999) to Rand scholarship, he does not take on Rand as a dialectical thinker.² So there is still a need for an introduction to Rand that fully integrates what is now known about her philosophical education and historical background.

Axioms

The more detailed treatment of Rand's ideas starts off powerfully. Chapter Two, on Rand's axiomatic concepts, is superb. It will help neophytes find their way around many errors; yet, it offers fresh perspectives to those who are used to the neighborhood. The axiomatic concepts of existence, identity, and consciousness are highly salient even to those who know little more about Rand's system. They have been regularly misunderstood and often ridiculed (a parody that circulated during my undergraduate days pretended to net out Rand's metaphysics in the pseudo-syllogism "A is A. B is B. Therefore, C is C."). Machan shows that Rand was hardly innovating when she claimed that certain principles are so basic that they must be presupposed in the course of attempting to deny them; Aristotle had already shown that any denial of the principle of non-contradiction is self-referentially inconsistent. So far, this is familiar ground to both orthodox (e.g., Peikoff 1993) and neo-Aristotelian expositors of Rand (e.g., Den Uyl and Rasmussen 1984).

Machan goes on to add value in this chapter by indicating how Rand's axioms are meant to function as basic selection criteria against error. Although they have a few corollaries (most crucially the law of causality), they do not function like axioms in a system of modern

symbolic logic; they are not put forward so "logical truths" can be deduced from them. As Machan convincingly argues, Rand was not a rationalist foundationalist, building all of her concepts and deducing all of her significant truths from primitive chunks of allegedly innate knowledge (many of her detractors have attributed such a view to her). And despite her endorsement of empiricism in the Aristotelian (rather than the seventeenth century British) sense, Rand was not an empiricist foundationalist, seeking to assemble all human knowledge out of primitive chunks of sensory experience (some of her followers have understood Rand as a sort of empiricist foundationalist).³ Machan argues convincingly that Rand was so free of "Cartesian anxiety" about our ability to know the external world that she did not need to allay her epistemic insecurities by undertaking either kind of foundationalist program.

Machan's interpretation is not only consistent with the function of the axioms as Rand wrote about it,⁴ it brings Rand into closer alignment than some of her followers would think possible with the views of evolutionary epistemologists. For instance, Karl Popper's student W. W. Bartley III (1984) rejected any program of "justificational" foundationalism, maintaining that our beliefs should always be subject to criticism—to the search for counterevidence and counterargument. But he realized that this view of rationality would not allow him to be a skeptical antifoundationalist in the manner of Paul Feyerabend or Richard Rorty; he had to draw the line at the principle of non-contradiction, because it is the basis for all criticism.⁵

Machan also recognizes that our ability to become conscious of the axioms requires a special explanation that Rand did not provide. The axioms, Rand maintained, are implicit in all human knowledge (even in a newborn baby's knowledge). For the axioms to become explicit "requires a special process and focus of consciousness" (Rand, 1990, 57). But what is this process? Machan points out that it cannot be abstraction as Rand usually described it. Abstraction involves differentiation, and as Rand herself noted, there is nothing else from which existence, identity, and consciousness are to be differentiated.⁶ Machan proposes that

First, there is a reflective turn, a step back from directly knowing

things, to reflectively knowing the knowing itself. Second, there is a shift in focus from the content of the knowledge to its form. . . . One simply zaps out the content of the experience, leaving a formal scheme, "existence-identity-consciousness" into which any particular content can be plugged. (49-50)

Although Rand's writings allude often enough to knowing about knowing, they never deal directly with the "reflective turn." (In *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, Rand takes "concepts of consciousness" to be formed on the basis of introspective evidence—but she does not characterize the process of introspection, or seek to explain its origins.) Machan's comments about the reflective turn⁷ serve to connect Rand's epistemology with Jean Piaget's (in press) theory of reflecting abstraction (Piaget, it is interesting to note, was particularly fond of oppositions between form and content). They also link up rather nicely with hierarchy of levels of knowing put forward by another psychological theorist, Mark Bickhard (Bickhard and Campbell, 1986). We cannot pursue these connections further here; some of the epistemological issues raised by these other theories would take us well outside the topics that Rand wrote about.

The Rest of Rand's Epistemology

Machan, in any case, does not push beyond this insightful treatment of axiomatic concepts into the rest of Rand's published epistemology. The Number 1 project throughout his philosophical career (1975, 1984, 1989, 1990, 1998a, 1998b) has been to explicate and defend a vision of the free society. With Rand, he concurs that a political theory will never succeed without a foundation in ethics, and that an ethical theory, in turn, will never succeed without an adequate conception of human nature. His work has never dwelt on aspects of Rand's philosophy unless they provided links for this chain of argument. Predictably, this has meant little attention to Rand's esthetic doctrines; it has also prompted a selective treatment of her epistemology.

Machan agrees with Rand that human beings think conceptually and that conceptual thinking must be volitionally initiated (in other words, that

we have free will⁸), but he has never seen much need to delve into Rand's theory of concepts. Consequently, the reader will not find a discussion of units and unit economy, conceptual common denominators, concepts of consciousness, or hierarchies of concepts. Machan somewhat downplays the three-way epistemic distinction that Rand drew between the intrinsic (really "out there" in the environment), subjective (strictly "in here" in the mind), and the objective (constituted as an appropriate relation between mind and environment). Those new to Rand will need some help sorting out her Objectivism from conceptions that rely on the conventional two-way distinctions, such as Pavlov's "objective" psychology. Machan first adverts to this three-way distinction in a footnote (27, n.1), and does not spell it out until he takes up Rand's conception of objectivity in ethics (73).

What he has drawn from in the past, and continues to stress in this volume, is Rand's axiomatic concepts, her conception of definitions as contextual, and her conception of certainty as contextual. Machan has been particularly adamant, throughout his writings, in favoring a conception that allows for the growth of knowledge, and in rejecting the false dichotomy between immutable knowledge of eternal Platonic Forms and general-purpose skepticism. But he has rarely expressed a need to describe in detail what our knowledge consists of, or the processes by which it grows.

One further insight that does appear in this volume could easily slip by the reader. We still know terribly little about the actual development of Rand's theory of knowledge. Rand sketched a treatise on Objectivism between 1958 and 1960, then abandoned the project; she did not publish on epistemology until 1966, when the series of articles on concepts (now Rand 1990) that was her major contribution began to appear. But the scant evidence indicates that Rand's epistemology actually coevolved with her novel *Atlas Shrugged* (written between 1945 and 1957), and her technical ideas had probably reached as far as they were going to around 1960. Rand (1990, 307) once said that she abandoned her earlier nominalistic leanings (after a discussion with a Thomist) and arrived at the basis for her theory of concepts in the late 1940's. According to David Harriman, editor of her *Journals*, most of her philosophical framework was in place by 1952. Machan gives us further evidence about this process

(5). It may be awkward to end Chapter 1 with a long email quotation,⁹ but in this email, philosopher J. Roger Lee shows how Rand was working out a technical epistemology while she was writing *Atlas Shrugged*. Lee quotes passages in the novel in which Rand refers to fundamentality and to the way that axioms are known—using the technical terms precisely as they would be used in *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*.

Ethics and Politics

Chapter Three introduces the basics of Rand's moral theory, emphasizing her naturalistic grounding for ethics and her responses to classic expressions of moral skepticism, such as David Hume's denial that an *ought* can be derived from an *is*, and G. E. Moore's "open question argument." Machan presents the Randian dependency of the concept of "value" on the concept of "life" in the orthodox formulation, the one that treats all other values as means to the end of life and posits a "pre-moral choice to live." "Once that choice to live is made, consistency demands that [human beings] judge and conduct themselves by the right code of ethics for the kind of living entity that they are, rational animals" (58). (He does not advert to any of the problems posed by this "survivalist" reading of Rand's ethics.) Machan emphasizes how little of Rand's ethics can be rendered into universalizable moral rules (not a whole lot more than: "Be rational. Keep your wits about you. Monitor your thought processes."). But, again in apparent accord with orthodoxy, his account of how individuals correctly judge what is good for them in their specific context makes no mention of the Aristotelian conception of *phronesis* (variously translated as practical wisdom or prudence). Machan is most likely taking it for granted that implementing Rand's ethics requires skilled priority setting and striking a balance between competing goods in concrete situations (in his 1998a, he goes so far as to equate "right reason" with practical wisdom). Rand's (1963) explicit presentation of her ethical system does not, however, identify prudence as a virtue. In fact, it acknowledges no explicit role for skill or expertise in making moral decisions, and it derives such virtues as justice and productivity from rationality in a manner that Machan might deem somewhat rationalistic.¹⁰

Chapter Four discusses Rand's effort to develop a case for individual

rights and *laissez-faire* capitalism from her moral theory of rational egoism. The project of refounding a Lockean theory of negative individual rights on an individualist Aristotelian ethical conception is Rand's unique contribution to political philosophy. It has inspired significant efforts at elaboration by Eric Mack (1995), Douglas Rasmussen and Douglas Den Uyl (1991), and, of course, Machan (1975, 1989, 1998a) himself. The Randian link between eudaimonistic ethics and individual rights has also been a primary target for nearly every critic: both ill-informed ones like Norman Barry (1989; see Machan's discussion here, 121-29) and well-informed ones like Gregory R. Johnson (1999). Chapter Five extends this analysis into a pithy set of contrasts between Randianism and Marxism, rooted in the opposition between Rand's individualism and Marx's conception of humanity as a "species-being."

These three chapters, fleshing out the treatment of Rand's moral vision that Machan first put forward in 1984, furnish a sound introduction to what Rand was up to in ethics and politics. Misunderstandings may arise, though, when Machan gets into the relationship between conceptual thinking and formal logic in Chapter Three (65-67). Machan understands deductive logic as a maximally decontextualized symbolic formalism. He uses both old-fashioned syllogisms and argument forms from modern logic to illustrate his point. But ancient logic, which Rand and Objectivists have, as a rule, strongly preferred to modern logic, is not preoccupied with the deduction of "logical truths" or with the elaboration of formal systems about which metalogical results can be proved. Machan challenges the modern conception (and its allied preoccupation with the "logically possible") as an unsuitable model for rationality because it requires that our concepts be "closed" and immune to further revision.

What Machan says about logic as opposed to conceptual thinking may prove confusing to those who have encountered little of Rand already. The ardent contextualism of Machan's argument is prominent in Rand's writings. Also prominent in these writings, however, is her assertion that logic is the human method of cognition. Rand (1990, 36) defined logic very broadly (as "the art of non-contradictory identification"); for her, the study of logic is supposed to identify methods for correct thinking, just as ethics is supposed to identify methods for living well. The average modern logician would spurn Rand's conception

as highly "psychologistic." In any case, Rand suggests that, when we are rational, we are actually using rules of logic to guide our thought process.

What Machan is saying could be brought into better alignment with Rand's stated views were he to distinguish the criteria that we use when seeking true conclusions and avoiding errors in our thinking from the abstraction of some of these into decontextualized systems of formal logic. The precise relationship between formal normative systems (such as logic, linguistic theory, and probability theory) and actual human thinking, speaking, and decision-making has bedeviled contemporary psychologists as well as philosophers. When we make logically valid arguments, write grammatically correct sentences, or make decisions that probability theory recommends, does this mean that we actually used the rules of formal logic, formal linguistics, and formal probability theory to arrive at these results? After all, none of these formal systems actually describes mental processes, and a range of different processes can produce the same pattern of accomplishments (Campbell and Bickhard 1986; Campbell 1998; Dartnall 1997).

Rand versus Kant

The tantalizingly brief Chapter Six (just 115-19) deserves special mention, as it takes on Rand's notorious antipathy to Immanuel Kant and his philosophy. Rand reserved some of her more colorful epithets for Kant: she likened his system, on one occasion, to a giant spider hanging in midair (1961), and, on another, to a belly-dancing hippopotamus (1990). I do not believe that Machan's treatment of Rand versus Kant is nearly as successful as his preceding chapter on Rand versus Marx. There simply isn't room in four pages plus endnotes to get the key points across to a reader who hasn't studied Kant. Chapter Six does not explain how Kant bifurcated the world into noumenal and phenomenal realms, how he imposed the same bifurcation of the human mind or self, and how he relied on these diremptions in his moral philosophy. Kant cannot be understood clearly unless a fair amount of his apparatus is introduced; explaining these metaphysical bifurcations is particularly important when contemporary philosophers so often prefer their Kant declawed and blandified.

Epistemologically, Rand (1990) objected that Kant had taken the human mind's specific identity and turned it into an insuperable barrier to carrying out the mind's proper function, namely, knowing the world. I doubt that anyone could infer from Chapter Six what it was about Kant's system that encouraged Rand to draw so radical a conclusion. Nor is enough said about the features of his moral philosophy that troubled Rand (e.g., 1971). Missing in action here are Kant's extreme moral impersonalism, his relegation of prudence to the realm of automatic, "nonmoral" actions, and his open detestation for Aristotle's ethics.¹¹ Machan has written much more adequately about these issues elsewhere (e.g., 1990).

There would be a little less mystery about what Rand was objecting to had Machan cited the discussions of Kant by her disciple Leonard Peikoff. Machan somewhat grudgingly accepts Nathaniel Branden's (1963) defense of free will as an explication of Rand's own views (75 n.6, 139). So why not Peikoff's (1971b) trenchant and well researched reaction to Kant's moral and religious doctrines? Machan might reasonably question whether Peikoff's published criticism of Kantian epistemology ([1967] 1990; 1971a) has gotten the job done; the content of his published arguments aside, Peikoff has left his analysis of Kant's ([1781] 1965) "transcendental deduction" and his "antinomies of pure reason" in taped lecture courses that remain out of reach for most non-acolytes.

Still, there is a huge difference between questioning Peikoff's arguments against Kant's distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions and not mentioning them at all. Have Peikoff's sycophantic attitudes toward Rand and his assumption of sectarian authority after her death become grounds for not citing him? Peikoff did come to know a lot about Rand's thinking—every indication is that he paid too high a price for that knowledge. What he published under Rand's tutelage was vetted word by word, so any inconsistencies with the spirit of Rand's philosophy were the ones that Rand failed to notice. And if Peikoff is refuted by his biography, then surely so was Rand. Rand did not merely attract epigones, as Machan says—she developed a taste for uncritical adulation and came to insist on servility in her disciples (B. Branden 1986; N. Branden 1989).

I suspect, too, that Machan has come to regard the Rand-versus-Kant

hostilities as somewhat beside the point. Kant is not his biggest worry, as philosophers go; Thomas Hobbes is. Hobbes does represent a turning point in the development of moral and political philosophy; once Hobbes' influence sank in, Aristotelian claims about what is really good for the individual were often rejected out of hand. Machan's (1990, 1995, 1998a) insistence on a moral case for capitalism has repeatedly brought him up against economists who are fundamentally Hobbesian in their view of human nature, reducing personal morality to subjective preferences and refusing to draw any distinction between what people currently feel is good for them and what is really good for them. (The prevailing bias among academic moral philosophers is neo-Kantian rather than Hobbesian, but very few of *them* are eager to put up defenses of capitalism.)

If Hobbes' view of humanity is accepted, the prospects for genuine ethical individualism are indeed bleak. Were there such a positive doctrine as Hobbesian individualism, it would give us all license to unleash our untamed egos on our defenseless conspecifics (Hobbes never harbored such a positive doctrine; he thought that our egos needed a ruler with absolute powers and legally mandated religious observances to keep them in check). As Machan has shown, the prospects for a political regime of negative individual rights are just as bleak under the Hobbesian dispensation, because those who reject the moral vision of "atomistic individualism" will surely enter a guilty verdict against capitalism and the liberal order for daring to build on it.

Hobbes left us with a vast diremption between what is supposedly good for self and what is good for others. Without the Hobbesian rendition of egoism to react against, it would be hard for advocates of altruism in ethics to confound caring for one's children, or valuing friendships, or engaging in everyday acts of generosity, with self-sacrificial acts (Campbell and Christopher 1996b; Machan 1998b). As Machan suggests, one of Kant's motives for walling off morality in the noumenal world was his fear that the phenomenal self would be causally determined to do whatever it felt like—and whatever it felt like would include lots of the grabbing, preying, display behavior, and compulsive one-upmanship that Hobbes thought were ingrained in human nature.

Machan is entirely right about Hobbes' significance. Anyone who

advocates a sociable form of individualism with an objective basis will have to fight the subjective, antisocial conception that we have inherited from Hobbes. All the same, my own reading of Kant's philosophy suggests that Rand's deep and biting objections to it are thoroughly defensible. Besides causing the troubles already mentioned, Kant's system helped to erode distinctions between the moral and the legal, or between the moral and the political—for Kant they are all a matter of universalizable, impersonal categorical imperatives. To use the terminology of Den Uyl and Rasmussen (1998), Kant was well on the way toward the "equinormative" style of thinking that has so badly limited the options for contemporary liberal political theory. Among twentieth century Kantians, it became a near article of faith that morality pertains only to our relations with others, and that our moral obligations (to be just or fair, to treat others equally, and so on) are virtually to be equated with our legal obligations. Consequently morality has been conflated with politics, the domain in which moral concerns are thought to apply has been sharply constricted, and both moral philosophy and moral psychology have been impoverished (Campbell and Christopher 1996a; 1996b).

I do agree with Machan, however, that Rand went too far when she cast Kant as an arch-villain. Was Kant really like Professor Moriarty, plotting to outwit Sherlock Holmes at every turn? Rand moved with lightning speed from judging that certain philosophical ideas were harmful to concluding that their authors harbored evil designs. Machan does not profess to know enough about Kant to conclude that he had destruction on his mind: "That would depend on more in-depth knowledge of Kant the person than I have. I don't know whether Rand had such knowledge. I doubt it" (118).

Loose Ends and Leftover Problems

Machan concludes his Chapter Seven, "Room for Work," with a section (134-51) on loose ends and unaddressed problems in Rand's system. Machan gives the reader a long, thoughtful, and intriguing list. I scarcely need to mention Rand's views on men and women; an entire book has already been devoted to those (Gladstein and Sciabarra 1999)

and, by all indications, there's enough controversy left over to keep us occupied for a millennium. Rand herself acknowledged two of the gaps in her framework that Machan mentions: she produced neither a philosophy of law nor a philosophy of science. Her comments about philosophy of science may bear repeating, as they are not so well known. Rand believed that one cannot be contextually certain that a scientific hypothesis is true unless one has ruled out every other hypothesis that could account for what is currently known about the phenomenon being investigated. When asked what kind of evidence—and how much of it—would warrant contextual certainty that the hypothesis is true, she replied: "That's the *big* question of induction. Which I couldn't begin to discuss—because (a) I haven't worked on that subject enough to even begin to formulate it, and (b) it would take an accomplished scientist in a given field to illustrate the whole process in that field" (1990, 303-4). Since Rand obviously regarded such questions as philosophically significant, her admission of needing a philosophy of science makes hash of the assertion (made in recent years by Peikoff 1993) that only Ayn Rand could add to Objectivism, so now it is a "closed system." If it is a closed system, it is, by her own admission, a closed system with vital components missing.

Now consider such questions as (a) whether Rand's naturalism was, in fact, materialistic, and if so, how it might deal with the problems posed by theories of evolution, including questions about the origins of life; (b) exactly how mind and body are related in Randian naturalism; (c) whether Rand had an adequate understanding of the nature and function of emotions; (d) what precisely is involved in "the choice to think" (which, for Rand, is what free will boils down to); (e) how to deal with apparent clashes between deterministic theories of human evolution and free will; and so on. A great many of the questions that Machan asks about come down, sooner or later, to Rand's expulsion of cosmology from her metaphysics.

As Machan reminds us in Chapter Two, Rand did not regard cosmological questions such as "What kind of stuff is the world made of?" (a favorite among the pre-Socratics) or "What explains planetary motion?" (a preoccupation for Descartes) as fit material for philosophy. In the sketches for her treatise on Objectivism, she derided such efforts;

if they are legitimate, “then philosophy is worse than a useless science, because it usurps the domain of physics and proposes to solve the problems of physics by some non-scientific, and therefore mystical, means” (1997, 698). By poaching on the territory of physics, Rand was convinced, philosophers merely guaranteed that their theories would periodically be “blasted . . . sky-high” (698) by new scientific discoveries.

Rand’s solution to the cosmological problem was to restrict philosophical metaphysics to what applies in the very broadest context of human knowledge. Its contents were held to the axioms plus some basic metaphysical categories, such as “entity,” “attribute,” and “action.” But note what her alternative was: “*Philosophy is primarily epistemology—the science of the means, the rules, and the methods of human knowledge. Epistemology is the base of all other sciences . . .*” (698). Wait a minute! Isn’t there metaphysics here, too? What are mental processes? What are minds made of? How does perception work? What are concepts? Are these the basic forms of knowledge? How does knowledge relate to action? Do the rules that describe logically valid arguments have to be used in order to produce valid arguments? Is language a direct expression of knowledge or is language use an organization of complex processes distinct from those involved in acquiring knowledge? Every one of these questions has a metaphysical component. But the component isn’t *physical* ontology (at least, not directly); it’s *psychological* ontology.

Now if epistemology harbors its own metaphysical issues, ought philosophers to keep well away from them, because they truly belong in the domain of psychology? Should philosophy refrain from straying into any area of knowledge where future discoveries in psychology might intrude? Rand (1997) mentions how old philosophical theories of color perception were discredited when physical optics revealed more about the nature of light in the seventeenth century. But how about the further upset to philosophical theories of “sensory qualities” when nineteenth century physiological psychologists realized that sensory nerves transmit electrical impulses, not sensory qualities, to the brain (Boring 1950)?

The moral is that Rand’s avoidance of cosmology can come back to bite. A good many of the problems that Machan would like Rand to bite more forthcoming on are problems that her minimalist metaphysics has

made off-limits to philosophy. While Rand rejected a metaphysical or moral diremption between mind and body, she didn’t feel obliged as a philosopher to explain the precise relation between them. Whatever her personal opinions of biological evolution (I honestly don’t know what these were), she didn’t think that philosophy needed to pay evolution any mind—in fact, to do so would be to poach on biological territory. But Rand had fewer inhibitions about poaching on the territory of psychology. She didn’t champion a minimalist epistemology (something along the lines of “Whatever human minds are exactly, and however they work in detail, they’re able to acquire knowledge and make rational arguments”).

On the contrary, she elaborated a theory of concepts (Rand 1990) that, as I have endeavored to show elsewhere (Campbell 1999), is loaded to the gills with psychology. This theory of concepts is not a mere presentation of basic axioms; it is not subject to reaffirmation through denial; nor is it testable (as Rand sometimes implied) through introspection alone. Rather, it engages psychological theory and behavioral as well as introspective psychological data at many points. Rand (1990) genuinely believed that her epistemological theories had no dependence on psychology, so she never had to confront her apparent violations of the prohibition against cosmology. Following Rand, many Objectivists continue to take the entire theory of concepts as true in advance of, and regardless of, the empirical findings of psychology. But once due attention is paid to psychological ontology, Randians will need to ask whether the scope of philosophy can be truly limited to what applies in the widest context of knowledge (in which case Objectivist epistemology will be obliged to slim down considerably) or philosophy necessarily coevolves, ontologically speaking, with physical and psychological science. For if philosophy is obliged to keep its mitts off the Big Bang and the origin of life, won’t it have to keep its mitts off cognitive evolution and human development too?

Rand’s Attitude toward Criticism

It would, of course, be wonderful to know how Rand might have responded to the issues raised in the previous section. But there was little chance in Rand’s later years that anyone would ask her about them—at

least, not anyone she felt obliged to respond to. Machan is reasonably frank throughout this volume about Rand's shortcomings. Of her notorious impatience with a certain topic he remarks, "Rand has argued—actually, more like railed—against anarchism" (145). Rand's curtness with critics and distaste for philosophical exchange with non-admirers deserve more comment, however. Machan cites her decision to narrate the history of Western philosophy as a parade of fools and rogues (Rand 1961), and her willingness to review reviews of *A Theory of Justice*, by John Rawls, instead of reading the book.

Another example, less commented upon, is her pokes at Bertrand Russell. That Rand would not care for Russell's efforts at "foundations of mathematics" (specifically, his attempt to construct numbers out of sets of sets) is reconstructible from a moderate knowledge of her overall system. But this hardly relieved her of the obligation to explain where she found fault with his philosophy. Only once in her corpus—in notes for the treatise on Objectivism that she never completed—does she articulate what is wrong with Russell's ideas: "Many instances of 'the stolen concept' are, in fact, instances of 'petitio principii,' such as [Bertrand] Russell's attempt to derive the concept 'unit' from [the concept] 'group,' which, throughout the whole reasoning, presupposes the concept 'unit'" (Rand 1997, 704). Since she did not see fit to get these remarks into print, and back them with a deeper analysis of Russell's theory of number, what was the point of her published injunction to "observe what Bertrand Russell was able to perpetrate, because people thought they 'kinda knew' the concept of 'number'" (Rand 1990, 50-51)?

Machan expresses some sympathy with Rand's rejection of academic dialogue: "Yet, it is arguable that someone who was treated so dismissively by her peers owes little respect in return" (147). Maybe he is trying too hard to be generous. Ignoring critics—even those who need an education more badly than they need a specific response—is rarely a good or a smart thing to do. To begin with, it works only when those doing the ignoring occupy an established position within an academic discipline. Persons not well established in the academic world cannot afford to ignore criticisms emanating from Establishment sources, unless they care to lose publication outlets and, very possibly, their jobs. Even when established academic figures go about their business acting as though critical

arguments have not been made, or seeking to swat them down preemptively with deliberate avoidance of scholarship, these policies prove expedient only when the critics' arguments are genuinely weak, the critics are easily intimidated, or such naysayers can be barred from continued academic employment.

Ayn Rand, as we well know, did not dwell in an established academic niche. Ignoring critics, villainizing them, or slamming them preemptively could never yield the pragmatic outcomes for her that they sometimes garner for members of the Establishment. Instead, such tactics encouraged her followers to identify themselves as the righteous remnant, hunkering down amidst irreversible cultural decline to await the final combat of the Children of Light with the Children of Darkness. The two thousand year old mind-set of religious sectarianism seems to have merged over time with Rand's feeling that she was one of a very few rational people in a world that was steadily getting more irrational. Sectarianism is mercifully absent from Machan's book. But that is precisely because, unlike Rand, he has always acted on the belief that every criticism deserves a response.

Conclusion

Very few philosophers have worked with Randian ideas on a daily basis for more than 30 years. Machan has had to call on outsized reserves of doggedness, for over most of this period neither mainstream philosophers nor Randian epigones have lent any significant encouragement to efforts like his. We are indeed fortunate to be able to take advantage of his expertise when it is offered to us. Newcomers to Rand's ideas will profit tremendously from reading Machan's volume. More seasoned Randians will also learn a thing or two. Now let us hope that this book is eventually followed by others of comparable quality and depth of learning.

Notes

1. I see no reason why philosophers who are not acolytes must handle questions about Rand's literary achievement with padded gloves. Rand was one of the most distinctive stylists in the English language during the twentieth century. Her style will never be for everyone, nor, I suspect, will it ever be a particularly good model for emulation by others.

A possible analogue in the jazz world is Sidney Bechet, a great soloist whose clarinet and soprano saxophone playing never left anyone neutral: many responded with fierce adulation, many more pronounced him unlistenable, and few have dared to imitate him. Summing up Bechet's achievement, a biographer wrote: "But some listeners will never fall under Bechet's spell, simply because of the intensity of his playing. [A French saxophonist] likened Sidney's playing to an African sun; he also compared it to 'alcohol that is 30 years old, and 70 proof'" (Chilton 1987, 293). A responsible jazz critic would not deny Bechet's musical achievement just because his throbbing vibrato is too much for some listeners; no one should deny Rand's literary achievement just because some readers will always find her writing too passionate or too charged with moral indignation.

2. Except, perhaps, in an aside about "unusual language" in which he draws an analogy between the redundant sentences that Rand took up to underline her axioms ("Existence exists") and certain usages in Hegel or Heidegger (43-44).

3. There are survivals of British empiricism in Rand's thinking. Machan mentions one of them: her continued belief in the existence of sensations (151, n.16). Machan does not attribute much consequence to this holdover, but Bissell (1999) has demonstrated how Rand did not consistently adhere to her stated account of sensations in her musical esthetics. I suspect that her acceptance of sensations points to some broader inherited difficulties in Rand's account of perception, but that is a topic for another essay.

4. "It is only man's consciousness, a consciousness capable of conceptual errors, that needs a special identification of the directly given, to embrace and delimit the entire field of its awareness—to delimit it from the void of unreality to which conceptual errors can lead. Axiomatic concepts are epistemological guidelines" (Rand 1990, 58-59).

5. See his comments in "Appendix 5. The criticizability of logic" (Bartley 1984, 247-60). Like Rand, Bartley further maintained that the denial of human free will is self-referentially inconsistent. It would not be strictly correct to call free will an axiom in Rand's system, however; she would not have regarded the existence of free will as implicit in *all* knowledge (including the knowledge attained by crows and goldfish).

6. "Since axiomatic concepts are not formed by differentiating one group of existents from others, but represent an integration of all existents, they have no Conceptual Common Denominator with anything else. They have no contraries, no alternatives" (Rand 1990, 58).

7. Machan has not visited this topic often, but in a brief discussion of the origins of human language, he has something to add: "if we consider such tasks as learning of the existence of some object or a feeling we are experiencing, making note of this need not involve any, let alone any considerably developed, conceptual knowledge. *Only upon reflecting on such matters does conceptual knowledge become necessary.* After all, other animals know in this sense just as we do—the dog knows where its food can be found, knows that the ball thrown at it is not to be eaten, knows its owner's car" (Machan 1998a, 161, emphasis added).

8. Machan (1974) defended free will in his first book. He has insisted on its crucial role in every discussion of moral issues since then, and puts free will front and center in his forthcoming volume on *Initiative*.

9. The level of editing slides up and down in this book, depending on the chapter. Chapter 2 is the most polished; elsewhere, sentences occasionally get loose that should have been recalled for retooling. For example: "She has addressed the issue of whether the Christian—as well as some secular—idea of human nature, intimately related to the doctrine of original sin—that is, that human beings have evil and self-destructive impulses that can be overcome only with divine grace or not at all—is true" (143). Overall, *Ayn Rand* is far better edited than Machan's *Capitalism and Individualism*, which suffers from enough lumpy sentence structure to impair communication. But it is not quite so smoothly carried off as *Classical Individualism*.

10. Machan could have strengthened his argument further had he mentioned Rasmussen's (1982) response to G. E. Moore's "open question" argument and Den Uyl's (1991) treatise on the virtue of prudence.

11. "If *eudaimonism* (the principle of happiness) is set up as the basic principle instead of *eleutheronomy* (the principle of the freedom of internal lawgiving), the result is the *euthanasia* (easy death) of all morals" (Kant [1797] 1996, 511). The "internal lawgiving" that Kant refers to is the issuance of categorical moral imperatives by the noumenal self.

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