

# Nietzsche, Rand, and the Ethics of the Great Task

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[Schopenhauer] teaches us to distinguish between those things that really promote human happiness and those that only appear to do so: how neither riches nor honors nor erudition can lift the individual out of the profound depression he feels at the valuelessness of his existence, and how the striving after these valued things acquires meaning only through an exalted and transfiguring overall goal: to acquire power so as to aid the evolution of the *physis* and to be for a while the corrector of its follies and ineptitudes. At first only for yourself, to be sure; but through yourself in the end for everyone.

— Friedrich Nietzsche (1874, 142)

You can't make a success of yourself unless you hold onto your one goal and drop everything else. When you have a great devotion to a goal—people call you ruthless. And when you work harder than anyone else, when you work like a freight engine while others take it easy, and so you beat them at it—people call you unscrupulous. . . . You don't work like that just to make money. It's something else. It's a great, driving energy—a creative energy?—no, it's the principle of creation itself. It's what makes everything in the world.

— Ayn Rand (1940, 179)

## Introduction

Scholars of Ayn Rand have struggled to place her ideas within the context of the grand traditions and familiar varieties of ethical theory. Was hers a virtue ethics or a value ethics? Was she primarily indebted to Aristotle, “the greatest of all philosophers” (Rand 1961, 14; see Wheeler 1984, Den Uyl and Rasmussen 1984), or to Epicurus (Shelton 1995; Saint-Andre 1997)? What is the relative strength of eudaimonism vs. deontology in her ethics?

While these questions are important and interesting, I cannot hope to answer them in a brief essay. However, I do think that leads

to some of the answers can be found by looking at Rand's ideas through the lens of Nietzsche's evolution as an ethical philosopher.

Such an approach is not without controversy. Although it is well-known that Rand was influenced by Nietzsche,<sup>1</sup> the degree of that influence has been a subject of sometimes bitter contention, colored by the often-factional disagreements about the originality of Rand's philosophy (Ridpath 1986; Merrill 1991, 8–9, 17, 21–26; Sciabarra 1995, 100–6, 108–10). Further, Nietzsche is a notoriously and self-consciously slippery thinker who can be difficult to categorize or precisely pin down—who, indeed, can be portrayed in many different (even contradictory) lights by playing the game of selective quotation. Yet between the Scylla of Randian polemics and the Charybdis of Nietzschean hermeneutics lies a route to greater knowledge about both thinkers, which I maintain can be achieved by hewing closely to the relevant texts. So let us sail forth.

### **Epicurus as Educator**

In contrast to Rand, who thought that the influence of Aristotle lay “at the root of every civilized achievement” (1982, 7), Nietzsche never held great respect for Peripatetic philosophy, and Aristotle does not figure strongly in Nietzsche's writings. Among the ancient philosophers, his preferences tended more to Socrates/Plato and to Epicurus (Nietzsche 1879, § 408). While the alternating current of Nietzsche's attitude toward Socrates has been explored extensively (e.g., Kaufmann 1974, 391–411), his changing perspective on Epicurus has not received nearly the same degree of attention (the main exception is Lampert 1993, 423–28). Yet it is central to clarifying the meaning of Nietzsche's thinking about ethics. Furthermore, as we shall see, my reading of the texts indicates that the end point of Nietzsche's intellectual evolution quite possibly provided a starting point for Rand's moral vision.

Early in his career, Nietzsche considered Epicurus to be one of his heroes: he thought that Epicurus was a “voice of reason and philosophy” and “wisdom in bodily form” (1879, § 224), the advocate of a “refined heroism” (1878, § 291),<sup>2</sup> “one of the greatest of men, the inventor of the heroic-idyllic mode of philosophizing” (1880, § 295).

It may seem odd that Nietzsche finds heroism in Epicurus, who is often thought to have advocated an enlightened but essentially lazy

form of hedonism. What could be heroic about the Epicurean theory and practice of *ataraxia*, which consists in no more than the elimination of pain and unnecessary desire?<sup>3</sup> Yet Nietzsche has his reasons for thinking that Epicurus advocates a kind of refined heroism. For one, Nietzsche deeply values independence, and he finds in Epicurus a kindred soul on this point. He bemoans the fact that in the modern world “there is a hatred of any kind of education that makes one a solitary, that proposes goals that transcend money and money-making, that takes a long time; such more serious forms of education are usually disparaged as ‘refined egoism’ and as ‘immoral cultural Epicureanism’” (Nietzsche 1874, 165). Comparing the Cynic and the Epicurean, Nietzsche notes that the latter “employs his higher culture to make himself independent of dominating opinions” (1878, § 275) and “would rather dispense” with “having an audience” (1882, § 306). One who is independent thus displays “a refined heroism that disdains to offer itself to the veneration of the great masses, as his coarser brother does, and tends to go silently through the world and out of the world” (1878, § 291). Harkening back to the Epicurean maxim *latbe biosas* (“live unknown”), Nietzsche counsels one to “live in seclusion so that you can live for yourself,” to “live in ignorance about what seems most important to your age,” to “lay the skin of at least three centuries between yourself and today” (1882, § 338). In this way, one essentially emulates “the gods of Epicurus, who have no care and are unknown” (§ 277).

Such an ideal is withdrawn and contemplative: Nietzsche thinks that “modern agitatedness . . . is growing so great that higher culture can no longer allow its fruits to mature,” that “from lack of repose our civilization is turning into a new barbarism,” and that “one of the more necessary corrections to the character of mankind that have to be taken in hand is a considerable strengthening of the contemplative element in it” (Nietzsche 1878, § 285). Note again the phrase “higher culture”; for Nietzsche, following Hegel, such culture consists of philosophy, religion, and art. The very fact that Epicureanism too has its higher culture (§ 275) is high praise coming from Nietzsche. Furthermore, Nietzsche thinks that, at its best, philosophy can substitute for religion: “religion has the same effect [on those of a lower rank] that an Epicurean philosophy has on sufferers of a higher rank: it is refreshing, refining—makes, as it were, the most of

suffering, and in the end even sanctifies and justifies it” (Nietzsche 1886a, § 61).

Although Nietzsche’s attention to the experience of suffering may be perceived by those in the Randian tradition as betraying a “malevolent universe premise,” he would see some adherents to Rand’s “benevolent universe premise” as advocates of “the religion of comfortableness,” and would say to them: “How little you know of human *happiness*, you comfortable and benevolent people, for happiness and unhappiness are sisters and even twins that either grow up together or, as in your case, *remain small* together” (Nietzsche 1882, § 338). For Nietzsche, what matters is how one deals with the inevitable experiences of both suffering and happiness. He finds in Epicureanism a philosophy that gives one the perspective to overcome suffering by remaining “secure and calm” in the face of life’s vicissitudes (§ 45)—and “every individual who is calm and steady in head and heart has the right to believe not only that he has a good temperament, but also that he is in possession of a universally useful virtue and even that, by preserving this virtue, he is fulfilling a higher task” (1878, § 285).

What is that “higher task”? On Nietzsche’s interpretation (though not necessarily that of Epicurus himself), it is to foster a higher culture by pursuing a “project of cultivation and education” for the sake of “the overall development of man” (Nietzsche 1886a, § 61), by seeking to achieve the “exalted and transfiguring overall goal . . . to aid the evolution of the *physis*” (Nietzsche 1874, 142), where by *physis* Nietzsche means nature, especially human nature. Yet that seemingly abstract endeavor is first and foremost individual: “at first only for yourself, to be sure; but through yourself in the end for everyone” (142).

Such, in any case, are the possibilities that Nietzsche sees in the philosophy of Epicurus—in, to paraphrase the title of Nietzsche’s third Untimely Meditation, Epicurus as educator. But over time Nietzsche became much more critical of Epicureanism, in the end forsaking it entirely. Why?

## Nietzsche Contra Epicurus

There is no more dramatic illustration of Nietzsche's turn away from Epicurus than the first section of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (which is also the last section of the original version of Nietzsche 1882). Zarathustra turns his back on the hidden Epicurean life of seclusion he has led with his friends the eagle and the serpent, wherein "he enjoyed his spirit and his solitude, and for ten years did not tire of that" (Nietzsche 1883, 121). Indeed, Zarathustra lived almost as one of the gods of Epicurus: alone, aloof, caring nothing about the fate of men. Yet Zarathustra decides to forsake his godly existence and "to become man again" because, as he says, "I am sick of my wisdom . . . I need hands outstretched to receive it. . . . I want to give away and distribute it"—and not for the sake of his friends, but "until the wise among men enjoy their folly once more and the poor their riches" (122). To do so, he "must descend to the depths," "become empty again," "become man again" (122).

So "the good solitude, the free, playful, light solitude" (Nietzsche 1886a, § 25) is not enough for man, and neither are "moralities [that] are meant to calm him and lead him to be satisfied with himself" (§ 187). Nietzsche begins to perceive ominous parallels between Epicureanism and Christianity, both of which appeal to those whose "most profound desire is that the war they *are* should come to an end"—for "happiness appears to them, in agreement with a tranquilizing medicine and way of thought (for example, Epicurean or Christian), pre-eminently as the happiness of resting, of not being disturbed, of satiety, of finally attained unity" (§ 200). No longer seeing Epicurean *ataraxia* as "a state of serene agitation" that comprises "the artist's and philosopher's vision of happiness" (1878, § 611), Nietzsche now criticizes all "ways of thinking that measure the value of things in accordance with pleasure and pain, which are mere epiphenomena and wholly secondary" (1886a, § 225)—whether under the guise of "hedonism or pessimism, utilitarianism or eudaimonism" (§ 225). All such philosophies want "to abolish suffering" and offer an account of "well-being . . . that is no goal, that seems to us an end, a state that soon makes man ridiculous and contemptible" (§ 225).

Indeed, in his later writings Nietzsche seems to positively value suffering: "it really seems to us that we would rather have it higher and worse than ever" because it is "the discipline of great suffering"

and the “tension of the soul in unhappiness” that “has created all enhancements of man so far” (§ 225). Those who find within themselves the “inventiveness and courage” necessary for “enduring” and “persevering” (§ 225) do not seek “some final state,” “a negative definition of happiness,” “stillness, mildness, patience, medicine, balm in some sense,” “rest, stillness, calm seas, redemption from themselves,” or “a certain warm narrowness that keeps away fear and encloses one in optimistic horizons” (1886b, Preface to Second Edition, 34). That is the philosophy of a cautious optimism and of mere happiness rather than human nobility—and it is thus that Nietzsche “gradually learned to understand Epicurus” and “also the ‘Christian’ who is actually only a kind of Epicurean” (34).

Nietzsche argues that such a cautious optimism—which, confusingly, he also calls “romantic pessimism”<sup>4</sup>—stems essentially from a lack of vital force, from hunger for life, from a poverty of passion, fire, and creative power. And he opposes to it his own idea of “Dionysian pessimism,” which arises from an “overflowing energy that is pregnant with the future,” a “super-abundance that has here become creative” (34), a “selective and cultivating influence” that is “always destructive as well as creative and form-giving” (Nietzsche 1886a, § 61).<sup>5</sup> This is why Nietzsche says: “I have presented such terrible images to knowledge that any ‘Epicurean delight’ is out of the question. Only Dionysian joy is sufficient” (1967, § 1029).<sup>6</sup>

Thus Nietzsche felt that he had moved beyond a hedonistic or even eudaimonistic concern for mere happiness, for a state of finally attained unity, for some kind of paradise (whether heavenly or earthly), which he thought was “only the ‘garden of Epicurus’” in which “any task is lacking . . . it desires nothing . . . all reason is lacking to set up any further goals, to have children” (§ 225) either biological or spiritual. More important than happiness to Nietzsche is nobility: “that one leaves happiness to the great majority,” “that one instinctively seeks heavy responsibilities,” “that one constantly contradicts the great majority not through words but through deeds” (§ 944). Certainly such a creative soul and higher man suffers, and it is better to pity his suffering than that of the average man (Nietzsche 1886a, § 225); but better yet is the attitude that Zarathustra expresses at the end of his book: “My suffering and my pity for suffering—what does it matter? Am I concerned with *happiness*? I am concerned

with my *work*” (1883, 439).

## **Objectivism and the Ethics of the Great Task**

Finally we come to a sentiment that is recognizably Randian: the overriding importance of work, which Rand shares with the later Nietzsche and which sets them both in opposition to Epicurus. Although other thinkers and traditions (especially Calvinism) have valued “good works” rather than pleasure or intention or contemplation in life, only Rand acclaimed the value of productive work in such a thoroughgoing manner.

Rand’s focus on work appears even in her earliest journal entries from 1927, where she lauds “a man’s regeneration through work,” the “strength, energy, heroism” of a “good, strong, wonderful worker,” the “tremendous energy” of “breaking through obstacles” by means of “hard, heroic work” (Rand 1997, 4–5). She concludes:

*Achievement is the aim of life.* Life is achievement. . . . Achievement—give yourself an aim, something you *want* to do, then go after it, breaking through everything, with nothing in mind but your aim, all will, all concentration—and *get it*. (8)

Consider also a few quotes from her novel *The Fountainhead*:

“You’re unbearable when you’re working, Howard,” Austen Heller told him one evening, even though he had not spoken of his work at all.

“Why?” he asked, astonished.

“It’s uncomfortable to be in the same room with you. Tension is contagious, you know.”

“What tension? I feel completely natural only when I’m working.”

“That’s it. You’re completely natural only when you’re one inch from bursting to pieces. What in hell are you really made of, Howard? After all, it’s only a building. It’s not the

combination of holy sacrament, Indian torture and sexual ecstasy that you seem to make of it.”

“Isn’t it?” (Rand 1943, 252–53)

“Howard, have you ever been in love?”

Roark turned to look straight at him and answer quietly: “I still am.”

“But when you walk through a building, what you feel is greater than that?”

“Much greater, Gail.” (551)

“Look, Gail.” Roark got up, reached out, tore a thick branch off a tree, held it in both hands, one fist closed at each end; then, his wrists and knuckles tensed against the resistance, he bent the branch slowly into an arc. “Now I can make what I want of it: a bow, a spear, a cane, a railing. That’s the meaning of life.”

“Your strength?”

“Your work.” He tossed the branch aside. “The material the earth offers you and what you make of it . . .” (552)

The idea is expressed not only in Rand’s fiction, but in her philosophical essays as well:

Productive work is the road of man’s unlimited achievement and calls upon the highest attributes of his character: his creative ability, his ambitiousness, his self-assertiveness, his refusal to bear uncontested disasters, his dedication to the goal of reshaping the earth in the image of his values. (1961, 26)

Notice that productive work is not merely doing a job or pursuing a career for Rand. Although several minor characters in Rand's novels are presented as good, honest workers, in general she celebrates highly innovative individuals who create exceptional value; thus her ethical thought is "the code of the creator" (Rand 1943, 679–86; Kelley 1993), who "lives for his work" and who recognizes that "the highest virtue is . . . to achieve" (Rand 1943, 681). Yet even that does not go far enough, I think, for in Rand's view the virtue of productivity (Rand 1961, 26–27) is driven fundamentally not even by one's personal "creative goal" (Branden 1964, 62) but by "the goal of reshaping the earth in the image of [one's] values" (see also Rand 1943, 49: "I don't like the shape of things on this earth. I want to change them."). This, for Rand, is the "overall and transfiguring goal" (Nietzsche 1874, 142) of all human endeavor, the great task of "anyone who fights for the future" (Rand 1975, viii).

Yet Rand is perhaps less honest than Nietzsche regarding the price one pays for bearing such a heavy responsibility. Although her heroic characters often suffer tremendously, they almost always triumph in the end (at least in her later novels). Further, evincing a Stoic strand of repression, even when they do experience pain, "it's not really pain" because "it goes only down to a certain point and then it stops" (Rand 1943, 344). The Randian hero doesn't take suffering seriously even while being tortured (1957, 1072) because "happiness is that state of consciousness which proceeds from the achievement of one's values" (1961, 28). As long as one is achieving one's values, one is *ipso facto* happy.

The Objectivist ethics inherits from Nietzsche a disdain for any ethical theory that places issues of pleasure and pain in the foreground: pleasure is "the reward and consequence of successful action" (Branden 1964, 61) and thus essentially epiphenomenal, just as Nietzsche had argued. However, the Objectivist tradition makes a stronger psychological claim: that successful action (such as productive work or, more generally, the achievement of one's values) always results in pleasure or enjoyment. For example, in an early essay endorsed by Rand, Nathaniel Branden claims that "productive work is the most fundamental" of the "areas that allow man to experience the enjoyment of life" (62).

This optimism regarding the psychical effects of human action seems to be related to Rand's "benevolent universe premise." While Rand recognized (if only implicitly) that great creativity often involves some measure of destruction (e.g., her heroes are almost always presented as partially dangerous, amoral, or evil, at least according to conventional morality), she agrees with Nietzsche that moral preachers lie when they say that such passionate, strong-willed, conventionally evil people are miserable inside—instead, these great souls experience an "over-rich happiness" (Nietzsche 1882, § 326). Where Rand parts company with Nietzsche is in his claim that suffering and happiness are twins, which implies that such people also experience deeper suffering than those who cleave to "a certain warm narrowness" of thought and feeling (1886b, Preface to Second Edition, 34).

Both Nietzsche and Rand pay lip service to the importance of deeds rather than mere words, and Rand goes further by celebrating the productive work of engineers throughout her novels (Saint-Andre 2004); yet both were literary philosophers whose greatest acts were writing books rather than, say, building skyscrapers or railroads or inventing new motors or metals. Both accepted that the philosopher is "the man of the most comprehensive responsibility who has the conscience for the overall development of man," and that such a philosopher "will make use of religions for his project of cultivation and education"—though both preferred a religion that involves the "deification of man" (Nietzsche 1967, § 196) or what Rand called "man-worship" (1968, viii–xi). Indeed, Rand seems to have regarded the philosopher as the "commander-in-chief" of all life on earth (1960, 26).

It is an open question whether taking responsibility for the overall development of man or aiding the evolution of human nature is in one's self-interest. Neither Nietzsche nor Rand was an especially happy person, and both seem to have lived for the sake of philosophy rather than for the sake of their own enjoyment. Here again Nietzsche was the more honest of the two: he admitted that the form-giving activities of the strong-willed philosopher express a sublimated version of the will to creative power, and that the passionate pursuit of a higher culture consistent with the best within human beings is a recipe for deep suffering as well as for an over-rich happiness. Rand was more positive about the actuality of happiness among those who

value and pursue the great task of reshaping the earth in the image of their values, but her claims are mere assertions, not necessarily backed up by human experience.

The ethics of the great task as enunciated by Nietzsche transcends both Epicurean hedonism and Aristotelian eudaimonism (the two traditions to which the Objectivist ethics is most often compared). Yet it seems that Rand worked to make Nietzsche's transcendent image of the overman into something more real. So while Rand might have inherited the ambitious scale of her moral vision from Nietzsche, she brings that vision down to earth somewhat by embodying it in her novels through the stories and achievements of architects, inventors, and engineer-entrepreneurs rather than a nebulous archetype such as Zarathustra.

Even so, Rand's single-minded focus on the central importance (even, one is tempted to say, the redemptive power) of productive work sets her clearly apart from the eudaimonist tradition, which typically emphasizes a more balanced personal fulfillment that takes account of a wide range of human powers, interests, and commitments, such as family, friendships, self-knowledge, aesthetic stimulation, and community involvement. It appears that even if such pursuits have prominent places in Rand's ideal, they are subordinate to productive work, which provides the central, organizing principle of an Objectivist life well lived.

Even further, I would argue that the great task of "reshaping the earth in the image of [one's] values" provides for Rand an overarching standard or end for ethics. Human virtues, human values, moral rules, ethical principles, personal interests, and particular commitments can all be measured according to that standard (though the project of doing so is well beyond the scope of this essay). Rand thought it crucially important that ethics be grounded by such a standard (Rand 1961, 24–25; see Saint-Andre 1993, 141–49) and often stated that the standard is "man's life" (1961, 23, etc.).

There is a certain ambiguity in that phrase, since it could mean "one's own life" or "the life of man qua man" (which is close to Nietzsche's "evolution of the *physis*"). Rand perhaps intended to resolve that ambiguity by focusing on "the goal of reshaping the earth in the image of [one's] values" through a life that is centered on the creation of value in productive work. The seriousness, solemnity, and

transfiguring power of one's productive work in the Objectivist ethics—a “combination of holy sacrament, Indian torture and sexual ecstasy”—is what gives Rand's moral vision its distinctive cast and what sets it apart from the conventional categories of ethical thought. Unfortunately, aside from the hints that Rand gave in the form of the heroic characters she created, she mostly left the task of determining whether that vision truly forms the basis for “a philosophy for living on earth” (1974, 12) as an exercise for the reader.

## Notes

1. One indication of the degree of Nietzsche's influence on Rand can be gleaned from the fact that, as Rand related to Barbara Branden (1986, 45), “The first book I bought myself in America was an English version of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, and I underscored all my favorite sections.” Not only did Rand have many favorite sections in this work, but she underscored them all in an English-language edition even though “her English was halting and uncertain” at that time (68). She must have known the work extremely well.

2. It is not explicit that Nietzsche is talking about Epicurus here; however, the passage is redolent of Epicurus' concept of “living unknown” (*lathe biosas*).

3. On *ataraxia*, see for instance Principal Doctrine XVIII of Epicurus: “As soon as the pain produced by the lack of something is removed, pleasure in the flesh does not increase but only varies” (translation mine).

4. To Nietzsche, this cautious optimism is “romantic” in that it encourages a focus on mere happiness and is a form of “pessimism” in that it shrinks from the noblest possibilities of human existence.

5. Nietzsche realized that creation and destruction go hand in hand over fifty years before Joseph Schumpeter coined the phrase “creative destruction” (Schumpeter 1942, 82–83).

6. This quote is from Nietzsche's notebooks (commonly referred to as “The Will to Power”), and is dated by Walter Kaufmann between 1884 and 1886; such quotes need to be treated with caution, since they were never published during Nietzsche's lifetime and therefore must be considered provisional expressions of his ideas.

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