

Ayn Rand and the Mastery of Nature

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Productive work is the process by which man's consciousness controls his existence, a constant process of acquiring knowledge and shaping matter to fit one's purpose, of translating an idea into physical form, of remaking the earth in the image of one's values.

— Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (1957, 1020)

Productive work is the central purpose of a rational man's life, the central value that integrates and determines the hierarchy of all his other values.

— Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (1964, 25)

In "Liberty and Nature: The Missing Link," my essay for the premiere issue of *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies*, I argued that Ayn Rand's case for libertarian politics fails. Rand argues that men can attain values only by voluntary action and interaction, and laissez-faire capitalism is the only social system that respects this fact. Men cannot attain values by force, whether by forcing others to provide them with values or by having values paternalistically forced upon them. Rand bases these claims on her concept of objective value, which has three aspects. A value (or disvalue) is (1) a fact of reality (2) in relation to an individual human life (3) as evaluated by that individual. The third point implies that nothing can be a value for a human being if he does not consciously evaluate it as such, and Rand holds that such a cognitive act is volitional, voluntary. Hence, I

argued that this theory of value is actually subjective, for it makes the existence of a value or disvalue (necessarily though not sufficiently) dependent upon the mind of the valuer.

I then gave examples of values and disvalues that are not dependent on the mind of the valuer. For instance, oxygen was a value, and its absence a disvalue, long before we knew anything about its role in human survival. This means that we can have genuine values paternalistically foisted upon us. What is needed is an argument that paternalism shouldn't be used even if it can work. Rand's defense of libertarianism, therefore, fails.

I also attempted to explain how Rand's roughly Aristotelian attempt to create an objective moral philosophy based upon man's biological nature degenerates into a roughly Nietzschean form of subjectivism. I argued that there is a tension in Rand's thought between realism and nominalism—objectivism and subjectivism—Aristotle and Nietzsche.

Realism and nominalism denote two positions on the relationship of man's will to the good. The realist holds that there is a good by nature. This good exists prior to and independent of human choice, and human beings ought to conform their choices to the good. The nominalist holds that there is nothing good by nature, that the good exists only through human choice. Man, therefore, creates values and stamps them upon nature, including his own nature. Rand's Aristotelianism implicitly commits her to a holistic account of human nature and flourishing. And since the will is part of man, its free exercise is part of the human good. But Rand's nominalist tendencies lead her to make all human values dependent upon the free exercise of the will. Thus, Rand is a kind of reductionist, reducing a complex whole to one of its parts, or totalizing one part so that it eclipses the rest of the whole. Rand's Aristotelianism emerged relatively late in her philosophical development and was ultimately superficial. It never managed to supplant her deeply-dyed commitment to a Nietzschean subjectivism.

Vacker's Critique

Barry Vacker offers two criticisms of my essay. First, he responds to my argument that Rand is a kind of reductionist by stating that Rand is not a linear thinker but incorporates certain chaotic elements in her aesthetic. If I am reading him correctly, Vacker is assuming that reductionism and linear thinking are synonyms. But this is not true. I grant that these two patterns of thought are often associated, but that does not mean that they are the same. This is particularly the case insofar as Vacker constructs an opposition between linear *thinking* and chaotic *aesthetics*, which is like contrasting linear apples and chaotic oranges. Reductionist thinking is properly contrasted with holistic and pluralistic thinking—not with chaotic thinking, and certainly not with chaotic aesthetics.

Second, Vacker objects to my usage of the opening and closing pages of *The Fountainhead* to illustrate Rand's domineering and exploitative conception of man's proper relationship to the natural world. Rand depicts the natural world as having no intrinsic value. The hero of *The Fountainhead*, Howard Roark, sees nature merely as a stockpile of resources, "waiting for the drill, the dynamite and my voice; waiting to be split, ripped, pounded, reborn; waiting for the shape my hands will give them" (Rand 1968, 4). Nature is merely the stuff from which man creates values. Rand treats human nature, specifically the human body, in the same way. Man's healthy biological functioning is not treated as a value in itself, but merely as the material from which values are wrought by the will. Vacker points out, however, that in the opening pages and elsewhere in *The Fountainhead*, Rand describes both nature and Roark's buildings in dynamic and chaotic terms. In his earlier essay, from *Feminist Interpretations of Ayn Rand*, Vacker writes:

... in *The Fountainhead*, there exists beneath the industrial metaphors an aesthetic vision of deep complexity and organicity, unlike typical industrial aestheticism. Rand created an aesthetic vision in which humans and nature exist harmoniously, not in a static symmetrical world of timeless

tradition and classical forms, but in a turbulent world of chaotic organicity and strange attractors. (Vacker 1999, 131)

Vacker's point, I take it, is that these continuities and harmonies undermine the strict distinction I see in Rand between natural materials and the products of man.

I do not find Vacker's critique convincing for two reasons. First, although some of the passages he cites depict greater continuities between nature and art than do the opening pages of *The Fountainhead*, they do not contradict my thesis that Rand's thought is based upon a fundamental distinction between nature and the man-made and that man's proper task is to transform the former into the latter (see Rand 1982). Second, although I think Vacker is right to point out chaotic elements in Rand's descriptions of nature and art, it is a mistake to characterize the whole of Rand's aesthetic in terms of this part. Instead, I would argue that Rand's aesthetic signature is captured better by the concept of the sublime, an experience in which elements of chaos—mind-boggling magnitudes and fearsome powers—are incorporated into an elevating aesthetic phenomenon by the experience of man's cognitive mastery and moral superiority over them. Because of limitations of space, I shall argue only the first point here. (I argue the second in an unpublished paper [Johnson 2000].)

The Mastery of Nature as a Pre-Philosophical Conviction

Rand's deep commitment to man's mastery of nature is made clear in a remarkable passage from her notes for *Atlas Shrugged*, dated 26 April 1946. This passage is important because it shows that Rand's convictions on these matters come first, her arguments second; the arguments change, but her desired conclusion remains the same (cf. Rand's first philosophical journal [Rand 1997, 72–73] and her later discussions of the concept of sense of life [Rand 1969]).

The supposition of man's physical descent from monkeys does not necessarily mean that man's soul, the rational

faculty, is only an elaboration of an animal faculty, different from the animal's consciousness only in degree, not in kind. It is possible that there was a sharp break, that the rational faculty was like a spark, added to the animal who was ready for it—and this would be actually like a soul entering a body. Or it might be that there is a metaphysical mistake in considering animals as pure matter. There is, scientifically, a most profound break between the living and the non-living. Now *life* may be the spirit; the animals may be the forms of spirit and matter, in which matter predominates; man may be the highest form, the crown and final goal of the universe, the form of spirit and matter in which the spirit predominates and triumphs. (If there's any value in "feelings" and "hunches"—God! how I feel that *this* is true!) (Rand 1997, 465–66)

Although Rand often entertained the thought that many of her fellow men were Darwin's missing links between man and ape, Nathaniel Branden reports that she was actually rather uncomfortable with the theory of evolution (Branden 1984). This passage is clear evidence of her unease. Rand wishes to maintain the thesis that there is a difference of "kind" rather than of "degree" between man and nature, even nature at its closest proximity to man, the apes. To this end, she considers two hypotheses. First, she entertains a kind of Cartesian dualism. She models the relationship of man to nature on the relationship of soul to body: "It is possible that there was a sharp break, that the rational faculty was like a spark, added to the animal who was ready for it—and this would be actually like a soul entering a body." On this account, the natural world, including the animal kingdom, is treated as pure matter in motion, human intelligence being the only spiritual factor. Second, she considers a different form of dualism, distinguishing animate beings from inanimate beings. On this account, living beings other than man are no longer treated as mere mechanisms. Man is treated as one form of animate being and the human "spirit" is treated as one form of life. To differentiate man from other living beings and the human spirit from life in

general, Rand suggest that in animals, matter dominates spirit, whereas in man, spirit dominates matter: "the animals may be the forms of spirit and matter, in which matter predominates; man may be the highest form, the crown and final goal of the universe, the form of spirit and matter in which the spirit predominates and triumphs." No matter which hypothesis we accept, however, the result is the same: to establish a metaphysical distinction between man and nature and man's moral predominance over nature.

Rand's concern with man's predominance is also clear in the very next paragraph:

If it's now added that the next step is pure spirit—I would ask, why? Pure spirit, with no connection to matter, is inconceivable to our consciousness. . . . The unity of spirit and matter seems unbreakable; the pattern of the universe, then, would be: matter, as the tool of the spirit, the spirit giving meaning and purpose to matter. (Rand 1997, 466)

To establish man's dominance of nature, one must do more than prove that man is elevated above the animals. One must also prove that there is nothing above man. If man is the being in which spirit dominates matter, then, Rand reasons, any higher beings would have to be purely spiritual, e.g., ghosts, angels, gods. But Rand denies that such beings are even conceivable. (A fact that has not stopped the human race from conceiving of them for millennia.) Man, therefore, is secure in his status as "the crown and final goal of the universe" giving "meaning and purpose to matter." (Rand does not consider the possibility of living beings whose spirits dominate matter even better than our own.)

The Conquest of Nature in *The Fountainhead*

Vacker points to some of Rand's descriptions of Roark's buildings in *The Fountainhead* to illustrate his thesis that Rand has a chaotic "aesthetic." Rand describes the Heller house as follows:

The house on the cliff had been designed not by Roark, but by the cliff on which it stood. It was as if the cliff had grown and completed itself and proclaimed the purpose for which it had been waiting. The house was broken into many levels, following the ledges of the rock, rising as it rose, in gradual masses, on planes flowing together up into one consummate harmony. The walls, of the same granite as the rock, continued its vertical lines upward; the wide, projecting terraces of concrete, silver as the sea, followed the line of the waves, of the straight horizon. (Rand 1968, 119)

Vacker, of course, wishes to emphasize the continuities between the house and its natural surroundings. Clearly, Rand is describing a gentler relationship of art and nature than in the first pages of *The Fountainhead*—although the building materials themselves were surely "split, ripped, pounded, reborn." Rand also makes it clear that the natural setting of the house, left alone, is incomplete, and that the house is what completes it; the house is "the purpose for which it [the cliff] had been waiting." Alone, the rising ledges, planes, and masses of rock are an unresolved dissonance. It is the house that draws them together into "one consummate harmony."

Rand describes the Sanborn house in similar terms:

The house—of plain field stone, with great windows and many terraces—stood in the gardens over the river, as spacious as the spread of water, as open as the gardens, and one had to follow its lines attentively to find the exact steps by which it was tied to the sweep of the gardens, so gradual was the rise of the terraces, the approach to the full reality of the walls; it seemed only that the trees flowed into the house and through it; it seemed that the house was not a barrier against sunlight, but a bowl to gather it, to concentrate it into brighter radiance than that of the air outside. (166)

Again, Rand stresses the organic unity of house and surroundings, but she also points out how the house perfects the landscape,

drawing it together into a harmony as it draws the eye towards it; the house even perfects the sunlight.

Compare also Rand's description of Monadnock valley:

. . . the ledges had not been touched, . . . no artifice had altered the unplanned beauty of graded steps. Yet some power had known how to build on these ledges in such a way that the houses became inevitable, and one could no longer imagine the hills as beautiful without them—as if the centuries and the series of changes that produced these ledges in the struggle of great blind forces had waited for their final expression, had only been a road to a goal—and the goal was these buildings, part of the hills, shaped by the hills, yet ruling them by giving them meaning.

The buildings were of plain field stone—like the rocks jutting from the green hillsides—and of glass, great sheets of glass used as if the sun were invited to complete the structures, sunlight becoming part of the masonry. (528–29)

Here again, Rand stresses the continuities between Roark's buildings and their natural surroundings. She also speaks of the "unplanned beauty" of the rocks and uses the gentle metaphor of the sun being "invited" by the windows to complete the structures. Here it is nature that completes art. But the overall message is unmistakable. Nature, left on its own, is incomplete. The hills arose over "centuries" through the "struggle of great blind forces." Then they had "waited for their final expression," which nature alone could not provide. The hills were merely "a road to a goal." The goal was Roark's buildings, "part of the hills, shaped by the hills, yet ruling them by giving them meaning." Even the sunlight, which completes the structures, is incorporated into the masonry.

In closing, I should also note that my thesis that Rand is ultimately a nominalist, not a realist, hinges on her view of the relationship of the will and human nature, not non-human nature. A genuinely naturalistic approach to ethics requires that we treat the

actualization of human nature as the standard of value, as the good before which we should bend our wills. I have argued that Rand, however, reduced the human good to the free exercise of the will and treated the rest of human nature like non-human nature: merely as a stockpile of resources for manipulation by the will. A naturalistic ethic need not and should not oppose the wise mastery of non-human nature. Art can be used to perfect nature—even human nature. But a naturalistic ethic should oppose the domination and objectification of man, something Rand did not consistently do (see, for example, Johnson and Rasmussen 2000). In my original article, I cited the opening and closing pages of *The Fountainhead* merely as an illustration of Rand's overall vision of the relationship of will and nature, even though my main objection is to her views on human nature.

A Well-Aimed Bullet

William Thomas also offers a critique of my essay (Thomas 1999a and 1999b; unless otherwise noted, I will quote from the latter). Thomas focuses on my examples of objective values and disvalues that do not require our knowledge and choice. For instance, being hit by a car is a disvalue, even if one does not see it coming; being saved by emergency surgery is a value, whether one is conscious of it or not. Thomas, however, raises a counter-example: "Perhaps the victim was dying of a terrible terminal illness, and was walking the streets without regard to traffic, seeking a sudden death as the proper way to end." He asks: "Could one know from the outside whether or not a person wishes to live?" (Thomas 1999a, 13).

This objection is not very compelling, and in fairness to Thomas, he characterizes it as "off the cuff." The first problem is that Thomas's point is implicitly subjectivist. The mere fact that a person wants to die does not constitute a justification for his decision. I will gladly grant, however, that some people are better off dead, whether they think so or not. But this is probably not true of most accident victims, who are harmed by being struck down and "paternalistically" helped by emergency aid. Furthermore, since Thomas is right to

point out that there is no way of knowing an unconscious person's intentions (absent, I suppose, a suicide note), we have to settle upon a policy. We have two options. First, we could assume that most accident victims want to live, so we should paternalistically save all of them and let them sort things out later. Second, since at least some choose their plight and it would be an act of aggression to come to their aid, we should respect their autonomy by letting all accident victims die. Judged by the standard of man's life, the paternalistic policy is clearly the most life-affirming.

Furthermore, Thomas's response is inconsistent with his own Objectivist principles. First, the mode of suicide is immoral on Objectivist grounds because it is a form of aggression. Throwing oneself in front of another person's car traumatizes the driver, robs him of his time, and damages his car. Second, Rand would argue that a man who is seeking death can have no values or disvalues, because it is only on the condition that he is pursuing life that anything can be a value or disvalue to him. Therefore, being struck by a car cannot be a value for him and being saved by force cannot be a disvalue.

The rest of Thomas's response is given to methodological complaints, all of which are beside the point and some of which are unjust. Thomas objects to my suggestion that a true moral philosophy would be more comprehensive and holistic than Rand's, more like ancient Greek ethics. Thomas, however, claims that such an encyclopedic project is only for a very late stage of ethics. But my objection was not that Rand failed to integrate unknown data into her ethics, but that she failed to integrate data that has been known for thousands of years—hence, my reference to the Greeks.

Thomas also faults my scholarship. In preparing an article on Ayn Rand for *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies*, I read all of Rand's writings, and I cited everything by Rand relevant to my case. But Thomas says this is not good enough. He suggests that I need to be more "in touch with the ongoing development of Objectivism." In particular, he names his own "talks on rights at the I.O.S. [Institute for Objectivist Studies, now The Objectivist Center] Summer Seminar in years past" and "the 'beta' draft of *The Logical Structure of Objectivism* [forthcoming from Thomas and David Kelley] circulated

there and among attendees at the advanced, graduate philosophy seminar."

But William Thomas is not Ayn Rand. Furthermore, whatever elaborations and developments Thomas may add to Rand's theory of rights can only be as good as Rand's basic arguments, and I have shown that these arguments fail.

Thomas generously grants that my essay raises an interesting question about ethics, but then blames me for neglecting to pursue it in my "eagerness to denigrate the positions of Rand and sympathetic philosophers Douglas Den Uyl and Douglas Rasmussen." Thomas accuses me of "the prevailing academic tendency to read philosophy narrowly and to equate the critique of texts with the analysis of problems." He suggests that I am lazy in taking Rand's faulty statements at face value and then criticizing them, rather than making "the imaginative effort to see how [Rand's] system might be further articulated." Finally, Thomas deplores as "shabby" how I demand that Rand live up to her pretensions of being a systematic philosopher, while I (who have no such pretensions) "so signally fail" to fulfill these demands myself.

All these objections amount to the same point: My critique of Ayn Rand is objectionable simply because it is a critique of Ayn Rand—as opposed to an analysis of philosophical issues, or an imaginative reconstruction of Rand's thought "as it might be and ought to be," or the elaboration of my own philosophical system.

Thomas's critique brings to mind Keanu Reeves's wild gyrations as he dodged bullets in "The Matrix." But in reality one cannot dodge a well-aimed bullet.

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