

Rockin' with Rand: Sailing the Turbulent Seas of the Objectivist Aesthetics

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In his essay, "The Strange Attractor in Randian Aesthetics," Barry Vacker makes good on his offer to "provide some provocative ideas" and to "suggest broader margins of discourse involving Randian theory . . . in the realm of aesthetics, epistemology, and cultural theory." I endorse without contention his fascinating and perceptive comments on what he characterizes as the fractal aesthetics of Rand's *Fountainhead*, and wish merely to follow up by offering some additional observations on what I take to be the *actual* fountainhead of Rand's fractal aesthetics, namely, a certain "metaphysical value-judgment." I think it is important to challenge Vacker's claim that "aesthetics is at the core of Randian theory." I intend to do so, however, in a way that both acknowledges his insightful grasp of Rand's aesthetic preferences and places those preferences in the context of her own philosophical framework, grounding them on a level more fundamental than aesthetics.

Vacker quotes passages from *The Fountainhead* that "illustrate an existential or metaphysical aesthetic at the heart of Rand's overall world-view," and describes it as "an aesthetic vision that expresses chaotic processes, turbulent patterns, and fractal forms." Also, as he points out, Rand says in her aesthetics writings in *The Romantic Manifesto* that art concretizes metaphysics and performs the psychological and epistemological function of allowing us to directly grasp that metaphysics. "[W]hat does it mean," then, Vacker asks, "when Rand's own work of art, *The Fountainhead*, provides descriptions of the

world that express deeply chaotic and turbulent forms"? That's a very good question, one that begs to be answered, if possible, on Rand's own terms.

The explanation Vacker is looking for is not to be found in Rand's aesthetics, however, but in her metaphysics—specifically, in her “metaphysical view of man's nature,” a given view being defined by answers to certain metaphysical *questions*. The answers to one such question—does man have the power of choice or not?—are, respectively, the Volition Premise and the Determinism Premise. The answers to another—is the universe knowable or not?—are the Intelligible Universe Premise and the Unintelligible Universe Premise. The answers to another—can man achieve his goals in life or not?—are the Benevolent Universe Premise and the Malevolent Universe premise. Since both critics and supporters of Rand frequently misunderstand this last pair of premises, a brief digression seems in order.

One can begin with the anthropomorphic assumption that the universe is (or is inhabited by) a superior Being that cares one way or the other whether human beings are happy or miserable. One thus has a choice between seeing the universe as *actually* benevolent or malevolent in a personal, psychological sense. Or, one can adopt instead the more open-ended, naturalistic view that the universe is, in fact, so constituted that one either can or cannot achieve happiness. As Leonard Peikoff (1991, 342) observes, there is a sense of “benevolent”—viz., “auspicious to human life”—which does apply to the universe. He points out that “if a man does recognize and adhere to reality, then he can achieve his values in reality; he can and, other things being equal, he will.” Although Peikoff does not say so, there is an obvious parallel between this view of the universe's benevolence and Rand's discussion of morality (“Causality vs. Duty” in Rand 1982, 118–19). Just as the “demands” of reality are not “categorical imperatives” but “conditional imperatives,” so too is the “benevolence” of the universe not “categorical benevolence” but “conditional benevolence.” If you adopt an objective attitude of respect for the facts of reality, and if you enact the causes necessary to produce particular desired effects, *then* you will be able to achieve

your values in reality. (Perhaps an unpublished essay, “Causality vs. Blessedness,” is lurking somewhere among the archives of the Rand estate!)

The (conditional) benevolence of the universe, it can now be seen, is just another aspect of the turbulent, dynamic, chaotic processes that Rand, Vacker, and others see in the world around us. Just as (Rand has observed) knowledge is both possible and non-automatic, so too, more generally, are achievement and happiness. Knowledge, in particular, may be gained, but only with the right attitude, the right method, and the requisite effort. Specifically, one must have a respect for facts, employ logic in validating one's conclusions, and use whatever ingenuity and persistence it takes in order to pry those facts loose from a world which does not (usually) hand us ready-made intellectual contents on a silver platter. No one said it would be easy! Not knowledge—and not achievement or happiness either. The world is a messy, turbulent place, and it takes *effort* to grasp and retain one's fulfillment, whether cognitive, existential, or emotional. It is *possible*, because the universe is (conditionally) benevolent—that's the Benevolent Universe Premise—but it's *not automatic*, because the universe is turbulent and requires effort from those who want to survive.

Rand has written of the anti-effort mentality, the attitude of resentment toward the Law of Causality, and especially the fact that survival is not automatic and requires effort. Although these insights have been driven home time and again in the descriptions of her characters in *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, however, they unfortunately were not included in her catalog of metaphysical value-judgments. With Vacker's clear-sighted identification of this aspect of her novels, the time is ripe for us to amend that catalog by adding (for want of better names) the Pro-Effort Premise and the Anti-Effort Premise. As an alternative, perhaps, the Turbulent Universe Premise and the Placid Universe Premise would be more in keeping with Vacker's focus. It seems undeniable, however, that some sort of acknowledgment of the fundamental importance of the non-automatic-achievement flip side of the Benevolent Universe Premise is in order.

To return, then, to Vacker's apparent differences with Rand over the relation of aesthetics to various other disciplines: Rand does not view epistemology, psychology, culture, etc. as deriving from *aesthetics*. Instead, she sees *all* of them, including aesthetics, as deriving from one's fundamental view of metaphysics, one's "overall world-view," as Vacker puts it. She most definitely does not equate one's aesthetics with one's world-view or metaphysics or think of one's world-view as being essentially "an existential or metaphysical aesthetic." Yet, there is a connection, of course. The metaphysical value-judgments that are the foundation of all our actions and choices are, a fortiori, the foundation of our aesthetic abstractions, as well. What is most "important" or "significant," most fundamentally entitled to our attention, is the core of our world-view or personal metaphysics. Thus, it is no surprise or enigma to find that this same consideration should be at the root of how we form our aesthetic preferences, romantic preferences, or whatever. Nor, however, should we misinterpret this deep connection as an actual *identity* between metaphysics and aesthetics, any more than we should blur the distinction between metaphysics and romantic affinity. Nor is this to deny that Rand, or any philosophically inclined artist, could have been creatively active long before actually engaging in formal philosophy. But what drives her art and her system of philosophy is, at root, a set of interrelated perspectives on life and the world that she (like all of us) began forming as a small child. At that age, one gravitates toward such perspectives not so much because one senses them to be true or good or beautiful ideas, but instead because one feels that they are "right" or that one is "at home" with them ("Philosophy and Sense of Life" in Rand [1971] 1975, 27).

Vacker seems to view plot and purpose in literature and dramatic music as though they were uni-directional, "linear" phenomena and therefore not a full expression of the "chaotic processes and forms . . . at the heart of the Randian aesthetic." There is much more to "Randian art and aesthetics," he says, "than merely the progression of musical plot or the expression of the linear purpose." However, Vacker seems to contradict this when he later says, "we should not construe human 'purpose' as merely linear. For Rand, purpose

usually is associated with forces of nature that emerge or complete themselves in a chaotic dance of destiny and desire, chance and choice." Nature, as reflected in Rand's art, is not a static harmony of unidirectional linear causality and simple, uniform processes, but a dynamic harmony of bi- or multi-directional reciprocal causality and complex, turbulent processes.

Since I agree wholeheartedly with this perspective, it seems a bit unfair to be chided by Vacker for having "completely overlooked" it. First, the stated purpose of my own essay was not an explication of the nature of the causal processes reflected in Rand's art and aesthetics, but a "first installment of needed critical and reconstructive work on Rand's esthetics" (Bissell 1999, 62). It focused specifically on acknowledging and partly explaining the "extensive structural and functional analogy between music and literary drama" by establishing "the basis for our perception of location and motion in music" It also dwelled on "addressing and correcting certain errors in [Rand's] epistemology" that stood in the way of understanding musical perception. Second, I offered not only a "promissory note" to consider the nature of plot in music (77), but also referred the reader to the journal and Internet locations of my existing views on plot and conflict in dramatic music. In "Thoughts on Musical Characterization and Plot: The Symbolic and Emotional Power of Dramatic Music" (Bissell 1998, 8), I wrote:

A dashing and defiant melody can strengthen the effect of a victorious musical progression, significantly more so than a dignified and stately melody. The fact that there are distinct layers of meaning—that a passage joyful in itself can be expanded to an even wider context to suggest irony, or counterpoint a deeper triumph, or portend doom—means the potential for conflict, which is vital. Melody, harmony, and rhythm shape the musical progression and every segment of it. Conflict typically is found in all three. *One cannot construct a very interesting plot by arranging for an undistinguished, humdrum, non-dissonant march straight to the musical goal; this would convey the impression that there are no obstacles, no excitement or*

challenges in life. Instead, the musical plot dramatizes goal-directedness by employing conflict—whether in the implied goals of a single melodic idea, or between two or more melodic ideas, or within corresponding harmonies, or in other ways. The analogy of plotful music to literature and drama is profound and vivid. [emphasis added]

In the article quoted above, I also use as a key example Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, which is as fitting an example of the perspective Vacker champions as the later, Rand-preferred pieces by Rachmaninoff and Tchaikovsky. In addition, I'll just mention two of my favorite pieces by any composer: the Piano Scherzo in B Minor by Chopin and its sister piece, the Scherzo in B-flat Minor. Some day, when I make good my pledge to write a sequel essay, "Music and Conceptual Cognition," there will be a prominent place for Vacker's insights as exemplified by the Beethoven and Chopin pieces.

Vacker concludes by urging Objectivists to adopt the utopian vision and spirit of *The Fountainhead*, to avoid the "[e]ndless rationalization of epistemology and economics, seeking or expressing the linear convergence toward a narrow conclusion of uniform agreement," which he says "will never change the world." He envisions instead a pluralistic movement and, more generally, a pluralistic society, one embodying not the top-down, static, stagnant structure based on imposed order, but the bottom-up, dynamic, vital structures of emergent order. He also sees a continuing necessity for heroic efforts to bridge the "chaotic turbulence" between the Objectivist movement and mainstream academia (notably, Marxists and post-modern thinkers). If the Objectivist movement is to survive as more than just an intellectual curiosity and historical footnote, then we must take to heart Rand's trenchant observation from the mid-1960's:

It is obvious that a boat which cannot stand rocking is doomed already and that it had better be rocked hard, if it is to regain its course—but this realization presupposes a grasp of facts, of reality, of principles and a long-range view, all of which are precisely the things that the "non-rockers" are

frantically struggling to evade. ("The New Fascism: Rule by Consensus" in Rand 1967, 203)

These words, aimed so aptly and tellingly at the political state of our culture during the height of the Cold War, apply with at least equal force to the current desperate attempts of isolationist Objectivists and ostracizing mainstream thinkers to prevent the constructive, beneficial effects of a cross-fertilization of ideas. Just as the "linear convergence toward a narrow conclusion of uniform agreement" is unhealthy in the culture as a whole, so it is unhealthy for subcultures, if they are to retain their vitality and relevance.

References

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