

Books

Porter's Rand: A Commentary

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Ayn Rand's Theory of Knowledge: A Commentary

Tom Porter

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Ayn Rand's Theory of Knowledge (hereafter *ARTOK*) by Tom Porter is a paragraph-by-paragraph annotation of Rand's *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology* (hereafter *IOE*). It is an idea the implementation of which is long overdue. *Numbering* the paragraphs is also an idea that is long overdue. No doubt many a private copy of *IOE* will bear something like Porter's numbering, even if the executors of Rand's estate cannot be convinced to number the next edition.

ARTOK cannot be read straight through as a coherent work. I seriously doubt that Porter intended that anyone read it that way. Rather, it is most likely to be used as a study guide, consulted during a careful reading of *IOE*, or added as a thought-provoking reference when analyzing a particular claim of Rand's. Conceivably, one might pick up Porter's book and turn just to the annotation of the paragraph that discusses Rand's definition of "concept," to compare one's own thoughts to Porter's, or to shed some rudimentary understanding on a paragraph that seems incomprehensible at first brush.

A summary of each paragraph included at the end of the book provides a useful overview. This too would be a helpful addition to future editions of *IOE*, especially if the summaries were used at the top of each page of the primary work. In the present work, however, it would have been helpful if these summaries appeared with the annotations, rather than at the back of the book.

Porter distinguishes himself explicitly from sycophantic Randroids who would praise every thought that ever crossed Rand's mind, but he does not side with her harshest critics either. His explicit aim is to pull out the good bits and highlight the inadequate points, directing further questioning and study by presenting an objective and questioning view of the work.

To accomplish this task, Porter stops to analyze particular sentences. A numbering scheme is provided for this purpose as well; it should be noted that any sentence numbered by Porter explicitly will be referred to by number later, so sentences need to be marked when he calls attention to them.

Among the most useful types of comments are questions that strike Porter as important, and notes on the history of the ideas that Rand uses. The latter are particularly nice to see, since Porter sometimes points out that Rand was not the first to think of them—an idea that may surprise many Objectivists who are disinclined to read outside the canon or enroll in philosophy classes.

There are some problems, however, that prevent Porter from achieving his goal of picking out the good bits and highlighting the inadequate parts, at least as far as the audience is concerned. It is often not clear whether he is asking a rhetorical question, criticizing Rand, engaging in exegesis, filling out the argument, changing the argument, or just reporting back what Rand says in the primary source. The reason appears to be that Porter does not see why making these distinctions clear to the reader would be necessary. Yet, it *is* necessary. Scholars need to know whether Porter thinks he is reporting his own ideas or Rand's, so that they will know whether his book will be a useful resource or a waste of time. Young students just beginning to understand *IOE* need to know this, because they are having a hard enough time understanding what Rand actually said and distinguishing it from their own budding philosophical thoughts and/or from any random claim they have heard about Rand's philosophy; they cannot be expected to intuit when Porter is talking, as opposed to Rand.

This problem is compounded by the fact that, most of the time, it is not clear why Porter is making a comment about a particular

paragraph or sentence. I know *IOE* fairly well, and I have three degrees in philosophy; this background makes me better prepared than most to gain value from Porter's work. In addition, I have studied Aristotle's *Metaphysics* in close detail, and have similarly studied the works of his commentators, such as Ockham and Abelard. In other words, I am no stranger to commentaries. So I cannot in good conscience take my confusion as a sign of my own ignorance; I take it as a sign of Porter's uncommunicativeness. It is clear there is *something* on his mind, but he does not appear to be interested in telling us what. Cryptic passages range from Wittgensteinian aphorisms to marginalia apparently not meant for public consumption.

Even a book of annotation should have a particular audience in mind. On the face of it, the intended audience seems to be the serious scholar, whether mainstream academic or Objectivist. To be able to follow the points, one would need a deep interest in and familiarity with *IOE*, and possibly with Rand's other works. The mere fact that one has to have *two* books open at once in order to get anything out of *ARTOK* suggests that Porter is not offering a quick read before bed.

Yet the content is, to say the least, unscholarly. If Rand's *IOE* is "a disorganized collection of notes"—a claim of Porter's that one may well dispute, but the examination of which is outside the scope of this review—then Porter's commentary, which is organized in exactly the same order, is worse. One of the tasks of a scholar is to present a coherent view of another person's work, drawing connections both where they are obvious and where they are surprising. Porter attempts to draw the connections, but he does not attempt to present a coherent view.

Though I commend Porter for filling a gap in Objectivist studies by producing a commentary of *IOE*, the usefulness of his book is undercut by a lack of citations where they are desperately needed. Their absence is most glaring when Porter makes broad sweeping generalizations about "today's philosophers" and "philosophers since Locke," many of which I happen to know to be false, given that there are counterexamples to these claims. For example: "... the best

conceptualist was John Locke. There aren't any conceptualists left" (5). My dissertation advisor, Nino Cocchiarella, to name just *one*, is a conceptualist, as was Henry Veatch, another professor at Indiana University; some professors there who do not have a particular interest in epistemology are nevertheless sympathetic to conceptualist views. And certainly those of us who are Objectivists and who have—or are working toward—degrees in philosophy are conceptualists to whatever degree we understand the nature of concepts. This is just to indicate a *few* of "today's philosophers" who falsify Porter's broad statement. It does not matter whether these people were widely-read; the point is that Porter's claim is *arbitrary*, as must be any claim about every member of a group of people who are collected in an arbitrary manner.

Given the arbitrary nature of his claim about philosophers in general, what do we do with his claim regarding Locke? Rand's own such claims revealed her unfamiliarity (or unconcern) with other important works of philosophy and with the way genuine, scholarly philosophical work proceeds; many of us excuse her on the grounds that she was primarily a novelist. Porter, from whom we might expect more given his acquaintance with Objectivism and his recent enrollment in a philosophy graduate program, repeats the same error; the explanation for *his* mistakes in this regard does not immediately leap to mind.

Porter often considers it necessary to comment on his comments. He places these comments in footnotes—there are several on almost every page. These consist of vague, aimless meanderings. For example, section 332 is a comment on this passage by Rand:

Just as the concept "man" does not consist merely of "rational faculty" (if it did, the two would be equivalent and interchangeable, which they are not), but includes *all* the characteristics of "man," with "rational faculty" serving as the distinguishing characteristic—so, in the case of wider concepts, the concept "animal" does not consist merely of "consciousness and locomotion," but subsumes *all* the characteristics of all the animal species, with "consciousness

and locomotion" serving as the distinguishing characteristic. (Rand 1990, 27)

Here is the portion of Porter's comment (which, by the way, starts off with a claim about what "many philosophers think") on this paragraph that he considers worthy of additional footnoting:

Smoke is only a sign of fire to people who know about fire. The relation of the symbol to the thing is an abstraction from the relation of knowledge to its object. The symbol stands for the thing in our knowledge.³ The first *symbol* is awareness of reality.

If the concept is a symbol of the thing (240–1), then it symbolizes, means, denotes, includes and subsumes all characteristics of the thing, including unknown characteristics. If it symbolizes two things, it symbolizes their differences as well as their similarities.⁴ (ARTOK, 89)

And here are his footnotes on this portion of the comment:

3. Does that mean I can't symbolize the unknown? But I just did. I had to know *something* about it (e.g., that it's unknown), not everything; in order to symbolize *everything* about it. Abstractly.

4. What about negative concepts? They're surely needed (Furth 1968). How might they avoid this error? Perhaps by contextual scope. "Non-living" is wider than "non-avian" because, in real contexts, all non-birds are animals. Or they're all flying things, or all singing things. Real contexts are commensurable (217). (ARTOK, 89n)

One might wonder in any case why a book that consists of nothing but annotations warrants any footnotes at all. Footnotes are useful when the writer wishes to avoid breaking the reader's steady train of thought with a tangential comment, or with a reference to another

work; but such a use presupposes internal coherency in the main body of the text. Given that Porter's book is, in effect, a set of footnotes to *IOE*, footnotes to his own footnotes are an unnecessary layer of complication, a distraction from his already disjointed collection of thoughts, and an indication of a lack of understanding of the function of citations and asides. Indeed, they are an indication of the fact that he does not realize just how disjointed his own discussion is.

Note well that the reference to Rand, above, is not provided by Porter. And since I was not inclined to number all the paragraphs in *IOE*, it was necessary for me to count 33 paragraphs from the beginning of Chapter 3 to find the reference (I still did not get it right until I counted backward from the end). Yet, because there is no identifying reference in Porter to indicate that I did, indeed, find the right paragraph, and no clear connection between his comment and Rand's paragraph, I am left with a vague feeling, even after counting twice and rereading several times, that I did not in fact find the quote to which he refers.

Compounding this problem is the fact that cross-references are not just to other paragraphs in *IOE*, but to other books as well. These out-of-book excursions are heralded by initials standing for the work, a long key-value list of which is provided at the end of the work. Within that list, Porter notes whether the number accompanying the reference-by-abbreviation indicates a page number, or a paragraph numbered in accordance with his system. Again, the reason for the cross-reference is not given: does the other work provide an explanation? A definition? A contradiction? A better way of saying the same thing? Or does it just strike Porter as a neat correspondence?

Granted, there is a lot of material to cover. However, the problem of cross-referencing, especially when multiple editions with differing page numbers are available, is one that scholars have been dealing with successfully for a couple of centuries now. Where the entire work cannot be reprinted and annotated (as is the case with the vast majority of scholarly writings and studies), the reader can be directed to the appropriate passage by a combination of references to

specific editions and *quotations*, along with explicit discussions of the subject of the passage that will leave no doubt as to what is being discussed.

Porter is also dealing with the problem of annotating a book that he is not at liberty to republish and annotate by placing his comments at the bottom of the page on which the paragraph appears. The estate of Ayn Rand retains and jealously guards the rights to her works. But it is not at all clear that the way to deal with this problem is by numbering sentences.

If a second attempt is made at an annotation, however, there are a few essentials to which Porter should attend:

- (1) Get a proofreader and an editor. Grammatical errors (e.g., "it's" as the possessive instead of "its"; sentence fragments) and repeated spelling errors ("Aristotlean" instead of "Aristotelian") will be eliminated. The most nonconforming of individualists realizes that conventional language usage is very helpful in arguments. Logical reasoning proceeds by revealing one's understanding of the relation between the denotations of subject and predicate; we communicate our private reasoning to other people by making subject and predicate clear to them through the use of grammatically complete sentences that contain both a subject and a predicate. Since Porter frequently eschews this form, his arguments; when they can be detected, are extremely difficult to follow.
- (2) Give a brief summary of the paragraph before starting to talk about it, and provide ample quotations or paraphrases to direct the reader's attention to the appropriate sentence.
- (3) Make the "chapters" readable as stand-alone copy.
- (4) Make it clear who is the speaker and whose opinion or comment is being offered.
- (5) Provide citations (page numbers, titles, authors, and edition numbers).
- (6) Footnote only when the coherence of the text would be adversely affected by the inclusion of the note's content.

Porter obviously has a lot to say, and if he would pull together

related thoughts there might be a few articles or even a book that could be gleaned from his notes. Reading the book in its current form, however, is a deeply frustrating activity. What has come to be known fondly in Objectivist social circles as “the crow epistemology” (the inability or difficulty of cognitive beings to hold more than a few concretes in mind at any given time) is a real phenomenon, and any writer needs to take it into account when presenting enormous amounts of information. By ignoring this fact of human cognition, Porter has made a difficult subject more difficult.

References

Rand, Ayn. 1990. *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*. 2nd edition. Edited by Harry Binswanger and Leonard Peikoff. New York: NAL Books.