

Philosophy

Nyquist Contra Rand

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Ayn Rand Contra Human Nature

Greg S. Nyquist

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Let me begin by announcing what a treat it was to read this work. The author, who is described on the back cover as a freelance writer, has a clear and engaging style that made this book a page turner for me. In fact, it has a narcotic quality about it. I kept turning the pages instead of thinking critically. It required a real effort to slow down and assess Nyquist's logic and argumentation, especially in the face of his dripping sarcasm and repetitive name-calling. One must ignore those factors in order to assess this book on its merits, because he has enough arguments that prevent this book from degenerating into a mere screed.

Unfortunately, his writing style is not complemented by much organizational skill. Let me give two examples from chapters five and six respectively. On pages 209–21 of chapter five he announces the project that he will develop in the next two (or maybe three) sections, but this announcement is actually followed by nine numbered sections, the first two of which have no title, while the last seven sport italicized titles. Then on page 223, immediately preceding section three, he announces what he will do in the next four sections, but the text contains not four but seven more sections. And there is no section 8! After section 7, titled "Honesty is the best policy," we proceed directly to section 9, "Sex as metaphysical."

Chapter six is even worse. After telling us on page 276 that he will divide the chapter into four sections, the text is actually numbered and titled as follows:

- (1) The Objectivist Politics
- (2) The practical viability of individual rights
- (2) [Sic] Class-circulation [Not announced on page 276]
- (3) Capitalism
- (4) Freedom
- (1) Social Conditions
- (2) Untitled

I think what he meant to outline was the following:

- (1) The Objectivist Politics
- (2) The practical viability of individual rights
- (3) Class-circulation
- (4) Capitalism
- (5) Freedom
 - (i) Social Conditions
 - (ii) Objectivist strategies

Before I look at the eight chapters, I want to say something about the introduction. On page xii, he states his purpose in writing this book:

As I will seek to demonstrate over the course of this book, Rand's philosophy of Objectivism is open to many serious objections. Rand was a surprisingly sloppy and even maladroit thinker who apparently believed that matters of fact can be determined by the manipulation of logical and rhetorical constructions. Indeed, some of the most important doctrines in her philosophy, such as her theories of human nature and value, are based on nothing more than a mere play on words. . . . What is most astonishing about Rand is not that she made errors, . . . but that she made stupid errors—the kind of errors philosophers make when they are too precipitous in their judgments and haven't stopped to really think things through.

But don't get the impression that he has nothing good to say about

Rand. He regards her "as an important and perhaps even a great thinker" (xiii–xiv). But after reading the book, I came away with the exact opposite impression. On page xvii, he writes that Rand is "wrong about the nature of man, about the role of philosophical ideas in history, about the validity of induction, about the absolute objectivity of values, about the feasibility of laissez-faire capitalism, and about the nature of romanticism; and she is confused about philosophical idealism, the nature of consciousness, the relation between ideas and the things they represent in reality, the psychology of altruism, and the issue of a benevolent versus a malevolent sense of life." How much remains for her to be a great thinker about?

As to Nyquist's method, on page xxix he tells us that he does not have access to Rand's mind and so he will "judge her entirely by her writings." But he immediately begins to focus on her intentions (the word occurs twice on page xxix alone) and constantly tells us what she is consciously thinking as well as what her subconscious motives are.

Next, he writes that he is "content to allow Rand and her disciples to define their terms in any way they see fit, provided that I am granted the same liberty in my criticism of Objectivism" (xxix). But how is this to work in practice? If Rand can define man anyway she chooses and Nyquist can do the same, how do we know that they are referring to the same entity? Rand may define man as a rational animal, but if Nyquist defines man as an instinct-driven power luster, then how can we determine who is right? And is this even a question of right or wrong? Since both terms may refer to beings that actually exist, how can this dispute be adjudicated? Won't they be talking at cross-purposes? Given his stated allegiance to Popper, he should simply stop at the clause before the comma, i.e., let Rand define her terms anyway she wants, and see what happens from there. But his proviso seems to make communication quite beside the point.

Let's move on to chapter one, which contains Nyquist's critique of Rand's theory of human nature. Nyquist begins by chiding Rand for not including philosophical anthropology as one of the major branches of philosophy. He goes on to recall a distinction that he had introduced in the preface between two "conceptions of human

nature: the utopian and the naturalistic" (2). He lists the following characteristics of the utopian: "The utopian blames evil, not on man, but on environmental factors, such as unjust social conditions, abusive parents, or an improper or pernicious education" (2). He then characterizes Rand as "utopian to the core" (3). But anyone familiar with Rand's writings knows that she blames man for the evil he commits. She regarded all forms of determinism as anti-Objectivist. Where Nyquist got his notion I cannot say.

He concludes the section by saying that Rand believed that "[b]y changing man's ideas, . . . she could . . . change man's nature" (3). But she constantly tells us that we cannot change the fact that we are volitionally rational beings. (See the reference to *Atlas Shrugged* below.)

On page 9, he accuses Rand of committing the fallacy of difference. He claims that this fallacy occurs when one regards "only the qualities that differentiate a species from a genus [as] essential qualities . . ." But this is simply wrong. We don't try to differentiate a species from a genus, but from other species in a genus. What would it mean to differentiate man from animal? Man *is* an animal.

Nyquist makes a good point on page 10 when he views Rand's claim that "[e]verything we do and are proceeds from the mind" as a bit over the top. It leads to contradictory sounding statements about man, such as "*he must create himself*." Nyquist rightly asks, "how is it possible for an entity to create itself?"

Nyquist often refers to Rand's *Journals* or *Letters* as the sole basis for a given argument. I suppose he feels that anything she ever wrote is fair game. I tend to favor weighting the published writings more heavily than material she herself never saw fit to print. For example, I didn't like it when Heidegger in his *Nietzsche*, focused on Nietzsche's *The Will to Power*, a collection of unpublished notes, while virtually ignoring his published writings. I'm not against using unpublished material, but I think one should inform the reader that one is using unpublished material and downgrade their importance.

Let us consider one last topic from chapter one: free will. Nyquist claims that regarding man's primary choice as a first cause is tantamount to a collapse into the miraculous (19). Now one can

hardly discuss free will in all of its ramifications in a book review, but the Objectivist position is very close to that of Karl Popper, one of Nyquist's heroes. When Nyquist writes that "[u]nder such a view, human behavior becomes inexplicable and unpredictable" (23), I could not help recalling Popper saying precisely that vis-à-vis a Mozart symphony. Popper challenges anyone to try to predict the G minor symphony from antecedent causes. But if you can't do that, Popper (1988, 41) concludes that there is novelty in the world and much of what Mozart did was unpredictable, albeit not inexplicable.

Nyquist is also wrong when he argues: "Human beings are free, she declares, to adopt any sort of nature they please" (45). But Rand (1957, 939) actually said: "you are not free to escape from your nature." His assertion that we are free to adopt any nature we please simply does not have any basis in Rand's writings.

He then closes the chapter with the claim that "Rand's ideal society is nothing more than the puerile fabrication of a mind that has lost all connection with reality" (Nyquist 2001, 47).

Chapter two examines the Objectivist theory of history. "According to this theory, the course of history is primarily determined by one major factor: *philosophy*" (49). Nyquist disagrees with this claim: "If it is really true that in 'any historical period when men were free, it has always been the most rational philosophy which has won,' how is it that Kant's philosophy, which, as Rand puts it, 'closed the door of philosophy to reason,' ended up winning the battle of ideas during the very period of history (i.e., the Nineteenth Century) which Rand considered to the freest?" (59).

Objectivist epistemology is the topic of chapter three. I would agree with Nyquist that the theory should be called a "*theory of concept formation*, because that is the primary focus of the theory" (111). In this chapter and throughout the book, Nyquist accuses Rand of being "vague" and "indefinite." But I think he goes too far when he confounds semantics with syntax or form. Consider the following: "The great advantage of indefinite terms is that you can use them to prove anything you like" (150). But this is simply false. Nyquist uses the variable X to stand for an indefinite term, and then he constructs the following syllogism:

Reason = X

X = B

Therefore, Reason = B.

He concludes: "As long as X remains indefinite, we can use this syllogism to prove that reason is just about anything we please" (151). But consider the following syllogism:

Reason = X

B = X

Therefore, Reason = B

Here we have *not* proven that Reason = B, since we have failed to distribute our middle term, X—this despite the fact the X is just as indefinite in this syllogism as it was in the first. The difference between the first valid syllogism and the second invalid one is not the definiteness or indefiniteness of the term X, but rather the form of the syllogism. As everyone of my first year logic students know, AAA-1 is valid; AAA-2 is not. Indefiniteness is irrelevant to the validity of an argument.

But what would he have Rand do if not use logic? His reply is she should back up her "claim that *reason = B* with scientifically validated evidence" and this would settle the matter "once and for all" (150). Two points about this. First, he seems to be telling Rand what she *ought* to do; i.e., she *ought* to present scientific evidence. But this will not do if we are to believe Nyquist who a mere five pages later tells us: "The term *ought* is not compatible with the rigors of scientific thought" (155). So, ought we be scientific or not?

Second, he cannot, as a good Popperian, be serious about positive evidence being the end of the matter, even and especially a scientific matter. If one claims that all swans are white and one produces a white swan, or a thousand white swans, as evidence for the claim, is that the end of the matter? Popper built a career on the importance of falsifiability. Has Nyquist forgotten this fact?

Nyquist closes chapter three with an examination of Rand's position on certainty. He states that "one of Rand's most outrageous

... claims" is "that certainly is possible" (103). I take this to mean that certainty is not possible. Imagine my surprise when on page 172, he tells us that certainty is possible after all. Here are his words: "the only time we can be certain about a theory is when we have discovered evidence refuting it." But is theory testing the only time we can be certain? How about sentence refutations? If I claim that there is a naked woman in my bedroom and upon entering the bedroom I find no naked women about, am I not only certain that there are no naked women in my bedroom, but also that my senses did not deceive me, and that I remember what women look like so that I don't confuse them with aardvarks, etc.? If he answers yes to these questions, then we seem to have a proliferation of certainties when just a few pages ago he has dismissed as "outrageous" the claim that certainty is possible.

In defense of Nyquist, I do think that Rand is really a radical here. Her notion of certainty is one that challenges the usual definition of knowledge as "justified true belief," a notion that probably goes back to Plato. This definition insists that in order to know P, P must be true. Rand, for better or worse, sees this as a variant of intrinsicism and rejects it. Therefore, and Nyquist is quite right about this, you can know P, yet P may be false. But this should not bother a man who claims he will let Rand define her terms anyway she chooses.

After exposing Rand's concept of "contextual certainty," he asks what is the value of such a definition of certainty? To concretize this problem, Nyquist asks: Would a skydiver "give a fig" if you told him that you, the parachute packer, were "contextually certain" his chute would open? He thinks not. He thinks that what the skydiver wants is a "guarantee that the parachute will open" (177; emphasis mine). To focus on the word "guarantee" is to highlight and get at Rand's point, that there are no epistemic guarantees in life. God could guarantee that the chute will open if He existed, but alas, He does not. This is why Rand thinks such a quest smacks of intrinsicism. Since she is an Objectivist, this move is not open to her.

But let's press this issue. What good is contextual certainty? Nyquist sees no value in it at all. But I would suggest that if I'm the

skydiver, there is a difference between a chute that has been conscientiously packed, and one that has been shoddily packed. If I ask my packer, "Are you certain the chute will open?" and he replies, "what are you asking me for? I was drunk when I packed it," I would be worried. By contrast, if he says, "I checked it twice and so did my boss" and I know that he is telling the truth, that is about the best I can hope for. And surely there is a life and death difference between the two packers. Someone who does the best that is humanly possible is to be preferred to someone who doesn't "give a fig." This is the value of contextual certainty. It's the only certainty about the empirical that we humans can get. Descartes' dream is precisely that, a dream.

If one has any doubt as to how positivistic Nyquist is, one has only to read the opening paragraphs of chapter four on the theory of metaphysics. I felt like I was back in the middle of the last century during the heyday of logical positivism. He writes that "there is no word in any language that I detest more than the term *metaphysics*" (180). And just like the positivists of old, he commits the same self-referential fallacies, i.e., he does metaphysics. For example, on page 183 he writes: "According to my philosophy [metaphysics!], facts come first." If this doesn't remind you of the opening of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, the most beloved book of the Vienna Circle, then you don't know much about twentieth-century philosophy. For readers who enjoy self-referential fallacies, I highly recommend this chapter.

But what about Objectivist metaphysics? In this chapter, unlike the earlier ones, Nyquist seems to have ignored parts of the Objectivist corpus. This is particularly obvious in his examination of the concept of self-evidence. First, he tells us that the concept is "scandalously vague" but since he waives that objection, I shall also. Then, instead of doing what he said he was going to do on page xxix—letting Rand define her own terms—he ignores her and writes, "if it has any meaning at all, [self-evidence] must refer only to those things which the self has first-hand experience of" (192). Contrast that with what Rand (1957, 965) says about the self-evident, to wit: it "defeats its opponents by the fact that they have to accept it and

use it in the process of any attempt to deny it." The self-evident cannot be denied or escaped. This is not original with Rand and goes back to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, but it is the meaning she uses. Rather than do what he said he was going to do and let Rand define her own terms, Nyquist ignores her explications, imputes his own meanings to her and then bashes his own poorly constructed straw man.

In his attack on Rand's view of causality as the application of identity to the action of entities, he retorts: "If you want to know whether causality is valid, study the empirical word of facts. Only by *observing* the facts can you *know* what they are" (195; emphasis mine). He equates "observation" with "knowledge," a bit of empiricism that is both bad Rand and bad Popper. Rand would point out that most of human knowledge is conceptual and that you can't get it simply by "observing"—that observation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for conceptual knowledge.

Popper would be even more vituperative in remonstrating Nyquist about his replacing the divine God with the divine senses. For Popper, observation is not divine—everything is subject to refutation.

But even if observation were divine, and we tried to take Nyquist's advice on page 195 to simply observe the facts, by the time we get to page 201 he tells us that all we "directly perceive" are "images and feelings—and images and feelings do not constitute knowledge of the real world. . . . When I turn and look at the tree outside my window, what is fundamentally given and directly perceived by the mind is not the tree existing in time and space, but only an image of the tree which my mind, in its poetic fancy, has painted across the canvas of my consciousness." Is this not a *reductio* of Nyquist's position?

Nyquist ends the metaphysics chapter in a rather curious way. After spending pages telling us how vague and vacuous are the axioms of Objectivism, he quotes approvingly Santayana who writes "the world meantime is just as it is, has been what it has been, and will be what it will be" (203). True. But how is that different from the axiom of identity? Maybe I'm just one of "those uncritical persons who are most taken in by such piffle" as the "vacuous axiom

of identity" (204).

In chapter five, he turns to her theory of morality and degenerates into silliness. To appreciate how silly, consider the following:

Her thesis is that life is the ultimate value. She tries to prove this by arguing that the concept *value* is "genetically dependent" on the concept *life*. But what on earth can this mean? [Is he ignorant of the stolen concept fallacy?] Does Rand believe that concepts copulate with one another and engender offspring? If so, then Rand is guilty of committing one of the cardinal fallacies of philosophical ratiocination: she has reified her concepts into sexual entities. (212)

Any good dictionary would have helped Nyquist here. The biological meaning of "genetic" is not the only meaning, nor even the first, listed in either the OED or Webster's 3rd New International. What is Nyquist up to? Maybe he was just trying to be funny. But once he gets us laughing at silly counterarguments, will we not have a hard time taking him seriously?

Perhaps the best set of criticisms in the ethics chapter has to do with the virtue of honesty. Section (7) is titled "Honesty as the best policy" and runs from pages 258 to 265. The target in the entire section, however, is not Rand but Peikoff, who for some obscure reason Nyquist randomly calls "Leonard Peikoff," "Peikoff" and "Mr. Peikoff," the latter in ignorance of the fact the Peikoff has a Ph.D.

First, he attacks Peikoff for saying that there is an incompatibility between dishonesty and survival. Nyquist points out that this seems to be contradicted by the fact that "many dishonest individuals . . . have lived long and prosperous lives . . ." (258). Next, he points out that contrary to Peikoff's assertion that the dishonest man "wages war against reality," the con man usually "has a better grasp of the facts of reality than the honest fool whom he cheats and bamboozles" (259).

Finally, consider what Nyquist says in response to Peikoff's suggestion "that dishonesty is bad when it is used to 'obtain' a value, but justified when it is used to 'protect' one's values from criminals"

(263). He asks us to suppose "that an individual uses dishonest means to obtain a burglar alarm system for his home. Why would dishonesty in this situation necessarily be wrong?" Is Nyquist being too clever by a half or does he not make a good point? Honesty has always been a tricky virtue for Objectivists, especially when one remembers that one of the heroes of *Atlas*, Francisco d'Anconia, spends a good portion of the novel conning everyone, including his highest reverence, Dagny, yet this does not diminish him in our eyes.

Chapter six is a sustained attack on Rand's theory of politics. Nyquist is simply not willing to consider that in addition to descriptive political theory, there exists normative political theory. Most of what he says in this chapter is vitiated by his unwillingness to even consider the validity of the latter. Surely it is one thing to *describe* the politically sanctioned practice of clitorrectomy, another to *prescribe* this as a great way to raise one's daughter. Here again his positivism seems to blur his vision. Given this, he endeavors to "avoid any concern with what *ought* to be, preoccupying myself entirely with the problem of what *is*" (274). This causes him to totally misunderstand the logic of the social sciences versus the natural sciences. All social sciences are like the natural sciences in their descriptive parts—after Kepler discovered the elliptical orbits of the planets, he did not have to agonize over whether they ought to go round in circles.

But in the social sciences we do have more work to do after the descriptions are in. By their very nature, as the postulations of ideals, one cannot expect them to be actual. This means that they will deviate in part or in whole from what is the case. Given this, laissez-faire capitalism is more of a goal to be aimed at than anything that may actually be. This makes possible criticism of the status quo. If Rand is right and the nineteenth century approached nearer to this ideal than say, the twentieth or tenth centuries, then good for the nineteenth century and bad for the twentieth.

More persuasively, Nyquist refers to historians who seem to refute Rand's rose-colored picture of men like Vanderbilt and J. J. Hill. If this causes Objectivists to check their history as well as their premises, then so much the better. And I say this no matter who turns out to be right.

Nyquist's short chapter (329–44) on aesthetics is divided into three sections: (1) Sense of life; (2) Rand the philistine; (3) conclusion. He spends three pages on "sense of life," a concept Rand explored in two essays in *The Romantic Manifesto*. But he spends nine pages on "Rand the philistine"! This space allotment should come as no surprise from a man who tells us in the Introduction that his "fiercest antagonism towards Rand is inspired by her views on aesthetics. None of Rand's views on human nature, epistemology, history, ethics, or politics bother me [as much as her] shallow, uninformed, uncultivated, arrogant and thoroughly appalling" views on art (xxvii–xxviii). Nyquist fails to engage, in any serious way, Rand's philosophy of art. I would send the interested reader to Torres and Kamhi's *What Art Is* (2001), and for more chewing, to "The Aesthetics Symposium" in this very journal (Spring 2001, vol. 2, no. 2), which shows that Rand's theory is more than "merely a rationalization of her own idiosyncratic tastes . . ." (Nyquist 2001, 343).

In chapter eight, we get Nyquist's "Final thoughts": "No one who is well educated in these matters and is endowed with the ability to think critically can ever regard Objectivism as anything other than a mistake" (367). Obviously, I disagree. Ignoring the ad hominem form of Nyquist's sentence, I would merely point to the growing number of serious scholars on Rand who are well educated in these matters and have the ability to think critically. They have found much of value in the writing of Ayn Rand, so much so that any thoughtful book on her philosophy might well be titled, *Ayn Rand Pro Human Nature*.

References

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