

Seddon on Rand

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Ayn Rand, Objectivists, and the History of Philosophy

Fred Seddon

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In the introductory essay to *For the New Intellectual*, Rand (1961) sketches an interpretation of the history of Western philosophy as a deepening disaster, with her own views offered as a fresh start. Rand's own philosophical views should be assessed independently of her appraisal of other philosophers, since Rand may very well have misread them. If so, the viability of her positions remains an open question. What she would lose, however, is the eschatological tone with which she presents them.

That Rand was no historian is the burden of Fred Seddon's *Ayn Rand, Objectivists and the History of Philosophy*, and that claim is difficult to dispute. Why write a book arguing that Rand's interpretations of several key figures in the history of Western philosophy are at the very least problematic and at most irresponsible? Who is the audience here? Repeatedly, Seddon flies to the defense of the figure Rand (or occasionally, a follower of Rand) attacks by arguing that the figure held views that do not really differ from Rand's in important respects. Seddon uses this strategy with each figure he treats: Plato, Augustine, Hume, Kant, and Nietzsche. Thus, we learn that Plato revered reason, Augustine believed in free will, Hume embraced capitalism, Kant was something of an empiricist and Nietzsche embraced a this-worldly, antireligious ethic. This strategy does not appear to be merely internal criticism, nor is Seddon's tone ironic. Implicit in his procedure is the view that commitment to the essentials of Rand's system is the touchstone for truth. By this criterion, the figures prove more congenial than Rand's glosses on them would lead us to believe.

Since that criterion is unlikely to be one that scholars on any of these figures would embrace, apparently the book is written by an “Objectivist” for “Objectivists.” The book’s stylistic quirks suggest this, for Seddon (2003, 17) often makes exegetical points by reference to Rand’s fiction (for example, Plato’s *Meno* is described by comparing him to the fictional character “Peter Keating” in *The Fountainhead*). While this may promote a greater degree of exegetical caution in Objectivist historical scholarship, it does not contribute to our understanding of Rand herself (who is scarcely discussed except as an historian), or of the other figures under discussion. What is worse, Seddon’s interpretations of the figures in question are often questionable, or at the very least, partial and misleading.

The discussion of Plato is by far the strongest in the book, focusing on Platonic love, the doctrine of recollection and the theory of Forms. However, Seddon makes too much of the inscrutability of the dialogues as a source for Plato’s real commitments (it is unclear why Plato’s real but unknown commitments matter here, rather than those doctrines that readers have extracted from them). Seddon rightly stresses that Rand (or rather Allan Gotthelf) gets Plato’s views on love wrong, and rightly suggests that Rand’s own views are much closer to Plato’s than might at first appear. Seddon’s discussion of recollection is far more questionable (he suggests that Plato was not committed to the doctrine). The discussion of the Forms is less conclusive than Seddon seems to think, arguing only that the Forms do not exist in some distinct “Platonic heaven” apart from the physical world. However, he concedes that the Forms have a separate existence from the individuals that participate in them, and this suffices to suggest that Plato’s ontology is both extravagant and mysterious.

Seddon’s treatment of Augustine is limited to defending Augustine’s account of free will, his acceptance of the senses and his opposition to Academic skepticism. While these points are of interest, Rand’s conception of free will shares little in common with Augustine’s beyond their both licensing the attribution of moral responsibility. More important, it is Augustine’s opposition to Pelagius, who argued that moral perfection is possible, to which Rand

would most strenuously object, and on this issue, Seddon is silent.

Seddon's treatment of Hume is also a mixed bag. While he strives to reduce the distance between Rand and Hume on causality, he fails to come to grips with Hume's influential alignment of necessity with "relations of ideas" and contingency with "impressions." Whatever Rand's precise account of causality may be, clearly she rejects this alignment in favor of one that would have causal claims express necessary truths, something Hume must deny. What precisely Rand's view is, and whether it is the same as or different from Hume's view (it is almost certainly different), and whether it is defensible are questions Seddon's discussion fails to advance. Seddon, however, rightly sees Hume's rejection of a "soul pellet" conception of the self, known through introspection, as a rejection Rand would share. However, Seddon's treatment of Hume's defense of capitalism seriously misleads. Hume was a vigorous defender of capitalism, but Hume's view involves a theory of property rights as social conventions, whose only justification is utilitarian. Such a theory, however, is inadequate for a rational egoist (why should I care that my society does well, except insofar as I do well thereby?) and provides at best an unstable defense of *laissez faire* (if markets without redistribution conduce to general happiness, surely markets with some redistribution for the least well off would conduce to even more general happiness).

Seddon's defense of Kant from Randian misinterpretation encompasses both Kant's metaphysics and his ethics. Seddon tries to argue for an "empirical realist" interpretation of Kant that simply fails to come to grips with Kant's account of how a priori knowledge of natural necessities (in the first instance, the geometry of physical space) is possible. Once Kant's account comes into focus, it appears inescapable that Kant is in some sense committed to the thesis that the mind produces nature. Such a view is anathema to Rand, given her broad commitment to some sort of naturalism. It also fails to come to grips with Rand's own apparent commitment to mind-independent natural necessities, and thus her apparent affinities with rationalist metaphysics. Seddon's defense of Kantian ethics raises much subtler issues. Though Rand's published comments on Kant's

ethics contain outrageous distortions of Kant's views, a more nuanced picture emerges when we turn to Rand's letters, a picture that has much to recommend it (Rand 1995, 555–56).

Lastly, Seddon's defense of Nietzsche (from John Ridpath's criticisms) depends upon his broad acceptance of Walter Kaufmann's interpretation in *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (1950). Seddon is quite correct to distinguish Nietzsche's early views in the *Birth of Tragedy* from his mature positions. However, his suggestion that the *Birth of Tragedy* is not indebted in some fashion to Kant's contrast between phenomena and noumena is highly doubtful (see my *Nietzsche's Critiques* [2003] chapters two and three, for an extended discussion). Seddon's claim that Nietzsche's "perspectivism" owes nothing to Kant's thesis that "facts" are in some sense constructed by the mind is equally doubtful. And while Seddon is quite right to attribute to Nietzsche a virtue ethic that requires considerable self-discipline and reliance upon rationality, this is hardly incompatible with regarding Nietzsche as the advocate of social arrangements in which the interests of some are sacrificed to the interests of the "virtuous" elite (in Nietzsche's sense). Some of the most influential Nietzsche scholarship, for example, Brian Leiter's *Nietzsche on Morality* (2002), insists on this harsher Nietzsche.

Surely Seddon is right that the historical scholarship by Rand and her followers is seldom any less than irresponsible. However, this shortcoming is far from uncommon in the history of philosophy, and some of the very figures Seddon tries to rescue were guilty of quite a bit of it themselves. For example, it is ironic that Rand seems to have learned her Kant from reading Nietzsche's own far from fair or nuanced attacks on Kant. Intellectual blood sport seems even more prominent among the first rank, and really begins with Plato himself who, unlike John Ridpath, did not stop with quoting his adversaries out of context, but was not above literally putting words into their mouths. While none of this reflects especially well on the figures of the Western tradition, Rand's stature, in the end, should be assessed by a careful, charitable, yet critical account of her own views. By contrast, neither her originality nor her historian's integrity are or should be our primary interest, except to those who would rather

follow than learn from her.

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