

Questions About Answers

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Ayn Rand Answers: The Best of Her Q&A

Edited by Robert Mayhew

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In her biography *The Passion of Ayn Rand*, Barbara Branden (1986, 316) recalls that when she spoke publicly, the novelist-philosopher read verbatim from a handwritten script with little inflection and with a thick Russian accent, but “with the charismatic power of certainty. Her thoughts were new and intriguing to her audiences, her logic impeccable—her passionate conviction overwhelming in its force. No other modern writer has displayed a comparable capacity to generate intellectual excitement.”

Perhaps the appeal for some attendees was not much more than the thrill of seeing a controversial celebrity in the flesh. But many who came felt an overwhelming curiosity about her ideas, and how she would defend them in person. There was little risk of being treated to canned “talking points.” Though Rand visited certain themes often, her responses were typically bracing, and editor Robert Mayhew’s wide-ranging collection of Q&A shows just how vigorous and engaging she could be, and on how wide a range of subjects.

Even readers who have attended many of her talks will find much in *Ayn Rand Answers* that is new or at any rate only half-remembered. Mayhew includes material not only from lectures at universities and the Ford Hall Forum but also from radio interviews, the fiction-writing course she conducted for a small group in 1958, and the course on Objectivism taught by Leonard Peikoff in 1976. These are

organized into the following categories: “Politics and Economics,” “Ethics,” “Metaphysics and Epistemology,” and “Esthetics, Art, and Artists.” One would have to be quite a relentless devotee of things Randian to have already heard most of this material on the various recordings of Rand’s appearances that have been produced. The jacket copy tells us that the answers shed light on both Rand’s ideas and Rand herself—which is true enough (though not as much light as could have been shed).

Politics is a frequent topic. Speaking in 1970: “I didn’t expect much from Nixon; I was still disappointed” (Rand 2005, 59). On Nixon’s foreign policy (1971): “After his disgraceful performance at the UN, I’d say an office boy from Monaco could defeat Nixon in negotiations, let alone the Chinese Communists” (71). About Nixon’s vice president, Spiro Agnew (1970): “He won’t accomplish much. But for the moment, it’s wonderful to hear somebody saying something that’s not mealy-mouthed, apologetic, and middle-of-the-road” (10). Senator James Buckley (1976) “is the Trojan horse out to destroy any hope this country ever had of a return to capitalism” (67). She thought his electoral opponent, Daniel Moynihan, to be at least “semi-decent” by comparison, albeit a liberal. In the 1976 presidential election, Gerald Ford lost to Carter “because he didn’t say anything” (69). Ronald Reagan (1976) was “a cheap Hollywood ham” who had deliberately undermined Ford’s chances (70–71). “Ladies and gentlemen, should that monster succeed in 1980—and I hope to be dead by then, because I don’t want to see such a day—I damn any of you who vote for him. (I’m speaking of moral damnation.)” (71).

Was there any practical alternative to such political leadership? Not that Rand could see. Third-party offerings did not impress her. She was famously scornful of libertarians, small- and big-l, whom she accused of pragmatism, of “plagiarizing” and distorting her ideas, of giving capitalism a bad name.

Could she support the Libertarian Party’s presidential candidate? “I’d rather vote for Bob Hope, the Marx Brothers, or Jerry Lewis—they’re not as funny as John Hospers and the Libertarian Party. If Hospers takes away ten votes from Nixon (which I don’t think he’ll do), it would be a moral crime” (72). Hospers and Rand had been

friends once, engaging in an extensive philosophical dialogue and correspondence; but that was all in the past now. What did she think about the LP's 1976 candidate, Roger MacBride? "My answer should be 'I don't think of him.' There's nothing to hear. . . . I dislike Reagan and Carter; I'm not too enthusiastic about the other candidates. But the worst of them are giants compared to anybody who would attempt something as unphilosophical, low, and pragmatic as the Libertarian Party. It is the last insult to ideas and philosophical consistency" (73). She "emphatically" disagreed with the ideas of Jane Fonda, "and more emphatically than I can say without going into obscenities—which I disapprove of—or breaking this microphone" (80). But libertarians "are perhaps the worst political group today, because they can do the most harm to capitalism, by making it disreputable. I'll take Jane Fonda over them" (74). The reader may be forgiven for detecting a note of iconoclasm.

We can only speculate how she might have assessed the various strategies and rationales for the war on Islamic terrorists. Certainly, though a strong proponent of national defense, Rand did not offer any blanket defense of American interventionism or foreign aid. But she was also a confirmed basher of America-bashers. She opposed the war on Vietnam—and also opposed many who protested it. And she had no sympathy for the notion, espoused by some leftists and some libertarians, that to fight a war against even an aggressive dictatorship must be morally wrong in itself because of the likelihood that innocents will be killed. Speaking at the Ford Hall Forum in 1972, Rand argued that "if people put up with dictatorship—as some do in Soviet Russia, and some did in Nazi Germany—they deserve what their government deserves. Our only concern should be who started the war. Once that's established, there's no need to consider the 'rights' of that country, because it has initiated the use of force and therefore stepped outside the principle of rights" (94).

A few years later, when asked about the morality of responding militarily if the Soviet Union starts a war of aggression, given that some of its citizens are opposed to the communist regime, she said: "If we go to war with Russia, I hope that the 'innocent' are destroyed along with the guilty" (95). At least one critic has professed to find in

this statement a glaring contradiction to her opposition to terrorism (intentional slaughtering of innocents in the name of advancing some political goal).¹ But it's clear from the whole of Rand's answer that she was not suggesting that a country justified in going to war should specifically target innocents as some kind of independent end, but rather that the goal of defeating the enemy ought not be sacrificed to the goal of avoiding the deaths of those innocents: "There aren't many innocent people there; those who do exist are not in the big cities, but mainly in concentration camps. Nobody has to put up with aggression, and surrender his right of self-defense, for fear of hurting somebody else, guilty or innocent. When someone comes at you with a gun, if you have an ounce of self-esteem, you answer with force, never mind who he is or who's standing behind him. If he's out to destroy you, you owe it to your own life to defend yourself" (95).

Politics is the most often treated subject, but far from the only one. Rand regularly fielded queries on everything from metaphysics (including an interesting entry on the philosophical sin of "rewriting reality") and epistemology to the art of Maxfield Parrish. A single word is not much to go on, but her comment on this last ("Trash") (225) seems to exemplify Rand's much-noted intolerance when it comes to matters of aesthetic preference—springing from an apparent if largely implicit view that, setting aside issues of craft, our responses to art can be gauged by reference to some definite and readily accessible objective aesthetic-ethical-psychological standard, yielding definite and portentous moral-psychological implications. But a careful reading of *The Romantic Manifesto*, and the comments in *Ayn Rand Answers*, shows that this is not quite her position, or at any rate that there are tensions in her ideas about what is revealed by aesthetic response.

Rand's term for a person's deepest, often unspoken feelings about life and the world around him—what she defined as "an emotional, subconsciously integrated appraisal of man and existence"—is "sense of life" (Rand 1975, 25). Considering whether a novelist need know the sense of life of his characters ("impossible"), Rand adds that it is rare to fully know the sense of life of another person, except perhaps that of a loved one. Moreover: "You cannot *judge* the sense of life of

another person; that would be psychologizing. Judge their philosophical convictions, not whether their feelings match their ideas. That's not for you to judge; it's of no relevance to you" (186). This is a reasonable stance. But we also have testimony from many who knew Rand that sense of life could indeed become a sticking point with her. She did *judge* the sense of life of her friends, as manifested for example by artistic preferences that clashed with her own. Barbara Branden (1986, 242–43, 278) was too partial to the novels of Thomas Wolfe. Allan and Joan Mitchell Blumenthal were too partial to Rembrandt and Mozart (386–87). What would she have thought of someone partial to the “trash” of Maxfield Parrish? Some in the audience probably wondered about that.

In public, Rand may not have openly opined about how corrupt the “sense of life” of a questioner must be.² But it is not only the sense of life of another that one cannot reasonably judge on the fly; one also cannot infer very much about the philosophical convictions, let alone motives for them, of a person one has just met—especially a person about whom the only thing one knows is that he has just asked a particular question. Yet Rand's assessments from the podium of the psycho-philosophical condition of an inquirer could sometimes be, shall we say, less than placidly agnostic if she took offense at what was being said to her. Sometimes her ire was justified. But she could also read too much into a question, assume too much about the person asking it—as if logical implications and psychological implications were fungible units of the same stock.

In *The Passion of Ayn Rand*, Barbara Branden recalls that at the lectures sponsored by the Nathaniel Branden Institute (the Objectivism-selling organization that closed its doors in 1968), students eventually “either ceased asking [Rand] questions, or framed them with such care that they became meaningless” (329). Margit von Mises was among those who testified to how impatiently Rand could lash out at a questioner. Mayhew, for his part, offers many instances of Rand exhibiting greater tolerance, poise, and civility than her reputation as a flayer of nay-sayers might suggest. But although *Ayn Rand Answers* thus serves as corrective for a too-critical view of Rand, it also carefully omits any plain examples of the woman who could

lash out at a questioner at the drop of a hat. Yet even in this book we see hints of her tendency to impute more to the questioner than could possibly be justified by the question. A student whose inquiry equates “man’s survival” with “mankind’s survival” is told: “The questioner is so thoroughly on a collectivist premise that when he hears a pro-man moral code, he assumes it must refer to a collective: mankind” (108). Maybe, but it’s a bit much to conclude from a single formulation. On the other hand, some of her slams are too over the top to cause any lost sleep: Did any of her listeners really worry that they might be “morally damned” if they voted for Reagan in 1980? If such declarations were the worst one ever got from Rand, there wouldn’t be much to argue about with respect to her public temperament.

Showing Ayn Rand only at her best makes sense to an extent; it’s a “best of” collection, after all. You’d expect stutters and stumbles of various kinds to end up on the cutting-room floor. The editor notes that most of his editing consisted of cutting or line-editing, for purposes of clarity having to do with the differences between polished writing and extemporaneous speech. But Mayhew also admits “that some (but not much) of my editing aimed to clarify wording that, if left unaltered, might be taken to imply a viewpoint that she explicitly rejected in her written works” (Rand 2005, x). This latter purpose seems very dubious; it’s second-guessing whether Rand really meant to say what she was really saying, based simply on the fact that her ideas, like those of any human being, were not articulated with perfect consistency throughout every moment of her life. If we readers are to judge fairly whether she misspoke or perhaps changed her mind in a particular instance, we need to see the text. The editor’s opinion could then go in a footnote or brackets.³

Also problematic is the matter of Q&A omitted altogether because its inclusion would not foster the portrait of the speaker that the editor wishes to foster. Giving us a more complete picture of Rand on the podium would not have impaired the interest of the book or the ability of the reader to arrive at a reasonable perspective on Rand. But over the past quarter century, those assigned to prepare authoritative editions of her posthumous works have chronically Photoshopped her image through subtle and not-so-subtle tweaking

of the written and spoken record. They—and Rand’s Estate—just don’t trust the reader to be objective about Rand and/or her ideas if in possession of all the relevant facts.

One such fact is that Rand was not always calm. Sometimes she was stormy. But it is not only our idea of Rand’s temperament that suffers from this kind of censorious editing. It’s our idea of her ideas. Consider Rand’s notion, echoed by some followers, that homosexuality per se is immoral—an opinion that Nathaniel Branden (1983; 1996, 1, 3), Chris Matthew Sciabarra (2003) and others have reported has had painful consequences among many inspired by Rand who are a) gay; and b) either accept Rand’s (never publicly explained) opinion of the moral status of homosexuality, or at least are beset by those in their social circle who do accept it. This opinion cannot be found in her published work (though there’s a not-favorable allusion to “sensitive” homosexuals in *The Romantic Manifesto*); it was for the most part transmitted orally. But in the pages of *Ayn Rand Answers*, what we hear from her on the subject is only the following: “All laws against homosexual acts should be repealed. I do not approve of such practices or regard them as necessarily moral, but it is improper for the law to interfere with a relationship between consenting adults. Laws against corrupting the morals of minors are proper, but adults should be completely free” (18).

Well, this could have been worse, and the phrase “necessarily moral” might even suggest that Rand did not consider homosexuality to be immoral in itself. Maybe it is only the over-sensitive commie gay or under-sensitive commie lesbian who in Rand’s view definitely sinks into moral-sexual depravity.

But this escape hatch is snapped shut by a public exchange on the question noted by Sciabarra in his monograph *Ayn Rand, Homosexuality, and Human Liberation*. The questioner had heard that Rand considered “all forms of homosexuality immoral,” and wanted to know why. Rand answers: “Because it involves psychological flaws, corruptions, errors, or unfortunate premises. But there is a psychological immorality at the root of homosexuality. Therefore, I regard it as immoral, but I do not believe that the government has the right to prohibit it. It is the privilege of any individual to use his sex life in

whichever way he wants it, that's his legal right provided he is not forcing it on anyone. And therefore the idea that it's proper among consenting adults is the proper formulation, legally. Morally, it is immoral. And more than that, if you want my really sincere opinion, it's disgusting" (Sciabarra 2003, 7–8). Sciabarra notes that Rand's answer "was greeted by laughter and a round of applause (though the moderator scolded *one* person who hissed)" (8).

You won't find Rand's opinion that homosexuality is immoral and disgusting in Mayhew's book. But why not, since that public statement is the most direct one we have of Rand's view on a subject certainly of great interest to many of her readers? Why publish only her comments focusing on the legal aspect, with the merely oblique reference to the moral aspect? It is true that one can't include everything Rand publicly said in such a collection—doing so would make it unwieldy and reduce the market for it. But that's not why this particular answer is omitted. Nor does Mayhew as editor stress political concerns to the exclusion of moral and cultural ones. Most likely, the declaration didn't make the cut because it is embarrassing. Thirty years after the audience laughed and applauded, such a sweeping condemnation of the pursuit of sexual happiness by gays and lesbians could not have been included without some kind of distancing editorial comment. But no critical observations about Rand or her ideas have ever appeared in any Rand-Estate-sanctioned book interpreting or expanding her oeuvre. This writer would prefer that Rand hadn't believed what she believed about homosexuality. But better to have said what she believed than to lie about it. And better to report fully what she believed and said about it than to mangle it by omission.

I am glad to see this volume. It's vintage Rand. She is biting, witty, authoritative, eloquent, provocative, engaging, illuminating. She opines informatively and energetically about everything from Galt's Gulch to axioms to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to Ralph Nader, Robert Nozick, and Milton Friedman. There are at least a dozen or so comments on such topics as altruism, sense of life, foreign policy, and free will that improve our understanding of Rand's most basic philosophical ideas—ideas that have exerted an ever-growing impact

on American culture and individual lives. *Ayn Rand Answers* is a fascinating and vital work. But it's also part whitewash.

Notes

1. See Roderick T. Long's (2005) scrupulously obtuse essay, "A View to a Kill."
2. In a comment distributed by email on 6 March 2006 after this review was drafted, Robert Hessen, responding to ill-founded criticisms of the portrayal of Rand in *The Passion of Ayn Rand*, attests that Rand often did lash out unreasonably at questioners. "As an eyewitness to many such outbursts, I can verify that Ms. Branden's claim was accurate and not exaggerated. I remember many occasions when Rand pounced, assuming that a question was motivated by hostility to her or her ideas, or that the questioner was intellectually dishonest or irrational, or had evil motives, or was her 'enemy.' The key, I believe, to Rand's reaction was an assumption that every question was unambiguously clear, so she never asked anyone to clarify or rephrase a question that appeared to be critical." Hessen, an historian, was a longtime associate of Rand.
3. In a blistering comment at his blog page published 4 March 2006, after this review was drafted, George Reisman observes that thanks to the cloaked nature of Mayhew's editing of Rand's spoken words when he deems them to have clashed with her written words, "[w]e have no way of knowing if what was involved was a mere act of misspeaking, or something of real significance, possibly representing a change in her position on a subject. We cannot know if Ayn Rand was addressing a complexity in her position that was too subtle for Prof. Mayhew to follow and that he mistakenly inferred a contradiction of her published position when in fact there was none. Whatever the explanation may be, the reader will never know. . . . [W]ith the most cavalier disrespect for his readers' independence and powers of judgment, Prof. Mayhew not only does not provide the transcripts necessary to know what Ayn Rand actually said, but he does not even tell us which particular answers of Ayn Rand he has altered in this way nor how many answers he has altered in this way. The result is that a reader who has had no first-hand experience with Ayn Rand's answers can never be sure if what he is reading on any given page [are] the views actually expressed by Ayn Rand in a Q&A or some distortion of Ayn Rand's views invented by Prof. Mayhew." Reisman, an economist, was a longtime associate of Rand.

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