

Afterwords

America the Philosophical: Carlin Romano on Ayn Rand

Stephen Hicks
Rockford College

Over the years I've enjoyed and learned from many of Carlin Romano's articles in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. He can do good philosophical reporting. So I picked up his latest book, *America the Philosophical*, and I was disappointed.¹ Romano's thesis is that the United States is a nation of vigorous philosophical activity and—contrary to the critics who portray it as an intellectual wasteland of complacency and platitudes—a culture that takes philosophy seriously. It's a great topic, and I agree with Romano's thesis. First impressions matter, however, and the first section of *America the Philosophical* I read was the eight pages on philosopher-novelist Ayn Rand, a case study in how not to write about other philosophers (pp. 359-66).

Here's how to write a book about other philosophers:

- (1) Present their positions.
- (2) At least *sketch* the arguments for the positions they take.
- (3) Criticize those positions when necessary by making counter-arguments.

Here's how *not* to write about other philosophers:

- (4) Ignore the academic literature about the philosopher and use only critical remarks gleaned from amateurs or non-philosopher professionals.
- (5) Focus more on gossip about the philosopher's person rather than the person's philosophy.
- (6) Identify the philosopher's views in passing with those of contemporary politicians whom you despise.

¹ Carlin Romano, *America the Philosophical* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012).

On (1): Of the perhaps sixty major issues a philosopher can take a position on to define his or her worldview, Romano mentions perhaps four of Rand's positions. Easily more than 95% of Romano's Rand is about her biography and some indicators of her cultural impact. Why she has had that impact, though, is left a mystery since we don't learn about the positions that have driven it.

On (2): Romano does not present a single argument of Rand's in eight pages of discussion about her.

On (3): Since he presents none of Rand's arguments, Romano naturally makes no counter-arguments against them, though his disdain for Rand is clear. Once, he cites Ludwig Wittgenstein in questioning Rand's claim that words should be used with clear meanings.

On (4): Romano mentions works about Rand written by a journalist, an English professor, a political scientist, and a pair of high-school teachers, but none of the many books published on Rand by professional philosophers, for example, Tara Smith, Allan Gotthelf, Leonard Peikoff, Tibor Machan, Douglas Rasmussen, Douglas Den Uyl, David Kelley, and Harry Binswanger.²

On (5): Romano has read some of the colorful biographies of Rand, and he quotes many of the insults traded by her admirers and detractors. What philosophical issues drove the disagreements that led to the insults? Who knows?

On (6): Rand was an atheist and hostile to social conservative politics, but Romano blithely identifies her views with those of a recent theistic social conservative president. Rand opposed central banking and government monopolies, but Romano sees no disconnection between such opposition and the policies of a recent chief central banker and money monopolist.

Rand's work is one of my areas of scholarly expertise, so I sometimes use other authors' presentations of her views as a bellwether of their objectivity. Mess up there, and I'm disinclined to read further (many books, little time, etc.).

² See, e.g., Allan Gotthelf and James G. Lennox, eds., *Metaethics, Egoism, and Virtue: Studies in Ayn Rand's Normative Theory* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010); Tara Smith, *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics: The Virtuous Egoist* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Robert Mayhew, ed., *Essays on Ayn Rand's Atlas Shrugged* (Lexington, KY: Lexington Books, 2009); David Kelley, *The Contested Legacy of Ayn Rand* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000); Tibor Machan, *Ayn Rand* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2000); Allan Gotthelf, *On Ayn Rand* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Philosophers Series, 2000); Douglas Den Uyl, *The Fountainhead* (Toronto: Twayne, 1999); Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (New York: Meridian, 1993); Harry Binswanger, *The Biological Basis of Teleological Concepts* (Irvine, CA: Ayn Rand Institute Press, 1990); and Douglas Rasmussen and Douglas Den Uyl, eds., *The Philosophic Thought of Ayn Rand* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1984).

But maybe the author has good stuff to say about other philosophers. Romano's short sections on Charles Sanders Pierce and Cornel West are better, since he actually states their views and arguments. He devotes much sympathetic space to Susan Sontag, and his extended discussion of Richard Rorty is the best part of the book.

So why doesn't he do likewise for Rand? Yes, Rand is unorthodox. Yes, she is radical, often hard to categorize, provocative, sometimes outrageous, and controversial. But so are the other influential philosophers in history. That goes with the territory, and a competent professional philosopher should be able to handle it.³

³ This article is a revised version of an entry that first appeared on Stephen Hicks's blog as "Carlin Romano's *America the Philosophical*," August 22, 2012, accessed online at: <http://www.stephenhicks.org/2012/08/22/carlin-romanos-america-the-philosophical/>.

