

On Rand as Philosopher

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I want to say a few words that will be elaborated on more fully by my colleagues about why Ayn Rand is worth studying. This is different issue from why she is influential. She appeals to people for lots of reasons, but what is of concern here is the academic question—why is she worth spending any serious time reading as a possible significant thinker in our era. I see the matter in three categories, starting with the broadest:

Rand has a remarkable knack of being insightful intellectually. I think that sometimes she fails to fill in some gaps which then need to be filled in by others, but she has an intellectual vision. It perhaps is a coherent one, but it is certainly interesting in the sense that Rand has put together what people would not normally have conjoined, and she has revived an interest in things that people (at least early on) were moving away from.

In epistemology, for example, Ayn Rand revived an interest in classical realism. She has also, as I think my colleagues will say in ethics and politics, moved us to think about a defensible liberalism from the point of view of an Aristotelian ethic as opposed to a modern ethic. In other words, she has managed to integrate things that were not thought of by others in the contemporary era. How successful she is at doing this is yet to be determined, but those of us who have taken, and do take, an interest in her thought see that she has set some directions for study and research that are new and different and interesting. So her vision is there.

The second thing I want to say is that Ayn Rand has done what Contemporary Ethics has failed to do, and I think her accomplishment here is part of her appeal to people. It certainly was part of her appeal to me when I first started reading her. What Rand has done is to give a moral defense for one's own actions and one's interest and one's own projects and one's own pursuits. This is not a practical defense. It's not a defense which says, "Well, there is nothing we can do about self-interest so we'll have to

let it go on." It is not a defense which says we need self-interest because society is better off if we give it some range. It is not a defense which says self-interest is fine, but there are really many higher and more important values. Rand's theory is actually an attempt to give a moral justification for why it is right and of paramount importance for you and I to pursue our own lives and our own interests. And this is unique. The typical ethical systems that people use—utilitarianism and deontology in their various guises—have a very difficult time doing this.

Kant, for example, does talk about duties to self, but it is almost like an afterthought. It is as if he needs to worry about it and not because it's central to the system itself. And while utilitarians appear to give the self a central location in the theory, since they begin with the individual, the individual is in the end completely subsumed by others. So I believe in ethics Rand has, more than anyone else, provided us with a moral defense for a primary focus on one's own actions. She does it, by the way, without seeing human beings as bundles of desires pursuing one satisfaction after another, but as seekers of meaning guided by reason.

Finally, what I think is also important and interesting about Rand is that she gives a positive defense of liberty. Giving a positive defense may not sound particularly remarkable, but when you think about it, most of the classical defenses of liberalism have been essentially negative. We are ignorant; therefore, the state cannot really guide us, because no one possesses the wisdom to do so. We are sinners; therefore, we cannot really depend on the virtuous to rule. We need to allow certain vices of self-interest to take place in order to gain the goodies that doing so allows. I am not denying whatever truth there may be in these positions. What I am suggesting though is that Rand at least takes an additional step, if not points in whole new direction. She says, "It's not just that we need liberal orders because there are these failings in human nature; we need liberal orders because it is the appropriate positive political expression of what is best in human nature."

I think that is a unique defense. It is an interesting and unique way of going about defending liberalism. And again, I think part of her appeal is saying that we do not have to just settle for liberalism because we cannot have a society of angels. Her position grows out of an affirmation of human existence. And again, whatever one finally judges about these views, I think they are interesting intellectually. They are worth following through. They are worth debating. They are worth discussing. And for that reason I think Rand is going to remain an interesting, controversial, and important figure for some time to come.