

# A REBEL ENTERS ACADEMIA

Review of

*A Companion to Ayn Rand*

Allan Gotthelf & Gregory Salmieri (eds.)

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Providing a range of alternative perspectives often proves fruitful to philosophical discussions. A review of Blackwell's *A Companion to Ayn Rand* – devoted to the founder of what is called *Objectivism* – printed in a magazine issue dedicated to the discussion of *Relativism*, is thus not intended as an ironic act, but rather as an element broadening one's horizon.

Blackwell's Companion to Ayn Rand is an eagerly awaited philosophical companion to one of the most influential and controversial philosophers of the 20th century. Well, at least among a certain group of thinkers it is awaited. As a matter of fact, many – not to say most – academic philosophers, would not only reject the claim that she is one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th century, but would also discard her as a serious philosopher all together. Why this disparaging view on Rand's philosophy among academicians?

Is it Rand's unconventional method of partly conveying her philosophy through best-selling novels, such as *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead*, that makes academicians question her role as a philosopher? Considering that several philosophers throughout the years – Voltaire, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, just to mention a few – have conveyed their philosophy through novels and plays, this seems to be an unlikely reason. Could it be that Rand's philosophical values, her right-leaning political philosophy, makes her philosophy largely ignored within an often left-leaning academia? Hopefully not, as that would represent a thoroughly *unphilosophical* attitude.

A possible explanation – and probably also a consequence – of Rand's condition as an “outsider” within much of academia is a general misunderstanding of her overall philosophy. For instance, a well-known characteristic of Rand's Objectivist philosophy is its defense of *egoism*. It is indeed the case that egoism is at the core of Objectivism. However, Rand's egoism should not be confused with *egocentrism*, which is something different. Besides serving as a thorough introduction to the

most central aspects of Rand's wide-ranging philosophy, the key achievement of Blackwell's *Companion* to Ayn Rand is that it places Rand's philosophy in a philosophical context and thus clears up many potential misinterpretations of her philosophy.

## The Moral of Selfishness

A striking aspect of Rand's philosophy is the extent to which it is applicable to everyday reality. Thus, reading the *Companion* to Rand's Objectivist philosophy almost forces the attentive reader to critically think through many norms and values that many take for granted. Perhaps most known is her rejection of altruism and defense of ethical egoism.

A central clarification made in the *Companion* regarding Rand's view on *ethical* egoism is that it is not the same as *psychological* egoism. Psychological egoism makes the claim that people always act egoistically, i.e. that no human actions are ultimately motivated by anything other than self-interest (Salmieri 2016:132). This theory thus describes how people in fact act. Rand's ethical egoism, on the other hand, describes how people *ought* to act. Rand claims that people's own interest *ought* to be the goal of all human action, but she does not make the claim that all human action ultimately *is* driven by self-interest. On the contrary, she argues that self-sacrifice – or, altruism – is very apparent in society.

Altruism is often connected to the term “love.” Rand, on the other hand, argues that that self-interest is exactly what makes love something wonderful, the fact that you want the person you love, and that that person wants you too. Entering into a relationship for the sake of the other, like a saint giving bread to poor children, is not a pleasurable situation. One can draw a parallel between this kind of relationship and the many human destinies described by Dostoevsky, one of Rand's favorite authors (despite their philosophical disagreements). In many a novel he masterly describes psychological thought-processes behind self-sacri-

ifice, such as the tragic figure Marmeladov, from *Crime and Punishment*, who marries a poor widow out of pity. Their life together becomes miserable.

Yet, for what reasons does Rand consider it immoral to live for the sake of a “higher purpose?” The goal of Rand's moral philosophy is to enable human beings to achieve uncompromised happiness, and she considers the value of “living for others” a severe constraint to this enablement. Furthermore, placing others' welfare – even random people one has never met – before one's own is irrational, she claims. When discussing altruism and egoism, one is according to Rand choosing between selfishness and sacrifice, i.e. whether *yourself* or *the other* should benefit from your moral values. In fact, despite her views on egoism being most known, she does not find egoism to be a fundamental issue in moral philosophy:

The choice of the beneficiary of moral values is merely a preliminary or introductory issue in the field of morality. It is not a substitute for morality, nor a criterion of moral value as altruism has made it. (Rand 1964:x)

Blackwell's *A Companion to Ayn Rand* devotes four full chapters to the issue of Rand's ethics. However, given the central role ethical egoism plays in Rand's philosophy, the matter is widely discussed in articles in other sections as well.

## 'Existence Exists'

The way Rand treats metaphysics as a field of study exemplifies how important she regards philosophy's ability to be relevant to humans' practical life. According to Rand, the answers one gives to metaphysical questions shape a person's character. She defines some of the key issues in metaphysics, and their epistemological implications, as follows:

Are you [I] in a universe which is ruled by natural laws and, therefore, is stable, firm, absolute – and knowable? Or are you in an incomprehensible chaos, a realm of inexplicable miracles, an unpredictable, unknowable flux, which your mind is impotent to grasp? [II] Are the things you see around you real – or are they only an illusion? Do they exist independent of any observer – or are they created by the observer? Are they the object or the subject of man's consciousness? [III] Are they what they are – or can they be changed by a mere act of your consciousness, such as a wish? (Rand 1982:3)

Her answers to the metaphysical questions mentioned above boils down to what she calls “the primacy of existence,”

which holds that “there is a mind-independent reality, which can be perceived and understood by (human) consciousness, but which is not created or directly shaped by consciousness” (Rheins 2016: 246).

The first axiom of all metaphysics, according to Rand, is that “Existence exists.” The statement simply reaffirms the existence of whatever exists. She does not regard the formulation as a vacuous tautology; she argues that “existence” is an *axiomatic concept*, and thus an unanalyzable primary. The repetition serves a “special underscoring” function that, according to Rand, is “a matter of life and death for man” (Rand 1967:55). This rather dramatic formulation reflects how important she regards metaphysics to be for people's practical life.

In the *Companion's* chapter on Objectivist metaphysics, Jason G. Rheins quotes a radical example from Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* that shows practical implications of actively evading the existence of unwelcome facts. One of the villains in the novel, James Taggart, reacts to danger on the premise that what exists need not exist if one chooses not to acknowledge it:

... danger, to him, was a signal to shut off his sight, suspend his judgment and pursue an unaltered course, on the unstated premise that the danger would remain unreal by the sovereign power of his wish not to see it – like a fog horn within him, blowing, not to sound a warning, but to summon the fog. (Rand 1957:868)

To Rand, how one responds to the existence of something – whether it is dangerous or not – reflects one's fundamental metaphysical views. Such evasions as the character Taggart engages in is fundamentally evil, according to Rand's ethics. The Objectivist ethics argues in favor of living according to the axiom of existence, accepting that facts are facts and living accordingly. Rand acknowledges that the axiom of existence may at first sound like a given, but argues that humans in fact often do not live in accordance with it. Throughout the *Companion*, the reader is presented with examples – hypothetical as well as real-life – where the fundamental metaphysical questions have implications on all aspects of human life – from ethics to politics, and from economics to aesthetics.

## A Romantic Rebel

An interesting aspect for the readers to take notice of when reading the *Companion* is the radicalism of Rand's aesthetic theory. Her radicalism consists of being an alternative to the modernist aesthetic values, and belonging rather to the

aesthetic tradition of Aristotle and Romanticism. In other words, Rand's aesthetics is radical in virtue of endorsing what many people consider the opposite of radical, such as representational paintings, melodic music, and recognizable sculptures.

Franz Schubert was an enormously gifted composer whose musical production is extraordinary in quantity as well as quality. It is said that he could compose an entire musical masterwork, writing it directly down on paper, without once writing a single erroneous note. Within his circle of friends, there were generally two kinds of reactions to his unparalleled talent. Some friends called him a genius whose gifted inspiration was due to a direct connection to God. Other friends of Schubert knew how much he struggled and how dedicated he was to his musical studies, and considered him to be a master within his craft. Ayn Rand would have belonged to the second group of friends.

Besides being opposed to what she calls "mystical" explanation, such as the reference to God, the reason why Rand would have belonged to the second group is that her aesthetic theory is based on evaluating art on the basis of how skillfully the craft is carried out. She regards artistic creation as an expression of reason. Note that the first group has no rational explanation of how Schubert achieved what he did. While regarding what we today call "art" as different (learnable) crafts was common in ancient Greece and in the renaissance, it is indeed not uncommon within modern aesthetics to regard art as mysterious and unanalyzable, as something *sui generis*, beyond rational explanation. Although Immanuel Kant probably is the one who explicates the idea of the unexplainable genius most thoroughly, the general thought appears in writings of Herder, Goethe, and Emerson, just to mention a few (see for instance Herder 2006, Goethe 1989, and Emerson 1940).

Rand opposes the modernist ideas that usually follow the modernist doctrine, such as art serving no practical purpose – thereby the phrase "art for art's sake." In *The Romantic Manifesto*, her main work on aesthetics, she addresses the nature and function of art, which is clearly presented in the Companion. Rand argues that "Art does have a purpose and does serve a human need; only it is not a material need, but a need of man's consciousness" (Rand 1969:5). She regards art as a voice of philosophy, in the sense that it expresses "This is life as I see it" (Rand 1969:25). It is apparent that she regards philosophy as inevitably fundamental to one's identity:

Accordingly, Rand holds that, far from being a castle in the air or just a technical pursuit for professional aca-

demics, philosophy goes to the core of who one is and directs the course of one's life. (Binswanger 2016:408)

The purpose of art, according to Rand, amounts to fulfilling two needs: cognition and motivation. First and foremost, artwork can help one to use philosophy, as it can concretize highly abstract philosophical concepts: "Art brings man's concepts to the perceptual level of his consciousness and allows him to grasp them directly, as if they were percepts" (Rand 1969:8). A corollary need that art has the potential to fulfill is of a motivational character. The concretization of abstract concepts can help one to keep focused on what truly matters in life. Art thus provides emotional "fuel."

A necessary condition for the concretization of abstract philosophical concepts and judgments is that art is recognizable – for instance, that paintings and sculptures are representational. However, this does indeed not mean that she argues in favor of photorealism. According to Rand, successful artistic concretization depends upon a selection process emphasizing what is important to man – a process she calls "stylization." She presents a hypothetical scenario:

If one saw, in real life, a beautiful woman wearing an exquisite evening gown, with a cold sore on her lips, the blemish would mean nothing but a minor affliction, and one would ignore it. But a painting of such a woman would be a corrupt, obscenely vicious attack on man, on beauty, on all values – and one would experience a feeling of immense disgust and indignation at the artist. (Rand 1969:24)

Rand argues that if a re-creator includes every detail, it would interfere with the purpose of making the recreation (Binswanger 2016:415).

Lastly, Rand's view on romanticism is based on addressing the universal. In the introduction to her novel, *The Fountainhead*, she stated:

Romanticism is the *conceptual* school of art. It deals, not with the random trivia of the day, but with the timeless, fundamental, universal problems and *values* of human existence. [...] It is concerned – in the words of Aristotle – not with the things as they are, but with things as they might be and ought to be. (Rand 1943:vvii)

The romanticism of Rand is thus in sharp opposition to the Hegelian view of art being devoted to the depiction of every-day phenomena (related to "the end of art" argument), exemplified in instances where a picture of a soup box is

regarded as an artwork. Rather, Rand's romanticism is highly compatible with painter and philosopher Odd Nerdrum's philosophy of kitsch, where a painter's dramatic presentation of the *universally human* is considered a core value (Nerdrum et al. 2001). Rand sees romanticism as based on the premise that man has free will – also a fundamental of the human existence – a matter of huge importance for Rand in every aspect of her philosophy.

### The Controversial Ayn Rand

In philosophy – *especially* in philosophy – it is crucial to be presented to perspectives that stand in contrast to one's current values, whether it is the philosophy of Karl Marx or Ayn Rand. Blackwell Riley Publishing deserves credit for publishing a philosophical companion to Rand, as it to my knowledge is the first philosophical companion to Rand's philosophy printed by a publisher "independently" of the intellectual circle of Ayn Rand enthusiasts, such as the Ayn Rand Institute (ARI). Blackwell also deserves credit for a solid selection of authors, writing on various topics – ranging from familiar Rand topics, such as ethical egoism and capitalism, to perhaps less known aspects of Rand's philosophy, such as aesthetics and epistemology.

The *Companion* is appropriately introduced with two shorter chapters on Rand's life and Objectivism in a philosophical context. In the following part, "Ethics and Human Nature," central aspects of Rand's view on ethics are explored, such as ethical egoism discussed briefly above. This part also includes interesting clarifications on Rand's view on the act of valuing (and her concern that many people do not perform this activity). Capitalism is one of the topics on Rand's political philosophy presented in the section "Society." Here it becomes clear that she regards capitalism not merely as an economic, but also as a moral matter; "a free mind and a free market are corollaries," she claims (Rand 1961:21).

In the last half of the *Companion*, part IV "The Foundations of Objectivism" presents the reader to the Objectivist epistemology and metaphysics. Especially Rand's take on metaphysics is refreshing, as she (again) appears to draw inspiration from Aristotle's notion of the field of metaphysics. In the following section, "Philosophers and Their Effects," three articles present a more thorough study of Rand's philosophy in a philosophical historical perspective. The last section is devoted to Rand's aesthetics and romanticism, as discussed above.

Ayn Rand represents a unique voice in modern philosophy. When reading Rand, I almost get an impression of reading a philosopher of ancient Greece; her language is crystal clear, her philosophical discussions are relevant to everyday

life (whether one agrees with her or not), she holds reason and objectivity as ever-visible goals, she can appear somewhat downright, and she argues for the individual's happiness as an obvious aim of moral action.

In a 1960's talk show, where she was asked about how her philosophy was received in society, she replied: "My views would probably be the norm of the future, but *not* right now" (Warpicachu 2012). She was obviously well aware of her reputation. Perhaps Blackwell's *A Companion to Ayn Rand* represents the beginning of a change in attitude towards Rand within academia.

### LITERATURE

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The higher purpose has many names: "thy neighbor" (Christianity), "the collective" (socialism), "the country" (patriotism), "general welfare" (utilitarianism), "duty" (deontology), etc.

<sup>2</sup>In fact, Rand has expressed that she would have named her philosophy "existentialism" were it not for the fact that existentialism already existed(!), a philosophical movement with which she did not identify.

<sup>3</sup>Mimi Reisel Gladstein's *The Ayn Rand Companion* from 1984 emphasizes the literary aspect of Rand's works, and does not offer a thorough philosophical analysis.