

## Conservatism versus Objectivism

IT is quite true, I believe, that no single thinker has had the effect on the emerging intellectuals, the "new intellectuals" of the Right, that has Ayn Rand. She is brilliant, systematic, and efficacious. Her monumental work, *Atlas Shrugged*, is a powerful, intricately woven, and flawlessly written philosophic novel that dazzles the reader with its scope and message. And this is perhaps Miss Rand's greatest debit: Her readers are blinded by her brilliance, and in their blindness see not the errors she has made. It is the purpose of this essay to point out a few of these errors—errors made more dangerous because they are accepted as truth by those who hope to change things.

In her essay entitled "Conservatism: An Obituary," Ayn Rand assigns to conservatism three arguments used to justify capitalism: faith, tradition, and depravity. We shall here discuss her analysis of these three, praising where commendation is due, demonstrating inconsistencies wherever they may be found, and correcting the generally erroneous substance of her essay. Although quotations from the essay are used liberally, you are urged to read the essay. This analysis has been

John Robbins is a graduate student in Political Science and Philosophy at the Johns Hopkins University.

arranged in the same order as the original essay was written.

### I. Faith

*For as bats' eyes are to daylight  
so is our intellectual eye to those  
truths which are, in their own  
nature, the most obvious of all.*  
Aristotle *Metaphysics*, I. i.

From a perusal of Objectivist essays, it is obvious that Objectivism contains a clear distinction between "faith" and "reason," assigning to the realm of faith the unproved, and to the realm of reason the proved. Miss Rand writes:

*Intellectually, to rest one's case  
on faith means to concede that  
reason is on the side of one's  
enemies—that one has no rational  
arguments to offer.*

Nathaniel Branden in his essay, "Mental Health versus Mysticism and Self-Sacrifice," writes:

*Faith is the commitment of one's  
consciousness to beliefs for  
which one has no sensory evi-  
dence or rational proof . . . Faith  
is the equation of feeling with  
knowledge.*

This is the same conception of faith to which modern mystics such as Barth, Kierkegaard, and Julian Huxley subscribe; unlike Ayn Rand, though, they actually counsel men to renounce their minds and Believe without justification, because there is no object of belief. Given this total dichotomy of "faith" and "reason,"

one would be compelled to side with Miss Rand and against the modern mystics. But it is precisely this dichotomy that we wish to examine, endeavoring to demonstrate that historical Christianity makes no such false separation, that Christian faith is not belief into nothingness.

IT is a trite expression that one must exercise trust everyday in order to live, and triteness sometimes obscures truth. But the statement is nonetheless true. To take an example: one is making an air trip, which means one is placing his life in the hands of a pilot whom he has never seen, and probably will never see, who may be an inebriate, have a history of fainting, heart attacks or a hundred other things. Of course, one does not expect such things; it is reasonable that one should not. Why? Because one assumes that the airline is responsible and would hire only healthy, moral, and competent pilots. But one does not *know* these things: one assumes them. And such an assumption is entirely rational: it is a reasonable assumption or extrapolation from either past experience; or, if one has never flown before, from the nebulous evidence of the airline's reputation for reliability and safety. This is faith in the Christian sense of the word (in that there is no gap between reason and assumption, even though it may be easier to empirically verify the airlines reliability than Moses'), and it is the antithesis of what both Miss Rand and the modern mystics call "faith," i.e., the suspension of one's critical faculties or "the renunciation of the mind." This does not mean that this concept is unimportant, for it is essential in discussing modern irrationalism, but this conception of "faith" must not be confused with the Christian conception. Francis A. Schaeffer in his most interesting book *The God Who Is There* writes:

*When Paul was asked whether Jesus was raised from the dead, he gave a completely non-religious answer, in the twentieth century sense. He said:*

*"There are almost five hundred living witnesses, go and ask them!" This is the faith that covers the whole man, including his reason; it does not ask for a belief into the void.*

This is the kind of faith upon which Christianity and conservatism rest. But, one may ask, is faith necessary? Certainly it appears that it is necessary for the continuance of everyday life, but is it necessary in abstract philosophical thought, is it necessary in understanding the nature of things?



Ayn Rand

("Her readers are blinded by her brilliance.")

AGAIN, our answer is that it is necessary, and for this reason: Man's mind alone is not able to build any unified, non-contradictory field of knowledge. The fact that inductive reasoning alone cannot account consistently for all phenomena makes the injection of non-rationalistic, but very rational, knowledge imperative. Yet how does one know that these added unempirical data are true? Proof consists in whether such knowledge is consistent with empirical data, i.e., whether or not such knowledge contradicts possessed, empirical knowledge, and explains the previously inexplicable phenomena. We will mention only two of these phenomena here: Man and Order.

The first of these phenomena is man, or more precisely, man's consciousness. Objectivism holds that men have free will, or "volitional

consciousness," that is, are free to use or not to use their innate capacity to reason. Man is not determined, because determination contains within itself a contradiction: if man's thoughts were determined, man could not assert, as truth, that he is determined, because that thought, too, would be an imperative. Determinism allows no possibility of verification; determinists are reduced to saying: We are determined to think that we are determined to think what we think. Or, as J. B. S. Haldane wrote in *Possible Worlds*:

*If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motions of atoms in my brain, I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms.*

Determinism denies reason, and the validity of reason, which is, of course, a contradiction. Reason is valid, that is, it affords us knowledge of our environment and of ourselves. But whence this capacity to reason? Objectivism holds that it arises from matter, that is, non-rational, determined substance. The faculty which reasons then, is dependent upon, created by, and wholly accounted for by peculiar arrangements of atoms and molecules in the brain.

C. S. Lewis in his excellent book *Miracles* presents a discussion of precisely this problem which we find in Objectivism and makes this observation: "... no thought is valid if it can be fully explained as the result of irrational causes."

For example, one reason Marxism has been so destructive of traditional values and ideas is because it assigns irrational *natural* causes to them: class determinism. Freudianism emerged from Vienna with a monstrous psychological determinism—assigning irrational, *natural* causes to human behavior and thought. The ideas of the bourgeoisie are "bourgeois"; the desire for a smoke is a manifestation of a fixation at the oral stage of libidinal gratification.

Each discrete thought or idea is thus ascribed to irrational natural causes, and becomes invalid. "Obvi-

ously, then," writes Lewis, "the whole process of human thought, what we call Reason, is equally valueless if it is the result of irrational causes." The physical world obeys physical laws; the chemicals in our cortex obey chemical laws; the atoms in our cerebrum obey atomic laws. Any theory which attempts to explain the faculty which we call reason on a material basis is determinist, and therefore, nonsense.

CONFRONTED with this brutal alternative of "mysticism" or materialism (to use Objectivist terms), what do Objectivists do? Something wholly foreign to their philosophy: they evade. If man's reason cannot be explained by nature, what can explain it? Blank out. Is the whole greater than the sum of the parts? Blank out.

Commenting on this particular evasion ("in the future we will find an answer"), Francis Schaeffer says:

*There are, however, two overwhelming problems to this answer: firstly, this could be said about any answer to anything and would bring all thought and science to an end . . . Secondly, no one can live with this answer, for it simply is not possible to hold one's breath and wait till some solution is found in the future . . . if a person is to offer this seriously as an alternative theory, he should be prepared to go into deep freeze and stop making judgments which touch the problem of man.*

Writes Lewis:

*The Naturalists have been engaged in thinking about Nature. They have not attended to the fact that they were thinking. The moment one attends to this it is obvious that one's own thinking cannot be merely a natural event, and that therefore something other than nature exists.*

Something other than Nature exists. The alternative is determinism. To coin a phrase, it's either/or.

The second phenomenon is order, and man may also be included here as the representative of the most complex order. Having refuted Aquinas's "argument from design" for the existence of God, the Objectivists have yet to refute the modern argument from design which relies on scientific principles discovered in the latter portion of the nineteenth century and thus unknown to Aquinas. This "argument from design" differs substantially from the earlier, for it does not marvel that things behave or complement each other as they do, but that things, as organized existents, exist. The second Law of Thermodynamics is the disintegration of organization in a closed system, the irreversible and ineluctable tendency of all things to decompose, to disintegrate, to become more simple, in a word, the phenomenon of "running-down."

This recently discovered law, which has never been contradicted, has been used with some success in countering the theories of the evolution of the species. It may also be used to counter the Naturalists on the question of origins. For if the existence of the eternal personal transcendent God is denied, then there is no alternative but to maintain that the material universe has existed infinitely backwards in time, and will exist infinitely forwards. (The third "possibility" of the universe creating itself out of nothing is so patently absurd as not to be considered.) But if the physical universe has existed for an infinite amount of time, there could be no order, no complexity, nothing except evenly distributed atoms in space. Infinite time, coupled with the Second Law of Thermodynamics, must yield infinite randomness, i.e., zero organization. There could certainly be no stars and planets, and most certainly no men. The Second Law of Thermodynamics and the existence of order controvert any notion of eternally existing matter. Naturally, the Objectivists will have to maintain that the Second Law has not always been operative, or that it applies only to our particular sector

of space. Their first assertion would reduce the concept of natural physical law to fickle decrees, and their second to provincial ordinances.

THIS then is the necessity for faith: achievement of a unified field of knowledge. To base one's advocacy on faith then, is not to deny reason, but to recognize that reason is valid. To refuse faith is to deny the validity of reason by eliminating any possibility of a unified sphere of non-contradictory knowledge.

## II. Tradition

*... the dead have had a hand in every renaissance ... when a Hitler or a Stalin bestride the world it fares ill with a people that has no defiant ancestors to commune with, and does not feel the throb of their indomitable spirit in its veins. (Eric Hoffer)*

Secondly we come to what is perhaps the distinguishing characteristic of conservatism, what Miss Rand calls the argument from tradition. She writes:

*... to be a "conservative" means to uphold the status quo, the given, the established, regardless of what it might be, regardless of whether it is good or bad, right or wrong, defensible or indefensible. They [certain groups] declare that we must defend the American political system not because it is right, but because our ancestors chose it, not because it is good, but because it is old.*

One's first thought upon reading this passage would be, quite naturally: if it were true, then conservatism surely is irrational, for as Miss Rand later points out, if novelty as the standard of value is irrational, so is antiquity. The progressivists hold that the new is good because it is new—certainly that is irrational. But the conservatives do not hold that the old is good simply because it is old.

There is a further consideration: the old has been tried and found appropriate; the new has not. Conservatism is not the inverse of progressivism; it sees no general tendency in history. It is not regressivism. It merely holds that once a people become accustomed to a particular mode of government and arrangement of society, it is extremely unwise to attempt to alter (except in the most extreme cases) their prejudices and institutions to that form one deems to be more consistent with "reason."

It must be observed that both Objectivism and conservatism rely on reason for deciding what is the proper arrangement for society. But while Objectivism would seek to reduce the final authority to the level of the individual mind, conservatism would listen to what the giants of the past have said, and observe what systems have best achieved the proper ends of government, as well as engaging in individual ratiocination. Moreover, nations are not experimental laboratories wherein each fancied political "scientist" may test his latest theory.

It is probably true that there is no one "right" system of institutions. What is determined by normative theory is the end governments should seek; what manner of government is best equipped to attain this end is different at different times and in different places. Certainly, for example, the people of southeast Asia are not capable at the present time of self-rule, nor are the people of the "newly emerging" nations. The latter too often merely trade a benevolent colonial rule for a malevolent indigenous rule. Precipitous change almost always results in tyranny. That institutional system is "right" which best preserves order and freedom. Because of varying traditions, customs, and folkways, these systems will vary. One cannot build a science of politics the way one would build a system of geometry; one must continually refer to reality and interject fact.

Another of Miss Rand's essays,

"Government Financing in a Free Society," belies her dislike of the argument from tradition, or at least one central tenet of that argument, the contextual nature of politics. Advocating voluntary financing of government, she writes:

*The choice of a specific method of implementation [of voluntary financing] is more than premature today—since the principle will be practicable only in a fully free society, a society whose government has been constitutionally reduced to its proper, basic functions.*

Here Miss Rand implicitly recognizes the importance of context in political science. No longer is she abstractly advocating a principle: the principle is not even practical at this time. This is the conservative speaking. This is the recognition of the fact that that which is, or has been, is more important in the art of governing than that which one may imagine. It is the recognition of tradition and the importance of context in political science.

*Any program of voluntary government financing is the last, not the first, step on the road to a free society—the last, not the first, reform to advocate . . . it would not work today.*

Except for stylistic differences, the author of the two principles of conservatism and correction could have written that. Ironically, later in her essay on conservatism, Miss Rand appeals to the past to support her claim that it is an error to appeal to the past. She writes:

*America was created by men who broke with all political traditions and who originated a system unprecedented in history, relying on nothing but the "unaided" power of their own intellect. (author's emphasis)*

That, of course, is nonsense. America was not created by men who broke with all political traditions: America existed almost two centuries before the Fathers authored the Constitution. The Federalist Papers, which

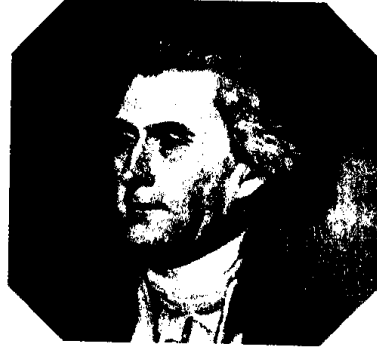
may be taken as the statement of philosophy behind the Constitution, are replete with examples and discussions of federations and confederations throughout history, including those of Greece, Germany, and most recently, the States under the Articles of Confederation. It was James Madison, Father of the Constitution, who wrote in essay 43: "Theoretical reasoning, in this and in most other cases, must be qualified by the lessons of practice,"<sup>1</sup> not realizing his unaided intellect was sufficient. In a letter in 1825 (to Richard Henry Lee) Thomas Jefferson wrote of the Declaration of Independence: It was "an expression of the American mind" combining "the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays, or in elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, etc.," and not intended to "find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of," not realizing that, actually, he was breaking with "all political traditions."

**F**URTHER examples of how Miss Rand has overstated her case may be given, but they are unnecessary. But she does have a point: there are some innovations in the Constitution. And it may be said, without exaggeration, that insofar as the Constitution was innovative, it tended to be detrimental in its effects on the body politic. One innovative creation was the Electoral College, which foundered shortly after its inception. Those persons who perceived the dangers of the innovations sounded remarkably prophetic warnings on the pernicious effects these innovations must inevitably cause.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See also Hamilton's essay 85 (*The Federalist Papers*).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Richard Henry Lee's *Observations Leading to a Fair Examination of the System of Government, Proposed by the Late Convention; and to Several Essential and Necessary Alterations in it. In a Number of Letters from the Federal Farmer to the Republican*.

The American War of Independence was not revolutionary; neither was the adoption of the Constitution. Both embodied needed corrective changes and innovations that were not corrective, but destructive. Indeed, the ratification of the Constitution may be seen as the result of the



Thomas Jefferson  
("He did not intend to 'find new principles or new arguments'.")

desire for a strong central government re-established, since the previous central government, Parliament, had been repudiated. The Constitution then marked the return to tradition, after the intervening disorder of the Confederation. This "New Parliament" was to protect and revive the traditional system, the States.

But, we have so far only touched upon the central importance of tradition. Russell Kirk, in *The Enemies of the Permanent Things*, writes:

*The objects of the civil, social order are the maintenance of order and justice and freedom . . . For both the student of politics and the statesman, order is primary: until some tolerable political order is achieved, nothing else can be.*

Order is the primary consideration in political science: it is needed for human existence. Anarchy is a contradiction of reality and is soon ended by the re-establishment of order. Order and precipitate change are enemies; order and chaos are opposites. Change, if slow and gentle,

and in the right direction, will enhance order; if rapid and harsh and in the wrong direction, will precipitate chaos. It is by appealing to tradition, by saying that this is the way public affairs have always been handled, that conservatives seek to preserve order and conserve what is. It is by scorning tradition that those who wish to accomplish revolution begin.

The desire for the unchanging is fundamental in human nature. Constant change and movement contribute to disorders of mind and spirit: one has no framework for thinking, acting, or believing if all is changing.

*... broken habits can be more painful and crippling than broken bones ... disintegrating values may have as deadly a fallout as disintegrating atoms.<sup>3</sup>*

History is strewn with the wreckage of peoples caught up in change and dashed down in chaos.

*The vice of the ancient democracies, and one cause of their ruin, was, that they ruled, as you [the French Revolutionaries] do, by occasional decrees, psephismata. This practice soon broke in upon the tenor and consistency of the laws; it abated the respect of the people towards them; and totally destroyed them in the end.<sup>4</sup>*

The need for a stable, unchanging public order is in the nature of things, and where that order is not preserved by reverence for the Fathers, by "pious awe" and "trembling solicitude," it will be enforced by naked power.

### III. Depravity

*Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said. "One can't believe impossible things." "I dare say you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age I did it for half an hour a day. Why sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."*

<sup>3</sup> Eric Hoffer in *The Temper of Our Time*, p. x.

IN order to advance any ideas concerning the proper organization of society and government, it is evident that one must derive his ideas from his perceptions of the nature of man and of reality. It follows, then, that those who perceive man and reality differently will arrive at different systems for the organization of society. For example, materialists, who believe man to be a machine, would probably arrive at the conclusion that society ought to be centrally ordered in all respects, like a great, automated factory. Christians, who believe that man has been made in the image of God, will affirm that freedom is proper to man, and that the political system which most closely approximates freedom is the proper arrangement of society.

Within the "Political Right" today there are two distinct and opposed views of the nature of man, and therefore of the proper arrangement of society. The first view is that man is flawed—it is the Christian and conservative view. The second view is that man is perfect, i.e., not flawed. This view is given lip service by Ayn Rand and more practical service by the anarcho-capitalists and libertarians such as Murray Rothbard and Karl Hess.

These views are of course, antithetical. Either man is flawed or man is perfect. They are fundamentally opposed. And because they are so opposed, the political systems derived from each premise are also opposed: the Christian views government as defined by Ayn Rand in her brilliant essay, "The Nature of Government," as absolutely necessary. Interestingly enough, so does Ayn Rand. The anarcho-libertarians do not view government as absolutely necessary, and, indeed, appear to be working for the demise of government.

Ayn Rand, despite all her vigorous and lengthy protestations to the con-

<sup>4</sup> Edmund Burke in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, p. 293. (Regnery Gateway Edition).

trary, (e.g., "This is John Galt Speaking" from *Atlas Shrugged*), appears to accept the view that man is flawed. If she did not, she would have no justification for saying that man needs government. In her essay mentioned above she writes:

*But the possibility of human immorality is not the only objection to anarchy: even a society whose every member were fully rational and faultlessly moral, could not function in a state of anarchy; it is the need of objective laws and of an arbiter for honest disagreement among men that necessitates the establishment of a government.*

Implicit in this statement is the notion of flawed man.

The first question to be asked is, how can fully rational men disagree? If knowledge is non-self-contradictory, how is disagreement possible? Notice that this does not imply omniscience. According to Objectivist epistemology, conclusions rationally formed on whatever knowledge is available are consistent, not in disagreement. But let us concede, for the sake of discussion, that, as Miss Rand implies, fully rational men can disagree. It still would not follow that government is needed. If anyone can work out an agreement, it is "fully rational" men. There is no need for a third party, possessing the exclusive use of force, to enter the picture, unless of course, "fully rational and faultlessly moral" men cannot be trusted to remain "fully rational and faultlessly moral." This is a tacit admission of flawed humanity.

Miss Rand writes further:

*The retaliatory use of force requires objective rules of evidence to establish that a crime has been committed and to prove who committed it, as well as objective rules to define punishments and enforcement procedures. Men who attempt to prosecute crimes, without such rules, are a lynch mob. If a society left the retaliatory use of force in the hands of individual citizens, it would de-*

*generate into mob rule, lynch law, and an endless series of bloody private feuds or vendettas . . . he the individual must accept the separation of force and whim (any whim, including his own.)<sup>5</sup>*

In the last analysis, the function of government is to keep "fully rational and faultlessly moral" men from vaporizing each other.

TO further clarify what Miss Rand has so deftly obscured: It is because man is man that freedom is requisite to his survival and morality. It is because he is flawed that government is necessary to achieve freedom. If man were not flawed he would have no need of any governmental system. Miss Rand, in her essay, "Conservatism: An Obituary," sets up a straw man and then expertly knocks it down:

*This argument from depravity runs as follows: since men are weak, fallible, non-omniscient, and innately depraved, no man may be entrusted with the responsibility of being a dictator and of ruling everybody else; therefore, a free society is the proper way of life for imperfect creatures. Please grasp fully the implications of this argument: since men are depraved, they are not good enough for a dictatorship, freedom is all that they deserve; if they were perfect, they would be worthy of a totalitarian state.*

What Miss Rand does is juxtapose two contradictory concepts: dictatorship and perfect man. If men were strong, infallible, omniscient, and innately perfect, any and all systems

<sup>5</sup> It is interesting that Miss Rand will subordinate the individual to the views of others (government) in order to achieve short-term justice for all, and explicitly expresses distrust of individual judgment in such matters, but will heatedly defend the judgments of individuals in such infinitely more complex matters as the nature of the polis and establishment of institutions for the maintenance over long-term periods of justice for all.



would work, but there would be no need for any. Perfect man and dictatorship or totalitarian state are mutually exclusive concepts. If men were perfect, there would be no necessity for the use of force, and it is contradictory to say that perfect men would or could use force and remain perfect. A "free society is the proper way of life for imperfect creatures," not because they are imperfect, i.e., liable to error, but because they are Creatures, i.e., beings capable of reason and morality. A free society would also be the proper way of life for perfect ("fully rational and faultlessly moral") Creatures, not because they were perfect, but because they were Creatures (rational and moral beings). The difference is over the means to achieve a free society. Imperfect Creatures need government; perfect Creatures would not. The need for government flows from man's imperfection; for limited government from his "creatureliness."

Contraposed to this Christian, conservative, and (implicitly) Objectivist view of flawed man and the resultant necessity for government is the anarchist and socialist conception of perfect man. M. Stanton Evans, in an incisive essay titled "A Conservative Case for Freedom," writes:

*Again, there is a division of opinion on the right. The "libertarian," or classical liberal, affirms the natural goodness, or—the more scientific forms—the non-evil of human nature. He views government as the source of evil, the unfettered individual as the source of good. He has considerable faith in "progress" as the natural creation of free men, and tends to believe that material success and moral virtue are closely akin, if not identical. For all of these reasons, he concludes that government should let people alone to employ their natural goodness. In his extreme form, the modern-day libertarian is a philosophical anarchist—a free-enterprise utopian.*

This fundamental dichotomy in the "Right" concerning the nature of man, and the opposite political systems derived from each explains the affinity of the New Right (as distinguished from the Old Right), for the New Left. Stateless societies are seriously proposed by both groups. Use of hallucinogens, a predisposition toward nihilism (the opposite of conservatism), "doing your own thing" <sup>6</sup> are being advocated and practiced by members of both the New Left and New Right. Libertarians of both Right and Left are enamored of "freedom," and destructive to values. Instead of virtue being the goal of man, and freedom the means to attain the goal, "freedom" has become the goal, and virtue has been relegated to limbo. To the Biblical truth, "Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools" might be added, "Professing themselves to be good, they became sinners."

FORTUNATELY, although Ayn Rand explicitly states that she agrees with the concept of perfect man, she implicitly admits that man is flawed and has no truck with such irrational doctrines and activities as anarchy. Unfortunately, the youthful "true believers" adhere to the explicit concept and thus deny the need for government. They are more consistent than Miss Rand.

It is inconsistency that rescues brilliant minds from irrational conclusions when they have accepted incorrect premises. It is consistency that destroys mediocre minds when they have believed impossible things.

<sup>6</sup> Men's terminologies are not accidental. "Thing" is a very vague term: the conclusion being that it does not matter what you do, what is emphasized is *doing* and *own*. It is equivalent to saying it's right because I do it, which is the secular Existentialists' doctrine of "self-affirmation." Rational, "doing your own thing" is not.