

Objectivism and the Corruption of Rationality

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A Critique of Ayn Rand's Epistemology

Scott Ryan

Writers Club Press
New York Lincoln Shanghai

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Writers Club Press
an imprint of iUniverse, Inc.

For information address:
iUniverse, Inc.
2021 Pine Lake Road, Suite 100
Lincoln, NE 68512
www.iuniverse.com

ISBN: 0-595-26733-5

Printed in the United States of America

Dedicated to Brand Blanshard and Josiah Royce

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Foreword

I suppose the readership at which this book is aimed consists of two main groups: readers of Ayn Rand who have little acquaintance with philosophy in general, and philosophers who have not considered Rand worth the bother of refuting. The former group I hope to interest in philosophers who will better repay their attention (and I hope that Objectivists who *do* have some acquaintance with philosophy in general will find my criticisms helpful as well). The latter group will, I hope, find something of interest here even though I am not myself an academic philosopher.

This book was written over a period of several years and consisted initially of a few short essays posted to an online Objectivism discussion list (at the time of this writing still extant at <http://www.wetheliving.com>). I posted various prepublication versions of the text on my personal website (<http://home.att.net/~sandgryan>) and as a result benefited from a great deal of electronic correspondence.

The twelfth chapter (“Values and Volition”) is somewhat longer than the others because it is the only chapter specifically devoted to the Objectivist ethics. It, too, was originally a much shorter essay, but it was not originally part of my critique of the Objectivist epistemology. I eventually decided to incorporate it into the text because I had come to see more clearly that the difficulties in Rand’s ethical theory parallel, and in certain respects depend on, those in her epistemology.

Acknowledgements: A project like this book depends on the help—not always intentional—of many persons living and dead. I cannot possibly thank them all, but special thanks are due to my family, generally for their love and support and specifically for tolerating my occasional long disappearances into my work area. My greatest philosophical debts are to Brand Blanshard and Josiah Royce, as will be

obvious to the reader. I also owe a number of only slightly smaller debts to such philosophers as Thomas Hill Green, Harold Henry Joachim, Francis Herbert Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet, John McTaggart Ellis McTaggart, and Timothy L.S. Sprigge. And behind them all stands Baruch de Spinoza.

As far as critiques of Objectivism are concerned, I have made little use of most of them, and in my bibliography I list only those to which I directly refer in the main text. There is one such critique that, in my estimation, stands head and shoulders above the rest: John W. Robbins's *Without a Prayer: Ayn Rand and the Close of Her System*. I do not agree with all of Robbins's interpretations of Rand and I do not share the Calvinistic foundation from which he makes his case, but he has a keen eye for difficulties and contradictions in her philosophy. When I first read his book, I found that we had noticed many of the same problems, and I am indebted to him for spotting some that I didn't. Where I recall which ones those were, I give him credit in the text. But no doubt I have overlooked some of them, and so I am happy to give his work general acknowledgement here.

I am also happy to acknowledge a debt to Greg Nyquist, the author of *Ayn Rand Contra Human Nature*. I have made no direct use of Nyquist's critique of Objectivism, but I have profited from Nyquist's online review of an earlier draft of this book ["Ayn Rand Versus The Idealist," online at <http://homepage.mac.com/machiavel/Text/Philosophy.htm>]. I disagree with many of Nyquist's philosophical positions and believe that for the most part he has misunderstood mine. But his review was helpful in two important respects: it demonstrated that there were several points at which I needed to state my case more clearly and completely, and it hinted (I think correctly) that I had not dealt sufficiently with the "dehumanizing" aspects of Objectivism's falsely rigorous ethical standards. I have edited and expanded my treatment accordingly, with what I hope is a corresponding increase in quality.

In this context I should also mention Jeff Walker's *The Ayn Rand Cult*. Walker's book has been criticized—rightly, I think—for lack of

discretion in its attacks on Rand and Objectivism. But taken, as I think it must be, with several grains of salt, it is a helpful source (in fact the only such source in existence at the time of this writing) that collects all the “dirt” on the Objectivist movement into a single volume.

I am also grateful to Prof. Phillip Ferreira of the Department of Philosophy at the Kutztown University of Pennsylvania. Prof. Ferreira kindly provided me a copy of his paper “Bosanquet, Idealism, and the Justification of Induction,” which he delivered at Oxford University’s conference on “Bernard Bosanquet and the Legacy of Idealism” (31 August–2 September 1999). At the time of this writing the paper is unpublished.

A note on style: The careful reader may notice that throughout the main text I refer to Rand (and usually, but not always, to Brand Blanshard) using the present tense, whereas I use the past tense in the Introduction and Afterword. (The *very* careful reader may notice occasional shifts in tense when I discuss the views of some other philosophers.) This is deliberate. In works that deal closely with someone’s thought, I prefer a style which treats the thought itself as “present” to the reader and writer (and as a matter of fact I believe that in a sense it literally is thus present). On the other hand, in those portions of the book in which we are dealing with her “from a distance,” as it were, I find it artificial to retain the present tense since she did, after all, die in 1982.

A note on punctuation: My use of quotation marks departs from standard American usage in one respect: I do not include the final period within the quotation marks unless I specifically intend the period to be part of the quoted matter. (I shall not emulate Rand and insist that this is the only “rational” practice—especially since, for various reasons having mostly to do with my own convenience, I have not been so fastidious about commas. One revolution at a time.) I have, however, made no changes to any quotation marks *within* quoted matter; if the original source includes a period within the quotes, I leave it there.

A note on abbreviations: I have used them only for Objectivist works, and I have tried to organize the text so that the meanings of all the abbreviations are clear in context. Ordinarily, when I cite a work, if it's been more than a few paragraphs since the *last* time I cited it, I write out the full name of the work. At any rate, anyone familiar with the Objectivist literature will probably recognize such shorthand as *IOE* for Rand's *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, *OPAR* for Peikoff's *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, and *EOS* for Kelley's *The Evidence of the Senses*.

A note on textual citations: I have used in-text citations rather than footnotes or endnotes, mainly on the grounds that I myself prefer them when I read. The full citation for each work will be found in the bibliography; I have sometimes used obvious shorthand or elision when the context makes clear which source I am using. When I cite an essay that has been published as part of a collection, I cite the collection as well (and list only the collection in the bibliography—whereas I separately list essays and articles that have not been included in such collections). For essays and articles posted on the Internet, I have included the last known URL of each item. Those that were available *only* on the Internet I have listed in a separate section at the end of the bibliography. (The HTML version of this book, available at the time of this writing on my personal website at <http://home.att.net/~sandgryan>, includes live links to the relevant sites; I shall retain these in the e-text for as long as the sites remain active.)

Introduction:

Why Critique Ayn Rand's Epistemology?

[I]f you brush [certain philosophers] aside, saying: “Why should I study that stuff when I *know* it’s nonsense?”—you are mistaken. It *is* nonsense, but you *don’t* know it—not so long as you go on accepting all their conclusions...[a]nd not so long as you are unable to *refute* them.... The battle of philosophers is a battle for man’s mind. If you do not understand their theories, you are vulnerable to the worst among them.... [Y]ou have to understand the enemy’s ideas and be prepared to refute them, you have to know his basic arguments and be able to blast them. [Ayn Rand, “Philosophy: Who Needs It,” in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, pp. 7–8; emphases hers.]

WHY BOTHER?

Why bother writing (or reading) a critique of Ayn Rand’s epistemology? There are two major reasons.

First of all, Rand still exercises an altogether undue influence in the political arena—not merely behind the barricades of the Objectivist movement currently headed by Leonard Peikoff, but even among classical liberals and libertarians who ought to know better. Even some of those who are aware of her shortcomings are still inclined to credit her with much more than she deserves. A bit of iconoclasm is therefore in order.

Rand seems to have pitched her philosophy of Objectivism toward secular intellectuals, presenting it as a non-Statist replacement for tra-

ditionalism and conservatism while basing it on essentially the same “radical” empiricist-nominalist-materialist-secularist worldview (up to and including a remarkably similar view of “reason”) as Marx and Lenin. (Readers will find further discussion of this last point in John Robbins’s imperfect but helpful *Without a Prayer: Ayn Rand and the Close of Her System*.)

Therein lies a danger. The enemies of liberty are fairly obvious, and most classical liberals are unlikely to be taken in by them. The greater hazard is posed by apparent friends who borrow more or less classical-liberal conclusions and try to place them on a foundation which will not hold them, indeed which leads to their very opposite if (unlike Rand) one starts from the allegedly foundational premises and works forward. In *that* direction, as we shall see, both reason and rights collapse pretty quickly. (There is a twofold additional hazard: supporters of the classical-liberal commonwealth who come to see the inadequacy of Objectivism and related philosophies may also, quite unnecessarily, reject classical liberalism itself; and opponents of classical liberalism will find it all too easy to discredit the entire political philosophy by quoting its most popular but least competent defenders.)

As we shall have occasion to note later, Rand’s sole originality seems to have been her attempt to graft a (somewhat) classical-liberal social superstructure (which she most assuredly did not discover or invent, despite her claim that libertarians “plagiarize the Objectivist theory of politics” [“Philosophical Detection,” in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 13]) onto a fundamentally subjectivist/Nietzschean view of individual human beings. She began as a “vulgar Nietzschean” who toted around a copy of *Also Sprach Zarathustra*; the original version of Rand’s novel *We The Living* included some passages that seem clearly to reflect the popular understanding of Nietzsche common in the Russia of her youth.

She did revise these passages later, in accordance with her eventual view that Nietzsche did not really stand for “reason” and that her essential view of human beings (which she believed to be his as well)

should have committed him to a belief in capitalism and individual rights. But I do not see that she ever changed her fundamental view itself, and indeed she importantly altered central concepts like “reason” and “rights” in order to make them fit this fundamental view. The effect is that Objectivism is unable to provide any dependable foundation for either reason or rights.

We shall be discussing these matters thoroughly as we sort through Rand's writings. The details of our examination must wait, but the general outcome will be this: we shall show that Rand's philosophy makes both reason and rights impossible—reason, by denying that the mind has any ability to grasp relations of necessity actually present in objective reality, and rights, by denying that the well-being of persons other than oneself has any direct moral bearing on one's conduct.

(I do not, of course, mean to imply that Rand was a *deliberate* enemy of either reason or liberty. On the contrary, her intent was to defend both, and I think she did a somewhat better job with the latter than with the former. In my view, Rand's strongest philosophical writings were in political theory, and she became less and less reliable the further she wandered from her strengths. But we shall criticize her political theory only much later, and then only briefly.)

Which brings us to the second reason for critiquing her epistemology: it represents—in a rather threadbare and skeletal form—the culmination of a number of trends in nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophy, of which Rand was a good deal more representative than she thought. In particular, as surely as any positivist, Rand excoriated speculative metaphysics and theology (and indeed hardly bothered distinguishing between them), and attempted to give an account of reason that neither depended on any such woolly theorizing nor entailed anything much about the nature of reality. Quite apart from any desire to topple Rand from her pedestal, her work provides a chance to see where these trends lead in a fairly “pure” form without having to dig too hard to expose their difficulties; whatever her other vices, she at least wrote clearly enough to be found out. And as we shall see, she

regarded herself as reacting against certain of these trends, while nevertheless buying wholesale into most of their basic premises; she was simply unaware of doing so, because she was not a particularly competent philosopher.

As regards this latter reason, I shall also be mounting a positive case alongside my destructive criticism of Rand's epistemological work. For purposes of criticism I have generally tried to offer critiques that do not depend on the acceptance of any specific philosophical outlook and thus will be of interest to readers of all philosophical stripes; Rand's implicit reliance on principles she explicitly disavowed vitiates her philosophy whether the principles in question are true or not. But I am ultimately arguing for a revival of rationalistic objective idealism in general, and for a renewed look at the philosophy of Brand Blanshard in particular, as the proper philosophical foundation for any political theory that bases itself on reason and rights.

And here a third, personal reason comes into play: I have known far too many Objectivists who are in the habit of citing Blanshard as a source who agrees with Rand on this or that point. It is high time such misconceptions were cleared up once for all. Blanshard was a rationalist; Rand was not; as we shall see, her account of reason is one that Blanshard would have found altogether inadequate, and indeed portions of it have implications that he actively opposed throughout his philosophical career.

A MINIMAL IDEALISM

Since neither Blanshard nor objective idealism is much in favor these days, and for that matter since Rand herself tended to use the term "idealism" as a synonym for "subjective idealism," it will be as well to set out briefly the philosophical perspective from which my critique is offered.

It is important to be clear that what is at issue here is *metaphysical* idealism. In the Preface to *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*, Royce calls attention to his use of the word “idealism” to refer to

the strictly “metaphysical” rather than to what is technically called the “epistemological” meaning of the word *idealism* itself.... In its “epistemological” sense idealism involves a theory of the *nature of our human knowledge*; and various decidedly different theories are called by this name in view of one common feature, namely, the stress that they lay upon the “subjectivity” of a larger or smaller portion of what pretends to be our knowledge of things.... But in its “metaphysical” sense, idealism is a theory as to *the nature of the real world*, however we may come to know that nature. [Royce, *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*, pp. xii-xiii; emphasizes his.]

My own outlook is “metaphysical idealism” in this sense, and in fact I concur to a very great degree with Royce's early work *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*.

I am not, however, undertaking a full-blown defense of such idealism in the present work, although I do make occasional arguments in favor of it. Overall, I am defending here only a minimal sort of objective idealism, perhaps best described by G. Watts Cunningham: “‘To be’ is not necessarily ‘to be perceived,’ [as the young George Berkeley held,] but it is necessarily ‘to be implicated’” [“A Search for System,” in *Contemporary American Philosophy*, George P. Adams and William Montague, eds.; vol. I, p. 272]. Reality, that is, is a logically related system, as Blanshard maintained throughout his philosophical career. Blanshard's view (and mine) is characterized by his former student Elizabeth Lane Beardsley as the view that “*every entity can (in principle) be understood*.” This thesis is what I call “intelligibilism” [in *The Philosophy of Brand Blanshard*, Paul Arthur Schilpp, ed., p. 247; emphasis Beardsley's].

Blanshard himself accepts this characterization in the same volume (p. 259), and indeed this is one of the respects in which his philosophy is essentially Spinozistic; Spinoza, indeed, seems to have begun from

the assumption that everything can in principle be understood. (Cf. Richard Mason, *The God of Spinoza*, p. 108.) And to be thus intelligible is, for Blanshard, to be part of a coherent system in which, ideally at least, each such part can be seen to be necessary.

This overarching systematic whole—which Blanshard, following the British neo-Hegelians, calls the “Absolute”—is in fact the logical subject of all of our judgments. As Royce puts it, “the very Absolute, in all its fullness of life, is even now the object that you really mean by all your fragmentary passing ideas” [quoted without citation in “English and American Absolute Idealism,” by G. Watts Cunningham, in *A History of Philosophical Systems*, Vergilius T.A. Ferm, ed., p. 317].

As Cunningham also notes (p. 321), Bernard Bosanquet and F.H. Bradley concur that the Absolute is the logical subject of every judgment or assertion. Here is Bosanquet: “Every judgment, perceptive or universal, might without altering its meaning be introduced by some such phrase as ‘Reality is such that—,’ ‘The real world is characterised by—’” [*Logic, or the Morphology of Knowledge*, vol. I, p. 78]. And Bradley: “‘Reality is such that S is P,’ may be taken...as a formula which expresses the nature of truth” [“On Some Aspects of Truth,” reprinted as chapter 11 of *Essays on Truth and Reality*].

Is this Absolute personal? Blanshard thinks not, and at any rate sees no way of demonstrating as much. We shall officially take no position here on this question, but in my own view Blanshard abandons theism too hastily.

Is all reality in some way “mental” in nature, or are there nonmental realities too? For the time being we shall content ourselves with the view of Mary Whiton Calkins: “The Universe contains distinctively mental realities; it may or may not also contain non-mental entities, but in any case irreducibly mental entities exist” [“The Philosophical Credo of an Absolutistic Personalist,” in Adams and Montague, vol. I, p. 200]. I shall suggest occasionally, and at one or two points even argue, that apparently nonmental entities may be in a certain sense reducible to mental ones, but if this turns out not to be true, nothing

in the remainder of this book's arguments will suffer thereby. Our positive task here will be, not to mount a thorough defense of Thought, Mind, or Consciousness as the nature of ultimate reality, but to defend a Blanshardian account of reason and its role in understanding reality as a single overarching whole, however characterized (that is, as mental, nonmental, or some combination).

Does this Absolute amount to, or entail, some sort of God, either personal or impersonal? Again, though I am personally a panentheist myself (and clearly, as I implied above, therefore have some important disagreements with Blanshard), the question is largely beyond the scope of the present work and will play little direct part in our critique of Rand's epistemology. But it will be helpful to adduce some pertinent remarks of Thomas Nagel's.

In a very important passage of *The Last Word*, Nagel writes as follows:

If we can reason, it is because our thoughts can obey the order of the logical relations among propositions—so here again we depend on a Platonic harmony.... I call this view alarming...[because] it is hard to know what world picture to associate it with, and difficult to avoid the suspicion that the picture will be religious, or quasi-religious. Rationalism has always had a more religious flavor than empiricism. Even without God, the idea of a natural sympathy between the deepest truths of nature and the deepest layers of the human mind, which can be exploited to allow gradual development of a truer and truer conception of reality, makes us more at home in the universe than is secularly comfortable. [pp 135–36.]

After a short discussion of the “fear of religion” (which Nagel confesses himself to share strongly), he concludes that “this idea—that the capacity of the universe to generate organisms with minds capable of understanding the universe is itself somehow a fundamental feature of the universe—” [p. 138] seems to be inescapable on the view of reason he is defending. (He argues, however, that this idea need not commit anyone to the existence of a “divine person”.)

FEAR OF RELIGION

Now, I find Nagel's remarks highly relevant to a discussion of Rand's epistemology. As Hugo A. Meynell, author of *The Intelligible Universe*, writes in his essay "Hume, Kant, and Rational Theism" [<http://www.origins.org/truth/3truth08.html>]:

There is a great truth which Plato discovered, with some assistance from the Pythagoreans; this is, that there is a real intelligible world which underlies the sensible world of our experience and which we discover by asking questions about that sensible world. This truth is at once presupposed and copiously illustrated by science; it is parodied by the mechanistic materialism which some suppose to be the metaphysical implication of science. Now there is a crucial division in thought about the world, and one fraught with consequences, between those who maintain that the intelligible aspect of reality apparently discovered by Plato is intrinsic to it, and those who are convinced it is a mere subjective device evolved by human beings for describing or controlling it. The former viewpoint leads to a conception of the universe as ablaze with intellectual light, and very naturally and properly issues in an affirmation of the existence of God as the intelligent will responsible for the intelligible universe, rather as Shakespeare is responsible for *The Tempest* and Mozart for the Jupiter symphony. The latter viewpoint, which envisages science as exclusively a matter of control and domination rather than of understanding, makes "the glory and the freshness" disappear from the universe and brings about the *Entzauberung*, the removal of the magic from things, which Max Weber and countless others have thought was a necessary if regrettable consequence of rationality. I believe this conception of the nature of science not only to be spiritually deleterious, but to be incoherent in the final analysis—quite apart from the fact that it appears to remove the grounds for rational theism in the real intelligibility of the universe. (It should be noted that I would by no means deny that control of the physical environment is a proper subsidiary object of science; it is when it becomes its exclusive or dominant aim that it is so unfortunate.) The philosophies of Hume and Kant

strongly encourage this second kind of outlook on science and the universe, and appear to destroy the basis for the first.

Not only philosophers but also informed religious believers of various sorts will recognize that Meynell is here giving expression to an ancient doctrine in which several strands of religious and philosophical thought intersect and which (apart from possible questions about consistency) is the common property of each.

The intelligible order in the cosmos and the divine intelligence from which it is believed to spring are known to Christians and Platonists as the *logos*. Christianity holds that Jesus was and is the incarnation of this *logos*, and some Christians (especially followers of Gordon Haddon Clark) will understand the *logos* to be the very "logic of God". Traditional Jews, for their part, while demurring from this view of Jesus, will share the belief in the order itself and its source in the divine intelligence: they will likely identify this intelligible order by the term "Torah," understood not only as the written text of the Five Books of Moses together with the oral tradition originating from Sinai, but also as the very blueprint of Creation itself. Rationalist philosophers who, like me, stand more or less in the Stoic and/or Spinozan line of succession will recognize this intelligible order as that to which the mind must conform in order to be "free"; those of us with a liking for Royce may even follow him in using the term "Logos" to refer to the single organic Self which we believe to constitute the cosmos (see e.g. *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*, p. 379).

My own specific positions are stated briefly in the appendix. (More briefly still: I am a theologically liberal panentheist, in same the philosophical camp as Spinoza, Royce, and Timothy L.S. Sprigge and spiritually at home among Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman; I share Blanshard's essential views of reason; and among traditional religions my primary loyalties lie with Judaism.) But for the purposes of the present study we shall not attempt to adjudicate among these traditions but shall instead focus on what I take to be the view roughly common to them all. Paraphrasing Brand Blanshard at the end of *The Nature of*

Thought, it is the view that a single intelligible order is in the process of construction or reconstruction in and through all individual knowing minds, and itself constitutes the common order in which all such minds participate.

At any rate, in the passage we have just quoted, Meynell is simply spelling out Nagel's intuition that the philosophical world of the "rationalist" is more "religious" in flavor than that of the "empiricist". I think Meynell is right, but it is no part of my purpose here to argue for that claim.

But while it is no part of the present project to argue directly for theism in any of its varieties, it is very much part of our project to show that Rand's own commitment to atheism seems to have warped her thought at several crucial points. At the very least, it seems clear that she was at some pains to rid philosophy of just those points that smacked of "religion" in the sense Nagel describes. And, importantly, she would not have accepted Meynell's remarks as presenting a genuine dichotomy between "intrinsicism" and "subjectivism": she thought she had found a Third Way, which she called "Objectivism".

I have in mind two major examples; here is the first. As William Lane Craig notes in a debate with Michael Tooley [<http://www.origins.org/offices/billcraig/docs/craig-tooley1.html>]:

God provides the best explanation for the existence of abstract entities. In addition to tangible objects like people and chairs and mountains and trees, philosophers have noticed that there also appear to be abstract objects, like numbers and sets and propositions and properties. These sorts of things seem to have a conceptual reality rather like ideas. And yet it's obvious that they're not just ideas in some human mind. So what is the metaphysical foundation for such abstract entities? The theist has a plausible answer for that question: they are grounded in the mind of God.... [William Lane Craig, in William Lane Craig and Michael Tooley, "A Classic Debate on the Existence of God: November 1994, University of Colorado at Butler".]

And as we shall see, Rand goes to tremendous lengths to argue that such “abstract entities” have no real existence after all.

The second example has to do with ethics and axiology, which we shall be discussing later in the present series of essays. In the debate just quoted, Craig makes further remarks that are relevant to an assessment of Rand's views of “intrinsic” values:

God provides the best explanation for objective moral values in the world. If God does not exist, then objective moral values do not exist. Many theists and atheists alike concur on this point....

[W]e've got to be very careful here. The question here is not: Must we believe in God in order to live a moral life? I'm not claiming that we must. Nor is the question: Can we recognize objective moral values without believing in God? I think we can. Rather, the question is: If God does not exist, do objective moral values exist?

...I just don't see any reason to think that in the absence of God the morality evolved by Homo sapiens is objective.... On the atheistic view, some action, say, rape, may not be socially advantageous and so in the course of human development has become taboo. But that does absolutely nothing to prove that rape is really morally wrong. On the atheistic view, if you can escape the social consequences, there's nothing really wrong with your raping someone. And thus without God there is no absolute right and wrong which imposes itself on our conscience.

But the fact is that objective values do exist, and we all know it. There is no more reason to deny the objective reality of moral values than the objective reality of physical objects. Actions like rape, torture, child abuse aren't just socially unacceptable behavior. They're moral abominations.... Some things are really wrong. Similarly, love, equality, self-sacrifice are really good. But if objective values cannot exist without God and objective values do exist, then it follows logically and inescapably that God exists. [Craig, *ibid.*]

That Rand meant by “intrinsic” what Craig here means by “objective” should be evident to any reader of her essays on ethics. But we shall deal with these issues later in more detail.

While I do agree with Craig's remarks to a great extent (though not completely and not for precisely his reasons), my point here is only that Rand's treatment of epistemology and ethics seems to have been driven in large measure by a desire to do away with anything smacking of theistic belief or evincing the remotest possibility of entailing it. ("I want," wrote the young Rand in 1934, "to fight religion as the root of all human lying and the only excuse for suffering.... I want to be known as the...greatest enemy of religion" [*Journals of Ayn Rand*, pp. 66, 68].) Nor should there be anything controversial about this point; many of her followers would agree with what I just said but insist that it was a virtue.

Indeed Rand herself was occasionally explicit about what she was doing. She wrote the following in her notes for *ATLAS SHRUGGED* on April 26, 1946 (and this passage should be read carefully, not only by religious believers who find features of value in Objectivism, but also by any Objectivists who think that Darwinian evolutionary theory can simply be imported into Rand's philosophy):

The supposition of man's physical descent from monkeys does not necessarily mean that man's soul, the rational faculty, is only an elaboration of an animal faculty, different from the animal's consciousness only in degree, not in kind. It is possible that there was a sharp break, that the rational faculty was like a spark, added to the animal who was ready for it—and this would be actually like a soul entering a body. Or it might be that there is a metaphysical mistake in considering animals as pure matter. There is, scientifically, a most profound break between the living and the non-living. Now life may be the spirit; the animals may be the forms of spirit and matter, in which matter predominates; man may be the highest form, the crown and final goal of the universe, the form of spirit and matter in which the spirit predominates and triumphs. (If there's any value in "feelings" and "hunches"—God! how I feel that this is true!)

If it's now added that the next step is pure spirit—I would ask, why? Pure spirit, with no connection to matter, is inconceivable to our consciousness.... The unity of spirit and matter seems

unbreakable; the pattern of the universe, then, would be: matter, as the tool of the spirit, the spirit giving meaning and purpose to matter. [*Journals of Ayn Rand*, pp. 465–466.]

In short—and this point could easily be documented further—she was expressly concerned to preserve the high view of reason, man, and spirit that grew out of Western religious tradition, and yet to deny that this high view depended on theistic belief. (Interestingly, she cannot even state her own view without using theistic language at least as a source of interjections: “God!”)

To put her view another way: There is no God, and man is made in His image. (I wish I could claim full credit for this turn of phrase, but I cannot. The philosopher George Santayana retained close aesthetic and emotional ties to Roman Catholicism despite his rejection of literal theistic belief; his religious outlook was therefore summarized by some as the view that “there is no God, and Mary is His Mother”.)

That this was Rand's view is really not open to serious dispute. What her followers will disagree with is my contention that her attempt to flesh out this view, as a resolution of what she took to be a false dichotomy, was in fact a complete failure. But that point will have to emerge from our discussion.

However, it should be noted in advance that if Rand in fact relies on the “abstract objects” the existence of which she officially denies, and if her own account of them is found insufficient, then we will have reason to believe that her atheism—or, in Nagel's terms, her “fear of religion”—was a driving force behind the development of her philosophy. And a major theme of this volume will be that Rand had to debase the concept and practice of rationality itself in order to promote her aims—as if to say, in effect, “If we can't have reason without God, we must redefine ‘reason’ to mean something we *can* have without God.”

As will also become clear in our later discussions, I am not at all contending that anyone espousing “atheism” is *automatically* irrational. The problem in Rand's case is that she is actually evincing what Nicholas Rescher somewhere calls “axiological atheism,” roughly the belief

(or emotional attitude) that it would be a very bad thing if God were to exist. I shall argue in a later chapter that Rand's *own* atheism is unreasonable, being based not on sound arguments but on Rand's largely unexamined emotions, and that her express philosophical thought is warped at nearly every point by her desire to avoid any philosophical tenets that seemed to her (often correctly) to be associated with any form of theism.

RAND THE IDEALIST?

Why should a criticism of Objectivism offered from this vantage point be of interest? Basically, because the central epistemological plank of the minimal sort of idealism I am adopting is one which Rand herself shared. Of course her "Benevolent Universe premise" aligns her with Nagel in her belief that we are "at home" in the cosmos to a greater degree than secularists usually find it convenient to admit. However, as we shall argue later, Rand seems to have resisted rationalistic idealism out of the same sort of opposition to religion to which Nagel refers.

Nevertheless there is a basic affinity between Rand's fundamental approach to epistemology—however flawed we find it to be—and that of historical idealism. Here is J.E. Creighton: "[S]peculative idealism, as occupying the standpoint of experience, has never separated the mind from the external order of nature. It knows no ego-centric predicament, because it recognizes no ego 'alone with its states,' standing apart from the order of nature and from a society of minds. It thus dismisses as unmeaning those problems which are sometimes called 'epistemological,' as to how the mind as such can know reality as such. Without any epistemological grace before meat it falls to work to philosophize, assuming, naively if you please, that the mind by its very nature is in touch with reality.... If it be said that this is mere assumption, and not proof, I reply that this is the universal assumption upon which all experience and all science proceeds" ["Two Types of Idealism," originally published in the September 1917 issue of *The Philo-*

sophical Review and reprinted as ch. 14 of *Studies in Speculative Philosophy*; quoted by Cunningham in Ferm's volume].

Though we shall have to be a bit more self-critical in our "philosophizing" than Creighton's remarks would seem to allow, it seems clear enough that Creighton's characterization of speculative idealism rests it on foundations that Rand should have found congenial. Here, similarly, is H. Wildon Carr: "Knowledge is not an external relation. There are not pure objects on the one hand and indifferent subjects on the other. Mind in abstraction from nature, nature in abstraction from mind, are unsubstantial shadows" ["Idealism as a Principle in Science and Philosophy," in *Contemporary British Philosophy*, J.H. Muirhead, ed., p. 111].

As we shall see, this principle was very much at work in Rand's own philosophizing whether she recognized it or not. And indeed, on the broadest possible reading of the term, she was an idealist herself: "In the final analysis, any doctrine that denies the existence of in-principle unknowable 'things-in-themselves' and insists that the only reality there is is a potentially knowable reality is a form of idealism" [Nicholas Rescher's entry "Idealism" in *A Companion to Metaphysics*, p. 228]. Cf. Royce: "The *opposite* of an idealist, in this [metaphysical] sense, is one who maintains the ultimate existence of wholly unspiritual realities at the basis of experience and as the genuine truth of the world—such unspiritual realities for instance as an absolute 'Unknowable'" [*The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*, p. xiv; emphasis his]. We shall see later that Rand was firm in her denial of unknowable "things-in-themselves" even though she would presumably disagree with Royce that this commits her to a belief that the world is ultimately founded on mind or spirit.

Moreover, despite her railings against other philosophers, Rand herself was (as former Objectivist George Walsh somewhere puts it) not much of a reader of primary sources. Since Blanshard is one of the few philosophers whom we can be sure Rand actually read (and even somewhat approved), our discussion here should also be of relevance to stu-

dents of Rand who are interested purely historically in the sources of her ideas. (It may also be of interest to readers of Chris Matthew Sciabarra's groundbreaking study *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical*, though I make little direct reference to that work in what follows. My own reading of Rand has at least some points of contact with Sciabarra's, though—to oversimplify our respective theses a good deal—where he believes her to be practicing “dialectic,” I believe her to be relying implicitly and for the most part unintentionally on premises to which her explicit philosophy does not entitle her.)

In the end, our fundamental philosophical criticism of Rand will be that she failed to get clear, indeed even to make any real effort to get clear, the relation between thought and its object—an issue that is of direct concern to the metaphysical idealist. Cf. Royce again: “A metaphysical idealist will of course deal with the problem of the relation of knowledge and its object, and will try to get at the nature of the real world by means of a solution of this very problem” [*The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*, p. xiv]. This Rand did not do, and because she did not do it, her implicit metaphysical idealism never came under serious scrutiny. As a result, I shall argue, she neither developed her implicit idealism to the level of a respectable philosophy nor noticed that her explicit principles would have disallowed the very presuppositions on which she relied in arriving at them. And at each step, I shall claim, she was moved to adopt her explicit, “empiricist” principles by her desire to avoid any taint of theism.

This critique should also therefore be of interest even to those who completely disagree, or think they do, with my account of objective idealism, rationalism, and panentheism (as does, for example, Greg Nyquist, the author of *Ayn Rand Contra Human Nature*). If nothing else, it should make clear that Rand was attempting the impossible: she was trying to show that one could coherently combine a more or less “religious” outlook on life and humanity with an explicit philosophy of secularism, materialism, nominalism, empiricism, and naturalism. If she is found to have imported into her arguments the premises of the

“opposition”, then that fact is surely significant for Objectivism’s prospects as a secular philosophy. People of a turn of mind altogether opposite to my own may therefore still appreciate my revealing of Rand’s hidden premises, and reject Objectivism for an entirely different set of reasons.

Though most of our findings shall be negative, our approach will as far as possible be what Michael Oakeshott (in *Experience and Its Modes*) described as exposing the half-truth in the error and the error in the half-truth. “Most controversies,” as Spinoza remarked, “arise from this, that men do not correctly express what is in their mind, or they misunderstand another’s mind. For, in reality, while they are hotly contradicting one another, they are either in agreement or have different things in mind, so that the apparent errors and absurdities of their opponents are not really so” [*Ethics*, Scholium to Prop. 47, Part II; quoted from *Ethics, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect, and Selected Letters*, tr. Samuel Shirley, p. 95].

Sometimes, at least, we shall find that Rand (or Leonard Peikoff) had the kernel of a good idea (adopted, ordinarily, from some other unacknowledged source) but failed to develop it in a coherent fashion. (And although I am not especially sympathetic to her style of thought, we shall at least try in these cases to give credit where credit is due and get clear ourselves what underlying truths she must have had, however unclearly, in mind.) More often than not, however, we shall also find that Rand simply did not do her homework, and that in such cases it was Rand who either “incorrectly express[ed]” what was in her mind or misunderstood “another’s mind,” so that the “apparent errors and absurdities” of *her* opponents were “not really so”.

“The time is long past,” Royce remarked over a hundred years ago, “when really intelligent thinkers sought to do anything outside of intimate relations to the history of thought. It still happens, indeed, that even in our day some lonesome student will occasionally publish a philosophical book that he regards as entirely revolutionary, as digging far beneath all that thought has ever yet accomplished, and as begin-

ning quite afresh the labors of human reflection.... [Y]ou will always find them either ignorant of the history of the very subject that they propose to revolutionize or incapable of reading this history intelligently. What they give you is always an old doctrine, more or less disguised in a poorly novel terminology, and much worse thought out than it has already been thought out, time after time, in the history of speculation.... [T]he sole corrective of the error is a certain amount of philosophical study of an historical sort before one begins to print one's speculations" [*The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*, p. 343]. It was in 1892 that Royce published the lecture in which these remarks were included, but the century that followed has more than borne out his warning. Indeed, it would be hard to find a better description of Rand's philosophical writings.

Overall, then, I shall argue for a "two-tiered" view of Rand's epistemology: namely, that she has offered an explicit philosophy that is basically "empiricist" in outlook, but arrived at it and (incompletely) developed it by implicitly relying on principles or premises that properly belong to rationalistic idealism. Her essential failure, I shall contend, is not that she offered a philosophy with absolutely *no* truth in it—which would be strictly impossible on the philosophical outlook I shall be defending—but that through various failures of study, reflection, and introspection, and under the influence of an irrational revulsion from any form of theistic belief, she failed to develop her ideas to the point of, or even within a considerable distance of, what Spinoza would have called "adequacy".

Our first topic falls squarely under this description. We shall begin by briefly describing the philosophical problem Rand believed she had set out to solve: the problem of universals.

Chapter 1:

The (Genuine) Problem of Universals

Most people believe that an issue of this kind is empty academic talk, of no practical significance to anyone—which blinds them to its consequences in their own lives. [Ayn Rand, “The Metaphysical Versus the Man-Made,” in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 29.]

WHAT IS A “UNIVERSAL”?

A “universal” is any property, quality, relation, characteristic, attribute, or combination of these—generally, any “feature of reality”—which may be identically present in diverse contexts. The “problem” of universals is—to put it in any of several ways—whether there are, or can be, strict identities between disparate contexts; whether two objects can literally have common attributes; whether universals (i.e., repeatable predicables, or qualities that can be “predicated” of more than one object) are really and genuinely present in their apparent “instances” or whether the mind merely behaves as though they are.

(We are not much concerned in this volume with the Hegelian and neo-Hegelian understanding of the “concrete universal”. Basically, a “concrete universal” in this sense is a coherent system, and although we shall be concerned with coherent systems we shall not be using this term for them. In nineteenth- and early twentieth-century idealism, the “concrete universal” was held to be the true alternative to the “abstract universal,” the latter of which was allegedly an abstract common feature extracted from a class of similar entities. The idealists,

more or less following Hegel in this regard, held that the abstract universal is a false universal, and the true universal is a single overarching system in which each of the entities in question finds a coherent place. This understanding is entirely consistent with the account I am about to offer but does not, in my view, adequately address the role of fully specific universals within such a system.)

What is odd about universals is that they seem to be able to be in more than one place at the same time. (Somehow being present at more than one *time* doesn't seem so counterintuitive—even though it probably should.) If this book and that one are the exact same shade of green, the shade itself appears to be identically present in each book or our experiences thereof; if I have five dollars and you have five fingers, the number “five” seems to be present in both my set of bills and your set of digits. For that matter, if my cat is exactly the same color this evening as she was this morning, that color seems to be identically present at two different times. If not, what is it about these apparent instances that makes them “instances” in the first place?

Even the perception of a single quality can be shown to involve a real universal. Suppose I perceive a certain precise shade of red. The perception cannot be instantaneous; it must extend “through” some nonzero interval of time, or I could not be said to perceive it. Likewise, it must occupy some nonzero volume of perceptual space (or, in more traditional parlance, be “extended”). But in that case I seem to be able to subdivide both the interval of time and the volume of space, thereby in thought turning the red patch into two or more red patches in which the same precise shade of red is identically present. This argument seems to show that, if we deny the existence of all real universals, we would be in the odd position of denying that even *one* thing can be “the same”.

We shall have more to say later about why the problem is important; for now I simply want to have it clearly stated. I have tried discussing universals with Objectivists before, and I have found that even getting the issue straight is something of a chore.

This is a surprising difficulty to have in dealing with a philosophy expressly devoted to solving the “problem of universals”. For Objectivism does take the solution of this problem as its central task.

In her essay “For the New Intellectual,” by way of introducing her own allegedly groundbreaking insights, Rand characterizes “post-Renaissance philosophy” as “*a concerted attack on man’s conceptual faculty*” [the italics are hers]. According to Rand, even those philosophers who did *not* “intend to invalidate conceptual knowledge” nevertheless “did more to destroy it than its enemies”—precisely because these philosophers “were unable to offer a solution to the ‘problem of universals,’ that is: to define the relationship of concepts to perceptual data—and to prove the validity of scientific induction” [in *For the New Intellectual*, p. 30].

This Rand believes herself to have done. The preface to the same volume indicates that Rand is “working on...a treatise” which will present the full system of Objectivism; this treatise “will deal predominantly with...epistemology, and will present a new theory of the nature, source and validation of concepts” [*ibid.*, p. vii]. The full treatise never appears—but the theory in question is the one she later presents in the monograph (originally a series of essays) published as *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, and we shall begin dealing with that work in our next chapter.

First we must be clear, at least, that Rand departs from standard philosophical usage in using “universal” as a synonym for “concept” and “abstraction” (which, we shall soon see, is just what she does, although she never quite gets around to offering us a definition of “universal”). Here, partly to make this point firmly and partly to introduce a few references for interested readers, are some excerpts from relevant sources.

Objects around us share features with other objects. It is in the nature of most such features that they can characterize indefinitely many objects. Because of this the features are called universals and the main problem is to describe their status. [A.R. Lacey, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, entry for “Universals and particulars,” p. 368 of

the 1996 edition. Antony Flew's dictionary of philosophy gives a similar definition.]

The problem of universals has a rich tradition that dates back, at least, to Plato. It is a distinctively philosophical problem[, as is] demonstrated by the fact that people other than philosophers are generally unaware that the problem even exists. Nevertheless, it is a real problem because particulars are, and can only be, described by their characteristics. Such characteristics are qualities and qualities are what are generally understood to be universals.... [I]t is indubitable that relations exist, e.g., that San Francisco is north of Los Angeles. Once it is understood that qualities and relations are ontologically inescapable, it remains to determine the nature of such beasts. [Andrew B. Schoedinger, *The Problem of Universals*, p. ix (Introduction). This volume includes an extensive collection of topical readings from throughout philosophical history.]

At this point I think we can get a deeper view of the Problem of Universals. There are those philosophers who hold that when we say truly that two tokens [apparent instances] are of the same type, then sameness here should be understood in terms of strict identity.... Historically, these philosophers are called Realists and are said to believe in the reality of universals.

On the other side there are philosophers who...hold, with John Locke, that 'all things that exist are only particulars.' There are no (strict) identities reaching across different tokens; there are no universals. Philosophers who take such a view are traditionally called Nominalists. [D.M. Armstrong, *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction*, pp. 5–6. A highly recommended volume in general.]

The phenomenon of similarity or attribute agreement gives rise to the debate between realists and nominalists. Realists claim that where objects are similar or agree in attribute, there is some one thing that they share or have in common; nominalists deny this. Realists call these shared entities universals; they say that universals are entities that can be simultaneously exemplified by several different objects; and they claim that universals encompass the properties things possess, the relations into which they enter, and the kinds to

which they belong. [Michael J. Loux, *Metaphysics*, p. 20, from the overview of the first of two chapters on the topic “The problem of universals”. One chapter each is devoted to realism and to nominalism, which are correctly presented as exhausting the possibilities. And note that the book’s title is *Metaphysics*, not *Epistemology*. Robert Audi’s work of the latter title in the same series (Routledge Contemporary Introductions to Philosophy) contains not a single word on universals—for the very good reason that, as we shall see, the “problem of universals” is an ontological problem, not an epistemological one.]

The entry under “Universals” in Blackwell’s *A Companion to Metaphysics* is also helpful, especially as regards the various subheadings of realism and nominalism. (And as above, note that this is the companion to “metaphysics,” not to “epistemology”. The latter volume has no entry for “universals,” because, again, the problem of universals is ontological rather than epistemological.)

And since, in our discussion, I shall be relying on philosopher Brand Blanshard at numerous points, I may as well quote him too:

[W]hat we mean by a universal is a quality or relation or complex of these that may be identical in diverse contexts. [Brand Blanshard, *Reason and Analysis*, p. 392. In *The Nature of Thought*, v. I, p. 649, Blanshard argues that the existence of such intercontextual identities entails that space and time cannot be real just as they appear to us. No wonder Rand is worried.]

Anticipating our argument a bit: before one announces to the world that with half an hour of introspection one has solved a philosophical problem of some two thousand years’ standing, it is advisable to make sure one has correctly understood the problem one is supposedly trying to solve. Since Rand does not do so, her sole contribution to the problem of universals is to confuse her readers, perhaps irreparably, about what it is.

In fact she does not solve, or even raise, the genuine problem of universals at all, as I have demonstrated to my own satisfaction not only by reading her works thoroughly but by asking Objectivists, “According to Rand, is it *possible* for two objects literally to have properties in common?” Usually, when I do so, there is a minor flurry of responses that say, in effect, “That’s a trivial question to which the answer is obviously _____” —and then half say “yes” and half say “no”. My conclusion, then and now, is that Rand does not address this question.

Whatever Objectivists may say to the contrary, the question I quoted in the preceding paragraph *is* the problem of universals, and Rand not only fails to “solve” it, she does not appear even to know what it is. Here is a brief excerpt from Michael Huemer’s “Why I Am Not An Objectivist” [<http://home.sprynet.com/~owl1/rand.htm>]:

I have here two white pieces of paper. They are not the same piece of paper, but they have something in common: they are both white. What there are two of are called “particulars”—the pieces of paper are particulars. What is or can be common to multiple particulars are called “universals”—whiteness is a universal. A universal is capable of being present in multiple instances, as whiteness is present in many different pieces of paper. A particular doesn’t have “instances” and can only be present in one place at a time (distinct parts of it can be in different locations though), and particulars are not “present in” things....

Also understand that I don’t by a “universal” mean a certain kind of word, idea or concept. I mean the sort of thing that you attribute to the objects of your knowledge: Whiteness itself is the universal, not the word “white” and not the concept “white.”... Whiteness is not a concept; it is a color.... I say this because the confusion between concepts and their referents is all too common, both inside and outside Objectivist circles.

Exactly. And we shall soon see how Rand deals—or fails to deal—with this topic.

First, though, by way of introducing several themes that shall concern us throughout this volume, we shall look briefly at a short passage that illustrates many of the points we shall be raising later.

SCENES FROM A “WORKSHOP”

What follows, interspersed with my own comments, is from an edited transcript of a “workshop” Rand conducted on some unspecified date with unnamed people, as edited by Harry Binswanger [*Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, pp. 137–141].

(According to one source [[href=http://www.bomis.com/rings/obj/17](http://www.bomis.com/rings/obj/17)], “Prof. A” was Harry Binswanger himself, “Prof. B” was Allan Gotthelf, and “Prof. C” was someone named Nicholas Bykovitz—as recollected by Lawrence Gould, who was himself “Prof. M”. Incidentally, it does not appear that all of them were “professors” at the time, if indeed any of them were, so it is unclear what “Prof.” is supposed to stand for. Leonard Peikoff also seems to have been one of the participants: Gould identifies him as “Prof. E”).

I hesitate to rely too heavily on this passage, both because of its brevity and because of the practical impossibility of determining how much it has been edited. I shall therefore not base any arguments directly upon it at this point; I present it here only because it does represent, in microcosmic form, many of the errors and other difficulties we shall be discussing further on. But we shall be returning to certain of these “workshops” when we are further along in our arguments, and readers skeptical that I have understood this or that point of Rand’s epistemology are advised to re-read this passage later as well.

Prof. A:...Now, as I understand it,...measurement-omission is accomplished by means of differentiation. Take the concept of “blue.” You begin as a child with two blue objects of different shades perhaps (so their specific color measurements differ), and, say, one red object. And then you are able to see that the two blues belong together as opposed to the red; whereas if you just consider

the two blues by themselves, you would only be aware of the differences between them; you wouldn't see them as similar until you contrasted them to the red.

AR: That's right.

Note that the possibility that the two blues are *identical* is mentioned briefly and thereafter ignored. Note also Rand's claim that in order to form a concept, we need a third object as a sort of "foil" in comparison to which we can see two objects as similar. This point will come back to plague her account of "axiomatic concepts," which by the present standard are not concepts at all since—as she explicitly tell us—they are not formed by contrasting anything with anything else. [See *IOE*, p. 58: the two paragraphs beginning, "Since axiomatic concepts are not formed by differentiating one group of existents from others..."]

Prof. A: Now...[i]s it that by means of this differentiation you see blueness as a range or category of measurements within the Conceptual Common Denominator: color?...You see the blue of this object and the somewhat different blue of that other object; both have specific measurements, but those measurements fall into one category, as opposed to the measurements of some red object, which fall outside that category. So that the omission of measurements is seeing the measurements as falling within a given range or category of measurements...within the Conceptual Common Denominator.

AR: Yes, that's right. Now, the essential thing there is that you cannot form a concept by integration alone or by differentiation alone. You need both, always. You need to observe similarities in a certain group of objects and differences from some other group of objects within the common standard or kind of measurement....

Here again, this point will come back to haunt her. She claims, with great definiteness, that we always require "foil" objects against which to perceive similarities among a group of nonidentical existents (even though the "always" admits of an exception in the case of "axiomatic

concepts”). And note once again that she never raises the question whether the two objects might be an identical shade of blue.

Note also: we have been told that we cannot perceive “similarities” unless there is a third, dissimilar object present. But we are also told that we really do perceive the similarities in question (and we shall be told later that they are really there quite independently of our perceiving them). So the business about the third object is something of a red herring, having to do only with the psychological conditions under which we can *recognize* a similarity and not with the real existence of similarity relations themselves. Even if Rand is right about our requiring a third “foil” object, this fact is no more interesting *epistemologically* than the fact that we can’t see colors in the dark.

(Cf. the following from Peikoff: “When we form a concept, we group objects on the basis of similarities, which we can detect only in relation to a background of contrasting entities. Two tables, perceived as separate objects, are simply different. To grasp their similarity, we must see them, say, in relation to chairs; then they emerge as similar, similar in shape as against the shape of chairs” [*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, p. 121]. Even if this claim is true, it means only that—as Peikoff himself writes—we can *detect* similarities only when a third, “contrasting” entity is present.)

Nor can I fathom why we “always” need a third *object*. If we have discriminated two objects, we have already “differentiated” them from their background, have we not? (Does the background count as an “object”?) Even if we require a “foil” of some sort, why may it not be simply another attribute (or complex of attributes)?

And speaking of attributes, note also that we are apparently granted the real existence of “ranges,” “categories,” “standards,” and “kinds”—at least as far as measurements of perceptually-given attributes are concerned. These brief remarks appear to rely on a perfectly ordinary “realist” understanding, not only of attributes, but of *kinds* of attributes. We shall see later that Rand has swept the problem of “nat-

ural kinds” entirely under the carpet and goes about blithely assuming the real existence of such kinds.

Prof. B: In forming the concept “blue,” a child would perceive that two blue things, with respect to color, are similar and are different from some red thing. And he places the blues in a range of measurements within the broader category, red being somewhere else on the scale.

AR: Right.

Prof. B: Now, in fact, he doesn’t have a category of measurements explicitly, so what actually goes on, as you indicate, is that he perceives similarities and differences directly.

AR: That’s right.

So according to Rand we *directly perceive* similarity relationships. And, moreover, we do so without knowing anything about the underlying measurements themselves:

Prof. B: To describe the process of concept-formation on a conscious level, one wouldn’t have to refer to omitting measurements [because one does not ordinarily possess, or need to possess, knowledge of such measurements]. Is the purpose then of discussing it in terms of omitting measurements to stress the metaphysical basis of the process?

AR: No, not only to stress the metaphysical basis, but to explain both the metaphysical and the epistemological aspects. Because, in modern philosophy, they dismiss similarity practically as if it were ineffable; the whole nominalist school rests on that in various ways. The nominalists claim that we form concepts on the ground of vague similarities, and then they go into infinite wasted discussions about what we mean by similarity, and they arrive at the conclusion that nobody can define similarity. So that one of the important issues here, and the reason for going into the process in detail, is to indicate the metaphysical base of similarity and the fact that it is grasped perceptually, that it is not a vague, arbitrary abstraction, that similarity is perceptually given, but the understanding of what similarity means has to be arrived at philosophically or scientific-

cally. And similarity, when analyzed, amounts to: measurements omitted.

We aren't told which "nominalists" make such claims and then "go into" such "infinite wasted discussions," of course. But note the advance confirmation of a point we shall make later: what Rand is doing is trying to provide a non-vague, non-arbitrary formulation of "similarity" or "resemblance". She has not granted that any two objects may literally have properties in common; her examples assume the contrary (and so, as we shall soon see, never get around to raising the problem of universals). She is dealing with one issue only: how we form concepts based on, and of, ranges of properties which are assumed not to be identical.

And yet her view of measurements is firmly realistic; the attributes in question, their measurements, and the relations between them that allow them to be ordered along a spectrum are acknowledged to be "really out there". The position for which she is actually arguing is simply that all cases of "perceived" similarity are ultimately based on real relations of commensurability whether we are aware of it or not.

Prof. C: I understand how one grasps similarity on the perceptual level. Aristotle, presumably, was unable to identify how we grasp similarity beyond that point...

AR: He didn't say you grasp similarities intuitively. He said you grasp the essence of things intuitively.... He assumed that there are such things as essences—and that's the Platonism in him. But he didn't agree with Plato's theory that essences are in a separate world. He held that essences do exist, but only in concretes. And the process of concept-formation, in his view, is the process of grasping that essence, and therefore grouping concretes in certain categories because they have that essence in common.... He isn't concerned with perceived similarities and differences. And since he can't explain how it is that we grasp these essences, which are not perceived by our senses, he would have to treat that grasp as a direct intuition, a form of direct awareness like percepts, but of a different order and therefore apprehending different objects.

For Aristotle, she says, “essences” are “not perceived by our senses” and so must be grasped by “direct intuition”. Rand seems to be bothered by the possibility that reason may provide us with direct intuition of the structure of reality; this point too shall concern us later. But for the time being, note that Rand is confusing two issues here: the possible existence of essences, and the process by which we allegedly apprehend such essences. Again she conflates the question what constitutes knowledge with the question under what conditions knowledge becomes psychologically possible. Even if she is successful in her arguments, she will have shown, not that there are no “real essences,” but that we apprehend them through sensory perception rather than by rational intuition.

Here we see a hint of a deep problem in Rand’s epistemology: note that little phrase, “perceived by our senses”. We shall repeatedly have occasion to wonder whether the “senses” can do all the work Rand eventually heaps upon them. (We shall have a similar wonder about perception. Note Rand’s earlier remark that similarity is “grasped perceptually”. “Grasped” is an interesting term to use in the context of perception; it seems to imply that perception itself involves some sort of rational apprehension. Is Rand building *reason* into the “perceptual level”?)

And here also we see the beginning of a confusion that will concern us in our next two chapters: the difficulty of deciding whether, in the final analysis, Rand is a nominalist or a realist as regards the existence of universals. Disagreement is surely possible here, and I have changed my own mind on this point as I have read and studied Rand’s epistemological writings.

At one time I took her, as regards universals, to be a realist who was trying to show that the nominalistic understanding of “resemblance” actually rests on a foundation of realism. But my best opinion at this point is that Rand sets out to be a nominalist and falls into realism only by accident, neither knowing nor caring that her analysis of similarity presumes the existence of real universals. (Of course I mean these terms

to have their standard philosophical meanings, not the tendentious misdefinitions Rand gave them.)

To show this, we must look very critically at her account of “concept-formation”. To that task we now turn.

Chapter 2: The Optical Illusion of Objectivism

All philosophical con games count on your using words as vague approximations. You must not take...any abstract statement [] as if it were approximate. Take it literally. Don't translate it, don't glamorize it, don't make the mistake of thinking, as many people do: "Oh, nobody could possibly mean this!" and then proceed to endow it with some whitewashed meaning of your own. Take it straight, for what it *does* say and mean. [Ayn Rand, "Philosophical Detection," in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 16; emphases hers.]

RAND THE NOMINALIST?

Rand's epistemological outlook is easily stated. She maintains that all knowledge ultimately depends on, and indeed comes through, sensory perception; she regards "reason" as the faculty which in some manner "integrates" the material provided by the senses. (In all of this she is a perfectly standard-issue empiricist, though she would not use that term to describe herself.)

Concepts or "universals," she holds, are simply mental "file folders" for groups of similar existents; their importance lies not in their corresponding *directly* to any features of reality (though of course they are supposed to "refer" to reality in some way), but solely in their meeting the human need for cognitive economy.

Her approach to the "problem of universals" may be summarized as follows. She denies that concepts refer to really-out-there "universals"

that are somehow present “in” their instances. She holds instead that concepts refer to open-ended *groups* of “existents” that human beings class together (for human purposes) because of perceived similarities. These perceived similarities, in turn, either are or reduce to relations of commensurability (measurability in terms of a common unit).

For Rand, then, a “concept” is a creation of the human mind which serves the purpose of cognitive efficiency, but does not directly “refer” to some real “form,” or “essence,” or “universal”. Nevertheless, it is not arbitrary; it has real referents, namely that open-ended collection of real objects whose measurements fall into the range specified by the concept’s definition (though these objects are not, *à la* Plato, universals themselves and do not, *à la* Aristotle, instantiate universals). Concepts are therefore neither “intrinsic” to reality (universals don’t somehow sit “out there” in their apparent instances) nor “subjective” (i.e., arbitrary, dependent only on our wishes and whims and not subject to any check by the “real world”); they are objective in that (a) they refer (when they are “valid”) to real features of the world in which we live, and in that (b) in order to *be* “valid” they must conform to the objective requirements of human cognition.

It is from this very contention that her philosophy apparently takes its name. Introducing her famous trichotomy (“intrinsic” vs. “subjective” vs. “objective”), she writes as follows:

The extreme realist (Platonist) and the moderate realist (Aristotelian) schools of thought regard the referents of concepts as *intrinsic*, i.e., as “universals” inherent in things.... to be perceived by man directly...but perceived by some non-sensory or extra-sensory means. The nominalist and the conceptualist schools regard concepts as *subjective*, i.e., as products of man’s consciousness, unrelated to the facts of reality, as mere “names” or notions arbitrarily assigned to arbitrary groupings of concretes on the ground of vague, inexplicable resemblances.... None of these schools regards concepts as *objective*, i.e., as neither revealed nor invented, but as produced by man’s consciousness in accordance with the facts of reality, as mental integrations of factual data computed by man-as

the products of a cognitive method of classification whose processes must be performed by man, but whose content is dictated by reality. [IOE, pp. 53–54; all emphases Rand’s. In *The Virtue of Selfishness* she makes a similar and closely related argument about values which will occupy our attention later.]

We must note two points about this passage.

The first point is that Rand appears to consider briefly, and then to dismiss without argument, the possibility that “universals” are not concepts but the *referents* of concepts, features of reality that are actually “inherent in things”. If she rejects this possibility, as she apparently does, then her explicit ontology should be classed as a form of nominalism, and her epistemology should be classed as a form of “conceptualism”.

(Some Objectivists and quasi-Objectivists seem to recognize that Rand may well have been a “conceptualist” despite her explicit rejection of “conceptualism” in IOE. For example, Carolyn Ray, in her Indiana University Ph.D. dissertation *Identity and Universals: A Conceptualist Approach to Logical, Metaphysical, and Epistemological Problems of Contemporary Identity Theory* [<http://enlightenment.supersaturated.com/essays/text/carolynray/diss/index.html>], defends a version of “conceptualism” which she locates in the line of succession from William of Ockham and John Locke to David Kelley. Rand’s IOE is mentioned in the bibliography but neither quoted nor cited, so far as I can tell, nowhere in the text; we may, I think, take the liberty of inferring that Ray regards Rand as a conceptualist herself. Moreover, Ray does not seem to regard conceptualism as a form of nominalism, and the reader should be aware that her usage of these terms, whether technically correct or not, is at least in accordance with that of some mainstream philosophers. In the present book we are regarding “nominalism” as an ontological theory which denies the reality of universals, and “conceptualism” as an epistemological theory which maintains that knowledge is held in the form of concepts *because* “concepts” are the only true “universals”. On that understanding it is

possible to be a nominalist *and* a conceptualist, and a conceptualist will ordinarily be a nominalist too. Indeed, we shall later meet a philosopher—Roy Wood Sellars—who expressly claims to be both.)

But *does* Rand quite reject the possibility that concepts may refer to real universals? Or is she merely rejecting the claim that we perceive real universals by nonsensory means? What she actually rejects is the combined claim that (a) there are real universals *and* that (b) we “perceive” them by a means other than the senses. But this conjunction is false if either of the conjoined claims is false—and so we cannot tell from this remark alone whether Rand rejects claim (a), the existence of real universals themselves.

(By the way, this is a fairly common pattern in the writings, not only of Rand, but of her followers as well: Rand attaches a “rider” to a position, rejects or refutes the “rider,” and seems to think she has thereby rejected or refuted the position itself. Cf. the following from Tara Smith’s *Moral Rights and Political Freedom*: “My proposal is not that life is an intrinsic good that people have an unchosen duty to preserve” [p. 43]. Does Smith reject the claim that life is an intrinsic good, or only the claim that it is an intrinsic good *which we have an unchosen duty to preserve*? The two are not identical in meaning; there may be intrinsic goods that impose no duties on us. Smith probably thinks otherwise, but as her passage stands, she is either fudging a distinction or poisoning a well. We shall see this pattern repeatedly, but I shall not explicitly draw attention to it every time we encounter it.)

At any rate, the difficulty of getting clear what Rand means on this point makes two things evident: first, that Rand does not devote any sustained or careful attention to the genuine problem of universals, and second, that it is therefore hard to tell for certain whether she should be classed as a realist or a nominalist. And the difficulty is compounded by the fact that—as we shall have ample occasion to note later—Rand is not always very careful herself to distinguish between concepts and their referents.

But as we shall see in just a moment, there is something that strongly indicates a presumption that Rand is a nominalist: her initial posing of the problem already presumes that the possibility of real universals has already been eliminated.

This question brings us to our second point about the passage quoted above, and gives an indication of something that will concern us later: Rand's *grounds* for ruling out the existence of real universals. In the passage we are now examining, we have seen that she appears to reject them on the argument that, if universals were real, we would have to acquire our knowledge of them via "non-sensory" or "extra-sensory" means. (And again, this suggestion seems to confirm that she has not given any attention to the problem of universals. As we have already noted, even if her contention were sound, it would not establish that there are no real universals—only that, if there are any, we "perceive" them by means of the senses rather than by, say, rational insight. Whether even this restated and restricted claim is plausible we shall presently inquire.) We shall see this pattern repeatedly in all that follows: Rand is a bit overeager, here and elsewhere, to deny that reason has any task distinct from the organization of purely sensory data, and this overeagerness leads her to reject positions she has not examined carefully.

But it is with the first point that we shall begin, for it is also where Rand begins. We have looked at a comparatively late passage in *IOE* in order to get clear where Rand wants her argument to take her. But the passage from which we have quoted is an all but verbatim recapitulation of the problem she poses in her foreword, and in order to examine her solution we shall start with her initial summary of that problem.

RAND'S STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

It is crucial that we understand as precisely as possible the problem that Rand is setting out to solve. Her own statement is as follows:

The issue of concepts (known as the “problem of universals”) is philosophy’s central issue. Since man’s knowledge is gained and held in conceptual form, the validity of man’s knowledge depends on the validity of concepts. But concepts are abstractions or universals, and everything that man perceives is particular, concrete. What is the relationship between abstractions and concretes? To what precisely do concepts refer in reality? Do they refer to something real, something that exists—or are they merely inventions of man’s mind, arbitrary constructs or loose approximations that cannot claim to represent knowledge? [*IOE*, p.1.]

We should note at once that Rand’s later remarks are not *quite* a verbatim recapitulation of the problem she poses here. When she initially sets out to state the problem of universals, she identifies “universals” with “concepts” and does not consider the possibility that universals might be the *referents* of concepts. Later, and only later, she dismisses the possibility that universals are “inherent in things”. But she is not entitled to dismiss a possibility she has never raised.

Rand is conflating distinct but related questions; most importantly, she has misstated the actual “problem of universals” through failure to define her terms. So let us again define ours: a universal is a repeatable predicable, a “feature” of any kind that can occur, appear, or be predicated of reality, in more than one context. The genuine problem of universals is: do any universals exist, and if so, which ones and in what sense? (And if not, why do we seem to think they do?)

The “issue of concepts” is not exactly the same as the problem of universals with which Rand has parenthetically identified it, nor is either of these identical with the problem of how abstractions are related to concretes. More precisely, these three problems are the same only on the hypothesis that nominalism is the correct ontology. Rand is simply assuming her unacknowledged solution at the outset: namely, that a concept is an abstraction, and that an abstraction is a universal.

It is easy to confuse abstractions and universals because the most common “universals” are such generic terms as “man” and “horse”—and, historically, it was through the consideration of such terms that

the problem first arose. But the fact that these terms are abstract or generic is not what makes them universals; “precisely seven and a half inches long,” being repeatable, is a universal even though it is entirely specific. (This point alone guarantees that Rand’s theory of “measurement-omission” cannot be a complete account of “universals”: specific measurements are universals too. And a related point: as “Prof. D” points out to Rand in one of her “workshops” [*IOE*, pp. 142–143], there appear to be real classes constituted by the common possession of the same specific measurements—which seems to imply that measurement-*omission* cannot be the only way to form concepts of such classes. Rand’s reply to “Prof. D” is unsatisfactory but will not concern us here.)

Neither does giving an account of abstractions amount to providing a full theory of concepts—especially in the absence of any reason to suppose that all our concepts refer to generalities or abstractions. Rand gives no such reason but merely asserts without argument that a concept unites *two or more* existents. This claim has the curious consequence that we cannot form “concepts” of unique entities. Apparently we are simply to assume that, e.g., my concept of “horse” (or “length”) is a genuine concept, but my “concept” of *this* horse (or *this* length) is not a concept at all. (I do not mean, of course, a concept purportedly formed by combining “thisness” with “horse”. I mean a concept or idea of a specific horse, regardless of whether I recognize it as a member of the class of “horses”.)

On Rand’s account, that is, I seem to be unable to form a concept of what Rand would call a “concrete”. This point may not appear very interesting, but it is an early indication of something we shall discuss at length later: Rand seems to assume, from the very outset, that there is just no problem getting “concretes” themselves *into* our minds in order for us to perform mental manipulations on them. On Rand’s view, in order to know or to think about a specific entity, we do not seem to require an “idea” of the entity; we are in cognitive contact with the real entity itself. This assumption is not necessarily objectionable (or would

not be, if it were made explicit), but we shall see that it places Rand firmly in the “idealist” camp and makes highly questionable her claim to be defending a “correspondence” theory of truth.

At any rate, what Rand is really trying to provide, once her confused and confusing terminology is sorted out, is a theory of “where abstractions come from”. Since, as we shall see, she also claims (without argument) that abstractions exist only in the mind, her account also purports to be a description of how we form at least a certain range of concepts. It is probably needless to say that her theory therefore does not solve the age-old problems she thought it solved; in particular, it leaves the genuine problem of universals very much where it was. So the scope of her enterprise is a good deal less sweeping than her characterization of it would have us believe.

In order to evaluate her success at this more restricted project, the main point we need to note here is that Rand is emphatic about one thing: what we perceive, indeed what exists, is specific and concrete. There are no “abstractions” in reality.

Here I think (with certain reservations to be briefly discussed later) that she is right, although she does not offer any support for her contention. She is even more emphatic in what follows:

When we refer to three persons as “man,” what do we designate by that term? The three persons are three individuals who differ in every particular respect and may not possess a single *identical* characteristic (not even their fingerprints). If you list all their particular characteristics, you will not find one representing “manness”. Where is the “manness” in men? What, in reality, corresponds to the concept “man” in our mind?” [*IOE*, p. 2; emphasis hers.]

Again we see that Rand regards reality itself as altogether specific. As Brand Blanshard somewhere phrases it, there is no vagueness in nature.

And note well: the three human beings in her example have (or at least “may” have) *no* literally common attributes. She clearly intends to offer a theory of “concept-formation” (i.e., abstraction) that does not

depend on two entities' common possession of any identical attributes ("particular respect[s]" or "characteristics").

If further evidence is wanted, we find it at once. Immediately after posing her problem, she divides what she takes to be the historical solutions into four camps. These are as follows: extreme realism ("Platonism"), which accepts the existence of abstractions as real entities in their own right; moderate realism, which holds that abstractions exist in reality, but only *in* concretes; nominalism, which holds that our ideas are images of concretes and that abstractions are "names" we give to arbitrary groupings of concretes based on vague resemblances; and conceptualism, which agrees in essence with nominalism but holds that concepts exist in our minds as ideas rather than images. (A fifth category, extreme nominalism, is dismissed as unworthy of discussion.)

Note particularly her statement that the ancestor of moderate realism, "(unfortunately), is Aristotle". She obviously does not accept the (allegedly Aristotelian, though we shall not address her understanding of Aristotle in this book) view that a common "abstract" attribute is present in all specific cases subsumed under the concept of that attribute.

Yet she also does not accept the view (which she slants rather heavily) that concepts/abstractions are based on "resemblances". She clearly thinks such resemblances are "vague" and any classifications based on them would be "arbitrary". (Many actual nominalists would be surprised to hear this. In fact, as we have noted, Rand appears to qualify as an entirely mainstream nominalist herself, at least according to the opening remarks of her essay.)

In short, she has set herself what appears to be an insoluble problem: how to form a "concept" (of an abstraction) without assigning any kind of mind-independent existence to abstractions (even "in" concretes) and without invoking either identities or resemblances.

It is clear enough what she wants to do. Her plan is to argue that although abstractions exist only in the mind (i.e., they are not "intrinsic" to reality), they are not therefore arbitrary ("subjective"); they are

“objective” when they are formed in accordance with perceived reality and the nature of the human mind. Human knowledge, she wishes to contend, is the outcome of “cognitive processing” but is not invalidated by that fact; the problem of abstractions is really one of epistemology rather than ontology. And we may well sympathize with her aim, whether or not we think she succeeds.

IS THERE A “THIRD WAY”?

But in fact, the problem as she has posed it *is* insoluble. There are precisely two basic solutions to the genuine problem of universals: realism and nominalism. The former holds that there are some real universals, the latter that there aren’t any. A general theory of universals may hold that some apparent universals exist only in the mind and that others are real in some other sense. But for any given universal, these two alternatives exhaust the possibilities, and an ontology that admits even a single real universal is a version of realism. Though there are subheadings under each type of solution, there is no genuine third alternative unless we are willing to dispense with the Law of the Excluded Middle.

And—importantly—both views are irreducibly *ontological*. There is simply no way to reduce the problem of universals to a pure matter of epistemology; that is why it has traditionally been regarded as a problem of metaphysics in the first place.

In fact Rand is not offering a third alternative at all. What she has in effect committed herself to, in her introductory statements, is the view that abstract universals exist only as concepts in the mind (ontological nominalism and epistemological conceptualism with respect to abstract universals) and specific universals *may* (she does not commit herself) exist either in reality-as-perceived or in fully objective reality itself (realism with respect to specific universals).

The genuine problem of universals never makes an appearance. Rand has simply assumed her solution to that problem—though, as we shall see, she is unable to stick to it consistently.

Why is the genuine problem of universals important? Basically, because unless real universals exist, thought and communication (including communication with oneself) would be impossible, as no two persons (nor even one person at two times) could use the “same” word or entertain the “same” thought. Moreover, a responsible account of causality seems to rely on them; “the causal relation... [being a relation between *natures*] must be uniform. The denial of this is just the denial of universals” [H.W.B. Joseph, *An Introduction to Logic*, 2nd ed., p. 409].

We shall support these claims later. But if they are at all plausible, they throw a heavy burden of proof on the denial of real universals; indeed, without some positive account to replace that of real universals, it would appear to be the nominalists who are committed to “mysticism” in maintaining that we can somehow think and communicate without them. The fact is that thought everywhere and always behaves as though there are real universals. Antisthenes: “I see a horse, but not horseness.” Plato: “That is because you have eyes, but no intelligence.”

(The precise source of this exchange between Antisthenes and Plato is unknown to me. I first encountered it in Blanshard’s *Reason and Analysis* but later discovered that his citation of it is quite incorrect. The exchange is quoted in Joseph, *An Introduction to Logic*, on p. 27 of the second edition, where the footnote—the first on the page—refers us to a similar exchange in §287 of Ritter and Preller, *Historia Philosophiae Graecae*. Blanshard quotes it again on p. 51 of *Reason and Analysis* but misattributes it to the *Parmenides*, p. 131, presumably of the Jowett edition. There is no such exchange in the *Parmenides*, in Jowett’s translation or any other. Apparently Blanshard, or a student helping him to edit his work, took the citation from Joseph but looked at the wrong footnote: the *second* footnote on p. 27 of Joseph reads

“Cf. Plato, *Parmenides*, 131.” So far as I know, no one else has called attention to this amusing misattribution.)

Thought, then, acts as though genuine identities obtain between disparate contexts. If this behavior is unwarranted, some other account is wanted that does not destroy the possibility of genuine knowledge and communication.

In my view, the only remotely plausible reply comes from trope theory. “Trope” is a term of art which has become the standard word for what has been variously called an “abstract particular,” a “concrete property,” a “particularized property,” and a handful of other names. Trope theorists contend that apparently identical properties or attributes are not, strictly speaking, “universals,” but rather “particular” attributes that are distinct and yet “exactly similar”. (This is a vast oversimplification of a theory which is actually offered in several variations by a number of different philosophers. The interested reader should consult *Properties*, edited by D.H. Mellor and Alex Oliver, especially chapters VII-XI; *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction*, by Michael Loux, pp. 79–87; and *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction*, by D.M. Armstrong, ch. 6.)

There is something intuitively plausible about trope theory in at least one respect: it insists, probably rightly, that the “attributes” or “properties” of an object are not really metaphysically separable from that object. And it must be frankly admitted that there are difficulties with every realist theory of universals so far offered.

But the tropists’ reply is not without troubles of its own. A consistent tropist must contend, for example, that “two” exactly similar properties, characteristics, qualities, or what-have-you are nevertheless not identical, and is thus committed to the view that there is an important (indeed a crucial) difference between “exact similarity” and “identity”.

On the other hand, the defender of real universals is committed here to an admittedly controversial principle: the Identity of Indiscernibles (sometimes miscalled “Leibniz’s Law”—a designation many philoso-

phers prefer to reserve for a different principle, the Indiscernibility of Identicals). We shall not concern ourselves here with any of its technical variations; this principle is, roughly speaking, that “exact similarity” just *is* “identity”. There cannot, according to this principle, be “two” of anything that cannot be distinguished in any way; if the “two” things are really indistinguishable (“indiscernible”), then they are not two but one (“identical”). Thus, for example, if two objects are really the *same* color, a *single* color is identically present in each object.

We shall have more to say on this topic in our discussion of Rand and Roy Wood Sellars. But for now it will be enough to suggest the following thought experiment (adapted from a question raised by D.M. Armstrong):

Suppose object A and object B have what appears to be the “common” property p . Trope theorists must contend that this is not literally a single common property, but a pair of properties p_A and p_B which are “exactly similar”. Very well; if there are really two properties, let us suppose they were reversed. The property which formerly belonged to A now belongs to B, and vice versa.

The question is: has anything really changed? If this book and that book have what we would ordinarily call the exact same color, does it really make any difference, or even any sense, to suppose that the “two” colors were swapped? If the beers in a case and the hours in a day have what we would ordinarily call the exact same number, what could it possibly mean to conceive or imagine what it would be like if the twenty-fours were the other way round?

Indeed it is the tropists who seem committed to a sort of mathematical mysticism at this point. The claim that “exact similarity” is something other than “identity” seems to presume that there can be a sheerly numerical difference: “two” without any prior distinction on which to base the “two-ness”. Differences in spatial location alone will not suffice, for the very question at issue is whether one quality or relation can be identically present in two places. (Incidentally, a quantum-

mechanics-based argument sometimes advanced against the Identity of Indiscernibles begs the question at just this point.)

And whatever conclusion we favor, we shall get no help from Rand on this question. As we have already seen, she appears to begin *IOE* with a commitment to nominalism; she maintains that “only concretes exist” and seems to conclude therefrom that universals must be both abstractions and concepts. (Or perhaps the order of her “argument” is the other way around; it’s hard to tell. At any rate, she begins her foreword by seemingly assuming nominalism.) And whatever she says about the “problem of universals,” the question she is really trying to answer is: having assumed nominalism with neither argument nor examination, can she give an account of “concept-formation” as a source of genuine knowledge without inadvertently stumbling back into realism?

RAND THE REALIST?

She does not remain a consistent nominalist for very long. Aside from the fact that she has already managed to confuse no fewer than four distinct pairs of contraries (universal/particular, generic/specific, abstract/concrete, and concept/referent)—thereby beating even Leonard Peikoff’s silver-medal score of three (analytic/synthetic, *a priori/a posteriori*, and necessary/contingent)—she also leaves herself an escape hatch in the allowance that two entities “may not,” and therefore, one supposes, *might* have “identical” characteristics [*IOE*, p. 2].

And this escape hatch allows her to duck out of the actual problem of universals—namely, whether two “identical” attributes are literally identical or not. So whether by “identical” she really means “identical” (rather than just “exactly similar”) is anybody’s guess; any Objectivists who want to tackle the Identity of Indiscernibles will have to do so without her aid.

At any rate, as we have seen, she should turn out to be a “nominalist” (and/or “conceptualist”) with regard to abstract universals and *pos-*

sibly a “realist” with regard to specific universals. Even if she is consistent from this point onwards, she will nevertheless have contradicted her own summary dismissal of the four categories we listed above. As far as the problem of universals is concerned, Objectivism will be, not a mysterious *tertium quid* that overcomes a false dichotomy between “intrinsicism” and “subjectivism,” but a simple, straightforward, and not at all original combination of the only two logically possible solutions to the problem.

However, she is not “consistent from this point onwards”. This we shall see in our reading of the passage in which Rand discusses “the simplest [case] epistemologically”—the formation of a concept of a single attribute, for which she chooses the example “length” [*IOE*, p. 11]. Here we shall find that she is unable to adhere to her own solution and offers an incoherent account of abstractions. (And we shall remember throughout our discussion that, for her, all cases of concept-formation, no matter how complex, reduce in the final analysis to such simple cases as this one.)

We should note in passing that she has made things as easy as possible for herself in choosing, to illustrate her theory of “measurement-omission,” an attribute that we already know can be measured in terms of a unit. She might have had a harder time with, say, “pain”. (She does try to deal with such cases in Chapter 4, “Concepts of Consciousness”. However, she acknowledges on pp. 32–33 that her notion of “teleological measurement” does not require cardinal measurement in terms of a common unit. That this admission is damaging to her theory of “measurement-omission” apparently does not occur to her. We shall discuss this point later.)

But for now we shall give her the benefit of the doubt and acknowledge that she is trying to offer the simplest possible example. For present purposes we shall note only that, if her account fails in this case, it will fail *a fortiori* not only for more complex cases but also for any attributes that are *not* measurable in units (if there are any).

We therefore return to her account of “length”. It will be as well to have the passage before us, as there are features in it that I wish to emphasize. Here it is:

Let us now examine the process of forming the simplest concept, the concept of a single attribute (...the simplest [case] epistemologically)—for instance, the concept of “length”. If a child considers a match, a pencil and a stick, he observes that length is THE ATTRIBUTE THEY HAVE IN COMMON [my emphasis], but their SPECIFIC LENGTHS DIFFER [my emphasis]. The *difference is one of measurement*. In order to form the concept “length,” the child’s mind retains THE ATTRIBUTE [my emphasis] and omits its particular measurements. Or, more precisely, if the process were identified in words, it would consist of the following: “Length must exist in *some* quantity, but may exist in *any* quantity. I shall identify as ‘length’ that attribute of any existent possessing it which can be quantitatively related to a unit of length, without specifying the quantity.” [IOE, p. 11; emphases hers unless otherwise noted; also, Rand’s are italicized and mine are in ALL CAPS.]

Rand’s reference to “the attribute they have in common” is surprising, since it completely undoes the apparently careful distinctions of her introductory remarks. “Length,” it seems, is the attribute common to a match, a pencil, and a stick that have no specific attributes in common.

Let us be clear what the problem is here. We have been told that everything we perceive, and by implication everything that exists, is concrete and specific. It has been assumed from the very outset that a proper theory of concepts will locate “abstractions” only in our minds. And yet here Rand is, positing an apparently unproblematic generic attribute (“length”) that exists independently of the mind and is even common—apparently *perceptibly* common—to three entities that are admitted to differ in their specific lengths.

“Length,” we are told, “must exist in *some* quantity but may exist in *any* quantity.” And how, exactly, does this differ from the “Aristote-

lian” account she has earlier dismissed, to the effect that abstractions do exist, but only *in* “concretes”? Has she not just given us what she herself would call a “moderate realist” account of the attribute “length”?

That she has had a difficulty here is obvious from the final quoted sentence above: “I [the child in effect thinks] shall identify as ‘length’ that attribute of any existent possessing it which can be quantitatively related to a unit of length, without specifying the quantity.” The child is supposed to be forming the concept of length at this point. Yet the definition of “length” offered here is circular: a “length” is any attribute that can be qualitatively related to a unit—of length.

Is this circularity vicious? Perhaps not. But the only way to escape that charge would be to fall back on the view that (abstract) “length” is simply given in perceptual experience. As we have seen, that does appear to be Rand’s view. But again, it is not a view she can hold consistently with her premises: she has already told us that this sort of “moderate realism” will not do, that everything we perceive is concrete and specific. She may not, on her own terms, invoke such a generic attribute in explaining why it is that we class lengths together.

I wish to be as clear as possible here about one important point: I am *not* saying that, on Rand’s account, we must already have the “concept” of length in order to form that very concept. I am saying that her account, as stated, requires us to *perceive* an abstract attribute of the very type she says is never given in perception. (It also apparently requires us to *retain* that attribute literally *in* our minds, a point that will concern us later.)

Rand glosses over the problem of “qualitative universals” (e.g. length, color, etc., which seem to “exist” only in certain more specific forms—three feet, this shade of red) by simultaneously (a) denying that this match, this pencil, and this stick have any specific attribute in common and (b) asserting, quite literally and with a straight face, that we form the concept “length” by isolating the attribute they have in common. If she also holds—as we have seen she clearly begins by hold-

ing—that only specific attributes exist (quite apart from the question whether such attributes are themselves universals or not, a point on which she is unclear), her statements are inconsistent; given (a), we cannot make sense of (b) without accepting the mind-independent existence of a generic attribute.

In effect, she undertakes to tell us how certain mental entities come into being—and unwittingly assumes, in the process, that they refer unproblematically to some sort of generic attribute outside the mind, when the nonexistence of such generic attributes was supposedly what raised the problem to begin with. She thereby, on her own classification system, shifts herself from the “conceptualist” class to at least the “moderate realist” class, as regards qualitative universals, without even noticing the change.

Rand shares this self-contradiction with John Locke, by the way, who runs into the same difficulty in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, III, 3. Locke, like Rand, urges that we form e.g. the idea of “man” by “leaving out something, that is peculiar to each individual; and retaining so much of those particular complex ideas, of several particular existences, as they are found to agree in”. But on Locke’s view as surely as on Rand’s, they can “agree in” nothing at all if they differ in all their specific attributes. Locke’s account thus also presumes the real existence of the very sort of abstraction he is trying to generate via mental activity. Rand shares other nontrivial difficulties with Locke here as well, but we shall let most of them pass; the interested reader is referred to Thomas Hill Green’s *Introduction to Locke and Hume* for a thorough critical dissection of traditional “empiricist” epistemology.

(One which we shall not let pass is this one: David Kelley notes in “A Theory of Abstraction” [p. 9] that Locke’s account presumes our ability to perceive abstract attributes directly, an ability Kelley rightly believes to be problematic. Kelley argues that Rand escapes this criticism, but if our reading of *IOE* thus far is any indication, Rand falls squarely into the same morass herself.)

It might be objected that, even so, once we have adjusted her terminology, her solution may still be sound. We have said, after all, that she was really trying to develop an account of how we form concepts of abstractions; perhaps her odd take on the problem of universals is extraneous to this concern.

But in fact it is not extraneous at all. Quite aside from her misunderstanding of the problem of universals, she appears to have become a “realist” even on her own terms. If so, then her theory does not bear out her claims for it.

Whether this is so or not depends on what she would do with the abstract universal “length” (not any specific length, that is; just “length as such”). Is she really committed to its existence as a real universal?

It certainly appears that she is. “If a child considers a match, a pencil and a stick, he *observes* that length is *the attribute they have in common*” [emphases mine]. That statement surely sounds as though Rand is saying the child observes a common attribute that is given in perceptual experience; indeed I see no other way to read it.

And whether or not Rand *calls* length an “abstract attribute” of the “Aristotelian” sort, she *describes* it as an attribute that “must exist in *some* quantity but may exist in *any* quantity”. Quantities are generally quantities *of* something, are they not? Of what, if not of an “abstract attribute” which Rand identifies as “length”?

Rand at least claims to speak and write with a high degree of precision. And in this passage she writes, quite explicitly and precisely, that a child *observes a common attribute* among a pencil, a stick, and a match whose specific lengths are admitted to differ, and then describes this common attribute as the presence in varying *amounts* of something called “length”. Which makes her, with respect to “length,” a “moderate realist” despite her express intention not to be one.

Now, perhaps—Rand’s claims to precision notwithstanding—this is not what Rand means, even though it is what she writes. I certainly have no difficulty granting that Rand is not as precise a writer as she would have us believe. But in that case—that is, if her account of

“length” on p. 11 is merely a slip of mind or pen—then, as regards abstractions, she is still the “nominalist/conceptualist” she was on pp. 1–2. And in neither case, of course, is she the innovative creator of a groundbreaking epistemological theory.

That it was not merely a momentary lapse we might be tempted to infer from her later remarks [p. 17], in which the three human beings of her introduction, who originally had no identical characteristics at all, have in the interim sprouted a whole host of “common” attributes: shape, size, facial features, vital organs—even fingerprints, the very paradigm of nonidentical resemblance. Evidently her account of “length” is indeed supposed to indicate the existence of “abstract” attributes that can be held in common by entities that share no specific features. And that appears to make her, in her terms, a “moderate” or “Aristotelian” realist.

THE UNCLEARNESS OF HER INTENT

Unfortunately, this passage alone does not clear the matter up for us. Consider the following exchange from the “workshop” portion of *IOE*:

Prof. A: In regard to the concept of an attribute—for example, “length”—since the attribute is something which does not exist separately in reality, is the referent of the concept of an attribute in the category of the epistemological rather than the metaphysical?

AR: Oh no, why?

Prof. A: Because length doesn’t exist per se in reality. Length is a human form of breaking up the identities of things.

AR: Wait a moment, that’s a very, very dangerous statement. Length does exist in reality, only it doesn’t exist by itself. It is not separable from an entity, but it certainly exists in reality. If it didn’t, what would we be doing with our concepts of attributes? They would be pure fantasy then. The only thing that is epistemological and not metaphysical in the concept of “length” is the act of mental separation, of considering this attribute separately as if it were a separate thing. [*IOE*, pp. 277–278.]

“Length” does exist in reality, but not “by itself”. Does this mean that length exists only as an attribute of specific entities, or does it mean that length as such does not exist as a real universal? Or both?

Either way, Rand’s intent here seems to be more or less “nominalistic”. There are specific lengths really “out there,” she says. But length does not exist in its own right; any real length is an attribute of an entity and cannot be separated from that entity. We recall that this point is one of the most intuitively plausible motivations for trope theory, which is a form of nominalism (to the extent that it is offered as an alternative to a theory of universals, as it usually is).

However, Rand has not directly addressed the question whether a specific length is a real universal. We may freely admit that “exactly three inches long” cannot exist all by itself, that there must be something else for there to be “three inches” *of*. (Peikoff concurs: “There is no ‘red’ or ‘hard’ apart from the crayon or book or other thing that is red or hard. ‘Five inches’ or ‘six pounds’ presuppose the object that extends five inches or weighs six pounds. ‘To the right of’ or ‘father of’ have no reality apart from the things one of which is to the right of the other or is the father of another” [*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, p. 13].)

But that does not, in and of itself, mean that “exactly three inches long” is *not* a real universal, nor does Rand (or Peikoff) appear to recognize that this is a distinct question from that of metaphysical separability. (Peikoff, in fact, is not even arguing against real universals in the passage from which we have just quoted; he is arguing for the metaphysical primacy of “entities,” a topic that will concern us in a later chapter.)

Rand’s intent in the foregoing exchange is therefore less than clear. She appears to want to argue that the specific length of this match is not “separable” from the match itself—and to conclude therefrom that this length is not literally identical with the specific length of that pencil, even if the two objects are what we would ordinarily call the exact

same length. That this view is at odds with her remarks on “length” in her first example does not seem to occur to her.

Moreover, Rand has confused two steps or types of abstraction here. The mental isolation of an attribute from an entity is not sufficient to generate an abstract concept (like “length,” as opposed to this or that specific length); for that we require another step of abstraction in which we isolate a common element among the attributes themselves.

Rand has folded both into a single step, thereby obscuring the fact that each step, in its way, depends (for similar-but-nonidentical attributes) on the existence of a different sort of universal. The fact that an attribute does not exist in splendid isolation does not tell against its status as a real universal in any obvious way; Rand has therefore not shown that attributes are not specific universals, though she also has not explicitly acknowledged that they *are* such. Furthermore, the extraction of a common element “length” from three different specific lengths depends on the existence of a generic or abstract universal, and here Rand unambiguously assumes the real existence of such a universal.

It seems safe to conclude, then, that her “moderate realism” is probably unintentional. But so, apparently, is her failure to recognize specific attributes as real universals. For the fact is that, as far as the genuine problem of universals is concerned, she has not even asked the right questions. And that fact has serious implications for her philosophy.

Let us be clear what we were offered in Rand’s account of concept-formation. Rand has told us in no uncertain terms that she is proposing a solution that is neither nominalist nor realist. And her entire philosophy, by her own admission, rests on the rejection of these allegedly false alternatives; her account of (conceptual) abstractions is supposed to show that they are neither “intrinsic” nor “subjective” [pp. 53 and 68] but “objective”. It is from this very distinction, as we have said, that her philosophy “Objectivism” takes its name and its *raison d’être*.

But—unbeknownst to herself, owing to her misunderstanding of the “problem of universals”—she cannot even state her theory without relying on a realist (“intrinsicist”) understanding at least of “generic” attributes, and perhaps of specific attributes as well.

The specific lengths of the match, the pencil, and the stick are (she asks us to stipulate) really “out there,” and their “inseparability” from their objects does not tell against their status as universals. (Suppose the pencil is exactly 3.37 inches long or a certain precise shade of yellow; these properties may be shared by any number of other objects. Thus “specific universal” is not the oxymoron it might appear to be. “Specific” is the contrary, not of “universal,” but of “generic”; the contrary of “universal” is “particular”.) But Rand does not recognize specific attributes as “universals,” so she sees nothing problematic in treating them “realistically”.

We see here that Rand has tried to offer an “epistemological” solution to what is exclusively and irreducibly an ontological problem—and in the process has accidentally imported some implicit metaphysics into her argument. Rand has begun by confusing the issue, asserting that a “universal” is an abstraction is a concept, and then asking us to *grant*, in effect, that specific universals are real without ever directly raising the question. Then she has simply failed to notice that her account of concept-formation implicitly depends on them, never quite raising the question whether they are genuine universals. And before she is through, she has inadvertently acknowledged the real existence of the very “abstractions” which she had initially supposed to be only the outcome of cognitive “processing” by the human mind.

In standard philosophical terms, then, she has set out with more or less nominalistic intent and stumbled back into realism in fairly short order. Nor can we rescue her from herself by ignoring the problem of universals and treating her account as nothing more than a theory of conceptual abstractions: *even in her own terms*, she has officially

rejected, and then slipped back into, what she calls “Aristotelian” or “moderate realism”.

So far we have found nothing to justify her claim to be offering a new solution to any long-standing problems; indeed we have found her misstating those problems and then offering an inconsistent solution that never quite addresses the real issue. To put it bluntly, the fact that she seems to be offering a “new” solution to the problem of universals is due entirely to the facts that she (a) doesn’t get the problem straight to begin with and then (b) fudges her proposed solution, indeed blunders back into a solution she herself has already rejected. Objectivism is an “alternative” to realism and nominalism only in the sense that ducking a yes-or-no question is an alternative to answering it.

A FAILURE OF INTROSPECTION

What has happened here? *IOE*’s “Concluding Historical Postscript” (the title is a little dig at Kierkegaard) provides the following account of Rand’s discovery of her theory:

I asked myself, “What is it that my mind does when I use concepts? To what do I refer, and how do I learn concepts?” And within half an hour, I had the answer. Now it took me longer than that to check it, to apply it to the various categories of concepts, and see if there are exceptions. But once I had the answer, by the logic of it, I knew that that’s it. And that’s it. [*IOE*, p.307.]

And I think this is the answer we seek. Which is more likely: that Rand has found a “new” solution to the insoluble problem she posed in her introductory remarks? Or that, during her whopping half-hour of introspection, she has unknowingly reified her own concepts into objectively existing “generic” attributes and thereafter never notices that she had thereby contradicted her own disbelief in such abstractions?

It is obvious that two lengths are similar, and the obvious way to state this similarity is to say that they are alike in having length. And to Rand, who thinks that resemblances were just too “vague” to serve as more than an “arbitrary” foundation for concepts, it must have been extremely tempting to reduce such obvious resemblances to underlying identities. It must be admitted that the temptation is hard to resist.

But resist it we must. There is some sense in saying that two similar entities must resemble each other in certain “respects,” namely their attributes. There is none whatsoever in saying likewise of the attributes themselves, which simply *are* those “respects”. If the attributes themselves are not further analyzable, if we have really arrived at “the simplest [case] epistemologically,” then there simply is no further “respect” for these two attributes to resemble each other *in*.

And if we have not arrived at the simplest case, we must keep pressing on until we do. At some point we must reach a relation of resemblance (perhaps identity, which is the extreme case of resemblance on a realist view of universals; otherwise the extreme case is “exact similarity”) that cannot be described in terms of further “respects”. The alternative is an infinite regress. (Such a regress is arguably not a vicious one; cf. Bradley’s famous account, in *Appearance and Reality*, of the infinite regress allegedly involved in “relations” and Royce’s less famous reply in the “Supplementary Essay” to *The World and the Individual*. But as Rand denies the existence of actual infinities, the option of a non-vicious infinite regress is not open to her anyway.)

But Rand seems here to give in to the temptation to seek a “respect” in which three lengths can resemble one another, and in the process conjures a “common” attribute out of three different lengths. Even some of her supporters who recognize that she does so nevertheless insist that on this point she must have been right, that two lengths are similar in the possession of a common “lengthiness”.

Unfortunately, if she is right, then her theory of concept-formation depends on a more or less Platonic theory of universals. I cannot say I would regard that as a disaster. But it is not a theory that Rand can

offer consistently with her own aims. If such abstractions as “length” can exist independently of the human mind and even be grasped as objects of perception, then the problem she initially set out to solve is a pseudo-problem; in forming concepts of such generic attributes, we are simply apprehending abstract universals that are actually present “out there” in reality, the alleged paradox vanishes, and we can all break early for lunch. There was no need of her “new” account at all.

There is, in short, no way to reconcile Rand’s “solution” with her own claims for it; the only things “new” in it are the confusions she herself has introduced.

The apparent newness of “Objectivism,” then, depends on an optical illusion. Rand has begun by taking a nominalist view of universals, and has then stumbled inadvertently into realism after all. It is only her failure to notice this slip back over the fence—which in turn depends on her misstatement of the problem of universals—that allows her to believe she has offered anything new here.

Defenses of her originality on this point invariably depend on the same sort of fudging or misrepresentation in which Rand herself engages. Here, for example, is Allan Gotthelf:

Consider a simpler example, three objects each possessing length: a pen 5 inches long, a ruler 12 inches long, and a hallway 10 feet (120 inches) long. Their common length is not, for Ayn Rand [Gotthelf always writes out her full name], a matter of their each possessing some identical abstract attribute, “length” (to which is “contingently” added “5 inches,” “12 inches,” “120 inches”). Nor is it a matter of their each possessing different but irreducibly similar attributes “being five inches long,” “being 12 inches long,” “being 120 inches long”. It is a matter of their each being “*x inches long*”. [*On Ayn Rand*, p. 60; emphasis Gotthelf’s.]

Note that Gotthelf does not merely deny that Rand believes the three objects share an “abstract attribute”; he denies also that this abstract attribute is related only “contingently” to the three specific lengths in question. We therefore cannot tell whether Gotthelf thinks

Rand denies the existence of a common “abstract attribute” *at all* or merely the existence of an attribute “contingently” related to the three specific lengths.

And it really doesn’t matter. Whether or not Gotthelf wants to *call* “x inches long” an “abstract attribute,” it will clearly do as one until the real thing comes along—and if not, then it is simply another way of describing irreducible similarity. Treating “x inches long” as a common attribute is Gotthelf’s (and Rand’s) *only* alternative to recognizing the three specific lengths as “different but irreducibly similar”—and Gotthelf masks this fact by the aforementioned fudging of what “abstract attribute” means in the first place. As he himself immediately goes on to add: the three objects in his example “each possess *the same attribute (length)* but in varying measure or degree” [*ibid.*, emphasis mine].

David Kelley likewise asserts, “There is no abstract property *length as such* lurking behind these determinate lengths” [“A Theory of Abstraction,” p. 28; emphasis his]. But although Kelley is here summarizing Rand’s theory of abstraction, he stops short of attributing this precise view to Rand.

And again, it is not necessary that we object to the contention in question; it may well be that no such “abstract” property exists in its own right. But we must raise our two by now standard objections: (a) Rand’s account asserts that there *is* such an abstract attribute; and (b) Gotthelf (and perhaps Rand) to the contrary notwithstanding, the only alternative is that specific lengths are irreducibly similar—a view that is neither original nor exclusively or even primarily “epistemological”. It is an ontological claim about the nature of real universals.

At this point, some of Rand’s defenders may say (as some of them have in fact said to me) that the “problem of universals,” as I have stated it, is of merely “academic” interest anyway. They may maintain that Rand’s real innovation here is to sweep aside the cobwebs of academic philosophy and deal with the practical problems of cognition in the service of life.

Even if this were true, it would still mean that Rand did not offer a new, alternative solution to the problem of universals itself (except perhaps in the limited sense in which ignoring a yes-or-no question is an “alternative” to answering it). But it is not an adequate reply on other grounds.

Rand herself *does* say she is addressing the “problem of universals,” and she is *not* simply brushing aside what she thinks is a merely “academic” problem. On the contrary, she has a deep reason for wishing positively to deny the existence of real universals even on her own understanding of this term.

For there is a basic motive at work in Rand’s philosophizing—and not just on “universals”—which we shall see is a significant source of difficulty: her fervid anti-theism.

RAND’S ANTIRELIGIOUS MOTIVATION

The basic problem in her epistemology seems to me to lie in Rand’s desire to avoid *making the human mind answer to anything else*. It is crucial to her view of “man as a heroic being” that we be in some way self-creating, and that our faculties of cognition not be beholden to any reality greater than ourselves.

Ultimately, I think, this is why Rand paints herself into such corners (as we shall see her doing again later). In the final analysis she is trying, and trying very hard, to do two things that are in some ways at cross purposes with one another. We shall later have occasion further to document her smoldering hatred of anything smacking of religion, so here I shall merely note that it takes the following two forms:

On the one hand, she wants to invest (her) philosophy with something like the authority of religion, and (nonmental) reality with something like the authority of God. “Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed,” she insists with Bacon. Our concepts and our values answer to the absolute-but mindless-authority of “the facts of reality,” to “evade” which is in effect to deny that “A is A”.

On the other hand, she wants to leave human beings in the driver's seat, as it were; she wants both our "concepts" and our "values" to depend fundamentally on human volition. For her, there are to be *no* real universals apart from our own "chosen" conceptual classifications; nor are our values really values *to us* until and unless we have "chosen" them.

In effect, she is having a hard time deciding whether to replace "God" with "reality" or with "man". And so she tries to do both at once.

Gregory R. Johnson has provided an excellent discussion of what this division of motive does to Rand's ethical theories; in his fine piece "Liberty and Nature: The Missing Link" in the first issue of the *Journal of Ayn Rand Studies*, he argues that she falls into a form of ethical subjectivism. I think the same divided motive is at work in her epistemology, and the difficulties to which it leads are parallel to those in her ethics. (We shall return to this point later when we discuss the Objectivist ethics.)

Evidence of this motive is not hard to find. Leonard Peikoff returns to the issue in *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* and provides ample support for the view I am suggesting.

We shall not rehearse Peikoff's discussion of intrinsicism vs. subjectivism (really, realism vs. nominalism), as he merely repeats and emphasizes Rand's own tendentious misrepresentations of the two schools. For the most part his remarks are just as free of citations as hers; we do not meet any actual "intrinsicists" or "nominalists" who hold the views he thinks he is demolishing. The reader should examine *OPAR* pp. 142–151 for him- or herself; suffice it to say here that Peikoff merely reiterates Rand's confusion of "intrinsicism" with the alleged passivity of the mind in intuiting real universals. The remarks we have already made about Rand's account apply to Peikoff's as well and appear to me to be quite a sufficient reply.

However, Peikoff does elaborate in an interesting way on the underlying motive of Rand's (and his) rejection of real universals. The reader

should bear in mind that Peikoff is also the author of the piece “Religion Versus America” (reprinted in *The Voice of Reason*, pp. 64–82), which begins with the statement: “A specter is haunting America—the specter of religion.”

We shall later discuss Objectivism’s views of “religion”. For present purposes we need only note that this is the same Leonard Peikoff who writes in *OPAR* as follows:

Intrinsicists describe man’s faculty of “just knowing” by many names, including “intuition,” a “sixth sense,” “extra-sensory perception,” “reminiscence,” and “divine revelation”. This last is the most suitable term, inasmuch as religion is the logical culmination of the intrinsicist theory. [*OPAR*, p. 145.]

Of this Peikoff will have none:

If abstractions are other-worldly phenomena..., they must be construed as ideas in an other-worldly intellect, i.e., as thoughts in the mind of God.... One churchman, Numenius, expresses the upshot in a perfect intrinsicist aphorism: “All knowledge is the kindling of the small light [man’s mind] from the great light which illumines the world.” [*OPAR*, pp. 145–146; the comment in brackets is Peikoff’s, and the quotation from Numenius is cited from p. 223 of W. Windelband’s *History of Philosophy*.]

Note that Peikoff’s list of synonyms for the “faculty of ‘just knowing’” is not accompanied by any references. It would surely be helpful to know, for example, which “intrinsicists” rely on the terms “sixth sense” and “extra-sensory perception”. (If her discussion of “length” is any indication—as we shall see that it is—then Rand’s terms belong on this list as well; her euphemisms for “just knowing” will turn out to be “perception” and “observation”. We shall be arguing at length later that far from eliminating rational intuition, Rand simply disguises it as sensory perception: when she invites the reader to “observe,” she really means “reflect, understand, and grasp *a priori*”.)

Peikoff also sees no need to offer any refutation of the view that “abstractions” are thoughts in the Divine Mind; apparently this view is sufficiently ridiculous on its face that no refutation is needed.

(I suspect Peikoff has John Robbins in mind here. Robbins, let us recall, wrote *Answer to Ayn Rand* in 1974, arguing that not only “abstractions” but in fact all the objects of our everyday thought and experience are propositions in the mind of God. Neither Rand nor Peikoff has ever published an answer in turn to Robbins’s “answer,” but there are points here and there in Peikoff’s writings that seem to be oblique replies to Robbins. The interested reader is referred to Robbins’s *Without a Prayer: Ayn Rand and the Close of Her System* for a revised and updated version of *Answer to Ayn Rand*.)

At any rate, what we wish to note here is that Rand’s (and Peikoff’s) hostility to the possibility of real universals (which Peikoff, like Rand, misidentifies with “abstractions”) stems directly from opposition to theistic belief. Real universals, it seems, would commit us to a belief in a Divine Mind, and so real universals are rejected. (Since Rand uses them anyway, the proper conclusion is left as an exercise for the reader.)

Some of her defenders may still claim that she has offered some genuine advances in other areas. In particular, it is sometimes claimed that she has broken new ground in two areas: her contention that the mind is active in the formation of concepts, and her theory that concepts are formed by “measurement-omission”. We shall soon look at each of these in turn.

But first we must take a detour through her account of sensation and perception.

Chapter 3: *Sensation, Perception, and the* *Tabula Rasa Mind*

At the root of every significant philosophic theory, there is a legitimate issue—in the sense that there is an authentic need of man’s consciousness, which some theories struggle to clarify and others struggle to obfuscate, to corrupt, to prevent man from ever discovering. [Ayn Rand, “Philosophy: Who Needs It,” in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, pp. 7–8.]

RAND’S NON-ACCOUNT OF SENSATION VS. PERCEPTION

Rand wishes to rest her entire epistemology on the allegedly axiomatic validity of sensory perception. Yet she does not offer anything like a coherent view of sensation and its relation to perception.

In chapter 1 of *IOE*, Rand claims that we do not remember sensations, nor do we experience pure isolated sensations [*IOE*, p. 5]. Later she reiterates and confirms: “Sensations are merely an awareness of the present and cannot be retained beyond the immediate moment” [*IOE*, p. 57]. We shall take this as our jumping-off point.

What Rand is passing along to us in this remark is her own version of the rationalist-idealist doctrine that no part of our experience (including perception and even “sensation”) is untouched by reason; that experience is coextensive with judgment; that discriminated awareness is itself already at least the first stirring of thought and rea-

son; and that “sense-data,” to whatever extent they can be meaningfully isolated at all, are inferred rather than directly experienced.

This is a defensible doctrine, and indeed variants of it have been ably defended by Green, Bradley, Bosanquet, Joachim, Oakeshott, and various others. (It is also discussed at some length by Brand Blanshard, from whose massive two-volume work *The Nature of Thought* Rand probably learned something about the philosophical dispute over whether talk of “sense-data” was at all meaningful.) But as we shall see, Rand’s adaptation of this doctrine (which was in part also a reaction against it and an ill-considered attempt to combine it with the very “empiricism” it was developed to refute) is not sufficiently coherent to be called a doctrine at all.

Rand does not stick to her stated view with anything remotely resembling consistency. In the *very next paragraph* of *IOE*, she continues as follows: “A percept is a group of sensations automatically retained and integrated by the brain of a living organism” [*IOE*, p. 5].

So “sensations, as such, are not retained by man’s memory,” but (some) groups of sensations *are* thus retained—and retained *automatically*, at that. But if sensations, “as such,” are not “retained” by our memories, how is it that one’s “brain” is able to retain them—even in “groups”—while it performs the task of “integration”? And if a percept is a “group of sensations,” is it not true that our memories *do* “retain” sensations? Or are our sensations transformed into something else by this mysterious process of “integration” (on which Rand nowhere sees fit to elaborate)? And does all of this mean we cannot remember single sensations? As Rand would say: Blank-out.

Nor can Rand stick to her view that we cannot experience “pure” sensations. In “Art and Cognition,” she writes: “Music is the only phenomenon that permits an adult to experience the process of dealing with pure sense data. Single musical tones are not percepts, but pure sensations; they become percepts only when integrated” [*The Romantic Manifesto*, p. 59].

So much for her contention that “man is [not] able to experience a pure isolated sensation”. Apparently Rand the aesthetician thinks we do so every time we hear a single musical tone, even though Rand the epistemologist says we do not. (I shall not try to imagine what significant difference she fancies there to be between a single musical tone as a “sensation” and the very same tone as a “percept”.)

And why only musical tones? Why not every time we see a single specific color? Why not every time we feel a single specific tactile sensation? Why not every time we smell a specific odor? Why is hearing singled out as the only sense through which we can experience “pure” sensations?

Earlier in the very same essay (in *The Romantic Manifesto*, p. 46), she has made the statement that sight and touch provide us with direct awareness of “entities”. This is surely wrong; sight, for example, considered purely as a sense (if it may even be meaningfully considered as such), gives us “direct awareness” of, at most, variously-shaped expanses of color; anything else involves perception (and Rand is clearly wavering here between sight as a “sense” and sight as a mode of perception). But even if Rand’s statement were unexceptionable, it would seem to leave open the possibility that we could experience “pure sensations” not only through hearing but also through taste and smell. So why do we not?

We shall find that Rand sweeps a lot of genuine problems under the rug of “perception”. In fact I shall go even further: her views on sensation and perception are so poorly thought out that there is no point in trying to extract a coherent doctrine from them. Perhaps that remark seems harsh. But it is hardly responsible philosophy to avoid (indeed to postpone indefinitely) difficult questions about the relationship between sensation and perception while claiming to base one’s philosophy on the “evidence of the senses”.

(“Prof. E:...certain incontestable data on which we base all of our reasoning—namely, the direct evidence of the senses, about which we can’t be wrong, as apart from errors in conceptualizing it or reasoning

about it. AR: Right” [IOE, p. 228]. How the “direct evidence of the senses” can be regarded as “incontestable,” if we are unable to remember sensations directly or even to experience them at all, is a mystery I confess myself unable to solve. According even to her own epistemology, should she not be referring to the “evidence of perception”?)

Frankly, in the final analysis, Rand’s view of perception accomplishes just one thing: it reassures Rand herself of her own cognitive efficacy on her own terms—i.e., it condones her own uncritical belief in the indubitable rock-bottom reality of all and only those “entities” she believes she can see and touch. (Recall, for example, her anger at Joan Mitchell Blumenthal when the latter informed her that what she had thought was a tree outside her ninth-floor hospital window was only the reflection of an IV pole in the glass [*The Passion of Ayn Rand*, p. 383].)

PEIKOFF’S PROBLEMATIC ACCOUNT

But we cannot, of course, rest content with a mere *ad hominem*. I have said that Rand fails to take a coherent approach to sensation and perception; we must look at this point in some detail. Since Rand’s own remarks on this topic are rather scattered, we shall work primarily from Leonard Peikoff’s account in *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (and we shall be as mindful as we can of the possibility that Peikoff’s views may differ somewhat from Rand’s).

We should begin by making an important distinction that Rand and Peikoff nowhere see fit to make. The difference between sensation and perception is a very fundamental one, and as we shall see, Objectivism gets a good deal of illicit mileage out of the failure to make it. It is this: perception is a form of judgment, and sensation is not.

A sensation, as such, is just not the sort of thing that is capable of truth or falsity. It would be absurd to describe, say, a tingling feeling as either true or false. Perception—by which we shall mean an experience in which, on the basis of sensations, we take some object (entity, qual-

ity, or relation) to be present to us—is clearly a form of judgment, in that it may be mistaken.

There are some further complications we could discuss here, but they leave the basic picture unchanged. The point to bear in mind is that there is a fundamental and irreducible difference between (a) features of experience that are *about* something other than themselves, in which we take something or other to be the case, and (b) features of experience in which this is not so. Sensations, if they can be meaningfully isolated as features of experience at all, fall into the latter class. Perceptions, like all judgments, fall into the former.

(Moreover, even if this turns out not to be the best way to distinguish between sensation and perception—and I happily admit that some contemporary epistemologists draw the line differently—the distinction I am making has to made somewhere. And neither Rand nor Peikoff makes it anywhere. We shall see later that Rand even conflates the mere possession of a concept with the use of a concept in making a judgment.)

Now, with the foregoing distinction in mind, let us examine Peikoff's account in *OPAR*.

We do not begin auspiciously. Peikoff announces that we must discuss the topic of “sense perception” [*OPAR*, p. 38] and then launches the discussion as follows: “The validity of the senses is an axiom” [*OPAR*, p. 39].

There are at least two problems here. The first, about which we shall say more below, is that we are not told what “validity” means.

The second problem is a straightforward but crucially important one. Peikoff has apparently begun by conflating “sense perception” with “the senses”.

Anyone concerned with what Rand and Peikoff call the “validity of the senses” is really concerned about the reliability of sensory *perception*. Nobody in his right mind would worry about whether bare sensations were veridical; what is in question is only the reliability of perceptual judgments *based* on such sensations, or (to put it another

way) of such sensations as the ground of what we might call “perceptual inference”. Rand’s famous “stolen concept” dismissal (discussed briefly below) is just wrong: people who raise (legitimate) questions about the so-called “validity of the senses” are actually trying to examine their adequacy as a basis for perceptual judgment—and not (usually) because they doubt whether we have knowledge of an “external world,” but because they doubt whether the senses themselves are our sole source of knowledge of that world.

Because Peikoff fudges or ignores this distinction, he is able to pass off several straw-man arguments. Consider the following:

Sensory experience is a form of awareness produced by physical entities (the external stimuli) acting on physical instrumentalities (the sense organs), which respond automatically, as a link in a causally determined chain. Obeying inexorable natural laws, the organs transmit a message to the nervous system and the brain. Such organs have no power to invent, distort, or deceive. They do not respond to a zero, only to a something, something real, which acts on them. [*OPAR*, pp. 39–40.]

Now, if all Peikoff means here is that sensations, and the purely physical processes that purportedly give rise to them, are in themselves incapable of truth or falsity, we may simply agree. But so what? A telephone line is also a purely physical channel that carries pulses of electric current; it has neither “volition” nor any power to distort its own purely physical processes; and yet anyone who has tried to carry on a phone conversation over a static-filled connection knows that Peikoff has missed the real point here.

The problem lies largely in his ambiguous and misleading use of the word “message”. We are not concerned with phone lines (or optic nerves) as carriers of electric current. We are concerned with phone lines (or optic nerves) as carriers of information, which may be distorted by purely physical processes precisely because such processes are not “volitional”. Whether or not the phone line has the power to dis-

tort its “message,” regarded purely as a signal, is beside the point; as far as perception is concerned, the point is whether the phone line accurately transmits the information from which we perceptually “reconstruct” the other end of a conversation. And we know all too well that sometimes it does not.

But because Peikoff does not bother distinguishing sensation from perception, he fancies himself to have shown something he has not shown at all:

The senses do not interpret their own reactions; they do not identify the objects that impinge on them.... It is only in regard to the “what”—only on the conceptual level of consciousness—that the possibility of error arises. [*OPAR*, p. 40.]

He thinks, that is, that he has pushed the possibility of error clear up to the “conceptual level”.

Now there is a legitimate point to made here—and both Rand and Peikoff make it elsewhere, though we shall not quote them—to the effect that our apparently “perceptual” experiences are much more “theory-laden” than we think. We simply cannot see things the way we saw them as infants.

But that is not Peikoff’s present point. Note that we are not quite sure, at this point, what Peikoff has done with *perception*—the very process he set out to discuss. Has he assimilated it to sensation? Or has he folded it into the “conceptual level of consciousness”? Which shell, in short, is the pea under?

A good deal hinges on whether he would acknowledge that there is such a phenomenon as perceptual error. If he would, then he may be quite properly recognizing the role of intelligence and reason even at the “perceptual level,” and we shall have no major quarrels with him in spite of his misleading way of approaching this topic.

But we are disappointed. Soon enough we find him arguing, in effect, that perception is never mistaken:

If a “valid” sense perception means a perception the object of which is an existent, then not merely man’s senses are valid. *All* sense perceptions are necessarily valid. If an individual of any species perceives at all, then, no matter what its organs or forms of perception, it perceives something that is. [*OPAR*, p. 41; emphasis his.]

So “valid” *does* mean “veridical”. And, apparently, whether an experience is veridical or not is what determines whether it counts as “sense perception” or not. “If an individual of any species perceives at all,” as Peikoff explains, “then, no matter what its organs or forms of perception, it perceives something that is.” If it thinks it perceives something that *isn’t*, then it just wasn’t perceiving after all. Sense perception is always valid, except when it’s not—and in those cases, we find out (retroactively, one must suppose) that it wasn’t really sense perception to begin with.

This does indeed seem to be Peikoff’s view, for he goes on at once to tell us the following:

Once a mind acquires a certain content of sensory material, it can, as in the case of dreams, contemplate its own content rather than external reality. This is not sense perception at all.... [*OPAR*, p. 41.]

But this concession completely vitiates Peikoff’s whole account. It seems that for Peikoff, perception, as such, is automatically veridical (“valid”), but we can be mistaken about whether or not we are “perceiving” in the first place. (And by the way, is *this* type of error perceptual?) He has therefore subjected perception to an external standard—at least in the sense that we have to invoke consistency/coherence with something outside the (possible) perception itself in order to determine whether it is a genuine “perception”. And if perception is subject to such a standard, it is not axiomatically “valid” or veridical.

We have, that is, merely passed the possibility of error back one step; the alleged (and allegedly axiomatic) incontestability of the “perceptual level” has just been altogether undone by the palpable contestability of whether a given experience really *is* at the perceptual level in the first place.

And we have introduced a new confusion to boot. For suppose I feel what seems to be a pain in what seems to be my right leg; my sensations are indistinguishable from those of a “real” pain in my “real” right leg. But as it happens, I am waking up in a hospital bed—having, as yet unbeknownst to myself, just had my right leg amputated.

Now, the problem here is not that I cannot find out the true state of affairs; of course I can just flip up the sheet and see that my leg is missing, at which point I shall get busy reinterpreting my “sensations” coherently with my newly acquired perceptual information.

The problem is that of two experiences which seem qualitatively identical “from the inside,” and which are clearly “perceptual” at least according to Rand’s/Peikoff’s definition of a “percept,” Peikoff wants to regard one as a case of “sense perception” and the other as something else. Why? Are my ghost pains something other than “sensations”? Do I get something other than a “percept” when I “retain” and “integrate” them?

Or is it that I am perceiving something which really exists, but merely misinterpreting *what* it is (at the “conceptual level”)? This interpretation is not very plausible either. Just what is the existent I am perceiving? The absence of my leg? The empty space where it would be if I still had it?

The entirety of this confusion rests on one single error: the failure to distinguish sensation, which is not a form of judgment, from perception, which is one.

A bare sensation, whether of pain or of anything else, is not a judgment—and neither, *contra* Rand, is a group of bare sensations. But if I even implicitly infer the continued presence of my leg from those ghost pains, if I take those pains as “located” in a limb that is no longer there,

if I have the sort of experience that pretty much everyone but Rand and Peikoff would call “perceiving” a leg I no longer have, then *of course* I am rendering a perceptual judgment. It just happens to be wrong, that’s all. There is no reason whatsoever to regard a judgment as something other than a judgment just because it happens to be mistaken. After all, what else but a judgment could possibly be mistaken?

TWO OBJECTIVIST COUNTERARGUMENTS

There are two standard Objectivist arguments that might be thought to bear on this issue. Each of them, though fatally flawed, has a surprising hold on life, so we shall deal with them briefly and in turn.

The first, already mentioned, is Nathaniel Branden’s “stolen concept” argument:

It is rational to ask: “How can man achieve knowledge?” It is not rational to ask: “Can man achieve knowledge?”...It is rational to ask: “How do the senses enable man to perceive reality?” It is not rational to ask: “Do the senses enable man to perceive reality?” If they do not, by what means did the speaker acquire his knowledge of the senses, of perception, of man, and of reality? [Nathaniel Branden, “The Stolen Concept,” *The Objectivist Newsletter*, January 1963, p. 2.]

This argument is a simple *petitio principii*. I do not deny that we *do* acquire knowledge at least in part through sensory perception (note: *not* “sensation”), but the question here is *how*. And Branden begs both his own question and ours.

First of all, the assumption that we acquire knowledge through the senses is smuggled into the argument in the final quoted sentence. The very point at issue, for Branden, is whether the senses provide knowledge in the first place; he is not entitled to assume his conclusion.

Second, and in the present context crucially, while we gladly concur with Branden’s contention that skepticism is self-refuting, this argu-

ment does not show the *senses alone* to be the source of all our knowledge; in fact Branden has covertly assumed this much stronger claim as well. In this chapter, we are criticizing Objectivism for failing to recognize the work of reason even at the “perceptual level”. And on that issue, Branden has again begged the question in assuming that the senses are not only a reliable source of knowledge, but the *only* such source.

The second standard Objectivist argument, too, simply has no bearing on the present point, as in its usual form it relies implicitly on the very presumption we are criticizing. Here is Allan Gotthelf’s version:

“The senses tell us that railroad tracks converge in the distance,” it is said, “and yet we know that they don’t.” But how do we know that? We go down and...*look*.

“Our senses tell us that the stick in water is bent,” it is said, “and yet we know that it’s not”. But how do we know that? We reach in and...*feel*. We take it out and...*look*. [*On Ayn Rand*, p. 54; emphasizes his. The ellipses do not indicate omissions; they are part of Gotthelf’s original text.]

If this argument were meant to show us that reason is at work even in perceptual experience, it might count for something. But as a defense of the reliability of sensory “perception” as identified with *sensation*, it is useless. If the stick looks bent and feels straight, we do not need to know *which* one it “really” is in order to know that our “perceptions” are contradicting one another. Additional sensory-perceptual investigation may help us decide which interpretation is correct (because more coherent overall)—but this is precisely because perceptual judgment answers to reason, not because “the senses” can never mislead us. Indeed it is only through the rational insight that, e.g., “a stick which looks bent and feels straight cannot really be both” that we are able to recognize the “sensory” conflict in the first place.

(George H. Smith’s version of the argument—in *Atheism: The Case Against God*, pp. 147–162—actually supports our conclusion here;

Smith very effectively argues that recognizing the contradiction between the stick's "look" and "feel" is *not* the job of the "senses". Unfortunately he does not quite get around to drawing the proper conclusion regarding the role of reason in perception itself.)

Gotthelf is unable to acknowledge as much because—like Rand and Peikoff—he never raises the question whether reason is itself involved in perception, and therefore confuses sensation with perception just as surely as Rand and Peikoff:

The senses do not "deceive" us, Ayn Rand explains, because they do not *interpret* the world at all. Interpretation is done by the mind—by reason operating with concepts. Perceptual awareness is the inexorable result of a causal interaction between physical entities and physical sense organs (and the nervous system and brain). [*On Ayn Rand*, pp. 54–55; emphasis his.]

Note well: the *senses* do not deceive us, Gotthelf alleges, because *perception* is an automatic process—and interpretation (*via* reason) comes *later*. Gotthelf has clearly assimilated perception to sensation here; the possibility that perception itself involves "interpretation" (and is already thoroughly implicated with reason) has simply slipped through the cracks.

IMPROVING THE OBJECTIVIST ACCOUNT

Now, so far I have been arguing that Peikoff, following Rand, fudges the distinction between sensation and perception (and we have just seen Gotthelf do likewise). I have written throughout as though there were some question whether it makes sense to speak of "pure sensations" as a level of experience. We now need to revisit that point, for reasons that will shortly become clear. Afterwards I shall point out another fundamental problem in Rand's epistemology that is brought to light by the present issue.

When I distinguished between sensation and perception, I said there were complications I did not wish to introduce at that time. Here comes one of them.

Another, perhaps better way to state the burden of the foregoing discussion is this: Peikoff fudges the distinction between, on the one hand, *discriminating* a sensation (which, it could and will be argued, is itself a form of judgment), and on the other, rendering a perceptual judgment of an external object *based on* our sensations. The difference between these two sorts of experience is a slightly more complex variant of what I described earlier: in the second sort of experience as opposed to the first, we take the content of our experience in some manner to “point” beyond itself to a reality that is not exhausted in the experience itself.

These two sorts of judgment do not stand on quite the same level of reliability. My (probably wordless) judgment that “I am now experiencing such-and-such a sensation”—for example, I am now “being appeared to redly,” as some writers put it—may be utterly incontestable. But my (perhaps also wordless) judgment that “these sensations are caused by such-and-such an entity” is not only contestable but actually fallible. (Of course it can be corrected by reflection, but we do not ordinarily take such reflection to be part of a perceptual experience.)

The advantages of putting it this way are twofold. First, we can do justice to the claim that judgment is coextensive with experience; and second, we can (therefore) do justice to what Rand *may* have been trying to say when she began her discussion in *IOE*. I shall comment briefly on each point.

(1) If the discrimination of a sensation is itself a judgment, to the effect that “my experience is presently characterized, in part, by this specific quality” (e.g. “I am now being appeared to redly”), then there is no feature of our experience that is untouched or unaffected by judgment. It sounds a bit odd to say that we “perceive” our sensations, but that is in effect what the thesis I am stating amounts to. If that is cor-

rect, then *all* of our experience consists of taking something or other to be the case, and experience is coextensive with judgment. (I am assuming, of course, that sensation is the only level of experience at which this point is in question.)

(2) In that case, what Rand was probably trying to say in her remark that we do not remember or experience pure, isolated sensations is that it makes no sense to regard an undiscriminated “sensation” as part of our experience. (It *may* not be meaningful to regard an undiscriminated sensation as anything at all, though I do not think this is quite Rand’s view.) If there are such entities as “pure” sensations, they must be inferred; all of our experience consists of discriminated sensations.

It is hard to tell for certain whether this is what Rand means. For example, on pp. 55–56 of *IOE*, she refers briefly to “the first discriminated sensation (or percept)”. Does she mean that a discriminated sensation *is* a percept? I cannot say. But if this is what she means, we can grant her point and continue from there, working out what she should have said (as opposed to what she *does* say that expressly contradicts this point).

In general we may well ask: what, exactly, is the relationship among sensation, perception and reason in Objectivist thought? There is some slight evidence that Rand assimilates perception to reason rather than to sensation in some of her earlier writings. In *ATLAS SHRUGGED*, she makes John Galt say, “Reason is the faculty that *perceives*, identifies, and integrates the material provided by [man’s] senses” [p. 934, my emphasis]. Here she seems to treat perception as a function of reason. But apparently she reconsiders this view; as of sometime in the 1960s she drops “perceives” from her definition, implying—or so it seems—that perception should be assimilated to sensation *à la* Peikoff and Gotthelf. See Jeff Walker’s *The Ayn Rand Cult*, p. 221, for one account of the alteration; Walker attributes the impetus for the change to Nathaniel Branden (but misstates the underlying issue; “‘perceiving what is perceived’ is a tad redundant,” Walker says, as though *redundancy* were the problem).

Walker does not notice, though, that at a still later (post-Branden) date she slips “perceives” back into the definition: “Reason is the faculty which *perceives*, identifies and integrates the material provided by man’s senses” [“Faith and Force: The Destroyers of the Modern World,” in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 62; emphasis mine].

And for that matter, so does Branden. In *Honoring the Self*, for example, he writes that “[r]ationality is our unreserved commitment to *perceive* [my emphasis] reality to the best of our ability” [p. 212]. For Branden, too, reason is again the “faculty which perceives”.

But cf. the following from *The Art of Living Consciously*: “To have a brain and nervous system that automatically learns to retain and integrate disparate sensations (energy pulsations) so as to make possible the perception of solid objects is not an exclusively human trait; other animals are similarly endowed. But to integrate percepts into concepts...*that* is a possibility of our species alone, through the operation of our rational faculty” [pp. 35–36; emphasis his]. Likewise Allan Gotthelf; recall his remark, quoted earlier, that “[p]erceptual awareness is the inexorable result of a causal interreaction between physical entities and physical sense organs (and the nervous system and brain)” [*On Ayn Rand*, p. 55]. Here perception is an automatic process in which reason plays no part—since animals which, on Rand’s account, lack the “rational faculty” can perceive just as well as we can.

It seems, then, that neither Rand nor any of her assorted protégés has ever quite decided exactly how perception is related to reason. See also the passage from *For The New Intellectual* quoted below in the chapter on “Universals, Units, and Natural Kinds,” and the discussion—also below—of the role of perception in Rand’s theory of “measurement-omission”.

At any rate, we are considering the possibility that Rand takes all of sensory experience to consist of *discriminated* sensations. Perhaps, we have suggested, her point is that an “undiscriminated sensation” cannot possibly be part of anyone’s experience.

Now, if this is her point, it seems to have been all but completely lost on Peikoff (perhaps understandably, since his mentor appears to have waffled on the issue herself). But later—when he is no longer arguing for the alleged incontestability of “the senses”—he forgets that he has folded perception into sensation and distinguishes them roughly along the lines we have suggested: “In order to move from the stage of sensation to that of perception, we first have to discriminate certain sensory qualities, separate them out of the initial chaos. Then our brain integrates these qualities into entities” [*OPAR*, p. 77].

We shall not pause here to inquire how it is possible for a mind to “discriminate” anything out of what is initially a “chaos”; Peikoff has not bothered to ask this obvious question, let alone made the remotest attempt to answer it. Still, Peikoff’s claim, properly reread, can at least point us in the right direction.

What Peikoff has more or less shown, not entirely intentionally, is that intelligence and reason are in some way inchoately at work even in “perceptual” experience, since sense perception (as opposed to mere sensation) is the sort of thing that *could* err. And, moreover, they are at work even in sensory experience, as an undiscriminated sensation is not properly speaking a feature of experience but merely part of an “initial chaos” if it exists at all, and the *discriminated* awareness of a sensation is itself already a judgment. (As far as “perceptual” experience is concerned, Peikoff zigged when he should have zagged—assimilating perception to the sensory level rather than to what he and Rand call the “conceptual” level.)

What he has *not* shown—because he has managed to persuade himself, or allowed Rand to persuade him, that he does not need to show it—is that we are justified in passing from one sort of judgment to the other: i.e., in inferring the real presence of an external object from a set of discriminated sensations, or even (as his words seem to imply) actually *constructing* or *reconstructing* a real “entity” from such sensations. For Peikoff, as for Rand and Branden and Gotthelf and every other Objectivist who has ever addressed this question, this job is done

“automatically” by the “brain” and we are not supposed to ask whether the “brain” can be counted on to do it correctly.

Of course I do not deny that such perceptual inferences or constructions *are* usually reliable; the fact that there are rare exceptions does not undermine the overall trustworthiness of such inferences. (Cf. William Alston’s *The Reliability of Sense Perception*.) And the kernel of truth lurking at the heart of Objectivism’s obfuscations is that the possibility of getting it wrong *does* presume the possibility of getting it right; we cannot talk about perceptual error without implicitly acknowledging that there is, at least ideally, such a thing as veridical perceptual judgment.

And we shall concede a point which Rand and Peikoff may have in mind here: that even “false percepts” are in some manner “assembled” from real attributes we have come to know through previous perceptual experiences. As Samuel Alexander puts it in *Space, Time, and Deity* [vol. II, pp. 214–215]: “The illusion is a transposition of materials.... [Illusions] are not the creation of the mind. What the mind does is to choose them from the world of reality.” With this much we can largely agree, although we shall draw back from Alexander’s apparent conclusion that illusory objects are actually physical.

But this concession falls very far short of the claim that every one of our perceptual experiences has a “real” object of some kind, at least one present in ordinary physical space at the time of the experience. It does not make the “evidence of the senses” somehow “incontestable,” nor does it make the “validity” of the senses “axiomatic”. (And it certainly does not even begin to support the much stronger claim that sensory perception is the source of *all* our knowledge.) The standard to which perceptual judgment answers is the same standard to which any and all judgments answer: coherence, including (at a minimum) consistency.

We do not ordinarily notice that perception has to meet this standard, because we have already done so much of the “processing” and “integration” involved. Much of it was done more or less automatically during our first year or so of infancy.

But it was completed all the same, and there is some question about where and how it began. A transition from pure sensation to perception—assuming, as Rand at least allows, that we *ever* operated at a stage of pure sensation—would amount to nothing short of a sea-change in conscious experience. This would be a transition from an alleged world of bare, undiscriminated sensations to a world in which such sensations are not only discriminated but even taken as providing information about external objects located in three-dimensional space and perduring through time. It is extraordinarily difficult (perhaps impossible) to describe this transition in a non-question-begging way—i.e., without covertly assuming that we already have implicit “intuitions” of space and time even at the supposed level of “pure sensation”.

Whatever the other flaws in Rand’s account of perception, she is wise not to try to explain this transition in order to “prove” that we can trust perceptual experience. The pure-sensation stage, she correctly implies, may never have existed; even if it did, we infer it from the perceptual/conceptual stage anyway. So in a sense she is right that we have to take the perceptual level as given, if not exactly “incontestable”. At the very least, as Blanshard insists in *The Nature of Thought*, if we give any consideration to the pure-sensation stage at all, we have to conceive it in such a manner that escape from it is possible.

But this is just where Rand has another problem.

HOW DOES A BLANK SLATE LEARN TO PERCEIVE?

How a *tabula rasa* (“blank slate”) mind could ever make the transition we have described is a complete mystery. (We have just seen the transition described, but not explained, by Nathaniel Branden as a process of “automatic learning”.) Even if Rand does not need to solve the mystery in order to defend the reliability of sense-perception, she really needs to say something about it in order to defend her contention that we *are*

each of us a *tabula rasa* at birth—especially since a *tabula rasa* mind should be, on her own terms, a self-contradiction.

Consciousness, she rightly notes, is always consciousness *of* something. “Some object, i.e., some *content*, is involved in every state of awareness.... Awareness is awareness of something. A content-less state of consciousness is a contradiction in terms” [*IOE*, p. 29]. In that case a consciousness without content is no consciousness at all. On her account, consciousness would seem to have to generate itself *ex nihilo* by conjuring up some mental content before there is a mind in which to put it.

And that is just what she implies, whether deliberately or not. “At birth,” she writes, “a child’s mind is *tabula rasa* [the phrase is unitalicized in the original]; he has the potential of awareness—the mechanism of a human consciousness—but no content.... [T]o perceive the things around him by integrating his sensations...is not an innate, but an acquired skill” [“The Comprachicos,” in *The New Left: The Anti-Industrial Revolution*, pp. 190–191; also in *Return of the Primitive*, p. 54].

What Rand seems to be imagining here is that we begin with what Peikoff has called an “initial chaos,” discriminate some sensations, and *learn*, more or less automatically, to assemble them into “percepts”. But in order to accomplish this task, it is not sufficient to have a “potential” in the form of a “mechanism,” if that means—as on Rand’s terms it must mean—a “mechanism” that has no “innate ideas” whatsoever.

For example, her allegedly axiomatic concept “entity” seems clearly to presuppose not merely an automatic process of learning to “perceive,” but even “innate” or “hardwired” *concepts* of space and time. (“[E]ntity’ does imply a physical thing” [*IOE*, p. 157].) Or, if these are not “hardwired,” we must be able to get at them by an innate faculty of *a priori* insight (which, we shall see later, Rand also disavows). Rand seems to be assuming, rather uncritically, that there is just no problem

passing from sensory or presensory “chaos” to knowledge of three-dimensional space.

(By the way, anyone who has followed the discussion to this point is now at least in a position to appreciate the problem with which Immanuel Kant—Rand’s great Satan—was attempting to deal. We shall not be dealing with Rand’s interpretations of Kant in this work, but one writer has, with justice, accused Rand of “arrogant ignorance regarding Kant” [Hans-Hermann Hoppe, *Economic Science and the Austrian Method*, in the footnote at the bottom of p. 20; this is a continuation of n. 14, which begins on p. 19].)

This is not a trivial point; our *tabula rasa* birth is absolutely crucial to Rand’s contention that “volitional consciousness” is the key to our “self-made souls,” which in turn is crucial to her own understanding of “man as a heroic being”. And it is also crucial to her claim that the “primacy of existence” is in some manner opposed to the “primacy of consciousness”—that, as Allan Gotthelf sharply puts it, “[e]xistence precedes consciousness” [*On Ayn Rand*, p. 50]. The central aims of her philosophy stand or fall with this issue.

But Rand is unable to tell us anything whatsoever about the transition from even *discriminated* sensation to full-blown perception; in fact she fudges it completely. A “percept,” for her, is just a group of sensations—one automatically retained and “integrated” by the human brain, but a group of sensations all the same.

IMPLICIT IDEALISM, EXPLICIT EMPIRICISM

This is sheer nonsense. A bare group of sensations, discriminated or not, is not a percept. (Or, if we insist on calling it one, we must at least not repeat Rand’s error as regards “concepts”—to be discussed shortly—and assume that we always take our “percepts” to refer to real objects.) To see a round red patch is not to perceive an apple. To see a round red patch and simultaneously to experience certain sensations of smoothness is still not to perceive an apple. To perceive an apple is to

have an experience in which one judges, on the basis of such sensations, that there is a round, red, smooth *object* before one in physical space. Sensations themselves are, as we have said, not capable of truth or falsity, and they do not become so by sheer accumulation of numbers. And it will take more than handwaving about “integration” to explain how such sensations are assembled into something that is capable of truth or falsity—namely, a judgment.

My conclusion, then, is that Rand has tried to combine two philosophical tenets (historically, one from idealism and one from its *bête noire*, materialistic empiricism) that strictly speaking cannot be combined: that it is not meaningful to talk about “pure” sensations as features of experience, and that the human mind is born *tabula rasa*. (Ultimately this is why she waffles on the issue of “sensations”.) One contention or the other must go. I think the first should be kept and the second consigned to permanent oblivion; others may have different opinions.

But that the two are at odds seems to me beyond question. In declaring the issue closed, we shall let Morris Cohen speak for several generations of philosophy and science: “The view that the mind at birth is a passive *tabula rasa* on which particular things write their impressions is a crude metaphor. And the view that the ‘mind’ of the newly born babe makes a synthesis of the particular facts and by comparing them obtains general ideas is a myth for which there are no corresponding empirical facts. The truth...is that the organism at birth is already adapted (or prepared to be adapted) to certain general phases of the physical world...and the perception of particular facts is conditioned by these general dispositions of the organism” [*Reason and Nature*, pp. 137–38].

Rand has painted herself into a very tight corner. On the one hand she claims, correctly, that consciousness is always consciousness *of* something. But on her reading of this claim, a mind cannot simply be conscious of its own contents; it must be conscious of something external to it and logically/chronologically prior to it. Which means that, on

the other hand, she is committed to a belief in the metaphysical primacy of mindless existence.

We shall be returning to Rand's "primacy of existence" premise later. But for now we must note that on her interpretation of this premise, she has impaled herself on the horns of a dilemma. If a mind cannot exist until it has content, it can never come into being—and yet here we are. Likewise, if metaphysical priority belongs to some form of existence which does not already include "mind" at least as a causal potentiality, it is very hard to see how mind could ever "emerge" from it—and yet here it is.

And the source of this dilemma is Rand's belief in the *tabula rasa* mind—a belief that on her own terms should have been impossible. The way out, as we shall see later, is simply to deny that existence and consciousness can ultimately be separated (theism being the most obvious, but not necessarily the only, way of keeping them conjoined). And in one way or another, that denial will entail a similar denial of the *tabula rasa* mind Rand requires for her self-creating human beings—a point to which we shall also return later.

A closing point: I have already suggested that Rand mischaracterized the "conceptual" level of consciousness. In my own view, the proper distinction is between what Blanshard has called "perceptual ideas" and "free ideas"—that is, between ideas that are tied to what is given perceptually in present experience, and ideas that are not thus tied. Space will not permit me to defend this contention here, but one additional comment is in order.

In part because Rand makes the distinction as she does (and in part because of the other errors we have been examining), she fancies herself to have demonstrated, in effect, that reason answers to perception rather than the other way around. This error, strange enough considered even in isolation from the rest of her thought, is an especially strange one in a philosophy that is proffered as a defense of reason.

For Rand's epistemology manages, through all its confusions, to obscure a crucially important truth: not only is intelligence operative

even in perception, but no intelligence worthy of the name is satisfied with the bare conjunctions of attributes we encounter in perceptual experience. The mere existence of philosophy and science is a testimony to the fact that sheer perception is not a final resting place for the mind that is genuinely guided by reason.

With this last I can only think Rand would agree. But in that case she should have offered an account of “concepts” that treated them as something more than ad-hoc file-folders for “groups of sensations”.

We shall eventually have more to say about her curiously impoverished notion of “reason”. But first we must discuss one of the alleged advances offered by her theory of concept-formation: her claim that the mind is active in the formation of concepts, and her concomitant claim that this fact does not undermine the possibility of knowledge even though there are no “universals” outside the human mind.

Chapter 4: *The Mind's Activity in* *Concept-Formation:* *Universals, Units, and Natural* *Kinds*

The best way to study philosophy is to approach it as one approaches a detective story: follow every trail, clue, and implication, in order to discover who is a murderer and who is a hero.... If a given tenet seems to be true—why? If another tenet seems to be false—why? and how is it being put over? [Ayn Rand, “Philosophy: Who Needs It,” in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 8.]

WHY RAND’S CONCERN ABOUT THE MIND’S “ACTIVITY”?

Many of Ayn Rand’s defenders think she has offered a genuine advance with her insistence that the mind is “active” in the formation of “concepts”. (“Consciousness, as a state of awareness, is not a passive state, but an active process...” [IOE, p. 5]. “All knowledge *is* processed knowledge.... Consciousness...is not a passive state but an active process” [IOE, p. 101, emphasis hers]). Why is she so concerned about this?

We should note first of all that her characterization of “realism” is as tendentious as we have seen her characterization of “nominalism” to be. She conflates two related but distinct issues: whether the mind is

active or passive in the discovery/invention of real universals, and whether real universals exist in the first place. (Leonard Peikoff repeats her confusion in *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*. Again, even a successful argument that the mind is “active” in concept-formation would not show that universals were unreal.)

As we shall see in the present chapter, there is a reason why Rand needs to be particularly concerned about the active role of the mind in concept-formation, and it is probably not as flattering to her philosophy as some of her admirers may expect. In fact she is forced to defend this point precisely by her unwitting presumption of nominalism.

In order to address this issue, I am going to begin by looking outside of *IOE* and Objectivism entirely. This move may appear questionable at first, but the reason for it will shortly become clear. Rand tended to reinvent the wheel, make it square in the process, and then denounce anyone who said it wouldn't roll; her work in epistemology, as we shall see, is no exception.

I shall look here at the work of a philosopher whose views on this topic are all but indistinguishable from Rand's—except that he places them correctly into their context in philosophical history, presents actual arguments for them, demonstrates awareness of genuine philosophical issues, and uses philosophical terms with their standard meanings. That philosopher is Roy Wood Sellars.

ROY WOOD SELLARS: LOGICAL CONCEPTUALIST AND ONTOLOGICAL NOMINALIST

Sellars (1880–1973) was an American philosopher aligned with the “Critical Realist” movement who spent most of his career at the University of Michigan. Among other things, he was the author of the first draft of the “Humanist Manifesto”. His political views were poles apart from Rand's (he was a socialist)—but his epistemological views were in

close agreement with hers, not only in the broad and general way in which most nominalists/empiricists agree with Rand (or she, unwittingly, with them), but even on specific points sometimes mistakenly thought to be unique to the Objectivist epistemology.

(Nor is epistemology the only field in which such agreement is evident, though I shall not discuss their other agreements here. Whether Rand actually read any of Sellars's work, I do not know. I think he would have been hard to avoid altogether if she had done much of any reading of contemporary philosophy during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. But perhaps she simply reproduced some things that were "in the air" at the time she wrote. Readers seeking a short introduction to Sellars may find his essay, "The Humanist Outlook," in Paul Kurtz's collection *The Humanist Alternative* [pp. 133–140].)

In what follows I quote from Sellars's 1932 book *The Philosophy of Physical Realism*. In Chapter VIII, Sellars characterizes his own position as "logical conceptualism and ontological nominalism", writing: "I believe in concepts but I do not believe in universals as a peculiar kind of entity in external things which may be in many things at once and gives them an identity of nature. Thus I desire to do justice to concepts, or meanings, as instruments of thought and of knowing, while keeping to similarity as a fact about things which are built up in corresponding ways out of the chemical elements" [p. 155].

(Note that Sellars has correctly characterized both the problem of universals and its solutions, realism and nominalism. In other words, he holds critically and responsibly the same position that Rand holds uncritically and irresponsibly.)

Unlike Rand, Sellars devotes some attention to the actual problem of universals, since he is aware that his theory of concepts will depend on his solution to it. He characterizes universals (quite correctly) by quoting Norman Kemp Smith: "The position which I [Smith] shall adopt is that universals, expressive of genuine *identities* and not merely of *similarities*, are necessary to knowledge.... The position ordinarily adopted by those who believe in universals is that...if it be asserted that

A is red and that B is red, what, on this view, is meant is that...one and the same identical character is found in each" [*Mind*, 1927, p. 137, emphasis Smith's; quoted in Sellars, p. 160; the article's title, which for some reason is not included in Sellars's reference, is "The Nature of Universals"].

Sellars disagrees that "sameness" means literal identity, and so requires his theory of concepts to give some account of why the mind acts as though there are real universals. His solution: "[Critical Realism, in accepting ontological nominalism, can] show that it is merely *as if* there were universals because meanings have the capacity to disclose the characteristics of similar things" [p. 156, emphasis his].

Concepts and meanings, for Sellars, are "intrinsic to operations" [p. 157]. He argues that, because the mind uses concepts to disclose the characters of real objects, there is a strong tendency to treat our concepts themselves as features of external reality: "[T]he very mode of working of our minds through concepts as instruments leads us to *project* the recurrence of the same meaning in our minds into the things we are thinking of. Logical identity is transformed into real universals" [p. 158, emphasis his].

Does this view not commit Sellars to the further view that there are real universals at least in the mind-brain events he takes to constitute thought? It does, and he is at least aware of the difficulty even if his handling of it is not altogether satisfactory. Remarking at one point on the view that upholds "universals *as entities*" [emphasis his], he adds at once: "I put in this qualifying phrase for I am a believer in meanings, ideas of, concepts, predicates, as I think every philosopher must be. It is only a theory about them which I am attacking" [p. 162].

Basically, then, he takes it as beyond question that the mind can "repeat the same meaning *as content*" [p. 163, emphasis his]. What he does not do is regard meanings, or concepts, as *entities*. He treats them as mental *operations*.

Now, I do not think this position is even remotely tenable, but my purpose at this point is not to criticize it; we shall do that soon enough.

Right now I am concerned only to show why a philosopher who holds views similar to Rand's is also concerned with the question whether the mind is active in the production of concepts. And Sellars is every bit as concerned about that as Rand is:

"Concepts are achievements, products of operational organization. We have shown [in an earlier chapter] that the mind was taken too passively. The mistake lay in the purely causal approach to perception which did not grasp the responsive act grounded in the active nature and capacities of the knower" [p. 167]. Critical Realism, for Sellars, advances the argument by "regard[ing] things and external states of affairs as having patterns and connections which are manifested in mental states. Acts of knowing involve the taking up of these manifestations and *developing* them by methods and processes and then the using of the concepts so obtained as a means to interpret the nature of external reality" [p. 168, emphasis his].

Now Sellars is able to arrive, as a conclusion, at the point Rand simply assumes without argument on the first page of *IOE*: "In short, universals are concepts held in the act of knowing to reveal the disclosable texture, behavior, and connections of things. In the strict sense, the only universals are concepts. But the controlled correspondence and revelatory capacity of these concepts makes it seem to us *as though* there were universals in nature [p. 168; emphasis his]." (Rand herself falls into just this supposed error on p. 11 of *IOE*, where her perceptual experience "makes it seem to [her] *as though*" there is an abstract attribute called "length" literally common to three objects. She thereby demonstrates both that Sellars's account may not be all that plausible when applied to actual cases, and that half an hour of introspection is not always a sound basis for an epistemological theory.)

Now we can see why, on the account of a "logical conceptualist and ontological nominalist," it is important that the mind be active in the process of concept-formation. The problem of universals, whether it is explicitly acknowledged or not, crops up in the problem of concept-formation. If we do not believe in real universals (under whatever

name), we still have to explain why the mind acts as though there are real universals (and why that's okay). Sellars tries to do so by arguing that the mind *actively creates* universals as "operational" features of its own functioning.

I do not see that his position here differs in any significant way from Rand's, either in content or in plausibility (and we shall address its plausibility shortly). But my main purpose at the moment is not to criticize this view but merely to point out why a denier of real universals finds himself compelled to discuss the "activeness" of the mind in the creation of knowledge. I think a close reading of Sellars on this point is helpful in explaining what Rand herself does not see fit to explain. Sellars is at least informed about the philosophical issues he is discussing and writes pretty clearly about them (I would say "clearly enough to be found out"). And unlike Rand, he does not present realism and nominalism in a misleading and tendentious fashion and so does not present his account as a mysterious Third Way between the two.

And again, I do not know whether Rand adopted her views by actually reading Sellars (or, say, hearing about him, or some philosophy similar to his, from Leonard Peikoff or one of the Brandens). But his account certainly shares important features with Objectivist epistemology. And since his account is far superior to Rand's in both exposition and sophistication, then if his account is found implausible, so much more is hers. To the question of its plausibility we must therefore now turn.

KNOWLEDGE WITHOUT UNIVERSALS?

The point so far is this: Even the most devout nominalist has to recognize the plain fact that the mind, however "active" or "passive," always *behaves* or *operates* as though there are real universals. If there really are such universals, then our epistemology doesn't have to explain why we think as though they exist; so far as the problem of universals is con-

cerned, we may give either an “active” or a “passive” account of knowledge. The acceptance of real universals thus leaves the problem of “activity vs. passivity” just where it was.

But the denial of real universals forces us to regard the mind as “active” in the creation of knowledge—because if those universals are not really “out there” to be found, we must have created them ourselves. (Incidentally, this is also why the “problem of universals” seems to reduce to a problem of epistemology and even psychology if, as Rand did, we assume a nominalist solution.)

The denial of real universals also forces us to do some pretty complex handwaving to make plausible the contention on which a non-skeptical nominalism must ultimately depend: that in every case in which we think we have discovered a genuine identity, we have actually discovered a “similarity” and *created* an identity—and that this claim does not undermine itself by undermining the very possibility of knowledge.

(Of course the acceptance of real universals does not tell us, in and of itself, just *which* universals are ultimately real; a realist as regards universals may adopt a “mixed” position overall, holding that some apparent universals are not fully and finally real after all. And I do not think any realist would defend the view that everything we *think* is a real universal necessarily *is* one—except, trivially, as a “mental content” that may be, as Sellars acknowledges, identical among diverse mental contexts).

Now, this is why a (universal) realist is not, as such, committed to the view that the mind is “active” in the production of knowledge. The mind may in fact *be* active in such production, and I think that it clearly is. But the role of activity in an epistemology grounded in the reality of universals is not the same as in a nominalist account; a realist need not make the mind “active” just in order to account for the possibility of knowledge itself.

The nominalist is in a far worse position. What nominalism needs is an account that describes just how the mind goes about “creating”

(apparent) universals. And this account must both (a) show positively that genuine knowledge is still possible even though the mind regards certain qualities and relations as “identical” when they are really no such thing, and (b) itself avoid any reliance whatsoever on an underlying “substrate” of real universals.

Sellars’s account does not and cannot succeed in satisfying both these conditions at once. It is worth looking at this point in detail in order to see why Sellars’s account (and therefore Rand’s) is problematic.

We have already seen that Sellars’s account has to admit the real existence of universals as “mental content”. Now, that fact poses a tremendous problem for Sellars’s “ontological nominalism,” since he also regards mental events as, ultimately, occurrences within a purely physical universe. In that case he is committed to the view that *some* physical events—namely, the special subclass he regards as “mental”—do in fact harbor genuinely real universals (in the form of “concepts” and “meanings”). That he regards these as “operations” rather than “entities” is neither here nor there; he still runs head-on into the problem of explaining just what it is that makes two such “operations” identical. And the answer he is forced to give—since he acknowledges that two mental events, *as* physical events, are never identical—is that they are identical in “content”.

And he is also committed to the view that the mind uses this content to refer (successfully) to external reality. In fact, he explicitly tells us that, technically, concepts themselves are universals, and explicitly acknowledges that, although two uses of a concept are of course two different physical events, the mind can nevertheless “repeat the same meaning *as content*” [p. 163, emphasis his]. The concepts thus repeated have the power to “disclose” the nature of external reality in some way that is not specified.

In other words, he seems to admit the existence of genuine identities—not just “exact similarities”—among judgments. That is, if I judge that object A has property *p* and that object B has property *p*, the

two uses of my concept of p are (or may be) literally identical in their asserted content, even though the two objects themselves have, not one identical property, but two properties that are exactly similar.

Now this will clearly not do. The asserted content of my judgment just *is* property p —or, more precisely, the real existence of property p , first as a property of object A and then as a property of object B. A nominalist might contend (and inherit a whole host of additional problems by contending) that the contents of the two judgments are *not* identical. But to say that the two asserted contents are identical and yet insist that the two real properties in question are diverse is simply to say that at least one of my judgments is wrong.

Using a concept is not like using a pointer, which may be successfully pointed in turn at any number of disparate objects. My concept of property p is what it is because it is a concept of property p ; I may not use it indifferently to refer, willy-nilly, to just any old property at all. To predicate, of object A, the “content” of my concept of p just *is* to assert that object A has property p . It would be one thing to hold that I am really assigning property p_A to object A and property p_B to object B; in that case the contents of my concepts are not identical after all. If, however, the content of my concept remains identical between disparate contexts but the real properties to which it refers do not, then there is what appears to be an impenetrable wedge between my thought and the reality at which it aims.

(Rand might seem to escape this difficulty *via* her contention that a concept “means” all of its referents—so that my concept of p actually means all the particular properties p_A, p_B, p_C, \dots . But we shall shortly find this conflation of sense and reference untenable on other grounds, so I shall not here discuss the further problems she would encounter if she gave this reply.)

This is why Sellars’s account cannot simultaneously satisfy both of the conditions I listed above. He must choose between them: either he acknowledges that two judgments with identical “asserted content” may both be true (and therefore implicitly relies on the existence of real

universals that are not simply the products of our mental activity) or he denies that there are such real universals (and therefore implicitly denies that two judgments with identical "asserted content" can both be true).

And these are not his only difficulties. We have not even begun to address a matter which, on Sellars's account, is altogether dark and mysterious: how in the world we manage to arrive at a concept to begin with. For Sellars acknowledges frankly that a concept *is* a universal, at least with respect to its "content". But we are left entirely unenlightened about how we manage to conjure a literal universal out of nothing but exact similarity. The argument *that* this is possible, let alone *how*, seems to be missing from my copy of *The Philosophy of Physical Realism*.

Rand is no more successful. As we have seen, when she gets down to cases and tries to show us how we arrive at a "concept" in the very simplest example she can construct ("length," *IOE*, p. 11), she unwittingly presumes that there really is a real universal "out there," a property that her three selected objects quite literally have in "common". But this fact is hidden by the ambiguous role she assigns to the mind's activity: on the one hand, simply isolating the common abstract attribute "length," and on the other, actually creating it.

Rand has two sorts of abstraction going on here, and acknowledges only one. First she has us "abstracting" (i.e., mentally isolating) the specific length of the pencil from the pencil itself, the specific length of the match from the match itself, and the specific length of the stick from the stick itself. Then she has us abstracting the common attribute "length" from the three specific lengths. That these two sorts of abstraction are actually different is what her account does not and cannot recognize.

This, then, is why she needs to emphasize the activity of the mind in concept-formation: to mask the fact that she is calling for the mind to generate universals *ex nihilo* when none exist in the reality we perceive.

As we shall later note in another context, Rand maintains that the mind's sole power of creativity is the ability to rearrange what it has observed ["The Metaphysical and the Man-Made," in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 25]. Naturally, then, the mind cannot whip up abstract attributes out of thin air; if we have knowledge of them, as we clearly do, then we must have observed them somewhere. Yet if "everything that man perceives is particular, concrete" [*IOE*, p. 1], then we cannot possibly have *observed* such abstractions as "length"; the mind must have generated them somehow through its own activity.

But these two claims obviously cannot be reconciled. And so Rand has painted herself into an epistemological corner, from which the only apparent escape is to wave her hands about the mind's "activity" and distract the reader's (and perhaps Rand's own) attention from the impossibility of the mind's task. The mind must be able—somehow—to bring "abstractions" into existence where none had existed before. But the "somehow" cannot be filled in consistently with Rand's claims about the mind's inability to create anything from scratch.

We therefore find her attacking the straw-man position that the mind is "passive" in apprehending real universals—as though some sort of "processing" can accomplish the self-contradictory outcome she requires.

It is all very well, then, to tell us—as Sellars and Rand both do—that the mind is "active" in the creation of concepts. But when we press the issue and try to see just how this happens, i.e., just how a mind beginning with a given "exact similarity" can manage to generate a literal intercontextual identity in a world that is otherwise without such identities, Sellars is silent.

Rand, perhaps less wisely but more informatively, attempts to show us how this is possible. And her attempt is informative precisely because it demonstrates something she herself utterly fails to notice: that she must presume the existence of real universals in the very process of trying to demonstrate that we do not need them.

We shall see something similar in Rand's account of "units". Here, too, Rand seeks to use the mind's activity to mask a genuine problem in her epistemology—this time one involving a more abstract sort of universal.

PERCEIVING THINGS AS "UNITS"

By way of introduction, we return briefly to Rand's non-theory of perception. At the end of the preceding chapter, I suggested that she should have given an account of "concepts" that treated them as something more than *ad hoc* file-folders for "groups of sensations". In fact she is unable to hold consistently to her own approach, and it will be instructive to look at one of her lapses.

Rand does not consistently hold that the "perceptual level" is not to be questioned. In *For The New Intellectual*, she writes as follows:

To the [mystic], as to an animal, the irreducible primary is the automatic phenomena of his own consciousness. An animal has no critical faculty; he has no control over the function of his brain and no power to question its content. To an animal, whatever strikes his awareness is an absolute that corresponds to reality—or rather, it is a distinction he is incapable of making; reality, to him, is whatever he senses or feels.... [FTNI, p. 17]

(A possible correction is suggested by John W. Robbins, *Without a Prayer: Ayn Rand and the Close of her System*, p. 41. Presumably, Robbins says, her curious reference to the "content" of the animal's "brain" is really a reference to the content of its *mind*; she is clearly writing here not about chemicals and electrical impulses but about features of experience. On the other hand, she does regard a "percept" as a group of sensations automatically retained and integrated by the *brain* of a living organism. So perhaps she means "brain" after all.)

Note well her claim that animals—whose consciousness, by her own admission (and Nathaniel Branden's) elsewhere, does (in some species)

operate at the “perceptual level”—nevertheless lack the “critical faculty” necessary to distinguish between veridical and nonveridical perceptual experiences (those that do and do not “correspond to reality”).

Apparently she agrees, at least in this passage, that the possession of a “conceptual level” is needed in order to distinguish between the two; they cannot be told apart “from the inside,” as it were. So it seems that the “perceptual level” is not inviolate after all, but subject to the judgment of the “critical faculty”. (An animal, that is, might not be able to differentiate between a “ghost pain” from a missing leg and a “real” pain from a real leg. As we have already seen, this consideration is fatal to Rand’s non-account of perception.)

However, her views on animal consciousness land her in some further trouble relevant to the present topic.

In *IOE*, Rand writes: “*The ability to regard entities as units is man’s distinctive method of cognition*” [p. 7]. (This sentence is italicized in the original text, presumably in order to call attention to its fundamental importance.) But in chapter 7 of the same work, after referring briefly to an experiment involving crows’ ability to count, she concludes as follows: “Apparently, their power of discrimination did not extend beyond three *units*” [p. 62; emphasis mine]. It seems, then, that *crows* share the distinctively human ability to regard existents as units.

And yes, she does mean that “units” can be recognized perceptually. For she continues at once: “[I]f we *omit all conceptual knowledge*...and attempt to see how many units (or existents of a given *kind*) we can discriminate, remember and deal with *by purely perceptual means*...we will discover that...we may grasp and hold five or six units at most” [pp. 62–63; all emphases mine].

Now, one of the many odd features of this remark is her implicit claim that we can recognize *kinds* by “purely perceptual means”. We have already noted that this admission undoes her (important) contention that only humans can regard existents as “units” (since she says crows can do it too).

But it also undoes her (equally important) contention that there *are no* “kinds” apart from human conceptual classifications. If she means what she appears to mean in the passage from which we have just quoted, then she believes that there are *real* “kinds” that can be recognized by sentient beings who do not even possess a “conceptual level” of consciousness.

ARE “KINDS” REAL OR NOT?

Obviously there is a problem here. And it derives from an ambiguity she introduces very early on.

“A unit,” we are told, “is an existent regarded as a separate member of a group of two or more similar members.... Note that the concept ‘unit’ involves an act of consciousness (a selective focus, a certain way of regarding things), but that it is *not* an arbitrary creation of consciousness: it is a method of identification or classification according to the attributes which a consciousness observes in reality. This method permits any number of classifications and cross-classifications...but the criterion of classification is not invented, it is perceived in reality.... [U]nits do not exist *qua* units, what exists are things, but *units are things viewed by a consciousness in certain existing relationships*” [IOE, pp. 6–7; all emphases Rand’s].

Another correction: when Rand writes that the “concept ‘unit’ involves an act of consciousness,” she presumably means that *regarding something as a “unit”* involves such an act. We shall have more to say about this misstatement shortly. (Moreover, she is not strictly entitled to hold that “relationships” can exist, unless she elaborates on her remark, “It is Aristotle who identified the fact that only concretes exist” [IOE, p. 52]. Are relationships “concretes”? At one time the existence of “relations” was a live philosophical controversy.)

Likewise Peikoff: “When studying the unit-perspective, it is essential to grasp that in the world apart from man there are no units; there are only existents—separate, individual things with their properties and

actions. To view things as units is to adopt a *human* perspective on things—which does not mean a ‘subjective’ perspective” [OPAR, p. 76; emphasis Peikoff’s; the emphasis presumably indicates Peikoff’s belief that nonhumans, e.g. crows, *cannot* view things in this way].

Now, Rand’s remarks on “units” contain a world of confusion, some of which (as we already know) comes back later to vitiate her entire account. Let us see what we can make of it.

On the one hand, she says, real existents really do stand in real relationships to one another, and some of these relationships include similarity. Real existents in real relationships of real similarity are members of real classes or kinds. So there really are “kinds” out there in observed reality; we discover them rather than invent them.

On the other hand, real existents are not “units” (members of kinds) except when regarded as such by a human conceptual consciousness. To be a member of a “kind” is simply to be *regarded as* a member of a “kind” by a human being. So there really *aren’t* any “kinds” out there in observed reality; we invent them rather than discover them.

We have already noted that Rand is unable to stick to the “other hand” even throughout the remainder of *IOE*. Her remarks on crows’ perceptual abilities clearly concede that even a consciousness utterly lacking a “conceptual level” can recognize “units (or existents of a given kind)” *perceptually*.

Rand’s position, as stated, is an uneasy compromise between two contradictory views, masked by her inaccurate (or is it equivocal?) remark that “the concept ‘unit’ involves an act of consciousness”.

What she means by this remark—what she must mean—is that *regarding an existent as a “unit”* involves an act of consciousness. But she seems to conclude from her remark that an existent’s *real existence as a unit* depends on an “act of consciousness”. This does not follow, and in fact is false; the fact that an existent’s relationships to other existents can be grasped only by “regarding” it in a “certain way” does not make those relationships any less real.

(Here as elsewhere, Rand thinks she has reduced to “epistemology” matters that are not fundamentally epistemological at all. If “Objectivism holds that the essence of a concept is that fundamental characteristic(s) of units on which the greatest number of other characteristics depend” [*IOE*, p. 52], then Objectivism must also hold that Aristotle was entirely right to regard “essences” as metaphysical.)

And we have already seen that she is unable to maintain this compromise for the duration of her own monograph. Now, I surely would not wish to maintain that *all* conceptual classifications correspond to “natural kinds”; what “kinds” are really “natural” is, I suppose, a matter for rational-empirical investigation.

But remember those crows and the conveniently-invoked “mechanisms” of those animal “brains”. Even on Rand’s own account, some “kinds” are so “natural” that—literally—even birdbrains can recognize them.

“INNOVATIONS” OR FAILURES?

Rand’s attempt to deal with “universals” by attributing them to human cognitive activity is therefore a complete failure, both for specific universals and for “natural kinds”.

What we have shown in the last several chapters is that Rand is quite unable to maintain her initial nominalist commitments, and that several of the alleged innovations in her epistemology are simple consequences of this failure. She has not offered a new solution to the problem of universals; she has not reduced any ontological questions to sheer epistemology; she has only failed to make important distinctions and allowed herself to be misled by a poor attempt at introspection.

So far the “intrinsicists” seem to be coming off rather well. Rand’s contention that there are no “‘universals’ inherent in things” [*IOE* p. 53] is belied by her own repeated reliance on the real existence of such universals. Her denial that “kinds” exist independently of human clas-

sification schemes is belied by her recognition that even animals are able to recognize real “kinds” without the aid of concepts.

Not, of course, that we should simply take Rand’s word about what animal cognition is like. I noted that the question of what kinds are really “natural” is presumably a matter for rational-empirical investigation; we should add that Rand seems curiously unwilling to undertake such investigation in general. She is, for example, constantly telling us how children and animals think, but she does not cite a single source anywhere in *IOE*. (Or anywhere else, for that matter, unless one counts Maria Montessori. The reader interested in a criticism of Rand’s failure to take into account the empirical facts of human psychology is referred to Greg Nyquist’s *Ayn Rand Contra Human Nature*, a generally competent critique written from a philosophical foundation that is in many respects very different from mine.)

So we shall be properly wary of her claims about the cognitive practices of children and animals. Nevertheless it is significant that she cannot present her *own* epistemological theories without presuming the existence of real universals, including “kinds”—indeed, without presuming that the mind is able, in some manner, to make direct cognitive contact with such universals. (As we have seen, she folds this contact into “perception,” along with everything else she wants to keep.)

While we are crediting the “intrinsicists,” we must also credit Rand: she has at least recognized a genuine problem, even if her own response to it is hopelessly inadequate. On most current views of mind and physical reality, there *is* something of a mystery in how the human mind is able to grasp real universals.

That is not to say the mystery is insoluble. Laurence Bonjour, to whom we shall be referring later, makes the following suggestion: “How is it possible that a thought, simply by virtue of its intrinsic character, is about or has as an element of its content a particular property or universal[?]...The answer to this question that I want to consider here is very radical indeed from a contemporary perspective, so much

so that it would be very hard to take seriously, were it not that there is no apparent alternative. It is that in order for the intrinsic character of the thought to specify precisely *that* particular property to the exclusion of anything else, the property in question must *itself* somehow be metaphysically involved in that character" [*In Defense of Pure Reason*, p. 182; emphases BonJour's].

BonJour develops this suggestion at some length, but we shall not recount his development here; the reader is referred to pp. 182–186 of the book (and indeed to the entire volume, which is uniformly excellent). Nor am I implying that I either agree or disagree with BonJour, or he with me, about any further particulars under this heading (although I do in fact have significant areas of agreement with him). All we need to note at present is that BonJour has made essentially the same point we made *supra*, in our discussion of Rand and Roy Wood Sellars: that a real universal must in some way enter into or inform a thought in order for that thought to be "about" the universal in question.

Just how this occurs, as BonJour notes, is a serious problem for most modern metaphysics and philosophies of mind. We shall see later that it is also a problem for Objectivism. Rand has recognized a genuine difficulty, but unfortunately she has responded in a fashion we must regard as altogether implausible: she has simply *conceded*, in effect, that the materialist, empiricist, nominalist view of the universe and the mind's place therein is the correct one, and simply tried to carry over the desirable features of reason and rationality onto that new foundation. In this sense, at least, her apparent rebellion against these "modern" trends is in fact a full-scale capitulation.

We shall return to all of these difficulties later, and we shall eventually award the match to the "intrinsicists". But first it is time to give the "subjectivists" their due. We recall Rand's complaint that according to the "nominalists" and "conceptualists," the unanalyzed relation of "resemblance" is vague and arbitrary, quite unsuitable as a foundation for "concept-formation". We have suggested that her own account is

best seen as an attempt to ground “resemblance” in a foundation of real universals (which she did not recognize as such and which is therefore at odds with her explicit ontological commitments).

Her analysis of “resemblance” is sometimes thought to be one of the tremendous advances offered by her epistemology. And so now we shall turn to her allegedly groundbreaking theory of “measurement-omission”.

Chapter 5: *Rand's Theory of* *Measurement-Omission*

Instead of dismissing [a philosophical claim], *accept* it—for a few brief moments. Tell yourself, in effect: “If I were to accept it as true, what would follow?” This is the best way of unmasking any philosophical fraud. [Ayn Rand, “Philosophical Detection,” in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 16; emphasis hers.]

A REALISTIC RESEMBLANCE THEORY

Let us suppose that Rand had been more alive to the real issues involved in the “problem of universals” and had followed through consistently on her initial approach.

She would, first of all, have had to introduce her theory very differently. Contrary to what Rand wishes us to conclude from her classification system, we have held that a resemblance theory is (or can be) a realist theory; specific lengths and colors do exist, and they are clearly universals in that they are repeatable predicables. Qualitative universals, on such a theory, exist only in the mind, but there are more or less well-defined classes of specific universals in each category that are grouped together on the basis of their real resemblances to one another. (I have already noted that we are not considering the idealistic conception of the “concrete universal” in this volume. However, we may as well remark in passing that a system of specific universals related by resemblances could well qualify as something very like a “concrete universal”. On such an account, idealism could contend that the unitary

whole of reality is a “concrete universal” and still cheerfully admit that specific universals occur within it.)

On such a theory, the specific universals fall, in some cases, into more or less “natural” classes. The relations of resemblance (and of difference) between specific universals are themselves specific universals; they really do exist and they are apprehended, not invented, by the mind. It is possible, though perhaps difficult, to constitute a fairly well-defined class of specific attributes based on their degree of resemblance to one example given ostensibly.

Brand Blanshard develops such a theory in *Reason and Analysis*, which Rand—or at least Nathaniel Branden—read when it was published, a few years before Rand’s own essays on epistemology appeared in the *Objectivist* from July 1966 to February 1967. (Branden, as we shall see in a later chapter, reviews *Reason and Analysis* in the February 1963 issue of *The Objectivist Newsletter*.) Richard I. Aaron offers a similar account in his *The Theory of Universals*, the first edition of which was published before *Reason and Analysis* and the second edition after. (There is therefore some helpful interplay between the two volumes: Blanshard’s work takes account of Aaron’s, and then Aaron’s second edition takes account of Blanshard’s.) A well-chosen excerpt from Aaron’s book appears in Andrew B. Schoedinger’s *The Problem of Universals*, pp. 326–345.

Rand’s remarks about vagueness and arbitrariness (in her dismissals of “nominalism” and “conceptualism”) thus appear to have been a bit hasty. In fact a theory of universals based on resemblances among specific universals need have nothing vague or arbitrary about it; a particular relation of resemblance is as specific as anything, and if it objectively exists, it provides a perfectly legitimate realistic basis on which to form concepts of abstractions.

Owing to her own confusion, as we have seen, what she offers in the end is not a resemblance theory at all. If she holds—as she seems to hold—that the abstract universal “length” exists in its own right, then with respect to the universal “length” she is, in her own terms, either a

Platonic or a moderate realist, respectively according to whether she thinks it can exist “abstractly” or only as instantiated in particular lengths. The latter, as we noted in our earlier discussion, would seem at one point to be her intended solution, but of course she cannot adopt it consistently with her own earlier statements.

But in very broad outline (and with her terminology corrected), I think the account Rand initially sets out to offer is sound (though in need of more supporting argument than she provides—i.e., none). Recall that even though she launches *IOE* by assuming a position properly characterized as “nominalist,” she leaves herself a loophole in the possibility that several people *may* not (and therefore, we suppose, *might*) have literally identical characteristics at the level of complete specificity. And so we initially characterized the position we expected her to defend as “nominalism” or “conceptualism” with regard to abstractions and “realism” with regard to specific attributes. As we have noted, this is essentially the position taken by Brand Blanshard in *Reason and Analysis*, and in my own view it is at least defensible (though see D.M. Armstrong's *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction* for further discussion of a number of related issues).

So let us suppose that she has offered her theory in this form, without tub-thumping pronouncements of originality. That is, let us assume that, as far as universals are concerned, she has adopted a “realist” view of specific attributes/universals, and a “conceptualist” view of abstractions.

If she is to avoid giving “abstractions” mind-independent existence of their own, she shall have to fall back on a resemblance theory of the type I have briefly described. Again, Blanshard has done much of the spadework here, despite Rand's dismissal (through Branden) of his theory of universals. Such a theory could presumably be combined with a more expressly Aristotelian metaphysics; at least, I do not know of any reason why the two cannot coexist peacefully.

I must add that I do not *know* whether it is possible to avoid abstract objects altogether; I am merely saying that *Rand* has to avoid them if

her epistemology is to be rescued. I suspect, though, that we shall ultimately have to acknowledge the real existence of at least some items Rand would have called “abstract”. (Jerrold Katz’s *Realistic Rationalism* contains much valuable discussion of this topic.)

As I mentioned earlier, I have some reservations about the claim that only the fully specific is real. Even on Blanshard’s own account, it is unclear just which universals are fully specific. Blanshard would, for example, acknowledge specific numbers as real universals, whereas Rand would not. (“That the number six does not differ in six spots on a die and in six apples, muses, or planets is, I think, self-evident” [“Reply to Marcus Clayton,” in *The Philosophy of Brand Blanshard*, p. 874].) Here, and on the Identity of Indiscernibles generally, Blanshard seems to me to have the better of the argument. Nevertheless “specificity” as a criterion of the reality of a universal seems a bit too subjective to be useful; I suspect Rand would simply deny that a number is “specific” in the required sense.

Moreover, Blanshard seems to me to have argued his case with an incomplete set of examples. I am in agreement with him about the unreality of such abstractions as “color” and “shape”. I am less sure about, say, “triangularity,” with which he deals in vol. I, chapter 16 of *The Nature of Thought* as an example of the “false or abstract universal” (citing Berkeley’s well-known criticism of Locke on the latter’s notion of a “general idea”).

And I am not at all clear what he would have done with something like “circularity,” which (unlike “triangularity”) seems to me to be as specific a *shape* as possible (even if every “real” circle also has a *size*). I do not see that “circularity” is subject to the objections Blanshard raises against “triangularity”. In general, it is not at all obvious that there are simply no “abstract schema” that exist as fully specific members of their “kinds” (and perhaps also as “kinds” in their own right).

But we do not need to settle such issues here. For present purposes we need only note that Rand’s approach to universals is inadequate as it stands; her claim that everything which exists is specific may well be

true, but it is not enough to determine the answers to some very important questions, including the question whether there are any real universals in the first place.

In any case she shall have to drop her claim that she has improved on Aristotle by making “essence” a matter of epistemology *rather than* metaphysics [IOE, p. 52]. Even Rand herself cannot maintain this point consistently: she defines “essence” as “fundamental characteristic,” and gives this characteristic a metaphysical definition herself [*ibid.*, p. 45] on which its epistemological definition clearly depends. (And by the way, she is heavily indebted both to Blanshard and to John Cook Wilson on this point, though she may never have read the latter.)

She also owes a good deal to Locke's distinction between “nominal” and “real essences”. Locke himself was not hopeful that the latter could make much difference to ordinary language. But Leibniz took him to task on this very point in *New Essays on Human Understanding* and made clear that what Locke meant by “real essence” was in fact the standard meaning of “essence”; Rand is herself vulnerable here to at least some of Leibniz's criticisms, for her account of abstractions makes them roughly equivalent to Locke's “nominal essences”.

And see Hilary Putnam's “The Meaning of Meaning” in his *Mind, Language and Reality*, as applied to this question by E.J. Lowe in *Locke On Human Understanding* [pp. 81–83]. Lowe, citing Putnam, maintains that even when we superficially classify objects or substances by observable similarities, we are always willing to modify our understanding based on scientific knowledge we may not at the moment possess, precisely because we *intend* to classify objects according to what Locke would call their “real essences” even when we do not yet know what these are. (Lowe is also the author of several fine works on ontology, including—relevantly here—*Kinds of Being*.) In general, there seems to be no good reason that a resemblance theory of universals cannot be combined with an account of “natural kinds”—the existence of which, as we have seen, Rand acknowledges despite herself.

Now, we have supposed that Rand is unhappy with “vague” resemblances, worrying that they could provide only an “arbitrary” basis for abstractions. (Cf. her remarks on Wittgenstein and “family resemblances” on p. 78 of *IOE*.) Her own account is best read, I think, as an attempt to provide a non-vague and non-arbitrary account of resemblance or similarity.

We have also seen that she tries to reduce resemblance to the possession of a common “abstract attribute” that must exist in *some* quantity but may exist in *any* quantity. But let us suppose that this language is misleading; she does not mean to posit the existence of an abstract attribute at all but merely to give an “objective” account of similarity.

Very well; we shall expunge the ghosts of those abstract attributes and consider her theory of “measurement-omission” as an attempt to render “similarity” precise. Does it succeed?

Not easily, at any rate. We noted earlier that she might have had a harder time had she chosen, instead of “length,” an example that was not obviously measurable in units—pain, for instance.

It is worth pausing for a moment over this point. We should not assume in advance that “omitting particulars” is in all cases equivalent to “omitting measurements”. It could be that in some cases we do not “omit” measurements for the simple reason that there are none to begin with. Even Rand herself acknowledges that some “measurements” may be purely ordinal. (In addition to her remarks on the subject in *IOE*, cf. the following: “Values are measured by a process of ‘final causation,’ not by ‘units.’” This is Rand’s marginal note in reply to Ludwig von Mises’s statement in *Human Action*: “There is no method available to construct a unit of value” [*Ayn Rand’s Marginalia*, p. 129].)

This is emphatically not a minor point; her theory of measurement-omission is supposed to be one of the tremendous advances that set her account of concept-formation apart from all the rest. Yet we shall look in vain for any argument supporting her contention that everything is in some way measurable. The nearest we come is a bare announcement

that whatever exists is measurable (if anything were not, it would be unrelated to the rest of reality for some unspecified reason) and an *ad hominem*, well-poisoning attack on the “motive of the anti-measurement attitude” [*ibid.*, p. 39]. And even here, as we already know, she does not mean that everything is measurable in *units*; “concepts of consciousness,” she tells us, rely only on ranking.

Even in the case of length, it is not obvious that we *omit* specific measurements; again, as Rand herself repeatedly acknowledges, it may be that they were never in our possession, even at the perceptual level. The fact that a specific length *can* be related to a unit of measure does not imply that we have in fact so related it; indeed what we seem to be grasping here is a relation of logical necessity, not an actual “measurement”.

That is: Rand's account requires that we be able to *perceive* a relation of commensurability, even without performing any measurements ourselves.

PERCEIVING COMMENSURABILITY?

Let us be clear what such an account commits us to. According to Rand, when we perceive the three similar attributes of the match, the pencil, and the stick, we also actually *perceive* their commensurability. The human perceptual apparatus is apparently so constituted as to be able to recognize more or less automatically that these attributes can be measured in terms of a common unit.

Now this is an astonishing claim, so perhaps we had better be clear that it is indeed Rand's own. She writes:

[S]imilarity, in [the] context [of concept-formation], is the relationship between two or more existents which possess the same characteristic[s], but in different measure or degree.... When, in the process of concept-formation, man observes that shape is a commensurable characteristic of certain objects, he does not have to measure all the shapes involved *nor even to know how to measure*

them; he merely has to observe the element of *similarity*. Similarity is grasped *perceptually*; in observing it, man is not and does not have to be aware of the fact that it involves a matter of measurement. [IOE, pp. 13–14; emphases Rand’s.]

So: we observe—grasp *perceptually*—that two objects are “similar,” which “in this context” just *means* that they are “commensurable” in some respect. We do so without any conscious knowledge of a common unit, without any acts of measurement, without any awareness that measurements are even involved. We just (in Rand’s words) *observe* the “element of similarity,” which (again in Rand’s words) *means* the possession of the same characteristic(s) in different measures or degrees.

In other words, we grasp perceptually, not the measurements themselves, but *that* two objects have commensurable attributes—without necessarily being aware that any measurements are involved. That is, we are comparing or relating in some way, but not actually measuring. And we saw in the preceding chapter that Rand regards perception, though not quite consistently, as an automatic process.

(However, for all her denials that we actually have to *perform* the measurements in question, she nevertheless refers [*ibid.*, p. 14] to the differentiation of colors as involving “implicit measurement”. This even though “[c]enturies passed” before wavelengths were identified. Exactly what she means by this expression I shall not try to say, since we shall shortly be arguing that it is little more than fudging.)

Moreover, Rand explicitly tells us that the “first concepts man forms are concepts of entities” [*ibid.*, p. 15]—concepts of attributes come later. She says that the child is “aware of attributes while forming his first concepts, but he is aware of them *perceptually*, *not* conceptually” [*ibid.*, p. 15; emphasis hers]. Obviously she thinks we can form concepts of entities based on perceived similarities (commensurability relations), prior to any conceptual knowledge of the similar/commensurable attributes themselves.

Again, what this means—what it must mean—is that when we see two similar attributes, we perceive, or render a perceptual judgment, *that* they are “commensurable” in terms of a common unit even though we may have no explicit knowledge of what that unit might be or what the actual measurements might be.

Consider what this theory requires. We must be able to notice, not merely that two (or more) specific attributes are similar, but that they are commensurable with a “unit” that is not itself given in perception. We must, in other words, be able to *perceive* a logical relation of commensurability with a third, “unit” attribute (or a whole spectrum of possible units) that is neither present in our perception nor (according to Rand) built into our *tabula rasa* minds as an “innate idea”.

And Rand's account does explicitly require this third “unit” attribute. Recall that on p. 11 of *IOE* Rand specifically writes: “I [the child in effect thinks] shall identify as ‘length’ that attribute of any existent possessing it which can be quantitatively related to a unit of length, without specifying the quantity.” She expressly states that her hypothetical child is “wordlessly” recognizing that such a unit is available, even if the child does not, at this stage, know what that unit is.

Nor is that all. If my “open-ended” concept is to perform the functions Rand assigns it, I must further be able to grasp that all attributes sufficiently similar to a given two—whether I have perceived them yet or not—stand in similar relationships to this “unit”. (That is, I must be aware that other such attributes may turn out to exist, and I will have to be able to recognize them when they appear.)

And in some cases (e.g. color, at least on her account of it), I must be able to grasp all of this without any knowledge of the unit in question—which, as Rand readily admits, may be yet to be discovered. That is, I must be able to tell—*perceptually*—that two attributes are “commensurable,” in some cases without having *any direct knowledge whatsoever* of what their “common unit” might be, if one even exists.

Now, I am not objecting to this view. I am simply pointing out that in order to make it fly, Rand needs a better account of perception than

she has given (i.e., none). And in particular I am saying that she needs to recognize an inferential element in perception, and that she will ultimately have to give some account of *a priori* knowledge if she wants to say that we can “implicitly” recognize the commensurability of two attributes with a “unit” not given in perception.

On my own view, she would have to recognize that at least the beginnings of reason are already active even in perception. We have already seen that, here and there, she seems inconsistently to grant this point. But she does not seem to have thought the matter important enough to pursue, or even to make an unambiguous statement about. (By contrast, Blanshard devotes the first six chapters of *The Nature of Thought*—over two hundred pages—solely to the topic of perception. Rand merely announces that we have to take the perceptual level as “given”.)

At any rate, as a rationalist myself, I have no problem with the direct apprehension of logical relations, but the relation Rand invokes here is fairly complex. And direct apprehension of it is also—not incidentally—ruled out by her own theories.

APPREHENDING LOGICAL RELATIONS

Rand is again sweeping quite a bit under the rug of “perception”. She needs a solid account of *a priori* knowledge for other reasons anyway; this is not the only point in her epistemology at which she implicitly relies on such knowledge while explicitly denying it. In fact she relies on it quite often, notably but not exclusively in her account of “axiomatic concepts,” with which we shall deal later. (It is also instructive to ask oneself what, on Rand’s theory, is the epistemological status of her initial contention that *everything* we perceive is specific. Is this a bit of “contextual” knowledge to which an exception may turn up tomorrow?)

But even such an account, however necessary, would not be *sufficient* to establish her theory. If such an account is available, there is no

longer any clear reason to reduce all concept-formation to “measurement-omission”. If I can directly apprehend a logical relation of commensurability, surely I can apprehend others—and then there appears to be no reason why I may not form concepts using those others too.

There is no hint of what Rand would call an “anti-measurement attitude” in my argument here. I do not know whether all resemblances can be reduced to commensurability (and I do not know how such a claim could be established short of an *a priori* argument, which is strictly not an option for Rand anyway). If this claim can be made out, I certainly have no objections to it.

But I do know that if I can “perceive” (or otherwise apprehend) commensurability directly, there is no reason to think that I cannot apprehend other logical relations directly. (I also wonder why the announcement that we can directly perceive logical relations is supposed to be such an improvement over the supposedly Aristotelian notion that we can directly intuit logical essences. Has Rand done anything here except smuggle a variant of the doctrine she rejects into her account of “perception”?)

And in that case it is not obvious that commensurability is the only relation suitable as a basis for concept-formation. That remains to be shown, and Rand has not shown it. (Nor, I emphasize again, is it clear how she *could* show it without invoking *a priori* knowledge, which she officially rejects—in my view based on a misunderstanding of the real issue. But we shall return to this topic later.)

In fact Rand's theory of concept-formation remains even superficially plausible only so long as we restrict it to our concepts of physical objects. It is very far from obvious that we arrive at our concepts of—say—logical necessity, negation, and causality simply by noticing resemblances and omitting particulars (let alone “measurements”). And if we can grasp logical relations directly, as Rand's own account presumes we can, then we do not *need* to invoke “measurement-omission” to account for such concepts even in the unlikely event that her theory

can accommodate them. Rand has, in short, made her theory superfluous by the very method through which she arrived at it.

In any event it is not clear why this theory is described as “measurement-*omission*” when it is admitted that in many or most cases we have no measurements to omit. Ultimately, the theory she is actually offering is that all relations of resemblance or similarity are really cases of commensurability and that we implicitly grasp them as such. And again, this is not primarily an epistemological theory but an ontological one. Here as elsewhere, her allegedly “epistemological” account depends on a good deal of implicit metaphysics—and would have been sounder, if less conducive to her claims of originality, had she spelled her metaphysical presumptions out.

MEASUREMENT WITHOUT MEASUREMENTS?

There is a related difficulty here which we shall consider briefly. Despite Rand’s remarks on our (and animals’? if not, why not?) ability to *perceive* relations of similarity at a preconceptual level, she nevertheless confesses that only at an advanced stage of intellectual development do we form concepts by doing any actual measuring.

Leonard Peikoff makes a like acknowledgement: “Measurement as a conscious process presupposes a substantial conceptual development” [*OPAR*, p. 86]. So, according to Peikoff (and Rand, if he is interpreting her correctly), concepts do not depend on measurement; the dependence is the other way round.

Of course that admission is fatal to Rand’s account of concept-formation. But, apparently unaware of the deathblow he has just delivered to Rand’s theory (or perhaps futilely trying to undo it), Peikoff adds almost at once: “The measurement involved in forming concepts, however, which may be described as ‘implicit’ measurement, does not require such knowledge [i.e., of separate attributes, counting, suitable units, and methods of relating objects to them in numerical terms]” [*ibid.*]. What Peikoff is saying here, behind all the handwaving, is that

“‘implicit’ measurement” does not involve measurement. (Indeed, it may not even involve *measurability*, if no suitable units in fact exist.)

And we have already seen that in the case of “concepts of consciousness,” Rand insists that we rely only on “*teleological measurement*” [IOE, p. 32; emphasis hers], i.e., ordinal ranking—which is not “measurement” at all according to her own definition: “the identification of...a quantitative relationship by means of a standard that serves as a *unit*” [IOE, p. 7; emphasis mine]. I am not at all sure how a standard could “serve as a unit” without actually *being* a unit, but in any event Rand admits that we have no such units available for “concepts of consciousness”.

So the theory of concept-formation we apparently have before us is a theory of “measurement-omission” which does not require us to do any measuring, does not require us to know how to measure anything, does not require us to know that anything *could* be measured, does not even *permit* us to know that anything could be measured until we have reached a highly advanced stage of the process, and in some important cases (i.e., the ones that guide most of our lives) does not require that there even *be* anything measurable.

We must admit that the theory is certainly well-named. Almost the only way to omit measurement any further would be never to have mentioned it in the first place.

And perhaps that is the course Rand should have adopted. Since (according to Peikoff) measurement comes late in the developmental process, she has not made measurement-omission the basis of “concept-formation” at all.

For Peikoff's understanding does seem to be tracking Rand's on the matter of chronology and development. Rand herself seems to acknowledge as much on p.12 of IOE [emphasis hers]: “Bear firmly in mind that the term ‘measurement-omission’ does not mean, in this context, that measurements are regarded as non-existent; it means that *measurements exist, but are not specified.*” If this means what it seems to mean, then Rand is admitting that knowledge or possession of specific

measurements is simply *irrelevant* to concept-formation until a fairly late stage of intellectual maturity.

(And note, by the way, that her position on the existence of measurements is firmly realistic. It might be instructive to wonder, given her claim that units do not exist “*qua* units,” what her views might be on the existence of inches *qua* inches. Curiously, in her 1959 notes on the Objectivist theory of concepts, she writes that a “unit” is a “*concrete entity* considered apart from the other entities which are subsumed under the *same abstraction*”—and at once identifies “an *inch*” as a “concrete entity of the abstraction ‘*length*’” [*Journals of Ayn Rand*, p. 700; all emphases Rand’s]. This would appear to mean that there is an *entity*—note well: *an* entity, and therefore a real universal—called an “inch”.)

Thought, from the very beginning, seeks specificity. We set out with a sort of vague general groping toward truth, and as we develop we begin to focus in on details. (In old age the process tends to reverse itself, so that we forget details and remember generalities.) A process of thought is in this sense a process of specification, in which specific measurements are relative latecomers if they appear at all. (Remember that we have thus far no reason to assume everything is measurable in units, although certainly such measurements are desirable where they are possible.) As Morris Cohen puts it: “[T]he universal and particular fact generally develop into clearness together, the particular instance helping to give body and prehensibility to the idea, and the idea making the instance clearer and more definite” [*Reason and Nature*, p. 138].

From Rand’s writings, one might get the impression that successful thought is abstract. And in one sense, as our quotation from Cohen suggests, this is no doubt true; there is surely something less than fully rational about an inability to see principles exemplified in specific cases.

But Rand’s occasional grand remarks about “higher and ever higher levels of abstraction” convey at least the impression—whether inten-

tionally or not—that we begin with specificity and work our way “up” to higher levels of abstraction. And particularly in view of her emphasis on concept-formation, a reader could at least come away from her works with the impression that we start with specific cases, working “upwards” until we know, in Bertrand Russell’s felicitous phrase, nothing about everything.

Whether Rand intends this meaning or not, it is in an important respect just the reverse of the truth. As Aristotle remarks somewhere, the child calls all men “father”; mature thought, in contrast, understands its object with full specificity. (In this sense, “A is A”—if this allegedly profound tautology may properly be called a “judgment” at all despite its having no predicate distinct from its subject—is, *qua* judgment, at a much, much *lower* level of intellectual achievement than, say, “Other things being equal, an increase in the money supply leads to an increase in the price level.”) In fact, as our knowledge becomes wider and (what is usually miscalled) more “abstract,” it comes to encompass *more* detail. The longtime music aficionado’s “general” understanding of music is not more “abstract,” but much more richly and specifically detailed, than that of the beginning listener.

Now, Rand sees this objection coming (from, I suspect, her reading of Blanshard, who deals with it at length in *The Nature of Thought*) and tries unsuccessfully to meet it. It seems to have been precisely this difficulty that she seeks to avoid with her doctrine that a concept “means” *all* of its referents and *all* of their characteristics. (See *IOE*, pp. 26–27, beginning with, “A widespread error, in this context...”)

SENSE AND REFERENCE, IDEA AND OBJECT

The difficulties with this view are legion, and I shall not canvass them all here. (One with which we shall not deal at the moment is this: if, according to this conflation of sense and reference, our concept “means” *all* the specific attributes of its referents, then we appear not to

have omitted specific measurements after all. Nor, if we have not omitted them, have we really generated an abstraction.)

But two difficulties are important: (a) as we have noted, it obliterates the clear difference between sense and reference, and (b) it treats a concept as altogether fixed and invariant once it is “formed”. The two points are closely related, and together they imply that Rand’s “concepts” are just about irrelevant to any actual *learning* we might do.

Allan Gotthelf writes that Rand “would reject...the traditional Fregean view that ‘meaning determines reference’” [*On Ayn Rand*, p. 69, n. 13]. (Gotthelf’s use of the subjunctive mood is admirably precise; it seems doubtful that Rand ever read so much as a page of Frege.) This will not do. It is just not feasible to reject any and all distinctions between sense and reference, between intension and extension, between subjective and objective meanings, even if the distinction should not be made in precisely the way Frege made it.

Such a rejection is quite untenable, and it leads to very odd results. Because a concept simply *means* all of its referents and all of their attributes, Leonard Peikoff writes, “[e]very truth about a given existent(s) reduces, in basic pattern, to: X is: one or more of the things which it is” [“The Analytic-Synthetic Dichotomy,” *IOE*, p. 100].

Now this is hardly a responsible understanding of ordinary thought, which passes, not from entities to attributes, but from some attributes to others. Peikoff has simply “deflated” the entire course of ordinary inference here.

When we say, for example, that lions are fierce, we do not expect our statement to be understood “in extension”. We do not, that is, mean to assert that the members of a certain definite and precise class of entities possess the attribute of fierceness. We mean to assert a relation between, on the one side, the attributes according to which we classify lions as lions in the first place, and on the other, the sort of behavior we describe as “fierce”.

And at least sometimes, we mean to assert that this relation is not purely accidental: we think we see, however dimly, that a carnivorous

and predatory jungle cat just *is* the sort of creature we should expect to behave fiercely. Reading our statement “in extension” simply papers over the possibility that such relations obtain among the attributes in question, and for that matter the possibility that we can pass by inference from one set of attributes to another. On Peikoff's view, the fact that an equilateral triangle is equiangular is on the same “empirical” level as the fact that firemen wear red suspenders. (We shall see later that Rand and Peikoff thereby eliminate the possibility of explanation altogether.)

Moreover, this view has the consequence that our thought is simply *identified* with its object or objects (a point about which we shall say a good deal more later). “Content,” Peikoff informs us, “is a measurable attribute [of thought], because it is ultimately some aspect of the external world. As such, it is measurable by the methods applicable to physical existents” [*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, p. 93]. The “content” of my present thought, according to Rand and Peikoff, just *is* the real object(s) of which I am thinking. (By the way, notice that Peikoff seems to have made us unable, in the final analysis, to think of anything other than “physical existents”.)

And this is supposed to be why my concept is completely fixed once it is formed: we shall later see that Rand believes the concept “man” to have remained unchanged since its creation, because it still has the same *referents*.

First of all, can this be true on Objectivist principles? The human beings who exist now are surely not the same human beings who existed even a hundred years ago; the concept “man” has always had the same referents only if it has always referred to all the human beings who ever did or will exist. This is of course just what Rand thinks the concept does. But how, in Rand's universe, does “reference” manage to reach across time and extend to entities that no longer exist? There is no real problem here for the Platonically inclined, who may perfectly well conceive of the entire physical universe—past, present, and future—as existing “all at once” in some eternal manner. It is telling,

though, that Rand does not even raise the question and fails to notice any conflict between her implicitly Platonic presumption and the rest of her philosophy. Unlike, for example, Royce (see e.g. *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*, pp. 374–380), Rand has simply failed to notice that there is anything interesting or odd—not to mention problematic for her philosophy—about our ability to *refer* to anything outside of the present moment.

Then, too, a standard objection to such an approach is that it makes two concepts identical whenever they have the same real referents. We would ordinarily say that the concept of an equilateral triangle (in Euclidean space) is not the same *concept* as that of an equiangular triangle, even though all equilateral triangles are also equiangular and vice versa; the two concepts have different senses or intensions, and pick out different (though mutually entailing) characters in their objects. But Rand's view forces us to regard the two concepts as the same. (And all concepts with *no* real referents would be the same too; assuming that there are neither unicorns nor mermaids, the concept of a unicorn would be identical with that of a mermaid because the real referent of each concept is just the empty set.) The approach that identifies a concept with its referents at the expense of its sense, or with its extension at the expense of its intension, does not allow us to make what seems to be a perfectly legitimate distinction. In effect we can never think of "the same thing" in two different ways.

Moreover, this approach affords a handy way to become instantly omniscient: I need only form the concept "universe". Now the object of my thought is everything which was, is, or will be, and my concept actually *means* all of it.

If this suggestion is ridiculous—as it surely is, and of course Rand does not believe any such thing—then Rand has made a grievous error in failing to distinguish sense from reference. There is a difference, however we wish to characterize it, between the present "content" of my thought and the "content" it would ideally have in the end. We shall take Rand to task later for failing to recognize this difference; for

now we simply note that she has proposed a “solution” that is worse than the problem it is supposed to solve. (And we shall also see later, when we discuss her account of “axiomatic concepts,” that she cannot explain them without reintroducing the distinction between sense and reference anyway.)

In short, the fact that we have formed a concept cannot possibly, on Rand's view, indicate that we have *understood* anything; no matter how much (or how little) we learn, or go on to learn, our concept continues to mean exactly what it did when we first “formed” it, namely its full range of referents together with all their attributes. What *I* mean by a concept is beside the point. I can answer any question with “A is A” and leave you to fill in the details. Again, Rand does not mean to imply this consequence, but her theory of concepts does entail it.

Put concepts back into their proper place in human intellectual development, allow them to change as we learn, and they become little more than mental dispositions, waiting to be filled in with more specific knowledge and fully prepared to adjust themselves to their objects as those objects become known with greater clarity and precision. A genuinely developmental account of concepts has no particular difficulty accounting for the so-called “open-endedness” of concepts. And it makes clear that, since our goal is specificity, “measurement” comes toward the end, not at the beginning.

And as anyone who knows a specific field in any depth can attest, specificity is not (or at least need not and should not be) parochialism. In thought as in the universe itself, connections spread *outward* (a better metaphor than “upward”) from the object of our focus to the rest of the cosmos. Blanshard argues, and I agree, that this process has no final resting place short of the whole. (In traditional idealist terms, this amounts to the claim that the whole of reality is itself the sole genuine “concrete universal”.)

So we need not treat “concepts” as hard little invariant nuggets of knowledge at all. Indeed we may even recognize an important fact that

seems to have passed Rand by: the possession of a “concept” is not knowledge anyway. Knowledge is propositional.

A discussion of this point will allow us to see some additional failures in Rand’s theory of concepts. And so it is to the question of propositional truth that we now turn.

Chapter 6: *Concepts, Propositions, and* *Truth*

[O]ne will be shocked by the number of questions it had never occurred to him to ask. [Ayn Rand, “The Missing Link,” in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 8.]

TRUTH: A MATTER OF PROPOSITIONS

In a letter to John Hospers in 1961, Rand writes that “we [i.e., Objectivists] challenge and reject the proposition that truth is a matter of propositions” [*Letters of Ayn Rand*, 527]. A few years later she goes on to asseverate, “An invalid concept invalidates every proposition or process of thought in which it is used as a cognitive assertion” [*Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, p. 49].

Neither of these contentions will survive scrutiny. I shall deal with them briefly and in reverse order.

Assuming that unicorns do not in fact exist (tales of unicorns appear to be based on European travellers’ accounts of the rhinoceros), the concept “unicorn” is presumably one which Rand would have regarded as “integrated in disregard of necessity” [*IOE*, p. 72]; yet there seems to be nothing whatsoever exceptionable about the proposition, “Unicorns do not exist.” I seem to have no difficulty forming the concept of a “unicorn” as a one-horned horse, and I do not, simply in forming the concept, thereby commit myself to the belief that there are any such beasts in the same way that there are lions and tigers and bears. Indeed, to assert that there are no real unicorns is simply to assert that the real

properties (universals) of being a horse and of having one horn are nowhere conjoined in physical reality as I have conjoined them in thought.

(That this assertion is, or may be, *true* also ought to pose a problem for at least the more naive versions of the “correspondence theory of truth”; it is not at all clear to what “facts of reality” such a negative assertion “corresponds”. Hypotheticals and counterfactuals are even worse. And in any case, none of these can be dealt with at all, let alone adequately, by an epistemology that denies the existence of real universals.)

And it is hard to see how I could know, or even entertain the possibility, that unicorns do not exist unless I can form the concept in advance of such knowledge, and to some degree independently of it. In fact, I seem to be able to form concepts with great abandon and even to be at utter liberty to make up words for them; for example, I hereby designate as “flagoons” all persons born in Des Moines, Iowa, in the year 1953.

Now, I suppose there must be *some* flagoons (and indeed, according to Rand’s conflation of “sense” and “reference,” my allegedly unalterable concept is even now referring ineluctably to each and every one of them, dead or alive, even though I haven’t the remotest clue who they are). But even if there are no such people, I do not see what is wrong with the concept purely *as* a concept.

Do I not have to have some idea what it *means* to be born in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1953 in order even to learn whether my concept has any real referents? (Or, to put it the other way around, wouldn’t I already have to know whether anyone *was* thus born in order to know whether I am “integrating my concept in disregard of necessity”?) Never mind the word “flagoons”; suppose I just want to know, for any reason at all, whether anybody was born in Des Moines in 1953. Do I not have to form the concept of “people born in Des Moines in 1953” in order even to raise the question?

Indeed a more natural account here would have us forming concepts in some sense tentatively and provisionally, and then seeing how far reality “bore them out,” modifying them as needed. On such an account, a concept (perhaps we should say “idea”) actually would, in a way, “mean all of its referents together with all of their attributes”—in the sense that those referents are the concept’s ideal fulfillment, the end in some manner implicitly sought throughout the process of an idea’s development. (Blanshard’s *The Nature of Thought* develops just such an account and we shall be returning to it later.)

But such an account presumes that ideas can develop and change (and, as I have pointed out before, that specificity, including “measurements,” lies somewhere near the end of the developmental process). On Rand’s view, by contrast, concepts cannot be modified once formed; we may acquire new knowledge about their referents, but such knowledge does not alter the concepts themselves. (One tremendous functional advantage of this view is that it effectively renders Rand’s own “conceptual integrations” immune to correction no matter what lacunae are discovered in her own “contextual knowledge”—assuming, that is, that all of *her* concepts were “validly” formed.)

But—“An invalid concept invalidates *every* proposition or process of thought in which it is used as a cognitive assertion”? Rand is unable to keep to this standard even in her own writings; here as elsewhere, when she is writing about an epistemological topic, she sets forth one principle, and when she turns her mind to something else, she follows another principle entirely.

She holds, for example, that “extremism” is not merely an invalid concept but even what she calls an “anti-concept” [in “‘Extremism,’ or The Art of Smearing,” *The Objectivist Newsletter*, September, 1964; reprinted in *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*]. Yet she quotes with approbation Barry Goldwater’s justly famous remark, “Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice,” which she clearly regards as meaningful and even true.

I happen to agree, both with Goldwater and with Rand. But if it is even *possible* for me to agree, then obviously there is something deeply wrong with the view that the use of an improperly formed concept invalidates every proposition in which it occurs. Goldwater's proposition is not invalidated even by the occurrence within it of an "anti-concept".

Moreover, if Goldwater's proposition is meaningful, would his opponents not also have been saying something meaningful, even if false, had they replied with its negation: "Yes, extremism in the defense of liberty *is* a vice"? It will hardly do to acknowledge a proposition as meaningful when we agree with it but to dismiss its negation, with which we disagree, as mere meaningless chattering.

It may be objected that in the propositions I discussed above, the concepts in question are not being used as "cognitive assertions" (as opposed, we may well wonder, to what *other* kinds of assertion?) even though the propositions themselves are assertions. This objection would rest on Rand's own presumably careful formulation, to the effect that an anti-concept invalidates a proposition or thought-process in which it is "used as a cognitive assertion".

But what is the point of Rand's proviso about "cognitive assertions"? In fact, the distinction Rand wants to make here is an altogether footless one on her own terms. As we shall shortly see, concepts themselves—if, as Rand's account requires, they are really distinct from propositions—are *never* "used as...cognitive assertion[s]," but are at most used *in* such assertions. Apparently Rand could not stick to her contention that concepts were themselves capable of truth or falsity, realizing too late that it is only when we make an assertion that we get something that may be true or false (that is, a proposition)—and then failing to realize at all that this fact undermines her initial claims for *IOE*.

The root of the problem is her apparent view that because propositions are (as she thinks) made of "concepts," it must be the case that those "concepts" themselves may be true or false.

This is unmitigated nonsense, roughly on a par with the belief that two-storey brick houses must be made of two-storey bricks. It is hard to see how a woman of Rand's obvious critical intelligence could have arrived at such a view. Simply to form the concept of a unicorn, or to announce "unicorn," is not, in and of itself, to assert anything at all; i.e., it is to say nothing that might be true or false.

It is only if such a formation or announcement is an elision of a propositional judgment that it becomes capable of truth or falsity. One may, for example, be answering a question; in that case, one may really be asserting that "there are unicorns," or "this is a unicorn," or some other proposition. But unless one is at least implicitly predicating something of something else, one has asserted nothing whatsoever. And merely to *have* a concept is not necessarily to predicate it of anything in particular. (Even to use it in assertions is not necessarily to assume it has physically real referents. Even if I do not believe in unicorns, I can still say meaningfully—and even, it seems, truly—that "A unicorn has four legs." Or, if an objection to this proposition is raised on other grounds, surely it must be admitted that I can at least *entertain* the proposition meaningfully.)

Nor, therefore, is it true that propositions are just "made of" concepts, at least in any sense relevant to the question of truth. (Many propositions may indeed be broken into a number of simpler propositions, but that is of course not the same thing.) Once we have broken apart the relation of predication that occurs in any proposition, we have broken the proposition into components that cannot be severally true.

Thus, whatever other merits Rand's theory of "concept-formation" may have—and I do not think they are exactly legion—it still cannot do the job she wants it to do, namely defending the "validity of man's knowledge" [IOE, p. 1]. Even if her account of concepts were itself adequate, she would at best have fulfilled a necessary-but-insufficient condition of such a defense. And since that account is not adequate, she has not fulfilled even that limited task.

“INVALID” CONCEPTS: FROM WHERE?

The Objectivist has an obvious but wrong-headed reply ready to hand. Rand was concerned, we shall be told, not (or not primarily) with the “truth” of concepts but with their *validity*. If we are interested in using our concepts to refer to “reality,” we had better make sure we are actually referring to something with them when we form them. And a “valid” concept is “true” at least in the sense that it does refer to something in “reality”. Even if we object to this use of the word “true,” it is still clear enough what Rand is getting at: she wants to provide a criterion for ascertaining that we form only concepts which have real referents.

Unfortunately this reply, though it does correctly characterize Rand’s aim, will not do as a defense of that aim.

In a way, it is too bad Rand did not apply to her theory of concepts the sweep-it-under-the-rug policy she applied to “percepts”. For on the Objectivist view, all percepts are percepts “of” something; it’s just that we sometimes misinterpret what we are perceiving.

But on Rand’s account, should not the same consideration apply to concepts? Granted for the sake of argument that we know there are no unicorns; did I therefore fabricate the concept “unicorn” out of whole cloth? There are, after all, horses and horns. By analogy with perception, it would appear that concepts are never “invalid”; it is just that we can be mistaken about what we are conceiving (i.e., about whether the referents of our concept are real objects in the external world or only combinations of other characteristics which are severally real but nowhere combined in just this way). Indeed this would seem to be the only view consistent with Rand’s claim (in “The Metaphysical vs. the Man-Made”) that “man’s imagination is nothing more than the ability to rearrange the things he has observed in reality” [*Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 25].

However, there are several serious difficulties here which Rand does not seem to notice, let alone handle adequately. It is far from clear that

we arrive at all of our concepts in this “empirical” fashion. How, for example, do we arrive at the idea of causality through purely sensory means? What about logical and mathematical concepts? Are these simple “rearrange[ments]” of what we have “observed in reality”? (Or are they all reducible to what Rand elsewhere labels “concepts of method”?)

There is surely ample reason to dispute this view. It is hard to understand, for example, how we could arrive at the concept of a perfect circle in the fashion Rand describes. We have never encountered any such object “empirically,” and it is not clear that our idealization is simply a matter of “abstraction”. Moreover, it has been argued many times that we cannot arrive at the concept of “causation” simply by abstracting from experience; we never, in either sensation or sensory perception, encounter a case of cause and effect. All of these concepts are arrived at by the intelligence, which does not seem to be limited to “rearranging” elements of perceptual experience in the way Rand describes. On the contrary, the intelligence seems to make a positive contribution that cannot be confined to perception; and yet the objects of these ideas seem to be real, indeed to be real universals.

And if that is right, then several of Rand’s other contentions must go by the board as well. For example, Leonard Peikoff has already acknowledged that “[o]nce a mind acquires a certain content of sensory material, it *can*...contemplate its own content” [*OPAR*, p. 41; emphasis mine]. So, according to Objectivism, a consciousness *can* be conscious of its own content; it’s just that it has to have some sensory experience *first* in order to get some content “in there” to contemplate, so to speak.

This contention is one premise of Rand’s argument against the “creativity” of consciousness. Together with her (correct) contention that consciousness is always consciousness *of* something, it implies that consciousness can generate no content “on its own” and that—as we saw Allan Gotthelf put it earlier—“[e]xistence *precedes* consciousness” [*On Ayn Rand*, p. 50]. If, however, not all of our “content” comes from

strictly sensory experience in the first place, then Rand's argument fails: a consciousness could, in principle at least, be conscious of its own content even if it had generated that content itself in some other fashion.

But we shall not pursue these points here; they will enagage our attention in later chapters. For now we shall simply note that Rand herself has not dealt with them at all (let alone adequately) and her epistemological claims are therefore not credible. For present purposes, then, we shall simply note that on Rand's own terms she should not have a problem with concepts that do not seem to "refer" to anything in physical reality, any more than she thinks she has a problem with "percepts" that do not refer to existents. (These, we recall, she simply dismisses as not involving perception in the first place; in all actual cases of genuine "perception," she maintains, we actually do perceive something "real".) But her own terms are quite insufficient to deal with some genuine problems we shall not deal with here.

We may well suspect, however, that Rand is at least dimly aware of the inadequacy of her approach, since as a matter of fact she does not apply her sweep-it-under-the-rug policy to concepts and is also (as we shall see later) strongly critical of the claims of "pure reason". If Rand's view of concepts were correct as it stands, it should not even be *possible* for us to form concepts that just completely fail to refer to anything in the "external" world, any more than it is possible, on her view, for us to have "percepts" without referents. Nevertheless she lets the apparently trivial problem of "false percepts" and spurious perceptual experiences go by the board, and yet becomes quite disproportionately exercised over the problem of "anti-concepts".

But these two problems are really aspects of a single problem, and should therefore be dealt with in the same way—by acknowledging the possibility of at least partial error in each sort of judgment and also denying that any actual judgment, however inadequate, ever completely fails to refer to reality. That Rand takes something like this

approach for the “perceptual level” but abandons it for the “conceptual level” suggests that something is amiss with her account.

Significantly, idealists have generally defended a theory of the idea which is at least superficially similar to Rand’s treatment of “percepts”. Specifically, they have rejected the doctrine of the “floating idea”—that is, “a theory in which significant or meaningful ideas are seen as capable of ‘floating’ or ‘wandering’ in the consciousness of a judging subject without being simultaneously affirmed as real or true” [Phillip Ferreira, *Bradley and the Structure of Knowledge*, p. 7].

The rejection of “floating ideas,” however, has in idealist thought been naturally accompanied by a doctrine of “degrees of truth” (and “degrees of reality”) that also rejects the possibility of a completely and absolutely false judgment: “[E]very idea, however imaginary, is in a sense referred to reality.... Every idea can be made the true adjective of reality, but, on the other hand..., every idea must be altered” [F.H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, p. 327; the title of the chapter is “Degrees of Truth and Reality”]. This path is clearly not open to Rand. (It was, however, open to Spinoza. The proof of Prop. 35 in Part II of the *Ethics* includes the observation that the falsity of an idea “cannot consist in *absolute* privation...nor again in *absolute* ignorance” [quoted from *Ethics, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect, and Selected Letters*, tr. Samuel Shirley, p. 86; emphases mine].)

Blanshard agrees with the rejection of “floating ideas,” and his comments are pertinent here. He takes the view that there are “no predicates entertained by thought that are utterly homeless in reality; every distinguishable reference in thought...is a reference which, if developed, would bring us to something in the real world. The error lies in supposing that these ideas, or any combination of them, tentative formulations as they are of a reality far exceeding our thought of it, would be ratified in their present form when we actually stood before the goal” [*The Nature of Thought*, vol. I, p. 512].

There are two key points to notice here. To the first we have already called attention: that the rejection of “floating ideas” is not simply an

uncritical claim that the contents of our present thought (including our perceptual judgments) are fully and completely true just as that thought now stands. (Moreover, Blanshard certainly does not believe that all of our ideas come to us through sensory perception.) We shall be taking Rand to task on this point later.

The second is that Blanshard is speaking here of the relation between thought and object, not simply between concept and referent considered in abstraction from their roles in judgment. His remarks about our “ideas” explicitly presume that we are trying to *predicate* these ideas of reality. (In this respect, too, the doctrine was anticipated by Spinoza, who held that “an idea, in so far as it is an idea, involves affirmation or negation” [*Ethics*, Scholium to Prop. 49, Part II; quoted from Shirley, p. 97].) The “ideas” in question here are therefore, by implication, organic parts of propositional judgments.

RAND THE IDEALIST VS. RAND THE EMPIRICIST (AGAIN)

Now Rand seems to be working on a premise much like the idealists’ rejection of “floating ideas,” but she also wants to claim that truth is not a “matter of propositions”. If we are right that Rand is working on implicitly idealist premises and combining them with an incompatible, explicitly “empiricist” epistemology, we should see her encountering difficulties on this point.

And as expected, she is unable to stick to her approach consistently. Indeed, before *IOE* is out, she writes, “Every concept stands for a number of propositions. A concept identifying perceptual concretes stands for some implicit propositions...” [*IOE*, p. 48]. At this point Rand seems to be maintaining, very much against her own stated intentions, that a concept *is* an elision of certain propositions and that the sheer possession of a concept amounts to propositional knowledge of some kind. We shall return to this point later; for now, we shall merely note

that she has completely undermined her original challenge to the view that “truth is a matter of propositions”. (As we shall see in a later chapter, Leonard Peikoff, in *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, utterly abandons Rand’s challenge and takes “truth” to be unquestionably a “matter of propositions”).)

At any rate, Rand’s main worry, as nearly as I can make sense of it, seems to be that we might form concepts that turn out to have no referents in “external” reality. That worry is surely misplaced, even if she (or the reader) does not want to grant us the real existence of ideal circles. The legitimacy of even a single hypothetical or counterfactual concept (Rand’s own “indestructible robot” in “The Objectivist Ethics,” for example) is enough to make hash of any claim to the contrary. There is no harm in forming concepts as freely as we please, even concepts that may not have “real” referents; there is harm only in mistaking which concepts are which—or, as I would prefer to put it, in mistaking what kind and degree of reality their referents possess.

And if Rand were merely providing a criterion for sorting these matters out, I should have no objection in principle to the effort even if I thought—as I do think—that her criterion is inadequate. (We already know, e.g., that as it stands, it would rule out such “valid,” meaningful, and true propositions as “Unicorns do not exist.”) But this is not what she understands herself to be doing; she thinks she is reducing propositional truth to the “validity” of a proposition’s component concepts. Rand cannot complete this impossible task, and indeed gives up on it partway through *IOE*.

It is as well to remind ourselves now and again that Rand made her living, indeed achieved her initial fame, by dealing almost exclusively in what she herself knew to be counterfactuals. Howard Roark was not, after all, a real person, and Rand’s express purpose in writing *ATLAS SHRUGGED* was to *prevent* it from becoming a true story. But if writing fiction is a legitimate activity, then Rand’s strictures on “valid” concept-formation are just wrong. Her theory and practice of esthetics are at war with her epistemology.

Which means that Rand has a deep difficulty here. Rand cannot eat her cake and have it too; she cannot practice the art of fiction (and regard the projection of a moral ideal as an important undertaking), and *also* regard it as crucially important that our process of concept-formation be strictly and firmly tied to what is given in purely sensory perception. Is her projection of a moral ideal really just a matter of “rearrang[ing] the things [Rand] has observed in reality” via sensory perception? Here again we find a problem Rand has brought upon herself by trying to subordinate reason to perception in epistemology despite her somewhat better judgment elsewhere.

CONTEXTUALLY ABSOLUTE KNOWLEDGE

This is also a natural point at which to deal with a related problem. Rand writes: “Concepts are not and cannot be formed in a vacuum; they are formed in a context...[A]ll conceptualization is a contextual process; the context is the entire field of a mind’s awareness or knowledge at any level of its cognitive development. This does not mean that conceptualization is a subjective process or that the content of contents depends on an individual’s subjective (i.e., arbitrary) choice.... [S]o long as and to the extent that his mind deals with concepts (as distinguished from memorized sounds and floating abstractions), the content of his concepts is determined and dictated by the cognitive content of his mind, i.e., by his grasp of the facts of reality. If his grasp is non-contradictory, then even if the scope of his knowledge is modest and the content of his concepts is primitive, *it will not contradict the content of the same concepts in the mind of the most advanced scientists*” [IOE, pp. 42–43; emphasis Rand’s].

Rand goes on to discuss the contextuality of “definitions,” which will not concern us here. We shall also ignore, at least for the time being, several other problems in this passage—for example, Rand’s apparent claim that the “facts of reality” just *determine* which concepts we shall form once we have duly chosen to attend to or focus on those

“facts,” and her apparent claim that the “facts of reality” are in some sense actually within our minds. We shall be dealing with some of these difficulties later.

Our interest in this passage at present is that it is the origin of Rand’s “contextual” theory of knowledge, according to which human knowledge is said to be “contextually absolute”.

On the face of it, this phrase is simply oxymoronic. “Absolute” means unconditioned or unconditional; “contextual” here can only mean “dependent on conditions”. The two are simple opposites; why would Rand (or her followers) characterize knowledge in such a self-contradictory way?

To answer this question we must look at some remarks by Leonard Peikoff. Rand’s own writings, so far as I have been able to determine, explicitly address “contextuality” only in the context of definitions and concepts. Peikoff, however, extends her view of contextuality to knowledge as well (quite legitimately, given her view that concepts themselves constitute knowledge):

Knowledge is contextual...Knowledge is an organization or integration of interconnected elements, each relevant to the others.... In regard to any concept, idea, proposal, theory, or item of knowledge, never forget or ignore the context on which it depends and which *conditions* its validity and use. [“The Philosophy of Objectivism,” Lecture 5, quoted in *The Ayn Rand Lexicon*, p. 104, emphasis mine; we may assume, I take it, that Rand approves of this extension, as the lecture course in question was given with her approval.]

Here Peikoff has clearly stated that any “item of knowledge” is conditional, a concession which would have gladdened the heart of many an idealist. Indeed, our knowledge is conditional to a degree that we hardly ever notice until we try to bring the conditions to light.

Peikoff seems to concur with our reading of his remarks:

Metaphysically, there is only one universe. This means that everything in reality is interconnected. Every entity is related in some

way to the others; each somehow affects and is affected by the others. Nothing is a completely isolated fact, without causes or effects; no aspect of the total can exist ultimately apart from the total. Knowledge, therefore, which seeks to grasp reality, must also be a total; its elements must be interconnected to form a unified whole reflecting the whole which is the universe. [*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, p. 123.]

All well and good so far (and see Chris Matthew Sciabarra's pertinent comments on pp. 126–127 of *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical*). Nevertheless we must still point out a fundamental confusion in the notion of “contextual absoluteness”. For Rand and/or Peikoff seem to be equivocating between two different sorts of proposition. Suppose proposition p is true precisely in case the necessary and sufficient conditions C obtain. Then p itself is not absolutely but only conditionally true; but the conditional proposition “If conditions C obtain, then p ” is itself absolutely and unconditionally true. (Of course we cannot, in the full and final sense, *know* this latter proposition—or even know exactly what it is—unless we can exhaust all the conditions C .)

Rand and Peikoff do not make this distinction and so seem ambiguously to be claiming that p itself is both absolutely and conditionally true. In fact the conditionality and the absoluteness attach to two different “items of knowledge,” respectively p itself and “ p under conditions C ” (or, in the standard notation of symbolic logic, with c representing the proposition that “conditions C obtain,” $c \rightarrow p$).

What they probably mean, or should mean, is that there are always such conditions C which we are never able to state completely, for the very good reason that we could never exhaust them. (“We commonly use ideas with no clear notion as to how far they are conditional.... To the suppositions implied in our statements we usually are blind” [F.H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, p. 327].) Our knowledge is in this sense “contextual,” but given that the requisite conditions actually obtain, p absolutely follows. But if this is what they mean, it is confusing to describe knowledge as “contextually absolute”. The contextual-

ity and the absoluteness, on this view, are in two different senses; knowledge is contextual in one way, and some of it is, or may be, absolute in another.

And even thus adjusted for clarity, this claim will not stand just as it is. Space will not permit a full discussion here, but the doctrine in question has been thoroughly criticized by Blanshard, along more or less traditional idealist lines, in his defense of “degrees of truth” (in *The Nature of Thought*, pp. 319–325, especially p. 324). Suffice it to say that if we distinguish carefully between the content we ideally mean to assert and the content we actually succeed in asserting, we shall find that most of our judgments are conditional in an additional sense that Rand has not discussed—and cannot discuss, because she does not wish her epistemology to allow that we *could* consistently fall short of asserting everything we ideally mean.

Of course as Blanshard acknowledges in his later writings, there must be *some* items of knowledge that are true just as we now take them to be; Bradley could not, for example, have argued his way to the Absolute if the law of contradiction itself were swallowed up upon arriving there. (In a similar vein Gordon H. Clark has argued that unless our knowledge has points of contact with God’s—at which, that is, we believe exactly what God believes—then we possess no knowledge at all and must fall into complete skepticism. Cf. also the brief and healthy rebuke to Harold Henry Joachim’s reading of Spinoza on pp. 90–91 of Richard Mason’s *The God of Spinoza*.) But this is a long way from the claim that *all* of our present beliefs constitute adequate knowledge just as they now stand—and a *very* long way from the Randian view that our experience of “the objects of sense” [Mason, p. 66] qualifies as this sort of knowledge.

Incidentally, this portion of Rand’s epistemology is also quite inconsistent with her fictional dramatizations of her heroes. “Only once during their association,” Barbara Branden writes in *The Passion of Ayn Rand*, “did Ayn’s wrath descend on Stirling Silliphant [during an attempt to turn *ATLAS SHRUGGED* into a television screenplay].

He had added the word ‘perhaps’ to a statement made by Dagny—and Ayn angrily shouted: ‘You’ve destroyed Dagny’s character on this page! You’ve made her qualify her thinking! She *always* knows what she’s doing—she doesn’t use words like ‘perhaps’ or ‘maybe’” [p. 390]. But if, as Peikoff tells us *supra*, “[n]othing is a completely isolated fact, without causes or effects,” and “no aspect of the total can exist ultimately apart from the total,” then there would appear to be ample reason for a rational person to “qualify” at least some of “her thinking” and occasionally “use words like ‘perhaps’ and ‘maybe’”. Does “knowledge” have to “be a total,” or doesn’t it?

In general, Rand seems peculiarly susceptible to a fundamental confusion here. On the one hand she is eager to recognize an objective reality, an absolute, against which our judgments are to be measured; on the other, she is anxious to preserve the possibility that at least some of our judgments may themselves be fully objective and absolute. But she does not distinguish these two very different aims.

And they are very different. “After all,” writes Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, “conceptual expressions are tentative and provisional, not because there is no absolute but because there is one” [*An Idealist View of Life*, p. 94]. (Cf. Royce, who boldly declared himself agnostic about everything *except* the Absolute: “There is nothing in the universe absolutely sure except the Infinite” [*The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*, p. 345].) Respect for the conditionality of our judgments is not a form of relativism but a frank recognition that there is an absolute of which our judgments fall short. There is nothing in “objectivism” about absolute reality that requires us to make our judgments absolute; on the contrary, the truth is just the reverse.

In general, though, Rand has a great deal of trouble dealing with conditionality. The effect is that she is generally unable to recognize any sort of warrant or evidence that falls short of deductive proof.

For example, Rand writes as though reliance on the opinions of others is “social metaphysics” and reliance on one’s emotions is “whim”. And yet, on the very views she professes, the fact that other people hold

a belief is at least *some* (perhaps very slight) evidence for its truth; she does hold, after all, that the mind is by its very nature in cognitive contact with reality, so these beliefs must be coming from *somewhere* “real”. Similarly, the fact that one experiences an emotion is *some* reason for action; she does maintain that an emotion is a rapid, first-look appraisal based on one’s previous thinking, so these emotions must be based on *something* “real”. Perhaps in each case such *prima facie* reasons are easily outweighed by other considerations. But because Rand does not distinguish between *prima facie* reasons and conclusive reasons, she cannot acknowledge that such “conditional” reasons are to be accorded any weight at all. (We shall later find that her ethical philosophy is similarly unable to deal with *prima facie* moral claims.)

Since we do not discuss Rand’s treatment of “emotions” elsewhere in this volume, let us devote a few paragraphs to the subject here. Rand’s objection to relying on emotions for guidance seems to be that we cannot safely rely on “unconscious” processes; in order to determine their reliability, she seems to think, we must examine them consciously. Her objection is at bottom that without examining them we cannot tell whether the value-judgments they represent are accurate.

But this objection is absurd on its face, and at any rate at odds with Rand’s own implicit belief in the basic cognitive efficacy of the mind. If the mind is fundamentally reliable, then we need not examine every bit of its working in order to make sure it is operating correctly; indeed, I doubt that doing so is logically possible anyway. The presumption is always that it *is* working properly, including its working in rendering the value-judgments that our emotions represent.

It is true that we do not *expressly and consciously know* that those value-judgments are reliable until we have examined them, but why do we need to know this expressly and consciously? Is there some reason why express and conscious knowledge is automatically more reliable than implicit, tacit knowledge? Do we not beg the question by asserting or assuming that we *do* need to examine our emotions in order to ascertain their reliability, and to distrust them until we have done so?

Is it doubtful that our emotions are infallible? Yes. But to my mind, there is just as much reason to doubt that our conscious minds can effectively bring to light every consideration that plays into our decisions. Some people, and probably all people at some times, really are better guided by their intuitive (and entirely rational) “emotional” judgments than by subjecting every emotion to conscious, allegedly “rational” inquiry. Rand would object that they cannot “know” whether this is so unless they are explicitly analyzing the emotions in question; I say her objection is a question-begging one that presumes the very point at issue, namely that explicit analysis is more likely to be genuinely rational than implicit, “intuitive” reasoning. (And has any of us ever had an emotional response that we could not consciously “justify” by a sufficiently concerted effort? Rand seems to me to have traded the risk of occasional error for the constant temptation to rationalization.)

I do not mean, of course, that one should never examine one’s emotional responses. My point is rather that we accomplish everything rationally necessary by simply being aware of those responses. Nor do I think that the mind separates neatly into “thoughts” on the one hand and “emotions” on the other. Partly for this reason, I object to Rand’s implicit claim that only conscious and deliberately analytical mental processes can be “rational,” especially when this claim is at odds with her (or Nathaniel Branden’s) explicit definition of “emotion”.

To return to the subject at hand: if Rand were better at dealing with conditionality, she would be able to allow that an emotion is at least *some* reason for action, even if it is outweighed by other factors. Instead, as elsewhere, she takes an all-or-nothing approach and holds that, if an emotion is not a *conclusive* reason, it is no reason at all.

Likewise, she is unable to acknowledge statistical evidence as evidence of any kind. There is, for example, her famous insistence that smoking is not hazardous to one’s health and that statistical evidence to the contrary should be ignored because “statistics are not proof”. Nevertheless, “it does not follow logically, from the fact that smokers are

much more likely to get lung cancer than nonsmokers, that smoking causes lung cancer, but one would be a fool to insist on a *logically* conclusive proof before concluding that smoking is dangerous to your health” [Jonathan Baron, *Thinking and Deciding*, p. 84]. Rand does insist on such proof, with medically disastrous results to herself [Barbara Branden, *The Passion of Ayn Rand*, pp. 380–81].

Nor is this all. For there is another issue here which neither Rand nor Peikoff addresses: the “contextuality” of *justification*. In particular, are we ever contextually justified in believing something to be true which a wider context would reveal to be false? And that is the question Rand really needs to address if she is to support her claim that even the most primitive “conceptual content” is not contradicted by more advanced knowledge. (For I think it is sufficiently clear that it is “knowledge” she wishes to talk about here.)

In effect, by ignoring this issue, Rand identifies “knowledge” with “justified belief,” omitting the requirement that the “knowledge” in question be *true*. Objectivism, that is, adopts the multiply oxymoronic phrase “contextually absolute knowledge” to mean “contextually justified belief”. (After I had written an earlier draft of this chapter, I learned that George H. Smith had come to a remarkably similar conclusion. See chapter 4, “Belief and Knowledge,” of Smith’s *Why Atheism?*, pp. 61–78.)

OBJECTIVISM AND PRAGMATISM

Interestingly, Allan Gotthelf writes that Rand’s “view of philosophy...differs from pragmatism’s, since for [her]...the practical purpose on which philosophy rests provides no part of the criterion of *truth*, as it does for pragmatism” [*On Ayn Rand*, p. 35, n. 8]. If I am right about Rand’s account of knowledge, however, this difference is more apparent than real. (And for a general criticism of the Objectivist misunderstandings of pragmatism on which such claims may be based, see William F. O’Neill, *With Charity Toward None*, pp. 103–110.)

For as Smith notes and as we shall see in a later chapter, Rand does define “truth” as the *recognition* or *identification* of a fact, and she also maintains that we have arrived at such “truth” whenever we have beliefs which are contextually justified. And for Rand, we recognize or identify facts *conceptually*—where our “concepts” themselves are contextually dependent on our own goals and purposes. Rand’s “contextual” theory of knowledge and truth, then, may not be pragmatism proper, but it comes perilously close in its strong association (falling short, we must admit, of actual identification) of *truth* with practical, contextual success in the attainment of other goals.

To put it another way, both pragmatism and Objectivism tend to identify truth with something that it is not: pragmatism with success in practical action, Objectivism with justification or “validation” in practical inquiry (in which one reduces one’s “concepts” to their sense-perceptual referents). Each exemplifies, in its way, a somewhat Peircean or “positivistic” tendency to assimilate the “truth” of a proposition to its *mode of verification*, the main difference being in *what* each accepts as a proper method of validation.

Strictly speaking, neither pragmatism nor Objectivism quite *identifies* truth with verification. Among Objectivists, it is Leonard Peikoff who comes closest to doing so: he propounds the view that—the original is italicized—“[a]n arbitrary statement is neither ‘true’ nor ‘false’” [*OPAR*, p. 165].

This is not quite as silly as it sounds, as Peikoff is actually basing this odd conclusion, in part, on an entirely legitimate point (and one which, like so many of his unacknowledged presumptions, is dear to idealism): an assertion expresses a judgment; judgment is a relation between a mind and an object; in the absence of such a relation, there is no judgment and therefore no assertion. His error seems to lie in his apparent belief that it is possible for a *mind* to make a genuinely and fully arbitrary assertion in the first place. On the contrary, this should be impossible even according to Objectivism itself, which—at least in Rand’s hands, or at any rate in one of them—maintains that the

human mind is simply not capable of imagining anything except by reassembling the bits and pieces of things it has encountered in “reality,” i.e., sensory experience.

Moreover, how could Peikoff ever determine that an assertion is “arbitrary”? If he can *tell* that there is no evidence for a specific “arbitrary” assertion, and for that matter if he can tell that it is an “assertion” at all, then he must surely understand the assertion well enough to recognize that it is unsupported by evidence; it therefore cannot be an *entirely* meaningless assertion, and if at all meaningful, it must have a truth-value. By his own account, then, such an assertion could not be “arbitrary” in the required sense.

There may be other reasons for maintaining that some sentences that appear to assert propositions nevertheless do not succeed in saying anything sufficiently meaningful to be either true or false; see e.g. the discussions of the Liar Paradox in R.M. Sainsbury, *Paradoxes*, pp. 107–133, and Nicholas Rescher, *Paradoxes: Their Roots, Range, and Resolution*, pp. 193–203. Paradoxes in general and the Liar Paradox in particular are a fascinating subject and I wish Peikoff had given me an excuse to discuss them here. (And I do indulge myself briefly below.) But this does not seem to be the sort of thing Peikoff has in mind, for he specifically states that he is concerned with arbitrary *claims* (and therefore, one supposes, with statements that somehow *do* succeed in asserting something even though “[s]uch a claim has no cognitive relationship to reality” [OPAR, p. 165]).

The problem he is attempting to address, then, is not that of “sentences” that fail to assert anything, but of genuine propositions asserted by minds that presumably intend them as the content of judgments. And his dismissing them as meaningless appears to be based solely on the view that if one fails to offer sufficient evidence for a belief, one is like a “parrot” that has been “trained to squawk” something that sounds like a truth but in fact involves no actual cognition [OPAR, pp. 165–166].

As I have already suggested, this view cannot be sustained, and Peikoff does not sustain it for even the few pages he devotes to the subject. Significantly, he explicitly ties his account to “Objectivism’s refutation of theism” [*OPAR*, p. 168], thereby providing us with a little additional demonstration of the philosophical lengths to which Objectivists will go in order to avoid theistic belief. But just as significantly, at this point he also seems to drop his claim that the arbitrary is neither true nor false. For here he expressly states that theism, though on his view “arbitrary,” nevertheless does somehow succeed in asserting “a claim that clashes with” the Objectivist understanding of reality [*OPAR*, p. 168]—and is therefore, according to Objectivism, false.

In short, what Peikoff really wants to tell us is that a claim is meaningless if it is *unjustified*. This is as close as Objectivism has ever come to equating the truth of a proposition with its mode of validation. But how a claim can clash with reality, and yet have *no* cognitive relationship to that same reality, is a mystery that Peikoff does not even pretend to solve.

All in all, this remarkable Peikovian innovation seems to be little more than a fancy way to pretend that one’s critics are not really saying anything worth answering—and to claim the epistemological high ground while doing so. But since our concern is with Rand and Peikoff is clearly going well beyond Rand here, we shall not critique his view any further; we mention it merely to note that it exemplifies, in extreme form, a tendency already present in Objectivism as developed by Rand herself, namely the tendency to identify truth with justification.

Nevertheless I repeat that there is a genuine issue lurking in here and that Peikoff’s view is not *quite* as silly as it sounds. According to some attempted resolutions of the well-known Liar Paradox, it does make sense to say that an ordinarily significant sentence may under some circumstances fail to assert anything meaningful. Consider the two sentences:

S1: S1 is false.

S2: S1 is false.

S1 gives rise to the standard Liar Paradox. S2, on the other hand, gives rise to no paradox even though, as far as its words and even its apparent semantic content are concerned, it seems to be *the same assertion* as S1. (Oddly, the paradox therefore seems to arise not simply from the sentence itself or even from the proposition it asserts, but in part from the way that we *label* it.) If we resolve the Liar Paradox by claiming that S1 fails to make a meaningful assertion (for whatever reason), then we do seem to be committed to the further view that (as Sainsbury puts it) “the same words, even referring to the same thing, and applying the same predicate to it, may not say the same thing on two occasions of use” [*Paradoxes*, p. 123].

Objectivism has had little to say on this subject, and the little it *has* had to say has not come to grips with the deeper problems involved in the Liar Paradox (and its relatives). See e.g. Roger E. Bissell’s “To Catch a Thief: An Essay in Epistemological Crime-Busting” [*Individualist*, July/August 1971; online at <http://hometown.aol.com/REBissell/indexmm9.html>; Bissell’s piece is a reply to Ronn Neff’s “The Liar is a Thief,” *Individualist*, May 1971]. Bissell argues that a proposition, in order to be meaningful, cannot refer *solely* to itself (although it may meaningfully, though perhaps falsely, refer to a *class* of propositions of which it is a member). Our S1 above is therefore, on his view, meaningless. (Bissell’s approach here is similar to one aspect of Rescher’s; see *Paradoxes: Their Roots, Range, and Resolution*, pp. 164–167, where Rescher expounds the “Successful Introduction Principle”.)

Bissell’s argument is based on a sound insight—namely, that a cognitive judgment cannot take only itself as an object but must refer to something in some sense logically prior to it. (He couches this point in Objectivist terminology but there is nothing especially Objectivist about the point itself; it is essentially what Lord Russell was attempting to codify in his theory of types, a theory Rand herself seems to have regarded as “gibberish” [“Philosophical Detection,” in *Philosophy: Who*

Needs It, p. 14].) There does seem to be a sense in which no *mind* could genuinely render a judgment expressible in the propositional form “This statement is false”; cf. F.H. Bradley: “We cannot, while making a judgment, entertain the possibility of its error” [*Essays on Truth and Reality*, p. 382]. (Bissell is also right, of course, to distinguish carefully between sentences and propositions and to lay the problem of paradoxicality at the doorstep of the latter.)

Nevertheless there are problems with Bissell’s attempted resolution. Ruling out *all* propositions that refer solely to themselves would rule out such unexceptionable examples as “This sentence is in English” and “This sentence is six words long”. It would also have profound consequences for mathematical logic: it would eliminate Kurt Gödel’s famous proof of the incompleteness of arithmetic, which depends on the construction of a *true* proposition that refers solely to itself.

Nor does Bissell’s resolution seem quite to get at the root of the paradox anyway. On his view, a meaningless proposition should not be able to succeed in referring to itself at all; after all, the point is supposed to be that it does not refer to *anything*. But this fact rules out his proposed resolution. It may be acceptable to say that an apparent proposition is meaningless; it may be acceptable to say that it refers only to itself; but it is not acceptable to say both at once. We cannot follow Bissell in simply dismissing a proposition as semantically meaningless if we can tell what it means well enough to know that it self-refers.

(Rescher, too, is vulnerable to criticism on this point. His own proposed resolution of the Liar Paradox, which relies on his aforementioned “Successful Introduction Principle,” calls for rejection of the claim that the offending statement is “semantically meaningful”—by which Rescher means “either true or false and not both” [*Paradoxes: Their Roots, Range, and Resolution*, p. 202]. He is probably right that this claim has to be rejected, but it is far from clear that this rejection is equivalent to regarding the statement as semantically meaningless. Ultimately, Rescher’s ground for rejecting the statement as semantically meaningless is that we recognize this as the most plausible alterna-

tive to paradox. But if we can *tell* that the statement “This statement is false” yields paradox, surely that is because it *is* “semantically meaningful” enough for us to recognize that it self-refers and indeed undermines itself. That is, denial that the statement is “either true or false and not both” seems to be a far cry from regarding it as not “semantically meaningful” at all. Rescher’s resolution is therefore at best incomplete: it leaves one wanting to know how, if the statement in question is simple nonsense, it manages to lead us into paradox in the first place.)

We therefore cannot say that a proposition is meaningless *because* it refers only to itself—partly because some solely self-referential statements are unproblematically true, and partly because if a statement succeeds in referring to itself, it is not altogether meaningless after all. At most we could say that some such propositions, though minimally meaningful, are not the asserted content of any actual or possible judgments. But even if this is true, it leaves the paradox itself right where it was; it merely guarantees that no judging mind can actually fall into it.

Nor does Bissell try to deal with the “Strengthened Liar Paradox,” which arises if we take into account the possibility that an apparent proposition may be neither true nor false:

S3: S3 is not true.

Here we seem to fall into paradox again if we try to regard S3 as meaningless; if it is meaningless, it is neither true nor false and therefore, *a fortiori*, not true. Yet that seems to be exactly what it says. (It is true that Bissell’s criterion would rule out S3 as surely as S1, but we have already found that criterion insufficient on other grounds.)

Moreover, even if further criteria could be offered, we seem to be able to go on strengthening the paradox indefinitely. Sainsbury expresses worry about this as well; he suggests that a response dismissing some apparent statements as somehow semantically or referentially defective in certain uses may be inadequate to deal with a case like this:

“No use of this very sentence expresses a true statement” [*Paradoxes*, p. 126].

Nor does Bissell consider the possibility that the paradox may arise from *two* statements:

S4: S5 is true.

S5: S4 is false.

Here *neither* statement refers solely to itself, and yet the paradox arises again. Nor does the problem seem to lie in either S4 alone or S5 alone; we could make the paradox disappear by replacing either of them by some innocuous statement that makes no reference to the other.

For that matter, consider the following:

S6: Either S6 or S7 is false.

S7: $2+2=4$.

Neither of these statements refers solely to itself; S6 makes explicit reference to S7, and S7 does not refer to itself at all. Yet the paradox arises again. So Bissell's criterion both rules out some nonparadoxical statements and allows in some paradoxical ones.

My own view is that such paradoxes call into question the very ontological status of “propositions” themselves. In general, a good paradox is an “incongruity in the structure of the Matrix,” an indication that there is something deeply problematic in our view of reality. Rudy Rucker, quoting Jorge Luis Borges, makes the point forcefully:

The very existence of a paradox such as this [he is considering the “Berry Paradox” at this point] can be used to derive some interesting facts about the relationship between the mind and the universe. No one has made such a derivation as boldly as Borges: “We (the undivided divinity operating within us) have dreamt the world. We have dreamt it as firm, mysterious, visible, ubiquitous in space and durable in time; but in its architecture we have allowed tenuous and external crevices of unreason which tell us it is false.”...Rather

than saying that the paradoxes indicate that the rational world is “false,” I would say that they indicate that it is *incomplete*—that there is more to reality than meets the eye. [*Infinity and the Mind*, p. 95, emphasis Rucker’s; the Borges quote is from “Avatars of the Tortoise,” in *Labyrinths*, p. 208.]

And what the Liar Paradox seems to indicate is that there is something fundamentally questionable about treating “propositions” as ontological entities in their own right. I do not mean that there is anything wrong with propositions or propositional judgments as such; I mean that there seems to be a problem in thinking of propositions at a level so abstracted or detached from judgments as to allow the existence of “propositions” that are not the asserted content of any possible judgment at all. But I find this problem devilishly hard to articulate and I confess that I have no satisfactory resolution of it to offer.

This point, as Sainsbury also remarks [*Paradoxes*, p. 126], has serious implications for the prospect of a purely formal propositional logic. Of course idealists and others have long been critical of a logic that characterizes implication and entailment strictly through form rather than propositional content; see e.g. Brand Blanshard’s *Reason and Analysis*, pp. 160–169, and, for a non-idealist’s criticism, E.J. Lowe’s account of John Locke’s “particularist” logic in *Locke on Human Understanding*, pp. 182–186. Then, too, Kurt Gödel’s famous incompleteness theorems have shown that *truth* is not reducible to purely formal considerations either.

But we cannot pursue such questions any further here, for Objectivism has not pursued them even this far. The interested reader is referred to William Poundstone’s *Labyrinths of Reason* for an excellent introductory discussion of a wide range of paradoxes. (During my own formative years, popular interest in such paradoxes, as well as in the work of mathematical logician Kurt Gödel, had been piqued by such writers as Rucker, Douglas R. Hofstadter, and Raymond Smullyan; Poundstone’s bibliography will lead the reader back to this literature as well.)

At any rate, the important point for us now is that what I have characterized as the genuine issue—i.e. whether an ordinarily significant statement may under some circumstances fail to assert anything meaningful—does not seem to be what Peikoff has in mind. Nor would it help him if it were; we have just seen that Bissell’s account, insofar as it is sound, guarantees that no judging mind can actually fall into the Liar Paradox—and we have already seen that Peikoff is trying to talk about a cognitive fallacy that a judging mind *can* commit.

We now return to our discussion of respects in which Objectivism comes near to pragmatism. Another of these is in its streak of almost militant anti-intellectualism—an odd feature in a philosophy aimed at “the new intellectual,” perhaps, but one to which many critics of Objectivism can probably attest.

This anti-intellectualism seems to me to stem from the fact that Objectivism, like at least some forms of pragmatism, refuses to allow the theoretical interest any career of its own or to recognize that understanding is a good to be prized for its own sake. Rand and her followers tend to have little but disdain for “armchair theorizing”; for Objectivism as surely as for pragmatism, the drive toward systematic understanding is constantly being required to answer to something else. When Objectivism says that philosophy is practical and that all one’s goals should further one’s “life,” it does *not* mean that philosophical understanding is worth seeking in and of itself as a constitutive part of a well-lived life; it means that philosophy is properly the servant of what anyone else, including and especially James and Dewey, would call “pragmatic” goals—as opposed to the merely “academic”.

(I do not, of course, mean to deny that rational understanding *does* have many instrumental uses or that these uses are important. I mean only to point out that it does not have these uses *in philosophy*, of which the goal is simply understanding itself—perhaps as part of a well-lived life but in any case as an intrinsic good sought and prized for its own sake. Since Objectivism disagrees and indeed regards philoso-

phy itself as purely instrumental, it is far nearer to pragmatism than its exponents like to admit.)

There is a good deal more to be said on this topic, but fortunately we do not need to say it. As a matter of fact Rand herself is not foolish enough to contend that contextually justified beliefs are always “true”—at least not when it really counts. For we find Nathaniel Branden, with her approval, writing as follows about capital punishment: “There have been instances recorded where all the available evidence pointed overwhelmingly to a man’s guilt, and the man was convicted, and then subsequently discovered to be innocent” [*The Objectivist Newsletter*, January 1963]. This point alone is sufficient to put Rand’s theory of “contextual” knowledge entirely out of court; Branden’s own example shows the term “contextual knowledge” to be a simple figleaf for error.

Rand has also, through Branden, conceded that attending carefully to the “facts of reality” and thereby being “determined” to form certain concepts in good noncontradictory fashion is not, after all, a sufficient condition for the possession of knowledge. We may therefore also take it that she has in effect conceded our claim that truth is indeed a “matter of propositions”.

Indeed, there is another strain in Rand’s thought about “knowledge” that is entirely at odds with the somewhat pragmatic trend we have been considering. Apparently somewhat *en passant* (by way of giving an example of how concepts are formed), she parenthetically defines “knowledge” as “a mental grasp of a fact(s) of reality, reached either by perceptual observation or by a process of reason based on perceptual observation” [*IOE*, p. 35]. Peikoff, later in *OPAR* (when he is no longer discussing the “contextual” nature of knowledge), picks up this definition and offers it as a “summary of Objectivist epistemology” [*OPAR*, p. 182].

What is of interest to us here is that Rand and Peikoff seem to allow us to have a *direct* mental “grasp” of the “fact(s) of reality”. If this is intended literally, then it seems to mean that to “know” a fact is, in

some nonmetaphorical sense, to *apprehend* it with one's mind—or, as we sometimes say, to “get one's mind around it”. On this view, a “fact” must itself simply *be* the sort of thing that can be “in” a mind.

One version of this view would fit neatly into an objective-idealist account of knowledge—and, indeed, is essentially the premise on which such an account is based. It would also fit neatly into a “contextual” theory of knowledge (at least, into one that does not include the confusions we have found in Rand's).

What it does not fit neatly into is Objectivism itself. For the Objectivist version of this premise is that, in *sensory perception*, we “grasp” reality just as it is—which, on the face of it, would seem to be at odds with the claim that our grasp is context-dependent. If knowledge really has to be a “totality,” then the sensory-perceptual grasp of an isolated fact is not knowledge—and yet one strand of Objectivism maintains that it is.

Before we entirely leave the topic of “knowledge,” it is worth noting that Rand's political theory also expressly contradicts her contextual theory of knowledge. In “The Nature of Government” (reprinted in both *The Virtue of Selfishness* and *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*), arguing against “anarchy,” she maintains that governments would be needed to settle “honest disagreements” even among people who were “fully rational” and “faultlessly moral” [VOS, p. 131; CUI, p. 334]—not, that is, omniscient or infallible people, but people who simply integrate such knowledge as they possess without contradiction or evasion.

But if her contextual theory of knowledge were correct, then the beliefs of fully rational and moral people could never contradict one another. Recall her remark, quoted earlier, that “[i]f [one's] grasp [of the facts of reality] is non-contradictory, then even if the scope of [one's] knowledge is modest and the content of [one's] concepts is primitive, *it will not contradict the content of the same concepts in the mind of the most advanced scientists*” [emphasis hers]. How two such persons could manage to have “honest disagreements” is therefore alto-

gether unclear. (Indeed, in practice Rand seems to have been quite unwilling to concede that anyone who was fully rational or moral could have “honest disagreements” with *her*. Her usual practice was to ascribe such disagreements to error or evasion on—of course!—the other person’s part.)

We shall return to some of these topics later—and we shall soon have to turn to a more thorough examination of Rand’s view of “concepts,” beginning with her account of “axiomatic concepts”. But first we shall have to say something more about Rand’s attempt to make reason the handmaid of perception.

Chapter 7: Universals, Particulars, and Direct Realism

Would *you* be willing and able to act, daily and consistently, on the belief that reality is an illusion? [Ayn Rand, “Philosophical Detection,” in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 16.]

IS RAND A DIRECT REALIST?

We have said that Rand seems to want to make reason the handmaid of perception. We shall soon get around to criticizing her entire understanding of “reason,” but for now we shall limit ourselves to examining an interesting trend in her thought.

In *ATLAS SHRUGGED* she writes as follows:

All thinking is a process of identification and integration. Man perceives [sic!] a blob of color; by integrating the evidence of his sight and his touch, he learns to identify it as a solid object; he learns to identify the object as a table; he learns that the table is made of wood; he learns that the wood consists of cells, that the cells consist of molecules, that the molecules consist of atoms. All through this process, the work of the mind consists of answers to a single question: *What* is it? [*ATLAS SHRUGGED*, p. 934; emphasis Rand’s.]

Note well: when she tells us what she believes to be the function of reason, she says that *all* thinking consists of answering the question, “*What* is it?”—but makes no mention of the question, “*Why*?” Again, we shall have more to say about this later. But the point for now is that

she seems to regard “reason” solely—as she puts it in “The Objectivist Ethics” (*The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 22)—as the faculty that identifies the “material provided by the senses” (and in some unexplained manner “integrates” it in a noncontradictory way); she seems to leave no role for *explanation*. (We have already remarked that no intelligence worthy of the name is satisfied with sheer noncontradiction.)

What is Rand up to? In my view, simply more of what we have discussed in the preceding chapters: she is taking a strongly “empiricist” tack and trying to establish sensory perception, not only as a completely reliable source of knowledge about the “external” world, but also as the sole source of such knowledge. (I do not know, again, that she ever distinguished these two claims, but they are of course different. Even a demonstration that sensory perception is 100% reliable 100% of the time would not prove that it was our only source of knowledge.)

All of our discussion so far leads naturally to a question. Is Rand a “direct realist”? If so, then in what sense? If not, then what precisely is her view of the attributes of which we become aware in sensory experience?

Let us be clear what we mean here. Under its entry for “direct realism,” the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* refers us to the entry for “naïve realism,” which it defines as follows: “A theory of perception that holds that our ordinary perception of physical objects is direct, unmediated by awareness of subjective entities, and that, in normal perceptual conditions, these objects have the properties they appear to have. If a pickle tastes sour, the sun looks orange, and the water feels hot, then, if conditions are normal, the pickle is sour, the sun orange, and the water hot” [p. 602].

For the record, my own position is this. The “attributes” of external objects of which we are immediately and directly aware in sensory experience are one and all mind-dependent, “color” being an obvious example. Specific colors are of course real in an ontological sense, for (at least) the following reasons: (a) they are “discovered rather than

invented,” i.e., they are not determined by what we think about them, and (b) according to the best science we have, they are the effects of causal interactions between the physical world and the human mind. Their appearance or occurrence in our experience is therefore causally dependent not only on our own minds but also on the physical world. (They are also repeatable, and therefore “universals” in the sense we have defined.) And effects are not unreal merely because they are effects; if the causes are real, then surely the effects are too.

Even on the extreme view according to which *all* the objects of our immediate sensory experience are in some way or to some degree mind-dependent, we can still take a “realist” view of them in this sense, although we will be at least skirting the edges of certain forms of idealism. (Idealism is not necessarily antirealist, by the way, and metaphysical idealism in particular is “realist” in the broadest sense. The traditional foil of “idealism” is “materialism,” not “realism”.)

As I indicated, this extreme view is in fact my own. And it is one on the points on which I agree with Brand Blanshard, who writes as follows: “Now I do hold, with Locke and Berkeley and Hume and Mill and the later Russell, that we never sense anything that is not mental content and mind-dependent.... I am an idealist in the sense that I think everything immediately apprehended is mental” [*The Philosophy of Brand Blanshard*, pp. 513–14, 644; see the text itself for elaborations and caveats].

On this view, we need not regard colors and other sensory qualia as “unreal” merely because they are features of conscious experience (which is surely “real” in its own right!). But what we may not do is fancy that, for example, the color-quality “red” is somehow really “out there” painted on the surface of a red physical object. Color-experiences are, we presume, the results of causal interactions between physical objects, our sensory apparatus, and our minds (and therefore describable as relational/causal properties of such objects). But they are not features that such objects “still have” even when no one is looking at them. Those properties, whatever they are, are known to us medi-

ately and indirectly (at least as far as our senses are concerned, though there is a case to be made that we may be able to apprehend some of them directly by reason).

Here we come to one of Rand's major worries. She is greatly concerned lest the view we have just sketched be regarded as a justification for wholesale skepticism about the efficacy of the senses. What she wants to argue is apparently this: the fact that the human brain/mind generates "colors" (and other purely sensory qualities) in some manner through an apparently automatic form of "cognitive processing" does not in any way invalidate the senses as channels of information. She insists that "consciousness has identity" and that the objects of our perception are not unreal merely because we are bound to perceive them in certain specific ways. Color, she maintains, just is the form in which the human mind is aware of certain features of external objects.

All well and good, and we shall have no substantial disagreement with her on this point. (We have already noted, however, that none of this makes the "perceptual level" unquestionably "valid".)

But now let us return to our question. In the sense we outlined above, is Rand a "direct (or naive) realist"?

On the one hand, the answer would appear to be "no". We have already seen that, in *For the New Intellectual*, she heaps scorn upon the "mystical" idea that things simply are just as we perceive them.

On the other hand, in *IOE* we find her arguing that questioning the "validity" of the senses amounts to a "stolen-concept" fallacy. And moreover, we find her former associate David Kelley trying to mount a case (in *The Evidence of the Senses*) for what he calls "perceptual realism". Does that mean that the qualities of our immediate experience really are "out there" on or in external objects?

Perhaps not. But let us recall Rand's curious remark in "Art and Cognition" (*The Romantic Manifesto*, p. 46) that the senses of sight and touch "provide [man] with a *direct* [my emphasis] awareness of "entities". (The same passage goes on to note that the other senses "give him

an awareness”—this time she does not say “direct”—“of some of an entity’s attributes”).)

There is something perilously close to self-contradiction here. It is almost as though Rand wants to say that we are *directly* aware of external entities because the qualities of our immediate experience are the forms in which we become *indirectly* aware of those entities’ attributes. Which is it?

In fact there is a very fundamental problem here, and to get at it we shall look briefly at Leonard Peikoff’s and David Kelley’s accounts of the matter.

DIRECT AWARENESS OF ENTITIES

The position I outlined above as regards “color” and other features of conscious experience is, as it happens, substantially the one Leonard Peikoff adopts in *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*. He writes:

For the sake of argument, let us make the extravagant assumption that [the ultimate ingredients of the universe] are radically different from anything men know now; let us call them ‘puffs of meta-energy,’ a deliberately undefined term.... If everything is made of meta-energy puffs, then so are human beings and their parts, including their sense organs, nervous system, and brain. The process of sense perception, by this account, would involve a certain relationship among the puffs: it would consist of an interaction between those that comprise external entities and those that comprise the perceptual apparatus and brain of human beings. The result of this interaction would be the material world as we perceive it, with all of its objects and their qualities, from men to mosquitoes to stars to feathers. [*OPAR*, p. 45; note that this position is all but indistinguishable from that of the mature Blanshard.]

Likewise the following from Allan Gotthelf (who, incidentally, seems perilously close here to the insight expressed in Douglas Harding’s *On Having No Head*):

Traditionally we are offered two alternatives: the form in which we perceive[]...color is either “in the object” or it is “in the mind”. The correct answer, Ayn Rand says, is neither. The form in which we perceive [a] color...is...the result of a physical interaction. As such it cannot be located in either of the interacting objects.... And it is certainly not “in the mind,” since [e.g.] green is the form in which we perceive the color of *the plant*. [*On Ayn Rand*, p. 56; emphases his.]

David Kelley, in *EOS*, seems to go more than a bit beyond Rand, but I think he is accurately capturing her approach. On pp. 39–40, he dismisses “direct realism” (under the name of “naïve realism”) as a flawed position stemming from the acceptance of what he calls the “diaphanous model” of consciousness (roughly, the view that perception, in order to be veridical, must show us things exactly as they really are). What he does instead is to introduce the idea of a “perceptual form” and argue that, as Rand claims, the various qualities of our subjective experience just *are* the forms in which we become directly aware of external objects. (By the way, we are not pausing here to wonder whether Peikoff, Gotthelf, and Kelley are justified, on Randian epistemology, in positing the real existence of “forms”.)

And this is the key. If I have understood them correctly, these three are not arguing that we are directly aware of the attributes of external objects. They are arguing that we are directly aware of the objects themselves.

(Kelley does occasionally use language suggesting that we are “directly aware” of attributes too; e.g., “We begin [as knowers] with the *direct* perceptual awareness of objects *and their attributes*” [“Evidence and Justification,” p. 17; emphases mine]. But according to his extended discussion in chapter 3 of *EOS*, what he means by such “direct awareness” of “attributes” is clearly not that the *qualia* appearing in our consciousness are themselves independent qualities of the objects we perceive; otherwise there would be no point to his rejection of the “diaphanous model”. We shall see further below that Gotthelf

sometimes uses similar language, but in his case it is not clear whether he is relying on a theory like Kelley's or simply being inconsistent.)

Neither Peikoff nor Gotthelf nor Kelley—nor, we presume, Rand, though we could show easily enough that she wavers on this point—wishes to claim that colors are really “out there” painted on the surfaces of physical objects. Our immediate awareness of “color” is, for them, a mediate and therefore indirect awareness of the surface properties of such objects, and none of them simply *identifies* the color-quality we experience with the surface properties of the physical object.

Never mind, then, whether any of them wish to *call* this theory “direct realism” (as Gotthelf seems to want to do; Kelley, as we have seen, appears to know better). It is not. For each of these writers, a color-quality is the product of a causal interaction between one's perceptual apparatus and the object perceived (and all sorts of other ambient conditions), and it is not identical with the attribute(s) of which we become aware in this “form”. They are therefore not claiming that the color-quality is “out there” waiting for us to perceive it. (And we shall also see, in a later chapter, whether Rand's account of causation is adequate in the first place.)

What they apparently wish to claim (with the possible and partial exception of Gotthelf, briefly discussed *infra*) is that, in having color-experiences in the usual way, we become directly aware, not of “attributes,” but of *entities*.

Now, in order to make this fly, they must find some way to distinguish firmly between an “entity” and its “attributes”. Rand does not bother, presumably never having noticed that she has a problem here. But Kelley does make such an attempt, and we shall look at it briefly. [The quotations in the following paragraph are from *EOS*, pp. 208–09.]

In order to bring off this attempt, he has to make an extremely dubious distinction between “perceptions” and “perceptual judgments”. He acknowledges that other philosophers have rarely seen fit to make this distinction clearly, noting correctly that most have held the element of

judgment to be what differentiates perception from sensation in the first place. But Kelley argues that his own theory allows him to “distinguish between the judgment and the percept and to consider the former on its own terms.”

(In fairness it should be noted that some contemporary epistemologists of a more or less empiricist bent do make distinctions not altogether dissimilar to Kelley’s. “Ordinarily, perceptual event and perceptual judgment are phenomenologically inseparable...but nevertheless they are conceptually distinct,” writes Susan Haack in *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate*, p. 161. And in *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*, John L. Pollock and Joseph Cruz argue for a “nondoxastic” theory of knowledge based in part on a distinction between “perceptual states” themselves and beliefs about such states, the former not being regarded as beliefs; see pp. 22–28 of the book’s second edition. But it would take us too far afield to see just how these contentions differ from Kelley’s and to consider whether, and in what ways, they are plausible.)

Kelley makes a strange move at this point: he argues that whereas “questions of justification normally concern the predicative element of...judgment” (when we judge that “x is P,” how do we know x is P and not R?), we can raise a similar question about the subject (when we judge that “x is P,” how do we know it is x and not y which is P?). This move leaves it open for him to identify “perception” as the means by which we (nonpropositionally and noninferentially) discriminate the subjects of such judgments.

What Kelley is trying to argue here seems to be that we become aware of the “subject” of a predication in some direct, noninferential manner that allows us to have *nonpropositional* knowledge of such subjects. And—presumably by way of rescuing Rand’s contention that knowledge is not (or need not be) propositional—he seems to want to distinguish firmly between our nonpropositional knowledge of the subject itself, on the one hand, and our propositional knowledge that certain attributes may be predicated of it, on the other.

This will clearly not do. The “x” of Kelley’s subject is, and must be, discriminated by means of its attributes; the judgment that “it is x and not y” (and isn’t this a proposition?) resolves upon analysis into the very same type as the judgment that x is P and not R, and must be both stated and justified in terms of other predicates. (Kelley’s act of perceptual discrimination thus also comes to look a lot more like inference than he thinks it does.)

Kelley seems to acknowledge as much, especially on pp. 218ff. (in his section entitled “Perception and Predication”—where, incidentally, he also acknowledges that the problem of universals is different from the problem of concepts; see pp. 222–223). I am not clear, however, that this admission does not undo his case, at least if we do not grant the ontological primacy of “entities” as Kelley seems to do.

In order to make out his case, then, Kelley needs to have some way to “discriminate” the subject of the predication without relying on any other “predicates”. And there is no foundation for this anywhere in Rand’s philosophy. In fact, Rand would seem to rule out this very possibility in her claim that an entity is simply *identical* with its attributes.

AN ENTITY IS ITS ATTRIBUTES

In other words, Rand seems to be committed to something like a “bundle theory” of particulars. A “particular” (which she would call an “entity” or an “existent”) should, for her, simply *be* a set of attributes in relation, not an underlying something-we-know-not-what on which such attributes somehow hang. (We shall say more about this issue soon, but further discussions of it may be found in Brand Blanshard’s *Reason and Analysis* and D.M. Armstrong’s *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction*.)

Is there confirming evidence that this is Rand’s view? Indeed there is. We find her arguing as follows: “[T]here is no such thing as ‘reality in itself.’ That is one of the concepts of Kant’s that we have to be very careful of....’[T]hings in themselves’—as separated from consciousness

and yet discussed in terms of a consciousness—is an invalid equivocation” [IOE, p. 194].

If we take the (small) liberty of identifying the “thing in itself” with the “bare particular” to which attributes are thought somehow to be attached, we have Rand taking a surprisingly Hegelian view here. For her, what Blanshard calls the “phantom particular” does not exist; universals are what there are, and all there are. (Of course she does not put it this way, but we have long ago noted that her use of philosophical language is unreliable.)

Allan Gotthelf seems partly to concur. “To *be*...is to be *something*.... In that sense, an entity *is* its attributes—there is no bare ‘substratum’ that possesses them.... An entity is not, however, a ‘bundle’ of attributes; it is a whole, a unity, of which its attributes are aspects” [*On Ayn Rand*, p. 40]. We shall not quibble about Gotthelf’s misunderstanding of the “bundle theory”: we shall simply concede his point (subject to some further discussion below) that an “entity,” as any “bundle theorist” could cheerfully admit, is not merely a ragtag collection of attributes but a more or less coherent unity. What we are primarily interested in here is his acknowledgement that, for Rand, there is no “bare particular” or characterless “substance” underlying an entity’s attributes.

But Gotthelf is not entirely consistent on this point. He tells us the following (in his discussion of the “primacy of existence” vs. the “primacy of consciousness,” to which we shall return later):

Even Kant held on to an unknowable “thing in itself” as a last vestige of a sense that an independent object must ground consciousness. But this was soon dropped by the “Idealist” tradition that followed; and we have been arguing that Idealism—the pure primacy of consciousness—is self-refuting. [*On Ayn Rand*, n.12, p. 43.]

Here Gotthelf seems to be *praising* Kant for retaining the “thing in itself” as a way of resisting the so-called “primacy of consciousness”.

Unfortunately we are not told how to keep from slipping into idealism ourselves if we follow Hegel and Rand in rejecting the only doctrine that kept Kant from doing likewise.

At any rate Gotthelf more or less confirms our belief that Rand, as surely as Hegel, rejects the notion that there is some sort of underlying characterless something-or-other to which attributes are somehow attached. Now this consequence (with which I agree, by the way, and so would nearly any idealist in history) poses a tremendous problem for the theory of perception we have examined above. If an entity just *is* its attributes, then it is nonsense to say that we are directly aware of the entity when we are only indirectly aware of its attributes. It is also nonsense to imagine that we can somehow “discriminate” an entity without relying on its attributes.

But then Kelley’s case for “perceptual realism” collapses. And if so, then Rand’s far weaker one collapses as well.

Nor, for reasons we have already discussed, will it do to insist with Gotthelf that sensory perception provides us with “*direct* awareness...of entities, including their attributes, relations and actions.... Awareness of entities *is* a direct awareness *of* those entities (including their attributes)” [*On Ayn Rand*, pp. 54–56; emphases Gotthelf’s]. (Cf. the following from Kelley, quoted earlier: “We begin [as knowers] with the direct perceptual awareness of objects *and their attributes*” [“Evidence and Justification,” p. 17; emphasis mine]. It is unclear whether Gotthelf is relying on a theory like Kelley’s or just falling into inconsistency.)

For one thing, we have already seen Peikoff’s and Gotthelf’s admission that all the sensory properties of external entities may well be the products of interactions between object and consciousness, and it does not suffice as a counterargument to asseverate that our awareness may be direct *anyway* (unless we are willing, as Objectivists are not, to allow that the object of our awareness may be at least in part constituted by our awareness). For another, Gotthelf is here perpetuating Rand’s and Peikoff’s failure to distinguish carefully and consistently—or indeed at

all—between “the senses” and “sensory perception,” a point we have already discussed at length. (The fact that Gotthelf does not make this distinction is one reason we cannot tell whether his account is supposed to be like Kelley’s. Kelley, who is in general a far more careful and self-critical philosopher than Gotthelf, does acknowledge a difference between sensation and perception even if we must disagree with him on other points.)

UNIVERSALS AND PARTICULARITY

For what is it that “particularizes” or “individuates”? On what we have reason to think is Rand’s own view, a “thing,” an entity, just *is* a set of attributes which stand in a (possibly very complex) set of relations to one another and thereby form a more or less coherent unity.

Now these attributes and relations themselves appear to be universals. Blanshard has argued on that basis (in *The Nature of Thought, Reason and Analysis*, and *The Philosophy of Brand Blanshard*) that what we ordinarily call “particulars” turn out, upon inspection, to consist of nothing but universals. And if we think we can increase particularity by simply adding more attributes and relations, Blanshard has a ready reply: these further attributes and relations are universals too. Continue adding them until you can add no more, and you will have arrived at the universe as a whole, which Blanshard regards as the only full “particular” (though of course lots of individual “things” possess unity to greater and lesser degrees).

Since Rand was familiar with Blanshard’s thought and since her own view of “entities” should have committed her to a view something like his, let us spell this out in some detail. On Blanshard’s view, what individuates is not the existence of bare “particulars” on which properties somehow hang, but the existence of relations (e.g. spatial and temporal ones). Suppose we have before us a “particular” tree. What do we mean by this?

A good deal depends on how we approach the question. The right way, I think, is to start with the (empirical, if we like) fact that there is a tree here and try to discern what it is that “individuates” it.

The wrong way—and the one Armstrong adopts in criticizing the bundle theory in *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction*—is to try to “construct” the tree out of universals. This is a little bit like trying to “construct” space out of dimensionless points. And when this attempt fails, as it almost undoubtedly will—especially if we rely, as Armstrong does, almost solely on Bertrand Russell’s incompletely-thought-out relation of “compresence”—we shall find ourselves introducing those barenaked little “particulars” in order to account for the failure. (We cannot pause here to mount a full criticism of Armstrong’s argument. But it is a logical error to conclude, from the failure of an attempt to construct objects out of universals using the relation of “compresence,” that the problem is in the “bundle theory” rather than in the Russellian concept of “compresence”. In fact there is no obvious reason why we must follow Russell in taking “compresence” to be a purely binary relation, and if we allow it to “expand” to relate as many terms as necessary, the problem vanishes.)

It seems plausible, then, to regard the tree itself as somehow composed of universals. That is, the tree seems to consist of characteristics or features that could in principle be repeated elsewhere: its colors, its shape, its atomic structure, its precise measurements, and so forth all seem to be properties that could appear in other contexts. (These properties are one and all specific: the colors of the tree are as specific as colors can be, its shape is not some sort of general “tree shape” but the altogether specific shape possessed by this tree. But properties with even this level of specificity are in principle repeatable. And please note once again that “specific universal”—the term is Blanshard’s—is not an oxymoron; as we remarked long ago, the contrary of “specific” is “generic,” not “universal”.)

But the same consideration seems to apply to the features that mark the tree as “here” rather than “there”. Are spatio-temporal relations not universals as well?

We do not ordinarily invoke “absolute space” (if there is such a thing) in order to locate the tree in spacetime; we specify it by its relations to other objects, including ourselves. All of these relations—six feet to the left of, on top of, higher than, *et cetera*—also appear to be universals.

If these are not thought to be metaphysically sufficient to give us a fully “particular” tree, then we must continue until we have specified its relations (spatiotemporal, causal, whatever) to everything everywhere and everywhen. And in that case we shall indeed have arrived at the fully particular: namely the universe itself. I shall omit the details of this argument (which, again, may be found in the references I have given above); the upshot is that a full specification of “this tree right here” would seem to involve its relations to everything there is, was, or will be. That specification takes place through universals, and the end result is the totality of reality itself as the sole full particular.

Of course in practice we stop far, far short of this, and we are able to do so because the set of properties-in-relation we isolate or abstract as “the tree itself” is in some sense relatively or comparatively “particular”. And I think we shall find something similar is true of what we usually pick out as “entities”: that they are relatively stable, relatively unified subsystems of reality—comparative wholes of which we can make relatively complete sense without referring to very much else, and which can therefore be referred to (and even to some degree explained or understood) with comparatively little reference to the vast portion of reality which lies “outside the system”. Its relations to the rest of reality are not completely irrelevant, but they are irrelevant enough that they are not ordinarily needed for practical purposes. (Moreover, for practical purposes we do not need to pick out “this tree” as metaphysically particular; we just need to be able to specify it within a relatively narrow range of pragmatic relevance. And for this task we seem perfectly

happy to rely on universals: “I mean that one over there, just before the hill—the tall pine with the cardinal in it, to the left of the pin oak.”)

Blanshard’s position is not beyond criticism; any reader interested in following up on this point is referred to D.M. Armstrong’s discussion of the “bundle theory” of particulars (in *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction*). Armstrong finds it unsatisfactory and argues instead for the existence of what he calls “thin particulars,” which are something like coat-hangers for properties. (And if Rand believed in such attributeless “particulars,” she would still have a hard time explaining how we could be “directly” aware of them! But while I am not at all loath to saddle Rand with another egregious error, this one, *mirabile dictu*, does not appear to be hers.)

THE COLLAPSE OF OBJECTIVISM’S PERCEPTUAL REALISM

At any rate, Rand’s implicit view of universals and particulars (though she does not call them that) should have committed her to a view much like the one we have described here. Even if she completely denies that the attributes of specific entities are universals (and we have seen that she is far from clear on this point), still she undoubtedly holds that an entity *is* its attributes. And in that case, she has no business arguing that an “entity” is something of which we can be directly aware while we are only indirectly aware of its attributes. “Entities” lie always at the end of an inference (no matter how thoroughly “automated” the inference may be). What we are directly aware of, in sensory experience, are certain characters or qualia which we believe (with good reason) to be causal and/or relational properties of certain more or less cohesive “bundles” of certain other attributes, and from which we (presumably successfully) infer the existence of such bundles. (And if, through reason, we can be directly aware of these further attributes,

all well and good; but in that case it is still the attributes, not the “entities,” which are the objects of our direct awareness.)

Nor, therefore, does Kelley have any business trying to discriminate objects in some noninferential, nonpropositional manner. There may be versions of “perceptual realism” that will stand up under examination, but the Objectivist version is not one of them.

What is the source of this confusion? Here we can only hazard a guess, but it is an educated one. Rand remarks [*IOE*, p. 15] that the “first concepts man forms are concepts of entities—since entities are the only primary existents.” Her remark here echoes a similar one in her essay “Art and Cognition,” in which she writes, “The development of human cognition starts with the ability to perceive *things*, i.e., *entities*.... The concept ‘entity’ is (implicitly) the start of man’s conceptual development and the building-block of his entire conceptual structure. It is by perceiving entities that man perceives the universe” [*The Romantic Manifesto*, p. 46; emphases Rand’s].

She is pretty clearly confusing chronological/epistemic priority with logical/ontic priority; even if entities were the only “primary existents,” it would not be obvious that we must therefore form concepts of them first. (Nor, even granting Rand’s asseveration that we *do* form concepts of entities “first,” would it follow that they were the only “primary existents”.)

So our educated guess is that Rand has simply, and rather uncritically, identified the contents of (what she takes to be) a pre-reflective level of consciousness with the features of “external” reality.

We shall have more to say on this topic shortly. But first, now that we are in a position to do so, we shall bring to light a fundamentally important issue: the difference between Rand’s view of reason and the one I am ultimately defending in this volume.

Chapter 8: *Two Views of Reason*

To set philosophy against reason...is such a crime against humanity that no modern atrocities can equal it: it is the cause of modern atrocities. [Ayn Rand, "From the Horse's Mouth," in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 82.]

RAND'S VIEW OF REASON

Rand has surprisingly little to say by way of explicating her view of reason, but perhaps that is because her view is apparently so extraordinarily simple. Here are four statements from various sources that seem to summarize her outlook:

The process of concept-formation...is an actively sustained process of identifying one's impressions in conceptual terms, of integrating every event and every observation into a conceptual context, of grasping relationships, differences, similarities in one's perceptual material and of abstracting them into new concepts, of reaching conclusions, of asking new questions and discovering new answers and expanding one's knowledge into an ever-growing sum. The faculty that directs this process, the faculty that works by means of concepts, is: reason. The process is thinking. Reason is the faculty that identifies and integrates the material provided by man's senses. ["The Objectivist Ethics," in *The Virtue of Selfishness*, pp. 21–22.]

Let us define our terms. What is reason? Reason is the faculty which perceives [sic!], identifies and integrates the material provided by man's senses. Reason integrates man's perceptions by means of forming abstractions or conceptions, thus raising man's

knowledge from the perceptual level, which he shares with animals, to the conceptual level, which he alone can reach. The method which reason employs in this process is logic—and logic is the art of non-contradictory identification. [“Faith and Force: The Destroyers of the Modern World,” in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 62.]

[R]eason is [man’s] only means to gain [knowledge]. Reason is the faculty that perceives [sic!], identifies and integrates the material provided by his senses. The task of his senses is to give him evidence of existence, but the task of identifying it belongs to his reason; his senses tell him only that something is, but what it is must be learned by his mind.

All thinking is a process of identification and integration. Man perceives [sic!] a blob of color; by integrating the evidence of his sight and his touch, he learns to identify it as a solid object; he learns to identify the object as a table; he learns that a table is made of wood; he learns that the wood consists of cells, that the cells consist of molecules, that the molecules consist of atoms. All through this process, the work of his mind consists of answers to a single question: what is it? His means to establish the truth of his answers is logic, and logic rests on the axiom that existence exists. Logic is the art of non-contradictory identification. A contradiction cannot exist. An atom is itself, and so is the universe; neither can contradict its own identity; nor can a part contradict the whole. No concept man forms is valid unless he integrates it without contradiction into the total sum of his knowledge. To arrive at a contradiction is to confess an error in one’s thinking; to maintain a contradiction is to abdicate one’s mind and to evict oneself from the realm of reality. [ATLAS SHRUGGED, p. 934.]

[R]eason is man’s only means of grasping reality and of acquiring knowledge—and, therefore, the rejection of reason means that man should act regardless of and/or in contradiction to the facts of reality. [“The Left: Old and New,” in *The New Left: The Anti-Industrial Revolution*, p. 84; also in *The Return of the Primitive*, p. 162.]

BLANSHARD'S VIEW OF REASON

And now for a contrasting view, though it will not be obvious at first that it *is* "contrasting". Here is Brand Blanshard, from the opening page of *Reason and Analysis* (the first chapter of which is entitled "The Revolt Against Reason"):

For the philosopher [the word "reason"] commonly denotes the faculty and function of grasping necessary connections. The function is seen in its most obvious form in reasoning, in the deduction, for example, of the logician and the mathematician. This may be taken as the narrowest and nuclear meaning of the term. But there radiate out from it a large number of subsidiary meanings. Reason for many writers shows itself not only in the linkage of propositions, but also in the grasp of single truths, provided these are necessary truths; the insight that two straight lines cannot enclose a space would be as truly an insight of reason as any demonstration in Euclid. Sometimes the meaning of reason and cognate terms is further extended to include reasonings that are less than necessary, such as inferences from past to future.... Sometimes reason is broadened again to describe the sceptical and reflective turn of mind generally. For Hobhouse it is "that which requires proofs for assertions, causes for effects, purposes for action, principles for conduct, or, to put it generally, thinks in terms of grounds and consequences" [L.T. Hobhouse, "The Philosophy of Development," reproduced in *Contemporary British Philosophy*, J.H. Muirhead, ed., p. 154]. Reason in the widest sense of all, says Thomas Whittaker, is "the relational element in intelligence, in distinction from the element of content, sensational or emotional," and he points out that both the Greek term *λογος* and the Latin *ratio*, from which "reason" has largely drawn its meaning, were sometimes used to denote simply "relation" or "order" [*Reason*, 12].

What is present through all these expanding meanings is the grasp of law or principle. Such a grasp is intellectual; it is not a matter of sensing or perceiving, but of understanding. [*Reason and Analysis*, pp. 25–26; I have inserted two of Blanshard's own foot-

notes as in-text citations, and added some information to the note on Hobhouse.]

And later in the same work:

The dominant meaning of reason, as it is considered in this book, is the power and function of grasping necessary connections. That such connections exist there is no doubt. [*Reason and Analysis*, p. 382.]

Now, on a superficial reading, Blanshard's account of reason might not seem to be at odds with Rand's. Indeed Rand herself (or at least Nathaniel Branden writing on her behalf) seems to have given Blanshard's *Reason and Analysis* only such a superficial reading before recommending the book to the Objectivist readership.

"It is necessary to mention," Branden writes, "that many of Professor Blanshard's own philosophical premises are deeply at variance with those of Objectivism. He is a representative of the Absolute Idealist school of thought, and there is much in his book with which an Objectivist cannot agree: for instance, his views concerning the nature of universals and the relation of thought to reality" ["Review of *Reason and Analysis*," *The Objectivist Newsletter*, February 1963; also at <http://www.nathanielbranden.net/ess/ton02.html>].

However, Branden—writing, let us remember, with Rand's approval—lauds Blanshard's "analysis of the irrationalist movement in contemporary philosophy". We may therefore presume that Branden and Rand take Blanshard's understanding of reason to be at least broadly consonant with their own.

In a way, I am sorry to have to say otherwise. "The real beneficiaries of the book, and its most significant readers," Branden writes in closing, "will be the younger generation, the college students who are to be the writers, the teachers, and the intellectuals of tomorrow. Struggling in the dense jungle of today's epistemological nihilism, they will find in

Reason and Analysis a powerful weapon to help them cut their way through to a clearer view of the proper nature of philosophy.”

I concur heartily with this judgment (and would extend it to all of Blanshard’s writings); indeed I am happy to acknowledge my gratitude to Branden for writing the very review that originally drew my attention to Blanshard over two decades ago. But my consequent view of Objectivism is probably not quite what the Branden of 1963 might have hoped it would be.

In fact, as I can attest, a close and careful reading of Blanshard is an excellent way to *overcome* one’s initial attraction to Objectivism. We have already seen that Rand’s and Branden’s dismissal of Blanshard’s theory of universals is altogether too hasty; now we must note that they are also too hasty in believing Blanshard’s view of reason to be even generally supportive of theirs.

For the central thrust of Blanshard’s entire account is entirely at odds with that of Rand’s. For him, the nuclear meaning of “reason” is “the power and function of grasping necessary connections”. By contrast, Rand believes that all thinking is a matter of answering the question “*What* is it?”—with no mention whatsoever of “*Why?*” (Cf. the following apparent partial exception: “[T]he process of *thinking*...is the process of defining *identity* and discovering *causal connections*” [*ibid.*, p. 954; emphases hers]. We shall explain why this exception is *only* apparent when we discuss Rand’s theory of causation later in this chapter.)

This omission is obscured by Rand’s insistence on noncontradiction, and so we must bring out an issue implicit in Blanshard’s epistemology: sheer noncontradiction is not sufficient to satisfy reason in its search for intelligibility. Intelligence seeks something stronger, usually called “coherence”. Coherence is extremely hard to characterize adequately, but we may at least note that recognizing it requires a grasp of necessity and impossibility.

No intelligence worthy of the name is satisfied with the bare conjunctions of unreflective experience, however “noncontradictory” they

may be. Even the universe of “logical atomism” is free of contradictions. (Thomas Aquinas remarks somewhere that contradictions are easily overcome anyway: when you find a contradiction, he says, make a distinction.)

OBJECTIVISM’S DEFLATIONARY ACCOUNT OF NECESSITY

But Rand is strangely silent on this point. Indeed, the only treatments of “necessity” I have been able to locate in any published “Objectivist” works are Leonard Peikoff’s discussions in “The Analytic-Synthetic Dichotomy” (reproduced in *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*) and *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, and a short exchange in the “workshop” section of *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*. (“The Analytic-Synthetic Dichotomy” will only briefly occupy our attention here. But in this deeply flawed essay, Peikoff has some problems beyond those we shall criticize below—including his conflation of the *a priori*, the necessary, and the analytic, no two of which are identical in meaning, and his claim that no other recent philosophers had rejected the dichotomy of his title when, for example, both Nelson Goodman and Willard van Orman Quine had done so.)

At any rate, Rand’s own discussion of the “metaphysically given” in e.g. “The Metaphysical Versus the Man-Made,” in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, should not be misunderstood as a discussion of necessity. On her own understanding, as we shall see, the “metaphysically given” is just a sort of brute fact that is not subject to further explanation; she never once discusses the possibility that intelligible connections of necessity may obtain within this “given”.

On the contrary, she seems to take a “deflationary” view of such necessity. For we find Leonard Peikoff offering just such an account in “The Analytic-Synthetic Dichotomy,” with Rand’s blessing.

Peikoff launches his discussion of “necessity and contingency” with, among other things, some derisive remarks about rational insight:

In the pre-Kantian era, it was common to appeal to some form of “intellectual intuition” for this purpose [i.e., to establish that a fact is “necessary”]. In some cases, it was said, one could just “see” that a certain fact was necessary. *How* one could see this remained a mystery. It appeared that human beings had a strange, inexplicable capacity to grasp by unspecified means that certain facts not only were, but had to be. [IOE, p. 107; emphasis his.]

We cannot, that is, have a rational epistemology so long as we continue perversely to believe in the occult power of reason. Away with it, then, and in its place we shall put the following:

Metaphysically, all facts are inherent in the identities of the entities that exist; i.e., all facts are “necessary.” In this sense, to be *is* to be “necessary.” The concept of “necessity,” in a metaphysical sense, is superfluous. [IOE, p. 109.]

Likewise in *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*:

A fact is “necessary” if its nonexistence would involve a contradiction. To put the point positively: a fact that obtains “by necessity” is one that obtains “by identity.” Given the nature of existence, this is the status of every (metaphysically given) fact. Nothing more is required to ground necessity. [OPAR, p. 24.]

That is, once we know that a fact obtains, we also know it is “necessary” in the only sense Objectivism allows—not, indeed, because we are convinced that with sufficient understanding or insight we could see *why* the fact obtains, but because once we know *that* it obtains, there is simply nothing more to know:

“Necessity” in the present sense is not a datum over and above existents; it is an identification of existents from a special perspective.

“Necessary” names existents considered as governed by the law of identity. “To be,” accordingly, *is* “to be necessary.” [*ibid.*, emphasis his.]

For Objectivism, the important distinction is between the “metaphysical” and the “man-made,” of which Peikoff writes:

The above formula does not apply to man-made facts; the antonym of “necessary” is “chosen,” chosen by man. Man-made facts, of course, also have identity; they too have causes; and once they exist, they exist, whether or not any particular man chooses to recognize them. In their case, however, the ultimate cause...is an act(s) of human choice; and even though the power of choice is an aspect of human identity, any choice by its nature could have been otherwise. No man-made fact, therefore, is necessary; none *had* to be. [*ibid.*, pp. 24–25; emphasis his.]

We shall return later in this chapter to Objectivism’s account of “choice”. For now we shall stick to Peikoff’s understanding of “necessity”.

Note that Peikoff has slipped from one meaning of “necessity” to another in his transition from the “metaphysical” to the “man-made”. First we are told that to be *is* to be necessary, just because whatever exists has identity. But “man-made facts” have identity too—and yet they are *not* necessary because they “could have been otherwise”. No explanation is offered for the switch in meaning.

Peikoff takes a similarly “deflationary” approach to the “necessity” of propositional truth. In “The Analytic-Synthetic Dichotomy,” he writes:

Some *facts* are not necessary, but all *truths* are.

Truth is the identification of reality. Whether the fact in question is metaphysical or man-made, the fact determines the truth: if the fact exists, there is no alternative in regard to what is true. For instance, the fact that the U.S. has 50 states was not metaphysically necessary—but as long as this is men’s choice, the proposition that

“The U.S. has 50 states” is necessarily *true*. A true proposition *must* describe the facts as they are. In this sense, a “necessary truth” is a redundancy, and a “contingent truth” a self-contradiction. [In *IOE*, p. 111; emphasizes his.]

And here, once again, despite his claim—two pages earlier in the same essay—that “the concept of necessity, in a metaphysical sense, is superfluous,” he informs us that the fact that the U.S. has 50 states is *not* “metaphysically necessary”.

This will clearly not do; if Peikoff can tell which facts are and are not “metaphysically necessary,” then the concept of necessity is *not* superfluous “in a metaphysical sense”. *On his own account*, some facts “had to be,” and others did not. When he writes about the “metaphysically given,” he says that the concept of necessity is superfluous, but when he writes about the “man-made,” he reinstates the very distinction the concept is supposed to track in order to work in Rand’s theory of volition (on which more below). So much for his “deflationary” account of necessity as regards facts; he cannot stick to it long enough to state it.

As for his corresponding account of necessary *truths*, it is frankly just silly. Any true proposition, he says, is a “necessary truth” in some redundant sense because, in order to be true, it *must* describe the facts; if it weren’t a truth, it wouldn’t be true.

This not very enlightening account completely misses the point. The question at issue is whether there are propositions that, because of their specific content, “must” describe facts—i.e., states of affairs which we can know to be facts precisely because we can *see* or *understand* that the propositions in question *must* be true. (For example: “A stick that looks bent and feels straight cannot really be both”—the rational insight on which Objectivism relies in order to prove that the senses do not answer to rational insight.) Peikoff says there are not; therefore he believes that, in the relevant sense, *there are no* “necessary truths”. We knew this anyway, as soon as we saw him pour his contempt on “intellectual intuition”. The rest is handwaving.

And he appears to have correctly caught Rand's approach, as indicated by an exchange recorded in the "workshop" section of *IOE*. Recall in reading the following that according to one source [<http://www.bomis.com/rings/obj/17>], "Prof. E" is none other than Peikoff himself:

AR:...Look at the facts. You observe that water boils. You discover something in the constituent elements of water that causes it. You know more than you did before. But [someone] tells you, "No, you're at the same place." Then you ask him, "What place do you want to go? What do you regard as knowledge?"

Prof. E: And then his answer would be that he wants a mystic apprehension of "necessity," which he hasn't yet received. All he has are "contingent" facts.

AR: Yes. And you ask him what does he regard the facts of reality as: a necessity or a contingency? He'll say, "Of course it's a contingency, because God made it this way, and he could have made it in another." And you say, "Good-bye." [*IOE*, pp. 297–298.]

Note especially Rand's acquiescence in the view that the apprehension of necessity is "mystical," and her expectation that the believer in such "mystical" apprehension will regard the "facts of reality" as "contingent" since "God...could have made [things] in another [way]". Had she thought there was any role for the apprehension of necessity in her own allegedly reason-based epistemology, this would surely have been a good time to say so. Instead, rational insight is simply dismissed without a hearing, because Rand associates it with theism (correctly, in my view, but that is not the point here).

By contrast, here is Brand Blanshard again, expressing the very view that Rand and her interlocutor are misunderstanding, parodying, and dismissing:

[S]uppose someone...asks us why the [gravitational]law of inverse squares itself should hold (or the law with its slight Einsteinian correction). Here at present science is bankrupt. There are those who

say it will always be, since the question is really meaningless. I do not agree. We have a perfectly good right to ask why matter should behave in one way rather than another; indeed we know what sort of insight would clear it up for us, whether achievable or not. It would be the insight that the constitution of matter, or some character within it, *necessitated* such behavior. To try to go beyond *that* point, indeed, would be merely absurd, for when we have arrived at necessity, the question Why? is no longer in order; the final answer has been given; the theoretical impulse has, on this point, come to rest. If someone wants to know why any angle in a semicircle should be a right angle, and you show him that this follows necessarily from theorems he admits, he cannot, if he sees this, ask Why? again. He could ask this with perfect propriety about the law of gravitation, because we do not as yet see its necessity; he could not do so here because he already has the only conceivable answer. When one sees that A *must be* B, the reiterated question Why? shows only that one did not see after all. [*Reason and Analysis*, p. 386; emphasizes his.]

Note particularly that holding out for an apprehension of necessity involves no mysticism and, for Blanshard at least, no theism. On the other hand, if belief in rational insight is itself to be regarded as “mysticism,” Blanshard is unmoved: “[A]t a time when empiricism is in the saddle, with its doctrine that all knowledge of the world springs from sense perception and must return to it as the final test, the tradition that there are other forms of knowledge must be kept alive. There are philosophers who regard any claim to nonempirical knowledge as itself essentially mystical. In that case I too am a mystic” [“Autobiography,” in *The Philosophy of Brand Blanshard*, p. 171]. (Probably Blanshard is not thinking of Rand here, but it would be hard to find a more fitting explication of their contrasting views of reason—and, for that matter, of Rand’s complete and largely uncritical conformity to the main lines of twentieth-century empiricism.)

For a theistic parallel which still involves no “mysticism” (apart from reason itself), here is Gordon Clark again (from his essay “God and Logic,” reprinted in John W. Robbins’s *Without a Prayer: Ayn*

Rand and the Close of Her System, pp. 277–289; also at <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/reviews/journal.asp?ID=015a.html>):

God is the source and determiner of all truth. Christians generally, even uneducated Christians, understand that water, milk, alcohol, and gasoline freeze at different temperatures because God created them that way. God could have made an intoxicating fluid freeze at zero Fahrenheit and he could have made the cow's product freeze at forty. But he decided otherwise. Therefore behind the act of creation there is an eternal decree. It was God's eternal purpose to have such liquids, and therefore we can say that the particularities of nature were determined before there was any nature. [p. 279.]

Clark has important differences with Blanshard on the nature of necessity and what it means to apprehend such necessity; in particular, Clark's view is that reason consists of purely deductive logic. He also powerfully, though briefly, criticizes Blanshard's account of perception [*Three Types of Religious Philosophy*, pp. 78–80] and, after a sympathetic consideration of his understanding of "belief" [*Faith and Saving Faith*, pp. 3–7], takes Blanshard to task (in my opinion somewhat justifiably) for certain difficulties in his analysis of Christian thought in *Reason and Belief*. However, in their view that the faculty of reason is that which grasps relations of necessity whatever these may be, Clark and Blanshard are not far apart. (John W. Robbins, a student of Clark, cites Blanshard repeatedly in *Without a Prayer: Ayn Rand and the Close of Her System*.)

And note that Clark is not holding out for "mystical" insight into why water, milk, and gasoline freeze at their respective temperatures. Clark would argue, I think, that the "necessity" in question comes ultimately from the role these substances play in God's eternal purpose. But our grasp of this necessity (assuming we attained it) would not be "mystical"; it would be a perfectly ordinary *rational* understanding of why the Divine nature (including God's eternal purpose, which on this view is eternally part of His nature) has necessitated that these substances behave in just these ways. And surely neither Clark nor any

other informed Christian would identify divine sovereignty with sheer arbitrariness. (Of course Rand may well think that theistic belief is itself “mystical”. But we shall deal with that topic later.)

We shall have more to say in the next few chapters about the implications of Rand’s view of reason. Our purpose here is simply to set out the contrast between Rand’s view, on the one hand, and that of Blanshard and rationalism, on the other—and to see why the difference is so important. In a nutshell, Rand’s own epistemology seems to be subject to the complaint she levels against the “bankruptcy” of modern philosophy: “we are taught that man’s mind is impotent...and reason is a superstition” [title essay in *For the New Intellectual*, pp. 10–11].

NECESSITY IN CAUSATION

To illustrate what is at stake here, I shall borrow and slightly modify a favorite example of Blanshard’s. I shall not be able to do it full justice here; the interested reader is referred to *The Nature of Thought*, vol. II, pp. 495–503; pp. 231–241 of Blanshard’s “interrogation” in *Philosophical Interrogations*, Sydney and Beatrice Rome, eds.; *Reason and Analysis*, pp. 453–465; and *The Philosophy of Brand Blanshard*, pp. 839–840.

(A bibliographic interruption to which the reader may wish to return later: In *Philosophical Interrogations* and *Reason and Analysis*, Blanshard is replying in part to Ernest Nagel in what I believe to have been one of the most important controversies in Blanshard’s career if not in all of twentieth-century philosophy. The two sides in this debate represent in essence the two views of reason we are discussing here, with Nagel’s view close to Rand’s in most relevant respects despite some significant differences in their outlooks generally. Nagel’s essay “Sovereign Reason” is the place to look for the other side of the argument; it is reproduced in Nagel’s collection *Sovereign Reason*, pp. 266–295, and—according to Andrew J. Reck’s *The New American Philosophers*, p. 119 n. 13—is also published in *Freedom and Experience*, edited by Sidney Hook and Milton Konvitz, and *The Idealist Tradi-*

tion: *From Berkeley to Blanshard*, edited by A.C. Ewing. Reck's book also contains a helpful short summary of the exchange, pp. 117–118, and the chapter on Blanshard is uniformly excellent; so, for that matter, is the rest of the book. A further exchange between Nagel and Blanshard would have been most instructive. Unfortunately Nagel was unable to contribute a fresh essay to *The Philosophy of Brand Blanshard*, and a note from Blanshard on p. 905 of that volume explains that the series' policy does not permit the inclusion of previously published works.)

Here is the example:

Father O'Shaughnessy had come to visit and was making conversation with the ladies of the house while awaiting the arrival of Mr. Smith. "Ladies," the priest remarked during the course of the conversation, "did you know that my very first penitent was a murderer?"

A few minutes later Mr. Smith entered the room. "Ah, Father O'Shaughnessy!" he cried. "How good to see you. Ladies, did you know that I was Father O'Shaughnessy's very first penitent?"

No reader will need me to explain why the ladies gasped at Mr. Smith's remark. Everyone will have already drawn the obvious conclusion, even though it is nowhere explicitly stated in the story.

But the question we must try to answer is: why does that particular conclusion appear?

The natural answer is surely, in part, that the conclusion is entailed by the two quoted remarks. But this answer, if it is right, has profound implications for epistemology.

It is crucially important to be clear on one point. We are not trying to explain why we see the conclusion to be entailed once we are explicitly thinking of it. We are trying to explain why we think of that conclusion in the first place—that is, why it arrives on the mental scene at all when we are *not* already explicitly thinking of it. These are two quite different problems.

The point is this: there seems to be a "real" and "objective" relation of entailment involved here which plays some apparently causal role in

our arriving at the conclusion at which probably every reader of this little story has in fact just arrived.

Of course I am not making the strong claim that such a relation of entailment is a *sufficient* condition for our arriving at that conclusion; it is only too obvious that it is not. If it were, then every time we entertained a proposition, everything it entailed would come flooding into our minds, and that clearly does not happen.

But I do not know how to deny that it is ever a *necessary* condition. It appears, on the face of it, that to deny this would also be to deny that we ever reach a conclusion *because* the evidence requires it. In that case we should be in the position of claiming that, every time we engaged in a process of valid reasoning, our conclusions appeared by something like accident and were nevertheless happily found, upon inspection, to be entailed by our premises. This is hardly a description of what we ordinarily mean by reasoning; if this is all there is to it, then there just isn't any such thing as reasoning in the usual sense of the word.

I also grant that we are sometimes mistaken about relations of entailment; we sometimes—fairly often, I should say—think some of our conclusions are fully warranted when they are not. But how to explain cases of *incorrect* reasoning is another issue; what we are concerned with here is what is really going on in cases of *correct* reasoning. And at any rate the possibility of error surely presumes, at least as an ideal, the possibility of getting it right.

Now, the relation of entailment can be present in diverse contexts and therefore seems to be a universal. (Or perhaps we should say that specific relations of entailment seem to be universals.) And its role in our arriving at a conclusion from premises seems to be causal. If all of that is correct, then we have at least one real universal (or, more precisely, a very large family thereof, namely the innumerable relations of entailment that obtain eternally among all facts, propositions, “possible states of affairs” and/or “possible objects of thought”) that can play a crucially important causal role in our mental activities.

What is not clear from this example is whether such relations go “all the way out,” so to speak—that is, whether such relations would still be present if our thought achieved its ideal end. The relation of entailment here holds between two propositions which are themselves fairly selective abstractions from a real, “out-there” fact (or what would be such a fact if the story were a true one). It is not clear, at least so far, whether such relations hold within actual “states of affairs” themselves.

I think there is good reason to say that, at least sometimes, they do. The alternatives would seem to be either a variant of logical atomism or a vast Bradleyan soup in which all such relations were somehow “transcended”.

(Either one of these metaphysics would be consistent with some version of “trope theory,” by the way, although discussing that point here would require us to deal with the doctrine of internal relations. We shall postpone dealing with that subject until chapter 11; for now we shall content ourselves with two brief remarks from Blanshard. The “independence of universals from their context is not always of the same degree and [] absolute irrelevance to their context is probably a degree that is never achieved” [“Interrogation of Brand Blanshard,” in *Philosophical Interrogations*, Sydney and Beatrice Rome, eds., pp, 241–242]. And: “A.C. Ewing has somewhere suggested that ‘relevance’ of relations would have been a better phrase than ‘internality,’ and would have saved much confusion. I agree...[because] relevance [unlike internality] is admitted to be a matter of degree” [*ibid.*, pp. 242–243]. Since, as we have seen, Objectivism holds that every fact is ultimately relevant to every other fact, it is also committed in principle to *some* doctrine of “internal relations”—although, based on our experience thus far, we may be reasonably confident it is not a consistent one.)

For there do seem to be various items of propositional knowledge which we can see and understand to be true quite independently of any further “empirical” investigation (although of course we may require “empirical” experience in order to know what these propositions mean in the first place), and which we have strong reason to believe would

not be much modified in the process of passing to the ideal end of thought. A handful of more or less stock examples from the rationalist tradition: whatever is colored is extended; whatever has shape has size; seven plus five is twelve; nothing is both red and green all over; other things equal, one can't take ten dollars from a wallet containing only five. And—importantly—if necessity (of any kind) operates in causal processes generally, then we have excellent reason to believe that real relations of entailment obtain throughout the entirety of the cosmos.

The suggestion that necessity *does* operate thus generally will take us to our next topic, and so we shall set it aside for a few paragraphs until we come to Rand's account of causation. Here I shall merely mention that Blanshard was a staunch defender of the view that we have powerful reasons at least to postulate that it does so and then see how far that postulate carries us. At any rate I think we have to take relations of entailment as "real" in at least the sense that we do not invent or create them but discover them, and that is sufficient for my present thesis.

But that necessity operates *in consciousness* is a crucial point for present purposes. An acceptable theory of causation will need to take into account the sorts of causation considered here, which occur within experience, consciousness, and the mind—or, alternatively, explain why they are not really cases of causation at all, which I think is pretty implausible.

I suspect that in order to deal adequately with the causal processes of mind, we shall have to introduce something like Aristotle's "final causation" into our account. At the very least, as I have suggested in the foregoing, we shall have to give an alternative account of it in terms of "eternal" causes, which are outside of time altogether rather than "in" the future.

Such an account is fairly compatible, in fact, with Spinoza's express *rejection* of "final causation"; I tend to think that what Spinoza actually did—as opposed to what he *said* he was doing—was to explain "final" causes in terms of eternal ones. (Spinoza's account of eternal/infinite causes is, however, a controversial point in modern Spinoza scholar-

ship; see Richard Mason's comments and references in *The God of Spinoza*, p. 64.) At any rate, Rand herself mentions "final causation" very briefly in "Causality Versus Duty" [*Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 99], but so far as I know she nowhere elaborates on how, or even whether, her theory of causality incorporates it.

I also suspect that a majority of Objectivists would agree on this point anyway (i.e., that Objectivism needs a better account of final causation, not necessarily that mine is the correct one!). But if so, then for the reasons to which I have briefly alluded here, there will have to be some improvements made to Rand's account of necessity—since, in the final analysis, she doesn't give one at all.

As I have tried to suggest in the foregoing, a proper account of causation will require a tremendous modification of Rand's view of "reason". There will also have to be some iconoclasm as regards the false god "autonomy"; the view of reason I am here advocating has important implications for Rand's theories of "free will" and the alleged importance of conscious "choice" to both knowledge and values.

So we must look narrowly at Rand's own theory of causation, in part because of its relevance to her view of reason and in part because her theory is sometimes thought—oddly—to be similar to Blanshard's. For example, George H. Smith's essay "Ayn Rand: Philosophy and Controversy," in *Atheism, Ayn Rand and Other Heresies*, calls attention to the apparent similarity between Rand's account of causation and those of Blanshard and H.W.B. Joseph [pp. 200–201].

NONDETERMINISTIC CAUSATION AND THE PRINCIPLE OF SUFFICIENT REASON

I say "oddly" because Joseph and Blanshard are determinists, and Rand is anything but. The importance of this point will emerge in our discussion.

“[T]he process of *thinking*...is the process of defining *identity* and discovering *causal connections*” [ATLAS SHRUGGED, p. 954; emphasizes Rand’s]. We quoted this remark earlier in the chapter as an apparent partial exception to the claim that Rand does not seem to allow reason to answer the question, “Why?” What we shall see in the following discussion is that Rand’s theory of causality is subtly but crucially different from that of Blanshard and Joseph, with the result that her own theory is neither able nor intended to answer “Why?” questions.

First we must get clear on the theories themselves. Rand states her own as follows:

The law of causality is the law of identity applied to action. All actions are caused by entities. The nature of an action is caused and determined by the nature of the entities that act; a thing cannot act in contradiction to its nature. An action not caused by an entity would be caused by a zero, which would mean a *zero* controlling a *thing*, a non-entity controlling an entity, the non-existent ruling the existent.... [ATLAS SHRUGGED, p. 954; emphasizes Rand’s.]

And here is an excerpt from Joseph’s:

If a thing *a* under conditions *c* produces a change *x* in subject *s*...the way in which it acts must be regarded as a partial expression of what it is. It could only act differently, if it *were* different. As long therefore as it is *a*, and stands related under conditions *c* to a subject that is *s*, no other effect than *x* can be produced; and to say that the same thing acting on the same thing may yet produce a different effect, is to say that a thing need not be what it is. But this is in flat contradiction to the Law of Identity. A thing, to be at all, must be something, and can only be what it is. To assert a causal connexion between *a* and *x* implies that *a* acts as it does because of what it is: because, in fact, it is *a*. So long therefore as it is *a*, it must act thus; and to assert that it may act otherwise on a subsequent occasion is to assert that what is *a* is something else than the *a* which it is declared to be. [*An Introduction to Logic*, 2nd ed., p. 408; if any Objectivist knows a single passage of Joseph, this is guaran-

teed to be it, though few of Joseph's Objectivist readers seem to know that he goes on to defend causal determinism as applied to human actions.]

Although one would never learn this from George H. Smith's uncharacteristically hasty summary, Blanshard, in *The Nature of Thought*, makes no secret of the fact that he is adopting his understanding of causality from his former teacher Joseph—and, indeed, quotes from this very passage, after which he writes in part:

[W]e suggest that when *a* is said to produce *x* in virtue of its nature as *a*, the connection referred to is not only an intrinsic relation but a necessary relation.... To say that *a* produces *x* and yet that, given *a*, *x* might not follow, is inconsistent with the laws of identity and contradiction. [*The Nature of Thought*, vol. II, pp. 512–513.]

Some Objectivists, quasi-Objectivists and former Objectivists seem to think Joseph's theory is "the same as" Rand's; Smith, e.g., cites portions of these same passages and says of Rand's, "This argument may be found in H.W.B. Joseph's book on logic" ["Ayn Rand: Philosophy and Controversy," in *Atheism, Ayn Rand, and Other Heresies*, p. 200]. And the two theories do seem to share a principle in their common claim that an entity acts according to its nature.

But are they really the same? An easy way to see that they are not is to recall that different conclusions are drawn from them.

Rand's conclusion is simply that all actions are the actions *of entities*, and that these entities cannot act in contradiction to their natures. (And by "entities," as we know, she seems to mean physical objects in time and three-dimensional space: "'entity' does imply a physical thing" [*Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, p. 157]. Cf. Leonard Peikoff's *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, p. 13, where Peikoff defines "entities" in the "primary sense" as the things "given to men in sense perception" and avers that any *other* "entities" are "reducible ultimately to combinations, components, or distinguishable aspects of

‘entities’ in the primary sense”.) Rand is, moreover, concerned to deny that causality is a relation between *events* rather than between entities and their actions; thus Peikoff: “Since the Renaissance, it has been common for philosophers to speak as though actions directly cause other actions, bypassing entities altogether” [*OPAR*, p. 16].

Now, Joseph and Blanshard would probably agree that there could be no actions if there were nothing to act, but that is not the point of their arguments. Furthermore, Blanshard also denies that causality is a relation between “actions” but does not conclude that the agents are “entities” in the Randian sense. “It is an old mistake, often repeated, that the causal conditions of events must themselves be events” [“Interrogation of Brand Blanshard,” in *Philosophical Interrogations*, Sydney and Beatrice Rome, eds., p. 236]. But Blanshard’s counterproposal is not that events are caused by “entities”—which, on Rand’s view as surely as on his, just *are* their attributes anyway. The proper relation here is not between “attributes” and “entities,” as though these were two different things, but between some attributes and others, i.e., between real universals (or real classes thereof). The causal conditions of events, Blanshard quite properly concludes, “can well be timeless logical relations” [*ibid.*]. And these relations, as we have suggested above and as Blanshard is himself suggesting in the passage we have quoted, can enter into the course of our thought and contribute to the “determination” of our conclusions.

(By the way, Joseph and Blanshard are defending *intelligibility*, not predictability. In the real world, no two sets of conditions are ever completely and absolutely identical anyway. Scientific inquiry into causal laws proceeds on the very different hypothesis that under “nearby” or *sufficiently similar* conditions, sufficiently similar “entities” will behave in similar ways. This hypothesis is not only defeasible but in many cases clearly false. But the exceptions are not exceptions to the law of causality.)

Blanshard’s and Joseph’s point, then, is a much, much stronger one than Rand’s. They are arguing, not merely that an entity cannot act in

contradiction to its own nature, but that it *follows* from this principle that the nature of the entity logically determines its behavior under any precise set of conditions. Especially for Blanshard, there are relations of logical necessity which obtain timelessly between an entity's presumably more fundamental or comparatively internal attributes (i.e., some more "essential" part of its "nature") and its presumably less fundamental or comparatively external ones (e.g., its behavioral or "processual" attributes). For both Blanshard and Joseph, if *a* does *x* under conditions *c*, then *a* is *such as* to do *x* under conditions *c* as a matter of logical necessity; it is not merely that "doing *x* under conditions *c*" is *consistent* with "being *a*," but—much more strongly—that "*not* doing *x* under conditions *c*" would also be *inconsistent* with "being *a*".

This Rand expressly denies, just as she denies the real existence of any universals between which timeless logical relations could hold in the first place. She distinguishes sharply (we have already seen Leonard Peikoff follow her in this) between the "metaphysical" and the "man-made," explicitly maintaining that the "man-made" could have been otherwise because it follows from *choice*: "The metaphysically given is, was, and had to be. Nothing made by man *had to be*: it was made by choice" ["The Metaphysical Versus the Man-Made," *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 27]. And she is very clearly committed to the principle that one kind of "entity"—man—*is* able to behave in more than one way under the same set of conditions.

Peikoff, as we know, agrees. And after he has forgotten that the metaphysical concept of "necessity" is supposed to be superfluous, he writes as follows: "In regard to matter, there is no issue of choice; to be caused is to be necessitated. In regard to the (higher-level) actions of a volitional consciousness, however, '*to be caused*' does not mean '*to be necessitated*'" [*OPAR*, p. 64, emphasis his].

Here both Joseph and Blanshard of course disagree. Blanshard's determinism is not at all of the "physicalist" sort; for him, there are levels of causation, and those appropriate to volition and the mind are on a higher level than those appropriate to physical objects. But he main-

tains that to be caused is indeed to be necessitated *at the appropriate level*. Joseph similarly, though without using the term “determinism,” argues that necessity does operate in human volition and intelligence but that this necessity is not “mechanical” [*An Introduction to Logic*, 2nd ed., pp. 410–413].

We should be clear here that Blanshard and Joseph hold rational thought to be determined in part by *timeless* logical relations—in direct challenge to a commonly held view that timeless entities like universals and logical relations cannot enter into temporal causal processes. When we speak of necessity in causation, then, or of rational thought being “determined” in part by an immanent ideal, we are speaking not of the past determining the future but of the eternal determining the temporal.

Rand and Peikoff, who are at war with the eternal, misconstrue “determinism” as “necessitat[ion] by *antecedent* factors” [*OPAR*, p. 65; emphasis mine]. (This is wrong anyway; the factors which “determine” thought—or anything else—at a specific time *t* must be factors which enter into time *t*; they therefore cannot be, strictly speaking, “antecedent” even if we do not wish to allow the eternal to have a say in the process of determination.)

And Blanshard concurs with Sir William David Ross that this sort of determinism is exactly what makes ethics possible in the first place—that what *makes* an action our “choice” is precisely that it follows or issues from our “nature,” and that in order for us to have chosen otherwise, some other conditions (again, at the appropriate level of mental causation) would have to have been different. (See Blanshard’s “The Case for Determinism” in *Determinism and Freedom in the Age of Modern Science*, Sidney Hook, ed., pp. 19–30; cf. Ross’s *Foundations of Ethics*, ch. X.) “Free will” in any other sense would amount to sheer randomness.

This also Rand denies. On her view, volition is not an exception to the law of causality but simply a *form* of causation—a form, that is, appropriate to the kinds of entities possessing a “volitional conscious-

ness”. So far so good; the determinists, too, agree that volition is part of an intelligible causal network. But Rand locates the fundamental freedom of choice in the choice *to think*—i.e., the choice to focus one’s mind on the “facts of reality” given in sensory perception. (See, for example, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 22.) And the manner in which she does so moves her account of causation into an altogether different world from Joseph’s and Blanshard’s.

Now, in fact, this freedom of hers is a good deal less sweeping than it seems. We have already seen her argue (in her account of “contextual” knowledge) that once we *have* elected to “focus,” the “content of [our] concepts is *determined and dictated* by the cognitive content of [our] mind” [*IOE*, p. 43; emphasis mine].

But she does hold that, under precisely the same conditions, the human organism—for her, an “entity” in an otherwise “deterministic” physical universe—has the unique and otherwise unheard-of ability to behave in either of (at least) two different ways, i.e., to increase *or* to decrease its “mental focus”. (And we may well wonder how such “entities” could ever come into being in a universe that *was* physically deterministic.) She is therefore committed, in principle, to a denial of the principle of sufficient reason.

And here we come to the heart of the matter. For Rand, causal “explanations” are not *really* explanations at all.

OBJECTIVISM AND EXPLANATION

For recall her claim that an entity cannot act *in contradiction* to its nature. We have said that what she means by this is a good deal weaker than what Joseph and Blanshard mean by it. One reason we have already seen: Rand and Peikoff collapse “necessity” into “identity” in such a way as to sap it of all meaning. For them, self-identity is the *only* necessity: A is necessarily A, they say in effect, because if A were non-A it would not be A, and it *is* A.

This trivial wordplay merely distracts attention from their denial that A might necessarily entail some character or quality distinguishable from A—call it B. Behind the wordplay, then, Rand and Peikoff are really *denying* that any character or quality A can logically entail any *other* character or quality B. They are thereby in effect reducing the relation of logical entailment to identity—that is, to tautology, in the manner of logical positivism and logical empiricism. They thus eliminate the sort of necessity we need if we are to regard causation as a necessary relation: some of the attributes of an “entity” must logically entail certain sorts of behavior under certain conditions.

The other reason is one that should be familiar from earlier in this chapter: *noncontradiction is a weaker standard than coherence*. Rand’s account leaves open the possibility that *more than one behavior* may be “consistent” with an entity’s “nature” under a given set of conditions, and therefore that the entity’s “nature” does not give a full *causal explanation* of its precise behavior. Under exactly the same set of conditions *c*, an entity *a* possessing “volitional consciousness” may, quite literally, do either *x* or anti-*x*, depending—on what?—on nothing whatsoever. And this is a flat rejection of the principle of sufficient reason.

As a matter of Rand’s intellectual history, she reaches this conclusion by a bit of legerdemain: she declares that “[*a*] *motivation* is not *a reason*” [*Journals of Ayn Rand*, p. 69, in an entry dated 9 May 1934]; emphasizes hers]. And why not? “One’s act,” she avers, “may be motivated by an outside reason, but the *choice* of that reason is our *free will*” [*ibid.*, p. 68; emphasizes Rand’s]. (Incidentally, this account of free will is at odds with the one she later offers; on that later account, our “reasons” should be determined as soon as we have chosen “to think,” but this problem does not seem to concern her at any point in her career.)

It hardly seems that Rand can mean what she says; *of course* a motivation is a reason (as even her own language acknowledges when she says that we may be “motivated by [*a*] reason”). Her meaning becomes plain when we consider the entire context, however. Here is the full passage:

An example of the determinists: if a man drinks a glass of water, he does it because he is thirsty, therefore his will isn't free, it's motivated by his physical condition. But he drinks the glass of water *because* he needs it *and decides* that he wants to drink it. If his sweetheart's life had depended on his *not* drinking that water, he probably would not have touched it, no matter what his thirst. Or if it were a question of his life or hers, he would have to *select* and *make the decision*. In other words, he drinks because he's thirsty, but it is not the thirst that determines his action, the thirst only motivates it. *A motivation is not a reason.* [*ibid.*, pp. 68–69; all emphases Rand's.]

What Rand apparently means is that, since one may still choose not to drink the water even when one is thirsty, the motivation in question—one's thirst—is not a *sufficient* reason for drinking the water. But no determinist would disagree on this point; the claim at issue is simply that one's thirst is *one* of the causal conditions that contributes to the decision to drink. A determinist might well claim that there *was* a sufficient reason for the decision to drink, but he is not therefore committed to the claim that the thirst alone constituted that reason.

Here and in general, Rand seems unable to consider the possibility that something may be a *contributing factor* that is not determinative alone. She therefore confuses the claim that thirst is not a sufficient reason (or cause) with the quite different claim that it is not a reason (or causal condition or factor) at all. As a result she dispenses with the principle of sufficient reason without ever expressly considering it.

(Interestingly, the very same journal entry contains the following remark: "Thoughts are [governed] by certain implacable rules" [*ibid.*, p. 69]. The square-bracketed "governed" represents an editorial change by David Harriman, not Rand's original wording. Might Rand have originally written that thought is "determined" or "controlled" by those implacable rules? Of course we cannot know for certain until and unless Rand's original journals are made available in unedited form. But at least we may be sure that she wrote *something* that Harriman felt a need to alter for the sake of clarity. The presumption is therefore that

Rand's original wording is *unclear*, a point which constitutes further evidence that Rand has not thought the principle of sufficient reason through very carefully.)

Of course a journal entry from 1934 does not represent Rand's final thinking on the subject. But so far as I know, Rand does not deal explicitly with the principle of sufficient reason anywhere in her writings. George H. Smith, though, with his usual perspicacity, has seen that the Objectivist worldview requires its denial for other, closely related reasons:

According to this principle, there must be a sufficient reason, an explanation, for the existence of everything. Many theists accept this principle as axiomatic, claiming that it is an essential ingredient of rationality. But nothing could be further from the truth. The "principle of sufficient reason" is false; not everything requires an explanation.... [T]he natural universe sets the context in which explanation is possible.... [*Atheism: The Case Against God*, p. 252.]

Smith is of course correct that theists invoke the principle as an explanation for the physical ("natural") universe as a whole. On this point Hugo A. Meynell writes as follows:

Let us distinguish world (a), the totality of what exists, from world (b) as the totality of what there may be *excluding* God, and world (c) as the total of what there may be *including* God.... [Terence Penelhum—in "Divine Necessity," reproduced in *Cosmological Arguments*, D.R. Burrill, ed.—claims] that the principle of sufficient reason is demonstrably false, since not everything can be explained. It is true that world (a) and world (c) cannot be explained, because, since the "world" in these senses consists of everything, there is nothing beside, beyond, or apart from it which could explain it. But the question is whether there could or must exist something to explain world (b). The principle of sufficient reason would be satisfied if it could be shown that such a being or beings [i.e., being(s) which could appropriately be called "God"]

was or were somehow self-explanatory, in a way which world (b) was not. [*The Intelligible Universe*, pp. 68–69.]

Note carefully that Meynell’s argument is *not* that nothing can be self-explanatory. It is rather that there is an ambiguity in the term “world” which parallels an ambiguity in the Objectivist term “existence” (to be discussed later). It is one thing to say that existence “as such” requires explanation; it is another to say only that the physical universe requires an explanation in terms of a being or beings who is or are self-explanatory. (The problem is, roughly, that the physical universe just doesn’t seem to be the sort of thing that *is* “self-explanatory”. And, moreover, we have knowledge of certain real phenomena—e.g. mind and reason—that do not seem to be explicable in purely physical terms; whatever we invoke as our ultimate explanation must be such as to explain these as well.) But something somewhere must be such as to require no further explanation in terms of anything else; the question is *what* it is.

And note, therefore, that it is on Meynell’s view rather than on Smith’s that the physical universe receives an intelligible explanation. For Smith—and Rand—the physical universe just *is*, and that is all there is to it.

Between Rand’s acceptance of the weak standard of “consistency” and her (implicit) rejection of the principle of sufficient reason, then, her “metaphysically given” universe consists, not of an intelligible and coherent order, but of brute, surd, “consistent” but essentially “atomic” facts which simply set the (unintelligible) boundaries within which we must think. Rand’s law of causality, then, is a weak and emasculated version of Joseph’s and Blanshard’s, having little in common with it other than the form of its words.

(Blanshard is, however, vulnerable here to a criticism with which I briefly deal in the appendix: namely, if everything is “explained” by placing it within a system of which it is seen to form a necessary part, then what, if anything, explains the ultimate system? Spinoza, who is also an “intelligibilist,” is arguably vulnerable here as well, depending

on what he intended his version of the ontological argument to show and whether he succeeded in showing it; if his argument fails to show that *Deus-sive-Natura* exists necessarily, then his “system,” too, is left in the end without explanation. But we shall leave this question aside in the present chapter.)

As we briefly and parenthetically noted in an earlier chapter, this point has consequences for the Objectivist account of “perceptual realism” as well. Since Objectivism holds that the qualities of our immediate experience are the effects of causal interactions with external physical objects, an inadequate account of causality will leave no ground of inference from which to pass to the properties of those objects from the features of our experience. If, in the final analysis, Rand’s theory of causation does not allow us to ask *why* the color-quality “red” arises from the causal interaction of the mind with the surface properties of external physical objects but permits us only to announce *that* it does, then her epistemology cannot *in principle* allow for any coherent causal account of perceptual experience.

STRAW-MAN DETERMINISM

As for free will vs. determinism, we cannot pause here to mount an exhaustive critique of Rand’s theory. But we may at least note in passing that when it comes to *criticizing* determinism, Objectivism just gets the issue wrong. Here is Nathaniel Branden, offering a reworked version of an argument he first mounts in *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*:

[N]o one can consistently maintain a belief in determinism without self-contradiction.... In all its forms the determinist view of mind maintains that whether an individual thinks or not, takes cognizance of the facts of reality or not, places facts above feelings or feelings above facts, everything is determined by forces beyond the individual’s control....

Yet consider this. We are neither omniscient nor infallible. We must work to achieve our knowledge. The mere presence of an idea

inside our mind does not prove that the idea is true; many false ideas enter our consciousness. But if we believe what we *have* to believe, if we are not free to test our ideas against reality and validate or reject them—if the actions and content of our minds, in other words, are determined by factors that may or may not have anything to do with reason, logic, and reality—then we can never know if any conclusion is justified or unjustified, true or false....

[The validation of our conclusions is possible only if our capacity to judge is free.] Without this freedom, we cannot maintain logically that any conviction or belief of ours is justified.... [I]f the claim is made that *all* one's beliefs or convictions are determined by factors outside one's control, *no claim to knowledge can be made without logical contradiction*. [*Taking Responsibility*, pp. 49–50; emphases Branden's.]

Determinism is therefore, allegedly, self-undermining in something like the manner of a “stolen concept fallacy” (to be discussed in our next chapter). (In essentials this is the same argument that Peikoff offers in *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* [pp. 69–72, 203–04], so we shall deal here only with Branden's version.)

Now, there may be determinists who believe in the odd caricature Branden has presented here. But Blanshard is not one of them, and we already know Branden has read Blanshard—at least *Reason and Analysis*, in which Blanshard repeats and expands upon his theory of necessity in causation. Yet Branden, as his subsequent remarks make clear [pp. 50–56, in which he attacks “determinism” as a denial of accountability and self-responsibility], is taking as his target only Rand's own understanding of “determinism”—according to which “[t]he person who believes in determinism...does not know what makes him act or how or why” [*Journals of Ayn Rand*, p. 296]. As Branden has undoubtedly encountered, and even favorably reviewed a volume of philosophy by, at least one determinist who is concerned *precisely* with learning “what makes him act [and] how [and] why,” there is little excuse for Objectivism's misrepresentations.

For that matter, one of the most famous “determinists” in all of philosophical history, namely Spinoza, famously held that understanding the causes of one’s own behavior is precisely the way to liberation. Indeed, Spinoza provides the foundation for *ad hominem* “psychologizing” in the opposite direction to Rand’s: “Men are deceived in thinking themselves free, a belief that consists only in this, that they are conscious of their actions and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined” [*Ethics*, Scholium to Prop. 35, Part II; quoted from *Ethics, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect, and Selected Letters*, tr. Samuel Shirley, p. 86]. On Spinoza’s view, it is the free-willer who “does not know what makes him act or how or why”.

We need not, then, deal at length with Branden’s straw man. It is enough to reply that, if our beliefs are *not* “determined” in any way by the “facts of reality”—as even Objectivism itself most certainly maintains that they are, at least once we have arbitrarily decided to “focus”—*then* we cannot “maintain logically that any conviction or belief is justified”. And if, at any moment, our beliefs could be altered by a sheer, causeless mental act which occurred *without* “sufficient reason,” and if our failure to perform this causeless act could introduce “false ideas” into our minds from no source in reality at all (which Rand says is impossible anyway), then our mental activities would simply be at the mercy of randomness—in Rand’s words, a “zero” controlling a “thing,” the non-existent ruling the existent. If our thinking is *not* under the “control” of an immanent ideal—if we are “free” to believe or not, for example, that two plus two is four—then we are *not* “free” but merely irrational; to be rational *means* to have the content of one’s consciousness “determined” by the flow of logical necessity, which operates not by short-circuiting but by positively engaging one’s volition, not by obviating the need for mental effort but by informing and directing such effort.

“When I am ‘thinking,’” as H.H. Joachim puts it, “in the fullest and most pregnant sense of the term, ‘the subject’—so it is commonly expressed—‘has taken full possession of my mind’; ‘reality’, or ‘the

truth', itself is 'shaping itself in my thought'.... It is this fundamental discursus which, so far as I am 'thinking' in [this] fullest and most pregnant sense, I recognize and adopt as 'mine'—as *one with* the natural functioning of 'my' intellect" [*Logical Studies*, p. 100; emphasis his]. (Cf. Bernard Bosanquet's remark, in agreement with a suggestion from Bertrand Russell, that the expression "I think" might be more correctly rendered as "It thinks in me." Bosanquet understands the essence of thought to be, in what he acknowledges is a near-verbatim paraphrase of F.H. Bradley, "the control exercised by reality over mental process" ["Life and Philosophy," in *Contemporary British Philosophy*, p. 61].)

It may be that the conflict between "free will" and "determinism" rests ultimately on a confusion or a false duality—that the two are actually compatible if we conceive them properly. Raymond Smullyan, in his dialogue "Is God a Taoist?", suggests (or rather has God suggest) that the confusion is caused by the "bifurcation of reality into the 'you' and the 'not-you'". Really now, just where do you leave off and the rest of the universe begin?...Once you can see the so-called 'you' and the so-called 'nature' as a continuous whole, then you can never again be bothered by such questions as whether it is you who are controlling nature or nature who is controlling you" [*The Tao Is Silent*, p. 107; also reproduced in Hofstadter and Dennett, *The Mind's I*]. For Smullyan this resolution (which recalls Spinoza's) is suggested, in part, by the remarkable fact that we often use "I am determined to do such-and-such" as synonymous with "I have chosen to do such-and-such." But this sort of compatibilism is inconsistent with Objectivism on several counts—not least in its rejection of the bifurcation of reality into the "you" and the "not-you".

There may be objections to this view, but Objectivism itself has not raised any sound ones or offered even the beginnings of a credible alternative. And—on a related topic we shall soon take up—even Rand believes there are certain "axioms" that we *must* accept if and to the degree that we think at all.

But before we leave the present topic, let us note three points in Branden's argument that indicate some trouble spots which we shall address shortly.

Branden writes that "[t]he mere presence of an idea inside our mind does not prove that the idea is true; many false ideas enter our consciousness." From where?

We must be "free to test our ideas against reality". How?

Under determinism, "the actions and content of our minds," being intelligibly necessitated by a cosmic order shot through with relations of logical entailment, "are determined by factors that may or may not have anything to do with reason, logic, and reality." Come again?

Here Objectivism (for Objectivism does accept this argument of Branden's) has at last turned one hundred eighty degrees from its initial orientation—again, under the powerful influence of Rand's intense anti-theism. We begin with the inescapable presumption that consciousness just *is*, by its nature, in cognitive contact with reality. But by the time we are through defending "volition," we have cut the mind off from reality altogether: the mind may contain all sorts of "false ideas" which show up out of nowhere, its ideas must be in some manner compared to a reality which is altogether *outside* the mind, and in that completely external reality no ultimate "explanations" are possible.

We shall deal in turn with these three difficulties in our next three chapters as we consider, respectively, Rand's theory of axioms and concepts, her "correspondence" theory of truth, and her assertion of an important dichotomy between the "primacy of existence" and the "primacy of consciousness". After that we shall turn to a discussion of Rand's axiology and ethics.

In the meantime we have perhaps seen enough of the difficulty Rand brings upon herself through her devotion to the idol "autonomy" that we may feel comfortable closing the present chapter with another series of remarks from Blanshard:

[T]he objection commonly felt to including human nature itself within the domain of necessity is largely based on a misunderstand-

ing. It is assumed that causality is all of one type and that this type is the sort exemplified in the pulling about of puppets in a Punch-and-Judy show. Any self-respecting person would be humiliated at the discovery that his conclusions and moral choices were the product of nothing but mechanical clockwork. But there are levels of causality; and there is no reason whatsoever to suppose that conclusions and moral choices are mechanically determined. When a thinker follows a line of implication, the course of his thought is conditioned by the necessity in his subject matter, but far from being humiliated when he realizes this, he finds in it a ground of pride. For a rational being to act under the influence of seen necessity is to place himself at the farthest possible extreme from the behavior of a puppet. For a moral agent to choose that good which in the light of reflection approves itself as intrinsically greatest is to exercise the only freedom worth having. In such cases the line of determination runs through the agent's own intelligence. To think at its best is to find oneself carried down the current of necessity. To choose most responsibly is to see alternative goods with full clearness and to find the greatest of them tipping the beam. This, in a way, is to be determined. But there is nothing mechanical about it. For it is what the rational man means by freedom. [*Reason and Analysis*, pp. 492–493.]

Chapter 9: *Axioms and Concepts*

[N]othing is self-evident except the material of sensory perception.
[Ayn Rand, "Philosophical Detection," in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 13.]

OBJECTIVISM AND THE *A PRIORI*

In our previous discussion, and especially in the preceding chapter's discussion of Rand's view of reason as compared with Brand Blanshard's, we have depended on a point that we must now bring out more fully. It is this: reason apparently has the power to arrive at knowledge by means other than purely sensory perception. We have already seen that Rand would deny this, and so we shall have to look more closely at her account on this point.

What we are ultimately interested in here is the existence and nature of *a priori* knowledge—or, better, of *a priori* justification. Here is a recent defender of such justification:

Historically, most epistemologists have distinguished two main sources from which the epistemic justification of a belief might arise. It has seemed obvious to all but a very few that many beliefs are justified by appeal to one's sensory (and introspective) experience of the world. But it has seemed equally obvious to most that there are other beliefs, including many of the most important ones we have, that are justified in a way that does not depend at all on such an appeal to experience, justified, as it is usually put, by reason or pure thought alone. Beliefs justified entirely in the latter way are said to be justified *a priori*, while beliefs justified at least partially in

the former way are said to be justified empirically or *a posteriori*.
[Laurence BonJour, *In Defense of Pure Reason*, p. 2.]

Now, it is clear enough that Rand is among those to whom the existence of this second class of truths is not at all obvious. (In a marginal note in her copy of Ludwig von Mises's *Human Action*, she declares roundly: "There is no 'a priori' knowledge" [*Ayn Rand's Marginalia*, p. 133].) As I think we have shown adequately, one of her main epistemological "projects" is to place all knowledge on a foundation of sensory perception (and perhaps introspection, though it would be an interesting exercise to try to extract a coherent account of introspection from her epistemological writings). We have already found her project questionable on several grounds: her confusion over the problem of universals, her inconsistent adoption of a nominalist ontology, her inability to provide a coherent account of perception (and her corresponding inability to make up her mind about whether reason was involved in perception or not), her attempt to reduce propositional truth to the "validity" of a proposition's component concepts, and—most importantly for present purposes—her reliance, in her theory of "measurement-omission," on *a priori* insight (folded, as we saw, into perception).

Deniers of such insight—roughly, "empiricists"—have always run to ground in dealing with the truths of logic and mathematics, as well as such simple observations as we adduced in our previous chapter (e.g., that nothing can be both red and green all over, that whatever is colored is extended, and that ten dollars cannot be removed from a wallet containing only five). And so we may expect Rand herself to encounter some difficulties in dealing with each of these.

And I am afraid that is just what we do find. In her attempt to place logic on a purely empirical foundation, she is forced to introduce a class of concepts she calls "axiomatic concepts"—which, as we shall shortly see, are very strange creatures indeed. Her dealings with mathematics force her to regard all mathematical concepts as "concepts of

method” and, curiously, to deny the real existence of actual infinities. And she does not try to deal with our other examples at all.

We shall not here examine her views of mathematics; we shall deal here with her so-called “axiomatic concepts”—namely, “existence,” “identity,” and “consciousness”. And the first question we must ask is whether, on her terms, these qualify as “concepts” at all.

ARE “AXIOMATIC CONCEPTS” CONCEPTS?

On her own account, they clearly should not. We noted long ago that her account of concept-formation seems to state definitively that the process “always” requires both “differentiation” and “integration” [*IOE*, p.138; “You need both, always”]. That is, to form a concept of any group of “existents,” we must first differentiate them from something else.

But her “axiomatic concepts” somehow escape this requirement. “Since axiomatic concepts are not formed by differentiating one group of existents from others...” [*IOE*, p. 59].

This remark should in and of itself tip us off that Rand is doing something quite illicit here. She has set out to give an account of concept-formation, and in order to complete it she has had to introduce “concepts” that, on her own terms, cannot be formed.

And lest we think that—say—the concept of “existence” might be formed by differentiation after all, Rand continues at once to raise objections herself: “It may be said that existence can be differentiated from non-existence; but non-existence is not a fact, it is the absence of a fact.... One can arrive at the concept ‘absence’ starting from the concept ‘presence,’ in regard to some particular existent(s); one cannot arrive at the concept ‘presence’ starting from the concept ‘absence,’ with the absence including everything” [*IOE*, p. 58].

So these alleged concepts cannot be formed in the proper Randian fashion. This fact really ought to pose something of a problem, since Rand wishes us to believe that these three concepts are of fundamental

importance; indeed she tells us—the italics are hers—that “*axiomatic concepts are the guardians of man’s mind and the foundation of reason*” [IOE, p. 60]. And yet she seems not at all disturbed by the fact that her foundation-of-reason concepts cannot be arrived at in the manner she says is “always” requisite.

This is emphatically not a trivial point. An epistemological theory needs to be able to account for its own existence as a theory; if Rand’s cannot, then it will have to go the way of the logical positivists’ “verification theory of meaning,” which was similarly unable to pass its own tests.

So let us see whether Rand’s theory can account for itself. Rand tells us that “a commensurable characteristic...is an essential element in the process of concept-formation. I shall designate it as the ‘Conceptual Common Denominator’ and define it as ‘The characteristic(s) reducible to a unit of measurement, by means of which man differentiates two or more existents from other existents possessing it’” [IOE, p. 15]. But she also tells us that axiomatic concepts “have no Conceptual Common Denominator with anything else” [IOE, p. 58]. So the existence of a commensurable characteristic is “essential” to the process of concept-formation—but not for the formation of “axiomatic concepts”.

“Unless you differentiate [a] particular grouping from another one with which it has something in common but differs in measurement, you couldn’t have a concept” [IOE, p. 143]. And yet axiomatic concepts “have no contraries, no alternatives.... ‘Existence,’ ‘identity,’ and ‘consciousness’ have no contraries—only a void” [IOE, p. 58].

So we cannot form concepts unless we can isolate one group of existents from another—but we somehow manage to form the concepts of “existence,” “identity,” and “consciousness” even though there isn’t anything else from which they can be “differentiated”.

Moreover, a concept, once formed, allegedly does not change or develop; all that alters is our knowledge of the concept’s referents. “From a savage’s concept of man...to the present level...the *concept*

‘man’ has not changed: it refers to the same kind of entities.... Since concepts represent a system of cognitive classification, a given concept serves (speaking metaphorically) as a file folder in which man files his knowledge of the existents it subsumes. The content of such folders varies...but it pertains to the same referents, to the same kind of existents, and is subsumed under the same concept” [IOE, pp. 66–67; emphasis Rand’s].

Yet she has already told us, “The (implicit) concept ‘existent’ undergoes three stages of development in man’s mind” [IOE, p. 6]. This process of development is, it seems, fairly important, since (in generating the concept “unit,” already discussed) it provides “the key, the entrance to the conceptual level of man’s consciousness” [*ibid.*]. So, once again, axiomatic concepts are an exception to Rand’s usual rules for concepts: concepts don’t change, but axiomatic concepts do.

And, interestingly, the reason Rand allows axiomatic concepts to change is that she wants to use them to account for the very existence of the “conceptual level”. She has, that is, to let them “develop” if she is to invoke them as *both* the pre-existing foundation for the conceptual level *and* the basic content of the conceptual level itself.

Yet if she holds that we reach the “conceptual level” by developing concepts that are already present in our minds, she has not explained the origin of the “conceptual level” at all; she has simply asseverated that we were *already at* that level whether we knew it or not, merely by virtue of having experiences.

Nor is this all. In one “workshop,” “Prof. K” reportedly asks her whether “Existence exists” and “There is a physical world” are the same axiom. Rand says the latter is not an axiom at all, replying in part as follows: “When you say ‘existence exists,’ you are not saying that the physical world exists, because the literal meaning of the term ‘physical world’ involves a very sophisticated piece of scientific knowledge at which logically and chronologically you would have to arrive much later” [IOE, pp. 245–246]. Here she suddenly reinstates the distinction between sense and reference, arguing that because there are facts about

“existence” that one may not know yet, the axiomatic concept “existence” does *not* “mean” all its referents and all their characteristics. (Leonard Peikoff concurs: “The concept of ‘existence’...subsumes everything...[but] does not specify that a physical world exists” [*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, p. 5].)

Since Rand denies the real existence of abstractions, it is not clear what she *does* take “existence” to mean. She has said elsewhere that “[e]xistence and identity are *not attributes* of existents, they *are* the existents” [*IOE*, p. 56; emphases hers]. Likewise Peikoff: “‘Existence’ here is a collective noun, denoting the sum of existents” [*OPAR*, p. 4]. So she cannot very well invoke “existence” as a real referent in its own right.

But she seems to have done just that—thereby making an exception for an “axiomatic concept” that she would not make for any others. As Leonard Peikoff elaborates her claim, with her approval, in “The Analytic-Synthetic Dichotomy”: “Every truth about a given existent(s) reduces, in basic form, to: ‘X is: one or more of the things which it is’” [*IOE*, p. 100]. By this standard, if physical reality exists, then our “axiomatic concept” of “existence” already *means* “physical reality,” whether we are aware of it or not. Our acquisition of further knowledge is not supposed to change our concept. But for some unexplained reason, this standard does not apply to the concept “existence”.

For, despite their repeated remarks that “existence” really means “existents,” neither Rand nor Peikoff seems to have any difficulty referring to “existence as such”. Here is Rand: “[O]ne cannot analyze (or ‘prove’) existence as such” [*IOE*, p. 55; try replacing “existence” by “existents” and see whether the result captures Rand’s meaning]. And here is Peikoff: “Consciousness is not inherent in the fact of existence as such” [*OPAR*, p. 5; try reading that as a statement that the volitionless physical universe doesn’t “have to” give rise to consciousness].

And, again, neither of them appears to see any problem for the Objectivist epistemology in the fact that the concept “existence” does *not* refer to all the attributes of all actual existents. Indeed, for all her

conflation of sense and reference elsewhere, Rand even acknowledges that “existence” and “identity” are *different concepts* even though they (as “Prof. B” puts it) “have the same units” [*IOE*, p. 240]. (On Rand’s alleged rejection of the Fregean distinction between sense and reference, it should be impossible for her to acknowledge that two concepts may differ while yet having the same referents. For her—to borrow a well-known example from Frege himself—“morning star” and “evening star” should be the same concept. Cf. Gottlob Frege, “Function and Concept,” reprinted in e.g. *Properties*, D.H. Mellor and Alex Oliver, eds., esp. pp. 40–41.)

Rand is clearly in difficulty here. It seems that, by her own standards, her “axiomatic concepts” cannot be genuinely axiomatic if they are genuinely concepts. If they are “built in” to the very nature of experience, then they cannot really “mean” *all* their referents and *all* their characteristics—so Rand has given up that standard in order to preserve their status as axioms, even though she thereby violates every principle she has established about “concepts”.

What is she really up to here? She seems to want to say that her “axiomatic concepts” are in some way absolutely presupposed by all thought, all knowledge, all experience whatsoever. But then she will have to answer the question: how does she know this?

And here we come to the heart of the matter—for she tells us, with a perfectly straight face, just exactly how she knows this and how anyone else might know it too. “[T]here is,” Rand says, “a way to ascertain whether a given concept is axiomatic or not: one ascertains it by observing the fact that an axiomatic concept cannot be escaped, that it is implicit in all knowledge, that it has to be accepted and used even in the process of any attempt to deny it” [*IOE*, p. 59].

So one *observes*, does one, that a given concept is implicit in all knowledge? And by which of our modes of sensory perception are we to “observe” this remarkable and altogether non-sensible fact? Sight and touch, which allegedly provide us with “direct awareness” of “entities”? Or perhaps hearing, taste and smell, which allegedly provide us

only with awareness of some of their “attributes”? Or do we have additional senses she has not bothered to list?

And even if such facts were “observable” by the senses, how might one go about “observing” that such concepts were implicit in *all* knowledge—even the knowledge one does not yet possess, or the knowledge one had yesterday and forgot?

But “all” knowledge does not mean only one’s own. Is she also claiming that we can “observe” the presuppositions of other people’s knowledge?

And is Rand also claiming to know—via “observation”—that this method will work, not only for her, but for anyone else who cares to apply it?

In short, Rand is relying on *a priori* justification for those concepts which provide the very “foundation of reason”—when she has defined “reason” in such a way as to rule out the very possibility of such justification.

IMPLICIT RELIANCE ON *A PRIORI* INSIGHT

Here, then, at the very heart of her defense of “reason” (as the faculty that identifies and integrates, and sometimes “perceives,” the material provided by the senses), we learn that in order to arrive at those concepts which allegedly provide its very *foundation*, Rand has to rely on a form of justification for which her own epistemological theory can give no account (and indeed has deliberately disavowed, if Leonard Peikoff’s dismissive remarks on “intellectual intuition” [*IOE*, p. 107] are taken to be representative of Objectivist epistemology.)

The pattern here is a fairly common one in empiricist epistemology; it has long been a commonplace of rationalist philosophy that denials of the *a priori* are ordinarily offered on *a priori* grounds, and that “empirical” accounts of knowledge, if they are to preserve the possibility of knowledge at all, must implicitly rely on *a priori* justification in some way. (Laurence Bonjour’s *In Defense of Pure Reason*, quoted

above, contains much excellent discussion of this point, as does Brand Blanshard's *Reason and Analysis*.)

"A man's protestations of loyalty to reason," Rand solemnly informs us, "are meaningless as such: 'reason' is not an axiomatic, but a complex and derivative concept" [*IOE*, p. 61]. We are no doubt expected to gather from this remark that Rand herself is a (if not "the sole") genuine defender of reason. But if we apply Rand's standard to Rand herself, then her repeated claims to represent reason should not be taken at face value but subjected to the severest scrutiny. As we have seen, it is not at all clear that what she defends as "reason" is really worthy of the name. On the contrary, she cannot mount her own epistemological arguments without departing in the process from the very account of "reason" she professes herself to be defending.

In fact it is time we questioned her claim to represent even *logic*, which she defines as the "art of non-contradictory identification". In order for logic—even in this highly limited sense—to play any role in her epistemology, we must surely be able to recognize contradictions. But we are not told by which of our senses we "observe" that two proposed truths are in conflict.

Unfortunately for Objectivism, recognizing contradictions is not a matter of sensory perception. Therefore Rand, who wishes to base all knowledge on sensory perception, is not entitled to build even the ability to recognize contradictions into her epistemology.

Of course any rationalist will agree with Rand that there are no contradictions in reality—but how do we know this? Is the law of contradiction known through sensory perception? Does Rand's epistemology entitle her to claim to know that there are no contradictions in reality?

On the contrary, does not our grasp of this law amount to what Rand would have called "mystical apprehension" if she did not require it for her own epistemological case?

Rand—who dismisses, as "mysticism," claims that essences can be intuited and that necessities can be apprehended—seems to have no difficulty relying on such "mystical" insights herself whenever they suit

her arguments. She has no trouble claiming to know, for example, that a certain class of concepts is “implicit in all knowledge”; she escapes her own charge of “mysticism” merely by using the words “perceive” and “observe” instead of “intuit” or “grasp” or “apprehend”.

Rand seems to be playing the same game here that she played with “measurements” in her theory of “measurement-omission”: since it is only too obvious that in most cases we have no actual measurements to omit, they must be “implicit”. This claim, we have seen, is merely an attempt to disguise as “epistemology” the entirely ontological claim that there are *real* measurements sitting out there waiting for us to discover them. (Except, that is, when there aren’t and we call the process “measurement-omission” anyway.)

Similarly, Rand acknowledges that these “axiomatic concepts” are not actually in our explicit possession until fairly late in the game. But watch carefully: “Existence, identity, and consciousness are concepts in that they require identification in conceptual form. Their peculiarity lies in the fact *that they are perceived or experienced directly, but grasped conceptually*” [IOE, p. 55; emphasis hers].

And we pause before continuing this quotation in order to note that Rand has again perpetrated one of her most common confusions. Reread those two sentences carefully; she has just told us that we *perceive the concepts* existence, identity, and consciousness. (And does she really mean that existence, identity, and consciousness must themselves be concepts simply because we must use concepts to identify them? Whether she means it or not, that is what she has just said.)

She continues: “They [does she mean our concepts or their real referents?] are implicit in every state of awareness, from the first sensation to the first percept to the sum of all concepts. After the first discriminated sensation (or percept), man’s subsequent knowledge adds nothing to the basic facts [ah! she does mean the real referents of the concepts] designated by the terms ‘existence,’ ‘identity,’ and ‘consciousness’—these facts are contained in any single state of awareness [but wait; the referents of these axiomatic concepts are ‘contained’ in

awareness?]; but what is added is the epistemological need to identify them consciously and self-consciously" [*IOE*, pp. 55–56].

Is Rand referring to the *facts* of existence, identity and consciousness? Or is she referring to our *concepts* of them? Or both?

Is she trying to smuggle *categories of being* into her philosophy under the label "epistemology"?

It would appear that she is doing precisely that—and, indeed, arriving at these categories of being by way of uncovering the absolute presuppositions of experience by means of *a priori* "observation". Another example: "[Y]ou are the precondition of the concept of 'consciousness'," she reportedly says to "Prof. D" at a "workshop". "In every state of consciousness that you experience, part of it is the fact of the person who experiences. And in that sense you are implicit in every state of your consciousness" [*IOE*, pp. 254–255].

And she has already informed "Prof. D" that the concept of "self" is not "something abstracted from a content of consciousness"; on the contrary, "[t]he notion of 'self' is an axiomatic concept; it's implicit in the concept of 'consciousness'; it can't be separated from it" [*IOE*, p. 252]. This remark occurs during a discussion of Descartes and "innate ideas," in which Rand summarizes her own view as follows: "[B]efore your conscious apparatus, the faculty of consciousness, is aware of something, it is not conscious, and certainly there is no 'I.' But when you become aware, implicit in your first sensation are certain axiomatic concepts. And they are what? That you exist, that the outside world exists, and that you are conscious. The baby could not conceptualize this, but it's implicit; without that implication he couldn't be aware of anything" [*IOE*, p. 253]. (And we note again that Rand seems to have made consciousness and self impossible. "I" do not exist prior to my first sensation, but my having of that sensation presupposes that I do exist.)

But the same consideration surely applies not only to the human infant, but to animals as well. So if the sheer fact of awareness involves

“implicit” axiomatic concepts, do not animal minds also have “concepts”?

As we know, it is hard to get a straight answer from Rand on this point. In the present context, she remarks as follows: “The whole difference between a human type of consciousness and an animal is exactly this. The ability to be self-conscious and to identify the fact of one’s own consciousness, one’s ‘I’” [*IOE*, pp. 255–256]. But this seems to mean that the difference between a human and an animal mind is only in the level of explicitness with which each mind has “brought out” the “concepts” that are already implicit in its states of awareness. (It also, of course, fails to differentiate between the animal and the human baby, as the latter is also incapable—by Rand’s own admission—of bringing these implicit concepts to explicitness.)

At any rate, what we want to notice here is that Rand is indeed discussing absolute presuppositions of experience—and, it appears, identifying certain basic categories of being with the concepts that are supposed to refer to them. For note carefully that in one passage Rand says that one’s existence is “implicit in every state of [one’s] consciousness”—and in another, identifies the *fact* that one exists with the “concept” of existence, claiming that this “concept” is “implicit” in the experience even of sentient beings who are unable to “conceptualize”.

Cf. the following:

[A] transcendental concept *need* not be defined, because we are all possessed of it so far as we think at all; nor *can* it be defined, because, being necessary to all thought, it is necessarily presupposed in its own definition and the definition thus becomes circular. Let anyone try to define the transcendentals I quoted from Spinoza (*ens, res, unum*) and he will see not only that it cannot be done but that the reason why it cannot be done is not that he is ignorant of their meaning but that he recognizes their meaning to be of a kind which makes definition impossible. [R.G. Collingwood, “The Idea of a Philosophy of Something, And, In Particular, a Philosophy of History,” in *The Idea of History*, revised edition, Jan Van Der Dussen, ed., pp. 357–358; emphases Collingwood’s.]

The reader will already have noticed, not only the similarity between Rand's general approach and Collingwood's, but also the detailed similarity between Spinoza's "transcendentals" (cf. *Ethics* Part II, Prop. 40, Scholium 1) and Rand's "axiomatic concepts". (Indeed, the further we travel into Objectivism's implicit presumptions, the more it looks like a sort of degenerate Spinozism.) Rand even agrees that one cannot actually define "existence" (although—empiricist that she is!—she seems to think one can do the next best thing by sweeping one's arms about and saying, "I mean *this*" [IOE, p. 41; emphasis hers]).

One cannot, Rand says, "analyze (or 'prove') existence as such, or consciousness as such. These are irreducible primaries" [IOE, p. 55]. But Rand appears to be telling us that the *concept* of "existence" cannot be analyzed because *real existence* (existence "as such") is an "irreducible primary"—not just "conceptually," but in reality. This reading gains support from Rand's remark that an axiomatic concept is the "identification of a primary fact of reality," such a fact being "fundamentally given and directly perceived or experienced" [IOE, p. 55].

If so, we must renew several objections at this point.

First of all, Rand is not entitled to hold that there is any such "irreducible primary" as either existence "as such" or consciousness "as such". These are abstractions, which she at once identifies with their individual referents. Existence and identity are not attributes of existents, she says; they simply *are* the existents. Consciousness is not an "attribute" of a state of awareness, it simply *is* "that state" [IOE, p. 56].

But in the case of "consciousness," at least, Rand fudges this identification by switching to a singular noun. Existence, recall, is identified (for now) with "existents," but consciousness is identified with *a* state of awareness. Why is "state" singular? Is my own consciousness literally the same state as your consciousness? Should Rand not say here that "consciousness" is identical with *states* of awareness?

She does not do so. Against her own explicit policies, she has smuggled back into the discussion the very sort of "abstract attribute" she

has tried to do away with altogether. Earlier, it was “length”. Now—and much more seriously—it is “consciousness” (which she acknowledges to be an “attribute”; see *IOE*, p. 56).

Second, we must continue to question her use of “perception” as a bin into which all inconvenient problems are to be thrown. Note her remark that fundamental facts of reality are “directly perceived or experienced”. Does she mean to identify perception with experience? Or does she add “experienced” to allow for the possibility of nonperceptual experience? Our overall understanding of Rand favors the former reading, but it is also possible that she is just fudging again.

Third, and in the present context finally, we must again note that this process of sorting out absolute presuppositions of experience is one in which Rand is not entitled to engage. We have already noted that this process depends on the possibility of at least modest *a priori* justification (not necessarily *infallible* justification, which is a bogey of Rand’s).

Note carefully that we are *not* objecting to the process of extracting absolute presuppositions via *a priori* insight. In fact I personally think this is exactly the right thing to do. The point is that Rand is not entitled to do it; her explicit epistemology does not allow for this sort of thing.

An epistemology that *does* allow for that sort of thing will have to include an account of *a priori* knowledge and of the ability to grasp relations of necessity. (These are not precisely the same thing, although, as we have occasionally mentioned, Leonard Peikoff conflates them in “The Analytic-Synthetic Dichotomy”.) And once again, it is classical idealism that has generally placed the greatest emphasis on these matters.

“STOLEN CONCEPTS” AND THE ABSOLUTE PRESUPPOSITIONS OF THOUGHT

What Rand wants to do here was done first—and better—by Bradley, Bosanquet, and Blanshard, among others. We shall not be describing their approaches in detail here, but just to get the issues clear, consider the following remark from Phillip Ferreira:

We may, on Bosanquet’s view, justifiably see as necessary and universal (and, in this sense, *a priori*) any judgment whose denial would upset or preclude the basis upon which it is made. Put differently, since all assertions assume the existence of what we may call a *minimal systematic universe*, any judgment that denies this minimal universe must be seen as necessarily false and the principle it denies as necessarily true. [“Bosanquet, Idealism, and the Justification of Induction,” delivered at Oxford University’s conference on “Bernard Bosanquet and the Legacy of Idealism,” 31 August–2 September 1999; p. 11; emphasis Ferreira’s.]

I have singled this sentence out because it is both a fine summary of a constant theme in Bosanquet’s thought and a succinct statement of the issues Rand ignores. For Bosanquet, the process of inference is of the form, “This, or nothing” (as he puts it in *Implication and Linear Inference*); he holds that we make the inference by recognizing that the whole of our experience would be undermined by the denial of the judgment to which our inference leads.

The pattern of argumentation here will be familiar to anyone who is familiar with what Rand and Nathaniel Branden call the “stolen concept” fallacy. Here is an example of Rand’s use of the pattern:

“We know that we know nothing,” they chatter, blanking out the fact that they are claiming knowledge—“There are no absolutes,” they chatter, blanking out the fact that they are uttering an absolute—“You cannot *prove* that you exist or that you’re conscious,” they chatter, blanking out the fact that *proof* presupposes existence,

consciousness and a complex chain of knowledge: the existence of something to know, of a consciousness able to know it, and of a knowledge that has learned to distinguish between such concepts as the proved and the unproved....

When [someone] declares that an axiom is a matter of arbitrary choice and he doesn't choose to accept the axiom that he exists, he blanks out on the fact that he has accepted it by uttering that sentence, that the only way to reject it is to shut one's mouth, expound no theories and die. [ATLAS SHRUGGED, p. 956; emphases Rand's.]

"The fallacy," Nathaniel Branden says, "consists of the act of using a concept while ignoring, contradicting or denying the validity of the concepts on which it logically and genetically depends" ["The Stolen Concept," *The Objectivist Newsletter*, January 1963, p. 2].

Of course we already know that when Objectivists write about "concepts," they really mean to say something about the nature of existence; and when Allan Gotthelf makes the argument, "concepts" are nowhere in sight:

The facts that axioms state are...self-evident in perception.... [The statement] that *nothing exists*...is *self-refuting*. In order for such a statement to be made, the statement's speaker must exist, its content must exist, and some sort of world must exist to give meaning to that content.... What is perceptually self-evident and absolutely undeniable is that *something exists*. [*On Ayn Rand*, p. 37; emphases his].

As a statement of the practical contradiction involved in a positive claim that "nothing exists," this is well put. However, I have read *On Ayn Rand* from cover to cover and failed to find any positive account of either *a priori* knowledge or the rational apprehension of necessity. Nor have I turned up any such positive accounts in any of Rand's own writings, or anywhere else in the literature devoted to Objectivist epistemology. All I have found is a handful of remarks offering a "deflationary" account of the *nature* of necessity; we discussed those in

the previous chapter and found them wanting. It would appear—ironically enough—that this form of argument is, for Objectivism, a “stolen concept” itself.

Like Rand, we have said, Bosanquet bases this sort of inference on the recognition that the whole of our experience would be undermined by the denial of the judgment to which our inference leads; and like Rand, he wants to use this recognition in order to ferret out the “axioms” on which all knowledge is based. (And like at least the later Rand as interpreted by Gotthelf [*On Ayn Rand*, p. 43. n. 17], he does not regard these “axioms” as first principles from which the world is to be deduced—which is one reason he prefers to call them “postulates”. The postulates at which he arrives in *Logic, or the Morphology of Knowledge* [vol. II, pp. 206–214] will be familiar enough: they are the laws of identity, contradiction, the excluded middle, and sufficient reason, of the last of which he regards the law of causation as a “sub-form”.)

But unlike Rand, Bosanquet is well aware that this recognition involves a kind of *a priori* insight into a relation of necessity. (And unlike Gotthelf, he does not rely on an unexamined belief in “self-evidence”. Cf. Blanshard, *The Nature of Thought*, vol. II, pp. 237–258, where Blanshard argues that “self-evidence” is actually coherence in disguise: even the law of contradiction, he argues, rests on Bosanquet’s this-or-nothing principle of inference. The law of contradiction is not, strictly speaking, *self-evident* if we refer, for its support, to the whole of our experience; we believe it because we can see that if we denied it, we could believe nothing whatsoever.)

And Bosanquet is unlike Rand in another respect as well: he does not presume that our *grasp* of axiomatic truths is perfect just as it now stands. As Ferreira continues: “[W]e should also understand that our apprehension of [the formal] postulates [of knowledge] in any finite act of judgment is, according to [Bosanquet], always ‘flawed’ or ‘impure.’...[W]e are forced to say that every such *a priori* principle points beyond itself to its concrete manifestations” [*op. cit.*].

In other, less precise words: what we take to be axioms may require some adjustment and fine-tuning in order to capture concrete reality. In our examination of Objectivism we have seen several examples of axioms which require such adjustment, and we shall see another one fairly soon when we consider Rand's defense of the "primacy of existence" in opposition to the "primacy of consciousness".

What we must note here is that Bosanquet's approach gives a better account than Rand's of the fact—acknowledged by Objectivism—that what is "self-evident" need not be self-evident (or equally self-evident) to everyone. We are *not* here denying that anything is axiomatic; we are saying that Rand and her followers have not gone far enough in critically examining what they *take* to be axiomatic. (Bosanquet's understanding even of the laws of identity and contradiction is not exactly the same as Objectivism's.) Since axioms are not literally "self-evident" but rather presupposed and entailed by the whole of our experience, it is entirely possible for our fallible *a priori* insight to provide us a genuine, but still flawed, understanding of an absolute presupposition; our ostensible axiom may not be true *just as it stands* even though it is, so to speak, in the ballpark.

On this approach, then, we can do what Rand cannot: acknowledge that even our axioms may stand at least slightly in need of correction. And this acknowledgement also gives us a foundation from which to criticize Rand's own axioms without either renouncing the search for axioms as such or declaring that Rand is just flat-out wrong in the axioms she selects. We are free to admit that she is really "on to something" and just fails to carry it through very self-critically.

For Rand is not very self-critical here; if she were, she would not have offered us an epistemology that relies on "self-evidence" and yet also rejects *a priori* knowledge. Once again she seems to have had hold of a kernel of truth but to have resisted it out of some other motivation.

MORE FEAR OF RELIGION

And once again, there is a strong presumption that Rand's motivation is anti-theistic. Here is Gordon H. Clark, in his essay "God and Logic" (reprinted in John W. Robbins's *Without a Prayer: Ayn Rand and the Close of Her System*, pp. 277–289; also at <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/reviews/journal.asp?ID=015a.html>):

The Christian view is that God created Adam as a rational mind. The structure of Adam's mind was the same as God's. God thinks that asserting the consequent is a fallacy; and Adam's mind was formed on the principles of identity and contradiction. This Christian view of God, man, and language does not fit into any empirical philosophy. It is rather a type of *a priori* rationalism.

Man's mind is not initially a blank. It is structured. In fact, an unstructured blank is no mind at all. Nor could any such sheet of white paper extract any universal law of logic from finite experience. No universal and necessary proposition can be deduced from sensory observation. Universality and necessity can only be *a priori*. [p. 288.]

I am not endorsing Clark's view that his statements apply solely to Christianity, of course. But his remarks illustrate, in a nutshell, why Rand is so eager to deny *a priori* knowledge, reduce all knowledge to sensory perception, and insist that we are born with *tabula rasa* minds even though these aims are at odds with her actual practice in arguing for them. As Clark remarks in "The Cosmological Argument" [<http://www.trinityfoundation.org/reviews/journal.asp?ID=006a.html>]:

Thomas Aquinas rejected the Platonic cast of Augustine's theology and based his thought on Aristotle. Therefore he had no time for the ontological argument, but reconstructed the cosmological argument. To refer again to the question of knowledge, the difference between these two arguments is basically a difference in epistemology: For Augustine it was not necessary to start with sensory experience, for one could go directly from the soul to God; but Aquinas

wrote, ‘The human intellect...is at first like a clean tablet on which nothing is written’ (*Summa Theologica* I, Q:97, 2). It is sensation that writes on the *tabula rasa*. The mind has no form of its own. All its contents come from sensation.

It is significant in this context that Aquinas was virtually the only philosopher other than Aristotle with whom Rand was willing to claim any sort of kinship. She describes him as the “bridge between Aristotle and the Renaissance, spanning the infamous detour of the Dark and Middle Ages” (*The Romantic Manifesto*, p. vii; one wonders, by the way, what she would have made of Moses Maimonides).

We are taking no great liberties if we infer that it is Aquinas’s view of reason, as expressed in the foregoing citation, that Rand finds so laudable. And as Clark indicates, the doctrine of the *tabula rasa* mind is entirely at odds with the view that the human mind is in any literal sense the Divine image. What Rand is in fact rejecting is the Augustinian (and “Dark Ages”) notion that the soul has any direct kinship with God.

We shall return to this point soon enough. But first, we must deal with Rand’s repeated failure to distinguish clearly between a concept and its referents. Before we continue our discussion of what Rand regards as “axiomatic,” we shall try to determine what she means by the term “concept”.

For we have been writing so far as though Rand has something definite and meaningful in mind when she writes about “concepts”. It is high time we question that assumption and consider whether she means anything coherent at all by this term.

WHAT DOES RAND MEAN BY “CONCEPT”?

“A concept,” she writes, “is a mental integration of two or more units which are isolated according to a specific characteristic(s) and united by

a specific definition” [IOE, p. 10]. There are several problems here that we shall have to unpack.

What, exactly, is a “unit”? As we have already seen, a “unit” is just a real existent *qua* a member of a kind (or, as she puts it on p. 6 of IOE, “an existent *regarded as* [my emphasis] a separate member of a group of two or more similar members”). Then a “concept,” on Rand’s definition, is apparently a “mental integration” of two or more existents.

So Rand’s formulation clearly will not do. Do I somehow merge a physical car and truck to form a “vehicle”? Do I even merge such objects “mentally,” whatever that might mean? If not, then just what are we “integrating” to form our concept?

Rand does attempt to answer this question, as we shall see in a moment. Unfortunately, as we shall also see, her answer is not much help. What she seems to have implicitly in mind here is some sort of merging of mental representations, images, or ideas. She presumably wants to say that we recognize two (or more) entities’ possession of a common feature (perhaps in differing quantities), bracket them in our minds as therefore belonging to the same kind, and then choose and define (or learn) a word which refers to this kind. We have already discussed her unclearness as to whether such kinds are “real”. And in order to avoid committing herself unambiguously to their reality, she makes us *arrive* at “kinds” by performing various mental operations on the contents of our experience.

The result of this “integration” is, at any rate, an unambiguously mental entity, she says—but the process somehow manages to start, at least sometimes, from what Rand undoubtedly believes to be nonmental existents. For after the definition we have already quoted, Rand continues as follows:

The units involved [in the integration] may be any aspect of reality: entities, attributes, actions, qualities, relationships, etc.; they may be perceptual concretes or other, earlier-formed concepts. The act of isolation involved is a process of *abstraction*: i.e., a selective mental focus that *takes out* or separates a certain aspect of reality from

all others (e.g. isolates a certain aspect from the entities possessing it, or a certain action from the entities performing it, etc.) The uniting involved is not a mere sum, but an *integration*, i.e., a blending of the units into a *single*, new *mental* entity which is used thereafter as a single unit of thought. [IOE, p. 10; all emphases Rand's.]

Does this elaboration answer our questions? Unfortunately not, and it raises even more.

First of all, Rand is again conflating two very different sorts of “abstraction”. On the one hand, she writes of mental “isolation,” as though she merely means that we think of some features of “reality” apart from their relations to other features.

On the other hand, we have already seen that this sort of “abstraction” is quite insufficient for her purposes. She needs for us to be able to perform a further feat of “abstraction,” e.g. extracting a common attribute “length” from two specific lengths which are admitted to differ and which therefore, on her own account, have no common attribute. If no such common attribute is “really” present in the two different lengths, no amount of sheer mental “isolation” will conjure it up, and Rand still needs to explain how we arrive at it. If, however, such an attribute is really “there,” Rand’s account of “concept-formation” is not needed in order to generate it.

So Rand leaves us with the following unanswered question: if abstractions do not exist “in reality,” as she contends, how do we arrive at such “abstractions” by acts of sheer mental “isolation”? Since this is the very question her monograph is intended to address, she might well have troubled to be clear on this point.

Moreover, we are left altogether unenlightened as to the nature of the “integration” we perform. We are told, indeed, that it is not a “mere sum,” but I do not see that “blending” is any more helpful a description. Just how are two entities, attributes, actions, qualities, or relationships “blended” to form a new, and mental, “entity”? What sort of “blending” could it be that produces a mental entity from a combination of such presumably nonmental existents? Again, Rand would

have done well to spell this out more precisely. (Instead, as we saw long ago, she relies on a single example—a child forming the concept of “length”—and fails to meet her own conditions even though the example appears to have been tailor-made to support her account of “measurement-omission”.)

And she does think “mental entities” are generated *ex nihilo* through the process of concept-formation:

[W]e can call them [i.e., concepts] “mental entities” only metaphorically or for convenience. It [i.e., a concept] is a “something”. For instance, before you have a certain concept, that particular something doesn’t exist in your mind. When you have formed the concept of “concept,” that is a mental something; it isn’t a nothing.... Actually, “mental something” is the nearest to an exact definition. Because “entity” does imply a physical thing. [IOE, p. 157.]

So our second unanswered question is: how does Rand think we generate (nonphysical) “mental somethings” out of *nonmental* somethings by an act of “blending”? In general, has Rand been able to maintain a firm distinction between “mental” and “nonmental” reality at all?

(For that matter, why is any “blending” at all required? Why do we not simply recognize *that* two “existents” stand in certain relations to one another and to a “kind” to which they both belong? If the “kind” is already real, then there is no need for us to spin it spider-fashion out of our own vitals; we need only to recognize its existence. Rand, of course, will have none of this; our apprehension of such “kinds,” she supposes, could only be mystical. But it is hard to see how it could be any more “mystical” than her own non-account of “blending”.)

Third, it is not at all clear how anything specific could result from this “blending”—at least on Rand’s own terms. In her world, everything is specific and concrete, and the result of “blending” is ordinarily anything but. For if we try to think of a “color” which is no specific color, or a “shape” which is no specific shape, what do we get? Brand

Blanshard, who makes a like attempt in both *The Nature of Thought* and *Reason and Analysis*, cannot see that anything results from this effort but a mental blur.

But Rand describes this apparent blur as the outcome of an act of (selective) mental *focus*. Now this is curious, since—if there is nothing in “reality” (or in our perceptual experience) that is thus unspecific—we should be able to arrive at such unspecificity only by *unfocus-ing*. If, on the other hand, the resulting blur is in some cases no blur at all, then it would seem that abstractions *do* exist in “reality”—for, on Rand’s view, we arrive at them by focusing on various features of our perceptual experience.

Our third unanswered question, then, is very nearly the contrapositive of our first: if Rand thinks we arrive at concepts by an act of mental focus, why does she deny that abstractions exist in reality?

There are a number of other questions we could address here as well. For example, Rand vacillates mightily on whether a concept exists prior to its being assigned a “word”. On p. 11 of *IOE* she tells us that “[w]ords transform concepts into (mental) entities” (which, indeed, the unwary might have thought they were already). Yet on the *very same page*, she describes a child’s concept-formation as occurring “wordlessly”—the child having, “as yet, no knowledge of words”. Perhaps the child’s concepts are therefore something other than “mental entities”? If so, then what?

She vacillates similarly on whether a concept requires a “definition” in order to exist. Nor is it clear what business she has speaking of “mental entities” in the first place—as she herself acknowledges. (“[E]ntity’ does imply a physical thing” [*IOE*, p. 157].)

But we shall not pursue those matters here. For now we shall merely note that Rand’s unanswered questions tell us something very important: that she does not mean anything coherent by “concept” at all.

For what our questions indicate is a fundamental problem, to which we have called attention several times in other contexts: Rand repeatedly shifts back and forth between the contents of her own mind and

the contents of “objective reality” without ever noticing the difference. Existents—entities, attributes, and so forth—are “out there” in the “external world”—but when it is time to “integrate” them into a “concept,” they suddenly and conveniently migrate into our minds, where we may perform mental operations on them. There are no abstractions in “reality”—but once we have formed an “abstraction” by an act of “mental focus,” its real referent is unproblematic: the “abstraction” slips out with no fuss into the “external world” to take its place as a real existent, as abstract “length” is transformed into a literally “common” attribute by the sheer fact that Rand claims to perceive it. Rand is, in short, no more self-critical of her “concepts” than she is of her “axioms”.

What is really ironic here is that Rand intends this hodgepodge to *replace* the allegedly “subjective” features of idealism (and its so-called “primacy of consciousness premise,” on which more later). Rather than recognize that there is an irreducibly “mental” (at least “mind-attuned”) aspect to objective reality itself, that our ideas are contiguous with their objects but must develop in order to become adequate to those objects, and that the success of human cognition is measured in some way against the ideal knowledge of an “ideal mind” (a theistic idealist would say “God’s”), she has introduced an unbridgeable chasm between mind and reality—and proceeded to hop back and forth across the chasm without any awareness of the transition.

And the irony is that the result of her allegedly “objective” approach is such a pure example of subjectivism. According to Josiah Royce, the ontology of objective idealism is needed in order to account for even the possibility of cognitive error. (The error is an error, Royce argues, only with respect to a more complete thought which we should have had instead. And this higher thought cannot exist as a potential only—a point with which Rand should have agreed, as she likewise rejected the existence of the merely “potential”. Royce first offered this argument in *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*, pp. 384–435.) Blanshard is similarly concerned lest a too-uncritical identification of

thought with its object render us unable to provide any theoretical account of error. The real trick, according to both Royce and Blanshard, is to distinguish the idea from its object without tearing them completely asunder—to make error possible without simultaneously rendering truth impossible.

In rejecting their approach and in effect relying, while she theorizes, on the implicit presumption that what she has in her own mind just *is* the object of her thought, immediately apprehended exactly as it is in nature, Rand unwittingly confirms Royce's and Blanshard's worst suspicions by throwing out the very possibility of such error—at least on her own part. Her opponents are consigned to damnation on the nether side of the false dichotomy; *they* are just out of cognitive contact with “reality” altogether, and willfully so.

(We saw earlier that Rand's account of “contextual knowledge” amounts to an evasion of the problem of error. The practical effect of this doctrine in the Objectivist movement seems to have been to secure the twin convictions that Rand's “conceptual identifications” were correct, having been determined by unbiased attention to the “facts of reality,” and that those who disagreed with her had formed “anti-concepts” through deliberately evading those same “facts”.)

Let us see what sense we can make out of all this. We saw earlier that Rand wants to reduce propositional knowledge to a matter of concept-formation. But we noted at the time that before *IOE* is out, she undoes her plan altogether: “Every concept stands for a number of propositions. A concept identifying perceptual concretes stands for some implicit propositions...” [*IOE*, p. 48]. We noted that here Rand acknowledges in spite of herself that a concept, on her view, is an elision of certain propositions and that for her, the sheer possession of a concept somehow amounts to propositional knowledge of some kind.

And we soon find her admitting it again, at least by implication. “The pattern is as follows: when a child grasps the concept ‘man,’ the knowledge represented by that concept consists of perceptual data.... The implicit principle guiding this process is, ‘I know *that* there exists

such an entity as man...” [IOE, p. 66; emphasis added]. So she really does seem to mean that the possession of the concept “man” is actually propositional knowledge, i.e., knowledge *that* “such an entity as man” exists.

And now, of course, it is even less clear what she takes a “concept” to be. She originally set out to tell us that it is a mental integration of “units”. Now it is apparently a mental integration of propositions—or at least it “stands for” such propositions, whatever that means.

But there is more. We have also already seen that she takes a concept to be unchanging. As she remarks: “From a savage’s knowledge of man...to the present level...the *concept* ‘man’ has not changed: it refers to the same kind of entities. What has changed and grown is knowledge of these entities. The definitions of concepts may change with the changes in the designation of essential characteristics, and conceptual classifications may occur with the growth of knowledge, but these changes are made possible by and do not alter the fact that a concept subsumes *all* the characteristics of its referents, including the yet-to-be-discovered” [IOE, p. 66; emphases Rand’s].

So it seems that the concept “man” has not changed in several millennia—because it still refers to the same *kind* of entities. (And we note in passing that Rand has again relied on the real existence of a “kind”.) And it seems to do this referring quite independently of our knowledge; once a single person becomes aware that this “kind” of entity exists, the concept winks into existence and just *refers* to each and every one of the entities, past, present, and future. Indeed, it refers to all the characteristics of these entities, whether they are known or not—and is not altered by new knowledge, for the ostensible reason that its *real referents* have not changed.

In fact, if we take her phrasing as it stands, the concept would seem to refer to, and indeed be, the “kind” itself. If so, then concepts are now (a) mental integrations of units (which are in turn entities regarded as members of kinds); (b) stand-ins for collections of propositions; and (c) objectively existing “kinds”. (Curiously, the “concept”

somehow both includes *and* omits the particular measurements of the individual members of each “kind”.) And according to none of these meanings do concepts themselves change when we acquire new knowledge.

Now this is an exceedingly odd view of “concepts”. We have of course had occasion to call attention to some of its difficulties already. But we have now seen enough to confirm our longstanding suspicion that Rand is, in some obscure manner, identifying “concepts” with their referents.

Indeed, her notion of “implicit concepts” seems to mean nothing else. For she has already confirmed for us that the concept “existent” is “the building-block of man’s knowledge” [*IOE*, p. 6]. And yet this alleged “concept” is not explicitly grasped until the “conceptual stage” [*ibid.*].

Oddly, however, it is “implicit in every percept (to perceive a thing is to perceive that it exists)” [*IOE*, pp. 5–6]. (Note also that she has just identified perception as a form of propositional knowledge: we perceive *that* something exists.)

To make matters worse, we are even told that this “implicit concept” is present even in *sensation*—“if and to the extent that consciousness is able to discriminate on that level” [*IOE*, p. 6]. (Note that this makes even sensation propositional in its way: “[a] sensation does not tell man *what* exists, but only *that* it exists” [*ibid.*; emphasizes Rand’s].)

Now all of this means that Rand has undone her theory before it even begins. For we already know she will go on to tell us that concepts are not “mental entities” until they are made so by words—and yet all this talk of “implicit concepts” surely applies to the prelinguistic stage of consciousness. Indeed, we seem to have here another indictment of Rand’s theory of the *tabula rasa* mind; surely, in order for these “implicit concepts” to be present from the very beginning of consciousness, even in discriminated sensation, we must suppose at least a predisposition to “pick out” certain features of experience as “entities”.

And I describe “entities” as “features of experience” quite intentionally. For what seems ultimately to be going on here is that Rand has unwittingly adopted a peculiarly uncritical variant of idealism.

STILL MORE IMPLICIT IDEALISM

She has not, mind you, fallen into the very least critical version of idealism; her rejection (or so we believe it to be) of “naïve realism” is also the rejection of subjective idealism, i.e., the more or less Berkeleian view that sensory qualities simply *constitute* the objects of experience. We have reason to think Rand does not believe any such thing, and she as much as says so in a passage from *For The New Intellectual* which we quoted some time ago.

However, she adopts an extremely naïve and (in effect) idealistic view of the relations that are either discovered or supplied by reason. We have seen repeatedly that she tries, over and over again, to fold those relations into the “perceptual level” while ignoring the work that reason must do in apprehending and/or reconstructing them. The upshot of this approach is that she effectively assumes that the grasping of such relations is the work of (axiomatically “valid”) sensory perception—and therefore that such relations are really “out there” in the “external world,” *just as they appear in her own mind*.

We have already seen her simply assume that “entities, attributes, actions, qualities, relationships, etc.” are unproblematically available to the mind, even susceptible to mental isolation and manipulation. She has therefore already assumed that all of these features of “external reality” just are the sorts of thing that can be “in” a mind. And now we have seen her treat “existent” (including “entity”) as an “implicit concept” present even in purely sensory experience—i.e., as what seems unambiguously to be simultaneously both a category of being and an absolute presupposition of experience. (Of course she adopts this view by relying on *a priori* insight, but we need not return to that point here.)

We have no quarrel with her implicit acceptance of the fact that the (or at least “some”) features of “external” objects just *are* the sorts of thing that can be “in” minds. Although this assumption is very much at odds with her explicit epistemology, still every “empiricist” epistemology that does not end in wholesale skepticism will be found to have worked such an assumption in somewhere. But there are grave difficulties with her apparent inability to subject her “perceptual level” to reflective criticism.

For her account would have been a bit less problematic if she had not insisted (however inconsistently) that our “concepts” were frozen solid as soon as they are formed. Had she allowed them to change and develop, she might have been able to follow Royce and the early Blanshard in holding that an “idea” is an inchoate or undeveloped form of its object. (Blanshard later made important modifications to this view which we shall discuss briefly later.) She might then have been able to give some plausible account of the fact that our present ideas or conceptions are not necessarily final, that not only our “knowledge” but our *understanding* can grow and develop.

But what she has in fact done is to sidestep the entire question of “development” as regards any particular concept. In effect she has made concepts spring into being fully formed and fully identical with their objects whether we know it or not. Quite independently of our knowledge at any given time, a concept “subsumes” all of its referents together with all their characteristics—not in the sense that those objects represent the concept’s ideal fulfillment, but apparently in the sense that the concept simply already *is* its referents.

Even the apparent exception—her treatment on *IOE* p. 6 of the concept “existent,” already discussed—is part of this overall pattern. The distinction between “entity” and “unit,” she wishes to argue, is just a matter of how we *regard* the object in question. The exception, that is, is to Rand’s rule that concepts do not change or develop, but not to her identification of concepts with their referents. She has merely reintroduced a couple of previously forbidden “abstract

attributes” to serve as the referents of her axiomatic concepts “existence” and “consciousness,” and identified the concepts with those referents rather than with the existents they are said to subsume.

(And even at that she seems to have gotten things backwards. If our axiomatic concepts really do represent categories of being and absolute presuppositions of all experience, then surely they should be the ones that do *not* change or develop. Such development really should characterize our concepts of “existents” of which our knowledge is partial and subject to correction.)

Now, of course Rand would vigorously deny that she has simply identified a concept with its referents. And we shall admit freely that it is not what she *means* to do. But she has done it all the same—and could not have gotten her epistemology off the ground had she not done so.

Rand is in the position C.S. Lewis describes in *Surprised By Joy*: “[W]e accepted as rock-bottom reality the universe revealed by the senses. But at the same time we continued to make for certain phenomena of consciousness all the claims that really went with a theistic or idealistic view.... Unless I were to accept an unbelievable alternative, I must admit that mind was no late-come epiphenomenon; that the whole universe was, in the last resort, mental; that our logic was participation in a cosmic Logos” [*Surprised By Joy*, pp. 208–209; also quoted in Michael B. Yang, *Reconsidering Ayn Rand*, pp. 193, 197–198]. By the way, the third chapter of Lewis’s *Miracles*—“The Cardinal Difficulty with Naturalism,” pp. 20–35—contains a serviceable version of the argument that reason, the *logos*, must transcend physical nature.

(Incidentally, Rand would not appreciate my quoting Lewis against her. Her ill-tempered marginal notes in Lewis’s *The Abolition of Man* indicate that she believes him to be, for example, an “abysmal bastard,” a “cheap, awful, miserable, touchy, social-metaphysical mediocrity,” an “old fool,” an “incredible, medieval monstrosity,” a “lousy bastard,” a “cheap, drivelling non-entity,” a “God-damn, beaten mystic,” and an

“abysmal caricature who postures as a ‘gentleman and scholar’” [*Ayn Rand’s Marginalia*, pp. 90–94]. Remarkably, at one point she accuses *him* of arguing “Ad hominem!” [*ibid.*, p. 92; the exclamation point is hers].)

Rand thinks she has found a way around Lewis’s “unbelievable alternative,” a way to retain all the usual claims about reason and logic, mind and thought, without also accepting theism or idealism. Fundamentally though perhaps unintentionally, she seems to be a materialist: “Matter is indestructible, it changes its forms, but it cannot cease to exist” [ATLAS SHRUGGED, p. 931]. (It is important to remember here that the traditional foil of idealism is not “realism” but “materialism”. It is hard for us today to realize how recently belief in the fundamental reality of “matter” came to intellectual ascendancy, and indeed how typical it is of political ideologies like Marx’s and Lenin’s. But a philosopher as recent as J.M.E. McTaggart was able to conclude, in *Some Dogmas of Religion*, that there was really no good reason to believe in the existence of “matter” at all—a view that, incidentally, some recent writers on modern physics have come to share on other grounds. We shall not be arguing the point here; at any rate, without careful analysis of the meaning of “matter,” it is hard—and arguably pointless anyway—to differentiate between the proposition “Matter does not exist” and the proposition “What we call ‘matter’ exists but is really, or is reducible to, something else, e.g. mind.”)

As we shall soon see, she inherits all the epistemological difficulties of materialism. But she thinks she has avoided those difficulties by treating the “phenomena of consciousness” (or at least those she wishes to retain) as occurring at the level of *perception*—and then never getting around to analyzing perception itself. (*IOE* is touted on p. 1 as a “preview” of Rand’s “future book on Objectivism,” which she never got around to writing.)

Indeed, what we are seeing here is the result of this convenient policy of sweeping the problem of “sensation” and “perception” under the rug: this policy is what has enabled her to slip back and forth between

the “content of consciousness” and the “external world” without any awareness of the passage. That is how she manages to get her “conceptual level” (and even her “perceptual level”) started in the first place: by in effect assuming that certain “concepts” are in fact identical with real features of the real world. Her implicit idealism, in addition to being less than self-critical, is also, for her, a “stolen concept”.

And that fact raises further difficulties for her epistemology, even beyond those we have already canvassed. In particular it poses tremendous problems as regards her adoption of the “correspondence theory” of truth and her denial of what she calls the “primacy of consciousness” premise. To those we shall now turn.

Chapter 10: *The Correspondence Theory of* *Truth*

You must attach clear, specific meanings to words. [Ayn Rand, “Philosophical Detection,” in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 16.]

RAND’S THEORY OF TRUTH

What exactly is Rand’s theory of truth?

Unfortunately this question, like so many others about Rand’s precise views, is hard to answer satisfactorily. Some of Rand’s defenders sometimes say this is because her views are so groundbreakingly new that they simply do not fit into existing categories; some say that her answers are unsatisfying to “academic” philosophers merely because these ivory-tower folk are engaged in a different task from hers.

I do not find these claims persuasive, and in the present case they are belied by the fact that Rand does use a perfectly standard term to describe her theory of truth. She weighs in as an advocate of the “correspondence theory”.

Now, admittedly, she does not go into a great deal of detail. Her sole comment in *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology* is this: “Truth is the product of the recognition (i.e., identification) of the facts of reality” [*IOE*, p. 48]. In “Philosophical Detection” she repeats this remark in a shortened and not quite equivalent form—“Truth is the recognition of reality” (thereby reverting to the form she had used in Galt’s speech on p. 935 of *ATLAS SHRUGGED*)—and adds paren-

thetically, “This is known as the correspondence theory of truth” [*Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 14]. This is not much material from which to reconstruct her theory of truth.

Nor are we much helped by Leonard Peikoff’s essay, “The Analytic-Synthetic Dichotomy,” in which Peikoff simply adopts Rand’s definition of “truth” without discussing it further. (“Truth is the identification of a fact of reality” [*IOE*, p. 111].) Nor, perhaps more surprisingly, does David Kelley provide a fuller account of “truth” in *The Evidence of the Senses*. For elaboration we must wait for Peikoff’s *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*. And even here we do not find much.

What we do find is a short paragraph reading as follows:

The concept of “truth” identifies a type of relationship between a proposition and the facts of reality. “Truth,” in Ayn Rand’s definition, is ‘the recognition of reality.’”...

And here we must interrupt. At this point in the text, Peikoff inserts a footnote in which he cites *ATLAS SHRUGGED* and refers to p. 48 of *IOE* as a “see also”. This is somewhat odd; the two definitions are not precisely equivalent, and one would have thought the fuller definition in *IOE* was primary—especially since the fuller one is consistent with a “correspondence theory” of truth, whereas the shorter one arguably is not. (Is truth a *product* of the “recognition of reality”, or is it the recognition itself?)

But let Peikoff continue:

...In essence, this is the traditional correspondence theory of truth: there is a reality independent of man, and there are certain conceptual products, propositions, formulated by human consciousness. When one of these products corresponds to reality, when it constitutes a recognition of fact, then it is true. Conversely, when the mental content does not thus correspond, when it constitutes not a

recognition of reality but a contradiction of it, then it is false.
[OPAR, p. 165.]

We note in passing that Peikoff appears to have abandoned Rand's misguided quest for a nonpropositional form of truth; for him, truth is a relation strictly between *propositions* and reality, as he says no fewer than two times in this single paragraph. This concession is significant (and we shall refer to it again shortly), but Peikoff does not seem to be aware that he has simply given up one of Rand's primary challenges to existing epistemologies.

He continues:

A relationship between conceptual content and reality is a relationship between man's consciousness and reality. There can be no "correspondence" or "recognition" without the mind that corresponds or recognizes. If a wind blows the sand on a desert island into configurations spelling out "A is A," this does not make the wind a superior metaphysician. The wind did not achieve any conformity to reality; it did not produce any truth, but merely shapes in the sand. [OPAR, p. 165.]

Here he is exactly right. Ultimately, it is only judgments which may be true or false; judgments take place in minds; where there is no mind, there is no possibility of truth or falsity.

What is not clear is whether either his formulation or Rand's is really a "correspondence" theory.

CORRESPONDENCE OR NOT?

To begin with, we must note that Rand, like nearly everyone else, sometimes uses the word "truth" interchangeably with "fact(s)". Indeed, shortly after the statement we have already quoted, she makes John Galt remark as follows: "Rationality is the recognition of the fact

that existence exists, that nothing can alter the *truth*" [ATLAS SHRUGGED, p. 936; emphasis mine].

Just a single page before this, Rand has made Galt define "truth" as the recognition of reality—which means (if later paraphrases adequately express her meaning) the recognition of the facts of reality. Yet in the passage we have just quoted, the recognition of a certain "fact" is called, not "truth," but "rationality"—while "truth" is identified with the "fact" itself. (I am assuming that she is treating "fact" as more or less a synonym for "real state of affairs," apparently in blissful unawareness of the philosophical controversies that have surrounded the ontological status of "facts"—or "propositions," for that matter.)

So at various times, and even very close together in the same context—indeed, in a context in which she was at least trying to write with the utmost precision—she uses the word "truth" to mean *both* a real state of affairs *and* the recognition of that state of affairs by a mind. From anyone else this might be either a verbal glitch or a use of the word in a derivative sense. From Rand, I am not so sure; we have seen her identify the contents of the mind with external reality far too often to write this fresh example off hastily.

However, cf. the following: "The metaphysically given cannot be true or false, it simply *is*—and man determines the truth or falsehood of his judgments by whether they correspond to or contradict the facts of reality" ["The Metaphysical Versus the Man-Made," in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 27; emphasis hers]. Here Rand is careful to distinguish the real state of affairs from the judgment, and to deny that the "metaphysically given" can be *true*. So perhaps we should not take her remarks in ATLAS SHRUGGED as indicative of anything much.

Indeed we should probably take them merely as symptomatic of a general carelessness about details—especially in view of the paucity of analysis, on Rand's part, of what corresponds to what, and of what the correspondence relation consists. The difficulties of spelling out such an account are legion. But neither Rand nor Peikoff evinces any awareness of the criticisms that have historically been levelled against the var-

ious correspondence theories (nor even any awareness that there is more than one such theory).

There is, first of all, the question of what does the corresponding. For Peikoff and, we suppose, for Rand, it is the “proposition” which in some way corresponds to “reality”. We shall understand a “proposition” to be, roughly, the asserted content of a possible judgment (without worrying here about its ontological status, though this is a much more vexed question that either Rand or Peikoff seems to know). I think we are safe in taking Rand and Peikoff to agree with this understanding, especially given Peikoff’s elaboration as quoted above.

And on this view, we may lodge the standard objection to a “correspondence” theory: if we have no direct access to “reality” itself, then we can never know that there is anything to which our propositions might “correspond,” whereas if we *do* have direct access to “reality,” it is not clear why we are worried about “correspondence” in the first place.

As we have seen, Rand is constantly assuming that we do have such access quite unproblematically (as e.g. in her definition of “knowledge” as the apparently unmediated mental grasp of a fact [*IOE*, p. 35]). It is therefore unclear on what basis she (or Peikoff writing more or less on her behalf) distinguishes a (true) “proposition” from the “fact” (as she calls it) or state of affairs to which it is supposed to “correspond”. Such a “correspondence” theory seems to assume a representational or “copy” theory of knowledge and historically has been associated with such theories ever since at least Locke.

There is apparently one strain of Rand’s epistemological thought that is not committed to representationalism. David Kelley remarks on some of the problems with representationalism in the fourth chapter of *The Evidence of the Senses*, and it seems clear that he does not want to commit Objectivism to representationalism. (Indeed, his discussion goes so far beyond anything Rand ever says on the subject that we will not be discussing it here, where our concern is only with Rand herself.)

Still, Rand's account of concept-formation via "blending" seems to be founded on some sort of representational theory even if some other portions of her epistemology are nonrepresentationalist. As we have noted, it makes little sense to suppose that we "blend" the actual objects of our experience to generate a "concept"; presumably what Rand wants us to "blend" are mental images or copies.

But it is incoherent to suppose that this is how "mental entities" are produced in the first place. Surely Rand is not expecting us to "blend" physical objects; the items we "blend" must be mental entities to begin with. Yet Rand also writes as though a "mental entity" is strictly the *outcome* of such "blending," thereby apparently presuming that the actual attributes of "external" objects are directly grasped by the mind—and since, on her view, those attributes are not themselves "mental," she has an irreconcilable difficulty here.

Moreover, and more importantly in the present context, the difficulty seems to belie her claim to be offering a genuine correspondence theory. For if—as she constantly assumes in the *other* strain of her thought—we have a genuine bit of reality directly in our minds, what need do we have of "correspondence"? And it is the classical idealist view that what is "in" our minds is indeed reality itself, not some copy thereof distinct from and discontinuous with its object.

On this view, the "contents" of our minds may require a very great deal of development in order to become fully "real," but the one is nevertheless at least contiguous with the other. The reason idealists have traditionally been wary of "correspondence" theories is precisely that such theories seem to presume an irreparable breach between mind and reality and to imprison us within an "iron ring of ideas". Rand's aims admit of no such breach—and neither does her actual practice, as distinct from her stated epistemological principles. Her epistemology, then, does not and cannot tell us what it is that "corresponds".

There is, second, the question of what the correspondence relation really is. Does the proposition somehow have to "mirror" or "picture" the fact, i.e., be in some way congruent with it? Or does it merely have

to “correlate” with it somehow? Or is there—as we shall maintain—another possibility?

Peikoff may seem to be rejecting the “congruence” version in his remarks about the wind and the sand. And it is clear that he does not take mere structural isomorphism, wherever it may occur, as a *sufficient* condition of truth; I assume from his remarks that he would (quite properly) reject the view that, merely because one object closely resembles another, it therefore *means* the other. Meaning requires a mind.

However, it is also clear—as Peikoff rightly notes—that in his example, a wind that happens to make certain marks in the sand is not entertaining a proposition at all. It is less clear what Peikoff would say in the case of a proposition actually entertained by a mind. In such a case, would a structural isomorphism between thought and fact be necessary and/or sufficient to provide “truth”? If not, just what is the relation that is supposed to obtain here? Peikoff does not say. (The context—Peikoff’s discussion, which we have briefly examined elsewhere, of his claim that “arbitrary” statements are neither true nor false—might tempt us to conclude that he identifies “truth” with “validation”. But he doesn’t, quite.)

The question may seem either trivial or over-abstruse. It is not; it cuts straight to the heart of the issue, namely, the relation between thought and its object. And if, as it appears, Rand has never given any attention to the precise nature of this relation, there is little reason to take her at her word that she is actually defending a “correspondence” theory as this term is usually used.

ASSOCIATION WITH “EXTERNAL REALISM”

For, frankly, she seems to have adopted this term because of its connotations. As Peikoff summarizes it, the “correspondence theory of truth” is simply the view that there is some real state of affairs that the mind is seeking to know, and that “truth” is the successful outcome of that enterprise. However, this understanding fails thus far to distinguish

“correspondence” theories from, say, “coherence” or “deflationary” theories of truth. At most it is a version of what William Alston calls “alethic realism” [*A Realist Conception of Truth*], which may or may not be a “correspondence” theory (at least beyond the very most primitive sense of the word “correspondence”).

Nor does it distinguish one metaphysical outlook from another, as Rand and Peikoff seem to want it to do. What John Searle helpfully calls “external realism”—the view that there is “a reality independent of human representations” [*The Construction of Social Reality*, p. 149]—is in fact common to a wide range of metaphysical outlooks, including objective idealism. As Richard Kirkham notes in *Theories of Truth* (p. 134), J.M.E. McTaggart accepts a “correspondence” theory of truth; in fact, in *The Nature of Existence* he says that he finds this nuclear sense of “truth” to be irreducibly present on any understanding of the term. However, the “facts” to which true beliefs “correspond” are, for McTaggart, ideal objects or “spiritual substance,” surely not a view Rand would embrace. Searle himself notes that even should it turn out that “physical reality is causally dependent on consciousness,” this outcome would still be “consistent with external realism” [*The Construction of Social Reality*, p. 156]. In this sense of “realism,” as Blanshard remarks somewhere in *The Nature of Thought*, we are all of us realists.

Now, such external realism does seem to commit us to the further view that at least some “true statements correspond to facts” [*The Construction of Social Reality*, p. 150], and we may take it that there is a sort of nuclear, primitive sense of “correspondence” with which external realism comes equipped. However, it is not at all clear that this primitive sense of “correspondence to facts” is sufficient to account for *all* truth. We have already briefly alluded to the difficulties with hypotheticals and counterfactuals.

And we do not find either Rand or Peikoff devoting any attention whatsoever to the “hard cases” for correspondence theories. “Every truth about a given existent(s),” Peikoff declares roundly, “reduces, in

basic pattern, to: X is: one or more of the things which it is" [IOE, p. 100].

We have already criticized this declaration on other grounds. Here we add that this pattern is also not at all an obvious reduction of, say, the proposition, "If Dagny had allowed the bum to be thrown from the train, he would probably have died." This proposition seems unexceptionably true even though the bum was not thrown from the train—either in "fact" or even in the fictional world of *ATLAS SHRUGGED*. We shall look in vain, though, for any analysis from either Rand or Peikoff as to what, exactly, is the "fact" to which this counterfactual (and even "counterfactual") yet true proposition "corresponds". I am *not* saying that no such analysis is possible (though I do think its analysis requires the existence of real universals); I am simply saying that since neither Rand nor Peikoff bothers to consider such cases, there is no reason to believe they have thought carefully about what they mean by "correspondence".

DOES CORRESPONDENCE PRECLUDE COHERENCE?

Moreover, depending on one's theory of the idea, this primitive sense of "correspondence" may or may not rule out other "rival" theories of truth, a point we may illustrate with Blanshard himself. In *The Nature of Thought*, he conceives the relation between "idea" and "object" as one of potentiality to actuality. On this view, the idea would, if developed, quite literally be its object; the transcendent aim of thought is, as F.H. Bradley held, identification with its object. This view goes pretty naturally with a coherence theory of truth, and Blanshard does indeed defend such a theory in that work.

However, significantly, he does not entirely rule out "correspondence" as altogether meaningless but merely "ask[s] leave to define correspondence in our own way.... [T]he only sense of correspondence in

which it is essential to truth is the sense in which the partial fulfilment of an end corresponds to the complete fulfilment" [*The Nature of Thought*, vol. I, pp. 510–511].

Nor do his arguments in vol. II chapters 25 ("The Tests of Truth") and 26 ("Coherence as the Nature of Truth") amount to a complete rejection of correspondence. What Blanshard actually does with "correspondence" in these two chapters—though I think he might well have been clearer on this point—is to deny that correspondence is a *test* of truth, and then argue that it therefore cannot provide the *nature* of truth, *if and to the extent that it is understood strictly as an alternative to coherence*. He simply never returns to his remark that the relation between potentiality and actuality could be described as "correspondence" too.

Now, what is instructive here is the manner in which his theory of truth changes with his conception of the relation between idea and object. According to his mature views, a fully developed idea would not in every case become identical with its object after all, this doctrinal adjustment being due largely to his "doubt whether the entities of modern physical science could be reasonably described as mental" [*The Philosophy of Brand Blanshard*, p. 626]. And partly as a result, his later writings give a much greater place to "correspondence" in his account of truth.

The difference between his earlier and later views is probably best illustrated by an example of his own. In *The Nature of Thought* he raises a series of possible objections to his theory of the idea, of which this is one: "According to you, the idea, if fully realized would *be* its object. The impulse to know something reappears as the impulse to *be* it. But...[f]or example, I am at this moment thinking of the great pyramid, but I certainly do not want to be the great pyramid" [vol. I, p. 508; emphases Blanshard's].

Blanshard replies that we certainly do not wish to convert ourselves *in toto* into the object of our knowledge, but that is because we have other aims than the impulse to know the great pyramid. "To the extent

to which I know the great pyramid,” however, “it does enter into the content of my experience” [pp. 508–509]. I think this is correct.

Later, however, he writes: “Does it make sense to say that...the historian of the Great Pyramid is trying to maneuver that somewhat awkward object into his consciousness? No, I must agree that it does not.... The person who sets out to know the Great Pyramid thoroughly...[is seeking] the goal [of] total understanding, not bringing of the object literally within itself or vanishing into the object” [“Reply to Andrew J. Reck,” *The Philosophy of Brand Blanshard*, p. 570].

He concludes (see pp. 569–571, 590–594, and 622) that the relation between thought and its object might as well be called either “coherence” or “correspondence,” that neither term seems to be adequate or at any rate to have been adequately elaborated, and that the relation in question is *sui generis*: the “coherence” between thought and its ideal object is not the same relation as the “coherence” internal to thought itself.

In fact I think Blanshard could and should have made this concession even without departing from his earlier theory of the idea. Moreover, I suspect that in making this concession, Blanshard has not reread his earlier writings very carefully; in fact he has already implicitly conceded this point in *The Nature of Thought*.

(A highly relevant criticism of Blanshard’s early views—which, unfortunately, does not take account of their later development—can be found in William Alston’s *A Realist Conception of Truth*, pp. 87–99. Alston is concerned to show that his “minimal realism about truth” can be disputed only at the price of such a “metaphysical commitment” as Blanshard’s or Bradley’s—namely, “that the ‘reality’ to which thought refers is simply thought itself in its ideal completion” [p. 96]. I am arguing here that Alston’s minimal alethic realism survives even that commitment.

Moreover, Alston would disagree strongly with a good deal that I have said in this volume, and the interested reader should consult his work for counterarguments. See especially pp. 73–74 of the same work

for an argument that theism—which “holds that everything other than God depends for its existence on the divine mind”—nevertheless need not entail idealism, and that idealism is “anti-realist”. I disagree, of course, but I also do not think Alston is using these terms in exactly the senses in which we are using them here.)

I also think—though my major claims in this book do not depend on this point—that Blanshard has too quickly rejected his earlier theory of the relation between thought and its object. Let us grasp the nettle firmly: if the Great Pyramid consists ultimately of universals, and if those universals are literally present in our thoughts of them, then there is a legitimate sense in which the pyramid itself *would* be “within” our thought if we knew it fully. If this seems paradoxical, has not Blanshard himself told us [*The Nature of Thought*, pp. 647–651] that we must preserve the possibility of real identities even at the cost of our ordinary intuitions of space and time?

Rudy Rucker calls attention to an interesting possibility along these lines: the suggestion of Jorge Luis Borges, in “A New Refutation of Time,” that when we revive a former thought, there is a literal sense in which we return to the time when we last had that thought [*Geometry, Relativity, and the Fourth Dimension*, p. 62, citing “A New Refutation of Time” in Borges, *A Personal Anthology*]. This is not as wild as it sounds at first hearing, though all we need for present purposes is that our past and present thoughts may literally instantiate the same universal(s).

Moreover, there are ethical issues riding on the possibility that real universals may be instantiated in our thoughts of them. If one person may have literally the same thought or experience at two different times, what reason is there to deny that two different people could share a common thought or experience? Timothy L.S. Sprigge points out a pregnant suggestion of Josiah Royce (in *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* [pp. 133ff.] and unfortunately not pursued in any of Royce’s later works) that whenever we enter sympathetically into another’s desire, the desire itself is in some manner reproduced in our-

selves, so that it becomes our desire as well [*The Rational Foundations of Ethics*, pp. 120–21].

Along similar lines, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan remarks, “It is through intuitive understanding or sympathetic interpretation that we know other minds”—and then, in a footnote, quotes D.G. Ritchie [*Mind*, vol. xiii, p. 260; emphasis Ritchie’s]: “It may very well be held that a *complete* knowledge of anything in the whole infinity of its relations...would mean the making of that thing. If I knew another individual through and through, I should be that person” [*An Idealist View of Life*, p. 112].

(Interestingly and significantly, though in his early works Blanshard has emphasized the participation of all minds in a common rational order, in his later years he uses language suggesting that each of us is an island existence as far as consciousness is concerned. Such remarks probably explain why David Boucher and Andrew Vincent write that “Brand Blanchard [sic]...leaned more towards Personal Idealism” [*British Idealism and Political Theory*, p. 15]. I disagree with him here; I think he is unnecessarily drawing back from his earlier conclusions. At any rate, though, it is clear that the change is closely related to the change in his theory of the idea.)

It may be objected that these latter examples have to do with identities among thoughts, whereas Blanshard’s example of the Great Pyramid involves an alleged identity between a thought and a physical object. But it is not obvious to me that the entities of physical science are peculiarly resistant to description as “mental”; Blanshard seems to be implicitly following (the early) Berkeley rather than Green about what is to count as “mental”. At any rate I do not see that even if true, the claim that physical objects are nonmental undermines the view that thought seeks identification with its object, for this latter view need not depend on the claim that the objects of thought are themselves mental; they need only be “instantiatable” in thought. It may be, I suppose, that physical objects consist of universals which somehow resist instan-

tiation in our thoughts of them; but I am afraid I have missed Blanshard's argument to that effect.

The point could also be illustrated from Royce, who, as we have said, also maintains that the object of an idea is in some sense the ideal fulfillment or completion of that idea, regarded as something like a disposition. His argument is set out at length in *The World and the Individual*, especially pp. 320–342. His conclusion as regards ideas: “What is, or what is real, is as such the complete embodiment, in individual form and in final fulfilment, of the internal meaning of finite ideas” [p. 339; the original sentence is italicized]. Apropos of a “correspondence” theory, Royce elsewhere has this to say: “Is the truth of my thought to consist in its *agreement* with reality?...Then reflect. What can, after all, so well agree with an idea as another idea? If the more my mind grows in mental clearness, the nearer it gets to the nature of reality, then surely the reality that my mind thus resembles must be in itself mental” [*The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*, p. 361; emphasis his; cf. *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*, pp. 340–349, where Royce develops the hypothesis that the “external reality” corresponding to true thoughts consists of the thoughts of a single World-Consciousness].

Royce would therefore disagree with me that thought could perhaps seek identity with a nonmental object. For him, as he maintains in *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* (pp. 384–435), an erroneous thought fails not so much by falling short of its *object* (as we ordinarily conceive this) as by falling short of a *thought* which we ideally should have had instead (and which actually exists in an overarching Self in which we are included). In any event, he is clearly of the opinion that if we take truth to consist in the “correspondence” of thought with its object, we are also committed to regarding the object as an idea in a mind.

But whether or not Blanshard's earlier theory of the idea is superior to his later one, and whether or not Royce is right that the objects of thought must be not merely “instantiatable” in thought but actually mental themselves, our major contention here is that the primitive notion of “correspondence” admits of a wide range of interpretations

depending on one's metaphysics. It is just not the case that the "correspondence theory of truth," as presented by Rand and Peikoff, carries with it the ontological commitments that they seem to think it does. As we noted very early on, absolute or metaphysical idealism accepts the existence of a logically prior reality at which our thought aims; it may even accept "correspondence" as a characterization of the relation between true thought and its object; it simply insists that the nature of that reality is either mental itself or at least internally related to mind.

The key point to carry back from this little excursus is that the relation of "correspondence" is extremely hard to analyze. One and the same term may be applied to any of a range of theories of truth, including—importantly—the theory that an idea simply *is* the potentiality of its object. So long as we do not uncritically identify a thought with its object, we can refer to the relation between them as "correspondence" in some sense if we wish.

And Rand rules out a potentiality/actuality relation as the meaning of truth only by never bothering to raise the question. Recall Leonard Peikoff's remark: "Content is a measurable attribute [of thought], because it is ultimately some aspect of the external world. As such, it is measurable by the methods applicable to physical existents" [*OPAR*, p. 93]. So: if I am thinking of the Great Pyramid, then the content of my thought is several hundred feet tall because the content of my thought is the Great Pyramid and the Great Pyramid is several hundred feet tall. Rand and Peikoff are susceptible to Blanshard's criticism from the opposite direction: it would be hard to ask for a better example of Objectivism's uncritical *identification* of idea with object.

RAND'S INCONSISTENT "EXTERNAL REALISM"

At any rate Rand is not, in the end, able to stick to her view that "reality" is "external" in the fullest sense. On the contrary, we have found her constantly writing as though the actual, real features of "external reality" can be got within the mind itself and subjected to various sorts

of purely mental manipulation—at least in concepts, and if in concepts then surely in propositions too. This view makes a good deal of sense if it is accompanied by the view that reality ultimately is “mental” or “mindlike” in some way. It makes a good deal less sense if this latter view is denied—and as we shall soon see, Rand does deny it.

On the alternative view that existence is different from and prior to “mind” or “consciousness,” if Rand’s epistemology depends implicitly on the possibility of getting portions of reality literally within our minds—and we have seen that at all crucial points it does thus depend—then her entire epistemology collapses. For it requires her to distinguish firmly between thought and its entirely nonmental object, and then to turn around and identify the two after all.

And so Rand can give us no coherent answer to our question about what the correspondence relation consists of. She has not even tried to analyze the relation of “correspondence,” and if our criticisms are cogent, she cannot do so consistently with her ontological commitments.

Now we shall have to deal directly with what may be her most fundamental ontological commitment. And it is a substantial one.

Rand is fairly militant in her efforts to throw “cosmology” out of philosophy and in her criticism of philosophers who “project[] their epistemologies into their metaphysics”; she herself wishes to claim that “philosophy is primarily epistemology” and that “‘Existence exists’ (or identity plus causality) is all there is to metaphysics” [*Journals of Ayn Rand*, pp. 698–699].

But by this time it should come as no surprise to learn that, although she claims to be doing “epistemology” primarily or exclusively, she has actually been doing quite a bit of implicit metaphysics all along. We have seen her repeatedly try to give epistemological answers to irreducibly metaphysical questions, and in every case we have found that she is relying on a good deal of unacknowledged ontology. In most of these cases we have found that ontology to be incoherent.

In the following chapter, by way of tying together the many threads we have followed so far in this volume, we shall look at what appears to be Rand's most basic ontological commitment: her belief in the "primacy of existence" as opposed to the "primacy of consciousness". We shall see that it goes a good deal beyond "existence exists". We shall also see that it is her aversion to "religion," and particularly to theism, which keeps her from acknowledging the real premises on which her epistemology is operating, even though—as we have repeatedly seen—they are so often directly at odds with her supposedly minimalist ontology.

What we have shown is that, in Rand's thought, two strains are at work: an "empiricist" strain which constitutes her explicit philosophy (and which she uses to criticize the thought of everyone else), and an unanalyzed, unacknowledged "idealist"/quasi-Spinozist strain which constitutes her actual practice in developing that explicit philosophy (and which she uses to protect her own thought from criticism). The result of this unsteady combination is that Rand conceives herself to have shown something which, if true, would indeed be crucially important: that all the nice features of reason, logic, and mind can be retained on a foundation of metaphysical anti-idealism, anti-theism, empiricism, naturalism, and materialism.

But it is not true. We have seen Rand repeatedly debase the concept of reason in order to make it fit onto her foundations, and we have seen her repeatedly rely on it anyway even against her own express principles. Even those who disagree with my own objective-idealist outlook must acknowledge that Rand's epistemology simply cannot do what she says it can.

Now we must deal directly with the root of the problem.

Chapter 11: *The “Primacy of Existence” vs.* *the “Primacy of Consciousness”*

[The concept “God”] is not a concept. It is an isolation of actual characteristics of man combined with the projection of impossible, irrational characteristics which do not arise from reality. [Ayn Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, p. 148.]

THE RATIONALITY OF THEISM

Rand is adamant that Objectivism entails atheism, and for some Objectivists atheism is one of the central attractions of her philosophical outlook. Moreover, we have already seen reason to believe, and I shall argue later in this chapter, that something similar is true of Rand herself—that atheism, far from being a minor side effect of Objectivism (as she and Nathaniel Branden occasionally claim), is in fact its main driving force. Indeed, at every point at which Rand faces a philosophical choice between a more reasonable position that seems to entail or suggest theism and a less reasonable position that seems to avoid it, she almost invariably chooses the latter.

I am not, mind you, suggesting that atheists are automatically irrational! In fact I am unable to tell much of anything about someone from the fact that s/he does or does not claim to “believe in God”. (I do not think that *atheism* is in the final analysis “rational,” but I know a good many *atheists* who are quite rational—in some cases more so than theists. Besides, I do not deny that there are *any* good reasons or arguments in favor of atheism.) My claim about Rand is not that she is

somehow evil or corrupt because of her atheism; in fact Blanshard, whom I greatly admire, was at least an agnostic, and Royce, whom I also admire, was hardly a traditional theist. My claim is that her commitment to atheism has seriously affected and undermined her philosophical judgment.

Before we address this point directly, I hope in the initial part of this chapter to remove what seems to me to be the major obstacle to theistic belief for the modern reader and in particular for readers of Rand. The argument is not long, but I believe it cuts straight to the heart of the problem.

My claims are that without the right sort of relation between thought and object, knowledge would be impossible; that this fact commits us to some form of metaphysical idealism as the only alternative to absolute skepticism; and that theism, properly understood, is one such form, whereas Objectivism is not. I do not, of course, thereby prove that "classical theism" is true; there may, for all I say here, be other versions of theism or even non-theistic idealism that provide reliable metaphysical foundations for epistemology. But I think I shall have at least defended theistic belief against the specifically Objectivist version of the charge that it is inherently irrational.

First we need to get clear something that Rand does not: the problem of knowledge itself. Blanshard once remarked as follows: "[U]nless one sees that there is a genuine paradox of knowledge of the kind Lovejoy insisted on, 'the mystery of the presence of the absent,' the paradox of ideas that go beyond themselves to lay hold of external fact, I do not think the problem of knowledge has been clearly seen" ["Reply to Richard Rorty," *The Philosophy of Brand Blanshard*, p. 771]. (The quoted remark is from Owen Lovejoy's *The Revolt Against Dualism*.)

Blanshard's own theory of the idea, which we have already discussed and to which we shall return again in what follows, is at bottom an attempt to overcome the "paradox" thus described, namely, that an "idea" would appear both to be and not to be in some way identical with its object. Lovejoy's work is a classic rebuttal of the naively nondualistic

claim that idea and object are simply identical; on the other hand, if we simply sever ideas from their objects, it becomes difficult to see how knowledge could ever be possible at all. So Blanshard's *The Nature of Thought* sets out a theory of the idea which, like that of Royce, regards the idea as the *potentiality* of its object, roughly in the way that an acorn is the potentiality of an oak.

(Two short notes: (1) As I have mentioned earlier, Blanshard found in his later years that he had to modify this theory of the idea, but I disagree with him that this modification was necessary. (2) Blanshard mentions in *The Nature of Thought* that he was not able, at the time of his writing, to take account of Lovejoy's monumental work: Blanshard was writing in England at the time and could not secure a copy of *The Revolt Against Dualism*. But in later life Blanshard spoke highly of that volume and, as in the passage we quoted above, regarded his own theory of the idea as an attempt to meet the sort of objection Lovejoy was raising.)

Now, I have argued at great length in this volume that Rand does *not* clearly see the "problem of knowledge," and that she therefore constantly writes as though the objects of thought could simply slip in and out of the mind with neither difficulty nor any need for her acknowledgement. In effect she simply and perhaps unwittingly presumes, in good idealistic fashion, that there is just no problem about getting "external reality" within the mind as an object of thought, but militantly refuses to draw any metaphysical conclusions about what that "external reality" must therefore be like. We shall not repeat her errors in what follows.

How, then, could it be possible for "external" objects to become objects of thought? My own view has been stated in earlier chapters: I maintain, with Blanshard, that all that exists is composed of "universals" (i.e., qualities and relations that can, in principle, recur in more than one context) and that such universals are literally instantiated in our thoughts of them. I do not work this view out fully, and I shall not do so here; nor do I claim that this view is necessarily the only one that

will suffice. I make only the more modest claim that the question must be dealt with and that this view, unlike Rand’s, does attempt to deal with it.

But the heart of the matter is that however we conceive “external reality,” we must understand it in such a way that at least part of it can be successfully got “within the mind” and thereby known. The alternatives are, at first blush, two: to understand knowledge in such a way that its object need not be literally present to thought; and to make knowledge impossible. I also claim that, on a deeper look, the former alternative is seen to collapse into the latter: if the object of thought is not in *any* sense literally present to thought, it is hard to see how the relation between thought and object could be called “knowledge” at all.

Is *all* of reality such that it could in principle be successfully got “within the mind” in this way? I think it is, but I shall not present a complete argument to this effect. However, consider the alternative, which is that there is some part of reality which cannot, in any sense, be instantiated in or present to thought. If so, then how is it that we seem to be referring to it right now?

I mean this as a pregnant question, not as an argument. Yet (as I am of course hardly the first to notice) there does seem to be *some* sense in which all of reality can at least be successfully made the object of mental reference. In that case we shall find ourselves committed to at least a minimal form of idealism: in particular, if reality consists, at bottom, of the sort of stuff that can be got within a mind, then reality is itself “mental” in some minimal sense yet to be explicated. We must therefore say a few more words about “idealism,” as this word has suffered a great deal of misuse and abuse (and not only from Rand).

“One often sees,” writes A.C. Grayling in *An Introduction to Philosophical Logic*, “an opposition posed between realism and idealism, as if the labels marked competitors for the same terrain.... [T]his is a mistake, and a serious one. It is surprisingly common” [p. 312].

“Realism,” as Grayling employs the term, is an epistemological thesis, and so, therefore, is “anti-realism”. But “[i]dealism is a metaphysical thesis (a family of such theses) about the nature of reality; it states that the universe is mental. Its chief historical opponent is materialism, the thesis that the universe is material (is made of matter—a view that should, strictly, not be confused with physicalism, which claims that the universe consists of what can be described by physics...)” [p. 310].

Grayling has gotten this just right. And—to anticipate our argument a bit—I hope it is clear that classical theism is “idealistic” in this sense, i.e., it maintains that reality consists fundamentally of a single absolute mind and, less fundamentally, of the objects created by that mind’s activity. In particular, on the traditional theistic view which bases itself on the opening chapters of the biblical book of Genesis, God is (to put it roughly) what there would still be even if there weren’t anything else; everything else is the creation of God’s own creative thought-speech and depends on God’s activity for its very existence.

(I am of course not, at this stage, presenting an argument for this view but merely noting that it *is* a form of idealism. One of my favorite books on philosophical theology—Hugo Meynell’s *The Intelligible Universe*, quoted already in our discussion of Rand’s view of reason—falls into difficulty on just this point: Meynell does not think the acceptance of theism entails any commitment to idealism. In my view this is because he falls into the error against which Grayling is warning us; what Meynell really means is that theism does not commit us either to anti-realism or to “subjective idealism”. Likewise, as I mentioned in the preceding chapter, I think William Alston rejects too easily the claim that theism entails idealism. But pursuing this point would take us rather far afield.)

We shall return shortly to Grayling’s exposition, but we must take a detour through the topic of what are traditionally called “internal relations”. As we shall see, Grayling’s brief discussion of realism and anti-realism will require us to open this can of worms, and I shall try to deal

with this vexed issue as painlessly as possible. The reader should bear in mind throughout the following discussion that what we are ultimately interested in is the relation between thought and object.

The doctrine of internal relations was, historically, a fairly central plank of idealist thought, especially as exemplified by the British philosophers (e.g. Green, Bradley, Bosanquet) somewhat misleadingly identified as "neo-Hegelian". The idea of an "internal relation" has suffered from much misunderstanding and, as A.C. Ewing remarked somewhere, would probably have been better served if philosophers had spoken of the "relevance" of relations rather than their "internality".

A relation between, say, A and B is said to be "internal" to A (and/or to B) if, in the absence of the relation, A (and/or B) must be other than it is. Now, the doctrine of internal relations has been variously stated, but we shall not worry here about those variations. What the doctrine claims, to put it baldly, is that, in some sense, everything is internally related to everything else: apart from its relations to everything else, nothing would be precisely what it is. (It is a corollary of this view that no *relation* is fully "external," i.e., completely irrelevant to the terms it relates: in the absence of that relation, the objects it relates would have to be at least ever so slightly other than they are.)

The doctrine does not, of course, maintain that all relations are equally significant or that even the most minor change in one term of a relation makes a significant change in the other term; probably most such relations and most such changes are as insignificant as could be imagined. All the doctrine requires is that none of them is *altogether* irrelevant in the most complete metaphysical sense. To at least some degree, however slight, everything matters to everything else; reality is a single coherent whole, not a ragtag of logically independent "atomic facts" *à la* the logical atomism of the early Wittgenstein.

The reader will find excellent discussions of this topic in Blanshard, especially *The Nature of Thought*, V. II, pp. 476ff. But one simple, if highly abstract, consideration in its favor is due to Hegel: that any two

things must differ, or they would not be two; that the relation of difference is internal, for in its absence two things could not differ and therefore at least one of them would have to be other than it is; and that therefore everything is internally related to everything else by at least the relation of difference.

It is hard to see why this simple point should be so bothersome, but for some reason, many otherwise clear-thinking people seem to object to it. By way of a short illustration, we borrow an example from David Gordon at the Ludwig von Mises Institute, who objects to internal relations in his review (“All in the Family?”, *The Mises Review*, Fall 1997) of Chris Matthew Sciabarra’s *Marx, Hayek and Utopia* [http://www.mises.org/misesreview_detail.asp?control=14&sortorder=authorlast].

Gordon writes as follows:

According to [the doctrine of] internal relations, everything is essentially related to everything else. Put in a slightly stricter way, all of a thing’s properties and relations are essential to it....

Applied to human society, for example, proponents of this view maintain that you would not exist without your relations to other people and institutions. It is not just that you are strongly affected by what goes on around you: no one questions this. Rather, you would not exist at all, absent these relations.

Let’s try again, in order to grasp just how radical the doctrine is. Consider this sentence: “If I had grown up in Japan, many of my beliefs would differ from what are in fact my actual beliefs.” A proponent of internal relations will dismiss the antecedent of this statement as meaningless. I grew up in America, and my having done so is one of my essential properties. Thus there is no “I” who might have grown up elsewhere.

This view strikes me as radically at odds with common sense. Further, if one accepts it, science, which deals constantly with hypotheticals, goes by the board.

These are more or less standard objections to the doctrine of internal relations, and they are based on more or less standard misunder-

standings of it. In the first place, the doctrine does not maintain that all of a thing’s properties and relations are *equally* “essential” to it; in Blanshard’s hands and in others, “essentiality” is itself a matter of degree. In the second place, it is false that a proponent of the doctrine would dismiss the sentence, “If I had grown up in Japan...” as meaningless; strictly speaking, all that follows from the doctrine is that an “I” that had grown up in Japan wouldn’t be *me*, which doesn’t seem at all counterintuitive to me. (There is also, of course, the possibility that there is, in the final analysis, only one “I”!) In the third place, it does not require us to dispense with hypotheticals and there is no obvious reason why it should. All it requires us to do is to recognize that most of our hypotheticals have to do with abstractions that are in some manner and to some degree affected by their removal from their context.

Our detour is almost over. We have had to take it in order to get clear both *what* an internal relation is supposed to be and *that* such relations obtain between any two existents of any kind or degree of reality. The reason is that we are about to discuss the internality of the relation between thought and object.

As I indicated earlier, we shall be taking our cues from Grayling, so let us return to the passage from *An Introduction to Philosophical Logic*.

Grayling characterizes realism in the following manner (I have added some commentary in square brackets):

Realism is the view that the relation between thought and its objects is contingent or external, in the sense that description of neither relatum essentially involves reference to the other.... [Grayling has already argued] that this commitment is incoherent. A more direct way of showing this is offered by the idiom of relations. A moment’s reflection shows that the claim in question—the claim that the relations between thought and its objects are external—is a mistake at least for the direction object-to-thought, for any account of the content of thoughts about things, and in particular the individuation of thoughts about things [i.e., the manner in which thoughts of one object are differentiated from thoughts of other objects], essentially involves reference to the things thought

about—this is the force of the least that can be said in favour of notions of broad content. [In other words, we distinguish thoughts on the basis of what they are thoughts *about*. Therefore the objects of thoughts are not external to those thoughts.] So realism offers us a peculiarly hybrid relation: external in the direction thought-to-things [i.e., thoughts are external to their objects], internal in the direction things-to-thought [i.e., things are internal to thoughts about them]. [p. 311.]

Now, beyond the claim (made earlier) that there simply *are no* fully “external” relations, I can suggest at least two further powerful reasons for thinking that the relation between thought and object is not external in the other direction either. One is that the object of thought must be *such as* to be “thinkable”. Thus, if (as we have suggested) everything which exists can, in principle, be present to and instantiated in thought, then to say that something is “real” *is* to make essential (though not necessarily explicit) reference to thought.

The other is that even on the most strongly “materialist” or “physicalist” view (I emphasize with Grayling that these are not the same), it still seems to be the case that the “material” or “physical” universe gives rise, in a causal manner, to the existence of mind. If the cause-and-effect relation is also a logical relation, so that causes logically entail their effects and (arguably) vice versa, then the material or physical universe does logically entail the existence of thoughts “about” it.

So it appears that we cannot strictly conceive of *any* “external” reality that is so completely independent of thought as to be related to it externally even in one direction. Thought is not “external” to its object if (a) that object is such as to be “thinkable” and therefore composed of the sort of stuff that can be instantiated in our thoughts, *or* if (b) the cause-and-effect relation between “matter” and “mind” involves logical entailment, so that “mind” was a causal potentiality always logically, and thus eternally, present within “matter”. Either of these points suffices to establish that “external” reality is not logically independent of mind in any meaningful sense.

(Readers who remain unconvinced are invited to try the following thought experiment. Imagine a universe entirely devoid of mind, and then try to conceive how mind could ever emerge from “matter” if it is not already “there” in any sense. This simple consideration is also one of the most powerful motives behind the related philosophical doctrine of panpsychism.)

And yet this view does not seem to be a version of “anti-realism”. For we certainly do mean to hold that the object of thought often, even ordinarily, exists in some way logically prior to the thought itself; we are not maintaining that human thought, at least, has the power to conjure “external” reality out of its own vitals. When our thought grasps an object, we really do seem to be laying hold of a reality that exists to a great degree independently of our thought; all we are concerned to deny is that this object is so completely independent of mind that its “thinkability” is not part of its very essence.

What we seem to be committed to, then, is something like the following. We may attenuate the role of mind as thoroughly as we please, so long as it does not vanish altogether; we may likewise try to consider thought as such, independently of any object, to as great a degree as we like. What we may not do is actually pass, in either direction, to the limit and conclude that there is a reality entirely independent of thought or a thought entirely independent of its object(s).

In that case, we cannot remove “intentionality” from reality and expect to have anything left over. Reality itself consists, as idealists have long held (and my exposition of this point is hardly new), of thought-and-object in essential, indivisible relation.

I do not propose to argue here that this view leads necessarily to a particular version of classical theism, although I think that it does lead to panentheism at least by way of an “inference to the best explanation”. (I also think there is a great deal more to be said about what we may legitimately infer about reality from the nature of reason itself, and about just where and how the argument I am sketching differs from “cosmological” arguments like Meynell’s. The short version is

that what we are doing is uncovering the absolute presuppositions of rational thought, in the manner described in chapter 9.) My primary purpose here is to spell out just where the Objectivist critique of theism goes wrong and remove the alleged Randian obstacle to belief in God.

And we shall see in the remainder of this chapter that the Objectivist argument goes wrong at a most fundamental level. Rand's argument against theism is based on what she calls the "primacy of existence"—a principle which, she tells us, is opposed to the "primacy of consciousness". Rand's claim is that, because consciousness is always consciousness *of* something, it must be the case that existence precedes consciousness and that there is an "external" reality altogether independent of consciousness.

This argument fails at several points; for example, even if it were otherwise correct, it would not show that "external" reality was independent of *all* consciousness merely because it was independent of *human* consciousness. But its most fundamental problem is that the two "primacies" are not genuinely in opposition: Rand has begun by asserting a false dichotomy.

For Rand has done exactly what we cautioned against a few paragraphs ago: she has tried to separate what are merely distinguishable, namely, thought and object. That the object of a thought is different from the thought itself is not evidence that the object is unrelated to thought in any essential way. Rand's dictum that "existence precedes consciousness" confuses logical priority with logical independence.

According to what we shall argue here, then, Rand buys atheism at the cost of epistemology. Far from "proving" that theistic belief is irrational, her claims about the "primacy of existence" merely sever the connection that must exist between thought and "external" reality in order for rational knowledge to be possible in the first place.

But let us first get clear just what Rand has to say on this subject.

RAND’S FUNDAMENTAL DICHOTOMY

Rand deals briefly with the “primacy of existence” and “primacy of consciousness” premises in *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*. But her fullest discussion is found in her essay, “The Metaphysical Versus the Man-Made,” originally published in the *Ayn Rand Letter* in 1973 and reproduced in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*. She writes:

[T]he basic metaphysical issue that lies at the root of any system of philosophy [is]: *the primacy of existence or the primacy of consciousness*.

The primacy of existence (of reality) is the axiom that existence exists, i.e., that the universe exists independent of consciousness (of *any* consciousness), that things are what they are, that they possess a specific nature, an *identity*. The epistemological corollary is the axiom that consciousness is the faculty of perceiving that which exists—and that man gains knowledge of reality by looking outward. The rejection of these axioms represents a reversal: the primacy of consciousness—the notion that the universe has no independent existence, that it is the product of a consciousness (either human or divine or both). The epistemological corollary is the notion that man gains knowledge of reality by looking inward (either at his own consciousness or at the revelations it receives from another, superior consciousness).

The source of this reversal is the inability or unwillingness fully to grasp the difference between one’s inner state and the outer world, i.e., between the perceiver and the perceived (thus blending consciousness and existence into one indeterminate package-deal). This crucial distinction is not given to man automatically; it has to be learned. It is implicit in any awareness, but it has to be grasped conceptually and held as an absolute. As far as can be observed, infants and savages do not grasp it (they may, perhaps, have some rudimentary glimmer of it). Very few men ever choose to grasp it and fully to accept it. The majority keep swinging from side to side, implicitly recognizing the primacy of existence in some cases and denying it in others, adopting a kind of hit-or-miss, rule-of-thumb epistemological agnosticism, through ignorance and/or by

intention—the result of which is the shrinking of their intellectual range, i.e., of their capacity to deal with abstractions. And although few people today believe that the singing of mystic incantations will bring rain, most people still regard as valid an argument such as: “If there is no God, who created the universe?”

To grasp the axiom that existence exists, means to grasp the fact that nature, i.e., the universe as a whole, cannot be created or annihilated, that it cannot come into or go out of existence. Whether its basic constituent elements are atoms, or subatomic particles, or some yet undiscovered forms of energy, it is not ruled by a consciousness or by will or by chance, but by the Law of Identity. All the countless forms, motions, combinations, and dissolutions of elements within the universe—from a floating speck of dust to the formation of a galaxy to the emergence of life—are caused and determined by the identities of the elements involved. Nature is the *metaphysically given*—i.e., the nature of nature is outside the power of any volition. [*Philosophy: Who Needs It*, pp. 24–25; all emphases Rand’s.]

We shall analyze the arguments in this passage soon enough (and we shall ignore both its *ad hominem* remarks and its unsupported empirical claims about how e.g. “infants and savages” and the “majority” of people think). But first we must call attention to a significant point.

Nathaniel Branden writes in *The Objectivist Newsletter* for December 1965 that Objectivists “are, of course, atheists.... But atheism is scarcely the center of our philosophical position. To be known as crusaders for atheism would be acutely embarrassing to us; the adversary is too unworthy.”

As John W. Robbins notes, this remark is at odds with Rand’s stressing of the “primacy of existence” as exemplified in the passage we have quoted. “Atheism is indeed the center of Objectivist philosophy,” writes Robbins, “because atheism is its metaphysical position” [*Without a Prayer: Ayn Rand and the Close of Her System*, p. 109; this work is a revised, edited, and expanded version of 1974’s *Answer to Ayn Rand*].

ATHEISM AS RAND’S PHILOSOPHICAL MOTIVATION

Robbins is correct. As is clear from the passage we have quoted, Rand makes the “primacy of existence” vs. “primacy of consciousness” issue a watershed between differing philosophies, places theism firmly on the side she is rejecting, and even argues that belief in God is both a sign and a cause of the atrophy of intellectual faculties. Branden’s remark is therefore just a bit of rhetoric and sophistry; Rand’s atheism is at the very heart of the Objectivist metaphysics—and epistemology.

Nor is it difficult to see why. Barbara Branden reports in *Who Is Ayn Rand?* that Rand became an atheist at the age of 13, as recorded in her diary (“Today, I decided that I am an atheist” [*Who Is Ayn Rand?*, pp. 161–162]). Branden explains Rand’s two reasons: “first, there are no *reasons* to believe in God, there is no *proof* of the belief; and second, that the concept of God is insulting and degrading to man—it implies that the highest possible is not to be reached by man, that he is an inferior being who can only worship an ideal he will never achieve.... She rejected the concept of God as morally evil” [*ibid.*, p. 162, emphasizes Branden’s; quoted without citation, and with the emphases omitted, in Robbins, p. 110]. Robbins notes that the first reason is probably in reality subordinate to the second; the remark about lack of proof is treated cursorily, suggesting that the moral objection is actually primary both in the Brandens’ minds and in the mind of the young Rand.

Robbins would have found his suspicion confirmed if he had consulted Barbara Branden’s *The Passion of Ayn Rand* as he updated his 1974 work. Here Branden reports that Rand recorded in her diary at age 13, “Today, I decided to be an atheist” (a slightly different wording that tends to emphasize Rand’s self-determination a bit more strongly). But this time Branden reports Rand as later explaining, “I had decided that the concept of God is degrading to men. Since they say that God is perfect, and man can never be that perfect, then man is low and imperfect and there is something above him—which is wrong” [*The*

Passion of Ayn Rand, p. 35]. “Her *second* reason” [my emphasis], Branden continues, is that “no proof of the existence of God exists” [*ibid.*]. The alleged absence of proof has indeed become Rand’s “second” reason.

Robbins writes trenchantly, “Perhaps this writer can be forgiven if he suggests that at the age of thirteen Rand was not yet capable of understanding the so-called proofs for the existence of God offered from Aristotle to Anselm, let alone grasping the much more subtle (and Scriptural) position that the God of the Bible is not a matter for demonstration, but the *axiomatic sine qua non* of all logical demonstration and rational thought” [*Without a Prayer*, p. 111; emphasis Robbins’s].

Robbins is surely right that the thirteen-year-old Rand could not have rejected theistic belief based on a thorough examination of the arguments on all sides (let alone the claim that the existence of God is presupposed by all rational thought and proof); Rand, we conclude, became an atheist on what she took to be moral grounds. For further illustration cf. *Letters of Ayn Rand*, pp. 182–185, from a letter to Isabel Paterson dated August 4, 1945; it is doubtful that the *adult* Rand understood any of those arguments either.

To be fair, Rand tells Paterson that as of that time, her (i.e., Rand’s) main argument against theism is that the conception of God, as she understands it from her reading, “denies every conception of the human mind” [*ibid.*, p. 184]. This objection could be understood as purely epistemological—that if God cannot be explained in human terms, then God simply cannot be understood by human beings. If so, then (whatever its intellectual merits or otherwise) Rand’s “main” reason, at least as an adult, is the one Robbins claims is subordinate.

However, see Rand’s reply of 9 July 1946 to fan Sylvia Austin:

You ask: “Do you think it would demean man to think that he was the child of the Creator of the earth, stars, etc.? Don’t you think it would make his noble dreams and acts even more noble to think that he has a divine heritage?” To your first question I would

answer: No, not necessarily. Perhaps a philosophical statement could be made defining God in a way which would not be demeaning to man and to his life on earth. But I do not know of such a statement among the popular conceptions of God.

The second question contains a most grievous demeaning of man, right in the question. It implies that man, even at his best, even after he has reached the highest perfection possible to him, is not noble or not noble enough. It implies that he needs something superhuman in order to make him nobler. It implies that that which is noble in him is divine, not human; and that the merely human is ignoble. That is what neither [*The Fountainhead* protagonist Howard] Roark nor I would ever accept. [*ibid.*, p. 288; emphasises Rand’s].

I think it is fairly clear which of the two reasons is really paramount. At bottom, Rand rejects the existence of God for what she believes to be moral reasons.

Note also Rand’s remark to Paterson: “Incidentally, I know some very good arguments of my own for the existence of God. But they’re not the ones you mention and they’re not the ones I’ve ever read advanced in any religion. They’re not proofs, therefore I can’t say I accept them. They are merely possibilities, like a hypothesis that could be tenable. But it wouldn’t be an omnipotent God and it wouldn’t be a limitless God” [*ibid.*, p. 185]. In other words, it would not be the God of Judeo-Christian theism and it would not “demean” mankind the way the God of the Bible allegedly does. (Editor Michael Berliner adds the following remark in square brackets: “AR never mentioned these arguments again.” Berliner does not explain how he is able to verify this sweeping negative.)

Interestingly, Rand quotes Paterson as writing, “You have adopted the ‘humanistic,’ ‘scientific,’ theanthropic philosophy.” This Rand vehemently denies, replying, “I have not *adopted* anyone’s philosophy. I have created my own. I do not care to be tagged with anyone else’s labels” [*Letters of Ayn Rand*, p. 182; emphasis hers]. She denies only having *adopted* this philosophy, believing herself, I suppose, to have

created it from scratch. At any rate, whoever's "label" it might be, the term "theanthropic" is an especially apt description of Objectivism's religion of "man-worship". Cf. the following: "I am an atheist and I have only one religion: the sublime in human nature. There is nothing to approach the sanctity of the highest type of man possible and there is nothing that gives me the same reverent feeling, the feeling when one's spirit wants to kneel, bareheaded.... It is a kind of strange and improbable white heat where admiration becomes religion, and religion becomes philosophy, and philosophy—the whole of one's life" [*ibid.*, pp. 15–16].

Again, it is not part of our project here to argue for theism, still less to argue that Rand was somehow "evil" because she was an atheist. However, it is very much part of our project to show that Rand's philosophy has been skewed by the combination of her antipathy toward theism and her desire to retain some of the consequences of a traditional Western-religious worldview in her own atheism-centered philosophy. Our thesis, as stated in the introduction, is that Rand has tried—unsuccessfully—to develop a philosophy which, in effect, holds that "there is no God, and man is made in His image". On that understanding, let us examine Rand's remarks closely.

"EXISTENCE EXISTS"

"The primacy of existence (of reality)," Rand says, "is the axiom that existence exists, i.e., that the universe exists independent of consciousness (of *any* consciousness), that things are what they are, that they possess a specific nature, an *identity*." Does she mean all these formulations to be even roughly equivalent?

For they are clearly not. The axiom that "existence exists," to the extent that it means anything at all, is apparently intended to affirm what John Searle has called "external realism". Such realism, as we saw in the preceding chapter, he characterizes as "the view that there is a way things are that is logically independent of all human representa-

tions” [*The Construction of Social Reality*, p. 155]. But as Searle is at pains to argue, such realism does not, in and of itself, entail that physical reality is causally independent of consciousness. (There is some question here about whether we should count causally related events as “logically independent”; that question will engage us below, albeit a bit indirectly.)

And Rand’s axiom does not even go this far. “Existence” will still “exist” even if—as we shall implicitly argue below—Searle’s logical independence cannot finally be made out. Rand cannot generate any specific ontological commitments at all from “existence exists”; whatever she claims to derive from it will turn out to be something she has smuggled in herself.

Nor, as we shall see, will the logical dependence of reality and mind commit us to anti-realism in any important sense. Rand appears to share the fairly common view that idealist epistemology is “subjectivist”. But this characterization is based on a misconception, or at least on a hidden assumption.

The idealist claim, as expressed vigorously by Thomas Hill Green especially in his *Prolegomena to Ethics*, is that the relations involved in knowledge are themselves constituted by intelligence. However, this claim is an impediment to objectivity only on the assumption that relations “out there,” in “real” reality, are *not* constituted by intelligence. Absolute idealists and several sorts of theist would claim that this assumption is just wrong: “objective reality” itself is the product or activity of an Absolute Mind, a divine intelligence Whose thought actively constitutes, or manifests as, the existing intelligible order of things.

Of course I am not here trying to mount a case for this “strong” form of objective idealism. Nor do I think Green himself made a successful *argument* for it. He seems to have thought it was self-evident, and I happen to share his intuition on this point. However, it is important not to confuse intuitions with conclusions, and I certainly have

not offered anything like a proof of the claim. I am merely pointing out that even this strong claim does not devolve into subjectivism.

For present purposes I shall be satisfied with the weaker claim, for which I *have* argued to some extent, that the world consists of (or at least includes) real universals, at least some of which can be directly grasped by the mind, and that everything which exists is in principle intelligible. And we have already seen that Rand, for all her dismissals of idealism, universals, nonsensory intuition, and the “primacy of consciousness” premise, relies on this weaker form herself at numerous key points.

Moreover, Rand’s claim is questionable on other grounds. If God created the universe (the latter term meaning, roughly, “all that exists other than God Himself”), then this fact itself is just the way things really are. Theism is not a denial of the “primacy of existence” premise as Rand has initially formulated it; every theist in history has held that God *exists*, and that God’s existence is logically and/or causally prior to the existence of anything else. (And why the existence of a divine Creator should amount to a denial of the Law of Identity is more than I can fathom.)

Rand’s further formulation—that the universe is independent of any and all consciousness, including God’s—is a simple *nonsequitur*. But Rand seems to conflate three distinct claims, holding that her axiom actually says the “universe” is independent of “consciousness” altogether merely because it is (allegedly) independent of *human* consciousness, when she has not even established the latter as a corollary of her “axiom”. (We have already seen Leonard Peikoff allow for the possibility that the universe we know is not independent of human consciousness.) The leap from “existence exists” to atheism is doubly unwarranted.

Of course if all she means is that God cannot create “existence as such” if God already exists, we shall simply agree. But this is a trivial point that has no bearing on the truth or falsity of theism. We have already seen Hugo Meynell (in *The Intelligible Universe*) expose an

important ambiguity in the term “world”; Objectivism uses words like “existence” and “universe” with the same ambiguity.

Nor, again, is Rand entitled to make even this trivial point, since her epistemology should not allow her to speak of “existence as such”. Cf. the following mystical insight (or is it a “rational intuition”?) from Nathaniel Branden:

I became an atheist at the age of twelve when one day...I had...[what I would call] a *spiritual* experience. I was hit by a sudden sense of the universe as a total, in all its unimaginable immensity, and I thought: if God is needed to explain the existence of the universe, then what explains the existence of God?...[If] we have to begin *somewhere*, isn't it more reasonable to accept the existence of the universe—of *being*, whatever its form—as the starting point of everything? (Begin with existence itself, I would later learn to say, as the ultimate, irreducible primary.) [*The Art of Living Consciously*, pp. 188–189; emphases his.]

Our discussion in the preceding chapter has already replied adequately to most of this. What we must note here is that Branden is perpetuating an error he clearly learned from Rand: “existence” cannot be an “irreducible primary” in a philosophy that, on its own terms, should be unable to regard “existence as such” as anything other than an unreal abstraction.

Not that it is clear what “existence” is supposed to mean anyway; Objectivism seems to treat it as some sort of attribute or existent in its own right. Some remarks of Blanshard's are apt:

It is idle to search beneath the surface of things for an indescribable something called existence, which is neither a quality nor a relation nor any complex of these. The existentialist pursuit of this will-o'-the-wisp has been an unprofitable quest; it has developed a baffling mysticism whose object is without content, and its dark pronouncements about existence preceding essence leave its critics curiously helpless, since nothing definite enough for a clear refutation is being said. And what would be the gain, from the philo-

sophic point of view, if the unfindable were somehow found? One is tempted to quote William James' sardonic advice to the troubled philosopher to seize firmly on the unintelligible and make it the key to everything else. At any rate, it seems to me that if existence, in this sense—assuming it is a sense—were to vanish from the universe tomorrow, leaving all the qualities and relations of things what they are, we should never miss it. ["Interrogation of Brand Blanshard," in *Philosophical Interrogations*, Sydney and Beatrice Rome, eds., p. 255.]

At times Objectivism does seem to seize on the unintelligible and make it the key to everything else; its own pronouncements on "existence" sometimes recall those of the existentialists (and Rand is in fact committed to the existentialist view that "existence precedes essence" whether she puts it in this language or not). At other times, when Objectivists remember that, on their philosophy, there simply should not *be* any such thing as "existence as such" or "being, whatever its form," we learn—as we have repeatedly learned throughout the rest of this volume—that by "existence" Objectivism really intends the *physical existents* which are allegedly given in axiomatically-valid sensory perception.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that by "existence" Rand, Peikoff, Branden, *et alia* mean merely "presentation in sensory-perceptual experience"—perhaps with a certain vividness or resistance to the will. This meaning is simply masked by the occasional insistence that one is saying something important when one speaks of "existence as such".

Be that as it may, the premise that "existence exists" tells us nothing whatsoever about *what* exists, and cannot—if we are careful with our language—be used to infer that matter exists altogether independently of mind. (And in fact Branden himself acknowledges—*ibid.*, pp. 201–202—that matter and consciousness, which are clearly not independent of one another in a causal sense, might both arise from some more fundamental reality that is capable of explaining both of them in a way that they do not seem to explain one another.)

A FALSE DICHOTOMY AND A PRESUMPTION OF MATERIALISM

Rand, however, is clear that her “primacy of existence” premise is supposed to have atheism as a corollary; she says that the “primacy of consciousness” premise amounts to “the notion that the [nonconscious] universe has no independent existence, that it is the product of a consciousness (either human or divine or both)”.

But even if this were correct, it would show only that God could not have created “existence as such,” which we have already acknowledged. If the physical universe is a product of an eternal consciousness, then that consciousness presumably *exists*. That the world we know might be the creation of a divine consciousness does not in any way negate the “primacy of existence” premise; Rand has simply assumed that possibility away by implicitly equating “existence” with the physical universe.

For it is fairly clear from her remarks on “basic constituent elements” that by “nature, i.e., the universe as a whole,” she does mean the physical universe. And her objection to the argument, “If there is no God, who created the universe?” makes sense only on the buried assumption that the physical universe itself is self-existent. This, of course, is the very assumption the propounders of the offensive argument would deny: the physical universe, we have said, just does not seem to be the sort of thing that is even self-explanatory, let alone capable of explaining all the apparently nonphysical features of our world. Those of us who believe in intelligibility will therefore continue to hold out for “mystical insight,” with or without Rand’s blessing.

What has all this to do with her epistemology? Rand is presumably thinking here of her claim that the fact of awareness implies both that one is conscious and that something exists of which one is conscious. She wants to argue that because consciousness always has content, the object of our awareness is always something other than our awareness itself.

Of course it is; but this point applies just as surely when we are thinking of Sherlock Holmes as when we are looking at a table. This bare-bones “realism” means only, as Royce puts it, that “an object known is other than the idea, or thought, or person, that knows the object. But in this very general sense,” Royce continues, “any and every effort to get at truth involves the admission that what one seeks is in some way more or less other than one’s ideas while one is seeking; and herewith no difference would be established between Realism and any opposing metaphysical view. Idealism, and even the extremest philosophical Skepticism, both recognize in some form, that our goal in knowledge is other than our effort to reach the goal” [*The World and the Individual*, p. 95].

Rand has thus offered us a false dichotomy, which she has generated through her assumption that the fundamental constituents of the universe do not matter to her thesis. That they do not matter is one of the very points at issue. If nearly any version of objective or absolute idealism is correct—if, for example, Timothy Sprigge is right that (as he argues in *The Vindication of Absolute Idealism*) the fundamental constituents of existence are little nuggets of “experience” or T.H. Green is right that (as he maintains in his *Prolegomena to Ethics*) relations, in order to exist, must be constituted by an objectively existing intelligence—then neither “existence” nor “consciousness” is “primary”; either one considered alone is an abstraction which, in reality, cannot occur without the other. But on any such view, we are not justified in equating “existence” with “nature” or the “physical universe”.

Rand has not, then, shown that the “primacy of existence” is axiomatic in the sense she really wants—i.e., in *opposition* to the “primacy of consciousness”. There are metaphysical systems according to which the two are not mutually exclusive. Rand may find such systems implausible, but she may not dispose of them by invoking an alleged corollary (it is not) which already assumes their falsity.

DISCONNECTING MIND FROM REALITY

Let us stay with Royce for a bit while we consider the remainder of Rand’s “primacy of existence” premise. The precise sense of “realism,” Royce takes it, goes considerably beyond the tame formulation set forth above. The realist, says Royce, “declares that whenever you know any being not yourself, your object is primarily and logically independent of your knowledge, so that whether your knowledge comes or goes, is true or is false, your object so far may remain whatever it was. He asserts also that in knowing the rest of the universe, you do, on the whole, know a being that is not your knowledge, and that is consequently independent of your knowledge” [*The World and the Individual*, p. 113].

Now this claim seems very close to Rand’s own (and to Searle’s formulation of “external realism,” which we shall be implicitly revising in what follows). For she makes the further claim that consciousness itself simply fails to exist until and unless it has content. In some mysterious manner—we are of course not told how—consciousness bootstraps itself into existence the instant some content is supplied to it. But this content must be, in Royce’s sense, “primarily and logically independent” of consciousness itself, since consciousness does not exist before said content is provided. And so, we remarked earlier, she seems to have made consciousness impossible.

This point alone is sufficient to put her argument entirely out of court. But we can follow Royce a bit further and level a more fundamental criticism against this entire approach.

Royce contends that, if we conceive thought and object to be so completely and absolutely independent that the existence of one makes no difference to the existence of the other, we have in fact destroyed the very possibility of knowledge. For on this theory, our ideas are absolutely independent of their supposed objects, and therefore unlinked by any relation, including causality. The idea has no true relation with its object, and the realist cannot consistently take his own

ideas as having anything to do with any “independent” reality. The realist theory, on Royce’s account, thus ends in self-contradiction.

(Ever since Royce made this argument, the standard realist rejoinder has been that no realists hold objects to be independent of thought in the sense Royce seems to attribute to them. But this rejoinder misses the point. Royce’s contention is not that realists *intend* this conclusion but that the degree of independence required by a thoroughgoing realism cannot be made out without, by implication, divorcing thought from object. One cannot avoid the logical consequences of a belief by asserting that one does not *mean* what the belief entails.)

If we try to adopt this sort of realism, then, we shall then be faced with the difficulty of piecing back together what we have thereby put asunder—somehow getting the “objects” of knowledge back into contact with thought—or we shall end in self-stultification. If we do not make this repair explicitly, we shall have to do it implicitly, as Rand does. For as we have seen, she repeatedly assumes that reality is *not* absolutely independent of thought; she constantly makes epistemological moves that make sense only on the presumption that the objects of our knowledge just *are*, at least in part, the sort of stuff that can be “in” a mind, that “reality” is *such as* to be “thinkable”.

Although this view obviously needs a very great deal of elaboration, something like it seems to be the only course open to us if we are not to fall into total skepticism. We shall, that is, have to adopt the minimally idealist view that reality itself is in some manner already constituted by quite literally the same sorts of object that conscious intelligence contributes to the process of knowing.

This doctrine, as we have said, received what may be its clearest formulation (although one surely falling far short of proof) in T.H. Green’s *Prolegomena to Ethics*. In Royce’s hands as in the early Blanshard’s, it is developed very self-critically into the view that an object of an idea is best understood as the fulfillment of the idea, as we saw in chapter 10. The reader who wants further elaboration is particularly referred to Blanshard’s discussion (in *The Nature of Thought*) both for

the development of the theory itself and for an argument that this theory of the idea is very close to that of Critical Realism.

We recall that in his later years Blanshard abandons—in my view too hastily—the view that the object of an idea just *is* the idea itself fully developed. At the same time he also recognizes—I think quite correctly—that the relation between thought and its object can be characterized as either “coherence” or “correspondence,” with neither term being entirely adequate to describe a relation that has never been satisfactorily analyzed or characterized. The reader will find his mature views set out in *The Philosophy of Brand Blanshard*, to which we have already referred in earlier discussions of these points.

Among those mature views is an item that may be of help to us here: his analysis (in his “Reply to Errol E. Harris”, *The Philosophy of Brand Blanshard*, pp. 511–516) of the various objects of perception and thought. Blanshard, following H.W.B. Joseph, distinguishes three sorts of “real object”: the commonsense object of perception, the physical object underlying the causal processes of perception, and the metaphysical object to which reflection would ideally lead. It is possible, I think, to show that each of these objects, in its way, presumes and involves mind in a constituent fashion, and yet the possibility of objectivity is not therefore destroyed; each sort of object acts as an epistemological check on the previous one, and the ultimate object is just the entirety of reality itself.

This analysis would not be entirely foreign to Objectivism at least as Leonard Peikoff has developed it; we have seen Peikoff concede (as Rand herself perhaps does not) that the objects of our everyday awareness may well be constituted in part by our awareness of them without therefore posing a problem for “objectivity”. On Peikoff’s view, at least, a substrate of “external realism” does not entail that the objects of our immediate awareness must exist independently of that awareness. And even the view that reality is fundamentally constituted by mind does not violate “external realism” in the very broadest sense (though

we would have to adjust Searle's definition if we wished to acknowledge causality as a logical relation).

Whether Blanshard's tripartite account of the objects of thought is found satisfactory or not, the crucial point is that thought cannot get off the ground without the presumption that at least some portion of reality can be got directly within the mind—a presumption we have seen Rand make repeatedly.

If we make this presumption explicit, we can at least be self-critical about the adequacy of the present contents of our thought to the object of that thought, however conceived. The presumption that we have direct cognitive access to reality does not commit us to the further view that the ultimately real object of our thought is *now* fully in our possession.

But Rand, since she has not actually noticed that she has made this presumption, tends to assume very uncritically that the present content of one's consciousness (at least her own) requires no development in order to be fully "real". (Her view of concepts as fixed and unchanging does not help.) Her remark about the "epistemological corollary" of the "primacy of consciousness"—that "man gains knowledge of reality by looking outward"—is thus tremendously ironic: by "looking outward," Rand actually means inspecting the sensory-perceptual contents of one's present awareness and assuming uncritically that these contents unproblematically involve a direct grasp of "external" reality, not inchoately, but completely. Perception is paramount, and the sole legitimate task of reason is to sort the welter of sensory-perceptual data into convenient file folders. Arguing correctly that all knowledge is "processed knowledge," she refuses to allow the processing to proceed far enough.

At any rate we have surely made out our initial claim. Though Rand's axiom that "existence exists" is strictly disallowed by her own epistemology (since "existence" is one of those "abstract attributes" whose existence she has in fact ruled out), what she means by this axiom is actually acceptable up to a point. However, she has been mis-

led by her atheism into concluding that there is something “axiomatic” about the untenable presumption that existence is independent of consciousness. Since her “axioms” do not in fact rule out either theism or idealism, we must conclude that she has already ruled them out on other grounds.

The strong presumption here—borne out by her own remarks about God and creation—is that she is led astray by her desire to remove divine consciousness from the scene altogether. It is, to say the least, not a long leap to the conclusion that she is motivated by what Thomas Nagel calls “fear of religion”.

Rand herself is profoundly subject to that fear, whether or not she admits it to be her “main argument against God”. As she writes to Isabel Paterson in the letter to we have already referred: “Can you interfere arbitrarily with what I am doing? Yes—physically. No—mentally. Can a brick kill me? Yes. Can a brick get into my mind and tell me what to think or do? No. Can an omnipotent being do that? Yes. An omnipotent being, by definition, is a totalitarian dictator. Ah, but he won’t use his power? Never mind. He *has* it” [*Letters of Ayn Rand*, p. 184; emphasis Rand’s].

Another tremendous irony: we have already seen that Rand’s own metaphysics and epistemology regard “existence” as a brute fact to which the human mind just has to conform or else. Having done away with “necessity,” having dissociated “existence” from “consciousness” and firmly subordinated the latter to the former, and having thereby drained the universe of “mind” except as a sort of cosmic accident, she has nothing but surd facts to which the human mind must be subjected. She quotes with approbation Francis Bacon’s “Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed” [*Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 25], but this “obedience” is to an ultimately unintelligible universe which has no power over our minds and no interest in our success. (This indifferent universe she anthropomorphizes as “benevolent”.)

As Richard Mason remarks in his exposition of Spinoza’s account of necessity: “The philosopher who takes the ‘objects of sense’ as basic

will take brute contingent facts for granted: they just *are*” [*The God of Spinoza*, p. 66; emphasis Mason’s]. Rand, who does indeed wish to take the objects of sense as basic while yet preserving some significant role for necessity and intelligibility, in the end falls prey to just this inevitable difficulty. “Explanations,” in her world, ultimately come to rest not in the coherent activity of an intelligible mind creating an intelligible order which it is the business of reason to reconstruct; they end in a sheerly “noncontradictory” but blind physical universe about which, in the final analysis, no further questions are possible once we identify in good noncontradictory fashion *what* it is. And yet she finds this prospect *less* fearsome than the existence of an omnipotent being, Whose very existence would allegedly make God a “totalitarian dictator”.

Which leads neatly into our next topic: Rand’s account of values.

Chapter 12: Values and Volition: The Objectivist Ethics

[A]sk yourself what a given theory, if accepted, would do to a human life, starting with your own.... [O]nce you understand the meaning of [such] theories, they lose their power to threaten you, like a Halloween mask in bright sunlight. [Ayn Rand, "Philosophical Detection," in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, pp. 16, 21.]

IDOLIZING AUTONOMY

As we have just seen, Rand places a great deal of importance on autonomy and independence, so much so that she believes an omnipotent God would be, by nature, a "totalitarian dictator". We are primarily concerned with her epistemology in this volume and will not be making an exhaustive critique of the "Objectivist ethics". Nevertheless we should not pass over this point without saying something about what her epistemology has to do with her theory of value.

Rand herself makes the connection all but explicit. In "Conservatism: An Obituary," Rand takes on what she calls the "argument from depravity" [*Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, p. 106; emphasis omitted]. This, allegedly, is the argument that "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" [*ibid.*, pp. 198–199].

Rand asks us to “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” [*ibid.*, p. 199; emphasis Rand’s].

Now this is an egregious misreading even of the version of the argument Rand says she is considering. The point of that argument, recall, was not that depraved people do not deserve to *have* a dictator, but that no human being can be trusted to *be* a dictator.

But there is a more basic problem here that bears directly on Rand’s axiology. Consider the following:

Suppose there were a human being who was omnipotent, infallible, omniscient, and perfectly good. Now, just why would Rand not trust this person as “dictator”? Presumably because having a dictator in some way interferes with human autonomy.

But by hypothesis, our omniscient dictator *knows* this. If s/he is genuinely all-knowing, s/he must also know whether, and to what extent, the existence and encouragement of human well-being requires the fostering of autonomy. And being both omnipotent and perfectly good, s/he would act (successfully) to bring that well-being about in the best possible way. (Perhaps even more importantly, s/he would also know how best to organize human society in order to aid and promote the very process of becoming autonomous.)

Readers can undoubtedly complete the argument themselves; the point is that *contra* Rand, a “dictator” who actually possessed all of those nice (divine) features *could* in fact be trusted as Absolute World Ruler. If a free society is genuinely ideal for human beings, then an omnipotent, infallible, omniscient, omnibenevolent “dictator” would in fact act to bring such a society about, and might even be the best possible guarantee of its continued existence.

So, again *contra* Rand, the reason such a dictator would be a bad idea is precisely that no human being fills the bill—either in practice or in principle. Again, the point is not that depraved people do not “deserve” dictatorship but that no human being possesses the attributes

required to merit appointment as dictator. In short, no human being is God.

But Rand thinks that an omnipotent God would be a “totalitarian dictator” merely by *existing*. Why?

Her argument here depends on an implicit assumption that carries us straight into the heart of her theory of value. She seems to presume, and elsewhere expressly states, that no values can be genuine values to someone who has not consciously chosen them. The analogy with her theory of concepts is direct; her strange idolatry of volition provides, in each case, both the name and the *raison d'être* of her philosophy.

We shall have more to say in our next chapter about her theory of volition, and in particular her view (to which we have already occasionally referred) that human beings are self-creating. In the present chapter we shall survey the major fault lines in her account of value.

RAND'S THEORY OF VALUE

Rand's theory of values is parallel to her theory of concepts. She wishes to deny that there is such a thing as “intrinsic” value and yet to avoid the conclusion that value is “subjective”; she maintains that value is “objective” in approximately the same sense as are concepts.

What she means by a “value” is anything that an agent “acts to gain and/or keep” [“The Objectivist Ethics,” in *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 16]. Like Ralph Barton Perry (whose *General Theory of Value* defined the “good” as the object of any “interest” whatsoever), Rand will not allow that something is a “value” to someone unless that someone is *in fact* acting to gain and/or keep it. But unlike Perry, she does not identify “goodness” itself with being the actual object of an actual interest.

By itself this account would allow for the possibility that not all “values” are genuinely “good,” and indeed Rand supplements it with what purports to be an account of “goodness”—a standard, that is, by which we can appraise what “values” we *ought* to act to gain and/or keep.

On her theory, the “good,” like “concepts,” is the outcome of human cognitive processing but not any less “objective” for that: Rand defines the “good” as “an *evaluation* of the facts of reality in relation to man” [“What Is Capitalism?” in *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, p. 22; emphasis Rand’s]. An evaluation by what standard? Rand argues that the standard is, ultimately, one’s own life [“The Objectivist Ethics,” *VOS*, p. 18]. (She attempts at one point to distinguish between the “standard” of ethics, which she says is the life proper to “man *qua* man,” and the “purpose” of ethics, which she says is one’s own life. We shall discuss this distinction later and argue that it fails.)

How plausible is this theory? Unfortunately it fares no better than her parallel theory of concepts.

Consider the following thought experiment. Suppose that there are two worlds. In one of them everyone is perfectly happy and healthy. In the other, everyone is perfectly happy and healthy with a single exception: one old man, who lives alone in a cabin in the woods and has little human contact, is at this very moment, unbeknownst to anyone else, undeservedly drowning in his own pond after an accidental fall. Is there not a clear sense in which even a fully disinterested observer can see and believe, quite apart from any purposes or goals of his own, that the first of these worlds is, really and intrinsically, “better than” the second, in that it contains more of the sort of thing we mean by “good”?

If so, then Rand’s account of “value” will not do. For what this thought experiment shows is that there is an intelligible sense of “intrinsic goodness” that is not strictly reducible to instrumental goodness in the pursuit of one’s own life and goals.

Now, what is ordinarily meant by an “intrinsic good,” and what we shall mean by it here, is this: something/anything that a rational agent would, all things considered and other things being equal, find worthy of pursuing for its own sake and not solely as a means to further ends. And as the foregoing thought experiment suggests, it is entirely meaningful to say that the achievement of intrinsic goods by such

agents—again, other things being equal—“makes the world a better place” in containing more of what we mean by “good”.

Nor is this all; even the most “subjective,” personal, or agent-relative value appears to give rise to a value that is “intrinsic,” objective, and absolute. If V is an agent-relative value for valuing subject S, then the state of affairs “S achieves V” (which, *nota bene*, does not exist apart from valuing subject S) is one which another rational agent can “see” is worthy of pursuit for its own sake—other things being equal. Indeed, it seems to be (at least sometimes) this insight that *turns* S’s achievement of an “agent-relative” value into an “agent-relative” value for someone else, and it seems also to be an insight available to rational agents as such about valuing subjects as such. Each of us can grasp that, say, the state of affairs hungry-Jones-receives-food or opera-buff-Smith-gets-tickets-to-*Aida* is, *ceteris paribus*, worthy of pursuit for its own sake and that each of us therefore has some (perhaps not ordinarily sufficient) reason to help bring it about.

In that case, it seems entirely meaningful to speak of a “common end” shared by rational agents as such, coherently inclusive of the ends of all such individuals; that each individual has a unique *prioritization* of reasons and goals does not mean that each individual has a distinct *set* of reasons and goals.

For example, perhaps Jones’s self-actualization as a brilliant concert pianist is supremely important to Jones and only marginally important to me. But if even one of my goals as a rational agent is to help bring “good things” into the world, can we say that Jones’s goal is simply irrelevant to me?

No matter how many other actual goals I may have that (quite properly) take precedence over my helping Jones to become a self-actualized concert pianist, it is still the case that, if I had no conflicting goals of my own, I *would* have reason to pursue Jones’s actualization. It also, therefore, seems to be the case that I have such reason even when it is not my controlling reason, i.e., when it is outweighed by my legitimate pursuit of—as Loren Lomasky puts it in *Persons, Rights, and the*

Moral Community—my own “projects”. My reasons, like W.D. Ross’s “*prima facie* duties” (and some of my reasons may well be based on such duties), do not simply disappear merely because they are outweighed by other reasons.

(Indeed, Rand should have been committed to some such view as this if she really holds, as Peikoff says she holds, that “no aspect of the total can exist apart from the total” [*OPAR*, p. 122–123]. Other people and their *teloi* are part of the totality of existence; on Peikoff’s view, I really shouldn’t be *able* to define my own *telos* in sublime indifference to everyone else’s.)

Moreover, to the extent that I can “make another’s values my own,” my well-being may be directly involved with, and dependent on, that of someone other than myself quite apart from any additional consequences to me. But we shall here show that it is precisely this feature—the ability of a rational agent to take a direct interest, simply *as* a rational agent, in the self-actualization and well-being of other such agents—that is missing from Rand’s account of value.

If so, then her ethic quite literally and quite deliberately leaves us no way to say that it is simply *good* that the hungry be fed, that human liberty be respected and protected, or that *laissez-faire* capitalism be established as a social order. In general, as we shall see, Rand’s theory flatly denies that the fulfillment of even the most “agent-neutral” values is good, period: for Rand, there is simply no such thing as “good, period”. On close inspection, then, her ethic is hardly the stirring cry for liberty that it appears to be when we look only at her rhetoric.

Some—not all—of her difficulty here lies in her almost exclusive focus on physical objects (a focus which, as we have already noted, has ill effects in her epistemology too). Of course she is quite right that physical objects have, at most, instrumental value, and that this value is dependent on the ends which they may or may not serve.

However, few defenders of “intrinsic goodness” attribute such goodness to states of affairs that exist independently of consciousness or sentience. “The intrinsicist school,” Leonard Peikoff informs us, “holds

that values, like universals or essences, are features of reality independent of consciousness (and of life)” [OPAR, p. 245]. This is just wrong. With rare exceptions, most have held that without consciousness, goodness vanishes as well. But unlike Rand, they have not drawn the conclusion that there is no such thing as “intrinsic goodness”. W. D. Ross and Brand Blanshard have held, for example, that the only “intrinsic goods” are states of consciousness and the relations between them; G.E. Moore once thought otherwise, but later changed his mind. (More recently, Noah Lemos has made an interesting and plausible case that the flourishing of nonsentient life should also be regarded as intrinsically good; see *Intrinsic Value: Concept and Warrant*, pp. 93–97. But Lemos is aware that he is departing from the “intrinsicist” mainstream on this point. And, Peikoff to the contrary notwithstanding, even Lemos’s view does not divorce “value” from the context of “life”.)

It is hard to know what Rand would have made of this thesis, since for all her railing against “intrinsicism” she never once discusses the views of an actual, living, breathing “intrinsicist”. If she did any reading in ethical theory at all, she *must* have run across Ross’s *The Right and the Good* and *Foundations of Ethics*. And we know that at one point she intends to read Blanshard’s *Reason and Goodness*, because she says so in a letter to him (*The Letters of Ayn Rand*, pp. 629–630). Yet neither of these “intrinsicists” receives even a passing mention in her account of value, nor does she deal even implicitly with their axiology. (It might, by the way, be objected that “The Objectivist Ethics” was written in 1961, before she had read Blanshard’s work on ethics. That is why I have quoted from “What Is Capitalism?”—which was written in 1965.)

We may suppose, however, that she would reject this whole line of analysis; for her, “the concept ‘value’...presupposes an answer to the question: of value to *whom* and for *what*?” [“The Objectivist Ethics,” in *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 16; emphases Rand’s.] And what she

means by this statement seems to preclude the existence of “intrinsic” value even in conscious states.

Her statement is about half-right; instrumental value, at least, is always value *for* something, i.e., toward some end other than itself. And we may accept Rand’s occasional salutary reminder that an instrumental value has value only to persons who share the end to which it is a means; chocolate cake is not valuable to people who dislike chocolate.

Nevertheless Rand’s question “value to *whom*...?” conceals a difficulty. If a value is not a value *to me* until and unless I actually adopt it, then how is it that I ever adopt a value in the first place? If I do so by seeing or recognizing that something is instrumentally valuable toward an end (presumably, though not necessarily, an end that I already have), then the existence of that value—its contributoriness toward that end—did not have to wait upon my recognition. But the real existence of real value—even real value “to me”—is masked by Rand’s somewhat positivistic definition of a “value” as anything that an agent *in fact* acts to gain and/or keep (a definition which, incidentally, does *not* seem to presuppose an answer to the question, “for *what*?”).

“Of value to *whom*...?” is thus something of a red herring: instrumental value itself (value “for *what*”), in the sense of contributoriness to an end, may exist prior to my decision to act to gain and/or keep it, and indeed must do so if my decision can possibly count as “objective”. (We are passing over the question whether Rand’s epistemology allows us to recognize contributoriness-toward-an-end in the first place, but we might well ask whether this is a property given to us in sensory perception.) It seems likely, given Rand’s misuse of the term “intrinsic” elsewhere, that by “intrinsic value” she means precisely this sort of objectively existing instrumental value; at any rate, as we shall shortly confirm, she denies that value is “really” there until someone creates it by actually choosing it.

But none of the foregoing quite touches on the subject of genuinely intrinsic value anyway. The nearest Rand herself comes to dealing with that subject is her contention that “life” is an end in itself. This is alleg-

edly so because a series of instrumental goods—she does not call them that—cannot continue on to infinity. (It is not made clear why we must therefore have a *single* end, why that end must be the same for each of us, or why the end must be strictly one's *own* "life"; we shall discuss these points later.) Nevertheless on her own account, "life" seems to fulfill some of the requirements of "intrinsic goodness".

And yet it does not fulfill one of the most important: as we shall shortly see, Rand does not—and cannot, consistently with her theory of value—maintain that "life" (or even the kind of life appropriate to ethical human beings) is intrinsically worth living. Ultimately, she is committed to the view that all values are values in the service of "life," whereas life itself is not "valuable" at all; it is merely *valued* by those persons who have quite arbitrarily chosen "to live".

We find here strong reason to suspect that Rand is trying—as she tries in her theory of concepts—to have it both ways: on the one hand she wants to urge that there are real features "out there," discovered not invented, that answer to our values (and our concepts); on the other she wants to deny that those features are really "out there" at all until we create them through our own cognitive activity.

What seems to worry Rand is the possibility that, if there are "intrinsic" goods, it will somehow become morally permissible to force people to pursue them. But the argument to this conclusion is not a short step; it is not even a long leap. It is simply not true that the "intrinsicness" of a good somehow entails *any* obligation, let alone one that may be coercively enforced, on the part of any and all rational agents to seek it come what may—nor, necessarily, even to seek it at all.

And it certainly commits no one to the further belief that it is somehow morally acceptable to force people to pursue every intrinsic good under the sun. Indeed, an "intrinsicist" could easily hold, as many do, that the use of force is in many cases intrinsically *evil*, and thereby take a much stronger moral stand against totalitarianism than Rand herself does. Rand was just wrong about the relation between "intrinsic good-

ness” and political theory. See, for example, her remarks on the subject in her correspondence with John Hospers, who apparently introduced her, unfortunately without beneficial effect, to the terms “intrinsic good” and “instrumental good” in 1961: “For instance, if one decided that ‘security’ is an ‘*intrinsic*’ good, one would be justified in attempting to establish it by any and all means” [*Letters of Ayn Rand*, p. 561; emphasis hers].

It is true that G.E. Moore, for example, holds that an intrinsic good is one which ought to exist for its own sake (and takes himself in this respect to be answering the question, “What kind of things ought to exist for their own sakes?” [*Principia Ethica*, p. 33]). But what Moore means is what every competent commentator has taken him to mean: “To say of something that it is good (*simpliciter*, in Moore’s sense) is to say of that thing that, *considered by itself, independent of its causes or consequences or external relations*, it ought to exist” [Donald Regan, “Value, Comparability, and Choice,” in *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, Ruth Chang, ed., p. 131; emphasis mine]. The “other things equal” clause is crucial, for even on the most extreme Mooreian view, not every intrinsic good imposes an obligation.

We may, for example, say with perfect intelligibility that a past event was intrinsically good (or bad), but it would be ludicrous to read that statement as entailing that we were somehow obliged to try to *bring about* (or *prevent*) that past event. And even regarding possible future events, we may also say, again with perfect intelligibility, that although some specific state of affairs would be intrinsically good, only certain specific agents are responsible for trying to bring it about. (We might sometimes even be positively obliged to seek an intrinsic evil—e.g. pain—if it is instrumental to something else—e.g. health.)

Here again, Rand has been led astray by her divided motives. On the one hand she wants to establish (her own) values as having something like religious authority; on the other she wants to deny that there is any overarching “authority” against which human values may be judged and found wanting.

OBJECTIVISM'S SUBJECTIVIST ETHIC

The effect is that her ethic slips easily into the sheerest subjectivism. There are two senses in which this is so.

(1) She sometimes holds (as Gregory R. Johnson notes in his excellent piece “Liberty and Nature: The Missing Link” in the first issue of the *Journal of Ayn Rand Studies*) that no value can be a value to anyone who has not consciously and deliberately chosen it. In strict consistency, this means that if I am knocked unconscious by a falling piano, then my rescue by paramedics and the emergency surgery subsequently performed on me at the hospital do not become values *to me* until and unless I wake up and consciously “choose” them. This is so implausible that it is hardly creditable that Rand should have meant any such thing.

And yet, as Johnson shows, one strain of her ethical thought does entail exactly this view. “Values,” Rand says, “cannot exist (cannot be *valued*) outside the full context of man’s life, needs, goals, and knowledge” [“What Is Capitalism?” in *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, p. 23; emphasis Rand’s]. Her argument here seems clearly intended to show that no genuine values can be achieved by “force” because *all* values depend on the rational-volitional appraisal—and therefore the conscious, voluntary cooperation—of the one to whom they are supposed to be valuable. Note especially her parenthetical claim that a value does not *exist* until and unless it is actually *valued*.

(Cf. the following: “How can one create if one does not first estimate—*value*—one’s materials?...How can there be valuing without those who value? A verb does not exist in a vacuum. A verb presupposes a noun. There is no such thing as an action without the one who acts. And who can do the valuing except *a* man?” [*Journals of Ayn Rand*, p. 86, emphasizes Rand’s]. This passage—to which the volume’s index refers us under the entry “Values, as presupposing a valuer”—is apparently supposed to show that not only “valuation” but even *values*

presuppose the existence of a valuer, apart from whose *conscious acts of appraisal* they simply fail to exist.)

It is this view, or something like it, that seems to inform and (in my view) to vitiate so many Randian and quasi-Randian accounts of the importance of “autonomy”. Cf. the following, also quoted by Johnson: “There may, of course, be circumstances in which it is better that others be in charge of one’s life, such as when one undergoes surgery, but this situation would not be a morally good one unless the choice to undergo surgery was one’s own” [*Liberty and Nature*, Douglas B. Rasmussen and Douglas J. Den Uyl, p. 95]. (At this point in the text, a footnote—with which Johnson does not deal—maintains that the young, old, sick, and injured are not really exceptions to the principle that it is better to be self-directed than not. This remark does not, however, support the odd claim that the “situation” of being rescued in an emergency is not “a morally good one” solely because one has not *chosen* rescue.)

(2) More fundamentally, she bases the entirety of the Objectivist ethic on the a- and pre-moral choice “to live,” and insists that all one’s moral constraints follow from this choice. Here are her own words:

Life or death is man’s only fundamental alternative. To live is his basic act of choice. If he chooses to live, a rational ethics will tell him what principles of action are required to implement his choice. If he does not choose to live, nature will take its course. [“Causality Versus Duty,” reproduced in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 99.]

And here is her erstwhile associate David Kelley carefully and clearly spelling out the straightforward implication of Rand’s view (in a critical review of Leonard Peikoff’s *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*):

Ayn Rand showed that values arise from the need of living organisms to maintain themselves by acting in specific ways in the face of the constant alternative of life or death. In the case of man, who has

free will, moral values depend on his choice to accept and pursue life as an ultimate goal. As she says in Galt's speech, "My morality, the morality of reason, is contained in a single axiom: existence exists—and in a single choice: to live." The choice to live therefore precedes all morality, as Peikoff notes. It is the foundation of all normative claims, and so cannot itself be morally evaluated. ["Peikoff's Summa," *IOS Journal*, vol. 1, no. 3, Spring 1992; also http://www.objectivistcenter.org/articles/dkelley_review-objectivism-philosophy-of-ayn-rand.asp]

Kelley is here replying to Peikoff's discussion of this very issue on pp. 247–48 of *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*. In this passage, Peikoff maintains that the "choice to live" is not "arbitrary," "whimsical," or "groundless" merely because it is "primary". His conclusion is that someone who chooses not to live nevertheless still has a "moral status" within the Objectivist ethics: "such a man, according to Objectivism, would belong on the lowest rung of hell" [*OPAR*, p. 249].

But Peikoff is confusing the question at issue with a different one. The question he should be addressing is: "If the Objectivist ethics, as applied to a specific individual, simply tells him how to implement his 'choice to live' if and only if he makes this choice positively, then what moral obligations, if any, does Objectivism say are binding on someone who has *not* made that choice positively?" The question he actually answers in the end (and Kelley thinks he has answered even this one incorrectly) is: "What should be an Objectivist's *own* moral evaluation of one who has not 'chosen to live'?" The two questions need not have the same answer if, as we here claim, the Objectivist ethics rests on a fundamentally subjective "choice". Peikoff's implicit assertion to the contrary involves a *petitio principii*.

At any rate, the view Kelley here describes is held not only by Peikoff (despite his moralizing to the contrary) but also by other Objectivists and neo-Objectivists writing in the field of ethical theory: for example, Tara Smith in *Moral Rights and Political Freedom* and *Viable Values*. (From the first of these works: "My proposal is not that life is an intrinsic good [note well] that people have an unchosen duty to

preserve [note the fudged transition from “intrinsic goodness” to “unchosen duty”]. We have no natural or preordained obligation to live, regardless of whether we would like to. Rather, life is to be sought if and because an individual chooses it” [p. 43]. To her credit, Smith at least recognizes that “[t]o speak of ‘the choice to live’ is somewhat artificial” [p. 44].) We are dealing here with a tenet common to all ethical theories that have a claim to the title “Objectivist”: there are no “categorical imperatives,” and all “hypothetical imperatives” are based on a fundamental choice about which the Objectivist ethic can give no moral guidance whatsoever.

ETHICAL AXIOMS?

At one time Rand appears to have attempted to get around this problem by taking the value to oneself of one’s own survival as axiomatic. “Man needs a rational decision, an axiom understood and consciously accepted: I wish to survive—my survival is desirable. In accepting this, he has accepted the standard and the first axiom of morality.... If anyone now asks: But why do I have to hold my survival as desirable?—The answer is: You don’t have to. It is an axiom, to be accepted as self-evident. If it is not self-evident to you, you have an alternative: admit that your survival is not desirable and get out of the way” [*Journals of Ayn Rand*, p. 303; Murray Rothbard makes a similar argument in *The Ethics of Liberty*, pp. 32–33].

Yet she has earlier written, “The axiom of the only morality proper to man is: *Man exists and must survive as man*. All that which furthers his survival is the good. All that which obstructs it is evil” [*Journals*, p. 255]. This is of course a different axiom; “my” survival is not the same thing as man’s survival either in general or as such, and we shall shortly see that the two principles are, or may be, in direct conflict with one another. It is not hard to see why editor David Harriman inserts a note at this point: “AR later rejected the idea that ethics began with an axiom” [*ibid.*].

But according to Allan Gotthelf, her rejection is not a rejection of ethical axioms as such. In *On Ayn Rand* he characterizes Rand's ethic as we have characterized it here—that is, as involving no “categorical imperatives” and as completely dependent on one's choice to live (the choice which allegedly establishes one's own life as one's “ultimate value”) [p. 84]. “But,” he continues, “that does not render moral values subjective, i.e., inventions of consciousness, or irrational. Just as one cannot ask for proof of an axiom, but must understand that all proof rests on the self-evident fact expressed in the axiom, so one cannot ask why one should choose to live, because all ‘should’s rest on that choice” [*ibid.*]. For Gotthelf, then, the value of one's own life to oneself is axiomatic and self-evident.

We must be very careful here. Gotthelf does acknowledge that Rand abandons her earlier belief that “ethics *begins* with an axiom” [*On Ayn Rand*, p. 22; emphasis mine]. But the context of his statement makes clear that his meaning is as follows: Rand comes to reject the notion that the *science* of ethics begins from an axiom and works its way along *via* deduction; her later approach begins by asking why man needs a code of values in the first place. Cf. p. 43 n. 4: Rand “certainly does not hold that all human knowledge is *deduced*...from these axioms.... [S]he holds that...axioms are that *by which* we reason, not that *from which* we do” [emphasis his]. Gotthelf is not saying, then, that Rand rejects the axiomaticity of the “choice to live”—only that she comes to think ethics does not *begin* with such an axiom.

We shall not return here to the question whether Objectivists are epistemologically entitled to speak of “self-evidence”. It is a pity, though, that Rand devotes so little reflection to the process of ferreting out ethical axioms. Henry Sidgwick, in the chapter entitled “Philosophical Intuitionism” in *The Methods of Ethics*, finds several that Rand misses; his list includes not only the axiom of Prudence but also the axioms of Justice and Benevolence [*The Methods of Ethics*, Chapter XIII, pp. 373–390]. Indeed, we shall see, later in this chapter and in

the next, that owing to such unreflectiveness, Objectivism attempts to reduce both benevolence and justice to prudence.

(It is not just obvious that our own future interests deserve any more weight in our decisionmaking than the present interests of others, and that prudence is thus a sounder foundational principle for ethics than benevolence. Cf. Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, pp. 15–17; cf. also Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, on the relation of such issues to the nature of “personhood”. Parfit seems at times to think that our obligations to other persons are *clearer* than our obligations to our future selves; e.g., “We ought not to do to our future selves what it would be wrong to do to other people” [*Reasons and Persons*, p. 320]. Similarly, Royce did not think it obvious that we should care more about our future selves than we do about present others; see *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*, pp. 156–157. Cf. Peter Fuss, *The Moral Philosophy of Josiah Royce*, pp. 35–36: “Critical reflection...finds no rational warrant for regarding my own future states that I do not now experience as any more or less ‘real’ than the present and future states of my fellow men which are not now my own.”)

The same unreflectiveness is evidently at work in Rand’s conflation of two very different principles: that it is morally proper to seek one’s own advantage/well-being, and that it is morally proper to seek *only* one’s own advantage/well-being. We called attention earlier to Rand’s apparent inability to deal with conditionality, matters of degree, and *prima facie* considerations that must be weighed against one another. In her ethics, she tends to collapse all moral concerns into self-regard, apparently on the view that if it is not morally proper for one to be the moral beneficiary of one’s actions, one is morally required to “sacrifice” oneself, i.e., to die. Her conclusion is that, morally, one *must* be the intended beneficiary of all one’s actions. But this does not follow; it is entirely possible, at least for all Rand has said about it, that prudent self-regard *and* justice *and* benevolence set the moral limits within which we ought to act (and therefore rule out Randian “sacrifice” without reducing all of our moral aims to self-regard).

Nor, likewise, is it clear that Rand's own axiom, whatever it is, is *the* axiom at which we arrive by ferreting out the absolute presuppositions of ethics. Alan Gewirth's "dialectic" approach in *Reason and Morality* arrives at what he calls the "Principle of Generic Consistency", namely, "Act in accord with the generic rights of your recipients as well as of yourself" [p. 135; the original is italicized]. This principle, Gewirth alleges, must logically be acknowledged by any agent whatsoever on pain of something like performative contradiction and therefore is, at least functionally, something like an absolute presupposition of agency. (It therefore also recalls Hans-Hermann Hoppe's attempted derivation of property rights by way of a similarly dialectic method; see *The Economics and Ethics of Private Property*.) But Gewirth's principle enjoins recognition both of negative ("freedom") rights and positive ("well-being") rights. Rand would of course disagree that we have positive rights to well-being. But in order to *show* this, it is not sufficient to prove that negative obligations are axiomatic, for this does not show that positive obligations are not *also* axiomatic.

At any rate, Rand takes the value to oneself of one's own survival as in some way axiomatic. According to Gotthelf, she eventually ceases to believe (if indeed she ever did believe) that ethics is deductively *derived* from this axiom, but she retains her belief in the axiom itself. Since she seems to retain this belief throughout her philosophical career, we must examine her argument briefly in order to evaluate her axiology.

The argument in view here seems to be something like the following. In order to pursue any course of action at all, including suicide, I must clearly be alive in the first place. Therefore my failure to value my life, indeed to hold it as my ultimate value, would involve me in a practical contradiction.

This is nonsense. We might as well say that if I hold being cured of AIDS as a value, then—since I cannot be cured unless I have the disease in the first place—I would be contradicting myself if I did not regard *having* AIDS as a value. It is just false that in order to value X I must also value all the causal preconditions of X. It is also false that in

order to pursue values I must value my own life in any way other than instrumentally—and even then, David Kelley’s “physical survivalism” to the contrary notwithstanding, I may be able to pursue certain values *by means of* my death.

MORAL OBLIGATIONS NOT ARISING FROM THE “CHOICE TO LIVE”

At any rate, though, this argument does not get at the root of the problem. For there seems to be a clear sense in which I *am* subject to “categorical imperatives” quite apart from my own “choice to live”.

Consider another thought experiment. I have decided to commit suicide, and am now driving my car at ninety miles an hour toward an embankment for the purpose of killing myself. Moments before I hit, a little girl wanders out in front of my car. Should I swerve to miss her, or should I ignore her and run her over?

The point is not that this scenario is likely to occur. The point is that if I am under *any moral obligation at all* to avoid mowing the little girl down even when I myself am hell-bent on death and about to achieve it, then I have a source of obligation other than my own choice (axiomatic or otherwise) “to live”—one, indeed, altogether independent of this alleged “choice,” and one setting limits within which my own “choice” must be exercised.

Since Rand denies that I have any such obligation, she must also deny that the well-being of persons other than myself directly imposes any sort of moral constraint on my behavior. Despite her assertions to the contrary, then, her ethic provides no foundation for either benevolence or rights—both of which involve respect for the well-being of persons other than oneself for reasons not strictly reducible to the prudent pursuit of one’s own self-interest. (And while Rand herself may have been loath to draw the appropriate conclusion from the foregoing thought experiment, some Objectivists have, in discussions with me,

adopted the position that the suicidal driver in fact does not have any moral obligation to avoid hitting the child.)

We are not being perversely anti-Objectivist in making this claim; even Rand's former associate David Kelley has noticed the difficulty here. As regards rights, he acknowledges that even if "I understand that your freedom is good for you in exactly the same way that my freedom is good for me, I don't yet have a reason for regarding your freedom as good for me. But this is precisely the point that must be established if we are going to validate rights on the basis of ethical egoism" ["How Principles Work," in *Liberty*, November 1992, pp. 63–76; quoted in Jeff Walker, *The Ayn Rand Cult*, pp. 235–236].

Here Kelley sees more clearly than his former mentor. Rand herself takes the (strangely Kantian) line that each human life is metaphysically an end in itself (*VOS*, pp. 17–18, 30), but never quite gets around to explaining why *your* metaphysical-end-in-itself life should be an *ethical* end-in-itself for *me*; nor does she seem to notice that there is a problem in the passage from one to the other. One's needs, she insists, do not impose ethical obligations on others; yet the fact that you *need* freedom is somehow supposed to confer on me an obligation to respect your rights. The argument for this claim is not, of course, forthcoming, and indeed Rand is not urging respect for rights *as* rights at all.

As regards benevolence, Kelley has, to his everlasting credit, noticed that there is something fundamentally wrong with a philosophy whose adherents need to be told that it's okay to be nice. By way of telling them, he has written *Unrugged Individualism*, an attempt to place benevolence on a foundation of rational egoism. I do not think Kelley's account is ultimately successful, nor do I think any attempt to reduce benevolence to prudence can succeed; benevolence, like respect for rights, is irreducibly other-regarding, even if the practice of such other-regard is in fact in my own best interests as well. But the fact that Kelley makes this attempt is significant in that it points out a deep and glaring flaw in Rand's own ethical theory, and so we shall deal briefly with Kelley's difficulties.

In Chapter 2 of *UI*, Kelley tries to distinguish in good Randian fashion between “benevolence” and “altruism”. In so doing, he completely rules out the possibility that a human being may have legitimate *moral* reason to seek the well-being of another without “ulterior” motives. His oversight is particularly obvious in the following: “[W]e cannot accept the premise that someone else’s need is a moral claim on our efforts and resources, overriding the use of those efforts and resources for our own benefit—without coming to see other people as threats and feeling hostility toward them” [*UI*, p. 9].

Acknowledging *any* such moral claim would have this effect? This is surely an overstatement.

If I can rescue a drowning man at very small cost to myself—say by throwing him the life preserver I happen to be carrying—then surely I have *some* moral reason to do so; on any rational scale of values, the life of another human being is a much greater value (quite apart from whether he is a “potential trading partner”) than the bit of time and trouble it will cost me to rescue him. There is, in short, a very clear “moral claim” on me to rescue him: if I am a sane, mature, rational adult human being, I *will* regard the preservation of his life as a greater value than a few moments of my own time. And I *should* be a sane, mature, rational adult human being—and therefore should *want* to rescue him.

In Chapter 5 of *UI* we see—to borrow a Randian phrase—some chickens coming home to roost. Kelley begins this later chapter by acknowledging, “Benevolence is obviously concerned with our relationships with other people” (p. 22), and then proceeds to identify the “values” it seeks as consequences strictly to *oneself*.

In fact benevolence is concerned with other people, period, and the value it seeks is their well-being. Consequences to oneself are not irrelevant; they determine whether, and when, it is prudent to be benevolent (and for that matter whether one enjoys being benevolent). But they are not the values benevolence itself seeks.

Kelley seems to be unable to acknowledge as much, and the reason is pretty clear. It is that his thought has been drawn out of its orbit by his devotion to Rand's theory of value—so much so that he apparently bases part of his argument on her *temperament*. There can be, I think, little doubt about the origin of his view that we will come to see other people as “threats” and feel “hostility” toward them as a simple consequence of acknowledging that their needs impose moral claims on us. One is tempted to adopt Rand's rhetorical style for just long enough to reply: Speak for yourself, brother.

(At any rate, this alleged problem should also affect our respect for the *rights* of others, should it not? Recall that for Rand, a “right” is

a moral principle sanctioning a man's freedom of action in a social context. There is only *one* fundamental right (all the others are its consequences or corollaries): a man's right to his own life.... [T]he right to life means the right to engage in self-sustaining and self-generated action—which means: the freedom to take all the actions required by the nature of a rational being for the support, the furtherance, the fulfillment, and the enjoyment of his own life. [“Man's Rights,” in *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 110; also in *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, pp. 321–322; emphasis Rand's.]

Is others' “right to life” not a moral constraint imposed on me by the “needs” of others, and one which at least materially affects my use of my “efforts and resources”? If my resentment of this claim is sufficient to refute it in the case of benevolence, why not in the case of rights as well?)

ONE'S LIFE AS ONE'S “HIGHEST VALUE”

If it has been difficult for Objectivist ethics to acknowledge the virtue of benevolence, it is because of a basic error (or, more charitably, an “ambiguity”) that we have traced to Rand's own writings: that values

make sense only with reference to one's own life as one's "highest value".

This odd assertion is at the heart of Rand's approach to ethics and provides the keystone of her "derivation" of rational egoism. As I shall argue, however, it is fraught with misunderstandings and would not suffice as a basis for strict rational egoism if it were understood in a more reasonable way.

Consider Rand's own argument in "The Objectivist Ethics" [VOS, pp. 17–18]. For the moment we shall accept without demur her contention that "value" makes no sense apart from "life". But her hair-raising derivation of "egoism" consists of little but bare asseverations that means require an ultimate end; that means require a *single* ultimate end; and that this ultimate end must be the valuing agent's *own* life to the exclusion of any others.

Now, Rand is surely correct that a series of means going off to infinity makes no sense. Eventually, for any given agent A, we must come to an end or ends that A pursues for its or their own sake. (In the ethical terminology that Rand refuses to adopt, these ends are what we have called "intrinsic" goods.) But there is no obvious reason why this end must be singular. Rand's argument on this point reminds me, both in quality and in brevity, of the one usually offered to show that every household requires a single head (male, of course!) who has final authority over every decision.

The latter argument clearly fails; there is no reason that, for example, the decisions in a given household might not fall into two classes, regarding each of which the husband and the wife, respectively, had final say.

Nor is any one "final authority" needed *within* the household in order to apportion these responsibilities; they can surely be assigned by mutual agreement in a more or less "natural" way, in accordance with the talents, skills, and availability of the respective spouses. (In religious households, such mutual agreement may consist at least in part of submission to a divine authority Who is presumed to *know* the "natural"

talents and skills of each spouse and therefore to be in a better position to apportion responsibilities.) If so, then the ultimate “arbiter” is just reality—as construed, at least ideally, by reason.

Similarly, the fact that there may be conflict between two or more “ends” does not in any way imply that a single end of one’s own must be set apart as having “final say”. Even on Rand’s own terms, it is *reason*—albeit her own restricted understanding of it—that has “final say” and serves as ultimate arbiter in any conflict of values. (“Who decides, in case of disagreements? As in all issues pertaining to objectivity, there is no ultimate authority, except reality and the mind of every individual who judges the evidence by the *objective* method of judgment: logic” [*Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, p. 46; her emphasis]. Incidentally, libertarian readers may also recall that the young Roy Childs, an anarchist at the time, used this passage to devastating effect against Rand’s claim that a government is needed in order to promulgate and enforce “objective” laws.)

And herein lies a clue to a better understanding of “man’s life *qua* man,” and an account of what we might call “rational eudaemonism” that is able to recognize benevolence as a virtue without distorting its meaning.

It *is* true, in a sense, that each of us has a “single” overarching end: it consists of that collection of “ultimate” or “intrinsic” goods which, all things considered, we *would* seek for their own sakes if our desires and goals were fully informed and modified by reflective reason, and which would constitute our “ideal” life.

We may say straightforwardly, if broadly and vaguely, that our ultimate aim is to live as *well* (not necessarily as “long”!) as reasonably possible. And the advantage of putting the matter thus is that we do not need to single out a specific “ultimate end” as arbiter over the rest; our ideal “end” is of a different order from the particular ends it both comprises and adjudicates.

That is an advantage because the process of reflection itself will undoubtedly modify many, perhaps all, of our current desires and

goals. Just as knowledge of good and evil, in Rand's view, begins with the experience of pleasure and pain, we may and probably do understand the perpetuation of our physical existence as our "ultimate end" at an early stage of reflection. But as we learn that pleasure and pain are fallible and in some cases false guides to what is genuinely good for us, so also we learn that there is more to life than sheer "survival". We come to regard our "life" as a concretely embodied *human* life, in human community with other human beings, whom we value directly and with whom we have (or develop) common interests. It is *this* life—life as "man *qua* man," if we like—that we recognize as our "ultimate end," and it is this life against which all our other proposed "values" are measured, each one taking its ultimate value (if any) from its place (if any) in this overarching whole.

One of the most important ways in which our values are modified is by taking account of the well-being of persons other than ourselves. If we are not narcissists or sociopaths, we learn fairly early on that these others are *people* too—ends in themselves, like us, with "goods" and "bads" of their own—and that our actions can either promote or hinder their "goods". And, crucially, we learn that their "goods" are goods in the same sense as our own, but in relation to their lives rather than ours.

And if we are consistent, we shall eventually recognize that as "interests" go, there is nothing special about "mine"; we can find fulfillment and take satisfaction in the promotion of others' well-being just as easily, or nearly so, as in the promotion of our own. Given this recognition, our understanding of our "ultimate end" is also modified by reflection: what we now ultimately seek is a life that in some sense helps to promote and preserve human good, including but not limited to our own, based on our rational recognition of ourselves *as* human beings and therefore as part of a human community. And we now find our own fulfillment as a "value-seeking personality" (I believe the phrase is Robert Bidinotto's) in the living of such a properly human life, in and through the practice of properly human virtues.

For at least the early Royce, it is crucial here that such recognition of others involves our coming to share their aims in a literal way: “Who can realize a given aim save by repeating it in himself?” [*The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*, p. 137]. We may not be able to maintain full consciousness of one another’s reality all the time—indeed, Royce believed that we could so only in fits and starts [*ibid.*, pp. 153–154]—but the fact that we can do it at all is the foundation of Royce’s essential moral maxim (from among the several variants of which I quote the shortest): “Act always in the light of the completest insight into all the aims that thy act is to effect” [*ibid.*, p. 141; the original is italicized].

As philosopher Robert Bass once pointed out to me, this account involves something like the Stoic concept of *oikeiosis*, a process in which we gradually expand our self-concept and recognize larger and larger parts of the whole as “ours”—and for that matter to Bass’s own “constructivist eudaemonism” [“Toward a Constructivist Eudaemonism,” Bass’s Ph.D. dissertation; online at <http://personal.bgsu.edu/~roberth/disser.html>]. It also bears a close relationship to Brand Blanshard’s account of the “rational will” in *Reason and Goodness* [pp. 395–408], an account which in turn owes a great deal to Bernard Bosanquet’s account of the “real will” and T.H. Green’s attempt to salvage something from Rousseau’s tortured account of the “general will”. Unlike Rousseau’s account, the present account does not require us to be “stripped of our powers” in order to enter into a “social contract” and be “forced to be free”.

(Incidentally, Royce’s variant of this doctrine involved the further claim that we are all of us bound up in a single overarching Self. Among present-day philosophers Timothy L.S. Sprigge also defends a view of this sort, and in chapter 8 we saw Raymond Smullyan offer something like it as a resolution of the free-will/determinism conflict. I agree with this further claim, but it is not necessary to our exposition at this point.)

Our ultimate aim itself is unchanged; it is still (as we put it above) what “we *would* seek...if our desires and goals were fully informed and

modified by reflective reason, and [what] would constitute our ‘ideal’ life”. But now—“all things considered”—our understanding of this aim takes account of the well-being of persons other than ourselves, and we may equally well describe our “ultimate end” as human well-being generally, with our own well-being realized in part through our participation in the promotion of others’. At this point we cease speaking exclusively of “good for me” and “good for you,” and speak instead of “good, period”. (This possibility may irk some “rational egoists”. But I see nothing rational about denying that another person’s good is just as objective a good as my own; if egoism commits us to such irrationality, we will not alter that fact merely by calling egoism “rational”. And if we must choose between rationality and egoism, it is egoism that must go.)

The resulting ethic, a sort of “multi-person egoism” (or, interpreted along Roycean lines, an “egoism of the overarching Self”) is very much in the mainstream of traditional idealism (for example T.H. Green’s *Prolegomena to Ethics* and F.H. Bradley’s *Ethical Studies*). It is really a version of eudaemonism, which I (and others) have suggested calling “rational eudaemonism”. What this ethic seeks to promote is human self-realization and self-fulfillment, but it does not consign each person exclusively to the sole pursuit of his *own* fulfillment as an artificially isolated ideal. On this account, our ethical ideal is, quite literally, a “common good” that at once coherently includes our individual goods and provides the foundation of our rights against one another.

An earlier version of this understanding was also well expressed by Spinoza, who wrote as follows:

Men, I repeat, can wish for nothing more excellent for preserving their own being than that they should all be in such harmony in all respects that their minds and bodies should compose, as it were, one mind and one body, and that all together should endeavor as best they can to preserve their own being, and that all together should aim at the common advantage of all. From this it follows that men who are governed by reason, seek nothing for themselves

that they would not desire for the rest of mankind; and so are just, faithful and honorable [Scholium to Prop. 18, Part IV; quoted from *Ethics, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect, and Selected Letters*, tr. Samuel Shirley, p. 164].

J.B. Schneewind has with justice called this “one of the most remarkable remarks in all [Spinoza’s] writings” [Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy*, p. 224]. For all its remarkableness, Rand and Peikoff seem to have overlooked it in holding out Spinoza as one of the “rare dissenters” who upheld the “principle of egoism” [OPAR, p. 248], as they also overlooked his proposition that “[t]he highest good of those who pursue virtue is common to all, and all can equally enjoy it” [Part IV, Prop. 36, in Shirley, *op. cit.*]. (Schneewind, of course, does not overlook Spinoza’s assertion of a genuine common good but points to it as the foundation of the “deep difference” between the positions of Spinoza and Hobbes as regards self-interest [Schneewind, *op. cit.*, p. 222].)

What underlies and informs Spinoza’s view here is a view of the “individual” that is at odds with Rand’s. Genevieve Lloyd gets this just right and sees its relevance to an issue that will shortly concern us: for Spinoza, “[t]he dichotomy between self-seeking and altruism...falls away” [*Spinoza and the Ethics*, p. 9].

Some other commentators—notably Jonathan Bennett [*A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics*, pp. 299–307]—have found Spinoza’s apparent attempt to reconcile egoism and collaborative morality quite unconvincing, and for very much the sort of reason that is usually adduced against Rand’s own claim that the interests of rational persons never conflict. (See “The ‘Conflicts’ of Men’s Interests,” in *The Virtue of Selfishness*, pp. 57–65. Jeff Walker quotes Objectivist William Dwyer to the effect that “[g]enuine conflicts of interests are ordinary, everyday occurrences” and notes correctly that “espousing egoism in opposition to altruism *presupposes* genuine conflicts of interest” [*The Ayn Rand Cult*, p. 229; emphasis Walker’s]. We shall have a bit more to say shortly about Rand’s treatment of this issue.)

Lloyd thinks (and I agree) that Bennett has failed to understand and appreciate Spinoza's reconception of individuals and their relations. Spinoza, she writes, "is well aware of the inevitability of conflict between human beings" [*Spinoza and the Ethics*, p. 75]—and therefore, we add, immune to the most obvious criticism of Rand's own approach to this issue. "Rather than a reduction of supposedly altruistic behaviour to egoism, what we find in Spinoza is a reconceptualising of the relations between individuals" [*ibid.*]. To be an individual *is* to be in relations to other persons—relations not merely "social" but causal. To miss this point, as Lloyd says Bennett has missed it, is to miss the full significance of Spinoza's insistence on a good literally common to those governed by reason.

While such an account of a "common good" does not require "sacrifice" in Rand's odd sense of the word, it does allow for the possibility that one may properly give up one's time, money, or even life in order to promote or preserve what one rationally regards as a greater value in the form of others' well-being; indeed, it recognizes that one may be rationally obliged to do so by one's commitment to live as a fully human being, responsible for helping to maintain the conditions that make a fully human community possible. (It also provides a more sympathetic account of people previously dismissed by some Objectivists as "altruists," "social metaphysicians," and "second-handers," many of whom are more ethically mature than the Objectivists who have called them such derisive names.)

To see the relevance of this account to the foregoing discussion of "benevolence," recall David Kelley's remarks on the values secured by benevolence.

To one camp (the one to which I belong), it is perfectly clear that there is something right and good about the virtue of benevolence, so clear that indeed we think there must be something wrong with anyone who cannot see it; the values it seeks—the life, health, and well-being of one's fellow humans—are among the most obvious values in the

world to any sane adult and surely deserve to be well represented in the value-hierarchy of any genuinely “value-seeking personality”.

To the others—and unfortunately I must include David Kelley in this class—the notion that one must preserve one’s own physical life at all costs forms an ideological “cyst” that resists further analysis and is never opened to serious question or reflection. For them, all other human values must rally round in service of this unquestioned “ultimate value,” and the result, as we have seen, is utter distortion of the very meaning of those values; even the virtue of “benevolence” is wrenched entirely away from its proper object and reduced without remainder to the seeking of beneficial “consequences” for oneself. (Cf. Leonard Peikoff: “A man must respect the freedom of human beings for a selfish reason: he stands to benefit enormously from their rational actions” [*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, p. 358].)

It is crucial here to differentiate carefully, as Rand and Kelley do not, between two different propositions. The first is that cooperation is generally beneficial even to persons motivated solely by their own self-interest. The second is that this sort of cooperation is what we mean by benevolence (or, for that matter, respect for rights).

The first proposition has received quite a workout over the last thirty or forty years, especially in the vast literature generated by the “Prisoner’s Dilemma”. For the reader not familiar with the Prisoner’s Dilemma scenario, I shall present a very short summary, based on the account in Douglas R. Hofstadter’s *Metamagical Themas*. (Hofstadter thinks, and I agree, that this version is easier to understand than the original version. On similar grounds William Poundstone states the dilemma in such a form in *The Prisoner’s Dilemma*, pp. 103–105.)

Smith and Jones want to make a trade that for some reason (make up your own) has to be conducted in secret and without their actually meeting. They agree to handle it in the following manner. Smith will drop off a bag of money in a locker on one side of town; at the same time, Jones will drop off a bag of goods in a locker on the other side of town. Then each will pick up the other item from the other locker.

After that, the two of them will never see or hear from one another again.

The “dilemma” is this. Smith can reason to himself that he can “do better” by not leaving the money in the locker after all (for example leaving an empty bag instead). His reasoning is that no matter what Jones does—i.e. whether Jones holds up his end of the bargain or not—Smith benefits more by keeping the money; if Jones leaves the goods, then Smith gets them for free, whereas if Jones doesn’t deliver as promised, Smith would be a fool to part with a bagful of money in exchange for nothing. But of course Jones can engage in parallel reasoning on his side, and so it seems that each of them is better off reneging on the deal. And yet they would clearly have “done better” if each of them *had* kept the agreement: Smith would have gotten the goods he preferred to the money, and Jones would have gotten the money he preferred to the goods.

(The dilemma is called the “Prisoner’s Dilemma” because it was originally stated as a case of two prisoners facing different prison terms according to whether one or the other, or both, confessed to their joint crime. As I mentioned, I agree with Hofstadter that this scenario is less clear than the two-bags scenario.)

The dilemma seems to show that under some circumstances, reason can lead two self-interested persons to a less than optimal outcome even though, from an impersonal standpoint, it also seems rational for them to cooperate. We have posed the dilemma here in terms of a somewhat unrealistic thought experiment, but there are real-world situations that approximate it fairly well (arms races, for example).

However, most relevantly in the present context, political theorist Robert Axelrod has shown in *The Evolution of Cooperation* that under the right conditions, cooperation can emerge even in a society of purely self-interested actors who interact in an *iterated* version of the Prisoner’s Dilemma. In a pair of round-robin computer tournaments, Axelrod found that under some reasonable circumstances, the game-theoretic strategy that “does best” for itself has the interesting property

of never being the first to “defect”. The winning strategy (submitted by game theorist and peace activist Anatol Rapoport and dubbed TIT FOR TAT) was almost absurdly simple: begin by cooperating, and thereafter do whatever your “opponent” did on the preceding iteration. In further computer simulations, Axelrod was able to show that a small cadre of TIT FOR TAT “cooperators” could increase their numbers and come to predominate in a large population.

Axelrod’s work on Rapoport’s TIT FOR TAT strategy and its surprising success has generated volumes of discussion (and is discussed in Hofstadter’s *Metamagical Themas* as well). Its implications are not limited to politics and ethics; the reader interested in its importance for evolutionary biology and psychology will find helpful expositions in e.g. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, pp. 202–233; Karl Sigmund, *Games of Life*, pp. 180–206; and Matt Ridley, *The Origins of Virtue*, especially pp. 51–66. Those issues aside, the ethical relevance of Axelrod’s work is that it seems show, in what looks superficially like a Randian-Kelleyite sense, that even pure egoists have reason to take one another’s well-being into account in a world of repeated social interactions.

Axelrod’s work is unusually deep and persuasive, but the claim it supports is not a new one. Indeed, the much-maligned Herbert Spencer seems to have had something similar in mind in his account of “survival of the fittest,” for contrary to common misconception, his claim was that in a free society, the “fittest” are precisely those who cooperate rather than exploit. (See George H. Smith’s excellent essay “Will the Real Herbert Spencer Please Stand Up?” in *Atheism, Ayn Rand, and Other Heresies*, pp. 239ff., especially pp. 242–246.) More recently, Derek Parfit has adduced a special sense in which, under a “Prisoner’s Dilemma” scenario, a morality of strict self-interest may actually be self-defeating [*Reasons and Persons*, p. 88–91]. Michael Scriven has come very near to this in his claim that a group of people can increase its life expectancy by following the moral rule: “give up

[your] own life if [you] can thereby save two or more others” [*Primary Philosophy*, p. 243].

Scriven can also help us to see why these arguments do not support the Objectivist account of benevolence. On his view, “[t]he unselfish interest in another is one of a man’s *own* interests but not one of his *selfish* interests. The moral significance of unselfish behavior is that it helps others ‘for their own sake,’ implying ‘not for what they or others will do in return’” [*ibid.*, p. 235].

The point is that there is a difference, and a moral one, between pursuing or promoting someone else’s well-being as an end in itself (where our interest is in precisely this well-being) and doing so as a means to a *further* goal of one’s own. The former is benevolence; the latter is simply prudence. It is good to know (if it is true) that benevolence and prudence are not ordinarily at odds. But in order to argue that they are compatible, we must first recognize that they are different.

Practically, of course, it is important and helpful to show that society will not fall apart simply because people pursue their own interests (and that Hobbes was therefore wrong that a central authority is required in order to bring about a cooperative society). Theoretically, the success of TIT FOR TAT has great explanatory power in contexts where ethics are not at issue. But morally, if we are trying to be benevolent, it is not enough simply to play the TIT FOR TAT strategy; it matters *why* we play it. If we are simply trying (as the strategists in Axelrod’s tournaments were instructed to try) to achieve the highest score for ourselves without in any way caring how well other “players” do, then under the right circumstances cooperation may emerge, but benevolence has not yet entered the picture.

Kelley’s account of “benevolence,” then, is actually an account of *prudence* applied to one’s relationships with other people. And if, as it appears, we are forced to choose between benevolence and egoism, it is egoism that we must be prepared to relinquish; the values secured by benevolence are far more obviously worthy of pursuit, and therefore far more obviously rational, than those secured by any form of “egoism”

that would ignore them. Among these forms we must include Rand's allegedly "new" one.

For Rand is, as we shall see, at great pains to deny the very point that makes "rational eudaemonism" work: that a rational agent, as such, can grasp the intrinsic goodness of someone else's well-being. (And note that this sort of "intrinsicism," too, depends on rational insight of the very type that Rand excoriates in her epistemology.)

For that matter, theories of intrinsic goodness aside, Rand seems to have been all but immune to the central "moral insight" that drives Royce's early account of ethics—the full realization that, as I put it above, other people are *people*. (More precisely, Royce's clearest statement of this realization characterizes it as "insight into the fact of the existence of other conscious wills besides our own, coupled with full rational appreciation of this truth" [*The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*, p. 172].) As Barbara Branden puts it in *The Passion of Ayn Rand*: "To Ayn, other people were not fully real; they were moving and breathing abstractions, they were, for good or ill, the embodiments of moral and psychological principles" [p. 263]. In light of the personal histories published by both of the Brandens, it is probably fair to add that in many cases, "other people" were "embodiments" only of the abstractions that Rand herself had projected onto them.

This peculiar blindness to the reality of other persons has consequences for Rand's ethics. For Royce, the essential "moral insight" by nature involves the principle that we should act, so far as we can, as if we and our neighbors constitute one life, as if there is a single overarching self who shares the conflicting aims of each of us. According to Royce, it has a corollary: "Act in such wise as to extend this moral insight to others" [p. 146]. On my own view it has another: that we should try to place and keep ourselves, so far as we can, in such a psycho-spiritual condition that we can *recognize* the aims of other persons, without distortion or misunderstanding. And as we noted above and shall note again below, Royce also claimed that we cannot fully recognize the aims of other persons without in some sense making them our

own. (Thus in the real world, where it is not always clear just what constitutes cooperation or defection, the advice “play TIT FOR TAT” may already presume a high level of empathy.)

Perhaps the most fundamental criticism we can make of the Objectivist ethics—whether or not we wish to characterize it, as I have here, in terms of intrinsic goodness—is that it permits none of these things. It not only makes impossible the insight on which a fully interpersonal ethic rests but also, when practiced, actively prevents the development and spread of such insight. And it implicitly depends on the dubious claim, further discussed below, that we can adequately recognize the ends and goals of persons other than ourselves without in any sense coming to share them.

Part of the difficulty here no doubt stems from Rand’s antipathy toward categorical imperatives. Her own ethics is supposed to consist of purely hypothetical imperatives: “Reality confronts man with a great many ‘musts,’ but all of them are conditional; the formula of realistic necessity is: ‘You must, if—’ and the ‘if’ stands for man’s choice” [“Causality vs. Duty,” in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 99]. But an ethic dependent on an irreducible act of choice about which no moral guidance can be given is an ethic founded on subjectivism.

“EGOISM VS. ALTRUISM” AS A FALSE DICHOTOMY

Another, related part of the difficulty stems from Rand’s antipathy toward moral constraint generally, and specifically toward moral constraints imposed by the well-being of others. It is hard to find anyone who has ever defended her odd caricature of “altruism”; far more typical is Thomas Nagel’s “rational altruism,” of which he writes as follows: “By altruism I mean not abject self-sacrifice, but merely a willingness to act in consideration of the interests of other persons, without the need of ulterior motives” [*The Possibility of Altruism*, p.

79]—in other words, the ability and tendency to be motivated directly by the well-being of persons other than oneself, the foundation of both justice and benevolence.

We saw above that on Genevieve Lloyd's reading of Spinoza, the dichotomy between self-seeking and altruism ultimately disappears. On Rand's own view that the real interests of rational people are never in irresolvable conflict, there would appear also to be no irresolvable conflict between "egoism" and "altruism"; whether I seek to benefit myself or someone else, I will find that I cannot limit myself to the well-being solely of my intended beneficiary, but will find the well-being of the other party inextricably involved in the outcome. If I try to pursue your good at my own expense, I shall find either that what I am pursuing is not *really* your good after all—or that the expense is not *really* an expense. (Not that this will necessarily be obvious to us when we are embroiled in an actual case. As most of us know, it is ludicrously easy to misconceive one's own real interests and to misconstrue or downplay those of others—even without the aid of a philosophy that encourages us to rationalize our self-absorption.)

That is certainly Blanshard's opinion. Consider the following excerpt from a tape-recorded discussion with Blanshard held by Eugene Freeman:

Well, I'm inclined to think that a person does the most for the world by being his own self in the fullest measure.... I think we ought to aim in education to make each person fulfil himself most completely *on the grounds* that by making people more completely themselves we equip them best to be of use to the community. ["The Commitment to Excellence," in *The Philosophy of Brand Blanshard*, p. 443; emphasis in the original.]

And cf. this remark, from the same conversation, about Blanshard's *The Uses of a Liberal Education* (a collection of Blanshard's talks edited by Freeman):

I realize that for the most part the emphasis throughout that book is on personal self-realization, rather than contribution to the community. And I have raised a question or two myself—the question whether my theory isn't too individualistic and subjective and too nonutilitarian in the larger sense. My answer would be, in general, that I think that each person does the most for the community by being himself most completely. [*ibid.*]

Yet this is not the conclusion Rand draws; she claims to offer, not a new synthesis that resolves the false alternatives of egoism and altruism, but a new version of egoism that does away with altruism altogether. The primary mechanism by which she accomplishes her aim is the simple rejection (and denigration) of any action of which oneself is not the primary beneficiary.

As a result, her exposition of the claim that “there are no conflicts of interests among rational men” [“The ‘Conflicts’ Of Men’s Interests,” in *The Virtue of Selfishness*, pp. 57–65; the quoted phrase is from p. 57] is strained and artificial. It is not just that her account depends on her impoverished account of what it means to be “rational” and insists that our conflicts will simply go away if we will but recognize the Law of Identity; it is not just that Rand downplays, even ignores or denies, the existence of as-yet-unresolved conflicts of actual interest that do not reduce to the frustration of arbitrary “desires”. The deepest problem is that, for all of its apparent concern for life in “society,” it contains not the merest hint of a recognition that conflicts may be resolved, in part, by our counting another’s well-being among our own direct goals.

This failure renders Rand’s account *inhumane* in the fullest sense of the word. She writes, for example, that “a rational man never holds a desire...which cannot be achieved by his own effort” and never so much as “desires the *unearned*” [p. 60, emphasis hers].

This standard is flawed not because it is too rigorous—its rigor is a matter more of appearance than of substance—but because it is just misconceived. If the mere *possession* of a desire that requires the help of others is a sign of irrationality, if it is irrational even to *want* something

that one has not “earned” (whatever that means), then any of us who want to be “rational” had better get busy rooting out any such “desires” so that we, too, may be independent Randian heroes!

But the standard is just wrong. There is nothing irrational in a willingness to depend on the help of others. There is nothing irrational in a willingness to accept “unearned” benefits (even assuming that we had a genuinely rigorous moral theory that could *tell* us, correctly and with a high degree of precision, exactly what we *had* “earned,” as Rand’s certainly does not). Indeed, as we remarked some chapters back, there is nothing irrational in relying on one’s emotions as at least a tentative guide to what one’s “interests” really are in the first place. People who genuinely value one another, who want one another to do well and feel good, do not need, and may even be positively harmed by, Rand’s ill-conceived, falsely rigorous standard of “rationality”.

Rand’s failure here has consequences throughout the rest of her philosophy, including its economic theory. At least some free-market economists have held that the apparent conflict between egoism and altruism is irrelevant in a strictly economic context, where the only goods at issue are exchangeable goods; whatever its ethical import, the distinction is of no consequence as regards the nature of economic activity. Here, for example, is Murray Rothbard:

[W]hichever moral philosophy we adopt—whether egoism or altruism—we *cannot criticize* the pursuit of monetary income on the market. If we hold an *egoistic* social ethic, then obviously we can only applaud the maximization of monetary income, or of a mixture of monetary and other psychic income, on the market.... However, even if we adopt an *altruistic* ethic, we must applaud maximization of monetary income just as fervently. For market earnings are a social index of one’s services to others, at least in the sense that any services are exchangeable. [*Power and Market*, p. 224; emphases his.]

In contrast, consider the following from George Reisman’s monumental volume *Capitalism*:

Economics as a science studies the rational pursuit of material self-interest.... Economics and capitalism are a...challenge to the morality of altruism....The teachings of economics encounter opposition not only from the supporters of altruism, but also from the practitioners of an irrational, short-sighted, self-defeating form of self-interest as well. [pp. 33–34.]

Note that Reisman—once a friend of Murray Rothbard who entered Rand’s inner circle from Rothbard’s “Circle Bastiat”—is concerned to distinguish between rational and irrational forms of self-interest but never does likewise for “altruism”. Egoism is assumed to be available in two forms, but the possibility of Nagel’s “rational altruism” is simply not raised. Yet should there not be such a thing as rational other-regard, and does not the science of economics apply to it too? Does the free market not also coordinate and “economize,” say, the distribution of charity?

And is there not such a thing as an “irrational, short-sighted, self-defeating form” of other-regard as well? Are not the forms of “altruism” which Rand excoriated precisely those forms of it which fail to recognize the genuine good of the beneficiary or seek it in some destructive fashion, or both? Indeed, as the sages of Judaism taught long ago, even if our goals are purely altruistic, do we not have to “economize” our benevolence in order to sustain ourselves for further giving and service?

(Reisman’s introduction to his volume makes clear that he regards his association with both Rand and Ludwig von Mises as placing him within the very highest intellectual lineage. But on the subject of ethics, and in particular on the difference between egoism and altruism, von Mises is no more reliable than Rand. I am reminded of Blanshard’s comment on von Mises’s utilitarianism as described in *Socialism*: “[H]ow the aim at ‘the greatest pleasure of the acting individual’ could be described as ‘altruism’ I do not understand” [*Reason and Analysis*, p. 53, n.2].)

In each of these contexts, what seems to be missing from Objectivism is a recognition that one person's well-being may be another person's value just *because* it is seen to be "good" in the sense we have here described—that is, as the fulfillment of some aim or end of a sentient agent. Writes Walter Goodnow Everett:

It is because the self is capable of including within its own interests the interests of others that altruism is possible. Some degree of it, indeed, may be said to be inevitable. Once it is seen that the self is a social self, the sharp opposition between egoism and altruism breaks down. The antithesis, if pressed too far, loses all meaning, since no individual can realize his personal interests without including more or less fully the interests of others. [*Moral Values*, p. 234.]

"It is entirely possible, in fact quite common, for *your* well-being to become something I want," writes Peter Fuss:

What the self-realizationist wishes to emphasize is that any voluntary, deliberate, responsible act on the part of a human agent is prompted by his self-conscious awareness for something that *he* wants—but not necessarily something he wants merely for *his own* sake, or private advantage. Properly speaking, the difference between the egoist and the altruist is not that the former aims at self-satisfaction whereas the latter does not. Rather, it is that the former tends to *find* his satisfaction in one class of objects—namely, those that will further his private advantage or provide him with personal pleasure—while the latter tends to *find* self-satisfaction in a different class of objects—namely, those that will give others pleasure or contribute to their well-being. In each case there is dissatisfaction with some state of affairs, accompanied by a will to alter that state of affairs with an eye to removing the source of the dissatisfaction. But it is only when one's effort to remove one's dissatisfaction knowingly involves placing personal advantage over the welfare of others that the desire in question can be called egoistic. [Peter Fuss, *The Moral Philosophy of Josiah Royce*, pp. 168–169, emphasizes his.]

We have already called attention (as does Timothy L.S. Sprigge in *The Rational Foundations of Ethics*, pp. 120–21) to Royce’s claim that whenever we enter sympathetically into another’s desire, the desire itself is in some manner reproduced in us, so that it becomes our desire as well. In an earlier chapter we also noted, as an extreme case, D.G. Ritchie’s remark that if we fully understood another person, we would *be* that other (which may also recall the early Blanshard’s claim that to know an object fully would be to have it literally within our consciousness). And here again, Spinoza offered an earlier version of this understanding: “From the fact that we imagine a thing like ourselves...to be affected by an emotion, we are thereby affected by a similar emotion” [*Ethics*, Part III Prop. 27; quoted from *Ethics, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect, and Selected Letters*, tr. Samuel Shirley, p. 118–119].

(For that matter, the point has been well made by one of Spinoza’s most erudite commentators, describing his approach to such commentary: “In order to understand another we must completely identify ourselves with that other, living through imaginatively his experience and thinking through rationally his thoughts. There must be a union of minds, like the union of our mind with the Active Intellect...of which Spinoza speaks as a certainty” [Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza*, vol. i, p. 31]. Something of this sort also informs Robin George Collingwood’s account of historical understanding as a literal re-enactment of the thoughts of the past [cf. *The Idea of History*]. Whether such lofty goals are ever in fact achieved is open to question, but something important rides on their being at least possible or conceivable goals at all. There is much more at stake on this issue than a simple point of ethical theory.)

Depending how literally we take such similarity or sameness, a realistic view of universals allows us to maintain that our experiences are *not* separate, island existences but parts of an overarching whole among which genuine identities may hold. On such an account, a self can quite literally include the interests of others among its own.

Rand is undoubtedly worried that such an approach to ethics threatens to destroy the “self” altogether. But despite occasional language apparently suggesting the contrary—e.g. Royce’s early characterization of the ethical ideal as “a life in which self was lost in a higher unity of all the conscious selves” [*The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*, p. 200]—this account does not require the obliteration of selves or persons as such; it requires only the recognition that a self is not an island existence, standing in splendid isolation from other selves.

Late nineteenth-century idealists did, we must admit, have a tendency to write disparagingly of the “merely individual” as though it were something shallow or dead. But by “individuals” they did not mean distinguishable persons in community; they meant the sort of separate island pseudo-selves that exist only in unreal abstractions from concrete human life and that therefore cannot serve as genuine ethical ideals. At any rate, even if their admittedly purple and sermonic prose is found occasionally lacking in critical thought, to reject the entire concept of common life on this ground would be to throw the baby out with the bathwater. A self is, as Everett put it, “capable of including within its own interests the interests of others,” and if an earlier account of how this can be so is found wanting, what is needed is a better account.

For Rand, though, it appears that the self is *not* “capable of including within its own interests the interests of others”—or, more precisely (since we do not wish to accuse Rand of “psychological egoism”), she does not think a *healthy* self *can or should* find satisfaction in contributing to another person’s well-being unless that person already serves the self’s own “life” or “interests” in some other, logically prior manner. (We shall soon see her maintain that it is “only in emergency situations that one should volunteer to help strangers” [“The Ethics of Emergencies,” in *VOS*, p. 54].)

And strictly speaking, on her theory of value, it is not even *possible* for a rational human being to take satisfaction in human well-being as such: her denial of “intrinsic goodness” simply precludes the rational

insight through which one person's well-being becomes another's value. (Nor, again, is it a coincidence that she has denied the efficacy of rational insight itself. Noah Lemos, in *Intrinsic Value: Concept and Warrant* [pp. 134–160], argues that our beliefs about intrinsic goodness enjoy “modest *a priori* justification” of the very sort we have seen Rand dismiss as “mysticism”.) Her epistemology and ethics therefore do not permit the sort of eudaemonism we have summarized above.

Rand is subject to a severe criticism here. As Prof. R.W. Hepburn writes under the entry for “egoism and altruism” in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*:

A simple but crucial step separates a broken-backed ethical egoism from a minimally acceptable and consistent *moral* theory. It involves the recognition of others as more than instrumental to my fulfillment. I may promote my own interests and personal fulfillment, so long as I do not encroach upon the pursuit by others of their fulfillment. That is to recognize other persons as limits to my action. [p. 221; emphasis Hepburn's.]

Now, there is no doubt that some of Rand's writings on “rights” do involve this recognition. It is very likely that, at least in one strain of her thought, she is genuinely trying to recognize “rights” as moral constraints imposed by the existence of persons other than oneself. And she seems at times to write as though the existence of fulfilled human beings really *is* “good, period”.

The problem is that her theory of value will not permit her to do so consistently. In denying the existence of intrinsic value, she commits herself to denying also that the well-being of other people can be of anything other than instrumental value to me.

DUELING AXIOMS

It is hard to find any direct acknowledgement on Rand's part that she actually has two different principles at work here—one having to do

with the value of human beings as such, and one having to do with instrumental value solely to oneself. But here is one indication that these principles are not only distinct but sometimes conflicting, even in Rand's own thought:

I asked her... "If you were driving and came across a sudden turn in the road, and had to choose between hitting a man [who is a stranger to you] and hitting [your own] dog... what should you do?" Apparently I had hit upon a tension-point between two principles, one about the value of man as a rational being and the other involving egoism and one's love for one's own pet. She admitted the difficulty, and opted for the man—but I wasn't yet aware of the intensity of this conflict or the depth in her thinking of the conflicting principles. [John Hospers, "Memories of Ayn Rand," p. 1; published with the May 1998 issue of *Full Context*.]

I think we must agree with Hospers here, and add that Rand never does successfully resolve the conflict. (Note that the two principles in question are roughly equivalent to the two versions of Rand's "axiom" we considered earlier.) We have already argued that a successful resolution would have carried her out of egoism altogether (and suggested between the lines that a full recognition of benevolence and justice might have committed her to a couple of other "axioms").

Blanshard can show us where the root of the problem is. Bemused by one critic's suggestion that his ethical theory seems to be egoistic, he replies as follows: "It must be admitted... that anyone who takes self-realization or self-fulfillment as the [ethical] end is very likely to be so classified [i.e., as an egoist]. He is bound to concern himself with what will realize or fulfill a *self*, taking it for granted that he will be read as talking about any and all selves" ["Reply to Oliver A. Johnson," in *The Philosophy of Brand Blanshard*, p. 294; emphasis his].

Rand's difficulty here is clear. She also—like Blanshard—concerns herself with what will realize or fulfill a "self," and yet—unlike Blanshard—she denies that there is anything good *as such* about the fulfillment of selves.

Blanshard will help us see why:

How is one to deal with an egoist who insists that though he feels the pull of his own prospective good, he feels none at all toward the good of others? “Why should I put myself out for a good I am never going to realize?” Now you cannot refute an egoist if his egoism is a Kierkegaardian commitment. You cannot deny or disprove an act of will. But as soon as he puts into a proposition the belief on which he is evidently proceeding, I think he is lost. This proposition is that an experience in another mind, even when qualitatively identical with a good experience of his own, is not to be regarded as good. And this is merely irrational. [*ibid.*, p. 295.]

Again:

If one can see that good A is intrinsically better than good B, reasonableness lies in producing A, whether A falls in one’s own experience or another’s.... [O]n the logical side, I do not see that argument is necessary; it *is* sometimes self-evident that one good is greater than another, and that one has a duty resulting from that insight. [“Reply to Richard T. De George,” *ibid.*, pp. 415–416; emphasis Blanshard’s.]

Rand seems, then, to be caught between two fatal alternatives. On the one hand, she could expressly deny that human well-being as such is intrinsically good, worth pursuing and bringing about for its own sake. But in that case she would also have to deny that respect for rights is any sort of *moral* duty, and her account of “rights” would collapse into the single strand that bases respect for rights solely on prudential considerations. On the other hand, she could expressly admit that human well-being is intrinsically good and thereby become a full-blown self-realizationist. But in that case she would find herself committed to at least *prima facie* “dut[ies] resulting from that insight”.

So she just doesn’t get around to raising the question. She either never sees or never admits that there is a difference between talking about what fulfills a self as such, on the one hand, and being an egoist,

on the other. It is hard to resist the temptation to conclude that Rand just doesn't *like* being morally constrained by concern for other people—because those constraints are *unchosen*.

UNCHOSEN OBLIGATIONS AND THEIR GROUNDING IN AN IDEAL COMMON END

In general, however, Rand's claim that there are no "unchosen" obligations will not withstand much scrutiny anyway. On the contrary, if I have no unchosen obligations, then I have no chosen ones either.

For suppose I say to Smith, "If you mow my lawn for me, I shall pay you \$20." Smith mows my lawn and comes to me for payment. "I'm not going to pay you," I say, "for I have no unchosen obligations." Smith replies, of course, that I chose the obligation to pay him for his work. "But," I answer, "I did not choose the obligation to be bound by my word. I am therefore under no obligation to keep my promises, and in particular I am not obliged to pay you a dime."

The point is that unless my obligation to abide by my word is itself an unchosen obligation, I cannot even get started on the task of assuming voluntary obligations. Unless my obligations "bottom out" somewhere in some that are unchosen, normativity simply has no purchase on me. Yet Rand maintains that just the opposite is the case: "A personal promise or agreement is the *only* valid, binding obligation, without which none of the others can or do stand" ["Causality Versus Duty," in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 101; emphasis mine].

(This is, by the way, a curious problem to encounter in an ethic supposedly intended to ground *laissez-faire* capitalism. If Rand's ethic cannot provide a moral foundation for the binding nature of promises and contracts, it also cannot provide a moral foundation for a market-based social order. Cf. Charles Fried, *Contract As Promise*, p. 10 (the emphasis is his): "If a promise is no more than a truthful statement of my intention, why am *I* responsible for harm that befalls you as a result of

my change of heart?” For further discussion of this issue, and an argument that contracts need not involve promises, see also Randy Barnett, “Rights and Remedies in a Consent Theory of Contract,” in *Liability and Responsibility*, R.G. Frey and Christopher W. Morris, eds.)

On Blanshard’s view, as we have seen, our rights against one another are grounded in a common ideal end: “The doctrine is quite simple. It is that men have a common moral end which is the object of their rational will” [*Reason and Goodness*, p. 395]. This end has upon us the moral hold that it does because we are rational beings:

Law is an instrument of the community employed for the communal good; its basis and sanction are ethical; and its claim on us is that the good to which it is an instrument is not an arbitrary imposition, but an end that our own intelligence would ratify if we saw things as they are. Justice is not a whim, but a rational requirement, and the common good derives its authority from a common reason. [Brand Blanshard, “Rationalism in Ethics and Religion,” in *Mid-Twentieth Century American Philosophy*, Peter A. Bertocci, ed., p. 33.]

This moral claim provides the basis for both a conditional obligation to obey the law and an obligation to rebel against it when necessary. (Blanshard makes this argument in *Reason and Goodness*, pp. 401–02, and throughout his “Reply to Richard T. De George,” pp. 402–419 of *The Philosophy of Brand Blanshard*.)

This view also gives an account of the fact that it is sometimes morally legitimate to behave in ways that look, at least superficially, like “rights violations”. We must be careful not to condone too much paternalism here, but it is at least sometimes not only permissible but morally obligatory to perform acts which, on strictly “libertarian” terms, look like acts of aggression against rights.

My own stock example is this: if I come upon you in the State of Nature about to pluck and eat a berry from the Previously Unowned Poisonberry Bush, I may well knock the berry out of your hand if that is the only way to prevent you from eating it. Of course this is a silly

example, but it exemplifies an important pattern: the berry in question is *yours* by every libertarian standard I know, and your life is *yours* by those same standards—and yet it seems to be right for me to prevent you from doing something which, I have excellent reason to believe, you would not choose to do yourself if only you possessed the same knowledge that I do.

(I may, of course, be *mistaken* about what you do and do not know, but it is still not at all obvious that even if you do mean to kill yourself, I would automatically be wrong to intervene. It is even arguable that I may be *obliged* to do so: “We are paternalists when we make someone act in his own interests.... Autonomy does not include the right to impose upon oneself, for no good reason, great harm. We ought to prevent anyone from doing to his future self what it would be wrong to do to other people” [Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 321]. Parfit’s position may be debatable, but if it has any merit, the truth of the “non-aggression axiom” is far from evident.)

There are much more realistic situations in which the “nonaggression axiom” is questionable and even wrong—in which it may be not merely permissible, but arguably even “our duty, to prevent others from doing what is seriously wrong” [*ibid.*], even if the “wrong” in question falls short of the initiation of physical force. This subject was a matter of discussion and debate in the May and June 1999 issues of *Liberty* magazine; John Hospers’s own contribution includes the following example:

A devotee of Christian Science refuses to consent to any medical help for her child, even to save the child’s life. Physicians offer to take measures to save the child’s life, but the parents refuse. The parents are libertarians and don’t want anyone to initiate force (not even to administer a vaccine), even on the child’s behalf; they just want their child left alone. It comes down to a question of who has authority to speak for the child, since the child can’t speak for herself.

Many libertarians, such as Rothbard, assign to the parents the role of final arbiters of the child’s fate. But not all agree; I once

asked Ayn Rand about parents who physically abuse their children; and she replied, though without her usual high-voltage energy, that presumably the children should be forcibly taken from the parents, to protect the rights of the children. ["Axioms and Egoisms," *Liberty*, June 1999, Vol. XIII, No. 6, p. 35; also <http://www.libertysoft.com/liberty/features/74symposium.html>.]

Hospers offers a number of other cases in which the "nonaggression axiom" is either clearly wrong or at least highly questionable; we do not need to examine them all here. (Hospers is also the author of an earlier essay on "Paternalism" that appeared in *The Libertarian Reader*, Tibor Machan, ed.) The point is that there is no shortage of real-life cases in which it seems to be morally acceptable, even mandatory, to "aggress against rights" on the precise grounds that the person whose "rights" are "violated" would approve the apparent violation if only he were in a condition to understand what was happening.

(None of this, by the way, necessarily entails that governmental institutions are justified in practicing paternalism. Apropos of political theory, the really searching question here is whether, and how far, a *State* is justified in implementing "paternalistic" policies—a distinct question that Rand does not reach because she thinks she has already ruled out such "paternalism" generally. Significantly, though, Rand's marginal notes on a paper Hospers once sent her suggest that such paternalism "open[s] the way for total dictatorship" [*Ayn Rand's Marginalia*, p. 83].)

On the view we are considering, this sort of thing is just not hard to take account of. "Natural rights," whatever they are, do not exist in a vacuum; they subserve a common rational end (as they must if *your* rights are to be morally binding on *me*) and are firmly subordinated to that end. But neither do they simply disappear when thus subordinated; they impose (or are equivalent to) *prima facie* duties which can—we hope rarely—be overruled or outweighed by other duties arising under specific circumstances, on the grounds that "our own intelligence would ratify" this overruling if we "saw things as they are".

Now, my account of these duties is actually more like W.D. Ross's than like Blanshard's, especially in that I do not think "right" reduces to "good" and I do not think the goal of ethics is to "maximize" something or other. But in general I have very close agreements with both Blanshard's *Reason and Goodness* and Timothy L.S. Sprigge's *The Rational Foundations of Ethics*. For reasons I shall not have room to discuss adequately here, I think Ross's much-needed criticisms of idealistic ethics actually advance the idealist argument a great deal. Suffice it here to say that if ethical obligations are grounded in a common ideal end that realizes itself through our voluntary actions, still our only access to this end is "constructive" (cf. Robert Bass's "constructivist eudaemonism"). On my view, the exercise of rational intuition in grasping specific duties, and the use of reasoned reflection to inform and modify our understanding of those duties and weigh them against one another, just *are* the self-realizing activity of the ethical ideal. Overall I would characterize this ethical outlook as "teleological" but not as "consequentialist" or "utilitarian" (nor, of course, as "deontological").

Blanshard also preferred the term "teleological" for his own ethics, but I depart from his account on an important point. Blanshard remarks at one point (*The Philosophy of Brand Blanshard*, p. 903) on his debt in ethical philosophy to H.W.B. Joseph. Specifically, his debt is to Joseph's *Some Problems in Ethics*, primarily pp. 97–98, where Joseph offered an account of right action and good consequences from which Blanshard drew his own (in *Reason and Goodness*, pp. 324ff.). Oddly, Blanshard did not find it necessary to reply to Ross's own criticisms (in *The Foundations of Ethics*, especially Ross's "three objections" on pp. 141–142) of Joseph's account.

I suspect that if he had done so, he would have held (as I do) that rightness and goodness are neither ultimately separable from one another nor reducible one to the other, but simply distinguishable aspects of an irreducible intentionality. (Ross's second objection is the relevant one here: namely, that we regard e.g. promise-keeping as part

of an ideal community's way of life *because* we can already see that promise-keeping is right.) But in fact, Blanshard's ethics reduces rightness strictly to a matter of producing good "consequences" (where among these "consequences" are strictly logical consequences, including the "way of life" with which an ethical practice is bound up; this is the point Blanshard adopted from Joseph).

Peter Fuss calls attention to Joseph as well, and understands him perhaps a bit better than Blanshard did. Fuss, summarizing what he takes to be Joseph's aim in *Some Problems of Ethics*, writes that on Joseph's view, "there is good reason to avoid both a deontological view holding that certain actions are right *per se*, independently of any relation to goodness, intrinsic or extrinsic, and a utilitarian view holding that the rightness of actions may be determined solely by the goodness of the consequences to which they lead" [*The Moral Philosophy of Josiah Royce*, p. 188]. Fuss further suggests, I think rightly, that this is what Royce attempted in his own ethical philosophy: "On his view, as I interpret it, an act is morally right only in so far as it is also good. But the goodness which makes the act right may be inherent in the act itself and not merely a consequence of it" [*ibid.*] This is a very clear statement of my own view as well, and it is in this respect that my ethical views depart from Blanshard's.

At any rate, the claim under discussion here—i.e., that rights entail *prima facie* duties that can be overruled but do not therefore simply vanish—also makes fairly good sense of the morality of emergencies. Rand herself wants to maintain that helping strangers is appropriate *only* under "abnormal conditions," on the grounds that ordinary ethical principles—which, on her view, should firmly curb such promiscuous benevolence—do not apply in emergencies: "By 'normal' conditions I mean *metaphysically* normal, normal in the nature of things, and appropriate to human existence.... It is only in emergency situations that one should volunteer to help strangers" ["The Ethics of Emergencies," in *VOS*, pp. 54–55, emphasis hers].

But apparently those ordinary principles do not *quite* vanish. In a radio interview during the early 1960s, she says that one may not, under ordinary (nonemergency) circumstances, steal *even* when one's life is at stake—surely, by the way, a recognition that one *is* under moral constraints not stemming from one's own choice “to live”—and then adds the following remarks on emergency situations:

[S]upposing you are washed ashore after a shipwreck, and there is a locked house which is not yours, but you're starving and you might die the next moment, and there is food in this house, what is your moral behavior?...[T]o state the issue in brief, I would say that you would have the right to break in and eat the food that you need, and then when you reach the nearest policeman, admit what you have done, and undertake to repay the man when you are able to work. In other words, you may, in an emergency situation, save your life, but not as “of right.” You would regard it as an emergency, and then, still recognizing the property right of the owner, you would retribute whatever you have taken, and that would be moral on both parts. [“Morality, and Why Man Requires It,” at <http://www.jeffcomp.com/faq/murder.html>.]

This is actually a fairly sensible solution—on the view that (a) my obligation to respect your rights is *not* grounded solely in the “needs” of my own life as determined by my arbitrary choice “to live,” that (b) on the contrary, I have a *prima facie* obligation to respect your rights which does not simply disappear even when it is temporarily overruled by my own emergency “needs,” and that (c) I am rationally justified in presuming that you are rational and benevolent and that our interests, even in emergencies, are therefore in principle harmonizable.

But it is an absurd solution on the view that *all* my values are dependent on my choice “to live” and receive their “normativity” only from their service to my *own* life, and that I have no “unchosen obligations”. On that view, as we have said, normativity simply cannot get hold of me in the first place; even if I “choose” an obligation, I am under no

prior obligation not to “unchoose” it at will (and indeed I *should* “unchoose” it if my own life might be saved thereby).

And it seems that in Rand’s ethic, normativity cannot get started. This problem is a microcosm of her theory of human self-creation, which we shall discuss soon, and it has implications for her political theory, which we shall discuss now.

RAND ON CAPITALISM, LIBERTY, AND THE “COMMON MAN”

Rand is probably best known for her support of capitalism, and deservedly so; I have long thought that her writings on the free market, though flawed, are the best of her nonfiction works (primarily and especially in their criticisms of the various opponents of capitalism). She seems to me to be at her strongest in some of the essays collected in *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* and to become less and less reliable the further she wanders from her strengths.

But curiously, she does not appear to have come round in support of capitalism until a bit later in her life. In her youth she was a dedicated reader of Friedrich Nietzsche and, perhaps, Max Stirner (see *Letters of Ayn Rand*, p. 175); and far from drawing any free-market conclusions from her “egoism,” at the age of about thirty she appears to have been a supporter of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

I do not propose to discuss here whether her early views were “really” Nietzschean or not; whether Nietzsche genuinely represented what she thinks he did is a question I gladly leave to others (e.g. Merrill and Sciabarra, *infra*). All we need to be concerned about here is that the young Rand’s understanding of Nietzsche matches the popular or “vulgar” understanding of her time, particularly in Russia; she believes him to be a kindred spirit to herself and finds herself in sympathy with various themes of his that remain with her throughout her writing career: the idea of God as a threat to the morality of an egoist, the idea

of man as a certain sort of hero, the idea of “revaluation of values” as the mark of heroism. As Allan Gotthelf trenchantly remarks, “Nietzsche’s influence on [her] was not a matter of her absorbing whole a body of ideas new to her. Rather, Nietzsche articulated and expanded upon ideas she had already formulated.... Nonetheless, the influence was real” [*On Ayn Rand*, p. 18 n. 6].

Certain remarks from Rand’s journals indicate the early presence of the strain of thought we discussed in the preceding chapter. Her notes (written in 1928 or so) for a novel entitled *The Little Street* feature the following description of protagonist Danny Renahan: “He is born with a wonderful, free, light consciousness—[resulting from] the absolute lack of social instinct or herd feeling. He does not understand, *because he has no organ for understanding*, the necessity, meaning, or importance of other people. (One instance when it is blessed not to have an organ of understanding.) Other people do not exist for him and he does not understand why they should” [*Journals of Ayn Rand*, p. 27; emphasis Rand’s; the square-bracketed insertion is David Harriman’s].

Renahan’s psychology is described as “what is good for me is right”—which Rand takes to be “[t]he best and strongest expression of a real man’s psychology I have ever heard” [*ibid.*]. (Curiously, the expression itself—i.e., “what is good for me is right”—appears to have been the remark of one William Edward Hickman, a young kidnaper/murderer who caught Rand’s attention for some reason; *ibid.*, pp. 21–22. Apparently it was also a good, strong expression of a real killer’s psychology, a fact that does not seem to have concerned Rand unduly.)

In her notes for what became *The Fountainhead* (originally entitled *Second-Hand Lives*), Rand notes: “One puts oneself above all and crushes everything in one’s way to get the best for oneself. Fine!” [*ibid.*, p. 78]. Here she goes on to consider what, exactly, constitutes that “best,” and to decide that it does not involve using force against others. But it also does not involve any recognition of “intrinsic” value in other persons, as becomes evident when she begins to develop the character of Howard Roark. Roark, she writes, “has learned long ago, with

his first consciousness, two things which dominate his entire attitude toward life: his own superiority and the utter worthlessness of the world" [*ibid.*, p. 93]. His "chief difference from the rest of the world" is said to be that "he was born without the ability to consider others" except as "a matter of form and necessity" [*ibid.*, p. 94].

As late as the writing of *We The Living* (into the 1930s), she does not appear to have believed that this sort of "egoism" entails any respect for the "rights" of other persons: "What are your masses but mud to be ground underfoot, fuel to be burned for those who deserve it?" [protagonist Kira Argounova in the original version of *We The Living*, in a line later expunged from this passage; see *The Ideas of Ayn Rand* by Ronald Merrill, pp. 38–39, and cf. *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical* by Chris Matthew Sciabarra, pp. 100–106].

And her eventual recognition of "rights" is based on the view that respect for rights is a condition of self-respect, not that there is anything about "other people" that *directly* imposes any moral constraints on one's actions. ("If a man bases his values on brute force...his code of values will destroy [those who must keep him alive]—and when they are destroyed, he will perish; thus he has destroyed himself" [*ibid.*, p. 289].) Her plan for *The Fountainhead* calls for her to defend "egoism in its real meaning"—i.e., "Demand the best for oneself.... An ethical man is essentially an egoist. The selflessness of sacrificing one's best for secondary ends, such as money and power, which cannot be used as he wishes" [*ibid.*, p. 90]. An egoist respects rights, then, because violating them is not in *his own* interest (as construed by Rand's theory of human nature, about which more later).

It is odd, therefore, to find Leonard Peikoff writing as follows:

AR's first notes reveal an influence of Nietzsche, in the form of droplets of subjectivism, and of the idea that the heroes among men are innately great, as against the inherently corrupt masses....

It is instructive to watch these droplets—every one of them—evaporate without residue, as AR's own principles emerge

into the sunshine of explicit statement.... By her early thirties, AR had thought herself out of every Nietzschean element. [*ibid.*, p. ix.]

We must, of course, acknowledge that Rand eventually rejects much of the “vulgar Nietzscheanism” of her youth, as represented by the ideas Peikoff describes; she does indeed come to believe, for example, that heroes are self-made, not innately heroic. But we must also recognize that in rejecting Nietzsche, she (thinks she) is abandoning his rejection of reason—not his egoism or his view of values. (And even in *Anthem* she can still write: “[T]he choice of my will is the only edict I must respect” [p. 109].) Peikoff has simply given too short (or too slanted) a list of the “Nietzschean” elements in Rand’s thought.

That Rand does eventually come to a belief in liberty and capitalism is, of course, to her credit. However, it should not be thought either that she adds anything of importance to the theory of capitalism itself, or that her understanding of capitalism is necessarily precisely that of the professional economists (notably Ludwig von Mises) and other thinkers (notably Isabel Paterson) from whom she has adopted it.

Since intellectual property law is one of my professional interests, I shall note in passing that some of her less obvious departures appear in her essay “Patents and Copyrights” [*CUI*, pp. 130–134]—where, for example, she presumes that the U.S. patent system is a “first-to-file” system [p. 133]. In fact, in contrast to the rest of the world, U.S. patents are issued based on priority of invention, not filing date. Rand also neglects to provide an argument in support of her claim [p. 132] that the “most rational” term of copyright protection is the lifetime of the author plus fifty years.

Most fundamentally, she presumes that the U.S.’s entire system of intellectual property is based on protecting the moral right of the inventor or author to the “product of his mind” [p. 130]. In fact U.S. federal patent and copyright law derives entirely from Article I §8 of the U.S. Constitution, in which the purpose of such laws is expressly stated to be the encouragement of “Progress in Science and useful Arts” by conferring monopoly privileges on inventors and authors—i.e., for

public, not private, benefit, and as a reward for disclosure, not for invention. (Suppose Smith invents a new and useful widget but never tells anyone about it, never puts it to any use, and never applies for a patent. Suppose further that Jones later invents an identical widget, and *does* apply for a patent, in the process disclosing the details of the widget. Under those conditions, Jones will receive the patent, and Smith's right to the "product of his mind" will not allow him to make the widget without Jones's permission.) Indeed, a patent provides precisely the sort of legally protected monopoly that Rand excoriates in other contexts.

But we shall not be spelling out all her departures here. The interested reader should consult Justin Raimondo's *Reclaiming the American Right*, pp. 194–208, and *An Enemy of the State*, pp. 109–135, for some healthy debunking of Rand's importance and originality as a theorist of the right. See also George H. Smith's "Ayn Rand: Philosophy and Controversy," in *Atheism, Ayn Rand and Other Heresies*, pp. 193–211, for a more sympathetic presentation of Rand's affinities with other thinkers including Henry Veatch and Herbert Spencer.

What is of most interest to us here is this: her view of the capitalist economy seems, at least at times, to be that the great masses of mankind (whom Kira had wanted to grind underfoot in the original text of *We The Living*) are dependent for their subsistence on the efforts of a handful of productive geniuses whose disappearance (as in *ATLAS SHRUGGED*) would spell the end of civilization. "The new conception of the State that I want to defend," she writes at one point early in her career, "is the State as a means...for the convenience of the higher type of man" [*Journals of Ayn Rand*, p. 73]. As late as 1945 she could write of that "higher type": "Perhaps we really are in the process of evolving from apes to Supermen—and the rational faculty is the dominant characteristic of the better species, the Superman" [*ibid.*, p. 285]. So much for the absence of "Nietzschean" elements in her writings after her thirties.

But there *is* a new twist that appears at this point. Rand very quickly identifies the “Superman” with the human being as such (the famous Randian “man *qua* man”) and begins to deny that the “irrational” are human at all.

Apparently still thinking, at this stage, of an axiomatic basis for ethics, she writes: “There are...only two axioms to be accepted as self-evident in my morality: (1) man must survive, and (2) man must be happy. But both of these axioms imply—‘as man.’ Man’s survival and happiness are not automatically ‘human.’ These two axioms apply only to man as a rational being. When man chooses to act in a sub-human manner, it is no longer proper for him to survive nor to be happy. There is no reason in fact by which he can claim these two rights as natural” [*ibid.*, p. 288].

So, strictly speaking, an irrational human being—meaning, as we know, one who is not true to the “facts of reality” in sorting out his sensory data—is not human and has no rights.

Now, one would have supposed that if a man “chooses to act in a sub-human [i.e., immoral] manner,” what is “proper for him” is to *start* acting in a “human” [i.e., moral] manner again, and thereby return to proper survival and happiness. Nor is it clear why one’s “natural rights” just evaporate when one behaves in certain ways; Rand seems to be assuming here that one’s behavior can, quite literally, *change one’s nature as a human being*. (And as we shall see, this is just exactly what she means.) But—unlike the God Who tells Ezekiel that He desires, not the death of the wicked, but their repentance [Ezekiel 33:11]—Rand altogether ignores the possibility of repentance, and moreover has no difficulty asserting that the wicked have alienated their apparently not at all inalienable rights.

Rand occasionally writes as though having “high ideals” about human beings requires one to condemn, even to condemn, most actual people. It seldom seems to occur to her that it is possible to have “high ideals” *and* to want and even encourage all human beings to live up to them as far as possible, compassionately recognizing all the same that

none of us do so completely. Indeed, her “ideals” themselves look, at times, curiously like rationalizations for her own pre-existing contempt for much of humanity. (And perhaps this is the source of her antipathy toward unachievable ideals: if others held an ideal to which she could not live up, she thinks, they would have contempt for *her*—because that is how *she* responds to people who do not live up to *hers*.)

In spite of all of this, it is occasionally suggested that she held a high view of the “common man”. (See e.g. Barbara Branden’s *The Passion of Ayn Rand*, pp. 32–33 and 161.) To some extent this is probably true, as suggested e.g. by the following:

The “common man” doesn’t understand the gibberish of the “intellectuals”—because the common man relates abstractions to the concrete. It takes a second-hander, a collectivist intellectual, to run amuck amongst “floating abstractions.” [*Journals of Ayn Rand*, p. 304.]

But that it is not the whole story is indicated by the person of Eddie Willers, the character in *ATLAS SHRUGGED* who largely represents that “common man”. Admittedly Rand portrays him somewhat sympathetically, as a genial fellow filled with moral earnestness and doggedly, determinedly loyal in his worshipful adoration of Rand’s heroes. And there is little doubt that he is a likeable enough character overall.

But although he is supposed to be roughly the same age as Dagny Taggart, probably few readers of *ATLAS SHRUGGED* are able to imagine him as anything other than boyish and childlike. (It does not help that both Rand and her characters constantly refer to him by his first name. Henry Rearden may be “Hank,” “Rearden,” or “Mr. Rearden” as occasion demands; Eddie Willers is “Eddie,” even though he is supposed to be a high-ranking executive of Taggart Transcontinental.)

And when the heroes disappear into Galt’s Gulch, Eddie is never asked to join them, nor does his lifelong friend Dagny ever appear to wonder why not. And when all the heroes have abandoned civilization,

Eddie is lost without them; utterly dependent on their genius for hope and guidance, all he can do is wander off into the wilderness to die.

We might also mention here the character of Cherryl Brooks-Taggart, a well-meaning, morally earnest “common girl” who, once aware of the monstrous evil in the world and in the man she has married (Dagny’s brother James), commits suicide by leaping over a parapet. (This Rand describes as an act of “self-preservation,” apparently thereby allowing, as we have suggested, for the possibility of “rational suicide”.) Significantly, Cherryl is portrayed as incapable of coping with the world as it actually is—at least without the help of Dagny, her confidante and sister-in-law. Dagny, for her part, knows of Cherryl’s distraught condition, indeed is portrayed as understanding it better than Cherryl herself, and yet leaves Cherryl to her fate.

This does not strike me as a high view of the “common man”; it strikes me rather as an expression of a philosophy that has a disturbing tendency to turn out people who expect to be worshipped by the “common man”. (We leave aside here the question whether Rand’s heroes are genuinely deserving of such “worship” in the first place.)

And sure enough, her view of capitalism makes everyone else dependent on, and forever indebted to, the “best” and “highest” human beings. “If,” she says, “[one has] a mental capacity insufficient for one’s survival...he has no choice except to exercise his mind to the full extent of his capacity—and let the overflow of the better minds of others help him” [*ibid.*, p. 289]. As the example of Eddie Willers demonstrates, she is not writing here about the mentally retarded or insane; she is writing about the “common man”.

In her 1928 notes for *The Little Street*, she introduces her task as follows: “Show that *humanity is petty*. That it’s small. That it’s dumb, with the heavy, hopeless stupidity of a man born feeble-minded, who does not understand, because he *cannot* understand, because he hasn’t the capacity to understand” [*Journals of Ayn Rand*, pp. 23–24; emphasis Rand’s]. (About this planned but unwritten work, Leonard Peikoff writes: “This was not a novel that she could have written; to her, the

purpose of fiction writing is not to denounce that which one despises, but to exalt that which one admires” [*ibid.*]. Significantly, he does *not* tell us that she could not have written it because she later ceases to despise “humanity” at all.)

Nor—Peikoff to the contrary notwithstanding—is this contempt for the ordinary run of humanity merely an early “Nietzscheanism” that Rand later overcomes. While writing Galt’s speech for ATLAS SHRUGGED, she summarizes her views of economics as follows: “How free enterprise worked—the benefit given to others by inventors and innovators, the inestimable benefit of an idea. The relationship of the ‘weak’ and the ‘strong’: the strong (intellectually strong...) raise the value of the weak’s time by delegating to them the tasks already known and thus being free to pursue new discoveries” [*ibid.*, p. 650].

Either Rand has never heard of the Law of Comparative Advantage, or she is mutilating it almost beyond recognition. It is certainly no part of our purpose here to denigrate the many geniuses whose works have contributed to human well-being. But it is extremely doubtful that there has *ever* been a human being—genius or not—who has possessed, in and of himself, a “mental capacity” completely *sufficient* for his own survival. The “strong” as well as the “weak” are made more productive by cooperation; the benefit goes in both directions. (Nor, in the context of a free market, are “strength” and “weakness” a matter of sheer intellectual power; on the contrary, as Herbert Spencer saw clearly, one’s “fitness” to such an environment is mostly a matter of one’s willingness and ability to cooperate.) Rand’s view of “capitalism” has, in this respect, little to do with that of mainstream free-market economists—who regard the “economy” as a vast, cooperative network of *interdependent* production and exchange.

Indeed, Rand sometimes—even usually—writes of her own imaginary geniuses as if they had nothing at all to gain from cooperation with lesser mortals, as if they had the capacity to strike out into the wilderness and rebuild civilization from scratch, doing their own typing and filing to boot. If these folks are not Nietzsche’s “Supermen,” the

difference is perhaps more evident, or at least more important, to Leonard Peikoff than to the rest of us.

And in one respect, Rand's new version of Nietzsche's *Uebermensch* is a step down from his: Nietzsche, for all his ranting, at least did not deny that the non-Supermen were human at all. Yet, as we have noted in passing, that is just what Rand does.

Nor is this a simple glitch that can be removed from her "system" without damaging it. Man, she consistently maintains from roughly the 1940s onward, "is man only so long as he functions in accordance with the nature of a rational being. When he chooses to function otherwise, he is no longer man. There is no proper name for the thing which he then becomes.... Man must remain man through his own choice" [*ibid.*, pp. 253–254].

This, then, is her vaunted replacement for the "Nietzschean" view that some people are innately heroic and others are innately suitable only to be ground underfoot. If such character traits were "innate," no one could be praised or blamed for them. And so Rand makes them volitional traits, and proceeds to condemn most of humanity for *choosing* to be depraved.

Rand seems, in short, to have come to the view that man must remain man, and perhaps even become man in the first place, entirely "by choice". This view is so startling that we shall devote a chapter to it before we close.

Chapter 13: *The Tale of the Self-Preceding Man*

If, in the course of philosophical detection, you find yourself, at times, stopped by the indignantly bewildered question: “How could anyone arrive at such nonsense?”—you will begin to understand it when you discover that *evil philosophies are systems of rationalization*. [“Philosophical Detection,” reproduced in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 18; emphasis Rand’s]

THE EMERGENCE OF CONSCIOUSNESS FROM MATTER?

“Man,” writes Rand, “has to be man by choice” [“The Objectivist Ethics,” in *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 27]. As we shall see shortly, Rand seems to mean exactly what she says: human beings must perform an act of choice, not only in order to remain, but perhaps even in order to *become* human. And yet it would surely seem (as we have noted before) that, since on Rand’s view only human beings possess a conceptual, volitional consciousness in the first place, in order to *become* human one must already *be* human. This odd contradiction vitiates her entire philosophy, and one major burden of this volume has been to demonstrate as much.

One practical philosophical problem arises at once, and we have repeatedly called attention to it in numerous contexts: she has not explained how consciousness can arise or “emerge” from unconscious matter, or even argued *that* this is possible. She has merely taken the

“axiomatic” fact that she is conscious and refused to draw any conclusions therefrom about what reality must be like. In fact, rather the reverse: despite her opposition to cosmology, she is downright militant in her denial of the “primacy of consciousness,” forcing us to conclude that she believes, at least by default, in the ultimate primacy of unconscious matter. The result is that she has painted herself into a corner as far as consciousness is concerned; she acknowledges that it is different in kind from matter, and yet she is unable to give a noncontradictory account of its bootstrapping “emergence”.

In fact it is her dismissal of the “primacy of consciousness” that lands her in this difficulty. If reality itself is ultimately altogether distinct from mind, then neither Rand nor anyone else can “explain” how consciousness arises. It is only if mind *is* in some sense primary that we have any hope of such an explanation at all. And more broadly, it is only if reality is fundamentally related to mind, at least in the sense that what exists is *such as* to be intelligible to a faculty of reason that seeks systematic coherence, that we have any hope of “explanation” in general.

Of course the simplest way for mind to be metaphysically primary is for God to exist (so that reality consists, at bottom, of a single Absolute Mind). But of this Rand will have none; indeed, as we saw, her rejection of the “primacy of consciousness” is in the end merely a thinly disguised rationalization for her anti-authoritarian, antinomian, emotionally-based atheism. She is, in the final analysis, a “materialist” whether she means to be one or not.

Rand herself would not accept this characterization. In part, however, her rejection would be based on her misunderstanding of “materialism” as involving the rejection of belief in consciousness. Here Leonard Peikoff echoes Rand’s misunderstandings: “Materialists—men such as Democritus, Hobbes, Marx, Skinner—champion nature but deny the reality or efficacy of consciousness” [*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, p. 33]. But Peikoff must be misunderstanding the

issue, for neither Hobbes nor Marx denies the reality or the causal efficacy of consciousness.

At any rate, for all her effusive praise of “spirit” and “mind,” Rand is ultimately committed to the view that matter is what *fundamentally* exists; her metaphysical position is therefore a form (albeit a possibly inconsistent and accidental one) of “materialism”. The point is not lost on Allan Gotthelf, who writes as follows: “The ‘first cause’ (or ‘cosmological’) argument maintains that God is needed as the creator or sustainer of the *material universe*. But that is to say that *existence* needs consciousness to create or sustain it. It makes a consciousness—God’s consciousness—metaphysically prior to *existence*” [*On Ayn Rand*, p 48; emphases mine]. Note that Gotthelf has explicitly identified “existence” with “the material universe”.

Unfortunately this possibly inadvertent “materialism” has repercussions throughout Rand’s philosophy. As we have seen, she has been at some pains to deny (as “mysticism”) just those philosophical doctrines that seem to smack of theism: notably, she rejects the reality of universals and denies the power of reason to grasp truth directly and to some extent independently of sensation.

But we have also seen that at each stage, she in fact depends on the truth of the doctrine she is officially rejecting: her initially nominalistic rejection of real universals in fact depends on real universals; her initially “sensationalist” account of reason depends at several crucial points on *a priori* insight and indeed the reality of metaphysical categories of being.

And she has masked this fact, probably even from herself, by her use of rhetoric and careless language. Some of her readers seem to regard her as a paragon of logic and clarity; we, on the other hand, have found her philosophical writings to be a muddle of confusion, misunderstanding, and bad introspection.

What is ultimately going on here seems straightforward enough. Rand is trying to argue that all the nice, desirable features of reason can be preserved independently of any claim that the very existence of the

rational faculty itself tells us anything of importance about reality. In the process she waves her hands with sufficient vigor that we do not notice her smuggled presumptions to the contrary.

The upshot of this analysis, then, is that Rand has begun with her conclusions and tried to argue backward to her foundations. We must emphasize again that this is not necessarily a poor practice in and of itself; as we indicated a few chapters ago, uncovering the absolute presumptions of reason is a perfectly fine thing to do, and we can only wish that Rand were doing a better job of it.

But since she does not do it better, we may legitimately infer that she arrives at her conclusions in some other manner and is simply trying to transfer them to a new set of foundational principles. And she is not, in the process, able to avoid reliance on the very principles she is attempting to reject. We shall argue that something similar is going on in her elaboration of her “moral standard”.

Her “new” set of foundational principles is actually not all that new. John W. Robbins’s *Without a Prayer: Ayn Rand and the Close of Her System* presents numerous excerpts from the writings of Ludwig Feuerbach, V.I. Lenin, and Karl Marx that espouse a materialist metaphysic and a sensationalist/empiricist epistemology with which Rand should feel entirely at home—and does; she simply fails to recognize their common ground owing to her own misrepresentations and misunderstandings.

I am not, of course, claiming that Rand is “really” a communist or a believer in totalitarianism; she most certainly is not. I am, however, noting that the metaphysical and epistemological principles she explicitly adopts, as opposed to those on which she implicitly relies, are those that have always been found congenial by the political left. And it is helpful to recall that Rand deliberately pitches her message primarily toward “liberals” rather than toward “conservatives,” in the hope and expectation that intelligent leftists might come to see, as she thinks she herself has seen, that those fundamental principles lead to capitalism rather than to socialism.

Whatever her ultimate intentions, however, it is not the case that her metaphysical and epistemological foundations support the philosophy of reason and liberty she intends them to support. We have already said a good deal about reason; in closing we shall say a few words about liberty.

OBJECTIVISM AND DEHUMANIZING

I hasten to reiterate that by the time she writes *ATLAS SHRUGGED* and her nonfiction essays, Rand does officially, if unsteadily, believe that all human beings have absolute, inalienable rights, and does believe that these rights impose moral constraints on the actions of each and every other human being. The argument in the preceding chapter shows only that her explicit philosophy fails to provide an adequate ground for them—in my view, because she has gotten so carried away worrying about “autonomy” that she fails to notice she has a problem and therefore never adequately “integrates” her view of rights with the account of “values” she has carried over from her youth.

But if the argument is correct, then she does have a problem. More precisely, anyone who tries to rely on her actual philosophical principles, rather than her professions of belief, will have a problem accounting for “rights”.

For one strain of her thought clearly denies that rights, *as* rights, have any foundation in reality apart from an arbitrary act of entirely subjective human choice. This same strain of her thought grants to human choice the metaphysical power to create human beings, or at least consciousness, *ex nihilo*. The effect, as we suggested long ago, is to assign to human beings the role that Western religion and philosophy (and the classical-liberal tradition springing from them) have generally assigned to God.

This consequence appears to be deliberate on Rand’s part; as we have seen, it is not at all difficult to document her belief in an anti-theistic religion of “man-worship”. The object of Objectivist worship is

“man *qua* man”. And in its actual application, this principle entails the “worship” of particular human beings who embody, or appear to embody, the specifically Randian virtues—human beings no greater than whom can be conceived and who answer to no standard higher than that of their own marvellous and self-generated “nature”. (The reader may examine the Brandens’ two biographies of Rand as well as Ellen Plasil’s *Psychotherapist* for three accounts of where this attitude leads in practice.)

And another, closely related strain of her thought—which we shall examine in the present chapter—clearly denies that rights are possessed by anyone Rand does *not* regard as a “human being”.

(I shall with difficulty resist the temptation to comment here on Rand’s views of abortion. The interested reader should consult “Of Living Death” in *The Voice of Reason*, pp. 58–59, and “Censorship: Local and Express” in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 173. Cf. also Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, pp. 357–358. In general, the Objectivist literature is full of pro-abortion arguments. One notable exception is James J. Campbell’s essay, “Abortion: Applying Objective Reason to the Debate,” which makes mincemeat of the standard Objectivist claims on this topic. And even pro-abortion-choicers should be uncomfortable with Rand’s view that an unborn child is not a biologically human being but merely a “piece of protoplasm” that may simply be destroyed for the sake of its mother’s convenience.)

The reader who has looked into the history of Rand and the Objectivist movement will not need me to recount the trail of withered souls and shattered relationships Rand and her immediate followers have left in their wake. Nor, at least in my experience and that of many former Objectivists, did the “cult-like” elements of Objectivism come to an end with Rand’s death in 1982. The reason seems to me to be twofold.

In the first place, if one’s explicit philosophy is even slightly “out of true”—if, e.g., it requires one to deny one’s clear rational insight that the well-being of others is intrinsically good and to suppress any benev-

olent impulses arising from that insight—then to the extent that one tries to put it into explicit practice and form one’s life around it, one will have to exert oneself mightily to try to keep that philosophy constantly in mind and rein in one’s thinking so as not to depart from its principles.

Second, if one’s philosophy demands this sort of explicit thinking and mental exertion as a condition of full humanity, a process of literally *creating oneself from scratch as a condition of valuing oneself*, then one will likely find oneself in a near-constant state of panic, perpetually taking one’s “philosophical pulse” and trying to make certain one is, as it were, among the elect.

These two factors together have made the practice of Objectivism a living hell for anyone unable to bash his or her mind to fit Rand’s outlook, and more than one suicide attempt has resulted. Sometimes such attempts succeed.

It is sometimes argued that these consequences are incidental to her philosophy, that with a little tweezing here and there Objectivism can be turned into a philosophy suitable for use as the foundation of a free society. Indeed, although I have never been an Objectivist myself, as recently as late 1998 I too thought there might be something in at least its broad outlines that could be salvaged by competent philosophers without departing from Rand’s essential vision, despite her extreme unreliability in philosophical matters.

I am no longer of that opinion—and I move further away from it every time I hear either from another appreciative “recovering Objectivist” whose life and reason have been sapped by Rand’s principles, or from another supercilious and philosophically illiterate Rand devotee who seems unable to grasp the possibility that there is anything deserving of criticism in Objectivism at all. (I am also sympathetic with Greg Nyquist’s argument, on somewhat different grounds from mine, that Rand’s account of human nature is so fundamentally flawed that even her supposedly achievable ideals are utterly unrealistic; see his *Ayn Rand Contra Human Nature*. For that matter, I have also ceased to

regard it as an accident that Objectivism is so often a “gateway drug” for Internet junkies.) On the contrary, I think that any salvaging operation on Objectivism will have to depart from Rand’s essential vision, and that it is therefore doubtful that the results of any such operation will deserve to be called “Objectivism”.

THE ILLUSION OF A MORAL STANDARD

One important reason for this is that Objectivism simply fails to provide any moral standard at all. Moreover, the *illusion* of a moral standard is one of the mechanisms by which Objectivism secures its hold on the minds of its followers. We shall therefore devote the remainder of this chapter to an analysis of the moral standard of the Objectivist ethics, of which the following is the central plank:

The standard of value of the Objectivist ethics—the standard by which one judges what is good or evil—is man’s life, or: that which is required for man’s survival *qua* man. [“The Objectivist Ethics,” in *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 25.]

We must be clear first of all that Objectivism, being vehemently anti-religious, rejects not only literal theism but even what we might call “virtual theism”: the possibility of a “God’s-eye view” in either ethics or epistemology, not only as a point of view occupied by a literal God, but even as a rationally-constructed ideal against which our progress might be gauged—and against which human beings might be measured and found wanting. (No doubt such ideals would tend to undermine our “man-worship”.)

In ethics: “Since man must establish his own values,” she writes, “accepting a value above himself makes him low and worthless.... The worship of something above you (like God) is an escape, a switch of responsibility—to permit you anything” [*Journals of Ayn Rand*, p. 284].

Likewise in epistemology: “[O]ne cannot demand omniscience. One cannot ask: ‘How do I know that a given idea...will not be overthrown one day by new information?’ This plaint is tantamount to the declaration: ‘Human knowledge is limited; so we cannot trust any of our conclusions.’ And *this* amounts to taking the myth of an infinite God as the epistemological standard, by reference to which man’s consciousness is condemned as impotent” [*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, pp. 171–172]. (So much too, then, for “ideal knower” theories of knowledge; if we cannot be perfect, we are “impotent”. Besides, admitting even the theoretical possibility of an “ideal knower” is tantamount to theism—and theism, one supposes, is too obviously false to require refutation.)

According to Objectivism, each value are relative to the purposes of an individual valuer (of whom there are billions, none of them answerable to a literal or figurative Supreme Valuer); each item of knowledge is relative to the purposes of a knower; and neither fact is supposed to make either values or knowledge less “objective”.

In *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, Rand explicitly endorses the statement that *epistemologically*, “Man is the measure of all things” [p. 8], and we have seen that she expressly denounces the use of unattainable ideals; in epistemology, they are somehow equivalent to expecting infallibility or omniscience, and in ethics they allegedly produce unearned guilt. (I doubt I need to point out the religious/theological language in either case.) Her statements are specifically aimed at epistemological and ethical ideals that set a standard of perfection short of which we will presumably always fall.

The reason is not far to seek (any reader of *ATLAS SHRUGGED* will recognize it right away): she likes people who pronounce absolute factual and moral judgments—and who do so not just sometimes, but *all the time*. She provides no arguments that such absolute judgments are always (or, for that matter, ever) *possible*; indeed, we have already called attention to the fact that in strict consistency her epistemology ought to recognize a good deal more “conditionality” than it does.

What she gives us instead is a dramatic and largely rhetorical “argument from intimidation” that it is *morally desirable* to be the sort of person who always goes around rendering such judgments and never qualifies one’s thinking with such words as “perhaps”.

At any rate, my point here is that Objectivism explicitly discards any moral ideals that involve something other than the standard of one’s own life; there is, for Objectivism, no “God’s-eye view” from which to pronounce moral/ethical judgment on anyone or anything, favorable or unfavorable. (As we have already seen, Rand’s idiosyncratic use of the term “intrinsic”—i.e., to mean what most people mean by “objective”—and her consequent rejection of “intrinsic goodness” leave us no way to say that human well-being is simply good, period.)

Now, any well-trained Randian will object to my statement that Objectivism relies on “the standard of one’s own life” as its sole moral ideal. I will be (and have been) told that Rand makes a firm distinction between a “standard” and a “purpose” and argues that the standard of ethics is the life, not of the individual human being in question, but of man *qua* man. I am, in short, fudging a distinction Rand herself was very careful to make and maintain. (“The Objectivist ethics holds man’s life as the standard of value—and his own life as the ethical purpose of every individual man” [VOS, p. 27].)

In fact Rand was not careful to maintain this allegedly clear distinction at all, and her departures from it indicate that I am reading her entirely correctly on this point. Here she is, for example, on p. 17 of VOS: “An [individual] organism’s life is its *standard of value* [emphasis hers]: that which furthers its life is the good, that which threatens it is the evil.” So, for Rand, the individual’s own life is indeed its *standard* of value.

And the fact is that, on her own epistemology, she has no business distinguishing the two in the first place. According to Rand herself, there is no such entity as “man *qua* man”. The “standard” in question here, applied to an individual life (as it must be if it is not to become what Rand calls a “floating abstraction”), calls simply for rationality,

productiveness, and pride (the “Objectivist virtues”; *VOS*, pp. 28–9) in the achievement of one’s *own* values (and in the manner specifically appropriate to those specific values).

In the (Objectivist) final analysis, the goodness of an individual human life is gauged, according to Rand, by the immanent standards of that life itself, the standards of one’s own individual nature as a human being. It is not, as I said, judged according to any “God’s-eye view” that evaluates human nature as such; the buck stops at “man *qua* man,” an abstraction which in turn has meaning only as instantiated in particular human lives and the specific values sought therein.

Let us look at this point in some detail. According to Rand’s epistemology (never mind for now whether she sticks to it consistently), the abstraction “man *qua* man” has no real (nonconceptual) existence and above all does not refer to any “metaphysical essence” that all human beings literally have in common. It is simply a conceptual shorthand for (presumably) the set of similar-but-nonidentical features on the basis of which we isolate human beings as a class of entities (with measurements duly omitted).

Or it might possibly refer to *all* the characteristics of *all* individual human beings—which is what it really should mean according to Rand’s conflation of sense and reference, but she does not seem to mean this. (Moreover, she could not use this meaning in order to determine who is human in the first place.) I therefore assume she intends it to refer to one of her allegedly epistemological “essences”—a set of characteristics that explain the most other common characteristics of a certain class of entities because they are the ones which make the most other common characteristics possible. (Of course this *is* a metaphysical definition of “essence” whether Rand calls it that or not, but we need not return to that point here.)

At any rate, on either reading, the abstraction “man *qua* man” cannot somehow “stand judge” over individual human lives, as those lives themselves are simply what the abstraction in question *means*. Even Rand’s own flawed derivation of “ought” from “is” does not invoke

this abstraction; rather, Rand arrives at it by (what she would call) “abstracting” from the “oughts” in the lives of individual human beings. (Her argument is, roughly, that since each individual human being has to be rational by choice, this standard applies to man as such and not just to special cases. The question whether this argument is sound will not detain us here; the point is that Rand begins with individuals and “abstracts” to arrive at a standard for “man *qua* man”.)

So the “life proper to man *qua* man” cannot be an overarching standard to which individual persons are somehow subject. It means, and on Rand’s own epistemology can only mean, that Smith should be rational, productive, and proud in Smith’s own achievement of Smith’s own values; Jones should be rational, productive, and proud in Jones’s own achievement of Jones’s own values; Brown should be rational, productive, and proud in Brown’s own achievement of Brown’s own values...

If this were not so, it would be most curious that Rand seems to limit the basis of her ethical standard to the features human beings appear to have *in common* (again, with measurements duly omitted). Is there any good reason for this? Why should my own actions be judged by such an apparently “collectivist” standard rather than by the specific features of my *own* life (some of which may not be similar to those of anyone else, let alone everyone else)? Why, in short, should I use for my own guidance an ethical standard that was arrived at by omitting everything specific to my life?

The only possible Objectivist answer (short of saddling Rand with another contradiction—which of course I am not at all unwilling to do, but this one is not hers) is that this “standard” does not exist in its own right but is intended merely as a shorthand, measurements-omitted summary of what each individual human being “ought” to do by the implicit standard of his or her own life (assuming, that is, that the “choice to live” is made affirmatively). Rand’s nominalist metaphysics and conceptualist epistemology simply will not permit any other interpretation; Rand’s attempt to distinguish “standard” and “purpose” in

this context relies on a distinction without a difference—if it does not rely on simply forgetting what she meant by “abstraction”.

Of course she does occasionally write as though her ethical abstractions are derived from, and apply to, human nature “as such,” just as she occasionally writes of “existence as such”. But just as her “existence as such” is supposed to be “cashed out” in terms of actual, physical existents, so too her “man *qua* man” is supposed to be “cashed out” in terms of actual, living persons. It is only by forgetting this point that we could suppose Rand to have provided a transcendent or categorical ethical standard. Her metaphysical and epistemological foundations simply do not support one.

Strictly speaking, she is not even entitled to regard an ethical standard as something like an automotive repair manual—as providing, that is, a set of abstract principles and guidelines that are nevertheless applicable to each example of a single make and model. For in that case—even assuming, *arguendo*, that human beings are as much alike as cars of the same make and model—her epistemology would have to acknowledge that there *is* a real yet abstract pattern common to all cars of that make and model. On Rand’s epistemology, *there is no such thing as a “make” or a “model”*. And we have found her proposed alternative to be riddled with contradictions.

Rand’s ethical approach, then, cannot provide a transcendent or categorical ethical standard unless we are willing to make sweeping and fundamental changes in Rand’s metaphysics and epistemology. Indeed I should argue that we should have to move both of them back toward at least the core of the traditional Western religious outlook from which Rand adopted and adapted her view of man to begin with, thereby undoing nearly everything that is supposed to represent Objectivism’s advance over previous philosophies. In the preceding chapter I have made a number of suggestions as to how that revision should proceed. But it is unclear to me that the result of such a revision would have any right to be called an *Objectivist* ethic.

And we already know that Rand does not want a transcendent or categorical standard anyway. Surely it is common knowledge—at least among Objectivists, even if they do not put it quite this way—that the allegedly liberating feature of the Objectivist ethic is precisely its insistence that one is not answerable to anything other than one’s own happiness.

(In her defense of her “new concept of egoism,” Rand even tells us at one point [in “The Ethics of Emergencies,” *VOS*, p. 52] that a man who, out of panic, lets his beloved wife drown is morally culpable for his failure to protect something that was personally important *to him*—specifically, something that was essential to his own happiness. That he might also have reneged on a moral responsibility *to his wife* does not seem to enter the picture. Readers who find the Objectivist ethics “liberating” presumably implicitly identify themselves with the husband rather than the wife in this example.)

That Objectivism is somewhat “moralistic” about people who fail to achieve their own happiness is a simple inconsistency, not an essential feature of the ethic itself. To be more precise, it is an inconsistent attempt to retain a veneer of suprapersonal moral rigor in a system that has no place for it. (Significantly, David Kelley criticizes Leonard Peikoff’s *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* on just this point [“Peikoff’s Summa,” *IOS Journal*, vol. 1, no. 3, Spring 1992; also http://www.objectivistcenter.org/articles/dkelley_review-objectivism-philosophy-of-ayn-rand.asp].

As we have seen, for Objectivism, all morality follows from the fundamental choice “to live” (which Rand, in a handwaving passage, identifies with the choice “to think”; *VOS*, p. 22). The decision to live, which Rand says must quite literally be made moment by moment throughout one’s entire life, is pre-moral and a-moral; in strict consistency, the Objectivist ethic can offer no guidance about it whatsoever (though the attempt is occasionally made by Objectivists who, apparently, do not regard themselves as bound by strict consistency).

People who do *not* spend their lives constantly “choosing to live” are therefore not, again in strict consistency, subject to moral censure, however subjectively distasteful Objectivists may find them (though, again, attempts are sometimes made to dress up this subjective distaste in more objective-sounding language).

Objectivist “ideals” therefore apply, not to human beings as such, but only to those human beings who choose, and keep choosing, to “live” in the sense(s) Rand assigns to this word. Strictly speaking, these ideals *cannot be used* to pass moral judgment on those who choose otherwise (i.e., the entire class of persons whom Objectivism regards, and moralizes against, as looters, moochers, and second-handers). And so much—to borrow a Randian turn of phrase [from *VOS*, p. 18]—for the issue of the relation between “is” and “ought”. In the case of human beings, at least, the fact that a living entity “is” does not determine what it “ought” to do unless that entity first, and continuously thereafter, makes a decision that the Objectivist ethic cannot address.

There is of course a deep ambiguity in Rand’s argument, which I (and many others) have pointed out before: when Rand talks about “life,” does she mean sheer physical survival (which is what she needs at the beginning of her pseudobiological argument), or does she mean flourishing or well-being (as she clearly does by the end of her argument)? She expressly tells us that—by the close of her argument, at any rate—“man’s survival *qua* man...does not mean...a merely physical survival” [*VOS*, p. 26].

But this is ambiguous. Does she mean that the sheer temporal extension of “merely” physical survival is not a *sufficient* condition for “life as man *qua* man,” or does she mean that it is not a *necessary* condition? Since she allows the protagonists in her novels to commit “rational suicide” (i.e., to kill themselves when the values that make their lives meaningful are threatened) we must assume she meant the latter. But in that case her entire argument collapses, falling to pieces at each point where she fudges the transition from one sort of “life” to the

other. (Rand's erstwhile associate David Kelley takes her to mean the former and is himself a "physical survivalist".)

Be that as it may, the Objectivist ethic rests ultimately on a foundation of subjectivism and even of arbitrariness (in the form of its pre- and a-moral choice "to live," in either sense). Its overtones of moralism are simply part of Rand's express (and elsewhere documented) attempt to borrow the "flavor" of religion for an explicitly anti-religious philosophical outlook in which "God" is replaced by Randian "reality" as the authoritative absolute—and by "man" (in practice, by particular men) as the object of worship.

If Rand is going to claim that the mere existence of a living entity determines what it "ought" to do, she needs—at least in the case of human beings, whom she regards as uniquely endowed with "volitional consciousness"—an argument that it "ought" to choose life just because it exists. And we have already seen that she cannot offer one, because she has made all of her "oughts" depend on a logically prior decision "to live" (in the ambiguous sense already discussed).

Nor does she try to offer one; she just makes occasional dismissive comments like this one: "If [one] does not choose to live, nature will take its course" ["Causality Versus Duty," in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 99]. ("Nature" takes its time with some of these folks; many of them live a good deal longer—not to mention more happily—than Rand herself.) She also masks her omission by using the value-laden term "need" in her allegedly fundamental question: why does man *need* a code of values?

And, to top it all off, Rand turns around and tells us that "choosing life" as "man *qua* man" may involve choosing literal death (in the case of "rational suicide"). If she is right about that, then *every* portion of her argument that depends on the meaning "biological life" must be wrong.

As with her epistemology, it is clear enough what she wants to do, and we may well be sympathetic to her aim. She wants to argue that the proper ethical goal of a human being is to live his/her life intelli-

gently and well, that self-reliance and loyalty to one's values are important constitutive parts of such a life, and that a life not characterized by such features may not be worth living. And this is all well and good as far as it goes.

Unfortunately her arguments for this claim are hopelessly confused. She fails even to offer a sound argument that "value" presupposes "life" (i.e., a process of self-sustaining and self-generated action in the face of a constant alternative between existence and non-existence). "Value" does indeed presuppose purposes and goals, but whether these in turn presuppose biological life (and the constant alternative of death) is an open question that Rand did not address adequately.

For example, both Artificial Intelligence theorists and theists say that purposiveness can exist in some manner apart from biological life—apart, that is, from a constant alternative between life and death which one can affect by one's actions. Whether the corresponding philosophical outlooks are true or false, Rand herself offers no cogent arguments against either. She merely announces, in her usual declamatory tone, that the "concept" of value presupposes the "concept" of life [VOS, p. 18]; why this is so is never made quite clear, though we are not here undertaking to examine this troublesome passage. (At any rate, Rand's identification of the so-called "fallacy of the stolen concept" runs to ground on the impossibility—by her own standards—of showing, by something other than an *a priori* argument, that a given concept can be arrived at in only one way. In order to show, that is, that the concept of value presupposes the concept of life in the required sense, she would have to show not only that we have *in fact* arrived at the concept of value from the concept of biological life, but that there is in principle no other way to arrive at it because the one absolutely presupposes the other. And here she would presumably have to rely on "mystical" *a priori* insight in order to justify what would otherwise be a clearly non-empirical induction.)

Nor does she make out her claim that an "indestructible robot" could have no values [VOS, p. 16]. In order to make this claim seem

plausible, she has to add the condition that her robot cannot be affected by anything or changed in any respect—a *much* stronger condition than immortality.

But these further difficulties in her ethical arguments will not engage us here. What we shall do in the rest of the present chapter is to expose the smoke-and-mirrors business with “man *qua* man” that generates the illusion of a “higher standard” within Objectivism. As we shall see, it is this illusion which allows Rand to argue from intimidation that anyone who does not practice the Objectivist ethic is quite literally subhuman (“human as such” being her own stand-in for “good as such”).

“MAN *QUA* MAN”: DERIVING “IS” FROM “OUGHT”

She invokes “man *qua* man” midway through her argument in “The Objectivist Ethics” in order to palm a card: having already announced that an organism’s biological, physical life is its standard of value, she finds that she needs to undo that very point in order to make her further claims for the sort of life she *prefers* her human beings to live.

I do not think she is expressing mere “preferences,” by the way. My point is that Rand’s own arguments do not establish, or even allow, them to be anything else, and that—for example—her claims about what is necessary for a “genuinely” selfish man’s “self-respect” are simply her own moral intuitions folded into her account of human nature. Without an independent reason why a “self-respecting” egoist would refrain from using force against people who are *not* his potential “trading partners,” Rand’s “new” version of egoism collapses.

It will collapse anyway if that “independent reason” is not itself egoistic. (It will also collapse if the reason *is* egoistic, for then she will be begging the question.) This is the reason Rand is sometimes accused of reductionism, as in the following: “In the United States today the most

vociferous exponent of this self-interest fallacy [i.e., the “reductive fallacy” of illegitimately classifying disparate moral phenomena together under the heading of “self-interest”] is Ayn Rand, a popular novelist with philosophical pretensions and semantic naivety” [Corliss Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism*, p. 244, footnote]. I am not endorsing Lamont’s views generally, but his criticism of Rand on this point is sound.

My claim, then, is that she is building into her account of “man *qua* man” her own views, at which she has arrived in some other fashion, about how human beings *ought* to behave—in short, that in a strange reversal of her intent, she is in effect deriving an “is” from an “ought”.

(For she does have a powerful intuitive sense of this “ought”—when she wants to have it. The woman capable of writing, for example, “The Comprachicos” and “Through Your Most Grievous Fault” cannot possibly believe—can she?—that the horrible miseducation of children and the tragic death of Marilyn Monroe are just morally neutral in themselves; she cannot possibly—can she?—object only to their effects on *her*. Surely these victims are of passionate personal value to her in the first place only because she has implicitly recognized that human well-being as such is *not* morally neutral but intrinsically valuable; surely she is arguing, with all the rhetorical and polemical skill she can muster, that some things are just *wrong* quite apart from their effects either on her personally or even on the doers of the deeds in question. *But her ethical theory does not permit her to say so.* And here we run again into the conflict between her two proposed ethical “axioms”—one, that is, addressing the value to me of my own life, and the other addressing the value of “man’s life” as such.)

That she is doing what I describe is betrayed by a brief passage in “What Is Capitalism?”: at one point she lets slip that by “man *qua* man” she really means “*man at his best*” [p. 24; emphasis hers]. It is worth looking at this passage in some detail in order to see just how much Rand betrays therein. By way of making what, for her, is an

unprecedented distinction between “philosophically objective value” and “socially objective value,” she writes:

[I]t can be rationally proved that the airplane is *objectively* of immeasurably greater value to man (to *man at his best*) than the bicycle—and that the works of Victor Hugo are *objectively* of immeasurably greater value than true-confession magazines. But if a given man’s intellectual potential can barely manage to enjoy true confessions, there is no reason why his meager earnings, the product of *his* effort, should be spent on books he cannot read—or on subsidizing the airplane industry, if his own transportation needs do not extend beyond the range of a bicycle....[I]t can be rationally demonstrated that microscopes are scientifically more valuable than lipstick. But—valuable *to whom*? A microscope is of no value to a little stenographer struggling to make a living; a lipstick is; a lipstick, to her, may mean the difference between self-confidence and self-doubt, between glamour and drudgery. [“What Is Capitalism?”, reproduced in *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, pp. 24–25; emphases Rand’s; we note in passing her curious and presumably rhetorical remarks that, despite her claim elsewhere that everything is measurable, some values are “immeasurably” greater than others.]

Note especially her concession that the values appropriate to “man at his best” may not be appropriate for each and every individual human being. In spite of her usual contempt for “ordinary people” and the “values of Main Street,” she cannot help but notice that there is something irreducibly subjective (i.e., dependent on the character, talents, and tastes of the valuing subject) about even the most objective values.

Now, when Rand notices a problem, she usually turns around and denies it immediately, apparently on the assumption that the problem will go away if only she asserts that she does not *intend* her view to entail it. (No doubt it is easier to take this approach when one’s philosophy denies the existence of real relations of entailment.) And sure

enough: as if on cue, she at once denies “that the values ruling a free market are *subjective*” [p. 25; emphasis hers].

She may be trying to score a point against Ludwig von Mises here (and her marginal notes in her copy of *Human Action* make clear that she does not understand what he means by “subjectivism”; see *Ayn Rand’s Marginalia*, pp. 105–141). But she is in any case using the word “subjective” in her own special sense (as we have seen her do in both epistemology and ethics). On some matters, at least, it seems that what is objectively appropriate for one person may not be objectively appropriate for another, even if one of these persons (e.g. a “little stenographer”) must be objectively judged to represent something less than “man at his best”.

And that *does* make (some) values “subjective” in the ordinary sense of the word—which poses a problem for Rand’s footless distinction between the “standard” and the “purpose” of her ethics, which in turn is why Rand is concerned to deny both the fact and the problem. Poetry may really be better than pushpin, and the exercise of poetic artistry may represent an objectively fuller flowering of humanity than skill at pushpin. But for a person lacking in appreciation for poetry, pushpin may be *objectively* the superior *subjective* choice.

(Brand Blanshard makes a case for just this point in *Reason and Goodness*—which was published in 1961, and Rand later received an autographed copy of it [*Letters of Ayn Rand*, p. 629–30]. As we have noted elsewhere, her reply to Blanshard, dated March 4, 1965, indicates that she was reading the book with great interest. “The Objectivist Ethics” was delivered as a talk on 9 February 1961; “What Is Capitalism?” was published in *The Objectivist Newsletter* for November and December 1965. Did her reading of Blanshard’s book lead her to recognize, and try to patch, a difficulty in her ethical theory?)

But this concession makes nonsense of her apparent identification of “man *qua* man” (or at least of “man”) with “man at his best”. For she is surely not maintaining that the “little stenographer” who wants the lip-

stick is not *human* merely because she happens to have a preference for something less than maximally valuable to “man at his best”.

And if not, then she is implicitly divorcing her standard of “humanity” from her standard of “goodness”. It is incoherent to take, as our fundamental standard of value, a “standard” which presupposes that we already have another. If we can tell what “man at his best” is, we do not need Rand’s handwaving pseudobiological argument about “man *qua* man” at all; that argument, we recall, purports to establish not what constitutes “man at his best” but what constitutes “man,” period.

Thus Rand accidentally reveals here that her real standard of value is not in fact “man *qua* man,” but Rand’s own opinion of what man is like “at his best” quite apart from whether her ethical arguments support that opinion. She really has three different standards operating here: one for determining who or what is objectively a human being at all; one for determining what objectively constitutes a *good* human being; and one for determining what specific values are objectively appropriate for a specific valuing subject *given* that subject’s specific exemplification of humanity and/or “goodness”.

(We shall not pause here to inquire whether she conflates these three standards on purpose or merely out of sheer intellectual sloppiness; either one gives the lie to her philosophical claims on her own behalf. I have already intimated what I believe to have happened: she has read Blanshard’s book on ethics, recognized a difficulty for her own ethics, and tried to paper over it with a little handwaving about “philosophical” vs. “social” objectivity.)

HUMANS AND SUBHUMANS

At any rate, let us return to “The Objectivist Ethics”. Having thus co-opted the terms “man *qua* man” and “human” to mean only those men/humans who meet her unadmitted moral criteria, she is then able to do what I mentioned above: to identify “human” with its (allegedly epistemological) “essence” relative to her contextual purposes—and,

trading on the fact that her “epistemological” essence is actually though unacknowledgedly metaphysical, to deny the title of “human” to anyone who does not suitably embody that “essence”.

It is of course one thing to deny that certain human beings are living ethical lives and to recognize that they are, or have become, evil or depraved human beings. It is quite another to announce that they have thereby ceased to be human altogether.

And it is yet a third thing to invoke quasi-religious language in order to make that denial sound righteous and holy. But this is just what Rand does.

As we have seen, Rand tends to regard those who are not moral by her standards as somehow less than human. Following Rand’s suggestion in the passage we quoted at the head of this chapter, we may find ourselves stopped by the indignantly bewildered question, “How could anyone arrive at such nonsense?”

In fact what she says is rather muddled. First she tells us that “[m]an has to be man—by choice” [*VOS*, p. 25], and then she tells us that “[m]an cannot survive as anything but man” [*VOS*, p. 26]. It would appear that human beings must choose to be human *and* that we have no choice about whether to be human.

But Rand’s intent becomes clear soon enough. We learn that man “can abandon his means of survival, his mind, he can turn himself into a subhuman creature.... But he cannot succeed, as a subhuman, in achieving anything but the subhuman. Man has to be man by choice,” she repeats for good measure, hammering the point home [*VOS*, pp. 26–27].

Who are the “subhuman” humans? Well, she has already told us: they are the ones who “do not choose to think” and/or who “attempt to survive by means of brute force or fraud” [*VOS*, p. 25]. And we may well agree that it is immoral to support one’s life solely by means of force and fraud. Unfortunately we are not told why the use of immoral methods has the power to alter one’s species. (Or is it choosing to think

that alters our species? Perhaps we are subhuman by default until and unless thinking turns us into something else.)

How literal is Rand being here? Does she really think that using or refusing to use one's mind actually has the power to turn a living being from one biological species to another? It is tempting to think this is just too ludicrous for words, that no reasonably well-educated person in the twentieth century could possibly believe such a thing.

But then again, Rand seems to be serious when she sets forth her hypothesis, in "The Missing Link" [reproduced in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*], that the "anti-conceptual mentality" is quite literally the "missing link". And on this view, it would seem that human beings must "choose life" not only to *remain* human but even to *become* human. (The "missing link" is, after all, supposed to be a link between the pre-human and the human, and as such cannot already *be* human.)

Now, if she really means that human beings are self-creating in any sense, her claim is incoherent. It is sheer nonsense to maintain that man becomes man by an act of choice; who does the choosing? A sub-human? But Rand also tells us that human beings are unique in possessing "volitional consciousness"; do we not therefore, according to Rand, have to *be* human in order to possess the capacity to *become* human?

Not, of course, that Rand is necessarily consistent on this point otherwise anyway. In fact it would be an interesting exercise to pick through her writings for all the activities she describes in one context as "volitional" and in another as "automatic," and perhaps someday someone will undertake it. But for now it will suffice to remind ourselves that the *tabula rasa* mind she borrows from Aristotle, Aquinas and Locke should be impossible on her own terms. Consciousness is, she rightly says, always consciousness of something. So: no content, no consciousness; no consciousness, no volition; no volition, no bootstrapping acts of self-creation, whether of "humanity" or of "consciousness".

That is just as well. What Rand is clearly attempting to do here is to co-opt the term “human” to mean something other than biological humanity. She wants to reserve the term for those human beings she regards as moral.

This might appear to be a legitimate move, since she has also identified “good” in some obscure fashion with the achievement of values in fulfillment of “human nature”. And there are indeed philosophers who have mounted legitimate arguments for ethics of self-fulfillment.

However, we are still awaiting an argument from Rand that the fulfillment of “human nature” is automatically *good*. F.H. Bradley had to distinguish between one’s “good self” and one’s “bad self” in order to make his own case for such an ethic; see *Ethical Studies*, pp. 276ff. Rand occasionally comes close to doing likewise; recall her remark [*Letters of Ayn Rand*, p. 15] that the object of her religion is, not “human nature” as such, but the *sublime* in human nature. She cannot make this distinction without allowing a standard of “goodness” that stands to some degree apart from “human nature” as such, but this she cannot do.

Yet she must do so if her ethic is to be meaningful. It is not obvious that the “will to power” is alien to “human nature” in a way that rationality is not. (Nor, obviously, can Rand follow Spinoza in effectively equating the “will to power” with the will toward a common good. Spinoza is able to arrive at this view only because, on his philosophy, it makes sense to regard humanity as acting with something like a single mind or will as parts of a unitary God. Not only will Rand’s metaphysics not permit this view; Rand would surely dismiss it as the worst sort of “collectivism”.) And Rand clearly wants to rule out the exercise of (nonretaliatory) force and fraud as morally improper for “true” human beings.

Unfortunately this will not do. For in her eagerness to promote her “new concept of egoism,” she seems to think she has placed justice, rights, and everything else onto a foundation of strict egoism.

(In my discussions with Objectivists, I have seen some of the silliness to which this approach leads: for example, the remarkable suggestion that one can have moral objections to the actions of Hitler only because of the good things his actions prevented *oneself* from having. One major problem for that suggestion is this: Hitler's effect on history was so profound that, had he not done what he did, many of us would not even have been here to reap those egoistic "benefits"; other people would have been born instead. That is, our moral objections to Hitler's actions are clearly to something other than just their effects on *us*.)

MISCONCEIVING JUSTICE

The key point at which her account goes wrong is, I think, in the attempt to place justice on a foundation of egoism—rather than placing a (high) degree of "egoistic" self-responsibility on a logically prior foundation of justice. The Randian/Objectivist argument here, to the extent that there is one, seems to be roughly this: that (a) justice means recognizing and treating other people as the sorts of beings they are, and (b) it is in my "interest" to treat every existent as the sort of being it is.

Unfortunately it is hard to see why, say, torturing some totally incompetent weakling to death constitutes a failure to treat him as the sort of being he is. Since he is totally incompetent, I am not (by Objectivist standards) going to profit in the slightest from any future dealings with him. Moreover he is a weakling, not only capable of suffering but highly susceptible to it; I am merely taking advantage of his "natural" weakness in order to cause him some of the suffering to which he is "by nature" inclined.

Granted that this is in some way *wrong*—I would say it is obviously so—but how on earth am I treating him as something other than what he is? The wrongness here surely has nothing to do with failure to treat him according to his "nature". Isn't it his "nature" to scream in pain when I kick him? And am I not treating him according to precisely that

“nature”? (Nor is it, in any obvious way, a violation of my *own* “nature” to treat him in this way. Perhaps I am just downright mean and nasty by “nature”. Even serial killers are acting in some fashion according to their “natures”.)

Nor will it do to announce, as we have seen that Rand does, that each human being is “metaphysically” an “end in himself”. Even if this is true (and Rand is not really entitled to this Kantian point)—so what? How does this metaphysical claim metamorphose into the “basic *social* principle of the Objectivist ethics” [VOS, p. 30, emphasis hers]? According to what Randian argument does the fact that you are valuable to yourself somehow make you valuable to me too?

Nor can we do what Rand does, ever so briefly, in “The Ethics of Emergencies”: acknowledge what are sometimes called our “negative obligations” and pretend we are still egoists. (“One’s sole obligation toward others, in this respect, is to maintain a social system that leaves them free to achieve, to gain and to keep their values” [VOS, p. 55]—i.e., by not violating their rights and by doing what one reasonably can to keep one’s “social system” from violating them as well.)

I have, let us say, a neighbor, two houses over on the next street, whom one of my children likes to visit. The easiest way to get there is to walk across the backyard in between. Unfortunately this yard belongs to a mean old codger who dislikes having children traipse across his property. So my child has to walk all the way around the block in order to avoid violating this neighbor’s right against trespass. Clearly the “negative” obligation to avoid violating the rights of other people looks, under at least some circumstances, a good deal like a *positive* obligation actively to seek other means of fulfilling our ends—and to adjust or abandon our ends if no other such means can be found.

The point is that Rand’s view of “justice” has a nontrivial kind (and measure) of irreducible other-regard already buried in it. The argument here is similar to one I advanced earlier regarding “benevolence”; both justice and benevolence are irreducibly other-regarding virtues, however much it may be “in my interest” to practice either one. When we

argue that justice and benevolence are in fact prudent, what we show is that your interests and mine are not ordinarily in fundamental, irresolvable conflict. What we do not show is that respecting your rights and treating you with benevolence are really “egoistic” or “selfish” acts.

By way of showing that rights-violating acts are “egoistically” immoral Rand wants to argue, in effect, that a self-respecting person just wouldn’t *do* such things, and *therefore*[!] that refraining from rights-violating action is really “egoistic”:

[I]f [a man] is an egoist in the best sense of the word he will choose [the] highest values *for himself* and for himself alone.... A man has a code of ethics primarily for his own sake, not for anyone else’s. Consequently, *an ethical man is essentially an egoist. A selfless man cannot be ethical.* [*Journals of Ayn Rand*, p. 78; emphasis hers.]

But *why* wouldn’t a self-respecting person do such things? Because it is not in his “interest” in some other way? Because a human being (not a “true” human being according to a moralized standard that already has our ethical conclusion built into it under the guise of “biology,” but just a human being) is unable to survive that way “in the long run”?

Nonsense—and it is nonsense on Rand’s own terms. If it were true that human beings cannot survive “in the long run” by what is sometimes called “prudent predation,” Rand would never have had to write “The Pull Peddlers” [reproduced in *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*]. A cardinal point of her pro-capitalist arguments is precisely that government favors *can*—unjustly!—benefit some people at the expense of others.

Not that she is entirely consistent on this point; the title of another essay reproduced in the same volume characterizes “big business” as “America’s persecuted minority”. Murray Rothbard’s reply is apt: “Persecuted? With a few honorable exceptions, big business jostles one another eagerly to line up at the public trough.... Big businessmen tend to be admirers of statism, not because their souls have been poi-

soned by intellectuals, but because a good thing has thereby been coming their way” [*For a New Liberty*, p. 309].

Rand more or less acknowledges as much but puts the blame solely on the government itself: “So long as a government holds the power of economic control, it will necessarily create a special ‘elite,’ an ‘aristocracy of pull,’ it will attract the corrupt type of politician into the legislature, it will work to the advantage of the dishonest businessman” [“Notes on the History of American Free Enterprise,” in *CUI*, p. 108]. For some reason, she has no difficulty blaming the “corrupt politician” for being corrupt but apparently shies away from blaming the “dishonest businessman” for being dishonest.

(Cf. the following from Richard Stallman, president of the Free Software Foundation, defending a proposed boycott of Amazon.com because of its controversial “one-click” patent: “[F]oolish government policies gave Amazon the opportunity—but an opportunity is not an excuse. Amazon made the choice to obtain this patent, and the choice to use it in court for aggression. The ultimate moral responsibility for Amazon’s actions lies with Amazon’s executives” [quoted in “Patent Upending,” by Evan Ratliff; published in *Wired* Issue 8.06, June 2000; at http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/8.06/patents_pr.html]. This seems to me to strike the right balance.)

But wherever the blame belongs, Rand admits that dishonesty in business can be advantageous and economically profitable, not only in the short run but in the long run as well. At most she simply ignores the role of the “dishonest businessman” in encouraging, creating, sustaining, and expanding such a corrupt government in the first place.

Whatever Rand’s followers may say about “prudent predators,” then, Rand herself certainly acknowledges, at least by implication, that prudent predation is sometimes effective. But if there is some other sense in which it is not in one’s “long-term interest” to survive by opportunistic rights-violation, Rand fails to spell it out. What she wants to say is that we have to “survive” as the kind of beings we are, as “man *qua* man”. But as to why we are the kind of beings who cannot

or should not “profit” at the expense of others—well, sound reasons never quite emerge. (Ultimately her reason seems to be that independence and autonomy are necessary in order for values to exist at all in the first place. But we have already dealt with this claim.)

We appear to have two options: (a) the one Rand took—namely, to define “human nature” in such a way that it includes all and only those traits which we evaluate as “good” by an implicit, unacknowledged standard, and then deny that anyone lacking those traits is “really” human; and (b) to invoke a standard of “good” that is to some degree independent of “human nature” and according to which the goodness (or otherwise) of “human nature” itself can be evaluated.

The advantage of the second course is that it does not require us to deny, as Rand does, that unethical or immoral human beings are human beings at all. The disadvantage—for Objectivists, at any rate—is that we cannot adopt it consistently with Objectivism. As we have seen, Rand rejects such overarching standards for the very same reason she rejects God: for her, nothing is supposed to stand in judgment over human nature. (Her epistemology and her ethics rule out even a transcendent ideal which we can asymptotically approach and which subsumes and coheres with our immanent standards. If we cannot actually *be* perfect, she says in effect, we must change the standard of perfection.)

But neither, for other reasons, can we adopt the first course consistently with Objectivism. I have already noted that Rand’s epistemology does not allow her to speak of human beings “as such” (even though she does anyway, just as she speaks of “existence as such” and “consciousness as such”). And in another sense, owing to a deep fissure in the Objectivist epistemology itself, she also has to break with at least one tenet of the “Objectivist epistemology” in order to identify the concept “human” with what she takes to be its “essential characteristic”. Specifically, she has to deny that this concept means *all* its referents together with *all* their characteristics, or else she has to turn her allegedly epistemological/contextual “essence” into a full-blown real

and metaphysical one. (Or possibly both.) In either case, her epistemology forbids her any abstract ethical standard.

So it appears that in any event, we cannot take the easy way out and simply identify “good” with the fulfillment of a vacuously-understood “human nature” that, moreover, depends (somehow) on an act of sheer self-preceding volition. Perhaps it is time to stop making a fetish of “autonomy” and get real about morality.

What is really ironic about this Randian nonsense is that—whatever Rand’s intentions may or may not have been—her attempt to place morality in the service of human life leads in practice to one of the most life-sapping and dehumanizing ethics ever implemented.

THE SANCTION OF THE VICTIM

Rand would have us believe that “dehumanization” is a feature solely of dictatorships and collectivist societies. I submit that such dehumanization happens elsewhere too, and without benefit of dictatorship. It happened, for example, in New York City during the 1960s, in the Objectivist movement. We have noted several features of Objectivism that contribute to such dehumanization: for example, Rand’s own apparent inability to recognize other people as “real,” her introduction of falsely rigorous standards of “rationality” that do not permit so much as a *desire* for the “unearned,” and her identification of rationality with humanity itself (with its implication that the irrational are literally subhuman). The Objectivist ethics, in practice, said in effect to its adherents: trim your personality to fit a false abstraction, or be condemned to subhumanity as a creature that does not deserve to exist.

Presumably Rand’s own personality is the root of the difficulty here. Rand has been described as a “narcissist” by at least one psychotherapist who knew her throughout much of her life; according to Jeff Walker, Allan Blumenthal believes she suffered from Paranoid, Borderline, and Narcissistic personality disorders [*The Ayn Rand Cult*, p. 266]. Whether or not this diagnosis is correct, Rand had at least this

much in common with narcissists: she was very good at manipulating people without actually violating their “rights”. Indeed one of the primary means by which she did so was through her view that certain people were not fully human, a view by the acceptance of which some of her followers granted her the “sanction of the victim”. (Which only proved that they were “social metaphysicians” anyway, didn’t it?)

It may be objected that her personal shortcomings do not reflect poorly on her ethics. Whatever she herself may have done in her personal life, at least one possible formulation of her ethic—that human beings, unlike animals, must discover their *teloi*—sounds fairly tame and bland.

And so it is; but for that very reason it is not Rand’s formulation. Rand’s own views entail that the only way someone could *fail* to discover his/her *telos* is by willful evasion of the responsibility to think. The fundamental choice “to focus” is supposed to be the one that determines all of one’s other choices; a handwaving passage in “The Objectivist Ethics” identifies it with the choice “to live”; and Rand does indeed regard the failure to make it affirmatively as morally blameworthy even though, in strict consistency, her metaethical foundations did not entitle her to do so.

Still less tame and bland is her contention that human beings who do not find their *teloi* (or properly “align” themselves therewith) are less than fully human. We have already remarked on its destructive effects on the people who have fallen under Rand’s spell; here I shall simply add that characterizing one’s own people as “people” and other people as “non-people” is an all-too-common human failing that has had similar destructive effects throughout history.

In short, Rand teaches that human beings have to do something—in fact something impossible in principle—in order to earn their humanity. Moreover, in the heyday of the “Objectivist movement,” the “Objectivist psychology” (largely created by Nathaniel Branden) followed her in this, regarding all psychological problems as resulting from morally blameworthy “errors of integration” that could

be corrected by adjusting one's premises—and if this adjustment failed (as it usually did), it must be one's own fault for willfully evading on some other point.

What else could the problem be? Human beings are born with *tabula rasa* minds and “volitional consciousness,” aren't they? If you botched your own creation, whom can you blame but yourself?

This is surely a recipe for suicidal depression—and indeed ex-Objectivists wind up in therapy with alarming regularity, though of course they do not all kill themselves.

However, an acquaintance of mine (who was associated with the Objectivist movement during the early 1970s) lost his first wife to suicide because of her belief that, by Objectivist standards, she was a flawed specimen of humanity who did not deserve to live (or, in Randian terms, had not “earned the right” to hold herself as her own “highest value” by “achieving” her own “moral perfection”). And she was not the only Objectivist or ex-Objectivist to commit or attempt suicide.

According to Barbara Branden, psychotherapist Allan Blumenthal agrees that Objectivism has had profound adverse psychological effects on its adherents. “For many years, I had been aware of negative effects of the philosophy on my Objectivist patients. At first, I attributed them to individual misinterpretations. But then I began to see that the problem was too widespread” [*The Passion of Ayn Rand*, pp. 387–388].

According to Jeff Walker, Blumenthal has gone so far as to suggest that the *entirety* of Objectivism was created as a sort of personal psychotherapy for Rand herself [*The Ayn Rand Cult*, p. 247]. We shall not go that far here, nor do I claim to be in any way competent to evaluate Blumenthal's suggestion. But we are able to confirm a related point. A good deal of Objectivism serves the sole purpose of protecting Rand's own views (including her tastes) against criticism—by “proving” that anyone who disagrees with her (or does not share her tastes) is at best a flawed human being and at worst a subhuman creature who has willfully evaded the responsibility of thought.

(Her views on emotion, which we have criticized in passing at one or two points, are deserving of separate treatment. We shall not undertake an exhaustive critique of those views, but we should note again that Rand was just wrong—and wrong on her own terms—to claim that “[e]motions are not tools of cognition” [“Philosophy: Who Needs It,” in *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 6]. By Objectivist standards, they are instant appraisals of what is good or bad for one, based on one’s previous thinking. They therefore have every bit as much right to be called “tools of cognition” as sensory perception does. The precise mechanisms by which emotional repression came to mark the Objectivist movement are, however, beyond the scope of this volume.)

I do not mean that her epistemology was intentionally *created* for the purpose of proving that Rand’s “enemies” were subhuman. Perhaps it was, perhaps it was not. But there can be little doubt that it does serve that purpose as it has actually been applied in the history of the Objectivist movement—whether through deliberate malice or merely through Rand’s lack of intellectual humility and her corresponding inability to engage in self-criticism, we shall not try to say.

Were Rand evaluated by the standards she wants to apply to Immanuel Kant regarding responsibility for the life-and-death consequences of the philosophical ideas one visits upon an unsuspecting world, she would be hoist by her own petard. And cf. the following, about Marilyn Monroe’s suicide: “Anyone who has ever felt resentment against the good for being the good and has given voice to it,” Rand writes, “is the murderer of Marilyn Monroe” [“Through Your Most Grievous Fault,” reproduced in *The Voice of Reason*, p. 160]. Is this Rand’s standard? If so, then could we not also say that anyone who has ever folded her own moral intuitions into a loaded definition of human nature, denied that moral human beings are human beings at all, and given voice to this view, is the murderer of every *Objectivist* who has ever committed suicide?

Rand’s admirers often seem curiously unwilling to acknowledge this point. I have made it before, and promptly been accused of “hating”

Rand (as though my alleged motivation could in and of itself discredit my claim).

For the record: no, I do not hate her. But frankly, I have nothing but contempt for her shabby, callous, inhumane, and often cruel treatment of other people, and moreover for the way she loaded her philosophy to justify such behavior.

So, I think, should any Objectivist who is genuinely committed to the principles she said she stood for (and for which she failed to provide an adequate or even coherent philosophical foundation). Anyone who plans to rescue the “philosophy of Objectivism” will need to rescue it from her first of all, because it is filled with little land mines placed there by her own personal limitations and psychological problems.

And since we opened this chapter with a relevant quotation from “Philosophical Detection,” I shall give in to the temptation to close with a quotation from “Philosophy: Who Needs It”—one which Rand originally directed at the philosophy of Immanuel Kant but which it now seems fitting to redirect toward her own:

In physical warfare, you would not send your men into a booby trap: you would make every effort to discover its location. Well, [Rand’s] system is the biggest and most intricate booby trap in the history of philosophy—but it’s so full of holes that once you grasp its gimmick, you can defuse it without any trouble and walk forward over it in perfect safety. And, once it is defused, the lesser [Randians]—the lower ranks of [her] army, the philosophical sergeants, buck privates, and mercenaries of today—will fall of their own weightlessness, by chain reaction. [Title essay, *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 8.]

Afterword

[T]he primary significance of...any philosopher[] does not lie in his politics. It lies in the fundamentals of his system: his metaphysics and epistemology. [Leonard Peikoff, *The Ominous Parallels*, p. 21.]

Ayn Rand was a fairly good novelist. I am not a tremendous fan of *ATLAS SHRUGGED*, which—quite apart from its content—I find to be rather kludgy, repetitive, wordy, and unwieldy; likewise I find the style of *Anthem* to be mostly annoying and precious. But *We the Living* is technically a fine novel, and I genuinely enjoy *The Fountainhead*. Rand could write well and plot well.

But as a philosopher...well, as a philosopher, she was a fairly good novelist.

For fiction is not philosophy. Rand's melodrama and rhetoric do not transfer well to the quest for systematic understanding. And Rand's particular brand of "hero worship", however useful in her dramatic and somewhat propagandistic novels, is unlikely to appeal in real life to those hero-worshippers—like me—whose objects of admiration possess such virtues as judiciousness, thoroughness, self-criticism, intellectual humility, and equanimity.

I say this not because, as some of her followers would have it, any opponent of Rand must have an anti-life, values-destroying desire to topple heroes from their pedestals. I say it because Rand was not as heroic as those followers would have us believe.

And I am not speaking only of Rand's personal life. Objectivism itself consists largely of trivial victories over unworthy opponents, cheap shots at easy targets, blasts of rhetorical fire directed at straw men, and short trips down blind alleys followed by furtive, unacknowl-

edged withdrawals. Rand had an undeniable ability to portray her foils vividly and to make the reader loathe them as much as she did. But even a successful criticism of some particular specimen of unreason is not the same as a positive defense of reason itself, and Rand was not at all clear on the difference. Nor were all of her criticisms successful in the first place.

We have criticized her not for defending reason but for debasing it. In this volume we have examined her positive philosophy in the light of another positive philosophy which, I have claimed, is *more* genuinely “pro-reason” than her own, and we have seen that her own positive account of reason—though it includes the beginnings of some genuine insights—is nevertheless sorely lacking in competence and self-criticism.

And we have argued repeatedly that her account is, ultimately, drawn astray by Rand’s own *irrational* opposition to anything smacking of God or religion—even though some of her own presumptions make much good sense on a theistic worldview and are utterly incompatible with her own anti-theistic one.

We began by describing the essence of Objectivism as the claim that “there is no God, and man is made in His image”. We have shown that Rand’s arguments do not make much sense on their own terms, and that therefore our own interpretation should be preferred. Rand is trying to show, in effect, that we can have reason and liberty without God—and she is doing so, not by following the argument where it leads, but by determining in advance where she *wants* the argument to lead and rejecting, for altogether inadequate reasons, everything that stands in the way of her preferred conclusions. In short, she deliberately eliminates from philosophy every doctrine, every tenet, which she associates with theism, ultimately for no better reason than that she *does* associate it with theism.

We have stuck primarily to an examination of the philosophy itself, but we have also tried, when possible, to see the mechanisms by which

Objectivism contributes in practice to the phenomenon to which we refer in our title: the corruption of rationality.

For Objectivism does corrupt rationality—the concept, the faculty, and the practice. And if our criticisms in this volume are sound, then we have exposed some of the ways in which it fosters this perhaps unintended consequence.

Some of these are simply patterns of poor argumentation; Rand was just not as logical as her admirers have tended to believe. Several of these patterns we have repeatedly encountered:

She tended to construct false dichotomies, argue against one side, and conclude in favor of the other side. For example, she argued in effect as follows: morally, a living organism's actions must serve either its own good or someone else's; if they serve someone else's the organism will die; therefore the proper beneficiary of the organism's actions is itself. The possibility that one's own good and that of others are not at odds in the first place does not emerge until much later—and even then, the initial premise is not questioned. Likewise, she argued for the “primacy of existence” against the “primacy of consciousness” by simply importing into her argument the presumption that the two “primacies” are opposed to one another; the possibility that they are as inseparably related as two poles of a magnet is just never raised. Her least critical followers still follow her in this respect.

She also tended to attach “riders” to important opposing positions, reject the “riders”, and assume (or at least write as though) she had thereby disproved the positions themselves. For example, she rejected the existence of real universals *which the mind apprehends passively*, and thought she had thereby rejected the existence of real universals, period. Likewise, she rejected any versions of nominalism and conceptualism *which held resemblances to be vague or arbitrary*, and thought that she had thereby rejected nominalism and conceptualism, period. Here again, her less critical followers do likewise, and we have cited several examples in this volume.

She also tended to be vague about the difference between a necessary and a sufficient condition. She failed to distinguish, for example, between the claim that sensory perception is a valid means of acquiring knowledge and the claim that it is the *only* valid means of acquiring knowledge; she failed to distinguish between the recognition that it is morally acceptable to pursue one's own interests and the claim that it is morally acceptable *only* to pursue one's own interests.

She also tended to be blind to matters of degree. She failed, for example, to recognize that a moral claim may exist as a *prima facie* claim and yet be overruled by other moral claims. She also wrote as though the alternatives in the face of an unachievable ideal (e.g. omniscience) were complete success and abject failure; given such an ideal, if we cannot be omniscient, she thought, our minds must be altogether impotent.

She also tended to use philosophical terms ineptly. For example, she rejected the concept of an "intrinsic" good, in part, because she thought (incorrectly) that an "intrinsic" good would justify any means whatsoever of securing it. She rejected the existence of real universals without ever once coming to an understanding of what philosophers had generally meant by the term.

She also tended to be illogical in dealing with the implications of her own principles. Indeed, she seems to have been peculiarly susceptible to the belief that she could eliminate undesirable implications merely by announcing that she did not *mean* them. The values served by a free market, for example, are inextricably and ineluctably dependent on the personal tastes and goals of the valuing subjects—but this fact does *not*, she announced, make those values "subjective".

And she was often unclear about just exactly what principles she was defending in the first place. Though claiming to base her entire philosophy on the "evidence of the senses," she appears never to have formulated an account of how perception is related to sensation and reason, nor (as we noted above) to have distinguished between the proposition

that sensory perception is reliable and the very different proposition that it is our sole source of knowledge.

But these are fairly superficial symptoms of a single underlying pattern. Most fundamentally, she tended to build on unacknowledged presumptions—and to draw conclusions that expressly undermined her unwitting presumptions. And she seems to have managed this feat in large measure by merely failing to acquire the most elementary understanding of the positions she believed herself to be attacking, while also failing to subject her own views to the most elementary self-criticism.

The result is that Objectivism cannot account for its own existence. Most of her presumptions belong, philosophically, to rationalistic objective idealism, and most of her express philosophy belongs to a sort of nominalistic, materialistic empiricism. Her entire philosophy, therefore, amounts to what she would have called a “stolen concept”.

Yet her ideas seem to exert a powerful gravitation attraction on anyone who has come within her orbit. Even her more critical followers—e.g. David Kelley—seem to have had their good sense addled by a misguided devotion to her ideas. The less critical ones tend to become what are usually, and for obvious reasons, called “Randroids”. (The term may have been coined by the late Roy Childs.)

Certainly not all of Rand’s admirers are “Randroids”. I am personally acquainted with some who are highly intelligent and thoughtful people and who have managed to refrain from adopting Rand’s “style of thought”. By and large, however, they are also the ones who have been furthest from the Objectivist movement, least likely to have spent much (if any) time with Rand herself, and most willing to question even the most fundamental tenets of Objectivism.

In many cases they expressly disagree with some of those tenets. Oddly and interestingly, there seem to be plenty of “critical Objectivists” who, having received professional educations, recognize that in their own fields of study—psychology, say, or the theory of art—Rand was (to put it mildly) not altogether reliable. What is odd and interest-

ing is that many of these very same people are still inclined to assume that in most or all other fields outside their areas of expertise, perhaps especially in epistemology, Rand's contributions were not only competent but even groundbreaking and revolutionary.

I have not found them so. On the contrary, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology* and its associated texts seem to me to be a hash of inconsistencies, misunderstandings, misrepresentations, and failures of introspection, pieced together from snatches of this and that, borrowed from anyone who happened to be going Rand's way. Like a pointillist painting, Rand's epistemology looks best when viewed from a certain distance; upon close analysis, it dissolves into an incoherent patchwork of dots.

My friend Bob Wallace insists, with much justice, that Ayn Rand was essentially a "leftist" despite her defense of (some) views that have generally belonged to the political right. In support of his claim, he cites a number of well-known features of Rand's thought, including her utter rejection of tradition and religion, her deep distrust of "implicit" reasoning, and her almost messianic plans to "remake" the world in accordance with her own explicit conceptual scheme while riding roughshod over basic human realities that might interfere. (For more on this general topic, see Paul Johnson's uneven but interesting *Intellectuals*. Though unfortunately he does not take Rand as one of his targets, his remarks on what happens when such "intellectuals" put their ideas into practice could practically have been written about the Objectivist movement. See also Michael Oakeshott's essay "Rationalism in Politics," in which he skewers a brand of "rationalism" very much like Rand's own.)

We have examined some of these features in this volume and confirmed many of my friend's opinions. My own view is that Rand added nothing whatsoever of importance to the philosophical foundations of classical liberalism, indeed that what she did add is not only philosophically negligible but also positively dangerous. To paraphrase a remark attributed to Oscar Wilde in another context: what is good in Objec-

tivism is not original, and what is original is not good. The philosophy of liberty and the economic theory of capitalism can best be studied from other sources, and the psychological hazards of cleaving to Rand's principles seem to me to outweigh by far any possible benefits therefrom.

The responsibility for those hazards rests ultimately with Rand herself. They are merely the expression, in pseudophilosophical form, of her own psychological tendencies and character traits. Her account of "reason" is not only flawed, but culpably flawed; she should have known better, she had access to the works of philosophers who did know better, and she deliberately offered a philosophy of "reason" that was expressly intended to undermine and discredit the foundations not only of theology but of any philosophical outlook that bore any remote threat of entailing theism.

In the process she undermined and discredited the foundations—and the exercise—of reason itself. I can hardly think that classical liberalism is any the stronger for her influence. Those who think otherwise should at least be warned of the hazards of her philosophy, and I hope this critique has in some manner helped to provide such a warning.

APPENDIX

Theism, Rationalism, and Objective Idealism

Here, for the convenience of the interested reader, is a short statement of my own theological-philosophical outlook. I include it not only in order to let the reader know what my own outlook is, but also for two other reasons.

One is that, since I am mounting a critique of Ayn Rand's philosophy, it seems only sporting to comply with "Rand's Razor"—that is, "State your irreducible primaries" [*Journals of Ayn Rand*, pp. 699–700]. I think this is a fine idea. I also think that if Rand herself had done it better, we would have been spared some extremely poor philosophy.

Which leads to my second reason. With the possible exception of theism, nearly every point I shall mention here is in some way presupposed in Rand's epistemology, as I show elsewhere in this volume. Therefore even readers who do not find my presuppositions compelling should nevertheless find them interesting and relevant; the rest of this book is largely devoted to demonstrating that these presuppositions were Rand's as well. If I am right that Rand's explicitly "nominalist/empiricist" epistemology actually depends on a good deal of implicit "objective idealism," then readers who reject objective idealism will have to reject Objectivism as well.

I am, in brief, a panentheist, a rationalist, and an objective or absolute idealist. Here I shall elaborate briefly on what I mean by these expressions—not, indeed, trying to prove the truth of my views but merely giving what I hope is a fairly straightforward statement of them.

Most of the views I describe here are supported elsewhere in this volume.

First of all, I am a theist (specifically a panentheist), and as far as traditional religion is concerned my primary loyalties are to Judaism. I do not believe that the existence of God can be “proven” by argument if this means arguing one’s way up to God by strict deduction without assuming God’s existence in any way to start with. Nor do I think it is strictly possible to show (as is sometimes argued) that the existence of God is an absolute presupposition of all rational thought. However, I do think it is possible to show that all rational thought depends on absolute presuppositions which, if true, are best explained by theism (and in particular by the theism of the Torah, at least on my own theological-philosophical understanding thereof, and all religions which incorporate or presuppose it).

I think these absolute presuppositions also provide the best explanation for the common core of religion sometimes called “perennial philosophy”. Now, I do not believe for a moment that everyone must come to this philosophy by the ordinary path of discursive thought (though that is surely one such path). On the contrary, some of my favorite “spiritual” books are Stephen Gaskin’s *This Season’s People*, Paul Williams’s *Das Energi*, Thaddeus Golas’s *The Lazy Man’s Guide to Enlightenment*, Douglas Harding’s *On Having No Head*, and the story collections of Anthony De Mello, each of which downplays (in one way or another) the role of reason in spiritual practice and insight. And I cheerfully admit that, whatever the role of reason may be in articulating and defending the “perennial philosophy,” one must first *have* the insight into the nature of reality on which such philosophy is ultimately based.

But I am also a rationalist, and this is not incidental to my panentheism (at least when it comes to articulating and defending it). First of all, I should make clear that I am not a “rationalist” in the modern, post-Enlightenment sense of this term, i.e., the sense of the term as it is used by those who wish to argue that the human faculty of reason

operates autonomously in arriving at truth. On the contrary, I regard this modern perversion as a form of anti-rationalism. What I mean by the term is the belief that the “world” itself is rational and intelligible (being, in fact, the product of a single creative Intelligence, though one can be a rationalist—albeit, I think, an ultimately inconsistent one—without this presumption), and that in order to arrive at truth, the human mind must subordinate itself to this intelligible order.

This too is, in its way, a belief in the autonomy of reason; but the “reason” which is thus autonomous is ultimately that of God (whether called YHWH, Brahma, or the Absolute). In important and fundamental ways, my theism is closely aligned with that of Baruch de Spinoza and I am in many respects a Spinozist. (And I contend that the insight I mentioned two paragraphs back—more traditionally called “intuition” and sometimes regarded as in some sense “higher than” reason—is itself a function of reason in the broadest sense of the word, notably as used by the great philosophical idealists from Plato to Shankara to Bradley, though not reducible to the analytical/deductive/left-brain functions we ordinarily *identify* with “reason”.)

I think it is possible to argue that all rational thought makes several absolute presuppositions. Here are a couple of the most important ones for present purposes:

(1) That objective reality itself is not something altogether distinct from mind but in some sense (to put it roughly) made of the sort of “stuff” that can be “in” a mind. The real object of a thought is in some manner a complete development, an idealization, of the thought itself. To concede otherwise, i.e., to hold that there is not even a partial identity between thought and object, is to introduce a chasm between thought and reality that can never be bridged by “empiricist” philosophy.

(2) That everything has an explanation, that is, is intelligible in principle. What I mean by “explaining” something is what Blanshard means by the term: to explain anything is to see it in the context of an overarching system in which it can be seen to be necessary. And expla-

nation in this sense is not satisfied with the bare conjunctions of “non-contradiction”; we seek something stronger, usually called “coherence,” and the absolute (and indefeasible) presupposition of all rational thought is that such coherence is really “out there” to be found.

Now, the simplest way of explaining (1) is simply to hold that the objects of our thought just *are* the objects of thought in a single Absolute Mind existing independently of us and prior to us; this is the explanation offered by Josiah Royce, and it is the explanation I accept. (“[T]his world, as it exists outside of my mind, and of any other human minds, exists in and for a standard, an universal mind, whose system of ideas simply constitutes the world” [Royce, *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*, p. 361]. It is also the explanation offered by the opening chapter of Genesis, in which we are told that all of reality consists primarily of God and secondarily of everything God creates by thought/speech. (I think that the biblical metaphor of “speech” is a better one than “thought,” for reasons we need not discuss here.)

There is a difficulty with (2) with which, unfortunately, Blanshard did not deal but which his predecessors Thomas Hill Green and Bernard Bosanquet did address, however briefly: that explanations would seem to find their ultimate end in a final overarching system which is not itself susceptible to further explanation, there being no further system “outside” of it in which it could find a coherent place. Both Green and Bosanquet, although in slightly different ways, held that this was indeed the case and that there simply is no intelligible answer to the request for an explanation of the total system itself.

I find this entirely unsatisfactory. And as far as I can tell, there are just two ways around it.

The first—which I mention because I have never seen anyone make quite this suggestion before—is that reality is just “too infinite” to come to the end of in a single system. (This possibility was suggested to me by some passages of Rudy Rucker’s *Infinity and the Mind*, though Rucker does not address its relevance to the possibility of explanation.)

In this case, explanations could continue forever; each partial system would be explainable by a larger and more inclusive system, but there would be no final system “at the top” that had no further explanations.

The second, and the one I in fact accept, is this (the structure is essentially Spinozistic): all of reality except God finds its explanation in God, and God exists necessarily and is therefore “self-explanatory” or intelligible without reference to anything “bigger”. (Incidentally, this second alternative does not preclude the first one; it might be the case that God Himself is “too infinite” in the sense I described in (1). In that case, “in the limit,” the system to be explained and the larger system in which the explanation rests would tend toward coincidence.)

A third consideration is one that I owe in part to Royce: the ontological status of ideals.

Blanshard did a workmanlike job of arguing that the process of reasoning is in fact the realization of an immanent, implicitly present ideal. What he unfortunately did not do was address the question of where this ideal “lives,” so to speak. And here he failed, I think, to make an adequate reply to Royce, who held (in a famous, and brilliant, argument to the existence of God from the possibility of error; see *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*, pp. 384–435) that such ideals could not exist as potentials only; an error, being a failure to realize an ideal completely, could be an “error” only with respect to a more complete thought which itself must *actually* exist.

Moreover, as I contend in chapter 8, there seems to be a clear sense in which the immanent ideal of necessary system governs the course of thought. Something similar could be said of the ideal “common good” we briefly discuss in the chapter “Values and Volition”. In either case we appear to have an “ideal” that participates causally in its own realization.

If that is correct—and I think it is, though I am not mounting an argument for it here—then we need somewhere to “put” such ideals. If there is an immanent ideal realizing itself in the thoughts of all thinking beings, then it is an ideal which in some manner already exists; this

apparent paradox is at least as old as Plato's *Meno*. And again, the simplest solution is that reality consists, at bottom, of a single Mind in which such ideals are realized absolutely and eternally. (The last few paragraphs of Blanshard's autobiography in *The Philosophy of Brand Blanshard* suggest that he may have been thinking along similar lines himself—though, again, he does not appear to have dealt directly with the relevant ontological problem.) The resolution of the paradox would be that the ideal in question exists eternally and is therefore timelessly “available” to inform and govern its own realization *in* time.

Readers familiar with theology will recognize that this view tends to lead naturally into a more or less Calvinistic and/or Spinozistic view of divine sovereignty, i.e., a sort of “theistic determinism” that finds a place for human volition as part of an eternal network of cause and effect, but not as a “free,” fully autonomous and a-causal phenomenon. I happily concur and note that much of Blanshard's philosophy, despite his agnosticism, in fact reproduces themes common among Reformed theologians (especially as regards determinism). I think he was quite right in this and only wish he had gone farther in this direction himself. (As Spinoza did. Indeed, Blanshard regarded his own philosophy as essentially Spinozistic and the view of religion he sketched in the closing chapters of *Reason and Belief* was very much along Spinozan lines. Strictly speaking, my own non-Christian “theistic determinism” is Spinozistic rather than Calvinistic, but we need not adjudicate between Calvinism and Spinozism here.)

Readers may also recognize that the view of universals which naturally attends this outlook places such universals firmly within the Divine Mind. I accept this view as well, thereby (arguably) departing to some extent from Spinoza and (unarguably) aligning myself with “British idealism,” Royce, and Timothy L.S. Sprigge. Indeed I would argue that the everyday “world” simply consists of objects within that Mind. On my view, as on Royce's, God—to borrow a phrase from Paul, who borrowed it from Epimenides—is the One in Whom we “live and move and have our being” [Acts 17:28]. We and the objects in our

world (including space and time themselves) just *are*, quite literally, activities within the eternal Mind of God. Technically this outlook is a variety of roughly Spinozistic panentheism (at least on the reading of Spinoza that I favor), but it is of a kind consistent with Jewish and Christian theology. (At least I take it to be so. I expect, though, that some mainstream Christians may disagree as firmly as their predecessors disagreed with Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* and the great *Ethics*.)

This view no doubt strikes modern readers as highly counterintuitive—which to me merely indicates that the positivistic revolution against religion, theology, and speculative metaphysics has succeeded far better than many of us realize. In fact something like this view was held (independently) by both George Berkeley and the young Jonathan Edwards (and Berkeley, significantly, thought he was simply giving voice to common sense). As Berkeley approached old age, his view altered to something closer to that of T.H. Green, who attributed to the external world—and the operation of Deity—not merely the qualities of “experience” but the relations apprehended by intelligence. I agree with Green rather than the young Berkeley here.

No doubt there are readers who will find my own suggestions more implausible than Rand's. These readers should at least bear in mind that I have here gone a bit beyond the “minimal idealism” of the rest of the volume. My criticisms of Rand will still stand even if my own specific positions are rejected, especially since—as I have tried to show—Rand herself relied implicitly and inconsistently on just such a “minimal idealism” and cannot get Objectivism started without it.

At any rate, the foregoing sets out with (I hope) both brevity and clarity the theological/philosophical perspective from which this volume is written. For further details the interested reader should consult the rest of this book, throughout which I elaborate on and offer some arguments for the positions I have here outlined, though for the most part I have stuck to the “minimal” views which I regard as most solidly

established. There are also plenty of helpful sources cited throughout my critique, not least the works of Blanshard himself.

Finally, I should add that in political theory, I am firmly in the classical-liberal/libertarian camp. Since this is not directly a work of political or economic theory, I shall make only one or two general comments.

First, I think that objective idealism provides the proper foundation for classical-liberal political philosophy. My own views on the sources of political obligation (and rights) are very close to those of T.H. Green as set forth in his *Principles of Political Obligation*; although I must disagree with him at numerous specific points, I agree with what I take to be his fundamental theory, namely that the source of our rights against one another, and the justification for whatever institutions of governance may properly exist, lie in our sharing an ideal common end or common good.

(It is a shame, by the way, that more classical liberals have not confronted Green's devastating criticisms of Lockean empiricism. Their ignorance—of which Rand is a particularly obvious example—has led them to reproduce arguments to which Green has already and in my view unanswerably replied, and which will not sustain the classical-liberal commonwealth. On the other hand, readers who open Green's political works for the first time will be surprised to see how "classical-liberal" his own views are, especially as compared with the brand of "liberal statism" that developed later as objective idealism lost ground to pragmatism, positivism, and other anti-metaphysical, reason-devaluing philosophies. Green's salvage operation on Rousseau's tortured notion of the "general will" turned it, in my view, into something rationally respectable, and the result was in turn picked up by both Bernard Bosanquet and Brand Blanshard; applied consistently, as not all idealists have applied it, it does not at all lead to "liberal statism". Of course with Green, as with any philosopher, one must read carefully and critically: for example Green's view of rights seemed, inconsistently, to deny that "rights" existed at all until and unless they were

recognized by society at large. But this possible inconsistency was noticed and corrected—independently, so far as I know—by both H.H. Joachim in *Logical Studies* [pp. 52–55] and W.D. Ross in *The Right and the Good* [pp. 50–52].)

Second, I think that the process of *discovering* our ideal common end, at least that portion of it which has to do with the allocation of exchangeable goods, is the very process which Austrian-school economists call the “market”. I therefore also think that objective idealism provides a foundation, albeit somewhat indirectly, for economic theory.

By way of closing this appendix and this volume, I shall give the last word to Blanshard (with no implication whatsoever that I personally live up to the ideal here expressed):

[O]f two things one can hardly doubt. One is that the rational temper—that is, clearness of vision, justice in thought and act, and the peace which is the harvest of the quiet eye—is an end that men desire too waveringly. The other is that to achieve it would transform life. [*Reason and Goodness*, p. 446.]

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This bibliography also includes a handful of other *books* (nothing else—i.e., no articles, essays, online publications, or private correspondence) that I thought should be included even though I do not quote them directly or otherwise cite them. I have not included any works by or about Ayn Rand or Objectivism unless I at least mention them in the text; I do not, for example, list Ayn Rand’s *Night of January 16th* or *The Art of Fiction* or *The Art of Non-Fiction*, or Tibor Machan’s *Ayn Rand*. Nor have I included standard works by well-known philosophers (e.g. Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel) that are widely available in various editions, even though I do at times

allude to them. The only major exception is Baruch de Spinoza, since I quote repeatedly from Samuel Shirley's excellent translation of the *Ethics*; the only minor one is Locke's *An Essay on Human Understanding*, since I do not merely allude to it but quote from it directly.

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