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Was Ayn Rand "Dead Wrong"?

I was recently asked for my reaction to Geoffrey James' [Top 10 Reasons Why Ayn Rand Was Dead Wrong](#).

James' anti-Rand rant is so full of holes, it seems that anyone who is genuinely familiar with Objectivism wouldn't need my response to detect its flaws.

James clearly has issues with Ayn Rand and her philosophy, and in the litany of alleged offences that he cites, he often toggles between Rand the person and Objectivism the philosophy as the target of his charges. In fact, some of the accusations which James presents, have nothing to do with what Objectivism actually teaches, but seem to stem from personal misgivings of his own.

James calls Objectivism "an absurd philosophy that got sold to the world of business and government," and blames it for "creating a world of havoc in the United States." While he points repeatedly to Alan Greenspan specifically as a link between Objectivism and the current economic crisis in America (an association which I address below), James fails to cite any piece of legislation governing American economic or other interest which finds its source in Objectivist philosophy. Given his stated understanding of the cause of this "world of havoc in the United States," James would apparently have his readers believe that Washington has been inundated by Objectivists and Objectivist ideas for the past 50 years. If only that were the case!

Throughout his article, James makes some bizarre and apparently self-contradictory statements. We find a howling example in his first paragraphs:

Objectivism is important to sales professionals because it's the kind of philosophy that, if you believe in it, you're going to screw up your ability to sell effectively. As a profession, Sales has moved beyond the attempt to manipulate people selfishly for one's own ends, which is how Objectivism plays itself out in the real world. [sic]

If what James says about Objectivism were true - namely that it will cause salesmen to "screw up [their] ability to sell effectively" - why would it be at all "important to sales professionals"? And if it were true that "Sales has moved beyond the attempt to manipulate people selfishly for one's own ends," why suppose that Objectivism has any influence on business practices today?

I've worked in sales for many years, and in that time I've not encountered anyone who expressed any familiarity with Objectivism. I'm sure there are some out there, but I haven't run across them yet. But James makes it sound like Objectivism is the Skull and Bones of every sales team in the land. But even he points out how Objectivism is at odds with the direction he apparently thinks "Sales" has taken itself since who knows when, by pointing out its inconsistency with appealing to the selfishness of consumers as a marketing tool.

James then goes on to say that "most successful sales professionals feel that they are in service to something greater than themselves." While James' ability to know what feelings "most successful sales professionals" have is itself impressive, he paints them as if they were motivated by some religious teaching that is completely alien to the content of what Objectivism teaches. Objectivism certainly does not teach individuals to think of themselves primarily as the means to some end that surpasses their own self-interests, as if they were sacrificial animals "in service to something greater than themselves." But what successful sales professionals adopt such a view? Suppose you take a proven sales professional and tell him that, instead of his monthly commission, he would be paid with the blissful assurance that his earnings would go to the March of Dimes, the Salvation Army, or some other charity whose scope is "greater than himself." How much longer do you suppose he would continue in his profession? Apparently James thinks contributing to some cause that transcends the salesman's own interests is what motivates him. Why then aren't more salesmen deferring their commissions and directing them to so-called non-profit organizations that are geared toward securing

that cause?

James has already clued us in on his bizarre understanding of human nature and his affinity for sacrificial ethics (anyone paying attention should have no trouble seeing this). But we haven't even gotten started on his list of objections against Objectivism, and already we're encountering howlers like this.

So, let's explore James' indictment against Objectivism, and see how well his "top ten reasons" why Objectivism is "a total crock" stand up to examination.

James' first objection is directed (at least on the surface) against Rand's political philosophy:

Laissez-Faire capitalism doesn't work. Laissez-Faire capitalism is a utopian fantasy. And like all utopias, it cannot actually exist. Therefore, as a philosophy, it needs to be judged on how it gets implemented in the real world, with all the real world's inherent inconsistencies. Just like Marxism, in the real world, produced the Soviet system in Russia, the real world implementation of laissez-faire capitalism, led by Rand-disciple Greenspan, produced the great recession.

James wants to indict Rand's philosophy for what he calls "the great recession," but his only link between the two is a personality which defected from the Objectivist movement decades ago, namely Alan Greenspan. Essentially, James invokes the fallacy of guilt by association in order to incriminate Rand and her philosophy as the cause of the current economic malaise afflicting the United States. James produces no analysis demonstrating any Objectivist *ideas* as the cause of *any* economic crisis in America or elsewhere. It is true that Alan Greenspan collaborated with Rand in compiling her book *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, to which Greenspan contributed three (out of 26) chapters. But it does not follow from this fact that Greenspan's practices as chairman of the Federal Reserve were in line with Objectivism's political teachings. Philosopher Harry Binswanger cites some clear evidence that this is the case in his article [Greenspan on "Infectious Greed"](#), which supports his case with direct quotations from Alan Greenspan. I'm more than confident that a close examination of Greenspan's decision-making in his role as Fed Chairman will reveal significant departures from Objectivism on Greenspan's part. But I am certainly not the first to notice this or point it out.

Speaking more directly to the cause of the current economic crisis, many commentators have pointed to the subprime mortgage delinquencies and related high-risk loan indiscretions in the housing market as one of the chief culprits of the current economic situation. I am persuaded that such arguments have ample merit, and we can thank a handful of leftists in Congress for making this possible. But where does James link these immediate causes to Objectivist teachings as their root cause? He doesn't. And he won't be able to.

Instead, James trades in vague generalities with the sole intent to smear, calling laissez-faire capitalism a "fantasy" which "cannot actually exist." He provides no argument for these characterizations; apparently he either thinks they are self-evidently true, or that they should be accepted on his own say so. But this undercuts his indictment of Objectivism as the cause of the current economic crisis in America: if Objectivism's political philosophy is a mere fantasy which "cannot actually exist," then it cannot have been in place as the condition in which the current economic crisis gestated and culminated into what it is today. Had James pointed out that America is not guided by laissez-faire capitalism, he would be correct. But again, this would only exonerate Objectivism from the economic sins he accuses it of bringing into being: if laissez-faire capitalism is only a fantasy that "cannot actually exist," then it couldn't possibly have been driving the American economy into the ditch over the past decade.

Considering James' complaint more broadly, exactly what is it about Objectivism's political philosophy that he thinks is so unrealistic? Objectivism defines 'capitalism' as "a social system based on the recognition of individual rights, including property rights, in which all property is privately owned." Needless to say, this has hardly existed in the United States, particularly over the last century, for the federal government has always owned at least some property (and does so more and more with each passing moment). What is James' objection against "a social system based on the recognition of individual rights" that has him so agitated against Rand and her philosophy? James does not explain this; he does not give any indication that he understands what Objectivism means by capitalism. But the fundamental point of contention should be clear: to oppose capitalism as Objectivism informs it, is to oppose individual property rights. In terms of essentials, there's no other way to interpret it.

James' second indictment against Objectivism states the following:

Reason has real-world limitations. While I'm all for valuing reason over superstition, the notion that one can use reason without emotion is science fiction. Maybe that works on the planet Vulcan, but human beings swim in a vast ocean of emotion. Emotion governs the "why" behind every exercise of reason, determining our choices of interest and intention. In the real world, people use reason as a way to buttress what their emotions desire.

Not only does James fail to quote Rand and thus establish the relevance of his objection to what Objectivism actually teaches, he also exhibits the tendency of equating what people do "in the real world" with what is philosophically proper. After all, since James is critiquing Objectivism as a philosophy, the concern here is the philosophical value of Objectivism's teachings. At least, that's what one might think given the task that James has set out to accomplish in his critique of Objectivism.

The problem for James is the fact that what people actually do "in the real world" is not a reliable indicator of what is true, false or philosophically viable. Nor does what people actually do in the real world have any bearing on whether or not Objectivism is true. "What people actually do" is a mixed bag, and includes everything from childrearing to running a business, from riding a bicycle to robbing a bank, from running a touchdown to participating in a riot. An individual might habitually make mistakes balancing his checkbook; but this is no sustainable implication against the validity of basic arithmetic. One would think that any adult, including Geoffrey James, could understand this.

Speaking more directly to James' objection, Objectivism nowhere denies the facts that man has emotions, that his emotions are real, that they color his experience and accompany his decision-making. Objectivism nowhere teaches that one should "reason without emotion," and James provides no citation which legitimizes this allegation against Objectivism. Rand's fundamental epistemological point regarding emotion is not that reason and emotion are inherently antagonistic to each other, but that emotion is not a substitute for his faculty of reason. Specifically, Rand wrote:

There is no necessary clash, no dichotomy between man's reason and his emotions—provided he observes their proper relationship. A rational man knows—or makes it a point to discover—the source of his emotions, the basic premises from which they come; if his premises are wrong, he corrects them. He never acts on emotions for which he cannot account, the meaning of which he does not understand. In appraising a situation, he knows why he reacts as he does and whether he is right. He has no inner conflicts, his mind and his emotions are integrated, his consciousness is in perfect harmony. His emotions are not his enemies, they are his means of enjoying life. But they are not his guide; the guide is his mind. This relationship cannot be reversed, however. If a man takes his emotions as the cause and his mind as their passive effect, if he is guided by his emotions and uses his mind only to rationalize or justify them somehow—*then* he is acting immorally, he is condemning himself to misery, failure, defeat, and he will achieve nothing but destruction—his own and that of others. (*Playboy's* Interview with Ayn Rand," March 1964.)

James gives no indication that he understands these distinctions as part of Rand's understanding of emotions and their role in man's mental life, which makes me wonder just how familiar he is with his chosen subject matter. Where is he getting his understanding of Rand and her philosophy?

In his third complaint, James excoriated Rand's character:

Ayn Rand was a [sic] emotional nut case. Regardless of what you think of her philosophy and writing, Rand's personal life was a complete shambles. She became involved in an adulterous affair with a disciple (a "reasonable" decision on her part, of course), and then went all "old bat of out hell" when he made the "reasonable" decision to start boinking some younger woman. The resulting emotional pyrotechnics were a perfect example of the impotence of Objectivism as a life creed.

This is pure ad hominem. James is simply trying to smear Rand's philosophy because she allegedly had character flaws. This is clear because he is saying that her personal life was an example of Objectivism in action. Of course, any high school sophomore should be able to recognize that this doesn't follow.

Then again, if what James describes here actually happened as he describes it, what possible contention could he have against Rand? James just got through telling us that “emotions govern the ‘why’ behind every exercise of reason, determining our choices of interest and intention,” and that “in the real world, people use reason to buttress what their emotions desire.” Now he finds fault with Rand for allegedly doing precisely this. If what James says in his prior criticism is accepted as the guiding light, what justifies his calling Rand “a [sic] emotional nut case”? James’ prior criticism of Rand’s teachings (ever so threadbare as it is) is incompatible with his disparagement of Rand the person.

But is it truly the case that “Rand’s personal life was a complete shambles”? I hardly think so. Rand’s personal life was punctuated with heroic successes that most men in the West could hardly rival. Rand was born into a Jewish family living in Russia at the turn of the 20th century. Perhaps James is unfamiliar with the culture of pre-Soviet Russia, but having Jewish roots in Russia was not a precondition for success and celebrity. At a very young age Rand endured a traumatic event in which she believed she was going to be murdered, survived the communist revolution of the Soviets in the early 20th century, and emigrated to a foreign nation on her own with nothing more than the shirt on her back, leaving her entire family behind, most of whom she never saw again for the rest of her life. In spite of these tragic events which no doubt affected her life, she finished her degree at Petrograd State University, wrote screen plays for Hollywood films, published two best-selling novels in the United States, appeared as a witness before US Congress, and founded her own original philosophy which has influenced many individuals in the US and abroad. Rand was a successful novelist, businesswoman, public speaker and celebrity. She earned her every achievement, which, according to her philosophy, is the formula for genuine happiness, so it is hard to see how one could rightly call her “personal life... a complete shambles.” Indeed, Rand’s success was not the result of some lottery win, nor was she riding on a wave of “luck” given the “accident” of her birth. Rand was born a Jew in pre-Soviet Russia, endured the Communist Revolution in that nation, departed the land of her birth completely on her own, and created a successful life for herself in America often in the face of extreme opposition, such as is evidenced in the vitriol of her detractors, which persists to this day, long after her death.

As for Rand’s extramarital indulgences, James seems to be judging this episode of her life through Judeo-Christian goggles. The stigma of “adultery” is not Objectivist in origin. Rand’s affair with Nathaniel Branden needs no apologies since all parties to it, including Rand’s own husband Frank O’Conner, openly consented to it. Rand did formally part ways with Branden some time after her affair with him had concluded, but her reasons for this cited Branden’s dishonesty to her, not his “boinking” of some other woman. Regardless, Rand’s personal life is neither here nor there when it comes to assessing the merits of her philosophy, just as Euclid’s personal faults have no bearing on the validity of the geometry he developed.

James announces his next complaint:

Her philosophy is devoid of gratitude. While individualism has some value, Objectivism largely discounts the fact the every successful person stands on the shoulders of those who have come before. In addition, success always involves an element of luck, often consisting of having had the luck to be born into a rich family with plenty of connections. Success devoid of gratitude and the *noblesse oblige* to help others brings out the worst in people.

If there were any question that James were personally familiar with what Rand actually wrote on the issues he raises, that question should now be settled: *Clearly he is not!*

Rand cited the only rational basis for gratitude when she offered the following observation:

We inherit the products of the thought of other men. We inherit the wheel. We make a cart. The cart becomes an automobile. The automobile becomes an airplane. But all through the process what we receive from others is only the end product of their thinking. The moving force is the creative faculty which takes this product as material, uses it and originates the next step. This creative faculty cannot be given or received, shared or borrowed. It belongs to single, individual men. That which it creates is the property of the creator. Men learn from one another. But all learning is only the exchange of material. No man can give another the capacity to think. Yet that capacity is our only means of survival. (*The Fountainhead*)

Here Rand explicitly acknowledges the effort and productiveness of those who came before us and achieved

values which we enjoy and build on today. In this passage Rand eloquently acknowledges both the contributions of those who came before us as well as the responsibility we have as individuals to make the choice to think for ourselves. I can only suppose that James is unaware of the sentiment Rand expresses here, even though she voiced similar thoughts elsewhere as well. Observe:

Just as a man's actions are preceded and determined by some form of idea in his mind, so a society's existential conditions are preceded and determined by the ascendancy of a certain philosophy among those whose job is to deal with ideas. The events of any given period of history are the result of the thinking of the preceding period. The nineteenth century—with its political freedom, science, industry, business, trade, all the necessary conditions of material progress—was the result and the last achievement of the intellectual power released by the Renaissance. The men engaged in those activities were still riding on the remnants of an Aristotelian influence in philosophy, particularly on an Aristotelian epistemology (more implicitly than explicitly). (“For the New Intellectual,” *For the New Intellectual*, 28.)

Elsewhere Rand wrote:

Have you ever looked for the root of production? Take a look at an electric generator and dare tell yourself that it was created by the muscular effort of unthinking brutes. Try to grow a seed of wheat without the knowledge left to you by men who had to discover it for the first time. (*Atlas Shrugged*)

Given statements like these and others which Rand published in her writings, what gives James the impression that “Objectivism largely discounts the fact the every successful person stands on the shoulders of those who have come before”? Does James show us where Rand supposedly did this, in spite of the statements which I have reproduced here? No, he doesn't. Like so many of Rand's detractors, James simply maligns her views without bothering to check the facts, perhaps hoping no one will notice.

James' own words clearly indicate that success is the result of “luck,” comparable to a lottery win. How else are we to interpret his claim that “success always involves an element of luck, often consisting of having had the luck to be born into a rich family with plenty of connections”? Many successful people could arguably be said not to have had “luck” on their side, let alone the supposed advantage of being “born into a rich family with plenty of connections,” but *chose* to pursue their ambitions in spite of the odds against them. Being born into a wealthy family in no way ensures a person's success; in fact, it often works against their potential by undermining their motivation to endure the struggle which success so often requires. A son or daughter born into a wealthy family can easily think he doesn't need to pursue success if he's already enjoying the fruits of someone else's success. Thomas Edison, for instance, was not born into wealth, nor did he achieve success as a result of winning some lottery. He relied on his own mind and effort and took entrepreneurial risks to achieve his ideals. Countless other stories could be told. My own father was born in Dustbowl Kansas and, having abandoned school at the fourth grade, eventually became a very successful business-owner. James' view of success clearly discounts the wise choices, effort and dedication that informs genuinely successful ventures by attributing success to “luck” and lottery wins. Why is that okay, but Rand's alleged ingratitude (which is a complete mischaracterization of her views) isn't? James does not explain this, for he has not rationally considered the issues involved, nor has he adequately familiarized himself with what Objectivism actually has to say on these matters.

Part and parcel with James' view of success as the result of luck and raffle drawings, is his view that success bestows upon those who achieve it the obligation to sacrifice themselves, to who knows what extent, for the benefit of anonymous “others” who need not earn the favors which James believes the successful allegedly owe them. No doubt, these same “others” who James thinks should reap the rewards of the efforts of successful individuals, often hold those who succeed in contempt as an expression of their own seething envy. After all, they weren't the winners of life's lottery, and Lady Luck hasn't graciously touched their lives with the gratuitous bounty that the successful must be enjoying given the specifics of their accidental birth, so there's a metaphysical luck of the draw which divides the haves from the have-nots. We see this to unending degrees today as the growing moocher class is being systematically cultivated and coddled by elected officials and bureaucrats, all to the destruction of those who have produced wealth, like parasites scavenging on living carcasses. James must be very pleased with the present administration, unless of course he thinks the handouts aren't “generous” enough.

If James were truly concerned about people showing gratitude, why doesn't he focus on those who have been subsisting on the wealth confiscated from those who have produced it? If he trains his sights on this portion of the population, which is growing by the hour, he'll find a boiling hotbed of ingrates. I wouldn't be surprised if James numbers among them.

Wading more toward the fundamentals of Objectivist philosophy, James writes:

Reality is NOT an objective absolute. There's no way to tell whether reality is objective or not because it can only be perceived subjectively. While it could be argued that the consensus of multiple subjective realities equals objective reality, the exact same logic would also assign objective reality to Jung's archetypes, which appear inside every human being's dreams. In any case, measuring something changes the thing measured, so simply perceiving "reality" changes the nature of reality. Therefore, so it can't be absolute.

Does James have even the slightest inkling of what Rand meant by the concept 'objectivity'? The congenital sloppiness of his entire paragraph here resoundingly indicates that he does not, or that he simply doesn't care. First of all, what does James mean by his claim that reality "can only be perceived *subjectively*"? What does it mean to perceive something "subjectively"? On Rand's account, perception is in fact objective just as reality is: perception is a biological process, just as blood circulation, respiration and digestion are. To perceive something "subjectively" could only be an instance of perceiving something that does not actually exist because someone *wants* to perceive it. But the senses do not behave in this manner. We perceive things regardless of any subjective intentions we may be experiencing. When I perceive a tree in my neighbor's yard dropping leaves all over mine, it's not because I want that tree to be there and the leaves to be littering my property, but because the tree in fact exists and it's shedding its leaves, as typically happens this time of year. On James' view, one could not know this is truly happening because "it can only be perceived subjectively."

When Rand states that reality is "objective," what she means is that existence exists independent of consciousness, that is: that things are what they are independent of anyone's feelings, preferences, dislikes, frustrations, ignorance, commands, temper tantrums, etc. Rand certainly was not trying to make the case that "the consensus of multiple subjective realities equals objective reality," nor was she consigning reality qua objective to background settings of everyone's *dreaming*!

Furthermore, James is mistaken in drawing the inference that "simply perceiving 'reality' changes the nature of reality" because "measuring something changes the thing measured." Perception and measurement are two different things, but James' inference here trades on equating the two and granting both the power to rearrange the identity of objects. James provides no justification for this move, even seems oblivious to the fact that he is making it, and apparently expects his readers to accept its result unquestioningly. Besides, why suppose that "measuring something changes the thing measured"? If I measure my daughter's height and find that she is 34.5" tall, in what way have I changed her? How does James know that any change in my daughter's nature has occurred as a result of measuring her height? Perhaps he thinks it's just a commonly accepted truism that this is the case. I suggest he give the matter some deeper thought.

James then attacks a leading character in one of Rand's bestselling novels:

Howard Roark was a lousy architect. If Roark (the hero of Rand's book *The Fountainhead*) wanted his "vision" to be his alone, he had no business getting other people to bankroll it. Instead, he should have done something like the Watts Towers, where he'd be responsible for every part of the project, including its construction. Large scale architecture is a collaborative venture that involves satisfying the desires and needs of the client. Good architects are expert at managing client expectations and working through creative differences.

James announces that Rand's character Howard Roark "was a lousy architect," but offers no reasons for supposing any of the buildings he designed were structurally unsound in any way. At best, James seems to be making the case that Roark was a poor businessman and suggests that would have been more successful not only as the designer of buildings, but also their financier, construction crew, general contractor, etc. In other words, Roark is faulted for having customers! And more, he is faulted for customers who sought him out for his visionary originality at his craft. Even in Rand's novel, Roark is hired by rags-to-riches tycoon Roger

Enright to build a tall skyscraper, allowing Roark to design it according to his ideals. This was the kind of customer that Roark wanted, and got. But James apparently finds the uncompromising pursuit of one's ideals in his business transactions unsettling. Perhaps he believes that Frank Lloyd Wright also should not have had any customers, or that he should have built only outhouses. I suspect Peter Keating would prefer a world populated by Geoffrey Jameses.

James then switches gears back to Rand's philosophy. He writes:

Facts do NOT trump feelings, wishes, hopes, and fears. As any sales professional knows, when dealing with human beings, facts ALWAYS run a distant fifth. That's particularly true when dealing with people who are operating under the fantasy that their decisions are based upon "fact." Emotion trumps reason every time, and nobody is easier to influence emotionally than those who are so unaware of that their emotions that they think they're making "reasonable" decisions.

In response to everything James writes here, the obvious question to ask is, "Is that a fact?" The comic irony of James' statements in conjunction with each other is indeed ripe. He says that people who base their decisions on facts are "operating under [a] fantasy," and yet has chosen to point out that "when dealing with human beings, facts ALWAYS run a distant fifth," apparently because he thinks that's a fact! Well, I can say one thing for sure here, I am not operating under the fantasy that James is making any judgments on the basis of facts. But it would be naïve to project his deficiency on everyone else, which is what he's apparently doing.

James' view of salesmen's customers is quite pitiful and condescending. According to James, customers are never guided primarily by facts, but are instead guided by emotion which "trumps reason every time," even when they think (so deluded they are) that they are basing their decisions on facts. James would have us believe that this is common knowledge among salesmen. I can only suppose that James is projecting here (again), perhaps both in the perspective of the salesman as well as his customers. I worked in sales for over five years, and I don't think I ever had one customer who bought from me based on his fleeting emotions. My customers were as shrewd as I was as a salesman, and they insisted on full disclosure of my product's specifications, by pricing, payment terms, ability to make delivery in the specified time, etc. They wanted the facts, and I happily disclosed them. After all, my customers were paying hundreds of thousands of dollars for my product, so there was a lot on the line. Business ventures of this sort are not mere flights of fancy as James supposes.

But speaking to the point more broadly, the Objectivist view pertinent to James' remarks is that one's feelings, wishes, hopes and fears do not alter facts, for facts do not conform to man's conscious activity. Take for example the fact that New York City is located on the eastern seaboard of the United States. Suppose this fact makes me depressed, that I wish New York City were located along the Mississippi River, that I hope one day it moves a thousand miles to the west, and that I fear New York City really is on the west coast and no one realizes it. According to James, since "facts ALWAYS run a distant fifth" and "emotion trumps reason every time," he must think that New York City will conform to whatever I feel, wish, hope and fear. Needless to say, this is absurd. But so is any position which is motivated by the desire to subordinate facts and reason to emotion.

Moreover, Objectivism recognizes the fact that emotions are not a means of knowledge. Our feelings do not tell us what is true or false, what actions to take, or why one should take any particular course of action over another. As I pointed out above, Rand observed that "there is no necessary clash, no dichotomy between man's reason and his emotions—provided he observes their proper relationship," since both reason and emotion have vital roles in man's life. Emotions are a response to new knowledge given its implications to one's values. But they are not a means of validating knowledge claims, nor are they a substitute for proper inferential method.

James then turns his attention to man and his purpose:

Every man does NOT exist for his own sake. While Rand believed that pursuit of one's own rational self-interest and one's own happiness is his life's moral purpose, the scientific fact is that man evolved as a communal creature, with bonds of family and community being tightly tied to health, happiness, longevity, and pretty much everything that makes life pleasurable. Objectivism thus runs

counter to demonstrable scientific fact.

Whether he realizes it or not, James is bifurcating in order to set the stage for altruism as man's ethical norm, and some form of collectivism as his political destiny. Rand's view that man *has the right* to exist for his own sake (which is the view which she affirmed and defended) in no way denies man's capacity for social relationships. Indeed, it is because man has this capacity that the concept of rights has application in his life in the first place. A man stranded all alone on a desert island need not worry about rights in a social context, since there's no one else to bump into, no one else who could violate his rights. Moreover, in such a situation, he would have no one to whom he could sacrifice himself. It is when men interact with each other in social relationships that the concept of rights finds its importance. Some thinkers throughout history have, whether intentionally or otherwise, undermined the very notion that man has any rights at all. Others who have presented themselves as champions of rights have done even worse harm because they fail to understand the issue in terms of philosophic essentials.

Also, Rand never denied man's capacity to find happiness in a family context or in community activities. Nor did she deny any man's right to seek happiness in such quadrants. Rand conceived of happiness as a reward for productive effort, as "that state of consciousness which proceeds from the achievement of one's values" ("The Objectivist Ethics," *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 28). Free individuals are able to seek this reward in the context of the effort they put into their families or community involvement. So it is unclear exactly what James' objection is here, especially when he cites "bonds of family and community" as "being tightly tied to health, happiness, longevity, and pretty much everything that makes life pleasurable," i.e., what the individual wants *for himself*. Even in James' conception of happiness (which he ultimately ties to what "makes life pleasurable"), man is really the primary beneficiary of his livelihood.

As for James' claim that it is a "scientific fact" that "man evolved as a communal creature," I don't know what sources he might cite for this (I'm sure he'd be able to find some, science these days being filled with a lot of nonsense at every turn). But it seems that the primary scientific fact in play here is that man has evolved as a biological organism with the capacity to reason, regardless (and often in spite) of his social surroundings. Man's capacity to reason is his most fundamentally distinctive attribute, while capacity for social interaction is something man shares with dogs, cats, pigs, honeybees, ants, sheep, etc. Perhaps James means to eclipse man's capacity to reason by characterizing him primarily as a "communal creature" because he doesn't grasp what distinguishes man from these latter categories. Too bad.

Now consider this: James says that man is "a communal creature," meaning he has an inherently social nature, and yet he has to be born into a certain family with wealth in order to have advantageous social connections? If man has an inherently social nature, why couldn't a person who wasn't born into wealth develop advantageous social connections? After all, everyone's nature is inherently social, or "communal," right? James cannot even integrate his own view on things.

Next, James attacks those who simply read Ayn Rand's writings: Reading Rand creates instant jackasses. Anyone who's been subjected to a friend who suddenly "discovers" Rand knows that reading her works causes people to act like selfish idiots. They combine a patina of "reason" over a self-righteous justification of whatever their "id" happens to want at the time and then insist that they're just pursuing their own self-interest. They also become incredibly boring, about on the level of a newly converted Scientologist.

To be honest, Geoffrey James comes across as a jackass, though it's pretty clear that he hasn't read Rand (look how much he's gotten wrong in just the previous eight points!). So while I cannot say whether or not James is consistently a jackass, or only when he gets onto the topic of rational philosophy and its champions, it's clear that one need not read Rand in order to be a jackass.

Now James assures us that whenever "a friend... suddenly 'discovers' Rand," that friend will begin to act like a "selfish idiot." James does not indicate whether or not he is talking from personal experience here, but given the level of understanding he has demonstrated thus far (and we're almost at the end of his list), "selfish idiot" seems to represent a rise in rank from where James himself is sitting.

What's notable in James' complaint here is that the indicators he identifies do not in any way suggest that the "convert" to Objectivism whom he has in mind has actually grasped or properly practices what

Objectivism teaches. Objectivism did not invent selfishness, nor is it easily grasped by idiots - just observe how hard a time James has had in understanding even its more basic principles. Additionally, Objectivism advocates *rational* selfishness, not the overtly *irrational* selfishness which James has allegedly observed in unnamed newcomers to Objectivism. James exhibits not even a modicum of charity in his evaluation of the situation, for not only does he not critically take into account what Objectivism actually teaches, he also fails to take into account that newcomers to a comprehensive system are unlikely to be that system's best representatives. Couple these intellectual infractions with James' unexamined penchant for granting to Rand's writings the magical power of transforming otherwise normal people into "instant jackasses" on their first reading, and we have on display before us a spectacle of unabashed irrationality for all to see (and hopefully avoid).

Besides, if someone acts like a jackass, so what? Why does Geoffrey James care? Everyone, including but by no means restricted exclusively to Objectivists, has the capacity to be a jackass from time to time. Objectivists do not lose their identity as human beings when they adopt the Objectivist philosophy. What James is really trying to say, however, is that Rand's writings have the effect of turning adherents into jackasses. But even James' own anecdotal report, if in fact he has actually had a friend who "suddenly discovered" Rand's philosophy, is hardly sufficient to justify such a sweeping generalization. Human beings are not robots, and nothing has the power to evoke the same behavioral effect on everyone in the manner that James has suggested regarding Objectivism. James just doesn't like Rand. Why doesn't he simply state this plainly instead of trying to fault others?

One final point, which should be obvious to any honest thinker, is that the particular behavior of a person does not necessarily invalidate the views he espouses. If a geometry teacher acts like a jackass, does his behavior invalidate geometry as a science? James needs to show a causal relationship between Rand's writings and the behavior he attributes to enthusiasts of Rand's writings. He hasn't done this.

Lastly, true to his leftist stance, James displays his contempt for business leaders:

Rand is the CEOs' favorite philosopher. Most CEOs already have CEO disease, which the medical profession defines as "the enlargement of the sphincter so that it covers the entire body, creating an overwhelming itch that can only be calmed by the frequent osculation of underlings." Let's face it: if there was ever an human ilk who don't need a philosophy that drives them to be even more selfish, it's the overpaid and overpampered CEOs of the world.

James comes across as one who's deeply afflicted with contempt for those who are successful in life. Why does how much a CEO makes even matter to James? Does James worry that CEO's have not earned their wealth? How could this bother him, especially if he prefers the political model in which wealth is confiscated from those who produce it and subsequently redistributed to those who have not earned it? If James thinks people should enjoy the unearned, and believes that CEOs have not earned the wealth they enjoy, he should be consistent with his own premises and be happy with the situation. But clearly he's not happy with the situation. What is probably the case is that James resents those who earn wealth and dispose with it as they choose. This is called the right to property. Perhaps James would like to abolish it.

James seems to think CEOs are all big fans of Ayn Rand. If only that were the case! By and large, prominent business leaders today demonstrate little if anything in common with the ideals advanced by Objectivism. In fact, a growing number have their hand out for government distributions and bailout funds, becoming more like wards of the state than independent businessmen as the federal amoeba ingests their means of production. But the incestuous relationships that have developed between some businesses and governments did not necessarily arise as a result of private enterprise initiative. Whether they are banks, automobile manufacturers, energy producers, medical service providers, commodity traders, etc., today's businessmen have been regulated beyond recognition. The preponderance of leftist propaganda in media outlets has only increased pressures on businesses to continue conforming to this trend. How often do you see a company advertisement promoting itself because of its "environmentally friendly" so that it can appease the "public" concern for "green" causes?

James needs to realize that simply being a CEO, does not make a person an Objectivist. It does not even indicate that he's at all familiar with Objectivism. I have known several CEOs myself, and I've yet to meet

one personally who is at all knowledgeable about Objectivism. I know this because I introduced them to Rand's writings myself, and in each case they seemed mostly disinterested.

Popular culture, infected as it is with leftist notions, is replete with example after example where businesses and CEOs are portrayed as vile scoundrels out to defraud everyone from their own mothers to crack babies. According to this paradigm, the unsuccessful will always be victims, and the producers will always be the victimizers, while its promoters are laughing their way to the bank with proceeds from the latest anti-business blockbuster. Whether it's "big oil" or "big pharma" or "big tobacco" or what have you, businesses which have been successful at manufacturing goods have come under fire from a vast range of interest groups, often for only imagined sins, but always for a free slice of the pie. What's telling is that resulting legislation allows these businesses to continue, but at a price, including increasing regulation, a growing list of fees and credentialing requirements, and an endless assortment of tax burdens. If businesses are so evil, why are they allowed to continue operating in the first place? Why is there never any concern about the growing size and scope of "big government" in our lives?

Sadly, today's business leaders offer little if any public self-defense, very possibly because they've uncritically accepted the basic premises of those who are so hostile to wealth creators and consequently have no philosophical defense for their livelihood. That's why they try to redeem themselves, as far as it's possible, by getting behind the "green" movement or broadcasting their contributions to charities. They've sold themselves out. They've allowed the US government to ban the incandescent light bulb for crying out loud!

From all his griping, James concludes:

IMHO, it's long past time to consign Objectivism to the same intellectual dustbin where we've thrown Marxism and Absolute Monarchy.

It's unclear what specifically James is proposing here. Is he seeking to censor Rand's writings by recalling all copies of her books and internet postings of her ideas, and banning them forever? To silence Objectivism's defenders? By force, perhaps? And what exactly is it about Objectivism's political philosophy that James objects to? We probed this above and I noted that capitalism as Objectivism informs it is distinguished from other political systems by its explicit recognition of individual rights, including the right to property. Essentially, capitalism is the social system premised on the view that man has the right to exist for his own sake. James did exclaim that "every man does not exist for his own sake," but this does not speak to the question at hand, which is whether or not man has *the right* to exist for his own sake, regardless of what others happen to choose for *their* lives. James stays clear of making his stance on this matter clear; he does not come out and deny man's right to exist for his own sake, nor does he affirm it. But the views which he has affirmed are incompatible with the view that man *does* have the right to exist for his own sake. Does James think *he himself* has the right to exist for his own sake? Does he think I have the right to exist for my own sake? Does he think that a corporate CEO has the right to exist for his own sake? Perhaps James weighs in on this matter elsewhere in his blog, but judging by what he has stated in the present entry, it appears not.

In conclusion, Geoffrey James has failed to show that Ayn Rand was "dead wrong." Indeed, if he's shown anything, he's show that *he* is dead wrong on a whole variety of issues.

by Dawson Bethrick

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