

On Reflection

Big Game, Small Gun?

By Stephen Hicks

The Ideas of Ayn Rand. By Ronald E. Merrill. LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1991. 191 pp., including index. \$32.95.

In his 1987 bestseller on today's universities, *The Closing of the American Mind*, Professor Allan Bloom of the University of Chicago offered this comment:

...I began asking my large introductory classes, and any other group of younger students to which I spoke[,] what books really count for them....There is always a girl who mentions Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*, a book, though hardly literature, which, with its sub-Nietzschean assertiveness, excites somewhat eccentric youngsters to a new way of life.

Professor Bloom's remark is typical of members of the academic establishment, who almost unanimously agree that Ayn Rand was hardly a serious intellectual and those attracted to her ideas tend to be naive, cultist, and immature.

These charges are not news to Objectivists. Nor is it news that they go far to explain the lack of scholarly interest in Rand's ideas. So it should be exciting news to learn of Ronald Merrill's *The Ideas of Ayn Rand*, a systematic investigation of her ideas published by an academic press.

Mr. Merrill has been engaged with the fiction and philosophy of Ayn Rand for many years. He is in substantial agreement with her and makes clear where he disagrees. The result is a treatment that is light years better than most by authors claiming to present and critique Rand's work. *Ideas* offers many provocative points worthy of discussion and several that are both true and (to my knowledge) original.

Chapters one and two focus on controversies within the Objectivist movement in the 1960s and on Rand's life. Chapters three through five investigate her fiction and offer Mr. Merrill's best insights. They are well worth reading; even where I do not think he is right, he has raised hypotheses worth considering. Chapters six and seven address Rand's philosophy and, unfortunately, are much weaker. Although, again, they are much better than those of most other authors writing about Rand. *Ideas* doesn't approach the accuracy and sophistication, for example, of Leonard Peikoff's, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (reviewed in the *IOS Journal*, Spring 1992). Finally, chapter eight ends the book with a consideration of strategies for Objectivism's future.

Neither Kant Nor Nietzsche

The chapters on Rand's fiction are Mr. Merrill at his best, which is very good. For example, he traces striking parallels in plot structure and characterization between Rand's *We the Living* and "Red Pawn" and Victor Hugo's *Ninety-Three*. He carefully analyzes the strands in *Atlas Shrugged* leading to and from the disaster at the Winston Tunnel, illustrating the intricate philosophical and literary integration that Rand

achieved in *Atlas Shrugged*. The fate of secondary heroes such as Eddie Willers and Cheryl Brooks is compared with the fate of people of ordinary competence and integrity under the Soviets and Nazis. And, responding to a criticism that Dagny is inhumanely cold to Jeff Allen (who is about to be forced to jump from a moving train) until he exhibits a “sense of property” by tightening his grip on his belongings, Mr. Merrill shows keen insight into Dagny’s psychology by analyzing the full context of the meeting.

Mr. Merrill also makes more provocative claims. For example: that Dominique, not Roark, is the protagonist of *The Fountainhead*; that *Atlas Shrugged* conceals a number of “puckish tricks” involving “the sly use of Jewish symbolism and myth”; that Rand’s belief that humans are born *tabula rasa* means that she is unable to account for phenomena such as wanting to have children and explains her “confusion on such issues as feminism”; and that Rand “never seriously grappled with the fundamental problems of political theory.”

Mr. Merrill introduces his most provocative thesis by observing the fates of Rand’s early heroes. Bjorn Faulkner is murdered, Leo wastes away, Kira is shot, and Kay Gonda considers it a kindness to let Johnnie Dawes commit suicide. One common interpretation of this pattern has been that, until she created the character of Howard Roark, Rand had only a partial grasp of how moral perfection can be compatible with success in this world. Mr. Merrill disagrees, countering that the early Ayn Rand *did* have a complete vision of the ideal man: the one embodied in Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy. Because Nietzschean heroes do not fit into this world of bovine hypocrisy, they are doomed to failure, Mr. Merrill argues, and this explains the lack of victorious heroes in Rand’s early fiction.

On this account, what Mr. Merrill calls Rand’s “Nietzschean Period” was more than a sharing of Nietzsche’s reverence for human potential and his loathing of Christianity and the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. As evidence, Mr. Merrill begins by attempting to identify broad areas of agreement between Rand and Nietzsche on epistemology and human nature.

The attempts are strained. For example, Mr. Merrill notes that Nietzsche rejected mind/body dualism, as did Rand, and concludes that Nietzsche’s viewpoint became the basis of Rand’s rejection of dualism. But their common rejection of dualism does not imply agreement on what should replace it. Nietzsche’s choice was an extreme form of biological reductionism; Rand’s was not. (For that matter, Karl Marx also rejected dualism, but does this make Rand’s position Marxist?)

Mr. Merrill also suggests that Nietzsche and Rand agreed that Kant was the arch-enemy. Certainly Rand did believe that about Kant. She said it explicitly; and her rejection of Kant’s attack on reason is implied by her second axiom: that we are conscious and consciousness is of existence. Nietzsche, by contrast, was an ardent advocate of the view that reason is the resort of weaklings hiding from reality, which is just a variation of Kant’s conclusion that reason cannot know reality and is limited to manipulating our perceptions. How does this square with Mr. Merrill’s assertion that “Nietzsche rejected Kant’s attack on reason”?

In ethics, both Rand and Nietzsche hated Kant; but the premises underlying their rejection of Kant are fundamentally different. Nietzsche saw Kantian ethics as merely a secular version of Judeo-Christian “slave morality.” He did not agree with Kant (as Mr. Merrill asserts) “that reason and altruism were incompatible.” Instead, in *The Genealogy of Morals*, he characterized altruism as a *rational* invention of weaklings: altruism tells men to merge with the herd, which means the weak can avoid risks; and it neuters the strong, which allows the weak to feel safe. The strong man, by contrast, doesn’t rely on reason (which Nietzsche called man’s “weakest and most fallible organ!”), for he stands alone in the face of a cruel and contradictory reality and shouts “*Yea!*” So while Kant rejected reason to save altruism, Nietzsche rejected reason *and* altruism. Rand, in contrast to both, embraced reason and rejected altruism.

Queasy About Nietzsche?

Given that Rand and Nietzsche agreed that altruism is disgusting, the crucial question is whether or not they agreed on an alternative. Again, Mr. Merrill argues that they did: the early Rand “was definitely an ethical Nietzschean.” Since Nietzsche held that the sacrifice of some members of the “herd” is *justifiable* (if it advances those capable of greatness), and even *necessary*, Mr. Merrill’s allegation is important.

While he does not explicitly distinguish the two tenets, he seems to imply that Rand accepted both. For evidence, he relies most heavily on the 1936 edition of *We the Living*, which contains two passages cut from the 1959 edition. Here is the first, Kira speaking to Andrei:

“I loathe your ideals. I admire your methods. If one believes one’s right, one shouldn’t wait to convince millions of fools, one might just as well force them. Except that I don’t know, however, whether I’d include blood in my methods.”

“Why not? Anyone can sacrifice his own life for an idea. How many know the devotion that makes you capable of sacrificing other lives? Horrible, isn’t it?”

“Not at all. Admirable. If you’re right. But are you right?”

This exchange supports the idea that Kira believes the weaker Nietzschean thesis: the sacrifice of others is justifiable. Yet, each of Kira’s lines raises a problem for Mr. Merrill’s interpretation. In the first, Kira seems to exclude bloodshed from the legitimate use of force. This leaves open the hard question of what she means by “force”; but if it does not include bloodshed, then Kira is not assenting to Nietzschean force.

Kira’s second line is ambiguous, as well. What is she admiring: the devotion, the sacrificing of other lives, or both? If it is only the devotion (as it would have to be since she rejects bloodshed), then Kira is not Nietzschean. She might as easily say to a priest that she admires the devotion that makes him capable of celibacy, without advocating celibacy.

Even supposing that the first passage is ambiguous, the second passage later cut by Rand seems to take a giant step in the direction of Nietzsche:

“Don’t you know,” he asked, “that we can’t sacrifice millions for the sake of the few?”

“You can! You must. When those few are the best. Deny the best its right to the top—and you have no best left. *What are your masses but mud to be ground underfoot, fuel to be burned for those who deserve it?* What is the people but millions of puny, shriveled, helpless souls that have no thoughts of their own, no will of their own, who eat and sleep and chew helplessly the words others put into their mildewed brains? And for those you would sacrifice the few who know life, who are life?”

The 1959 edition cuts Kira’s fifth sentence (in italics). In combination with the second sentence, it seems to advocate the stronger Nietzschean thesis: the sacrifice of the masses for the great is necessary. And the fifth and last sentences indicate that Kira sees the only alternative to be the sacrifice of the great for the masses. So Kira’s mental context seems to be the traditional false alternative in ethics.

But before we conclude that Kira has embraced Nietzsche, we should note a passage that appears just a few lines later in the 1936 edition. Mr. Merrill discounts this passage, but it is directly relevant to establishing Kira’s full context. She says:

“I don’t want to fight for the people, I don’t want to fight against the people, I don’t want to hear of the people. I want to be left alone—to live.”

So we have a confused picture. Kira seems willing that the masses be ground and burned—but for herself she only wants to be left alone, not to fight anyone, and to have no bloodshed. Part of the expla-

nation for the ambiguity has to be that Kira (and Rand) let Andrei set the terms of the debate, just as the communist state sets the terms for Kira's life—and everyone else's. As a Communist, Andrei asks only *whose* lives will be sacrificed. This puts us—and Kira—in the awkward position of seeming to accept that if she is against sacrificing herself and Leo, then she must be willing to sacrifice the masses. But this does not fit with her ruling out bloodshed and insisting that she doesn't want to fight people. And if she cannot see through the package-deal Andrei offers, the confusion may be a symptom, not of Nietzscheanism, but of not yet having a full account of the proper alternative to altruism.

And indeed there is additional evidence for that in Rand's 1934 journals. *We the Living* was written between 1930 and late 1933, but not published until 1936. In 1934, Rand began to make notes for *The Fountainhead*, and her journals suggest a rejection of traditional false-alternative ethics. Her May 15 entry, for example, identifies the error of Nietzscheans such as Gail Wynand: in trying to achieve power, they use the masses, but at the cost of their ideals and standards, and thus become "a slave to those masses." The independent man, therefore, will not make his success dependent upon the masses. So Nietzsche was wrong: the great cannot succeed by sacrificing others.

This entry raises a question relevant to Mr. Merrill's thesis. If Rand was an ethical Nietzschean in 1933, and therefore *We the Living* contains explicitly Nietzschean passages, but she then had rejected Nietzsche by 1934 (as her journals clearly indicate), would she not have cut the offensive passages before *We the Living* was reprinted in 1936? Being the demon she was about precision, it seems that she would. And if they were not cut, then it is likely that Rand did not intend them to be taken as Nietzschean.

Mr. Merrill's conclusions, accordingly, strike me as overstated. He does grant that Nietzsche's willingness to sacrifice others "seems to have caused Rand some queasiness from the start." More needs to be said on this issue; but I suspect that until all of Rand's early notes are published, we won't be able to settle the issue of whether she suppressed the queasiness in loyalty to Nietzsche—as the Merrill interpretation requires—or whether the queasiness is indicative of her real state of mind—as the standard explanation asserts—and the influence of Nietzsche is only on her tone and style.

The Wrong Press at the Wrong Time

Ideas becomes weaker as it turns to Rand's formal philosophy. Her metaphysics and epistemology are sketchily presented. And, although he devotes more space to her views of human nature, ethics, and politics, the sections dealing with human nature and ethics are flawed by Mr. Merrill's seeming equation of *tabula rasa* (the view that we are born without innate knowledge) with the view that humans are born as inchoate lumps of plasticene. While Mr. Merrill is most at home with Rand's politics, his chapter analyzing her political theory is marred by his assumption that she is in the social-contract tradition. Unfortunate errors like these crop up regularly, and often are followed by Mr. Merrill's discovery of a problem in the position he has attributed to Rand.

This brings me to a final point. *Ideas* is addressed, in fact if not intention, to an Objectivist audience. It opens with a chapter devoted to the social environment of Objectivism in the 1960s and the controversies surrounding Ayn Rand's personal life—discussions of interest to those already interested in Objectivism's history. Likewise, the chapters on Rand's fiction presuppose an audience that has read her novels and short stories. And *Ideas* closes with an appraisal of the options open to us as we shape Objectivism's future. For all of those reasons, I find the choice of an academic publisher, Open Court, a disturbing one—one that may damage Objectivism's still shaky standing in the world of professional philosophy.

Ideas appears just as Ayn Rand's views are receiving increasing attention from academics. The clearest sign of this is that a selection from her writing regularly appears in new anthologies for courses in ethics and introductory philosophy. In other words, philosophers are coming across Rand's ideas for the first time or finding them harder to ignore.

Publication of *Ideas* through Open Court, an academic press, will cause it to stand out in the sparsely populated world of secondary sources about Rand's work. (At last year's American Philosophical Association convention in Manhattan, the profession's major annual conference, *Ideas* was prominently displayed at the Open Court booth.) It will therefore be read by philosophers expecting a professionally competent account of Rand's philosophy—which *Ideas* is not. Because the power and originality of Rand's insights do not come across in *Ideas*, professional philosophers may conclude, as most have for decades, that Objectivism is a watered-down version of old ideas. That can only hurt efforts by the Institute for Objectivist Studies, the Ayn Rand Society, and the Ayn Rand Institute to enhance Objectivism's professional standing.

The point, of course, is not that one has to be an academic philosopher to write about Rand's philosophy for publication. There is room for discussion of Objectivism at all levels of expertise. And, despite the weaknesses of Mr. Merrill's contribution to the discussion, he communicates a keen appreciation for what Ayn Rand's genius has bequeathed to us. As he puts it, in closing, "Our descendants will envy us that we were her contemporaries."

The Professor Blooms will no doubt disagree. But perhaps neither side is right, and the truth depends on what we—Ayn Rand's contemporaries—do as the next century approaches.

* * *