

# Open Objectivism

By Stephen R.C. Hicks, Ph.D.

An unedited transcription of Stephen Hicks's opening argument for the  
"Open Objectivism or Closed Objectivism?" debate

Belgrade, Serbia, April 2023

## Introduction: Benevolence

I'll start by saying that it's always a pleasure to meet other people who are passionate about ideas, who are interested in philosophy in particular, and who are at some level excited about Ayn Rand. It's a rare and special thing.

So I wanted to start by flagging this concept—the concept of benevolence. When you're doing philosophy and you're doing philosophy, particularly with people who share important values with you in the fight for liberty and Ayn Rand's philosophy in particular, that is a special thing. It says something special and wonderful about a person that they've responded well, positively, or strongly to something in Ayn Rand's philosophy.

When we're doing philosophy, reality is very complicated. Philosophy is difficult. It's difficult intellectually, and it's difficult emotionally because it pushes deep buttons in us. And when disagreements occur—and they will occur—it's part of the business of doing philosophy, always remember the benevolence point: you're doing philosophy with someone who likes, respects, or even loves Ayn Rand. Keep that as a governing part of your thinking about how you're doing the debates.

## Objectivism as a Philosophy and Philosophy as Science

Now, what is Objectivism? My first proposition is going to be this one: Objectivism is a science. Now, this is controversial within philosophy, but Ayn Rand and Objectivism are very clear about taking a firm stance and positioning Objectivism as a certain way of thinking, as a scientific way of thinking. A direct quotation from Rand on this:

“Epistemology is a *science* devoted to the discovery of the proper methods of acquiring and validating knowledge. Ethics is a *science* devoted to the discovery of the proper methods of living one's life. Medicine is a *science* devoted to the discovery of the proper methods of curing disease. ...” (Source: Ayn Rand, “Concepts of Consciousness,” *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, pp. 35-36)

And there's the source. You'll notice that the concept of *science* is emphasized and repeated, and *epistemology* and *ethics* are two of the four or five, depending on your categorization, core issues. But it's the same thing about doing metaphysics, about our understanding of human nature, proper principles of politics, how art pushes our buttons psychologically and morally as well. Philosophy is conceived of as a science,

and Rand is saying that we need to think very seriously—when we're doing philosophy—about what it is to be a scientist.

Now, science is about discovering truths about reality. So there's always a *content*. But there's also an entire *methodological* process that one engages in: observation, categorization, conceptualization, forming definitions, coming up with hypotheses, doing experiments, and the whole gamut of logical methodologies as well—all of that is built into science. There also are *character* issues when you are functioning as a scientist: What is it to think and behave as a scientist would? To be a philosopher is to be a scientist. Philosophy is a subset of science.

I'm hitting on this science point hard. It's my first big emphasis as a key question for Objectivists.

## Science Contrasted to Art

Now, Rand is complicated because in addition to being a philosopher she's also an artist. Art and science are related to each other, but also distinct in very important ways.

Art is a personal creation by an individual: It brings something into existence that did not exist before, and that would not have existed except for the unique contributions of the individual who created it.

Science is different: Science is not about making stuff up and your individual creativity. Scientist is about what is out there. And identifying it is, in that sense, in the public domain. When we are doing science, we are both in the same reality and trying to identify the same reality—and your personal creativity and my personal creativity are to the side.

So science is about objective reality and identifying it, while art is about individual creations. Art of course will embody, at least implicitly and sometimes explicitly, understandings of reality.

Now, why is this important? Well, here's the quotation that's relevant to notice, from Rand's article on patents and copyrights. The source comes a little later.

“It is important to note, in this connection, that a discovery cannot be patented, only an invention. A scientific or philosophical *discovery*, which identifies a law of nature, a principle or a fact of reality not previously known, cannot be the exclusive property of the discoverer because (a) he did not *create* it, and ...”

Pausing here. Objectivism as a philosophy, and philosophy as a science: it is about discovery. It's *not* about things that we are creating, and it is *not* owned by the discoverer.

Carrying on this long and important quotation:

“... (b) if he cares to make his discovery public, claiming it to be true, he cannot demand that men continue to pursue or practice falsehoods except by his permission. He *can* copyright the book in which he presents his discovery

and he can demand that his authorship of the discovery be acknowledged, that no other man appropriate or plagiarize the credit for it—but he cannot copyright *theoretical* knowledge.” (Source: Ayn Rand, “Patents and Copyrights,” *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, p. 130)

Philosophy/science—as theoretical knowledge—is not owned. It is discovered. It cannot be copyrighted, patented, and so forth.

What I’m suggesting is that we have to think of Ayn Rand in two ways. They are related—but Rand is a scientist *and* Rand is an artist.

How we think about Objectivism as Rand’s philosophy should be the same way that we think about Newton and his physics, or the way we think about Darwin and his evolutionary theory, or Einstein and his physical theory.

In contrast, the way we think about artists and their personal creations—Michelangelo and his sculptures, Beethoven and his music, Monet and his paintings, Rand and her fiction—you don’t add notes to Beethoven’s score, and you don’t take notes away from Beethoven score. You don’t take a Monet painting and add your own daubs and say ‘I think the color scheme should be changed.’ And you don’t say ‘I don’t like this bit over here, I’m going to paint that over.’ *The artwork is inviolable*. It is the personal creation of the artists: you do not alter it, change it, subtract from it, or add to it.

*But that’s not the case with science.* With science, science is precisely about identification of facts that are independent. And it is—I don’t want to use the word quite yet—an ongoing process of discovery and re-integrations when new discoveries are made.

So don’t touch Rand’s *art* work. The *philosophy* we now turn to.

## Open and Closed as Metaphors

Our central question today: Open or Closed? These words get used a lot.

The first thing to note, though, is that they’re metaphors. They’re a figure of speech. Doors can be open, doors can be closed, windows can be open, windows can be closed.

What metaphorically are we trying to get to when we talk about an abstract theoretical set of ideas—that it’s open or closed? So the first thing we have to do when we are doing philosophy, good philosophy and good science, is notice when we are using metaphors and take the extra efforts to take the metaphors or any figure of speech and put them into direct, literal language. And so defining what exactly this figure of speech is trying to capture in non-metaphorical language.

Now, I’m going to suggest that there are three important things built into the way in any theoretical science—including philosophy, and including Objectivism—in which the words *open* and *closed* are used. There’s a long history in the sciences of this terminology being used, so we can draw on that and apply it to Objectivism as well.

**1.** One way in which we might say a system of ideas is closed or open is by answering this question: Is it *complete*?

That is to say, whatever domain we're talking about in our science, all of the questions have been answered. All of the things that need to be known in that domain are known. So we don't need to add any more questions or add any more content. It is complete in that sense.

Now to throw out an arbitrary number: Suppose we say there are five branches of philosophy and then—here's the arbitrary part—in each part of philosophy (metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and so on) there are eight or ten or twenty important questions in that branch of the philosophy. Collectively, that means in all philosophy, to have a complete philosophy, you need to address, say, 100 issues.

Then the question is for Objectivism: On those 100 important issues that would make Objectivism a complete philosophy, did Ayn Rand address *all* 100 of them? And not only did she *state* a position on all 100 of them—did she make an *argument* for each of those positions? And did she make the argument in a *thorough* fashion up to whatever level of scholarly discourse you think is appropriate?

Now, here, I want to suggest that the answer to that question should be No. Rand did a lot. She did an enormous amount of important, fundamental stuff, and she had positions on a majority of those 100 questions that a complete philosophy has to answer. But she didn't do all of them. She wrote one book on epistemology, and she called an *introduction* to Objectivist epistemology, making it very clear there's lots more that needs to be said about epistemology beyond this introduction, so it's not complete in that sense.

It's also, with respect to completeness, not enough to say: Here are the 100 positions—that the philosopher announces what his, or in this case, her conclusions are. The philosopher must develop *arguments* for them. So we have 100 positions plus 100 arguments.

We know in Rand's case, on a significant number of issues, she would tell you what her position is but she did not develop the argument for that position. That means there is still work to be done. Sometimes she would give us the conclusion but not the argument. Sometimes she also she goes the other way. Interestingly, she will say: Here's the fact here's the facts, here's a fact, and then you, dear reader, you can see where this is going, or you can see what the implication of this—but she doesn't state the implication explicitly. And that means there's still work to be done, and filling in that implication. And that is an interpretive move for philosophers to engage.

All right, so that's the first question, the question of completeness. I think that's the easier question.

**2.** I think this is the harder question for *Open or Closed* is: Not only is it complete, but is it *correct*? Is it *true*? Is it *perfect*, in that sense?

Of all of the things that Rand said as the founder of this philosophy, did she get everything right? Sometimes that's a hard question for people to put explicitly and to engage with. But if we are going to be serious philosophers, serious scientists, we

must go through all of the important propositions that she makes and say: Do I think this is true? Do I think it could be stated more precisely?

If, for example, she is making a claim in epistemology that bears on some elements of cognitive psychology: Have we *learned* anything in cognitive psychology since Rand that might suggest that we can revise or tweak this or that?

Are all of her terms *defined* at a suitable level of precision? Sometimes she defined a term for a general audience, but in a more technical context, she didn't give you the precise technical definition, and that would need to be articulated.

And then of course the big thing would be: Are there cases where I think Rand has made a *mistake*? And it could be a mistake of fact that feeds into one of her premises, or I think she's engaged in a chain of logic—one of the powers of her brilliance is the long chains of logic, the huge amounts of historical and psychological and other philosophical and scientific data that she has integrated—that every single logical connection in all of those arguments is perfect.

And not only that: If we say a complete philosophy, suppose we satisfy the completeness criteria and every individual position is defined perfectly and the argument for it made perfectly. There still is the matter of taking all 100 of those and integrating them into a system. If we want to say Objectivism is a *systematic* philosophy. The amount of work to integrate 100 propositions (again, 100's a somewhat arbitrary number) completely and perfectly—that is an enormous amount of work. The question is: Did Rand accomplish that?

Now, those two senses of *open* and *closed*, are ones that all of us as *individual* philosophers, *individual* thinkers, *individual* scientists—emphasizing that context—do for ourselves. But it's also the case that we do philosophy in a *public* mode as well. It can be intimate one-on-one discussions or small-group discussions. Sometimes it's a doing formal courses, where one is a teacher with respect to students. Sometimes it's a matter of forming organizations and institutions around a certain set of ideas, because we want to advocate those ideas out in the world.

So when doing philosophy in a *social* context, the question of open or closed also is relevant.

**3.** Here are the initial questions. Is one *open* to all of the above questions in discussion? Or is it the case—the different side would be—I'm *not* interested in discussion: I have my views, and I am one-way-street with respect to communication. Are you *open* to being questioned? Or do you make it clear from the beginning that certain things cannot be questioned? Are you *open* to being not religiously dogmatic, but actually challenged by people who think they disagree with you?

And that's going to happen of course. If you have smart young people trying to do philosophy, they will have hundreds and hundreds of questions. What is your attitude with respect to those hundreds of questions? Are you *open* to the idea that you can be wrong? And should the arguments go against you, actually be willing to change your mind? That is what a scientist will do. That's what a good philosopher will do.

And then more formally, as we're trying to do here today, are you *open* to debate, which is a very public and stylized way of contrasting ideas, important ideas, and so forth.

Also, that's just to speak from your perspective, but because all social things involve at least two people: Are you *open to the other person with whom you are doing the philosophy going through this process*, this very difficult process of scientific philosophy—asking all of these questions and coming up with weird ideas and challenging and so forth—and recognizing because of the difficulty of philosophy and life that they have to go through the process? That they're not going to get it completely and perfectly the first time, that it's going to be an iterative process—and that your part in that social relationship is to foster in a healthy and benevolent way, that process of doing philosophy to whatever ideal standard you want to achieve.

Now, in that social context, a couple of-sub questions arise. Suppose you're going through this process, you're doing philosophy, and it's really hard. And you're in a movement, though, where you're younger. And you recognize that there are others in the movement who have credentials, PhDs. One aspect of this *openness* has to do with: How should that relationship go?

I actually am one of these Objectivist philosophers with a PhD. So suppose that you and I are doing some philosophy and you disagree with me. How should that go? How should I relate to you in that disagreement? How should you relate to me in that disagreement?

And then to raise the stakes even a little further. What if your thinking, when you're going through the process, disagrees with something Ayn Rand says? You're thinking that maybe this definition could be more precisely focused. Or given some new insights from neuroscience or whatever that we need to rethink Objectivist epistemology, say, measurement-omission and her particular hypothesis about that. So to say: Wow, perhaps I'm disagreeing with Ayn Rand on this issue. Are you *open* to going through that process? That's the challenge.

## Who Is the Final Authority in Philosophy?

Now, Rand's answer to this question is in an essay she wrote, "Who is the Final Authority in Ethics?"

"Metaphysically, the only authority is reality; epistemologically—one's own mind. The first is the ultimate arbiter of the second.

"The concept of objectivity contains the reason why the question 'Who decides what is right or wrong?' is wrong. ..."

When there is a disagreement between people who are more-or-less peers or between people who are in different ranks in a hierarchy of some social organization—PhDs, founders, and so on—metaphysically, the only authority is reality, there is no authority except for the world, reality, and epistemologically one's own mind. So it's not the Objectivist PhD's mind, it's not Ayn Rand's mind—it's *your* mind in connection with reality. That is the central thesis of Objectivism, the fundamental.

Rand continues:

“The answer, here as in all other moral-intellectual problems, is that nobody ‘decides.’ Reason and reality are the only valid criteria . . . . Who determines which theory is true? *Any man who can prove it.*”

... “This prevents the formation of any coercive ‘elite’ in any profession.”

(Source: Ayn Rand, “Who Is the Final Authority in Ethics?” *The Objectivist Newsletter*, February 1965, pp. 7-8)

Finally, this issue of elites. Of course, she’s a little worried, at this point writing in the 1960s, knowing that often-terrible history of what happens to philosophical and scientific, not to mention religious and other systems, that form social movements: the formation of elites that stopped being open, stopped being philosophers, stopped being scientists in the proper sense.

And you’ll notice she use the phrase *coercive elite in any profession*. She’s not talking about *political* coercion. She’s talking about all of the hard and soft versions of coercion, which can happen in any social movement. There is no tolerance for that in Objectivism. *Objectivism is your mind in connection to reality*. Only do that.

## How Best to Advance Objectivism?

If these are our social questions, how do we best protect and advance Objectivism?

Well, we know what it means to be an Objectivist. If you think of the argument I have made more personally—about the immense value and significance of Ayn Rand in your life, given the nature of her just astonishing accomplishments—it is proper to want to revere the amazing human beings who appear in our midst once in a while.

How do you do that? Well, you do not do it by turning her into a god or a demigod or anything close to that. She is encouraging you to question, to challenge, to debate, *even her*, and you have to step up to that task.

A quick point closing point. I want to say there’s a lot of water under the bridge, and I hope it can stay under the bridge. This is particularly for the young people in the movement here.

To advance Objectivism, and to revere Ayn Rand properly, the first thing I would say is: Forget the history of the movement. Just block it out of your mind entirely. There’s a huge amount of intellectual energy, emotional energy that you have. Don’t get yourself sucked into all of the debates and arguments and personality conflicts that have gone on for the last 30, 40, 50 years or so. It will waste all of your energy.

You have your mind, and you have Rand’s works to start with and build upon. And of course, there are other good philosophers you can learn from. Learn from them.

But focus on the future, start over, and create the world that *you* think is possible. That is what it is to be a good Objectivist.

\* \* \*