Almost sixty years since its first printing, *Atlas Shrugged* remains a towering classic of American philosophical fiction. *Atlas Shrugged* is Ayn Rand's magnum opus and most brilliant articulation of her Objectivist philosophy. Rand was an original, independent and controversial thinker and writer. Objectivism itself continues to attract and retain adherents in each generation; it is an applied philosophy for methodological individualists of the intelligentsia, widely practiced but nowhere taught in academe. While Rand's romantic Smithian capitalism and rugged virtue ethics ought to be well-received in America (her adopted land), she often stands accused--unjustly, I contend--of elitism and hard-heartedness. My focus is on the prescient and sagacious warnings she voiced in *Atlas Shrugged*. Rand rang strident, precocious but evidently unheeded alarms against the encroachment on the West of inconsistent metaphysics, collectivist politics, altruistic ethics, economics of need, debasement of merit, hatred of reason, celebration of mediocrity and deconstruction of high culture--the very hallmarks of postmodern decline. Since her prognoses are unfortunately so well-confirmed, it behooves us to re-evaluate her practical philosophical prescription.

**Keywords:** Ayn Rand, Objectivism, *Atlas Shrugged*, philosophical practice, philosophical counseling
Introduction

Ayn Rand is an original, independent, and controversial force in American intellectual life. She was born and educated in Europe, but emigrated to this country convinced that it was the only place in which she could earn complete liberty to write as she saw fit. And she was, by precocious avocation, a writer: this she had decided for herself at age nine. Rand's American saga is almost unremarkable in its remarkability: she arrived here penniless and friendless, subsisted through a succession of odd and often menial jobs, until by dint of her prodigious talent and unflinching integrity, she attained a stature sufficient for the production of her mature and lasting works. Thus her biography reads like a run-of-the-mill American success story told millions of times over, save that the immigrant norm for the socio-economic transition from utter impecuniosity to material comfort is probably closer to three generations than one. Nonetheless, persons of unusual vitality and ability are supposedly able to run the race in faster time; Ayn Rand, for one, certainly filled the unforgiving minute to the brim.

In my view, Rand is original because she founded a hitherto uncognized school of philosophical thought and deed, primarily a doctrine for romantic capitalists, called Objectivism. Her originality is also evident in that she espoused her philosophy primarily through literary fiction, the medium which most conspicuously displays her gifts. She is independent because although her philosophy was taken up and practiced by an intelligentsia partly grounded in the academy, she herself held no academic post. Her independence is fiercely personal, but it is neither anti-social nor aloof: it is based on her ability to produce and market her philosophy as an industry. She prefers by nature to be self-employed. Rand is controversial because the pillars of her philosophy are methodological individualism (in the tradition of Carlyle and Popper), logical empiricism (in the
scientific tradition from Bacon onward), and deontological virtue ethics (in the traditions of Aristotle and Kant). The moral, social and political components of her philosophy repose squarely upon these pillars.

Now you may ask: wherein does the controversy lie? Is not America pioneered and built on rugged and unabashed individualism? Is not America a world leader in the scientific enterprise? Is not America famous for its silent "moral majority", which (from Tocqueville to USA Today) is said to inculcate unsophisticated but wholesome moral intuitions? I must offer a Talmudic response to these apparently rhetorical questions, an answer of which neither Aristotle nor Rand would approve: "Yes but no."

Ayn Rand is reviled by the moral majority because she appears to be an elitist. While America rewards its elite as has no empire since Rome, it does so on the express unspoken condition that they shall not pretend to be superior to anyone else. So while Rand openly celebrates meritocracy, America hushes it up. Ayn Rand would also be reproved by any American anti-intellectual with sufficient acumen to read her. As there are probably none left, she is posthumously spared their despite. Yet there have always stirred profound currents of irrationalism in this republic, which revere physicality at the expense of mentality. Athletes are loved; coaches, hated. Astronauts are famous; astrophysicists, unknown. Actors and actresses are worshipped; directors and writers, disrespected. Homeopathists are championed; allopathists, denounced. Psychics are consulted; scientists, uncomprehended. Evangelists are televised; rationalists, marginalized. Ayn Rand is also reviled by moral consequentialists of every stripe, and in particular by contemporary social engineers bent on manufacturing and distributing their versions of "fairness" and "justice" and "truth" at any and all costs, even if the capstones of their edifice are
yanked from its very foundations. Small wonder that they condemn Ayn Rand: her magnum opus describes, in excruciating detail, the implosion of that edifice in the wake of their deconstruction of it. She pitilessly exposes how the moral deficits of coerced altruism become manifest as intellectual bankruptcy, social suicide, political thuggery and economic collapse. The victims of her apocalyptic vision are all self-made: they begin by refusing to acknowledge the philosophical distinction between objective fact and subjective value, and end by refusing to allow their unexamined hypotheses to be informed and modified by incontrovertible experience.

Rand's originality, independence and controversiality persist. She is an unfashionable meritocrat in a season of rabid mediocrity. She is an unheeded rationalist in an age of mindless feel-goodism. She is a jarring egoist in an ethos of overzealous altruism. She made an early diagnosis of the malignant philosophical cancer of her times, in a word "collectivism", which has metastasized throughout ours. In prescribing treatments for it, she re-invented fundamental aspects of philosophical practice. It is my present task-and possibly duty-to illuminate her re-invention.

Rand's complete works include novels, essays, and plays. Although all her works have philosophical content, and all explore facets of her Objectivism, it is her novels that most lucidly and powerfully convey her philosophical message. Her plays are virtually unstageable; her essays, surprisingly sophomoric. But the nucleus of her literary fiction, consisting of two massive novels (The Fountainhead and Atlas Shrugged) is to be reckoned among immortal works of apocalyptic philosophical fiction. I had always thought of The Fountainhead and Atlas Shrugged as a colossal literary Prelude and Fugue, and was therefore cheered to encounter Ayn Rand's own characterization: she wrote "The Fountainhead was only an overture to Atlas Shrugged" (1992, p.1085). Her musical metaphor is sharper than mine; now let us attend her symphony.
Philosophical Context

*Atlas Shrugged* is mainly the story of a brother and sister: James and Dagny Taggart. They are great-grandchildren of a railroad magnate, Nathaniel Taggart, whose single vision and indomitable will built Taggart Transcontinental, which becomes the leading railway in America. Heirs to this industry, James and Dagny are reared to run it. James, the elder, becomes President; Dagny, the younger, becomes Vice-President in charge of Operations. James Taggart is pampered, indecisive, weak-willed and mean-spirited. Moreover, he believes that he is "owed" respect and that he "commands" obedience because of the position he inherited, irregardless of his ability or inability to occupy it. In fact, he is administratively incompetent, unable to discharge any duty, and he maintains a pathetic facade of authority but leaves the actual running of the railroad entirely to his sister. Dagny Taggart is the antithesis of her brother: disciplined, decisive, strong-willed, and high-spirited, she earns the respect and commands the obedience of her employees--most of whom are men--because she leads by competent example. Her fellow captains of industry find it highly unusual that a woman should be doing this kind of work (indeed, it was unthinkable when Rand conceived and wrote the novel), but Dagny Taggart rises above what we today call "sexism" by her conspicuous and consistent competency. Time and again Rand has Dagny Taggart commune and identify with the bust of Nathaniel Taggart, which perches unnoticed by travellers on a lofty ledge in New York's bustling Taggart Terminal. Implicitly, Rand informs us that Dagny carries Nathaniel's genes for leadership. Time and again, Dagny remembers his history, and rediscovers in his tradition the inspiration to solve problems and overcome obstacles placed in her path.

And even in this cursory contrast between James and Dagny Taggart, one perceives the strong outlines of Rand's methodological individualism. It would never have occurred to Dagny
Taggart--as it never would have occurred to Ayn Rand, who expressed her philosophy through Dagny--to seek advantage via a collectivized culture, be it membership in a so-called "historically disadvantaged group" or in any other cult of victimhood. Dagny Taggart's femaleness is not on any political or economic agenda set by her. As the plot unfolds, Dagny finds ample opportunity to explore her womanhood in appropriately romantic and eventually marital contexts; but nowhere does she allow sex or gender to interfere with the rational functions she performs as a professional. Although male peers may initially regard her as a female *simpliciter* (and the Hobbesist in Rand portrays this as no sin either, merely as instinctive biological response), these same male peers are soon compelled to see her as a Vice-President of Operations of a major railroad. I emphasize that they are compelled to see her thus not by any legislation, policy, propaganda, sensitivity-training, bribe of sexual favors, threat of sexual harassment suit, or other form of external coercion; rather, by Dagny Taggart's conspicuous and consistent competency.

And this is one kernel of Objectivism: that it requires certain definitive skills to do a particular job properly, and that a person's gender (or color, or age) is irrelevant to that person's possession of said qualifications. Nor does Rand even care a fig for equal opportunity: on her view, the most daring and perforce useful innovations, in both thought and deed, have always been the product of unequal opportunity. Genius is rarely recognized in the first instance; rather, is stridently opposed by cultural inertias of its age. Geniuses therefore have less initial opportunity to display their brilliance than do mediocrities their drabness. For Rand, unequal opportunity is thus one further hurdle to be surmounted, and her heroes and heroines vault it without rancor. For them, it is part and parcel of accomplishment. In a Randian meritocracy, no Bach could be prevented from producing compositions, no Newton could be prevented from explicating nature; and no
Taggart can be prevented from running the Transcontinental Railroad at a profit.

One must appreciate that Rand is a naively romantic capitalist, in the tradition of Adam Smith. That is, she deems the individual's self-interest uniquely necessary and completely sufficient for the realization of the so-called "common good." For her, the phrase "common good" has no meaning other than a summation over individual accomplishment. Thus her ethic is egocentric but by no means strictly deontological. She bids each to live for his own sake, and not for the sake of another. So her consequentialism is vehemently anti-altruistic. In fact, her apocalyptic vision is triggered by none other than coerced altruism: when each attempts or pretends to live solely for the sake of others, the entire political economy collapses, until no-one is able even to subsist. Rand's noble captains of industry do not accumulate profit for the sake of generating wealth; rather, they generate wealth for the sake of accumulating profit. They are beholden to no-one but themselves, and dependent only on like-minded peers with whom they have entered into contracts. Each one fulfills his contract for the primary purpose of furthering his own interests, which are needless to say enhanced by his ability to fulfil his own contractual obligations. This sum of private interest in individual accomplishments leads men to engage the best talents they can find, and brings out the best in their employees at every level. Each job is therefore supremely important, in so far as it can be done well or badly; but not each job is equal in importance, as not each can be done by all.

In Rand's romanticized vision of industry, the steel-mill owner can indeed sweep the floors, and will gladly pick up a broom at any time if need be. This is because he was not merely born to inherit a steel-mill; rather because either he built it from nothing himself (in which case he wielded a broom at some time) or he stood to inherit it but was obliged by his own ethic to learn the meanest
job therein, the better to preside over the whole (in which case he wielded a broom at some time). On Rand's view, there is no shame in a future or even a present steel-mill owner wielding a broom; but there is shame in his not knowing how to wield a broom while pretending to be "better" than his hired sweepers. And conversely, there is no shame in being a hired sweeper in a steel mill, for one can take pride in doing any job well; but there is shame in a hired sweeper pretending that, but for some accident of birth alone, he would own the mill himself. For while every owner should know how to sweep, not every sweeper can know how to own. The stability and progress of an industrialized society depends vitally, on Rand's view, in the recognition of this fundamental asymmetry of ability: those more able can perform less demanding tasks, but those less able cannot perform more demanding tasks. Note that differences in ability do not mandate differences in intrinsic egoistic disposition (i.e. the mill sweeper is just as self-interested as the mill owner), but they do mandate differences in extrinsic axiological function (i.e. the mill owner enjoys a different quality of life than does the sweeper). Greater structural ability entails greater functional responsibility, which in turn justifies disparity of economic income and outcome.

For on Rand's view, in the absence of the inventors, scientists, engineers, industrialists and bankers, the mill sweeper would be sweeping out a cave or a mud hut, and his own quality of life--and his life itself--would be attenuated accordingly. In fact, this is precisely what befalls the hapless working classes in *Atlas Shrugged*, when philosophically incompetent and morally defective collectivist politicians succeed in driving the primary industries out of business with malignant legislation, motivated by the egregious socialist axiom that justice demands equality of outcome. On a purely technological plane, Rand thus anticipated one of Buckminster Fuller's more famous assertions; namely, that in industrialized nations, politicians function more and more as
parasites on the infrastructure. If all the politicians vanished overnight, asserts Fuller, no significant disturbance would propagate through the industrial complex; whereas if all the engineers vanished overnight, the complex would swiftly disintegrate (Fuller, 1969a and 1969b). And this is precisely what Rand foreshadowed and enacted in *Atlas Shrugged*. However, Rand saw further and deeper than Fuller. For while he framed man's cultural evolution almost exclusively in terms of its scientific and technological development, she understood and described the underlying philosophical (and in particular ethical) climates that can potentiate-or else destroy-the very foundations of such development itself. In other words, Rand understood the reversibility of cultural evolution, and sought to prevent reversals thereof. *Atlas Shrugged* is intended as preventive medicine. We know that one can bomb a given nation back to the Stone Age. Rand, however, knew that a given nation can also legislate itself back to the Stone Age, and moreover she understood that retrograde laws can proceed only from degenerate philosophy. In this sense, *Atlas Shrugged* is a textbook of the etiology and pathology of regressive philosophy in general, and of collectivist ethics in particular. In sum, she owned that it is fundamentally one's belief system that conditions if not determines one's prosperity or one's poverty alike.

**Interpersonal Context**

*Atlas Shrugged* is also the story of three men who vie, at different but overlapping times in her life, for Dagny Taggart's affections. Francisco D'Anconia is Dagny's first love, and heir to the world's most powerful consortium of copper mines and subsidiary industries. While Dagny and Francisco spent halcyon teenage summers together on the Taggart country estate, Francisco sometimes vanished for unspecified periods of time, to work clandestinely and incognito as a
telegraph boy at the local train station. He wanted to be able to boast, one day, that he had worked for Taggart Transcontinental even before she did. Dagny and Francisco drift apart as they come of age, but are reunited as their industrial and commercial worlds subsequently disintegrate.

Hank Reardon is Dagny's mature adult lover, and one of the last industrialists to succumb to the forces of moral bankruptcy and political expediency that unite to destroy a civilization entire. The owner of a steel empire that he built from scratch, Reardon invents a fabulous new alloy--called "Reardon Metal"--which is lighter, stronger, cheaper and more durable than any known steel. But a government of "looters" meanwhile exercises growing control over industry. By "looters" Rand means weak and mediocre individuals who form confederacies to bring down the strong (much as Hobbes and Freud warned they could and would), whose strengths they, the weak, envy and hate. All the while, the looters pretend that they are serving the "common good" by enforcing equality of outcome as social justice. Thus the looters pass laws attempting to prevent Reardon from producing his new metal, because its production would ostensibly be "unfair" to regular steel producers. After Hank Reardon and Dagny Taggart conspire to out-manoeuvre the clumsy legislation, and she succeeds in building a new track and bridge made of Reardon Metal, and the inaugural run is conducted safely at hitherto unimaginable speeds, the looters promptly oblige Reardon to supply his metal "equally" to all who demand it.

Ultimately, they blackmail Reardon into assigning to them the patent and property rights of the metal itself. Characteristic of the looters' methods--which begin by threat disguised as social fairness, which escalate by intimidation disguised as social conscience, and which end by coercion at gunpoint disguised as social necessity--is their utter dependency on the moral integrity of their quarry. The looters prey not on the vices, but rather on the virtues, of their intended victims. This
is devilish predation indeed, surpassing even Dostoyevsky's portrayals of psychological depravity, Orwell's forays into dialectical irony, and Solzhenitsyn's tales of political cruelty. Indeed, the antics of Rand's devils approach the *Screwtape Letters* in their diabolicality.

A couple of examples are instructive. Henry Reardon has a younger brother Philip, a hypocritical ne'er-do-well who lives rent-free in Henry's mansion, who drinks freely at Henry's bar, who freeloads at Henry's table, and yet who volunteers his time to a looter lobby group seeking to curtail the activities of "selfish, greedy, profit-driven industrialists." Henry's mother, who also lives like royalty in her son's mansion-while he foots her bills-incessantly nags Henry to help "poor Philip," on the grounds that Philip "never had anything" and that he strives so hard "for the common good" (unlike you, Henry, who have everything and are so selfish). Henry honors his mother's wishes by agreeing to donate ten thousand dollars (equivalent of a half-million today) to Philip's latest cause: a propaganda machine that portrays individualism as illness, self-interest as immorality, and profit as evil. Rand works a delectable irony here: when Henry offers to write Philip a check, Philip recoils with horror-because a check bearing the name "Henry Reardon" would be morally repugnant to him and his cohorts, who deem Reardon among their worst "enemies of the people." So Philip demands cash instead, and sees no ethical contradiction in the request. Henry accedes, and nobly restrains himself from violence. So the virtue of honoring one's mother is transmuted by the looters into the vice of contributing to one's own destruction.

Similarly, Reardon's wife Lillian patronizes-with Henry's money of course-a succession of politically correct authors, professors and social critics, who excoriate every kind of human achievement as hollow egoism, who equate every manifestation of human reason with sheer hallucination, who espouse nihilistic doctrines denying meaning, purpose and truth, and who
embrace irreversible self-sacrifice as the only measure of self-worth. Even en famille, the
Reardons' supper-table conversation consists in self-righteous attacks on Henry's accomplishments
by his mother, his brother and his wife. They deplore his lack of altruism, and revel in his public
portrayal (which they help fashion with his money) as a greedy industrialist, interested only in
profit and in possession of no redeeming social virtues. Lillian Reardon thus drives her husband
into the arms of Dagny Taggart-almost as much as Dagny Taggart attracts him.

So it is Henry's virtue of regard for Dagny's reputation, and not his own sin of adultery, that
the looters ultimately exploit. Having sought a way to bring him down, they had observed and
tracked him closely enough to discover the dates and places of his assignations with Dagny, whose
threat of public exposure they use to wrest his complicity in their confiscation of Reardon Metal.
Henry would never sign away his life's work for nothing; he would have defied their laws
"commanding" him to do so, and would have accepted trial, conviction and imprisonment as the
price of his affair with Dagny. And he would have reckoned that a fair bargain. But he could not
bear to see her publicly disgraced-not out of altruism, rather egoism-because of her value to him,
and his desire to protect her. And of course it is she whom the looters would target for scandal.
(Remember that Ayn Rand is writing in the America of the 1950's, when adultery or divorce or
childbirth out-of-wedlock were the ultimate social stigmas for a woman of that conservative
secular ethos. How far we have progressed since then!) The publicity of Dagny's affair with Henry
would have branded her in a way that Henry could not tolerate. And so he gives up Reardon Metal,
formula and patent-lock, stock and barrel-to the looters. And he deems that a fair bargain too.

Dagny's third and final love in this story, which culminates (it is strongly implied) in her
marriage, is with none other than John Galt: the man who orchestrates the stopping of the looted
motor of the world. John Galt is a physicist and engineer, who had worked diligently for a small midwestern engine manufacturer, when the self-destructive "altruistic" heirs to the factory began to collectivize their own employees. Making "altruism" their raison d'être, making "need" their basis of reward, and having no objective measure of "neediness," these precocious ideologues swiftly bankrupted their factory and themselves (even before the looter government could do it for them), and in so doing shattered the very backbone of the factory town's economy.

Galt, meanwhile, had just invented a motor that harnesses atmospheric energy so efficiently that it could have propelled manufacturing and transportation industries beyond dependency on fossil-fuel engines and hydro-electric power, and ushered in a new industrial revolution. But his prototype lies abandoned, comprehended, smashed, in the unsalvageable debris of the demolished plant of the wrecked factory of the ruined town, whose remaining inhabitants—who once worked in the factory, and in the secondary and tertiary businesses it indirectly supported—now share their domiciles with pigs and chickens, draw their water from wells, and burn tallow candles after sundown. They are not noble savages, but ignoble citizens. Their cultural reversal proceeded from their misplaced trust in a bankrupt ideology informed by an inconsistent ethic.

Counter-Revolutionary Context

As this ideology takes hold across the length and breadth of the Rand's allegorical America, John Galt perceives that individual ability is condemned as self-indulgence, that meritocracy is abandoned in favor of mediocrity, that individual liberties are trampled for the sake of collective rights, that capitalistic laws of supply and demand are suborned by unworkable socialistic
aspirations of centrally-planned equity, themselves speedily supplanted by a coerced, self-consuming economy supposedly based on need (but actually driven by political connections, so that the gauge of need vacillates between unreasoned caprice and unvarnished corruption). John Galt perceives that civilization had less and less use for its ablest exponents—be they scientists, engineers, industrialists, bankers, composers, or philosophers—except to loot their property and their ideas for "the common good" while deploping the very crudescence of their property and their ideas as against "the common good." John Galt realizes that this contradiction will sooner or later spell disaster for the civilization that embraces it, and so he resolves to accelerate the apocalypse, the sooner to recover from it.

John Galt and Francisco D'Anconia had been the students of a celebrated philosopher, Hugh Akston, at a once-prestigious institution, Patrick Henry University. Significantly, they had both studied physics and philosophy: the former, to understand how the objective world works; the latter, to discover which subjective ethic works best. Rand's Objectivism is thus an unabashed hybrid of scientific realism and moral naturalism, each underpinned by its own species of compatibilist determinism. The Objectivist pitches her tent in the Baconian and Lockean camp of the Enlightenment tradition, eschewing both Cartesian doubt and Rousseaugeois romanticism. Rand holds that the scientific method yields undeniable truths about the physical world; and likewise that her Objectivist ethic reveals ineluctable consequences—for good or for ill—of our beliefs about the political world. We are free to choose our beliefs—in particular, to establish moral norms—but we are also bound to reap the consequences of adhering to (and contractualizing from) those norms. Reason and passion are complementary in Rand's ethos: her protagonists are both passionate in their expression of reason, and reasonable in their expression of passion. Their reason
is tempered, and their passion is governed, by different degrees of reliable knowledge. This knowledge itself is cultivated painstakingly, via erudite instruction, by disciplined study, and through practical experience.

But as the Universities and Research Institutes in Rand's allegorical America begin to pander to the politics of the looters--at which juncture her allegory bears uncanny and prescient resemblance to contemporary reality--voices of Reason are drowned by the clamor of the Boeotians, and exponents of Reason are driven from the Academy by concerted forces of irrationalism devoted to its very destruction. The greatest living philosopher, Hugh Akston, resigns in disgust as the rigorous traditions and irreproachable values of his once-venerable institution are inundated by a flood-tide of rabble-rousing, emotive, destructive, vindictive and ultimately self-loathing populism. But Hugh Akston becomes neither philosopher-king nor philosopher-prophet, but philosopher-revolutionary. He masterminds a strike by the competent against the incompetent, the man against the beast, the objectivist against the looter, the egoist against the altruist, the capitalist against the socialist. His ablest students, John Galt and Francisco D'Anconia, carry out this action.

True to Rand's romantic capitalism, the revolt is not military; rather, industrial and scientific. The usual meaning of an industrial strike is a protest in which hired labor refuses to work until management makes certain concessions. Rand ingeniously stands this on its head: in *Atlas Shrugged*, it is the industrialists and engineers who refuse to work until labor learns that the well-being of the entire scientific-industrial complex depends upon the expertise of those capable of supervising it, and moreover upon their willingness to supervise it. In turn, their willingness to supervise it depends upon their being accorded sufficient degrees of personal autonomy by the
government. In particular and as a pre-requisite, they demand the liberties to produce what they will, when they will, for whom they will, and at such profit as they can realize. These are the essentials of libertarian economics. When these essentials are forcibly denied by the government of looters, John Galt and his allies, mentored by the philosopher Akston, resolve to teach them a fundamental lesson in what amounts to applied ethics. The captains of industry begin to abandon their ships, alone and silently in the dead of night, leaving no forwarding addresses and no instructions for seconds-in-command. Since the tail cannot wag the dog, the marionette cannot control the puppeteer, the camp-follower cannot plan the campaign, and the cabin-boy cannot pilot the vessel, the ships of industry and science begin immediately to wander from their proper courses, and to founder on the looters' reefs.

In their growing desperation to coerce equal outcomes as proof of the verity of their vision of social justice, the looters adopt such drastic measures that they achieve the sole equality entailed by their egregiousness; namely, the null outcome. As the infrastructure collapses from enforced bankruptcy, no-one can produce anything at all. This is the equality of death: suffocation of the spirit, asphyxiation of the mind, extirpation of the body, and annihilation of the means to societal resurrection. *Atlas Shrugged*, indeed. Rand's belief in free-will is explicit: the Atlases who bear this world's burdens do so because they choose to, and not because they cannot do otherwise. And God help the world if they choose to do otherwise.

As civilization crumbles, John Galt and his allies remove themselves by stages toward a utopian village they have built, secreted away in a Colorado valley, and protected from discovery by technologies made illegal in the looted world outside. Here the men and women of objective ability and Objectivist virtue wait patiently for the hard lesson to end, when they will re-emerge,
rebuild and reshepherd the shattered orb. But as they remove themselves by stages, Dagny Taggart tries to track them down. She needs to locate and hire competent people to save her railroad, which is expiring in the looted economy. They are watching Dagny even as she seeks them, but she is not yet ready to be recruited. So invincible is her spirit, so determined her mind, so energetic her constitution, and so fierce her loyalty to the Taggart tradition, that she actually serves the looters' purposes by keeping her railroad alive—the better for them to loot it more before its ineluctable collapse. Refusing to yield to the inevitability of that end, she finds ways to dodge or defy the looters' legislation. She thus forestalls the collapse. But by forestalling it, she strengthens the looters' short-sighted hand. And for that reason, John Galt and his allies must work against her in order to defeat them. To rescue Dagny Taggart, they must first ruin her.

The Philosophical Counseling Session

Desirous of stemming the great flood-tide of destruction, she searches out the dam-builders. She is not yet ready to understand that they have become dam-busters, that they have constructed an Ark, and that they will soon bring her aboard. Meanwhile, she courageously bears unbearable pressures alone. And in these circumstances, and in this frame of mind—searching out the inventor of a revolutionary motor lying smashed and buried in the debris of a ruined factory—she encounters Hugh Akston, the great philosopher, humbly operating a road-side diner on a near-deserted stretch of Colorado highway.

Dagny sat at the end of the counter, eating a hamburger sandwich. It was the best-cooked food she had ever tasted, the product of simple ingredients and of an unusual skill ... She
studied the man behind the counter. He was slender and tall; he had an air of distinction that belonged in an ancient castle or in the inner office of a bank ... There was expert competence in his manner of working; his movements were easy, intelligently economical ... somewhere behind his look of courteous sternness, there was a note of humor ...

"How is business?" she asked.

"Pretty bad. They're going to close the Lennox Foundry next week, so I'll have to close soon, too, and move on." ...

"Where to?"

"I haven't decided." ...

"Would you like a job in New York at ten thousand dollars a year?"

"No."

She had been carried away by the joy of discovering and rewarding ability. She looked at him silently, shocked. "I don't think you understood me."

"I did."

"You're refusing an opportunity of this kind?"

"Yes."

"But why?"

"That is a personal matter."

"Why should you work like this, when you can have a better job?"

"I am not looking for a better job."

"You don't want a chance to rise and make money?"
"No. Why do you insist?"

"Because I hate to see ability being wasted."

"So do I."

Something in the way he said it made her feel the bond of some profound emotion which they held in common; it broke the discipline that forbade her ever to call for help. "I'm so sick of them!" Her voice startled her: it was an involuntary cry. "I'm so hungry for the sight of anyone who's able to do whatever it is he's doing! ... What is your name?"

"Hugh Akston."

Through the blank seconds of recapturing her mind, she kept telling herself: You're hysterical . . . don't be preposterous . . . it's just a coincidence of names-while she knew, in certainty and numb, inexplicable terror, that this was the Hugh Akston ...

"Dr. Akston, I . . . it's inconceivable, it's . . . You're . . . a philosopher . . . the greatest living philosopher . . . an immortal name . . . why would you do this?"

"Because I am a philosopher, Miss Taggart ... The secret you are trying to solve involves something greater--much greater--than the invention of a motor run by atmospheric electricity. There is only one helpful suggestion that I can give to you: By the essence and nature of existence, contradictions cannot exist. If you find it inconceivable that an invention of genius should be abandoned among ruins, and that a philosopher should wish to work as a cook in a diner--check your premises. You will find that one of them is wrong." (Atlas Shrugged, pp. 311-315)

This episode qualifies as a session in philosophical counseling. The client had been seeking
it for some time, only did not know where to find it. Her pent-up emotions are released by the counselor's display of competence; her incredulity at his actual counsels is overruled by his confidence; her therapeutic task is to "check her hypotheses"; that is to search for and modify the inconsistent premise in her belief-system, which is responsible for enabling her emotional distress. That faulty premise, as Dagny eventually discovers, is that she has a "duty" to run the railroad at all costs, even though the government has dispossessed her of every correlative right. The faulty premise entails that she has a "duty" to bankrupt Taggart Transcontinental, but no right to earn a profit. She has a "duty" to operate the railroad, but no right to make decisions vital to its continued operation. She has a "duty" to hire incompetent people, but no right to fire them when they cannot do their jobs. In other words, she has a "duty" to destroy her railroad, but no right to preserve it. The looters are exploiting her virtue, not her vice. Since her personal identity and the very meaning of her life are bound up with running the railroad, they know she cannot abandon it, just as a loving mother cannot abandon her child. But by legislating that she destroy it by running it according to their rules, the looters are in effect commanding the mother gradually to poison her child in the very act of nourishing it. If a mother came to realize that a slow and agonizing death were inevitable for her baby--abetted partly because of her love for it--would she not rebel against the perversity and evil that compels her to administer the poison? In ultimate desperation, would she not kill her own child swiftly and painlessly, rather than slowly and painfully? And do that because she loves it? Would she not then contemplate taking her own life in the bargain, so as not to endure the torment and guilt that would surely ensue? Her psyche would become the ground of a classic clash between Eros and Thanatos, in whose aftermath she might be left neither alive nor dead, but driven toward insanity as the only attainable compromise.
The modification that Dagny needs to make to her belief-system is no more than the correlativity thesis entails, at least in its second-order version. The first-order thesis states that every right biconditionally implies a duty. The second-order version thus states that every entity that furnishes a right biconditionally implies a duty. Since the government of looters has abrogated Dagny's rights regarding the railroad, they have also annulled her duties to it. And since her railroad is a mechanized industry--as opposed to a flesh-and-blood being--she can terminate its existence without having taken a life. After all, her railroad is but a surrogate child. This consideration decisively mitigates her impending remorse and guilt.

Moreover, by modifying her faulty premise, and by abandoning her surrogate child, she gains a flesh-and-blood husband--namely John Galt--who can sire flesh-and-blood children. The psycho-biological subtext is quite compelling here, though it is unlikely that Ayn Rand had a conscious inkling of its contents. Note that John Galt must (with ample independent justification, and as part of a grander design) destroy Taggart Transcontinental before he can claim his bride. Viewed psycho-biologically, he is murdering the offspring--with the mother's eventual complicity--of her incestuous relationship with her great-grandfather, Nat Taggart. Once that progeny is slain, Galt can wed her and sire his own. Sociobiologically, this kind of behavior is rampant among the primates, humans included; but apparently humans alone can extend the behavior into psycho-biological dimensions, wherein the relations can be historical and the offspring surrogate.

Returning again to the episode in Akston's roadside diner, which marks Rand's re-invention of philosophical practice and sets Dagny on her therapeutic course, we note also that the scene is almost surrealistically Thoreauesque. In his classic essay on civil disobedience, Thoreau gave out
one of his more enduring aphorisms: "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true
place for a just man is also a prison." (Thoreau, p9.) Extrapolating this theme, one might well
inquire "In a collectivist society, what is the proper place for a capitalistic man? In an altruistic
society, what is the proper place for an egoistic man? In an irrational society, what is the proper
place for a rational man? In a savage society, what is the proper place for a civilized man? In an
incompetent society, what is the proper place for an able man? And in a vicious society, what is the
proper place for a virtuous man?" Rand fashions a single answer to these questions: they have no
place, and so must make their own. (The *I Ching* too offers advice for such a situation.) And so, by
modifying one's premises accordingly, one rather expects to find a great philosopher cooking
short-order meals. In Galt's secret valley, industrialists are become farmers; bankers, gardeners;
scientists, shopkeepers. They take pride in their work, assume responsibility for their products and
produce, supply what their local market will bear, and benefit as they can from their transactions.
No job is beneath anyone's "dignity," provided it is done well. No labor is "menial," provided the
worker values his own skills. And no profit is "evil," provided that it is honestly earned.

This may sound hopelessly idealistic: well, it is. Throughout this paper I have characterized
Rand as a romantic capitalist, and I think she would not mind the characterization. Idealism,
however, is not surrealism. I described Hugh Akston's diner as almost surrealistic; what prevents
it from being actually surrealistic is the realism itself. For me, the decisive issue is not whether Ayn
Rand's solutions to the problems she posed are realizable or viable; the decisive issue is: to what
extent are her prognoses themselves realistically manifest in contemporary society? If such
problems were not apparent, then *Atlas Shrugged* could be dismissed as an extravagant pipe-dream.
But if her prognoses are accurate, then perhaps we need to re-evaluate her prescription after all.
Because Objectivism is strong medicine, a philosophical practitioner must exercise professional caution in prescribing it. Ironically, and at the same time, a state of affairs that demands its prescription also implies he may be throwing political caution to the winds by prescribing it.

In my view, many of Rand's worst fears and direst premonitions have indeed come to pass. On the largest scale, the very fact that the movement of philosophical practice is gaining rapid ground throughout the west is indicative not of the west's re-enlightenment, rather of its decline and quite possibly its demise. That so many individuals, groups and organizations are turning to philosophers for help bespeaks the complexity, profundity and severity of their problems, which are exacerbated by the mockery of integrity, the denial of responsibility, the denigration of decency, the disintegration of family, the vilification of morality, the economy of need, the litany of entitlement, the suspicion of achievement, the ridicule of merit, the hatred of reason, the disavowal of purpose, the contempt of intellect, the debasement of the academy, the abrogation of due process, the farce of justice, the capitalization of hatred, the politicization of sexuality, the celebration of violence, the worship of death, the blind faith in technology, the engineering of catastrophe, the entrenchment of bureaucracy, the enshrinement of intolerance, the apology to indecency, the addiction to physicality, the fatuous expectation of equal outcome, and the otiose platitudes of utopian ideologuery, all endemic in the declining west.

The world turns to philosophers when all else has failed. Ayn Rand presaged this turning half a century ago, and we are experiencing it now. For our most fortunate clients, philosophical insight catalyzes a viable re-integration or re-interpretation of self and circumstance. But our least fortunate clients are like Humpty-Dumpties: all the king's horses, and all the king's men, and all the king's philosophical practitioners, cannot put the pieces together again. But perhaps we know why
not. When a medical patient dies, there are usually ascertainable medical causes of death. And of course there may be other causes underlying the medical ones, such as an unhealthy physical environment. Similarly, when a civilization perishes, there are usually ascertainable axiological causes of its demise. And of course there may be other causes underlying the axiological ones, such as an unwholesome metaphysical foundation.

**Conclusion**

Ayn Rand diagnosed the most pernicious ideologies that currently infect western mentality, and almost alone in her generation (along with the likes of Arthur Koestler and George Orwell) she realized that if the mind-politic becomes contaminated, the body-politic will become debilitated. Ayn Rand identified and decried deconstructionism and social constructivism long before the likes of Lyotard and Derrida communicated their insidious noetic diseases to an Occidental mind-politic born with all the pre-requisites for self-destruction, having inherited sufficient affluence to make self-destruction really worthwhile, and lacking only a "raison de ne pas être," (a reason not to be), which they have acquired--like so much fine food, dread disease, and perfidious ideology--from the French. In America, the disease has reached its final operable stages in the buffoonery of the likes of anti-realist Professor Stanley Fish who, cloaked in the facade of academic reputability and intellectual avant-guardism, was paid princely sums to deliver maudlin eulogies to reason. For example, Fish enthralled an a so-called "intellectual" elite by laboriously asserting during the course of an hour that justice is nothing but the interest of the stronger (Public Lecture at The Vancouver Institute, April 12, 1997). Half the audience consisted of well-fed, materially comfortable, thoroughly institutionalized and somewhat senile academics, who evidently did not
remember Plato's *Republic* or perhaps had never understood it, and did not in consequence recognize Thrasymachus incarnate, and moreover did not recall that there was any conceivable response to his pernicious doctrine. The other half of the audience consisted of young, materially insecure, not-yet-institutionalized academics, who could at least afford to feed themselves but who suffered invariably from eating disorders and other estrangements from well-being, engendered by unwholesome belief-systems foisted on them by the very Thrasymachi on whose every word they hung, thus imbibing noetic poison at each breath, gullibly mistaking it for the cure--instead of understanding it as the cause--of their several afflictions. They could not recognize this Thrasymachus at all, for such Thrasymachi have, with low cunning, long-since purged Plato's *Republic* from the curriculum itself, the better to strengthen their own interests, and interest their own strengths, by dictating that justice is nothing but the interest of the stronger.

The senile intelligentsia doddering toward rustication, and the credulous cannon-fodder of cultural aberration captive on its fringes, are all dupes of the epoch-ending intellectual charlatanism of the likes of Stanley (Thrasymachus) Fish, exposed for the ages by the Sokal affair\(^2\) (Sokal 1996). The telling point is that the academy is collapsing under them; their undergraduate students are no longer capable of reading the *Republic*, even if it were assigned, while their graduate students are no longer capable of comprehending the kind of public lecture I have just described, although it is supposedly for their edification too. Just as in *Atlas Shrugged*, academe is collapsing under the weight of its own politically orchestrated untruth.

In sum, we cannot ignore Ayn Rand's grim prescience, nor can we evade its corollary: that philosophical practice may sooner or later involve political action. And as we cannot act sincerely other than in accordance with subjective values, cannot act whole-heartedly other than in harmony
with personal beliefs, yet cannot act effectively other than in agreement with objective truths, and
cannot act blamelessly other than in the service of sound principles, it behoves us to attend Rand's
clarion cry of warning. We must Objectivize, else lose the subject.

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Notes

1 This paper was originally read at The Third International Conference on Philosophical Practice,
CUNY Graduate Center, New York, July 1997. This is its first publication. Thanks to Prof. Young
E. Rhee for inviting it.

2 Disgusted by postmodernism's institutionalized yet Boeotian attacks on science, reality, and truth,
physics professor Alan Sokal concocted a piece of pure gibberish, seasoned liberally with spurious
postmodern jargon, entitled "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity." This deliberately nonsensical article was soon published by the leading postmodern journal of the day, namely *Social Text*, then edited by Stanley Fish. Alan Sokal then publicly exposed Fish as a fraud, in the *New York Times*. 
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sokal_affair