

[About](#)[Content](#)[Store](#)[Forum](#)[Capturing
the Spirit](#)[Rebirth of Reason™](#)[War](#)[People](#)[Archives](#)[Objectivism](#)

A Critique of Murray Rothbard's "Sociology of the Ayn Rand Cult" (Part 1 of 3)

by [G. Stolyarov II](#)

In 1972, a renowned and insightful libertarian economist of the Austrian School and a former associate of Ayn Rand, Dr. Murray Rothbard (1926-1995), composed a purported analysis of the "cult dynamics" of Ayn Rand's personal associations wherein he compared the early development of Objectivism to a Soviet-like hierarchy of unquestioned subordination and an essentially religious acceptance on faith of the positions upheld by a master "guru." While Rothbard does validly pinpoint some of the foibles which lay within even so ingenious, industrious, and intellectually colossal mind as Rand's, his exposition should by no means be interpreted as a refutation of any of the fundamental principles of Objectivism, nor of the literary and philosophical stature and accomplishments of Rand herself, nor the immense value that each individual can gain by fathoming and applying those tools for life on Earth which Rand had discovered.

This analysis shall delve into the text and underlying assumptions of Rothbard's critique and filter the gold from the dustpan, to speak figuratively. Rothbard's work in the realm of economics is commendable, but in his stance on ethics he does err toward the side of traditional dichotomies of passion versus reason, hedonism versus stoicism, and upholds the former while attributing the latter to Rand. This trend, perhaps, is one that most substantially underlies his criticism and causes many of the erroneous observations that either Rothbard himself had made or was aiming for readers to accept.

There is another direr undertone in Rothbard's commentary, which can only be detected by reference to others of his writings. Its essential crux is Rothbard's revisionist historical position and his wanton anti-American stance in politics and international relations, a party line that smacks of a disciple of Howard Zinn, not Ludwig von Mises.

It is my hope to venture thoroughly into each of these fields and to subject Rothbard to a scrutiny more concordant with absolute facts and values of reality than his critique of Objectivism had been.

The Reason-Passion Dichotomy

Almost as a sacred given do both religious a priori dogmatists and nihilistic hedonists treat the doctrine of an essential antagonism between mind and body, and its derivative, reason and emotion. According to the dogmatists, via a philosophical framework subtly initiated by Immanuel Kant, personal passions and fervent pursuits of goals held in ardent desirability by the individual mind are

[Activism Reports](#)[Art](#)[Articles](#)[By Rating](#)[By Author](#)[By Category](#)[Ayn Rand/Objectivism Sightings](#)[Blog Entry](#)[Books](#)[CDs](#)[Free Radical Updates](#)[Jokes](#)[Local Club Meeting Plans](#)[Movies](#)[News & Interesting Links](#)[Objectipedia](#)[Opinion Polls](#)[Products](#)[Quotes](#)[Staff Announcements](#)[Video Link](#)[Web Directory](#)

a manifestation of "inclination," and the "petty" selfish concern of man with his own survival above all else. Kant urged this calculus to be abandoned in favor of an absolute albeit divinely ordained "duty," which negated inclination and acted based on an a priori framework wherein the individual tried not to fathom his emotions, but to act in direct opposition to them. For even an objectively beneficial act for oneself and/or others was not moral, according to Kant, unless duty was at its origin. On the other side of the coin were the hedonists, who rejected reason as stale, stolid, and arbitrary, frameworks as purposeless, and all truth as subordinate to the individual's desire for "happiness." Yet the hedonists, the New Left of the 1960s being their prime representation, having forfeit all principles, were unable to define what precisely constituted happiness, and what preconditions were necessary. Hence, their philosophy (or lack thereof) collapsed into acting on the random spurs of the moment, on frivolous caprices of intermingled lust, rage, and stupor.

Ayn Rand had refuted both of these seeming extremes and demonstrated that these are in fact not extremes at all, but rather two sides of the same philosophical coin. The Kantian framework emerges from the premise that the mind of man exists in a vacuum apart from the body, as a "ghost," and that it can act upon preconceived dictates of divine law without considering the survival needs and impulses of the body. The Hippie framework emerges from the proposition that the body of man exists as disjoint from its mind, a "corpse," controlled by mere perceptual concretes, sensations of the present second, with further abstraction, categorization, and the application of principles derived serving no constructive purpose. This is the predominant mindset of the late twentieth century and one that Rothbard generally upholds throughout "The Sociology of the Ayn Rand Cult." Yet be not surprised if an occasional Rothbardian excerpt should exposit a so-called "ghost" facet of the "cult." The consequences of either mindset are approximately equal in their detriment and quite more compatible than their advocates might conceive. Acting on "duty" contrary to inclination results in self-abnegation. Acting on whim contrary to reason results in self-destruction. But another reason why Rothbard can argue from both sides of the dichotomy is, as shall be explicated later, the nature of Objectivism itself.

Rothbard describes the initiation of most into the "Ayn Rand cult" as emotional residue following the reading of *Atlas Shrugged* shortly after its release in 1957. "Entering the movement through a novel meant that despite repeated obeisances to Reason, febrile emotion was the driving force behind the acolyte's conversion." This statement seeks to create a conflict of motives where none exists. Ayn Rand's philosophy is unique amid a sea of traditionalist dichotomies in that it integrates reason and emotion in a manner that the capacities of both can be utilized to optimal gain, and mind and body can be conceptually unified into a single complete entity, Man. An emotion is not some arbitrary subjective urge that is "just there." In Rand's own words, it is a "lightning-swift integration" of the sum total of a man's value-premises concerning that, which has sparked the reaction. Because man's knowledge is so vast, and the sum of it can never wholly be retained within the brain's attention span simultaneously, the brain must possess a "shortcut" to employ it nevertheless, without relinquishing hold of its essence. Hence, the value-premises which one derives via the concerted effort of his own mind are automatized into a complex, multi-faceted emotional reaction which is capable of yielding grand inspiration or sordid despair, depending on the value-premises behind the integration. So, an emotion is not an antagonist of reason. It is *a tool for employing the products of reason*. Long as its origins are traced, its

grounding proven, it ceases to be a derivative of the fluid hash within hippie minds, but rather becomes an extension and support of one's rational faculty. A work of fiction such as *Atlas Shrugged* is a prime means of illustrating the unity of the two. It can employ characters' emotions and interactions as a means of insight into fundamental value-premises and their dynamics in the realm of existence. It can utilize description to refer to a premise or a quality in its concrete embodiments. It can serve as a framework for principled action, whether it is action one wishes to emulate, or to avoid. A novel ventures beyond just stating ideas (although a good novel will do that also) to demonstrating them. And the masterful interplay of ideas that is *Atlas Shrugged* henceforth answers a question beyond "What is Objectivism?" This question is, "How can I apply Objectivism to my life?" Given the fortitude and innovativeness of Henry Rearden, the dedication and drive of Dagny Taggart, and the incorruptible integrity of John Galt, it is no wonder, and no fault, that readers of this phenomenal literary triumph had yearned to further exchange values with its author.

Rothbard's attitude toward *Atlas Shrugged* demonstrates a contempt for ideas that befits one subscribing to the Naturalist School of Literature, a movement that embraces photographic descriptions of every detail of a novel, no matter how minute and insubstantial to the development of the plot and theme. Rothbard refers to the "wooden, posturing, one-dimensional heroes and heroines" who were "explicitly supposed to serve as role models for every Randian." To this I reply that I would prefer to learn of the content of a man's mind over the color of his shoelaces any day. The characters of *Atlas Shrugged* do reflect philosophical values, as they are set in motion in a world not unlike our own, a world where need calculus and statist domination seek to subdue the sovereignty and autonomy of the producers' minds. The protagonists of the book are supremely productive, physically vigorous, dynamic individuals whose actions are not those of a chance statistical common denominator, but of purposefully, volitionally-driven persons in the truest sense of the word. They are in every respect far more colorful, multi-faceted, and intriguing than the average "Joe Couch-Potato" Naturalists and Rothbard would wish to see portrayed in writing.

Of course, this misevaluation of Rand's magnum opus is another offshoot of Rothbard's reason-passion dichotomy. Because the dichotomy cannot conceive of a unity between what it deems essential antagonists, and because Rothbard essentially emerges from hedonistic "corpse" metaphysics, any intense and intricate integration of reason and passion will inevitably seem to him as artificial, as "posturing and one-dimensional," neglecting the wholly as important facet of shoelaces and nail clippers in world-class literature.

Rothbard takes issue with Randians asking themselves the question, "what would John Galt have done" in a given situation? John Galt is Rand's projection of the consistent, reasoning value-producer. Rothbard deems it ludicrous that Objectivists emulate a non-living, non-historical character, but is it a flaw to establish standards for oneself that few in history have attained? Is it delusional to establish an ideal and strive toward it? Only in the world of perceptual reductionism and the spur of the moment.

Rothbard writes, "The Biblical nature of *Atlas* for many Randians is illustrated by the wedding of a Randian couple that took place in New York. At the ceremony, the couple pledged their joint devotion and fealty to Ayn Rand, and then supplemented it by opening *Atlas* – perhaps at random – to read aloud a passage

from the sacred text." If a reader admires a book and perceives it to be a guide for living, is it not proper to revisit it, especially upon monumental turning points within one's life, such as a marriage, where rational planning and the establishing of goals, expectations, and intellectual bonds is of paramount importance? But, of course, to the adherent of the hedonist/perceptual reductionist side of the reason/passion dichotomy, principles are either worthless or transient and dispensable, and any attempt to consistently employ them must smack of that other a priori dogmatic side of the split, i.e. of the religious notions of duty and obedience to divine authority, which are all too often equated with genuine reason. Hence, Rothbard's comparison of *Atlas Shrugged* to *The Bible*. Rothbard mistakes principles applied at one's own volition and discretion, fueled by the conclusions of one's own reasoning mind, for the dictates of a supreme authority accepted on faith.

Perhaps the most lucid illustration of Rothbard's adherence to the reason/passion dichotomy can be witnessed in the following passage: "Personal enjoyment, indeed, was also frowned upon in the movement and denounced as hedonistic 'whim-worship.' In particular, nothing could be enjoyed for its own sake – every activity had to serve some indirect, 'rational' function. Thus, food was not to be savored, but only eaten joylessly as a necessary means of one's survival; sex was not to be enjoyed for its own sake, but only to be engaged in grimly as a reflection and reaffirmation of one's 'highest values'; painting or movies only to be enjoyed if one could find 'rational values' in doing so. All of these values were not simply to be discovered quietly by each person – the heresy of 'subjectivism' – but had to be proven to the rest of the cult." Essentially, this paragraph presumes that an activity is only pleasurable if committed for no particular reason whatsoever, on some seemingly arbitrary emotional incitement, and serving no constructive purpose. But this is the hedonism that views emotions as the prime motive force in, and neglects their derivation from reason and their employment as a means for an end dictated to each man by his own rational mind. Rothbard does not wish to grasp the immense happiness that emerges from an individual who strives successfully toward an aim which he has calculated to attain the benefit of his existence. He considers only chance minor values, the sensations of the moment, the transient stimulations of the organism as the only genuine means of enjoyment. Note that Rothbard does not accuse Objectivists or members of "the Ayn Rand cult" of rejecting the experience of these, which is quite accurate. Rothbard, however, criticizes them for *pursuing something in addition to them as well*, in the realm of ambition and aspiration, of principled value pursuits, the euphoria induced by whose accomplishment is far more monumental and lingering, as well as truly savorable as a reward, for the individual's quality of life is genuinely elevated by their accomplishment. Rand's message to her adherents was twofold: to harness emotions and thereby enjoy them in the proper role intended them by the nature of man, as well as to ensure that every act one undertakes is not severed from the rest, that one should integrate it into the sum total of his life, and what he wishes his life to become. It is not Rand who seeks to limit the degree to which a man may obtain happiness and fulfillment; it is Rothbard.

As for proving the value of a work of art to one's colleagues, this is a mere instance of value-trading. If one discovers an exhilarating theme or a beneficial idea where none had previously been found, does Rothbard wish him to merely be accepted on faith, or go by his "gut" or "the general drift" of his sensations instead of attempting to lucidly pinpoint the source of his approbation? Instead of

integrating the art with the sum of one's knowledge and value premises, Rothbard, in the manner entirely consistent with his embrace of the mind-body dichotomy, suggests that it be treated as a disjoint perceptual concrete of the moment. Rand and her colleagues merely attempted to foster the integrated approach through discussions amongst themselves and to benefit from the fruits of each others' minds and observations.

Ultimately, Rothbard's conclusion that the Randians became robotic and grim in their demeanors can only allude to Rothbard's own misunderstanding of one of Rand's crucial principles, the integration of mind and body. Rothbard writes that "many ex-cultists remain imbued with the Randian belief that every individual is armed with the means of spinning out all truths a priori from his own head-hence there is felt to be no need to learn the concrete facts about the real world, either about contemporary history or the laws of the social sciences." But Rothbard neglects the fact that Rand synthesized the emphasis by rationalism on logical derivation from principles with the emphasis by empiricism on the acquisition and systematization of external data. Rand in no means encouraged anyone to view the entirety of the world as a priori; she merely contended that certain a priori foundational truths exist, something that Rothbard, the disjoint perceptually-bound mind, seems to deny. A priori truths include the absolutism of reality, the validity of reason, and the individual's life as the ultimate value, each derived from the other in that order. These lay the very groundwork for scientific observation and empirical study. That Randians rejected certain modern absurdities as "social history" (the study of the lowest common denominator of a time instead of its essential dynamics) and post-modern revisionism (which is, as will later be seen, at the crux of Rothbard's stance even here) is merely testimony to the fact that the former has zero conception of what is metaphysically significant, and the latter is a blow to the aspirations and nobility of man.

[Discuss this Article](#) (45 messages)

