

Viewpoint

Too Much Passion

Kevin McFarlane

I read with interest David Ramsay Steele's review of *The Passion of Ayn Rand*. I would however, like to point out some errors and add further comments of my own.

Steele claims that Rand held that the US is "virtually always entirely in the right in its conflict with other powers." This does not seem to accord with her views on the Vietnam War as described in *The New Left: the Anti-Industrial Revolution and Capitalism: the Unknown Ideal* and her condemnation of America's "altruistic" foreign interventionism.

I thought that Rand opposed Reagan not because he was anti-abortion but because he was a "typical conservative" who mixed religion with politics (*The Passion of Ayn Rand*, p.399).

Steele holds that human sexual impulses, feelings and responses are purely biological in nature. This is wrong. Personality, which obviously includes intellectual factors but also includes sense of humour, mannerisms etc. plays an important role.

An aesthetic point. I personally enjoyed *Atlas Shrugged* more than *The Fountainhead* but I seem to be in the minority in this opinion. Artistic tastes are subjective, contrary to Rand who held that artistic tastes are objective with the sole exception of musical taste. She nevertheless believed that her musical tastes were right and everyone else's were wrong!

A conjecture as to why Dagny Taggart ran a railroad rather than an airline. This was probably due to Rand's fear of flying which was rationalised by blaming the "modern psycho-epistemology (the method of mental functioning) of the mechanics and pilots." (*The Passion of Ayn Rand*, p.318). Readers may find this strange. It is very

strange. It is rather like saying you would not take a taxi if you knew the taxi-driver was Buddhist and you disagreed with Buddhism. It is an example of Rand's belief that all the behaviour of an individual should be "integrated" (the Randian buzz-word) or made to conform with a philosophical position.

Steele has difficulty in interpreting Rand's seemingly absurd tautology "existence exists". I think that all she means is that there is an objective reality which exists independently of anyone's beliefs, feelings, judgements or opinions i.e. commonsense realism. This has been denied by some philosophers. It is denied in most interpretations of modern quantum mechanics. However, as with free-will, in practice most people accept an objective reality whatever their explicit philosophical beliefs.

It must be admitted that Rand's "existence exists" is peculiarly stated. Its tautological character is presumably due to the fact that Rand considered the existence of objective reality to be self-evident. But this statement of Rand does have implications which shed some light on the way in which she treated her opponents. Rand claimed to be able to derive the whole of Objectivism from the axiom: "existence exists". In (*Atlas Shrugged*, p.944) she writes: "My morality, the morality of reason, is contained in a single axiom: existence exists - and in a single choice: to live. The rest proceeds from these." Therefore, those who are non-Objectivists must fall into one of two categories:

- (1) If they believe in reality, they hold inconsistent philosophies.
- (2) If they hold consistent philosophies, they must deny reality. (The whim-worshippers perhaps?)

Related to (1) is Rand's belief that if one accepts any point of her philosophy then consistency requires that one accepts it all. This is clearly false since any statement can be logically derived in an infinite number of ways.

Steele commits a blunder when he says that thinking is involuntary. If by thinking is

meant reasoning and problem-solving (and it is clear that this is what Rand means) then Steele is wrong - at least as far as conscious awareness is concerned. However, it is probable that involuntary thinking is performed by our subconscious minds. But this is different from what Steele is saying.

To finish I should like to say that Steele's definition of reason, "It consists in subjecting one's ideas to rational criticism, holding every position tentatively, and being prepared to abandon any position if it is successfully criticised" is an excellent statement of the Popperian viewpoint. I also liked his analysis of "Egoistic Ethics."

Most of the rest of what Steele has to say about Rand I have no quarrel with, though I still think she has at least a few good things to say.

A Dispassionate Reply

David Ramsay Steele

1. There is a distinction between being in the right and being right. One may be in the right with someone else (they may be in the wrong) even though one is behaving unwisely. I might inherit a fortune and give it away to the poor. Rand might say that I was wrong to do so, but still in the right when it came to a dispute with my relatives who wanted to have me declared incompetent.

Although Rand thought that the US was in Vietnam out of immoral altruism, wrongly trying to help unworthy victims of Communist aggression, she certainly never thought that there was anything to say for the Vietcong, or that they had any right on their side. She was even in favour of the curtailing of civil liberties for those who supported the Vietcong.

2. Rand often supported typical conservatives politically, though critically. She stated clearly on a number of occasions that the decisive issue which was so fundamental that no one who took the wrong side should ever be supported was abortion. (See *The Ayn Rand letter, Vol.4, No.2, Nov/Dec 1975*).

3. I do not hold that "human sexual impulses, feelings, and responses are purely biological in nature". I entirely agree that "Personality ... plays an important role." And I never said anything against these truisms.

4. A tautology cannot be absurd, but, on the contrary, the negation of a tautology is always absurd. I do not think "existence exists" is a tautology, any more than "redness is red" or "longevity has a long life". I wouldn't be surprised to find these statements were absurd. At any rate, they are mistaken.

5. "Commonsense realism" is quite different to the view that "there is an objective reality which exists independently of anyone's beliefs, feelings, judgements or opinions". Commonsense realism is much more specific than the latter. The majority of philosophers rejected commonsense realism but accepted that "there is an objective reality ..." This was true of Plato, Hume, Kant, Russell, etc. (The above holds even though what constitutes "commonsense realism" is open to question. Does it entail the view that a rainbow has mass? That when an ambulance goes past me the pitch of its siren always coincidentally drops? That people in Australia are in danger of falling off the Earth? Wherever one places the boundaries of commonsense realism, it is clearly hostile to science.)

6. I believe that every conscious human person engages in reasoning and problem solving every day, and could not avoid it except by suicide or rendering themselves comatose. It is not possible to get through the day's most mundane and rudimentary tasks (getting to work, finding out what's on TV) without reasoning and problem-solving. And one has no choice in this matter, as long as one is awake. Some Buddhist monks, by prolonged mental exercises, claimed to be able to reach a condition of mindlessness, without thought, but reports say they always emerged from this temporary state involuntarily. Of course, one can think, just as one can ride a bicycle, badly or well. Anyone who claims that it is possible to choose not to think at all is thinking very badly.

Crime and Punishment

Jon LeCocq

In his all too short article on free market justice (FL vol.5, no.2) J.C. Lester asks how any punishment may be justified from within the market libertarian viewpoint. It is safe to assume that he calls for this justification because punishment involves coercion, a thing inimical to his libertarian sensibilities. Mr Lester might have argued that punishment is the lesser of two evils for a libertarian - that a society without the deterrent and restrictive effects of punishment would be one less free (and less prosperous) than one with. But he rejects this 'safe' option. He prefers to argue that this coercion is in one sense no coercion for the criminal opts into the risk of punishment with a quasi (tacit) contract. This idea is refreshing but false. A contract requires consent and there are no partners. In a crime and its aftermath there is no consent to punishment - most are unwilling to be punished and will do all they can to avoid it. This is in contrast to the diner who not only expects a bill at the end of her meal but intends and is willing to pay it. Mr Lester's assertion that what the criminal quasi-contracts into is the liability of punishment rather than the punishment itself is no help. If I go for a walk late at night I am liable to be attacked and mugged. It doesn't follow that I have quasi-contracted into the mugging or consented to it in any way. It is true that I've taken the risk of being attacked as the criminal takes the risk of punishment, but where is the contract (or the insight) in this? I have entered into an understanding with no-one. I have merely taken a chance. The value of describing all voluntary human action in terms of contract is questionable. In this particular case this language and these ideas are clearly inappropriate.

In the rest of his article Mr Lester considers a variety of attitudes to punishment (more or less severe) and suggests that in a free market for justice some or all might be available. He states that no individual is entitled to decide for any other on this question. It is a matter of consumer choice alone. But is he right? Severity of punishment is an issue not just for the person demanding the punishment but for anyone who could receive it as well. That is, absolutely every-

one. If I am convicted of burglary, the question of whether I am to be fined, imprisoned, to lose a hand or be decapitated is not one that I would expect to be decided by my alleged victim alone. I would expect to be able to buy protection from an agency not just as a potential victim of mine, but also as a recipient of punishment. I would contract with an agency to support my right to be tried in a court whose sentencing policy was not too severe. If this protection for the criminal were not available I would expect liberal-minded people to be worried about it. There is a great likelihood that a society without government would be freer than one with, but it is not certain. It is possible, for instance, that free market forces would be more efficient than government ones in enforcing majority prejudice against harmless minority preferences such as homosexuality between consenting adults. In this case, I would still expect libertarian propagandists to argue the case for tolerance even if there were no obvious single target (government) at which to aim the attack. Similarly we should be concerned for the rights of criminals and have an opinion on an acceptable level of punishment for dealing with them. The libertarian case doesn't end with the replacement of government monopolies with free enterprise competition. There is room for a concept of justice, albeit a subjective one, beyond that indicated by market forces.