

Review of Allan Gotthelf and Gregory Salmieri, eds., *A Companion to Ayn Rand* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley- Blackwell, 2016). Hardbound. xv, 521.

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Many American universities have an Objectivist Club. These clubs are often very small, distributing a few free copies a year of the Ayn Rand novels *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead*. With the exception of these few diehard Objectivists, there is little interest in Objectivism per se on college campuses. (At my university, for example, the Objectivist Club had a table at the organization fair each semester next to the birdwatching group.) For this and other reasons, Objectivism is often mocked by philosophers as a fringe ideology popular chiefly among misfit undergraduates.

Given this, Objectivism may seem to have been largely forgotten in the United States. But as a new compendium shows, Objectivism, the brainchild of Ayn Rand, is not forgotten at all. Quite the opposite, in fact. It has become so popular as to become unquestioned, and has only appeared to fade into the background due to its tenets having been accepted, whether overtly or tacitly, by a large segment of the American population. Reading through *A Companion to Ayn Rand* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), edited by Allan Gotthelf and Gregory Salmieri, one is struck by how far Objectivism, and the personality of Ayn Rand more specifically, have permeated into the American psyche. Objectivism—moreso even than other native doctrines such as Pragmatism and Transcendental Idealism—is the quintessential American philosophy.

And yet, there is no small degree of irony in the American embrace of Ayn Rand. For example, as Shoshana Milgram points out in Chapter Two of *A Companion to Ayn Rand*, “The Life of Ayn Rand: Writing, Reading, and Related Life Events,” Rand was born in 1905 as Alisa Rozenbaum in the pre-revolutionary Russian city of St. Petersburg (22).

Twelve years later, amidst the exploding Bolshevik Revolution, Rozenbaum and her bourgeoisie family fled to the Crimea. They eventually returned to St. Petersburg (by that time renamed Petrograd), but as a university student Rozenbaum became fascinated with both Friedrich Nietzsche and American cinema. She decided to leave Russia and make a new life, as a writer, in the United States. Thus, the White Russian devotee of perhaps the most stridently anti-Christian philosopher in Western history moved to Chicago, the heartland of the biggest Protestant nation on earth (23-25). Along with her new adoptive country, Rozenbaum took a new name: Ayn Rand. It was under this pseudonym that American capitalism and individualism found their most articulate champion.

As a student, Rand had been fond, not only of Nietzsche, but also of Aristotle. Rejecting Immanuel Kant’s attempt to spin a moral system out of the universalizability of single ethical acts, Rand instead found in Nietzsche a hero of the lone stand, a man of uncompromising principle who was rejected by society. From Aristotle, Rand learned that reality is not subjective (i.e., dependent upon the whims of the perceiver) but is, on the contrary, objective, having an existence entirely independent of the human mind. While Rand eschewed many of Nietzsche’s key tenets—in particular his idea that some men were superior and therefore meant to exercise power over others—she married his lone hero image to the Aristotelian objective cosmos and devised a justification for individualistic capitalism: each man practices “rational egoism,” looking out for himself and advancing his own interests (with the important caveat of never encroaching on the absolute freedom of others). Taking sober stock of the world as he finds it, Rand’s capitalist individualist—a Nietzschean Romantic figure with a hardboiled Aristotelian view

of reality—works hard and, with luck, flourishes. In doing so, all of society benefits. Objectivism, Ayn Rand's highly developed contribution to Western thought, was, as Rand herself put it, "a philosophy for living on earth" (31 ff.).

Dismayed by what she saw in the United States after her arrival, and especially by the rise of collectivism and socialism under President Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal during the 1930s, Rand worked tirelessly to instruct Americans on the fundamental morality of their former, capitalistic, individualistic way of life. What was essentially moral about capitalism, Rand argued, was that it respected the sovereignty of the individual, which necessarily entailed an optimistic view of the universe. The world was basically benevolent to mankind, Rand thought, and man prospered in it by recognizing the world's objective realities and applying his mind to the betterment of his condition. Whereas the Bolshevism Rand had witnessed as a girl in Russia destroyed the human spirit, freedom under law—the American genius—was the recipe for setting the human spirit loose to achieve great things.

By the end of her life, in 1982, Rand had effected a revolution in American political thought. President Ronald Reagan, who took office in 1981, embodied this great shift: a New Deal liberal while a young man, Reagan had come to embrace the *laissez-faire* capitalism espoused by Rand as the best hope for human material happiness. He won sweeping victories in 1980 and 1984 on a platform of smaller government and greater individual freedom—an electoral victory which would have been unthinkable when Rand first arrived from Russia. In their own way, the Laffer Curve and trickle-down economics were Randian Objectivism translated into public policy.

Rand was a prolific author. In addition to the two novels mentioned above, Rand wrote countless essays, articles, pamphlets, tracts, plays, speeches, and edited volumes, all of them describing, in some way, the Objectivism which was her life's work. The very preponderance of Rand's output makes Objectivism a difficult subject, and it is here that *A*

Companion to Ayn Rand fills a pressing need. In eighteen erudite yet accessible chapters, experts on Rand and her ideas present us with a diorama of Objectivism. To scan the table of contents is to see just how broad was Rand's range. For example, Tara Smith, a legal scholar and philosopher in her own right, writes on "Objective Law" (Ch. 9), Tore Boeckmann outlines "Rand's Literary Romanticism" (Ch. 17), and Lester Hunt devotes an entire chapter to "Ayn Rand's Evolving View of Friedrich Nietzsche" (Ch. 14). There are chapters on Objectivist aesthetics, Objectivist metaphysics, and Ayn Rand's political theory (she was, as the authors of this chapter point out, a "radical for capitalism"). Especially helpful is the volume editors' coda, Ch. 18, "Hallmarks of Objectivism: The Benevolent Universe and the Heroic View of Man". Like many great thinkers, Rand lived as she thought and thought as she lived. It is essential, therefore, to keep the thinker in sight when considering the ideas. So, I suggest reading the first two chapters first, on Rand's life, and then Ch. 18, on the difficult subject of Objectivism, before working through the rest of the book.

Objectivism may not be popular on American college campuses, but Objectivism is nevertheless the *de facto* tenor of American life. I recommend, unreservedly, *A Companion to Ayn Rand* to anyone interested in American history, politics, or philosophy, and especially to college students trying to make sense of the world around them. *A Companion to Ayn Rand* is perfectly suited for use as a textbook for studying Objectivism, the nearly invisible creed which, along with Christianity, has most deeply molded the American character.