

Ayn Rand. By Tibor Machan. New York: Peter Lang, 2000.

TIBOR MACHAN'S *AYN RAND* aims to provide an introduction to Ayn Rand's thought for "a broader readership who may have heard of Rand but not examined her ideas in detail" (p. xi). He portrays himself as an admirer, but not as a true believer who supposes that Rand can think no wrong. In addition to sympathetically discussing her views, he tries also to respectfully assess criticisms of those views. His position is not one of unqualified endorsement, but rather one of respect and high regard for Rand as a philosopher.

He appears primarily concerned with addressing academic philosophers. Almost invariably, it is their objections that he takes seriously and endeavors to discuss—which is unsurprising as he is himself an academic philosopher. Even if there is some more important audience to reach, he may well feel that this is the audience which *he* is best qualified to address. It is further unsurprising in that Rand, though largely shunned by the academy in her lifetime, conceived herself as a philosopher whose most important contributions consisted in the development of a system of ideas that challenged and presented reasoned alternatives to dominant philosophical positions and theories. Philosophy, if not especially academic philosophy, is her chosen battleground. It is the vitality of her ideas in that arena that she herself would have regarded as most important.

This suggests the point of view from which I shall assess the book. To simplify exposition, I shall imagine some academic philosopher coming across the Machan volume. As a member of his intended readership, she has "heard of Rand but not examined her ideas in detail." The question for us to consider, as we observe her encounter with the book, is: How well does it perform the task of introducing Rand's philosophy to academic philosophers who are not likely to have extensively examined the Objectivist corpus first hand? To anticipate, the answer is that, despite some merits, it does not do a very good job.

An initial problem interferes significantly with the book's objective. It is badly in need of a competent editor. The book looks very much as if a rough first draft were spellchecked and rushed into print. One can hardly find a page without some egregious error or

other, sometimes more than one. I flip at random to page 85 and find a construction like this:

The second attitude, which as we saw Berlin propounded, denies moral foundation for any sort of political system and then counsels muddling through without given the system moral backing or, accordingly to many economists, on human drives, vested interests, and psychological or social theories.

I confess to having some inkling of what is being said here, but it is not much more than an inkling. It should be “giving the system moral backing” rather than “given the system moral backing,” and “according to many economists” rather than “accordingly to many economists.” What the preposition “on” is doing in the last clause is so unclear I have no idea how to interpret it. Does it mean that many economists counsel muddling through on human drives, etc.? Your guess is as good as mine.

Nor is this an isolated case. That example really was found by opening the book at random and reading a single page. Having read the book before, however, I knew there was a very good chance of finding some such error anywhere I turned. Here are a few more examples. On page 36, there appears this occasion for a double-take:

“Existence” identifies the fact that something exists. “Identity” identifies the fact that something exists.

Presumably, there were supposed to be different emphases in the two sentences, perhaps on “exists” in the first and on “something” in the second, but the emphases are not present in the text. (It is not much help that the next line is “And ‘consciousness’ identifies the fact and that we are aware of these other facts.”)

On page 76, I discovered that “ $p \rightarrow p$ ” (“if p , then p ”) is a “formal contradiction”—quite surprising since, in the first place, there’s nothing contradictory about it, second, there is also nothing contradictory about obvious alternatives, such as “ $p \rightarrow \neg p$ ” (“if p , then not- p ”), for which the text might have been a misprint, and third, we have also been informed, on page 63, that ““ $p \rightarrow p$ ” is a necessary truth of logic.”

References to other works, in the text and endnotes, are, to put matters politely, not very reliable. For example, between pages 26 and 29, I discovered that Rasmussen and Den Uyl had edited something called *The Philosophic Study of Ayn Rand* (in addition to their better-known collection, *The Philosophic Thought of Ayn Rand*—and in the same year, too!), that Stephen Boydston had become Stephen Boyton, that Graham Greene had authored *Looser Take All* (in addition to *Loser Take All*), and that Eric Mack had undergone a sex change to become Erin Mack.

This pattern of mistakes, far more extensive than can be conveyed with a few examples, is hardly confidence inspiring. It is not difficult to understand how, in the process that takes a manuscript to a finished product, errors could creep in, but it is the job of a decent editor to make sure that they do not *remain* in the final version. Especially when coming from an academic press, one expects a minimum of such errors in the final published version.

For all I know, the errors in this volume may be entirely the fault of the publisher and not at all due to Machan. Nevertheless, it interposes a barrier to the comprehensibility and usefulness of the book. Faced with uninterpretable passages and references that do not lead to the original sources, it would be unsurprising for someone without a great deal of prior interest in Rand's ideas to set the book aside as not worth the attention it would require. And anyone with a great deal of prior interest probably doesn't need Machan's introduction.

But suppose our hardy academic presses on. So far as she is able, she corrects for the obvious errors, and tries to deal with the substance of the book. What will she find there? The meat of the book is contained in seven chapters. The main exposition of Rand's ideas appear in the first four, with the first giving a sketch of her system of ideas, ranging from metaphysics to esthetics, and the second through fourth addressing, in order, her epistemology, her ethics, and her politics. The fifth and sixth chapters discuss the relation of her thought to two "enemies," Marx and Kant, while the last chapter focuses in some detail upon a variety of criticisms of Rand's ideas.

Rather than attempt to say a little bit about each aspect or feature of Rand's thought upon which Machan comments, I shall address three areas in some detail, his treatment of Rand's appeal to "axiomatic concepts" in epistemology, his treatment of her meta-ethics, and his case for her originality and importance.

In epistemology, Machan focuses upon Rand's use of the "axiomatic concepts," Existence, Identity and Consciousness. He speaks of all three, tries to clarify what is meant by calling them axiomatic, and spends some time on trying to say what phrases like "Existence exists" are supposed to mean and do in our thought and theorizing. His most detailed discussion is of Identity, which Rand expressed as "A is A" and which Machan speaks of as the "Principle of Non-Contradiction" (or "PNC"). We can take this to mean that there is no set of contradictory statements such that they are all true or, put differently, that every contradiction is false. Further, this should not be taken just as a claim about language or speech practices but as a claim about how things are: what exists is *such that* contradictions cannot be true of it.

In one respect, this is strategically wise on Machan's part, for it assimilates Rand's treatment of Identity to Aristotle's well-known defense of the PNC. On the other hand, from the way Machan treats it, one might be led to infer that many academic philosophers doubt or are inclined to deny the PNC. That, of course, is not true. There may be places in academia where questioning the PNC is frequent or prevalent, but not much of it goes on in philosophy departments. To this extent, defending Rand's position on the PNC, and by implication resting a large part of the case for her importance upon how well she fares in this debate, is apt to look like an argument for her comparative *unimportance*.

Responding to this concern, Machan says that "[t]o dismiss these axioms with the claim that they are repetitive, banal, or obvious is simply to miss the point. Of course they are obvious. If they weren't they wouldn't be identifying basic facts" (p. 42). Perhaps. Doesn't that assume that basic facts are obvious? Could it not be that facts that are basic in his sense—"ubiquitous, omnipresent" (p. 31)—go unnoticed *because* they are ubiquitous and therefore are not contrasted with anything else? For the moment, let us suppose Machan is right that axioms *should* be banal and obvious. Even so, that does not address the concern that Rand, in uttering banalities, is hardly staking a claim to great importance as a philosopher.

A further problem resides in Machan's response to those who suggest the PNC might intelligibly be given up. To some—William O'Neill for instance—what he says is sensible and to the point. With regard to others, such as Jonathan Dancy and Martha Nussbaum, who do not themselves reject the PNC, Machan seems not to understand. Against them, Machan urges that anyone who gives up the PNC must think it *true* that the PNC does not hold and that this conclusion is *supported* by the arguments against it, but it is only by relying upon the PNC that one could know that the truth and well-supportedness of a conclusion excludes its being false and baseless.

This is unconvincing, however, for the PNC makes a universal claim, that *no* contradiction is true. The denial of that claim is not, as Machan's argument would require, that contradictions are *always* true, but that they are not always false. Thinking that some contradiction may be true, or that we might have reason for thinking some contradiction is true, is consistent with thinking that it may be true and not false that that contradiction is true and that the course of reasoning that leads to that conclusion is correct and not mistaken. There is surely more of interest to say here, but Machan does not get around to saying it, since he misunderstands the original claim.

Further discussion of Rand's epistemology comes in connection with her ethics. There, one of Machan's concerns is to explain how Rand could respond to Hume's doctrine that claims about what ought to be cannot be logically derived from claims about what is the case. Unfortunately, the response is less than clear. Machan apparently *agrees* with the no-ought-from-an-is principle. He refers to the "true idea that one cannot deduce moral conclusions from factual premises" (p. 62). In passing, it is very doubtful that this was Rand's own view. Her associate, Nathaniel Branden, writing in 1962 and with her approval, wrote that Rand "refute[d] the contention . . . that values cannot logically be derived from facts" and asserted that she had demonstrated "that *not* to hold man's life as one's standard of moral judgment is to be guilty of a *logical contradiction*" (Nathaniel Branden and Barbara Branden, *Who is Ayn Rand?*, p. 26, emphases in the original).

Be that as it may, Machan suggests that Rand's epistemology allows the identification of facts that "aren't as barren as they must be in Hume's" metaphysics, where "factual premises cannot contain moral elements" and "the *is* . . . appears to be unable to contain value" (p. 62). Apparently, in contrast to Hume, Machan thinks it possible to identify some facts as having or involving already some value dimension. According to him, "premises of the relevant arguments will contain value terms as parts of the identification of something" (p. 62). But, if so, why doubt that moral conclusions can be deduced from factual premises?

His further discussion does not make matters clearer. He describes Rand's epistemology as conceptually inferential and insists that crucial transitions depend upon conceptual development rather than logical deduction, but the explanation seems confused. For example, he gives the argument, "All human beings are biological entities, all biological entities are mortal, so all human beings are mortal," and comments, "The concepts here are not finally locked in, so it is 'intelligible' to propose that the conclusion does not follow since the second premise might be false" (pp. 67–68). Apparently, this is meant to be an obviously reasonable argument that, nonetheless, is not a matter of deductive logic. But, surely, this is very wrong. The concepts being "locked in" or not has nothing to do with it. What matters as far as logic goes is just that the terms be used in the same way throughout the argument at hand, not that their meanings be somehow timelessly settled. And the conclusion *does* follow, regardless of whether the second premise, or any premise, is true or not. Whether something follows from a set of premises has nothing to do with whether the premises are true.

After numerous readings of Machan's treatment, I still have no idea what he thinks Rand's response should be to the Humean is-ought divide. He manages to convey that he thinks the response is important and that there is a sense in which it should not be understood as a matter of logical deduction. Confusingly, though, he also maintains that it may be deduction after all, since "a sense of 'deduction' . . . is clearly not inconceivable here" (p. 62). Machan does little to explicate Rand's actual response to the no-ought-from-an-is doctrine, and the alternative he evidently thinks she should have adopted instead is so unclear that it defies assessment.

Most of Chapter 3, on "Rand's Moral Philosophy," upon which I have been drawing, is devoted to various meta-ethical concerns. At the end of the chapter, Machan turns to a brief discussion of the ethical content Rand defended. Earlier, in the book's first chapter, he had provided the sensible characterization of "ethical egoism" as "the ethics of rational self-interest" (p. 18), and "the view that each person should live to achieve his own happiness" (p. 19). This was helpfully distinguished from psychological, subjective, and atomistic understandings of egoism, and it was admitted that much more work needed to be done to flesh out the view. At the end of Chapter 3, however, we get something which, incredibly, is attributed to Rand, but which is not recognizable as egoism at all. Here is what Machan says:

Rand basically answers the question, "How should I act?" by reference first and foremost to one's human nature. "How should I (a human individual) act?" and she believes, in my view, that "should" amounts to "What would make me a better person in the variety of options available to me?" . . . That's the nature of Rand's egoism. (p. 74)

The problem here is simple. There's nothing especially egoistic about this. Unless what makes you a better person is what serves your interests, with the interests in question somehow independently characterized, what we've got is not a version of egoism. The concrete recommendations of almost any moral theory can be described or redescribed as selecting the option that makes you a better person (as assessed from within that moral theory). If, on the other hand, interests are independently characterized, it will be the fact that the theory's precepts contribute to serving those interests that makes the theory a version of egoism.

The overarching theme of Machan's treatment appears to be that Rand's thought is important and worthy of attention. His general strategy appears to be to make claims both on behalf of the philosophical merit of her ideas and on behalf of her originality or the uniqueness of her approach. I have two reservations. On one hand,

Machan treats her originality or uniqueness as if it were a matter of her being alone or first to uphold specific philosophical doctrines. I think this misconceives what can be said on behalf of her originality or uniqueness. So far as it is true that she was original or unique, that is more a matter of the originality of her *system* and the fact that she incorporated and attempted to integrate philosophic positions that were rarely or never combined before. It is not that specific doctrines, taken one by one, were often uniquely hers.

And this leads to the second reservation. Machan is so anxious to portray her as unique and original in the doctrines-taken-one-by-one sense that he is led into making false claims on her behalf. One example out of several is that “Rand, incidentally, is unique among classical liberals . . . in that she believes that statements with moral import are capable of being shown to be true or false” (p. 58). That would be an important distinction if it were true. But it is plainly not true. One only has to mention a few classical liberals: Consider John Locke, who thought that morality was subject to demonstration or John Stuart Mill, who thought he could provide a proof of the principle of utility. Or, consider especially Herbert Spencer, who wrote a massive two-volume work, *The Principles of Ethics*, which aimed to set ethics on a scientific footing. Machan should remember it, since he wrote an introduction to a 1978 edition.

I would not want to leave the impression that there is nothing of value in Machan’s book. Its general temper is commendably undoc-trinaire, and Rand’s critics are treated, if not always with understanding, at least with respect. In what is by far the best chapter of the book, “Rand’s Rational Individualism” (Chapter 4), he provides a good sketch of the kind of personal, social, and political morality that Rand advocated, together with some indication of why it might be found attractive and the ways in which it provides an alternative to other conceptions of the political realm. Still, one chapter or the presence of some admirable features is not enough to redeem a book. What one would like in a short introduction to a thinker such as Rand is a guide that is clear and reliable, that introduces the reader to her central ideas, is sympathetic without being uncritical, and that leaves the reader prepared to make a well-informed judgment as to whether further investigation of the thinker or engagement with primary sources is likely to repay the effort. Unfortunately, we’re still waiting for that book to be written.

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