

Heads up Ayn Rand fans! Still some work to be done!

(This review appears on the Amazon UK website where the book is listed for sale.)

Ari Armstrong's *What's Wrong with Ayn Rand's Objectivist Ethics* is a book all admirers of Ayn Rand's philosophy should read, not necessarily for what it says, but because it illuminates the fact that Rand's rational egoism, the Objectivist ethics, still needs some refinement, amplification and clarification. Rand was a pioneer, and pioneers don't always find the best way or the only way. That's what pioneering is all about. Human knowledge grows; but not until a pioneer has hacked a way through the jungle (an apt metaphor where philosophy is concerned). Besides, as Rand said about her *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, she was outlining the fundamentals, she expected 'good minds' to fill in the details.

That is not what Ari Armstrong has done. Rather, he has homed in on some minor imperfections in Rand's thought and come to the conclusion that her whole ethical enterprise was misconceived. He was not alone in the exercise. It appeared to me as though he had trawled the scholarly literature for all the adverse comments he could find, then flung the entire catch back at Ayn Rand. In fact, given the extent to which he quoted other critics, it was hard to tell how much of his criticism was his own, or how much he owed to other Rand commentators. Whether Ari Armstrong and the others are correct, or not, is of course up to the reader to decide. Nonetheless, whatever one's conclusion, Ari Armstrong's book does point to areas of Rand's ethics where a little more thinking is required.

The extent of Ari Armstrong's research is revealed in 353 footnotes in a text of 214 pages, and in a massive appendix, a bibliographical list nearly forty pages long (pp. 175-214) in which he comments on expositions of, and reactions to, Ayn Rand's ethics since the publication of *Atlas Shrugged* in 1957. Many of his observations are reasonable and valid. His list is not complete, however. Names which should be there, such as Albert Ellis and Murray Rothbard, are absent. David Kelley's *Unrugged Individualism* is missing too, though it is criticized and quoted from in the text (pp. 133-5); and also Kelley's *The Contested Legacy of Ayn Rand*, although that too is cited and commented on briefly (pp. 186-7).

Virtually every aspect of Rand's ethics comes under attack in the book in one way or another. The first sentence of the text reads: "Ayn Rand's core survival-oriented, egoistic moral theory—her metaethics—is wrong ..." (p. 11); Rand "is on the wrong track" (p. 30); "Rand's core theory ultimately fails she got the foundations wrong" (p. 42); "Rand's basic approach to ethics is wrong" (p. 61; see also pp. 47, 82, 148, 151 & 161 for more of the same); it is "implausible" (pp. 62, 116), or "not plausible" (pp. 73, 98); Rand's metaethics is "shaky" (p. 69); "the theoretical base of Rand's moral theory crumbles ..." (p. 76); "a great part of Rand's argument ... falls away" (p. 117); she "offers no good reason" (p. 122); there is a "weakness in her moral theory" (p. 127) and there are "reasons to doubt the plausibility of Rand's moral case" (p. 144). Ari Armstrong ends his critique by

writing, “the Objectivist moral theory is false” (p. 146), and that it “no longer is necessary,” is ‘superfluous,’ ‘can be left behind,’ “does not hold up” (pp. 170-173).

While Ari Armstrong does give Rand credit for her achievements (p. 20); calls her “one of the most important thinkers of the twentieth century” (p. 30, although she “fails the test of evidence and plausibility” a few lines later); defends her from time to time (e.g. pp. 23, 42, 63, 106, 115, 118); agrees with much of what she wrote; sometimes praises the subtlety of her thought (e.g. p. 29); strives to be fair, and acknowledges her deep influence on himself (p. 32); his constant criticisms, coupled with a somewhat pontifical tone; comments such as Rand’s “intellectual gyrations” (p. 99); and a snide section heading – “Rand’s Underwhelming Compassion” (p. 137) – gave this reader the impression that Ari Armstrong considers himself superior to Rand as a thinker and, in some ways, as a human being. Having been an admirer of Ayn Rand for fifty-eight years, I was unable, in such an atmosphere, to develop any sympathy for the case Ari Armstrong was presenting. It was as if I were visiting a friend in an attractive neighbourhood and on going for a stroll was greeted by the furious barking of aggressive dogs every hundred yards; or as though I had spotted a new path through a lovely forest and set off down it only to be constantly attacked by mosquitoes.

The crux of Ari Armstrong’s case against Rand concerns her alleged ‘survivalism.’ In his first sentence he calls her ethics “survival-oriented” (p. 11). Thereafter, over 146 dry and humourless pages (barring a quip about academics on p. 99), he finds fault with survivalism, and continually refers to “Rand’s survivalism” (pp. 30, 90, 148) or her “survival-based moral theory” (pp. 73, 79) and incessantly labels Rand’s thought as “survivalist” (pp. 55, 88, 90, 118, 127, 143, 147, 148, 164, 170, 172, 173) as if she had been holed up in a walled compound armed to the teeth in some remote wilderness. Some of his criticisms are fair enough, if directed at a narrow, survivalist view of egoism. The problem is, whilst Rand’s ethics is indeed tied to man’s survival, it is not about *mere* survival, it is about ‘man’s survival *qua* man’ which means living the honest, just, purposeful, fully rounded life appropriate to a rational human being. Thus, Ari Armstrong has expended a huge amount of time and effort attacking a straw man.

Rand’s grand and elegant conception, ‘man *qua* man,’ is assaulted on pages 86-90. Calling on other critics – one of whom is Michael Huemer, an advocate of ‘absolute values’ and a vocal opponent of Rand (the enemy of my enemy is my friend, one presumes) – Ari Armstrong suggests that Rand may be “pulling a fast one ... she sneaks various values into her moral theory ... in effect, the “man *qua* man” standard does serve to introduce values into Rand’s moral system that do not fundamentally support survival” (pp. 89-90). Not so. They very much *do* support our survival, though not *directly*. Enjoying music and other arts, watching sporting contests, playing golf or tennis, cultivating prize roses or watching one’s children play, do not put food on the table, but they are components of *happiness*, that sense of well-being, contentment and occasional joy which most emphatically *does* contribute to our survival. A value does not fail to support human survival solely because its benefits are *indirect*. Human life is not just a matter of sufficient bread and water to stave off death and Rand never suggested it was.

Ari Armstrong adds, “I just don’t think those arguments are usually convincing” (p. 89) as if his opinion constituted a rebuttal. It does not. It is actually a sort of non-argument (an *ad hominem* in fact) which calls attention to a subjective element in Ari Armstrong’s book. Another example occurred earlier when he wrote, “Hardly anyone thinks he pursues all values ultimately to further his own survival. Are the vast majority of people deluded ... or is there something off about Rand’s moral theory?” (p. 65). The vast majority of people, probably 99.99%, once thought the sun revolved around the earth. Did that make them right? Though he denies doing so (p. 62), Ari Armstrong is appealing, *ad vericundiam*, to the authority of the crowd, or as William Godwin expressed it in his *Enquiry* (1793): “... that flagrant insult upon all reason and justice, the deciding upon truth by the casting up of numbers.”

A further example of his subjectivism came earlier still when Ari Armstrong took issue with Rand’s idea that one’s life is the end in itself to which all other ends are subordinate. He asserted that, “if someone experiences anything as valuable for its own sake, as an end in itself, apart from the further end of survival” such as enjoyment of music, watching one’s child develop, sex, fine food, relishing a beautiful sunset, reading finely written philosophy, then that “demonstrates conclusively that Rand is wrong about the relationship of values. And, as I think is obvious, such is the case” (p. 45). No. What is obvious is that, no matter how admirable, agreeable or widely shared, individual tastes and experiences are subjective. Music, children, fine food, etc., are contributions to living a fulfilling life, valued for the pleasure they give and the psychological rewards they bring. Whatever Rand may have said in other contexts, the above values are not ‘ends-in-themselves.’ They are integral constituents of the overarching goal or end of a rational, egoistic, *human* life, in other words, of surviving as man *qua* man. (One should perhaps stress nowadays that Rand used the word ‘man’ in a traditional, abstract, philosophical sense to mean mankind, humanity at large, all men and women considered together as human beings.)

Another instance of fallacious reasoning occurs when Ari Armstrong criticises Rand’s thought experiment about an immortal, indestructible robot which would have no values, by proposing a different kind of robot which would (pp. 80ff). It’s almost like saying ‘apples are inferior to oranges because they don’t have thick, protective skins.’ The two fruits are different entities. Rand’s robot is perfectly suited to her purpose. Ari Armstrong’s is a different type so has no relevance to Rand’s. In yet another instance, (pp. 100ff) he uses an absurd imaginary example offered by Michael Huemer – of some lunatic armed with a disintegrator ray gun removing people in his way by blasting them out of existence – in trying to establish that there are flaws in Rand’s entirely straightforward and totally true contention that living a rational life amongst other people requires respecting other people’s rights.

No doubt some aspects of Rand’s ethics are less easy to grasp; for example her insistence that we have to choose to live before we can live a successful life (discussed pp. 90ff). Other critics have attacked the idea. I once thought it was odd myself. I remember writing long ago something like: ‘Hang on, surely we don’t *choose* to live. Don’t we just *do* it?’ But in retrospect it seems clear enough that the choice to live is *implied* by continuing to live, even if the decision is entirely

unconscious. It is a commonplace today to observe that ‘the will to live’ is the strongest human emotion. Is there any significant distinction between the will to live and the choice to live?

The latter conception is an aspect of Rand’s first ethical premise, that man is a being of volitional consciousness, which the book did not seem to address. We must constantly remind ourselves when discussing ethics that while human beings have much in common with other animals, especially mammals, only humans possess the faculty of reason. Animal life in the wild is almost entirely automatic, humans have to make choices every hour of every day in order to live. We are a *new departure* in biological evolution, *different* from all other forms of life.

Another subject which seemed largely missing from the book – though it is mentioned (p. 117) and referred to obliquely in discussions of charity, etc. (e.g. pp. 137ff) – is the vital concept of benevolence, which has been so ably analysed by David Kelley in *Unrugged Individualism*. Ari Armstrong raises the matter of children and their importance in our lives, and implicitly criticises Rand for her lack of interest in them. He seems to believe that having children has nothing to do with individual survival, nor is a conscious choice, but is part of a biological urge by our *genes* to perpetuate themselves. It is indeed an element of Rand’s thought where some clarification is needed, and Ari Armstrong was correct to examine it critically. However, unless I misunderstood him, his whole attitude to biology appeared deterministic.

In sharp contrast, I suggest that we have children first to perpetuate *ourselves*; second, out of benevolence. Benevolence is the virtue inspired by successful *human* living. Life is such a joy when it succeeds that it is natural for us to want to share that joy and to perpetuate it. Watching our children grow, and helping them to do so, is in effect a continuation of our own lives and, because we are by nature essentially benevolent beings in an essentially benevolent universe, we create new life and help our offspring to flourish (and to avoid mistakes we may have made) out of benevolence, and for the love, warmth, tenderness, togetherness, gift-exchanging and all the other joys, pleasures and satisfactions, both big and small, which family life brings to us as individuals.

Yet, if some people choose not to enter into parenthood that is their absolute right. Becoming a parent is no trifling decision. It involves a lifelong commitment, and is, for many years, extremely time consuming, hard work and very costly!

I’m glad Ari Armstrong is a father. I am too. It’s wonderful. I sincerely hope that the son he mentions several times grows up to be as charming, generous and successful in his chosen profession as is my own son. Further, I hope his son eventually sires grandchildren so that Ari Armstrong can delight in the same joy that our daughter’s child, our grandson, has brought to my wife and myself.

Having dealt, to his own satisfaction, with the straw man of Ayn Rand’s alleged ‘survivalism’ – which included brushing aside in a footnote the objection I made earlier, raised in 2016 by Neera K. Badhwar and Roderick T. Long (p. 55, n. 81) – when Ari Armstrong presents his own view, “value integration theory” (p. 145ff), it turns out to be almost identical to Ayn Rand’s Objectivist ethics: “If we ask what an individual’s life is for, the only coherent answer is that it is for itself and not for

anything else ...” (p. 152). “In value integration theory (as in Rand’s moral theory) the crown virtue is reason ... the main sin is evasion” (p. 166). “Value integration theory shares with Rand’s metaethics the agent relativity of values ... a focus on biology as the starting point of values, an individualist ultimate value that provides objective moral standards, an emphasis on reason and related virtues, a social theory based on mutual consent and a theory of evil that sees evasion as the key problem ...” (pp. 173-4). Having been told repeatedly throughout the book that Ayn Rand’s ideas are *wrong*, to find them suddenly reassembled in a marginally different way under a new label is so distinctly peculiar that, well, probably the less said the better.

Additional defects in Ari Armstrong’s book include some typos (pp. 46, 110, 186) and line spacing which regularly switches from single space to one and a half, or double (e.g. pp. 18-19, 24, 32, 36, 64, 120, 126-8, 178) giving the book a feel of amateurish, over-hasty production. There is also no bibliography, and the index is seriously inadequate.

I could raise other, more substantial problems with the book. For example, a reader may wonder why a sense of moral repugnance is missing from Ari Armstrong’s discussion of slavery (pp. 116ff) during which he alleges that the self-interest of U.S. slave-holders “shows that Rand’s case for respecting others’ rights is not as strong as she supposes” (p. 119). A second might be to ask why, when criticising Rand’s case for individual rights (Chapter 7, pp. 100ff), Ari Armstrong did not raise the issue of their definition. Rand called rights both conditions for human existence and moral principles delimiting the scope for human action. The two definitions differ. Which is the more correct, or, how do the two conceptions fit together? That sort of issue would have been a perfect opportunity for Ari Armstrong to engage in some *objective* criticism, rather than heading off in entirely the wrong direction and in so doing misrepresenting Rand’s view of human survival.

Instead, I will close by recalling Isaac Newton’s famous remark to Robert Hooke: “If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” I might have found Ari Armstrong’s book less problematic if, instead of starting out by saying, and continually repeating, that the Objectivist morality is wrong – then offering a kind of *ersatz* Objectivism in its place – he had begun by acknowledging that without Ayn Rand’s immense contribution to ethics his book would never have been written. He was standing on the shoulders of a giant.

Herefordshire, November 2020

Postscript

I sent an earlier version of this review to various friends and acquaintances for comment. One suggested I should go on Amazon and look at other reviews of Ari Armstrong’s book. I did, and noticed one very significant objection by David W. Johnson, that there is almost no discussion in Ari Armstrong’s book of self-esteem. Since self-esteem is one of Rand’s trio of cardinal values, along with reason and purpose, this is a major lacuna. I’m sorry I did not notice it myself – but there was so much else going on! Well done and thank you David W. Johnson. (To stress Mr

Johnson's point, 'sex', 'parenthood', 'induction', and other topics are indexed in the book but 'self-esteem' is not).

Another correspondent sent me a link to "Atlas Neutered," a much more thorough review of Ari Armstrong's book written in the United States by Don Watkins. I was pleased to see that, although we were about five thousand miles apart and totally unknown to each other, he and I had come to similar conclusions. Except Don Watkins got there sixteen months before me! I wish I'd known. Instead of the labour of writing my own review I could simply have referred readers to Don Watkins's comprehensive critique.

November 24, 2020.