

AYN RAND: A BRIEF INTELLECTUAL/PROFESSIONAL BIOGRAPHY

By Michael S. Berliner

Born and raised under the religious collectivism of Czarist Russia and then the Marxist collectivism of the Bolsheviks, Ayn Rand became a champion of Western, non-Russian thought: realism, reason and individualism. The steps of that development is the subject of this essay.

Family Background

Ayn Rand was born Alisa Rosenbaum on February 2, 1905 in St. Petersburg, Russia. Her parents, though not professional intellectuals, had intellectual interests, from politics to the arts. Her father, Zinovy Zacharovich, had attended university and was a pharmacist. Well-read and interested particularly in politics, he had aspired to be a writer and, Rand reported, considered the spread of ideas to be the most important thing a person could do. Her mother, Anna Borisovna, was a language teacher and held salons in her home, where she hosted intellectual discussions.

The intellectual atmosphere of the Rosenbaum family seems to have been rather typical for a European-oriented upper-middle class family of the early 20th century. Of particular significance were two aspects of Rand's family life, one positive and one neutral. There was a wide acceptance among family members of such Enlightenment premises as free will and the importance of individual responsibility, purposefulness and pride. Comments in letters from her mother are typical:

Everyman is an architect of his own fortune....Every person is the maker of his own happiness.¹

[I]t is boring to walk down a smooth, well-trodden path. Anyone can do that. It is conquering one obstacle after another, getting around barrier after barrier, all the while traveling toward one's firmly chosen goal—that is the fate only of those of strong character. The weak immediately doubt their own abilities and the rightness of their choice. They bow their heads, leave the road, lower their arms and obey the orders of those stronger than they. The strong, who grow stronger in battle, become ten times as strong, lift their heads high and without looking sideways, will walk down their chosen road with firm steps, knowing that they have the right to it and that in front of them lies

¹ Letters from her mother, March 7, 1926 and January 1, 1934. For this and other letters from Russia, see the Ayn Rand Papers collection in the Ayn Rand Archives.

the goal which they had been striving toward all their lives and which they will reach regardless of any obstacles.²

Perhaps more important than these positive values was the relative lack of negative values, for the young Alisa was basically left alone to develop on her own. Her mother nagged her about such mundane things as diet and health, and she disapproved of Alisa's choice of career, but she was not greatly intrusive on this issue and, in fact, provided the Alisa with a French tutor and challenging reading material.

Mother literally did not allow me to read any Russian classics apart from whichever we got in school—until I graduated from high school. She insisted that we read French. It was strictly for the purpose of having us at home in the language. So it's she who started me on Hugo. And Dumas. But not Russian classics. It wasn't censorship because we were too young; it was strictly a linguistic issue.³

Even regarding religion, her family was non-intrusive. They were at least nominally Jewish—her mother spear-heading the celebration of the High Holidays, but her father was an agnostic, and the family even had Christmas trees. Her mother was more of a classic Reformed Jew, that is—as Rand later put it—“she was religious in a kind of emotional way, but not by conviction, more by tradition” and probably to please her own mother. As a result, no attempt was made to force religion on the Rosenbaum children, nor were they even subjected to any religious training. They were fortunate, because what they “missed out on” is one of the principal obstacles that children have to overcome in their development into rational adulthood, i.e. Alisa did not have to spend mental energy overcoming the irrationality of religion. The children were, as Rand said, “neglected intellectually,” but she realized that this had an advantage: “She didn't try to inculcate any conventional morality or *anything*.”

In sum, the Rosenbaum household was one that at least allowed for—if not actually fostered—the development of an independent thinker.

Early Childhood: Independence

Such independence was not long in asserting itself. Rand described the leitmotif of her early years as a quest for “why's.” This curiosity was fostered when she taught herself to read at the age of six, two years before she would have learned it in school. She was aware of books and reading and was unwilling to wait.

It was simply that there is such a thing as reading and writing and I wanted to know how it's done.... I grasped what it was that reading consisted of, and I asked people to show me how to write my own name. And I wrote in block letters. Then I would ask different words. And learn more letters.

² Letters from her mother, February 5, 1933

³ Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes from Ayn Rand are from her 1960-61 biographical interviews.

Two aspects of the pre-teen Rand are of special significance: her value-orientation and her self-reliance. Rand's moral sense of life began at a very early age, with her "violent" (as she called them) value preferences.

It would always be a succession of people, books, heroes in books, later movies, that became the symbol of: this is my world, and other things are not my world. It was literally a metaphysical judgment in that sense, though I wouldn't have used or known that word, but it was the feeling: my sense of life and an alien sense of life. And, I would always feel two things: the things I am interested in are important, and I am an important person.

As a very young child, Rand was psychologically self-sufficient. Although very desirous of a true companion, she was basically untouched by the lack of same. Nor was she much affected by either praise or criticism. She was, she said "so busy mentally with my own concerns that I didn't develop any social instinct." As to what she called her "form" (her manner of dealing with things and people), it alternated between bashfulness and "violence," and she had particular difficulty in talking to people. But that hardly bothered her: "I considered it a technical flaw. I considered that that is one of the things which I have to overcome as I grow up, but the reason I gave myself for why I can't overcome it *now* was this: I, in effect, dismissed that whole period of my life. I'm not a free agent yet. My life will begin when I am strictly on my own. So I considered this as I am not in my world. And the idea to develop standards of behavior in an alien world didn't occur to me."

At the age of eight, she wrote her first fiction, which consisted of short stories and fragments, none of which survive. But the focus of her stories was undoubtedly like the focus of her life in general: "I was very discriminating about what is interesting and what is routine. Anything which is routine or conventional would immediately bore me. I was always looking for the unusual or purposeful; those were the two first values that I could define. From that to the heroic concept of man..." It was also at this age that appeared the first signs of Ayn Rand as intellectual crusader. She had read a newspaper article by a education specialist who claimed that "If a child does not acquire ideals from school, he will never have them." This claim enraged her, because she knew she already had "some sort of ideals" and thought, "Wait until I grow up, and I'll show people and I will denounce this particular woman." She recalled this incident as her earliest memory "of thinking that the world of ideas is my business."

Pre-teen: Writing and Thinking

It was during the next year, 1914, that her intellectual future began to form. Her mother gave her a subscription to a French children's magazine, and one issue contained the first installment of an adventure serial entitled "The Mysterious Valley," by Maurice Champagne. The effect on young Alisa was monumental: she discovered the type of romantic hero that would fuel all of her fiction writing; the main character, Cyrus Paltons, was her first encounter with her ideal man. When, later that year, due to the outbreak of World War I, she and her family were stranded in London on their return to Russia after a vacation in Switzerland, she was telling

stories to her two younger sisters, and she suddenly realized that she wanted a career as a fiction writer:

I remember the day and the hour. I did not start by trying to describe the folks next door—but by inventing people who did things the folks next door would never do. I could summon no interest or enthusiasm for “people as they are”—when I had in my mind a blinding picture of people as they could be.⁴

In the year the Russian Revolution began, 1917, Alisa was 12 years old. She had made a list of stories to write, and they all had to do with politics: “I remember several that were my favorites of all the potentials. [They always involved] the individualistic hero, the revolutionary, fighting either against communists or against some king. I usually would lay them abroad; I never intended to write stories laid in Russia, which I despised to begin with. But usually I would make myself a mythical kingdom of some kind and they would always be fighting for individualism.” Her favorite, of which she remembered little, concerned “a hero who was a revolutionary” and a woman “who was a kind of intellectual.”

It was also in 1917 that she began to “formulate reasons,” what she termed “thinking in principle.”

[Reason] was an absolute, and I can't remember when it started. I can't remember any time when it wasn't....[E]verything has to be proved, and if something cannot be proved by reason, then it's nonsense, and [I had] contempt for any irrationality—I can't name when it was different. That was a chronic leitmotif....And here I remember fighting with Mother and with anyone, if they ever talked about faith or anything that one must just believe.

I began to ask myself the why of the ideas that I believed. You see, up to that point, [I would have made] very strong value judgments, but not too connected. As I look back, I would say I was very consistent by means of a sense of life, but it would be in those terms.... [E]ven before [the age of] 12, I would argue with my cousins or with the adults, if they listened, which was seldom; it would be arguing on single points or single issues. It's at the age of 12 that I began to integrate. And at that time, I began to keep a diary and write down ideas, and I kept it up for about a year, and then gave it up because it was too long.

The diary, which she destroyed because of its anti-Soviet content, dealt primarily with politics. The diary was “always about the individual, where man has the right to live for himself.” This was the beginning of Ayn Rand the philosopher, when her intellectual premises were becoming established. The most important premise was that there are answers and she could find them. Even at this age, she did not consider philosophy to be a mystery, a series of questions with no answers, a journey into the unknowable. For Ayn Rand, philosophy was—and remained—a rational enterprise, whose answers could be derived by looking at the world.

⁴ “To the Readers of *The Fountainhead*,” *Letters of Ayn Rand*, Appendix.

In 1917, two events occurred that indicated the type of future she might have as an intellectual. When her mother responded to a school questionnaire by stating that her daughter preferred indoor to outdoor activities, Alisa reacted with great anger. True, she spent much of her time reading, but only by default; that wasn't what she really wanted to do. Then, during a summer vacation at the beach, she delighted in the planning and building of castles for some future and unnamed war.

It was that sort of thing that I was looking for...[I]t's not exactly intellectual. But it is... the intellectual on this earth. My idea of pleasure would be purposeful, active activity, preferably outside. I did not like mental activity as a way of life, in the sense in which that questionnaire was asking....not sedentary activity. Not activity that is just spiritual, you see. Even then what I wanted to be as a writer would be for the purpose of living in reality. So that would have been my attitude toward the intellect.

This approach helped to determine her university studies. Her favorite course in high school was mathematics, and she was so good at it that her teacher told her, "It will be a crime if you don't go into mathematics." But, characteristically, she rejected it as "too abstract. It has nothing to do with actual life. I loved the subject. I loved the whole epistemology of it. But I didn't intend to be an engineer or to go into any applied profession, since I intended to be a writer. And to study mathematics as such I would have considered too ivory tower, too purposeless. And I would say so today. But I remember at that time all I could have said is: 'It's not enough; it's too apart from any practical application.' But you see the premise would be, in effect, the same as today" (1961).

Early Influences

In the next three years, as she completed high school and entered university, three significant influences entered her life: Victor Hugo, Aristotle and Friedrich Nietzsche. None of these were fundamental intellectual influences (although she did acknowledge a "philosophical debt" to Aristotle). She had no fundamental influences, for she was not a thinker who merely expanded on the ideas of others. But each was an emotional influence, someone who inspired her rather than provided intellectual content for her own growing philosophy.

She first read Hugo in 1917, at the age of 12. To her, it was like reaching Atlantis:

It's then that I began to be more interested in the kind of issues specifically which today we would call morality: What is right for man? And then I became much more man-centered than politics-centered, although politics still remained the background for individualism. But what I wanted of man was not what Hugo was writing about, nor what anybody was writing about—*that* I couldn't quite name at first. It's then that I began to be aware that my sense of life was not anybody else's, nor my view of man.

But simply the sense of life of [Hugo's novels] gave me what I now would call already adult terms: Of the grandeur of man and the focus on man.....and yet I was very aware that there isn't a character in *all* of his writing that is what *I* would want a man to be.

Heroic. That is the word I would have used then. And I would have said that he treats men and life as something important. Even if I don't like the particular kind of tragedy, he makes everything important and he features that which is dramatic and important. I would also have very strongly defined it by means of negatives. I would have said he doesn't have any commonplace people, he doesn't have the folks next door—or the Russian equivalent of that. He's not writing about pygmies. He's not a Naturalist.

What I wanted to match was the grandeur, the heroic scale, the plot inventiveness, and those dramatic touches that were so eloquent....

It was upon reading Hugo that she became conscious of writing style as such, of how a writer's use of language could increase the drama of a story. And it was Hugo's style that most directly influenced her—but in a way she described as “marginal.”

If you compare *We The Living* to *The Fountainhead* you'll see the difference. A certain kind of over-assertive, over-editorial, and slightly over-dramatic turn of sentences, particularly the description of Petrograd in *We The Living*, I think is as near as I came to being influenced by Hugo. That description is very much his influence on me; that is not the way I would write today [1960].

And I was very aware, even epistemologically, that my mind seems to follow at times his kind of pattern, because the field of expressing myself is totally new to me. And that what I'm learning in the process is how to form my own methods of expression.

It was during her last year in high school that she discovered Aristotle, likely in a logic course. She had heard of him earlier and had the impression that he must be a “vulgar materialist” because he was the philosophic enemy of idealism. Then, in her first university philosophy course, she studied both Plato and Aristotle in depth. As she said in 1961:

From the first things I began to read about him, I knew that that's the philosopher I agree with. What I didn't agree with is, in effect, what I don't agree with today: the whole issue of the metaphysics, the Prime Mover, and teleology. But all my judgment of philosophy at that time I suspended, I held in a hypothetical form only, because I felt I cannot judge [philosophers] from merely a course with reading of excerpts from them. To really understand him, or Plato for that matter, I would have to someday read the originals, not in Greek, but that I must read their works in order to know where they start. Because taking them up as was presented in the course, it seemed in midstream. They seemed to start in the middle with the questions of universals or particulars. [I wondered] why they don't start earlier. Even at that time I thought they should start with defining what are concepts, why do they make such a fuss about them.... I grasped immediately that the issue [of the problem of universals] is important, but I assumed that [I'm in] a course for beginners and that this is why the philosopher's basic premises, or their start, is omitted. And that we're given just the results and that I shouldn't judge in midstream. But I was fully convinced on the basis of what I did judge, that I'm against Plato and for Aristotle, but for Aristotle with reservations, subject to further reading.

I considered Plato of significance only as an arch example of mysticism. But I didn't consider him a cultural threat. I didn't think that he was the influence that he still is.... Well, that was my idea at 16. I considered those issues crucial, but...already solved, of course, that they are not a big danger. Now, as I learned more about philosophy, or the later philosophers, I began to appreciate Aristotle more and more, but what I didn't know is the total insufficiency of the case for reason....

[Aristotle] remained in my mind in college as the arch rationalist in my sense of the word, that is, the philosopher who is the greatest advocate of reason, and this much, of course, I would give him credit for. And it remained in my mind in that form for a long time. That is that he is a friend of reason but there are question marks in his system and that I know I can't agree with him fully, [but I thought him to be] the arch realist and the advocate of the validity of man's mind. ... And it's in the years preceding the research for *The Fountainhead* and from then on that I had a chance to read on my own. And then, of course, I began to take Aristotle much more seriously. I began then to see the enormous value, not only because I knew more of what he had advocated, but also because I saw more clearly the terrible disaster and lack in the other philosophers....

I never undertook in Russia to start a systematic reading of philosophy. That was something I intended to do later, but could not do in those years. I really intended to read everything from the start, at least the key works. The only one that I was reading, and had read everything of, at the time, was Nietzsche.

The relationship of Rand's philosophy to Nietzsche is of special interest, because (a) she initially thought she had found an intellectual ally and (b) it is still often held that her philosophy is merely a variation on Nietzsche. These matters are explored in John Ridpath's essay "Ayn Rand Contra Nietzsche" in this volume. Suffice it to say that Rand's initial attraction to Nietzsche turned into complete disaffection, as she came to realize the opposition between his philosophy and her own.

University and Post-Graduate

At St. Petrograd State University, she majored in history, taking numerous courses that dealt with the history of ideas. The major effect of her studies was to solidify her conviction that she agreed with little of either past or current thinkers. One incident she related from her university days indicates this. In her first year, she took a special course on ancient philosophy from, a famous Platonist, whom she (probably incorrectly) recalled as N.O. Losskii.⁵ At the final, oral exam,

He started asking me questions and all he was asking [about] was Plato. I had hoped that he would give me some questions on Aristotle....This was the first time that I had studied [Aristotle]. And I was liking him very, very much....And he didn't ask me a single

⁵ In her essay "The Education of Kira Argounova and Leo Kovalensky," Shoshana Milgram makes a convincing case that, in recounting the incident, Ayn Rand confused Losskii with the actual teacher of her course, Alexandr Vvendensky. See Robert Mayhew, ed., *Essays on Ayn Rand's We the Living*, second edition (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012) pp. 92-94.

question on Aristotle. They were all on Plato. And I recited very dutifully. I knew exactly what the theory was. [He asked me] what was Plato's view of this or of that and I would explain it. And finally he looks at me, slightly sardonically, and he asks, "Tell me, you don't agree with Plato, do you?" Now I had not said anything, but I think he gathered it by my tone of voice. And I said, "No, I don't." He asked, "Will you tell me why?" And I answered, "My views on philosophy are not part of the history of philosophy yet, but they will be."

In 1924, at the age of 19, Rand graduated from the recently renamed Leningrad State University and embarked on her writing career. In the fall, she entered the State Technicum for Screen Arts, with the goal of becoming a screen writer. Although the first year's curriculum did not include writing, she did produce essays about the film industry, using magazines sent by her relatives in America as a basis. One essay, about film star Pola Negri was published as a pamphlet—her first published work, which came after her struggles to make her style more lively. In the essay's second paragraph are hints of her adult style, whereby the reader comes to expect the unexpected: "Francesca Bertini is a prizewinning beauty; Pola Negri is unattractive. Gloria Swanson dazzles the eye with the sparkle and originality of her outfits. Pola Negri has no taste in clothing. Mary Pickford conquers hearts with her childlike tenderness, simplicity, naiveté. Pola Negri is a gloomy, intense, cruel woman. But Pola Negri is currently the world's leading movie star." And a collection of her essays, entitled "Hollywood: American Movie City" was published without her knowledge and permission in 1926, with an anti-capitalist preface added by the publisher.⁶ However, she realized that she could have no writing career in Soviet Russia: her themes of individualism and freedom—even if disguised—would brand her as an enemy of the state: "I would've been dead within a year," she later noted.

To America: Chicago and Hollywood

Before that could happen—and even before her second year at the film school—she was saved from Soviet Russia. Relatives in Chicago invited her for a visit, and in late 1925, she received her passport. Taking with her a dozen scenarios (none of which survive), she left for America. Her goal was taking shape: she would stay permanently in America and become a screenwriter as a stepping stone to a career as a novelist. Arriving in Chicago in February of 1926, she lived with her relatives for six months, working incessantly on silent scenarios and attending dozens of films at a theater owned by her cousin.⁷ Having changed her name to Ayn Rand—in order to protect her family in Russia—she left Chicago for Hollywood, with \$50 and armed with scenarios and an introduction to the scenario department at the Cecil B. DeMille Studios. Although she received an unenthusiastic reception at the studio, she had a chance meeting with DeMille himself, setting the stage for the launch of her career: DeMille took her to the backlot where he was filming his epic *The King of Kings*, and soon hired her as an extra and then as a junior screenwriter. While in the latter capacity, in 1927, she submitted screenplays (which weren't accepted) and wrote coverage analyses of works by others (some of which were

⁶ Both "Pola Negri" and "Hollywood: American Movie City" are reproduced (along with English translations) in Michael S. Berliner, ed., *Ayn Rand's Russian Writings on Hollywood* (Irvine: The Ayn Rand Institute Press, 1999).

⁷ Ayn Rand's movie diary (1922-29) is reproduced (along with an English translation) in *Russian Writings on Hollywood*.

produced).⁸ Her primary difficulty was lack of expertise in English; she had been prepared to write for the silent screen, but the film industry was switching to “talkies.”

While making a living working at odd jobs and then in the RKO Pictures wardrobe department, Rand devoted all of her spare time to writing, later characterizing herself as “a writing engine.” During the second half of the 1920s, she completed at least three short stories, which she wrote more as exercises than as intended publications: “The Husband I Bought,” “Think Twice” and “Good Copy.” Her big break occurred when, in 1932, she sold a film idea to Paramount Pictures. The theme of “Red Pawn” was the evil of dictatorship, and the “enemy” was both Communism and religion, which she had identified as morally equivalent. The sale price of \$1,500 enabled her to quit her job at RKO and spend full time on “Air-Tight,” the novel that she had started in 1929 and would eventually be published as *We the Living*. Before completing the manuscript, she wrote a play, produced in 1934 in Hollywood as *Woman on Trial* and in 1935 on Broadway as *Night of January 16th*, based roughly on the story of Ivar Krueger, the Swedish “match king” who had been criticized not for his dishonesty but for his virtues (ambition and productivity). The play was a murder trial and included a gimmick whereby she wrote two endings; which ending would be used depended on the verdict rendered by a jury chosen from the audience. She balanced the evidence at the trial so evenly that a jury member would have to reach a decision based on his implicit philosophy (what she termed a “sense of life”). The events of the story, she later wrote,

are not meant to be taken *literally*; they dramatize certain fundamental psychological characteristics, deliberately isolated and emphasized in order to convey a single abstraction: the characters’ attitude toward life. The events serve to feature the *motives* of the characters’ actions, regardless of the particular forms of action—i.e., the motives, not their specific concretization. The events feature the confrontation of two extremes, two opposite ways of facing existence: passionate self-assertiveness, self-confidence, ambition, audacity, independence—versus conventionality, servility, envy, hatred, power-lust.⁹

Night of January 16th is not a “typical” Ayn Rand fictional work and is usually omitted in discussions of works; it is philosophical by implication only, in contrast to overtly philosophical novels. It was during this period that she wrote another implicitly philosophical play (and novella), *Ideal*, the story of a great actress who was betrayed by her supposedly staunchest admirers. The story reflected Rand’s bitterness about the hypocrisy of Hollywood.

After many years of both part-time and full-time writing, Rand finished *We the Living* in early 1934. The most autobiographical of her writings, this depiction of collectivism (fascist or communist) used her own life and experiences as the background for a love triangle that dramatized the hatred of life inherent in the morality of collectivism. The heroine puts her view of life this way to her communist ex-lover:

⁸ *The Angel of Broadway*, *Craig’s Wife*, and *His Dog* were produced in 1927-28. Copies of Ayn Rand’s coverage are in the DeMille Collection at Brigham Young University and the Ayn Rand Archives.

⁹ Introduction to *Night of January 16th*.

I was born and I knew I was alive and I knew what I wanted. What do you think is alive in me? Why do you think I'm alive? Because I have a stomach and eat and digest the food? Because I breathe and work and produce more food to digest? Or because I know what I want, and that something which knows how to want—isn't that life itself? And who—in this damned universe—who can tell me why I should live for anything but for that which I want? Who can answer that in human sounds that that speak for human reason?¹⁰

Despite opposition from one of its editors (communist Granville Hicks), Macmillan published the novel in 1936. For the first—but not the last—time, Rand faced overt Communist opposition, as her novel attempted to gain a market during the Red Decade. However, having gotten her “Russian novel” off of her agenda, Rand was ready to turn to the type of fiction more truly hers—the projection of the ideal man.

It was also in 1934, at aged 29, that she began a philosophic journal, in preparation for *The Fountainhead*. The preface to her first entry indicates her approach:

These are the vague beginnings of an amateur philosopher. To be checked with what I learn when I master philosophy—then see how much of it has already been said, and whether I have anything new to say, or anything old to say better than it has already been said.¹¹

Content aside, this attitude is merely a stage of development of an attitude that began before she was ten years old: Answers to philosophical questions—like answers to anything—are “out there,” facts—however abstract—to be ascertained by an honest mind looking not to defend preconceived notions but to understand the world. This attitude would characterize Ayn Rand throughout her life.

The 1934 journal consists of five entries and, though only about 3,000 words, covers a wide range of topics. The first entry indicates that she was already well on her way to the view that philosophy is not an intellectual parlor game but a life and death matter: the “worst curse on mankind” (which she blames on religion) “is the ability to consider ideals as something quite abstract and detached from one’s everyday life.” Her second entry is on free will, which she is already connecting to reason: “One’s act may be motivated by an outside reason, but the *choice* of that reason is our *free will*....Doesn’t the ‘free will’ question come under the general question of human reason—and *its* freedom?” Other entries deal with ethics and social philosophy.

Her first notes for *The Fountainhead* (then called “Second-Hand Lives”) were written in late 1935 and began with a quote from Nietzsche, ending with “The noble soul has reverence for itself.”¹² The “first purpose of the book,” she wrote, “is a defense of egoism in its real

¹⁰ *We the Living*, p. 404.

¹¹ *See Journals of Ayn Rand*, p. 66. The entire journal is reprinted on pages 66-74.

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Chapter IX, section 287

meaning, egoism as a new faith,”¹³ “faith” being a term she still used synonymously with “credo.” In later years, she would identify the theme of the novel as “individualism vs. collectivism—not in politics, but in a man’s soul.”¹⁴ In *The Fountainhead*, she identified two archetypes, the independent man who thinks for himself, and the “second-hander,” the man who lives through others and allows them to determine his beliefs and values. It would not be until *Atlas Shrugged* that she would identify in print both the political/economic implications of her “new definition of egoism” and its metaphysical and epistemological foundations.

In 1937, she took a break from plotting problems in “Second-Hand Lives” to write a short, poetic paean against collectivism, which she named “Anthem,” in the dystopian tradition of *Brave New World* (which there is no evidence she read). Based on an idea she had while still living in Russia, *Anthem* portrays a world without the word (or thought) “I,” carrying collectivism to its logical extreme. Despite the potential for a negative message (common to other dystopias), *Anthem* exemplifies Rand’s benevolent universe premise: at the conclusion of the story, the hero triumphs, declaring his homage to those who had fought for freedom: “For the battle they lost can never be lost. For that which they died to save can never perish. Through all the darkness, through all the shame of which men are capable, the spirit of man will remain alive on this earth. It may sleep, but it will awaken. It may wear chains, but it will break through. And man will go on. Man, not men.”¹⁵ Unable to sell the story to a US publisher (one claimed that she didn’t understand socialism), she did sell it to Cassell and Co. in Great Britain—it wasn’t until 1946 that it was published in the United States, by a group of pro-capitalists called the Pamphleteers. In 1940, Rand wrote a theatrical version of *We the Living*, titled *The Unconquered*, produced on Broadway by the renowned George Abbott. Aware that it was not good Broadway material, Rand later said that it was the only writing project she ever undertook for reasons other than her own: purely to create interest in her novel. Not surprisingly, the play closed after only six performances. It was also in 1940 that she volunteered to work in Wendell Willkie’s presidential campaign. Seeing in Willkie an alternative to the increasingly leftist Franklin Roosevelt (for whom she had voted in 1932), Rand wrote position papers and answered questions at Willkie rallies.

I was watching every issue of the [New York] *Times Book Review* for anything that came out on the conservative side....Because by that time I was very interested in the state of American politics. I was beginning to see that [the Democrats] were really wrecking this country. And by the time the Willkie campaign came, I felt that that's the campaign....[I]t was now or never. And, in effect, it was an enormous crusading, pro-Capitalist movement at that time, which Willkie destroyed.

She soon realized that the campaign was an ideological dead-end, for the Willkie people wanted neither to attack Roosevelt nor were able to grasp the underpinnings of their own politics. Willkie, she later said, “had written some marvelous articles, totally uncompromising, proudly pro-business and pro-profit, and that's what he made his name on. All of that vanished

¹³ *Journals of Ayn Rand*, p. 77.

¹⁴ *For the New Intellectual*, p. 68.

¹⁵ *Anthem*, pp. 103-104.

from the moment he was nominated. That was the worst sell-out possible.” It was the start of her disillusionment with conservatives, who were at best non-intellectual, at worst anti-intellectual. But the campaign was valuable to her, for she not only got to observe American politics first-hand but got experience in thinking on her feet, answering questions from often-hostile audience members at Willkie events.

In 1943, after submitting the manuscript of *The Fountainhead* to Bobbs-Merrill, Rand embarked on her first major non-fiction project, an explication of the ethical philosophy of *The Fountainhead*, entitled “The Moral Basis of Individualism.” This work would draw on earlier essays written in conjunction with her efforts to form—with writer Channing Pollock—an “individualist organization.” For this never-established organization she wrote an 8,000 word, never-published essay “The Individualist Manifesto” and a shorter version, “The Individualist Credo,” the latter of which was published as “The Only Path to Tomorrow” in *Reader’s Digest*.¹⁶ Realizing that ethics and politics rested on more basic philosophic foundations (“I knew that it would be totally useless to present a morality without a metaphysics and epistemology”), she discontinued the project and reserved such philosophic writing for her next novel, *Atlas Shrugged*.

Back to California: Films and Political Action

Moving to Los Angeles in late 1943 in order to write the screenplay for *The Fountainhead*, she obtained a screenwriting job with producer Hal Wallis, when war-time restrictions delayed *The Fountainhead*. Her assignments were primarily adaptations: *Love Letters* (1945), *You Came Along* (1945, co-written with Robert Smith) and two unproduced adaptations (*House of Mist* and *The Crying Sisters*). But her most ambitious project was an original story about the making of the atomic bomb, a story with the working title of “Top Secret.” The story, drawing on Rand’s interviews of J. Robert Oppenheimer and Gen. Leslie Groves, would dramatize why the American free-enterprise system could do what the controlled economy of the Nazis could not do. Rand produced a treatment, parts of a script, and an essay “An Analysis of the Proper Approach to a Picture on the Atomic Bomb.”¹⁷ The underlying theme of this never-produced script was a premise that guided her whole career: the practical significance of basic philosophy.

Her second Hollywood period was very active intellectually and politically. She became a major participant in the fight against the growing influence in Hollywood of the Communist Party. To that end, she testified before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1947, wrote “Screen Guide for Americans” in 1947 for the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, for whom she also produced analyses of the implicit ideologies in current films. This is also the time period in which her correspondence was the heaviest: she often wrote multi-page answers to short queries about *The Fountainhead*, covering such topics as romantic vs. naturalistic writing, the esthetics of architecture, romantic love, the importance of

¹⁶ *Reader’s Digest*, January 1944. Neither the “Manifesto” nor the original, unedited “Credo” have been published.

¹⁷ All are reprinted in *Journals of Ayn Rand*, pp. 311-344.

careers, the ideological weakness of conservatives, the importance of philosophy vs. economics, Roark vs. Jesus, rationing, and writing dialogue. Of particular significance are her letters to two other women prominent in free enterprise circles: Rose Wilder Lane and Isabel Paterson. The letters, mostly in 1946-48, were often lengthy (up to 3,000 words) and dealt with such topics as cooperation and collectivism, individualism, reason vs. faith, concepts of “God,” religion and capitalism, and Catholic philosophy.¹⁸ At the same time, she was engaging in protracted philosophic discussions with friends at her ranch in the San Fernando Valley.

This was the period of her closest association with leading conservatives, such as Leonard Read of the newly-formed Foundation for Economic Education. And it was during this period that it was brought home to her just how radical were her ideas. She began to despair of the fact that conservatives were unwilling to challenge the altruistic moral premise of collectivism. Altruism and capitalism, she realized, were inherently incompatible: the belief that one should live for others would—being more fundamental—destroy a political philosophy advocating the right of an individual to live for his own happiness. Without the proper moral foundation, capitalism would be destroyed. As she wrote in 1943, “God save capitalism from capitalism’s defenders!”¹⁹

But her political activity and letter-writing took a back-seat to the start of the major work of her life, *Atlas Shrugged* (then called “The Strike”). She had begun thinking about this project in late summer/early fall of 1943. Rejecting the suggestion that she had a moral obligation to educate humanity, she wondered what would happen if *all* the creative minds refused such altruistic duty, i.e. went on strike. In an October 10, 1943 letter to Isabel Paterson, she wrote

I am beginning to think that the idea [of “The Strike”] is not fantastic at all, but probably more tragically real than I imagine. It seems to apply to many people, on different levels of ability or achievement—but when I think of people I have known, who have puzzled me because they seemed to kill precisely the best in them, I now see that that “strike” is the explanation, whether they consciously knew it or not. I find myself dropping everything and thinking about that story.²⁰

Atlas Shrugged would be a much more demanding project than any she had previously undertaken—and more demanding than she at first imagined: what she thought would take but a few years ending up taking 14 years. The most time-consuming aspect was not the writing itself but the thinking required by her plot: she had to intellectually integrate the plot and the theme (the role of the mind in human existence) with the underlying philosophic issues. She told a reporter that the novel would “combine metaphysics, morality, politics, economics, and sex. And it will show the tie between metaphysics and economics.” She was not merely portraying the ideal man but identifying the philosophy that made him possible.

¹⁸ For letters to Lane, see *Letters of Ayn Rand*, passim, and for letters to Paterson, see *Letters of Ayn Rand*, pp. 173-218.

¹⁹ Letter to businessman Monroe Shakespeare, *Letters of Ayn Rand*, p. 100.

²⁰ *Letters of Ayn Rand*, p. 174

When I was ready to make the outline, all the philosophical issues, all the ideology that would have to be included, was already clear in my mind. All that was worked out. Then I knew that it would have to be a very large-scale novel. And by that time, by the time I made even the first outline, I was already thinking of it as a metaphysical novel, primarily.

Thus began an intense period of philosophizing, in which she would identify and clarify her views on such issues as the origin of values, free will, the role of the law of identity as a connection between metaphysics and epistemology, the finitude of space and time, the theory of universals, and the connection between sex and values. This philosophizing culminated in “Galt’s Speech,” a 33,000-word section that she completed in 1955. It was the cornerstone of *Atlas Shrugged* and the first non-fiction presentation of her new philosophic system.

Fiction and Philosophy

Rand began *Atlas Shrugged* while living in California but completed it in New York City, where she moved in 1951. Just prior to that, she had met a young man, Nathan Blumenthal (later Nathaniel Branden), who became her protégé and primary member of a group of admirers she jokingly called “the Collective.” These young people, mostly professionals, met often in New York to read the latest chapters of *Atlas Shrugged* and to discuss philosophic issues therein and those they were encountering in their private and professional lives. But after *Atlas Shrugged* was completed in 1957, Rand faced a decision: was she a philosopher or a fiction writer.

I always thought in Atlantis I would not have been a fiction writer. Why? Because [fiction is] a projection of something theoretical rather than in actual reality. With my existential focus, you see, I always resented that aspect of fiction. And therefore, that would be part of why I would always want to be a Romantic realist, that is to deal with the kind of problems that apply to actual existence and can be factually applied to human life. Fiction as just a fantastic escape I would be positively opposed to. So I always had a slightly, almost faintly malevolent universe attitude towards fiction, that it's an art I have chosen only because I am not satisfied with the culture around me. That's on the one hand. On the other hand, philosophy alone I always saw as something too abstract. A blueprint for future living, but not life yet. And I have the same attitude today. One without the other is insufficient. It's almost as if it's a floating abstraction on the one hand and a substitution for concrete existence on the other. And only the two together give me the feeling of what I really want, the satisfying feeling of: this is the career or the activity that I really love. It has to be the two together, but not either one alone.

But circumstances—as well as her own values—determined otherwise. After *Atlas Shrugged*, the only fiction writing she would ever do would be occasional notes for a never-published novel. Instead, she became a full-time philosopher and activist for her philosophy. Not willing to stand by while *Atlas Shrugged* was almost universally attacked by the critics, she went on the offensive, giving talks on university campuses and appearing on radio and television. She had come to realize how radical her philosophy was and how much it needed nonfiction treatment.

I began to see that what I took as almost self-evident, was not self-evident at all. At first, the idea of doing a nonfiction book was almost paralyzing to me, because I thought it would be only a nonfiction paraphrase or elaboration of what's in Galt's speech. And if so, then it's only a job done because nobody else is in effect intelligent enough or old enough to do it. And it felt like a bad popularizing, at least for me. I had absolutely no interest in writing out something that people of lesser intelligence would need.... And add to it the fact that I considered, and in a sense still do, that *Atlas* is sufficiently clear....

But what I began to discover...is that the kind of issues which I thought I could explain to Leonard [Peikoff], and which I couldn't claim to be contained in *Atlas* at all, such as my theory of universals, were much more enormous revelations or departures from today's thinking than I had imagined. I began to see why, even in discussing it with Leonard, that it isn't easy to present, nor easy to grasp. And that a real job is needed. But the crucial thing that made the new book real to me was one conversation with Leonard; we weren't even talking about my future plans, but about Kant....And it was in that context or in that period that Leonard began to realize the importance of my statement that "existence is identity," and he explained to me in what sense no philosopher had claimed it, not in this form. I had thought of it as what I said in Galt's speech, that it's merely a clarification of Aristotle. I began to realize in what way it isn't. And that was the turning point in my decision. I knew then...that I could not write another novel for a long time.

She also discovered that—in an important way—she enjoyed writing nonfiction more than fiction. That “important way” was how she used her mind:

My nonfiction writing feels epistemologically like the return to the age of pre-twelve. I hope not in content. In epistemological ease, that it feels natural, it feels that it just comes to me....[A]ll my fiction was always difficult for me for this reason: that it's as if my mind were working on two tracks or two epistemologies, one of which was natural to me and the other one adopted or forced. And the forced one is the fiction element. All except the action sequences. Now, the action writes itself....But anything that has to do with the communication of moods and emotions, and sensory perception, that's the enormously difficult part. You see where the common denominator there is. The part which fiction requires is the breaking up of philosophical abstractions into concrete reality, and this is what always had the feeling of impeding what I really wanted to say.

[T]he main appeal of fiction to me was the presentation of the ideal man. That really was the motivating force. Ideal man, ideal view of existence. Not the creation of a story by means of words. My primary premise was not a writer's....In that sense, then, fiction was a means to an end. I wouldn't say that that means that I am not a fiction-writer. But it means that my epistemology would be set a certain kind of way, which is not primarily that of a fiction-writer.

The first formal lectures and courses on her philosophy came in 1959—by Nathaniel Branden, at which time she provided an official name: Objectivism, explaining later that she would have chosen “Rationalism or “Existentialism,” but they had already been taken.

Ever on the lookout for intellectual peers with whom she could discuss philosophy, she began a correspondence—interspersed with in-person discussions—with John Hospers, a philosophy professor at Brooklyn College and then UCLA. At Hospers’ invitation, she presented a paper, “Art As Sense of Life” at the 1962 meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics. Encouraged by his seeming openness to Objectivism despite his context of analytic philosophy, Rand spent countless hours and countless pages (one letter to him is more than 7,500 words) attempting to explain her ethical and epistemological positions and rebutting his objections to her philosophy. Her 1960-61 letters to Hospers constitute a 62-page chapter in *Letters of Ayn Rand*.²¹ In fact, it was conversations with Hospers that helped her to see “the enormous abysses or lacks, holes, in today's view of philosophy. And the unsolved issues.”

Rand’s first published nonfiction book was *For the New Intellectual* in 1961. The anthology contained reprints of the most philosophic passages (including Galt’s speech) in her four novels but was especially noteworthy for its title essay, described inside the cover as “an analysis of Western culture,” wherein she “discusses the causes of its progress, its decline, its present bankruptcy, and points the road to an intellectual renaissance.” In the course of this analysis, Rand provides a brief but essentialized survey of Western philosophy and history, using as a theme the “mystics of mind” (the advocates of faith) vs. the “mystics of muscle” (the advocates of brute force), both of whom sever ideas from the physical world. “The two,” she wrote, “may appear to be opposites, but observe what they have in common: a consciousness held down to the *perceptual* level of functioning....The key to both their souls is their longing for the effortless, irresponsible, automatic consciousness of an animal.”²²

Rand’s switch of focus onto nonfiction writing was most apparent in her starting *The Objectivist Newsletter*, the first of three periodicals that she wrote for and edited from 1962 until 1974. The articles that she would write on epistemology, political philosophy, esthetics and ethics—and their applications to current events—would eventually fill five anthologies: *The Virtue Selfishness* (1964), *Capitalism: the Unknown Ideal* (1965), *The Romantic Manifesto* (1969), *The New Left: The Anti-Industrial Revolution* (1971), and *Philosophy: Who Needs It* (1982). It was also in 1962 that she wrote a weekly column for the *Los Angeles Times*, identifying the essence of Objectivism in the first column, then applying it to current events in the following 25 columns.

One series of articles (in *The Objectivist*, 1966-67) was of special philosophic significance. Never losing sight of her teenage conviction that epistemology is of paramount importance, she published six articles on her theory of concept-formation. “I began to get a feeling,” she said in 1961, “like an intellectual detective of the manner in which I can cut through the nonsense and

²¹ Ibid, pp. 502-563.

²² *For the New Intellectual*, p. 14.

see what is the basic error there, and that no one seems to be doing it....But when I projected the issue of how we form concepts as distinguished from what are they, that I began to see enormously important issues that need statement and definition and that interested me.” As a follow-up to the articles, Rand conducted three epistemology workshops totaling approximately 20 hours, in 1969-71, at which philosophy professionals and graduate students asked her questions about her theory of concepts. An edited version of these workshops appears as an appendix to the 2nd edition of *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*.²³

The Final Years

Her regular writing came to an end in 1976, when she closed her last periodical, *The Ayn Rand Letter*. In a preface to her final article,²⁴ a survey of upcoming political events, she provided her reasons:

Today, the issues are becoming so crudely obvious that those who do not see them, cannot be helped by any discussion. Time and again, I have found that the basic evil behind today’s ugliest phenomena is altruism. Well, I told you so. I have been telling you so since *We the Living*, which was published in 1936. Those who still pretend that they can save freedom and individual rights without challenging altruism, are outside my power of persuasion....

A further reason, she wrote, was the state of the culture:

The state of today’s culture is so low that I do not care to spend my time watching and discussing it. I am haunted by a quotation from Nietzsche: “It is not my function to be a fly swatter.”²⁵ The evils destroying modern civilization are enormous, but their representatives, agents and carriers are too small to contemplate....Perhaps the last cultural fad one could still argue against was Karl Marx. But Freud—or Rawls? To argue against such persons is to grant them a premise they spend all of their effort disproving: that reason is involved in their theories.

Her third reason for discontinuing her “Letter” was more positive: “I intend to return, full time, to my primary work: writing books. I have two books in mind, but I have not yet decided which I will do first.” Her most likely project would have been an extension of her theory of concepts into a theory of propositions, and to that end, she began studying mathematics. However, the project never came to fruition, partly due to the declining health of her husband and then his death in 1979. She did, in 1977, edit abstracts of her philosophical articles and books, the abstracts written by Allan Gotthelf for *The Philosopher’s Index*.²⁶ In November of 1981, she gave her last public talk, a lecture to a monetary conference, warning businessmen not to finance universities that advocate the destruction of capitalism; it was not, she said, practical

²³ *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, 2nd revised edition, 1990.

²⁴ *The Ayn Rand Letter*, November-December 1975, Vol. IV, No. 2

²⁵ The passage (from *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Part 12) is usually translated as “It is not thy destiny to be a fly swat.”

²⁶ See Philosopher’s Index, ????????

for businessmen (or anyone) to believe that philosophy is impractical. Even at the end of her life, she was still arguing for a viewpoint she had accepted as a young child: the practical importance of ideas.

Her last intellectual work was in an area where she began her writing career: films. Frustrated by years of failed Hollywood attempts to produce a film version of *Atlas Shrugged*, she announced in 1981 that she would write the script for a nine-hour television mini-series and would produce the film herself. She did write one-third of the script, penning her last professional work on it, one page dated January 1, 1982. She died two months later, on March 6, 1982.

In the 1957 “Authors Note” to *Atlas Shrugged*, she wrote

I have held the same philosophy I now hold, as far back as I can remember. I have learned a great deal through the years and expanded my knowledge of details, of specific issues, of definitions, of applications—and I intend to continue expanding it—but I have never had to change any of my fundamentals.²⁷

That Ayn Rand always held the same philosophy is far from surprising. It fits a person who was so unusual intellectually. Most people base their every-day decisions—about food, clothing, shelter etc.—on what they observe in the world around them and then form generalizations based on those observations. Unlike most people, Ayn Rand took that epistemological approach much further and applied it to the widest abstractions. Her philosophy was derived from observation not from the conclusions of or even the contexts of preceding philosophers. As a philosopher, she was in the world: her conclusions based on observation, her philosophy a guide to living in the world.

²⁷ *Atlas Shrugged*, p. 1075.