

Houston Objectivism Society Newsletter

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Next HOS Meeting: "Chewing Honesty"

The June HOS meeting will feature a workshop titled "Chewing the virtue of honesty" by Brian Phillips. The purpose of the workshop will be to practice the skill of "chewing"-- i.e., the process of tying an idea to its concretes. The virtue of honesty will be used in the exercise.

Reality confronts us perceptually; ideas do not. For those ideas to have meaning (as well as be useful), they must be tied to reality. We must understand the relationship between abstract ideas and concrete reality. The process of "chewing" is intended to help one identify and understand these relationships.

Both the nature of reality and the nature of man's consciousness require a specific, logical method for attaining knowledge. The goal of consciousness is to identify relationships and differences. Yet, we do not automatically perceive the relationships between abstractions and reality. "Chewing" is the process by which we make concepts perceivable.

The workshop will begin with a discussion of the steps involved in "chewing". Attendees will then practice these skills by "chewing" the virtue of honesty.

The meeting will be held on April 11 at 6:30 p.m. at the Clubroom of The Meridian apartment complex, 6263 Westheimer (between Hillcroft and Fountainview), across from Payless Shoes. The Clubroom is located upstairs facing Westheimer.

NOTE: Attending members are asked to contribute \$2 to help pay for the expenses of renting this clubroom. We have not been recovering rental costs, and would like to encourage those who have not been contributing to do so. Those attending are asked to bring snack items.

Intellectual Activism

The Volunteer Summit

In late April, altruism dominated the news as President Clinton was joined by former Presidents Carter and Bush, former First Lady Nancy Reagan, and retired Gen. Colin Powell in Philadelphia at the Presidents' Summit for America's Future. "Much of the work of America cannot be done by government, much other work cannot be done by government alone. The solution must be the American people through voluntary service to others," Clinton had said when he first announced the summit.

That the summit, and the moral code which underlied it-- altruism-- were widely praised by the media and government officials is not surprising. Altruism-- service to others-- is the dominant morality of our culture. It is altruism which underlies the welfare state, regulation of the economy, and every other inappropriate government policy and program.

While the 3 day summit was making headlines, it was not without its detractors. And Objectivists were among the most vocal and visible.

Prior to the summit, the Coalition of Students against Servitude, was formed by college Objectivist clubs from across the

nation. The coalition organized picketing of the summit, as well as the distribution of posters for display on college and high school campuses.

The Houston *Chronicle* (as well as other newspapers) made mention of the picketing. On April 28 the paper reported that "Clinton was greeted by protesters, adherents to novelist-philosopher Ayn Rand, holding signs that read, 'Service-- Slavery with a Smile' and 'Duty to Serve-- Naziism.'" The previous day the *Chronicle* had noted that the Ayn Rand Institute denounced the summit as "an anti-American servitude summit."

On April 30 The Washington Times carried an article which quoted Peter Schwartz: "The idea that individuals must sacrifice themselves for the society, for the collective, underlies every dictatorship. This is the essence of evil." The article also mentioned ARI and two members of the Washington-Baltimore Area Objectivist Club.

In addition, David Harriman OpEd article entitled "Selfishness Made America Great" was printed in *USA Today* and CNN showed clips of protestors holding signs with Ayn Rand's name. Coalition of Students against Servitude

spokesmen and organizers gave approximately 50 interviews to newspapers, television stations and radio stations.

At least two HOS members also contributed to the intellectual assault on the summit and its underlying morality. Warren Ross sent the following letter to ABC News:

I wish to express my opposition to the idea of "community service." Your largely laudatory story on volunteerism by Deborah Weiner quoted only one, rather lame, opponent to the idea, by a teacher who wondered when the kids would learn their lessons if they were out volunteering. My opposition is much stronger-- I think it is morally wrong to

demand volunteering. The idea is based on the altruistic premise that one's life is not morally one's own, and that moral credit comes only through sacrificing (time, money, etc.) to others. This is a morally vicious premise, and runs counter to the philosophy on which this country was founded - namely that each person's highest moral purpose is his own happiness, which is to be achieved through rational efforts such as productive work, not through plundering others or demanding that they sacrifice for him.

If the idea of community service is morally wrong, the idea of "mandatory community service" is an abomination. To require, as Maryland does, that students under its power perform service in order to graduate is tantamount to dictatorship. It is not surprising, though. Once service is set up as a moral ideal, it is not long before someone wants to implement that idea politically. Then the other major tenet on which this country was founded-- individual rights-- becomes extinct too.

I challenge ABC News to put a REAL opponent of community service on the air, one who will state the moral issues involved and challenge the moral premise underlying it. Tepid opposition like the one you aired only discredits your objectivity. If you can't find someone who will oppose service, send a reporter to Houston (or call me), and I'll do it myself.

Neil Erian sent the following OpEd article to The Houston

Chronicle:

In the "spirit of volunteerism," Peter Jennings chose as Person of the Week (April 25) a man who was spending time away from his family to help victims of North Dakota's flood disaster. During the interview, I was taken by the man's competence and earnest attitude toward the disaster. He was confident that life in towns along the Red River would soon return to normal. Though he was sad to be temporarily apart from his children, he was only providing nonsacrificial help. He knew what he was doing and why, and rather than dutifully providing "service to others" was helping others benevolently.

Unfortunately, I can't say the same about President Clinton and his volunteer summit; and if Clinton succeeds, life in this country will not return to normal. It will become more unlivable.

The contrast of motives between the man in North Dakota and the "President's Summit for America's Future" is as stark as day and night, life and death. The residents of North Dakota recognize that Red River flooding disasters are infrequent and relatively short-lived. The need to rebuild their towns, to take preventative steps -- to get on with their lives, unites them.

In their call for "a new sense of duty", however, benevolence and recognition of the causes of today's problems are not the motives uniting the media, the liberal/conservative politicians, and the intellectuals. Ironically,

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The Houston Objectivism Society supports Objectivism and the Ayn Rand Institute; however, we do not purport to represent or speak for the same. HOS membership dues are \$15 per year (single); \$25 (couple). \$5 (student). The Newsletter address is: P.O. Box 112, Bellaire TX 77402.

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in his choice for Person of the Week Peter Jennings has inadvertently put his finger on the deeper meaning of President Clinton's summit: disasters and human helplessness are important in life and how we choose to meet them constitutes the ultimate test of virtue.

In his scramble to recruit an army of slavish volunteers, President Clinton does not seek our generosity or purposeful cooperation in a temporary emergency, but rather our sacrifice for the helpless as the norm and motive of life. Never mind the fact that most of this country's citizens are not helpless, and that if poverty and disasters were all that awaited us, there wouldn't be anybody to recruit. The illogic is not of primary significance here, only today's primitive call for self-sacrifice-- and at Independence Hall, no less.

The United States of America was created, not by those who advocated servility, but by independent thinkers, who offered a rational philosophy of individualism to a world struggling to emerge from the poverty and suffering of the Dark Ages. Their ideas made possible a country materially well off enough that disaster was not around every corner. The average American, as a consequence, can face what rare disasters do occur with confidence and pride. And the most offensive aspect of the "volunteerism" campaign is the media's equation of American benevolence with altruism. It cannot be said often enough-- altruism is not benevolence. I doubt that the man

in North Dakota would endorse Clinton's summit if he knew its actual self-abasing meaning.

Clinton's idea, that "to be a good citizen means you have to serve in your community," is the attempt to establish altruism -- sacrificing for others -- as the ethics of America and the need to combat suffering as the essence of life. But America's actual foundation is a human being's moral right to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. In their original intent, the Founding Fathers believed that a good citizen leads a rational, productive life for the purpose of achieving his own values, and recognizes the right of others to their pursuit of values. The greatness of America rests, not on "the spirit of volunteerism," but on the spirit of independent individuals who, valuing their own lives, courageously answer any natural or man-made challenge-- be it a raging floodwater or a tyranny of servitude.

Such activism as that demonstrated in the above two letters provides two great benefits. First, it informs individuals that a rational alternative to altruism does exist. Second, it challenges altruism's proponents to defend their calls for sacrifice.

Changing the intellectual climate of our culture requires efforts such as these. When Objectivists receive this level of media attention regarding a major event such as the summit, millions are exposed to Ayn Rand's ideas, perhaps for the first time.

HOS would like to applaud, and thank, all who participated in challenging the summit.

Peikoff Radio Program

At the March HOS meeting Janet Lee Wich launched a campaign to bring Dr. Leonard Peikoff's weekly radio program to Houston. Janet urged HOS members to send letters to the program directors of area radio stations.

Since that time, at least two HOS members have received responses from KTRH.

In early May Warren Ross received a letter thanking him for his comments. In that letter, the program director for KTRH stated that he had not heard Dr. Peikoff's program, but would make an effort to do so. A week later, Harry King received a letter from the same program director, who stated that he had heard the program. He added that, while he did not have open air time for the program, he would keep it in mind for the future. Apparently, the program director was motivated by Warren's letter (and perhaps letters from other HOS members) to promptly obtain a taped copy of Dr. Peikoff's program and listen to it.

Dr. Peikoff's program is currently carried by radio stations in Sante Fe, Los Angeles, Norfolk, VA, Fayetteville, NC, and Prescott, AZ.

HOS Meeting Summaries

Brains of Steel II April 1997

The April HOS meeting featured a presentation by Chris Land titled "Brains of Steel II". This was the second of a series of epistemological exercises presented by Chris.

Chris began his presentation by explaining that we often must make decisions without all of the information we would like, or need, to have. For example, a pipe bursts and we must hire a plumber. In such a situation, it is difficult, if not impossible, to make a fully informed decision. Using an exercise duplicated from a workshop he attended at work, Chris showed how decisions can be made when knowledge is lacking.

Attendees were told that they had crashed on the lighted side of the moon, 200 miles from the lunar base. Their survival depended upon their ability to utilize the 15 items contained on a list Chris gave them. These items included two .45 caliber pistols, a magnetic compass, a self-inflating raft, parachute silk, and food concentrate.

Attendees individually listed the items in the order of importance, as well as listing their context of knowledge on a scale of 1 to 3. Then all attendees discussed their rankings and came to a group consensus. The discussion illuminated the fact that no individual had a complete knowledge of the items, their significance, and the situational

context.

After the group reached a consensus, the rankings were compared to a panel of subject matter experts so that each attendee could evaluate his answers, as well as the group's.

Chris then identified several steps in making a decision in an imperfect context of knowledge. First, identify what you know (including what you know you don't know). Second, identify what you can find out, and then do so. For example, in the group discussion, attendees relied on the knowledge of members with expertise in particular fields, such as medicine, to determine the importance of particular items.

When a decision must be made without all of the necessary knowledge, one need not simply guess. A rational decision can be made, if one recognizes that the context of knowledge is limited. Rationality does not require omniscience, but rather the recognition of the facts, including the fact that one's context is limited.

Lyceum Conference May 1997

On May 3, Dina Garmong and Scott McConnell presented "From the Ayn Rand Institute Archives," a series of lectures based on letters, photographs and other artifacts from ARI's collection of Ayn Rand materials. The lectures covered three areas: In "Ayn Rand's Family and Friends (1926-51),"

Scott McConnell introduced her Chicago family and her Hollywood friends, based in part on McConnell's first-hand interviews with surviving relatives and friends.

Of special interest were Ivan Lebedeff, an actor who gave her encouragement in the early years before her success, and Albert Mannheimer, a Marxist whom Ayn Rand reformed to a capitalist by presenting to him for the first time the theoretical arguments for capitalism (i.e. the moral case, rather than merely the economic case). Mannheimer was blacklisted by the Communists in Hollywood, so he never had a very successful career, but he did manage to remove many of the leftist lines from the screenplay of the play "Born Yesterday," which was a very successful movie. Mannheimer later convinced Ronald Reagan (a Democrat in the 1950's) of the moral superiority of capitalism, thus becoming the link between Ayn Rand and the "swing to the right" of the 1980's (however limited and without a firm basis in rational moral principle, this "swing" was and is an improvement on the Kennedy-Johnson-Carter years).

In the case of Lebedeff, Ayn Rand remained grateful for his early support, and she stayed on friendly terms with him for many years despite his completely opposite sense-of-life.

In "Ayn Rand in Russia," Dina Garmong focused on Ayn Rand's youth, including the writing she

did as a teenager. The letters she received from her family reveal not only her own character traits, but also an enormous perceptiveness and benevolence on the part of a family who virtually worshipped her. They were aware of not only her genius but her single-minded purposefulness from an early age. Her mother once wrote to her: "You have been preparing for the life you will lead since consciousness first began within you." She was taught at home by tutors, and entered school at 10. She graduated high school in 1921, having obtained straight A's all the way through, in the basic subjects and also subjects such as languages, logic, political economy.

She decided at an early age to be a writer, and unlike those who say they'll be writers "later," or who say they must "study philosophy first," she didn't wait. In addition to various other types of preparation for writing, like reading good literature and analyzing movies in a detailed diary, she wrote many stories as a teen. She is said to have come to America with the plots of 19 novels in her head. Some of them would appear as stories later in *The Early Ayn Rand*, but there are early versions of them among the ones she wrote as a teenager. She also wrote magazine pieces and even had a full-length book-- on Hollywood filmmaking published around the time of her departure from Russia.

In college, she studied history, which was a conscious preparation for her writing career. One year before graduating, however, the

Soviets passed a law expelling all "nonproletarians." Stamped on her record was "expelled for poor studies," which, of course, was a lie. By the kind of accident that might have led Ayn Rand to ponder the difference between "permission of the State" and "right," she was eventually allowed to finish college because she was so close to completing her studies.

Expulsion would not have mattered. By this time, Ayn Rand knew that if she was to survive more than a year she must get out of the Soviet Union. She applied for permission for a temporary visit to her relatives in Chicago. This involved coaching by her mother on just what to say to the Soviet officials and to the U.S. officials who would issue a visa. Although Ayn Rand had no intention of returning at the end of the six month visiting period, she told the officials she would. Her family was staying behind, after all, and she told the consul that she had paid a portion of her return ticket. And the family helped her in an elaborate deception involving a male acquaintance who was dubbed her "fiancee."

Once in the United States, Ayn Rand was here to stay. She stayed by extending her visitors visa, then eventually marrying Frank O'Connor. There was no accident about her staying, though. Regardless of circumstances, she was determined never to go back to Russia. Her mother was in complete agreement, and even counseled her in her letters to go to Canada if necessary to avoid expatriation by the U.S.

authorities. (This was not written directly by her mother, but rather written in the oblique way Russians learn to write to confound scrutiny by the authorities.)

In "Ayn Rand in America," Dina Garmong summarized Ayn Rand's struggles to establish her career in the United States. Most people know the dramatic story of her meeting with C. B. DeMille, and her subsequent employment by him. What is less well known is that his studio closed within a year of Ayn Rand's employment and she was left unemployed. For a while between 1927 and 1929 she lived on 30 cents a day, eating little (in fact, her family, desperately poor and living in unspeakable circumstances in Russia, actually sent *her* money at one point). Later, although she obtained a remunerative job in the RKO wardrobe department, it was a six-day-a-week job and left her no time to write. She realized that in order to be able to pursue a career as a writer she must write a screen story and sell it. Finally, she wrote "Red Pawn" and sold it for \$1,500, equivalent to nine months' salary on her RKO job. Now, in 1931, after four years in the U.S., she could write full time.

During her life, few knew of Ayn Rand's early hardships because she didn't talk about them. Like the characters in her novels, she did not focus on pain or defeat but on her goals. She once wrote to a relative that "life is about happiness, not suffering." For this reason, she did not complain in her letters to her family, but only told them of her "adventures." (In fact,

the only way they knew she was having difficult times was that she didn't write.) Those adventures - the meeting with DeMille, the selling of "Red Pawn," the Broadway success of "Penthouse Legend," among many others - kept her family alive. They essentially lived through her. In a culture enduring mass starvation, with law prescribing 80 square feet of space per "proletarian," with no possibility of a career but only odd jobs to sustain oneself, with decent clothing so rare that pajamas sent from the United States are converted into formal dresses, the adventures of "The American

Resident" had the sustaining power of great fiction. Her parents even read her letters aloud to family and friends, at special gatherings for that purpose. In America, life is about happiness. In Russia, life could only be dreamed of, and only through Ayn Rand's letters.

We know the rest of the story pretty well, through Ayn Rand's publication history and her recently published volume of letters. Both speakers did an excellent job of organizing a massive amount of archival material. What these Lyceum presentations afforded was a glimpse into the early years when the character, ideas and

sense-of-life of the woman who would later write *Atlas Shrugged* was being formed. The ideas matured, but the sense-of-life and the character of Ayn Rand -- the view that life is a joyous adventure, the enormous purposefulness and energy -- seemed characteristic of her from a very young age. These traits make it easier to grasp how one woman -- born in a backward culture that degenerated into barbarism, and apparently doomed to destruction like all of her family -- not only got out but also created so much that is original in literature and philosophy that she has now become a part of history.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

§ HOS is looking for a volunteer to help run the lending library and a volunteer to send sample newsletters to those requesting them. Anyone interested should contact Warren or Brian.

§ The 1st Annual HOS July 4th Party will be held on July 4 at the residence of John Ford. His address is Short Court in Cypress. The party will begin at 3 pm. Members will be contacted to coordinate covered dishes, drinks, etc. Activities will include badminton, horseshoes, basketball, conversation and eating. Children are welcome-- please contact John so activities can be planned. John's phone number is [redacted]. Additional details will be announced. A map to John's is below.

