

Houston Objectivism Society Newsletter

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Next HOS Meeting: Cosi fan tutte

The February HOS meeting will be an opera at Opera in the Heights, Lambert Hall. The meeting will be held on February 21, 1998. Note that the meeting will be on the third Saturday of the month. The opera begins at 7:30 p.m.

Prior to the opera, members can meet at the King Biscuit restaurant at 5:30 p.m. for dinner. The theater is located approximately 5 minutes from the restaurant. King Biscuit is located at 1606 White Oak.

Going west on I-10 take the Heights/ Yale exit (if going east on I-10 take the Studemont exit). In either case, go to the light at Studemont and proceed north one light to White Oak. Turn right (east). Go through one stop sign and then about one mile further. The King Biscuit is on the left, where Beauchamp dend-ends into White Oak. Parking is mostly on the street (King Biscuit has a small parking lot).

If you are coming north on I-45 take the N. Main exit, and then turn left. Take an immediate left onto Houston Avenue. At the first light turn right onto White Oak. King Biscuit is about one block on the right.

Entrees are between \$7 and \$12. Cuisine is a little of everything-- pasta, seafood, burgers, and sandwiches.

El Niño and the Metaphysics of Chaos

by Warren S. Ross

See if you can integrate the following seem-ingly disparate concretes:

1. The movie *Jurassic Park*
2. The latest death in the Kennedy clan
3. The movie *Forrest Gump*
4. El Niño

If what unites them is not immediately obvious, let's start by reviewing the essentials of each item.

In the movie *Jurassic Park*, man's attempts to control nature are portrayed as a sham. Despite man's best rational attempts to defend against the harmful effects of raising dangerous animals, "chaotic" and "unpredictable" things occur which make his defenses useless. The animals break out of their cage and go on a rampage. The message, in the words of one character (a mathematician schooled in the faulty interpretations of modern chaos theory) is that "anything that can happen will happen."

The death of Michael Kennedy in a skiing accident was portrayed by the media as just another one of the inexplicable disasters to occur to the Kennedy family. The Kennedies have been plagued by assassination, deaths by drug overdoses, divorces, infidelities, accusation of rape, accusation of

murder, etc. That most of these are not even natural disasters, accidents or horrific killings, but completely predictable outcomes of the kinds of behavior engaged in by family members, is glossed over by the media. They emphasize the unpredictability of it. Michael Kennedy was supposed to be an excellent skier, but in the words of one friend, "accidents happen."

In the movie *Forrest Gump*, a dim-witted, childlike character goes through various scenes in which he accidentally is involved in historic events (e.g. scenes at the White House with presidents, investing early in the highly productive Apple Computer company). Gump doesn't take any action from which one could rationally conclude that he would succeed-- he's just a feather in the wind-- but he succeeds anyway...by accident. In the words of a slogan which he miraculously happened to be present to invent (and which is an

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eloquent premise of the modern intellectual), "shit happens." And, the movie goes on to argue, "good stuff" just happens too).

Finally, El Niño. For the last half year, the media have subjected us to an unremitting saturation in stories about El Niño. Everyone is sick of it-- I've known adults to groan and hold their ears when such a story comes on the nightly news, and young children to say they are tired of hearing about it-- yet the stories continue. We see stories of floods in South America, drought in Malaysia, fires in Australia, polar bears that are too warm, etc. Ignoring the fact that El Niño is a natural weather pattern that has been around for ages, and that science has allowed us to understand this phenomenon and explain previously inexplicable weather shifts, the media simply harp on the unpredictability of local

weather patterns - we used to have cold weather in Fargo, North Dakota, they say, and now we don't. Weather happens.

What do these stories and movies add up to? Weather happens-- shit (and good stuff) happens-- accidents happen-- *anything can happen*. The universe, according to the writers and reporters who interpret events for us, is not a predictable, stable world of cause and effect, but a place where the unpredictable is the norm, where the inexplicable just "happens."

Each of these concretes is an example of the metaphysics of a chaotic universe. Underlying our ability to predict events is first and foremost the idea that events are metaphysically *predictable*, i.e. they follow natural patterns where the same cause leads to the same effect. It is this metaphysical premise that is most consistently under attack in recent years.

Grasping the prevalence of this principle in our culture can help one to understand the nightly news-- not only the specific content but more importantly the principle guiding selection of content. Every night we are treated to one disaster after another, somewhere on the globe. If there were life on other planets, we would be treated to disasters from all over the galaxy. Why? What conceivable relevance can a flood in the Andes (or Alpha Centauri) or a famine in Africa have on one's life-- here, in America? The answer is that it has no rational relevance. It is, however, a systematic way for the media to draw our attention to something it considers very important: disasters are around every corner. The world is

unpredictable and even those who do not expect or deserve suffering are nevertheless subjected to it. (Never mind that in most cases, relevant facts are omitted to paint this picture, e.g. famines in Africa are caused by Marxism and tribalism, not by weather; and at least some of the disasters in the Kennedy clan are caused by the immoral behavior of clan members themselves.)

In effect, the media are trying to convince us, through repeated concretes, of the exact opposite of a proper philosophy. A proper philosophy-- Objectivism -- holds (in metaphysics) that the universe is subject to cause and effect; that inexplicable, causeless events don't happen; that when disasters do happen they are temporary; that (in epistemology) such disasters can be combatted by reason applied to understanding nature, coupled (in ethics) with action to implement the conclusions of reason.

All of this is wiped out by the metaphysics of disaster and chaos-- the entire philosophical structure is toppled if the foundation is destroyed-- and that is exactly what is accomplished by the media concentration on such a metaphysics.

To judge by most people's reaction to this campaign, they are bored with the content but they have bought the message. People appear relatively unaffected by all the disasters shown in the

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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. E-mail: wsross@ix.netcom.com (Warren Ross), or brian@philpaint.com (Brian Phillips).

If you have not paid your membership dues for 1998, this will be the last issue you will receive

nightly news stories, but then they say things like "It's a dangerous world out there" or "Anything is possible" when arguing current issues at the lunch table. The litany of emergencies and heartache cannot but have the desired result unless people consciously identify what principle underlies it and consciously reject that principle. For you who do actively conceptualize what you see on the news and in our culture, you possess a powerful weapon to immunize yourselves against such a destructive premise, and to convince others of the right premise. Just living in this culture, we cannot help having the undertow of "the chaotic universe" continuously pull at our heels, but at least we don't have to be swept under by the tide--and we can help change the tide, too.

Harry Wu at Rice University

by Warren S. Ross

In a speech at Rice University on January 19, Chinese dissident Harry Wu spoke against Western support for the Chinese government. Wu clearly understands the brutality of the communists and argued that there is no fundamental difference between them and the Nazis. The Jews in the audience understood and in fact were the most receptive to his comments. He was heckled by some students from the Chinese students group at Rice. They think he is "hurting China" by spreading lies. He argues for the withdrawal of economic support for China because of its human rights record. His case, as far as it went, was good, but he failed to make a strong integration between political and economic freedom. He

acknowledged (in fact argued passionately) that limited economic freedom is not of value if you can't "say what you think," but I think his case could have been immensely strengthened if had said the following:

Political freedom is what guarantees and perpetuates economic freedom. Dictatorships are always "freeing" their economies for short periods when the situation gets desperate, only to later revoke the freedoms when the whim of the dictator changes (e.g., Lenin's NEP was followed by Stalin). People should realize that the Declaration of Independence provides far more protection, and is of far more value, than the ability to "choose between brands of shampoo" (Harry Wu's example),

Intellectual Activism

In your editorial, "Biodiversity," Jan. 7 1998 you declare that we must save endangered species to save ourselves. Is your sense of life and view of man so malevolent that you think nothing more possible to us except a global Noah's Ark? The scientific discovery of a useful, natural substance does not prove the intrinsic value of nature and the need to save it, as you claim. It proves the efficacy and value of reason to deal with the problem of human survival.

Nature can change form, but cannot cease to exist. The Industrial Revolution, an age of reason and individual freedom,

inspired creative minds to meet the challenge of reshaping it for human life. Henry Bessemer and non-phosphorus iron ore for low-cost steel; Thomas Edison and heat-bearing filaments for lasting light bulbs; and today, Abbott Laboratory scientists and animal extract as a possible strong, safe pain reliever. Such men and their discoveries have made possible human flourishing on an unprecedented scale. The principle guiding their creativity is "Nature to be commanded must be obeyed."

You who extol "biodiversity" and other destructive environmentalist ideas are driven by the principle that "Man to be

commanded, Nature must be obeyed."

In urging our sacrifice to the Ecuadorian frog and other species you quietly disregard the fact that reason raises human survival to an active intellectual enterprise, as against meek physical toil founded upon primitive nature-worship. To sustain a complex, developing world we do depend upon a diversity, though not of "endangered" species, but of inspired ideas-- ideas that shape matter to serve human life.

Neil Erian
Houston Chronicle
January 1998

not just because being able to speak your mind is important but also because rights are what guarantee that you'll be able to continue to choose between brands of shampoo (and everything that implies).

The problem with his economic argument as it stood is that he has an implicit dichotomy between economic and political freedom-- one can have one or the other, he implies, but it's better to have both. (He did make the point that only party members and their sons and daughters are benefiting from the improved economy, which is part of the argument that politics and economics are integrated). If one understands that economic freedom depends upon political freedom, then one doesn't have to make a "choice" between them, and one avoids the comeback that many of his critics have made-- "bread is more important than speechmaking."

Except for that theoretical limitation, his speech was moving and exceptionally good in his concretization of life in China. He told us his life story-- the 19 years in the Laogi for mildly commenting on the Russian invasion of Hungary, the suicide of his mother on the day he went into the camp, the murder of his father and brothers, his coming to America with \$40 and sleeping in the San Francisco bus station for the first few weeks, the decision to forsake a career in engineering to tell the world what he knew, sneaking back into China to film atrocities-- all in an articulate and morally righteous tone that is so absent in speechmaking in our country today. He told us of his shock at finding that the slogan on the Nazi camp Dachau (which he recently visited) was the same as that on the Laogi camp: "freedom through labor".

He urged us to not provide investment and money to build up the Chinese as a superpower, since a totalitarian regime uses that money to scale up militarily. "A communist superpower is not good," he said. "Western investment and technology are the fuel in the tank driving the communist Chinese vehicle." He concretized this latter point by saying that the Chinese border guards who arrested him in 1995 communicated with one another using Motorola cellular phones, which nefarious purpose is what Western products are used for in general. Despite Motorola's rationalizations that it is contributing to the "communication revolution" in China, it is really contributing to the enhancement of the dictatorship's ability to suppress rights.

At the end of his talk, questioners were mixed in support of him-- the Chinese hecklers clapped every time a person challenged him (and many did, not only the outright Maoist professors, but also the pragmatic Chinese students). As I said, the Jews who remembered the Holocaust were supportive, especially since he referred to the Holocaust several times in his speech ("If I had come here in 1938 to talk about the Nazi camps, you would not have been interested. But it was a different story in 1945 when we saw films of what happened... the bodies...") At the end of his speech, I initiated a standing ovation, which was joined by almost all present (700 seats). I also shook his hand at a small after-speech gathering, as did several other members of HOS. I told him that I was proud to have him as an American (some Chinese in the audience accused him of betraying China by accepting American citizenship). Then he was whisked off by four policeman.

1998 HOS Meeting Calendar

The following are the 1998 HOS meeting topics, and the meeting presenter or coordinator:

February 21-- Opera: *Così fan tutte*, Johnnie McCulloch

March 14-- Movie: *We the Living*, Stanley Lewis

April 11-- "Book Share", Janet Wich

May 9-- Movie: *Love Letters*, Stanley Lewis

June 13-- "The Objective Value of Sports", Clark Hamilton and Brian Phillips

July 11-- Audio Lecture: "Eight Great Plays"

August 8-- "Raphael's 'School of Athens'", Neil Erian

September 12-- "Movie Share", Janet Wich

October 14-- "Planning for your Financial Future", Harry King

November 10-- "Local Art Galleries", Pete Jamison

December 12-- Annual Christmas Party, Janet Wich