



Houston Objectivism Society

Vol.7, No. 2 March 1994 Newsletter

Pamphlets in April

At the next meeting on April 9, Warren Ross will discuss the subject of pamphleteering and engage members in a project designed to influence legislation in the health care field.

Janet Wich has chaired a pamphleteering committee for some time now, which has sent various pamphlets to officials, writers of letters and editorials to newspapers and other interested parties.

Besides discussing this activity, we are asking members to bring the names and addresses of their physicians or any health care professionals that you may know in order to mail them an appropriate pamphlet and cover letter.

Also at this meeting, we may address a couple of the questions scheduled for the meeting in February.

Project

At this time, we are also starting a large project to send pamphlets to health care professionals in the Houston area, addressing the need to counter current proposals to socialize the industry.

The Ayn Rand Institute is selling Dr. Peikoff's "Health Care is not a Right" for \$125/1000 copies. Professional mailing lists sell labels for between \$50 and \$100/1000, and stamps are \$290/1000 (unless bulkmail is used). These are the major costs, and they total at about \$490/1000 pamphlets sent. With approximately 45 HOS members in the Houston area, you can calculate how many mailings your contribution will provide. In the city of Houston alone, there are approximately seven thousand physicians.

The Houston Medical Center is world famous, and I believe it presents for us an opportunity to influence opinion. As we saw with the successful battle to prevent zoning in Houston, attention is heightened, and minds are persuaded when faced with hard alternatives and rational options. As a by-

product, this project also serves to spread the ideas of Objectivism in a worthy light. Please pledge or send as much money as you can for this project to Warren Ross at

and make your check payable to The Houston Objectivism Society. Money not spent on this endeavor will be returned.

This issue will be discussed further at the meeting, and, if funds are adequate by then, your labor, should you volunteer, will help in preparing mailings. The Austin Objectivist Society has already started a similar project.

Please join us at 6:30 pm, Saturday, April 9, at the Phillips clubroom. The gate code is #5145.

"Introduction" to Objectivism

At the March meeting, Dawn Phillips and Chris Land hosted activities which included the viewing of an introductory video by Dr. Leonard Peikoff on Objectivism, followed by a discussion of several issues.

Many questions of interest were submitted prior to this meeting by those relatively new to Objectivism. Nine members of HOS were assigned the task of orally answering these questions and leading their discussion. Interspersed with these prepared answers, several questions were taken from the audience. Although fifteen previously submitted questions were handed out for discussion, extensive discussion of questions "from the floor" allowed time for only six of the prepared questions. The remaining questions may be addressed in the future, along with the major activities of each respective meeting. An Objectivist bibliography was distributed to help with further study.

The following is a list of some of the topics: the metaphysical status of a fact which man could have changed but chose not to, the evaluation of a work

of art which contains mixed elements, e.g., "Star Wars," the importance and relevance of philosophy, Objectivism's condemnation of sacrifice and humility, the status of casual recreational activities, such as watching certain types of television, moral and legal aspects of abortion, indirect force, as pertains to legal fraud, and the issue of agreement and dissent on fundamentals in philosophy, as opposed to differences in derivative areas. Several interesting points were made in these discussions by audience members.

Visiting HOS for the first time were Frances Schwartz, wife of Dale Schwartz; Jerry Smith, a student at the University of Houston, who was introduced to Objectivism by Laura Lucas; Liza Waldman, a student majoring in philosophy at the University of Texas in Austin (who offered some cogent remarks), and Clay McFaden, an aerospace engineer and friend of Chris Land. David Crook, also an engineer and friend of Chris, attended this meeting and tried to help this editor with memory skills.

Relativity Examined

by
Warren Ross

At the February meeting of HOS, George Marklin presented "The Philosophical Premises Underlying the Theory of Relativity and its Alternative," a philosophical discussion of Einstein's theories of special and general relativity.

George gave a history of the physical measurements and conceptual development leading up to the special theory, including the famous Michelson-Morley experiment, which

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showed that the speed of light as measured by two observers is independent of the speeds of the respective observers. George, in reviewing the various attempts to explain this result, contrasted the approaches of the physicists H.A. Lorentz and Albert Einstein. Lorentz showed that the dimension of a physical body would contract as it moves at high speed through the ether (believed at that time to be a supporting medium for light propagation). Thus any physical unit used to measure distance would also change. This in turn yields an apparent constancy of the speed of light. Einstein, in contrast to Lorentz, began by postulating the speed of light as constant and deducing the contraction of a physical body from the resulting mathematics. The two perspectives are quite different in what they regard as the fundamental physical phenomenon and what is a consequence. George related the debate on this issue to Ayn Rand's principle, expressed in her *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, that a unit to be used as a standard must be immutable and absolute. George preferred the Lorentzian approach as more physically-based and more consistent with Ayn Rand's immutability principle. (The immutability principle is well accepted by the scientific community—the establishment of standards of measure for temperature, weight, pressure, etc. that are either unaffected by differing physical conditions or, if affected, can be compensated by known factors, is an important part of science.)

A similarly dichotomous perspective arose in the theory of general relativity, which is a theory of gravity. The most famous prediction of general relativity is that light appears to bend when it comes near a large gravitational body like the Sun. As a consequence, measurements over large distances in the neighborhood of the Sun or other large masses do not appear to agree with Euclidean geometry (the geometry of straight lines). Einstein's achievement was in developing the mathematics to precisely calculate the degree of this apparent departure from Euclidean geometry.

The question arises, however, as to

what is the physical interpretation of these observations? Is the departure from Euclideanism a fundamental property of space, i.e. is space "curved"? Or is this simply an issue of the measuring unit (light) not being immutable. George presented a number of amusing and instructive examples to illustrate that a varying unit of measurement used as a standard can lead to apparent contradictions of observation with simple geometry.

George stressed that both the perspectives—the "changing unit" and the "curved space" viewpoints—lead to the exact same predictions in today's context of knowledge. (This is also true of the parallel debate in special relativity—the Lorentzian vs. Einsteinian approaches.) Neither perspective can be favored or ruled out based on observations currently available. Disagreements arise not on the level of the descriptive behavior of the phenomena, but at the point where scientists make physical interpretations of the mathematics. However, unlike some moderns who further conclude (adhering to an epistemological theory called "Operationalism") that if two theories have the same mathematical predictions they *are* the same (their differences are "meaningless"), George argued that the differences do matter because 1) the two theories do say different things about the nature of the phenomena (and hence will one day lead to different predictions), and 2) the two theories lead to different research programs when scientists try to identify the causes of the observations.

Three guests also attended this meeting: Pat Freeman, a relative to George Marklin, from Allentown, Pennsylvania; Richard Carlson, who works in Austin and was president of the student club there for two years while earning a degree in architectural engineering and Steve Floyd, a senior at the University of Texas in Austin, majoring in aerospace engineering. Steve noted that his father introduced him to *Atlas Shrugged*.

Texas Objectivist Societies Conference

The following is a response to those people who have asked why the 1994 Texas Objectivist Societies Conference, which was scheduled to be held in Houston and chaired by Brian Phillips, was cancelled.

From the first year of the Conference, it was jointly sponsored by the Hill Country Objectivist Association in Austin and the Houston Objectivism Society. Reflecting that joint responsibility, two judges from each organization served to select and edit formal presentations—Yaron Brook and Steve Rogers in Austin and Warren Ross and Dwyane Hicks in Houston. The first Conference was held in Austin, chaired by Dan Fordyce, and the second Conference was held in Houston, chaired by Dwyane Hicks. The next three Conferences were held in Austin.

During the 1993 Conference, Yaron Brook, Steve Rogers, Brian Phillips and Dwyane Hicks discussed the 1994 Conference, which would be held in Houston and chaired by Phillips. Phillips proposed to solicit presentations from previous presenters, graduate students and professors, rather than conduct an open call for papers. He also proposed to offer an honorarium to some presenters. These changes were intended to maintain or improve presentation quality with less work for the judges, while simultaneously retaining the essential character of the conference.

For the next two months, Chairman Phillips organized a Houston committee and made preparations for the conference. This included sending a request to Steve Rogers to provide information pertaining to the 1993 Conference, as well as a mailing list, a request which was agreed to but never honored. Instead, Rogers, without the knowledge or consent of Brook (who now resides in California), Ross or Hicks, sent Phillips a letter in the name of the Texas Objectivist Societies Conference (TOSC), declaring that TOSC was the intellectual property of the Hill Country Objectivist Association

(HCOA) and that HCOA would license the 1994 Conference to be held in Houston provided that certain conditions were met. Some of those conditions violated the terms agreed to at the 1993 Conference.

In response to the letter of Rogers, the Executive Committee of the Houston Objectivism Society sent Rogers a letter rejecting his claim to sole ownership of TOSC, denying his authority to grant a license in the name of TOSC, dissociating the Houston Objectivism Society from HCOA and revoking the use of the name "Texas Objectivist Societies Conference", since the word "Societies" implies the mutual involvement of HOS and HCOA. The Executive Committee took these actions in order to reject the improper characterization of the relationship between HOS and HCOA and so as not to be held responsible for the future direction of any conferences sponsored by HCOA.

Brian Phillips considered hosting a new conference in Houston in 1994 but decided not to because of delays and problems presented by this disagreement with HCOA.

Another conference is scheduled for Houston, however, to be presented by Atlas Conferences on February 10-12, 1995. This conference is put together by Pamela Benson of Washington and Yaron Brook, and it will feature Gary Hull, Andy Bernstein and Richard Salsman.

Non-interchangeable

Comments on *Shindler's List*

by
Dwyane Hicks

With *Shindler's List*, Steven Spielberg, America's premier provider of movie entertainment, presents a story of the Holocaust. What can the originator of *E.T.* say about systematic destruction? What point of view directs his examination and what does he conclude?

Spielberg has never been the darling of the critics; yet, his movies have

been more popular than any in movie history. This contrasting view of his work is paralleled by contrasting views expressed in his movies—implicitly benevolent views which reach back to an earlier Hollywood and explicit views which are contemporary...and not so sunny.

Like Shindler, a German "businessman" who fights to save the lives of a few, while millions are being murdered, *Shindler's List* does not attempt to comprehensively project the whole of the subject, preferring instead to focus on one story within an historic context. But, through the power of art, Spielberg's selectivity extends the reach of his story.

Shindler was a German "businessman" who traveled to Poland after the beginning of World War II to get rich exploiting the black market and slave labor. As portrayed in the film, he was an amoral, superficial cad, who viewed himself as neither a producer of wealth nor as a hater of Jews, but as a German providing a front for the work of others. The worth of his enterprise is entirely derived from the victimization of Jews, who are officially deprived of liberty and property, being herded into shelters, prohibited from employment or career and deprived of possessions. Although Shindler is depicted as one innocent of bringing about such policies, his exploitation of them is complete. Not only does he select a Jewish accountant to manage his affairs, find black market sources through Jewish contacts and use Jewish labor; he even capitalizes his business with Jewish investment, offering them a return on their investment based only his word.

However one may judge his actions, they offer a relative benefit to the Jews involved, giving them a chance to survive in desperate circumstances.

Such situations, where people are bereft of rights, are transitional, however, and the ghetto is destroyed by the Germans. The Germans brutally confiscate all possessions and terrorize with random murder while removing all occupants. Unaware that the ghetto is to be destroyed, Shindler witnesses this event in horror.

At the labor camp where many of

the Jews are transported, Shindler establishes a factory the conditions of which represent a relative windfall, quickly identified by a few: Jews do not die working for Shindler. In the midst of casual murder, a slave master who does not kill is a saint.

To be on Shindler's list of workers is to gain hope of survival. When a request by a Jew is made to Shindler with this end in mind, Shindler is faced with an explicit and dangerous choice in regard to the purpose of his "business".

From this point on, the harshness of the situation forces Shindler to abandon his fence-sitting policy—he must become an out-of-uniform Nazi henchman or an agent secretly fighting against the regime. His role changes from that of refraining from the negative to one of pursuing the positive, at one point even chastising an "employee" concerned for the quality of their artillery shells. Shindler reminds him that they *want* to deliver inferior products to the German army and that it would be a crime if any of them worked.

Under the mask of providing goods for military contracts and pursuing "profit", Shindler fights to save those for whom he has taken responsibility and does so at great risk to his own safety. The rest of the story glorifies that endeavor.

To those who have read *Ominous Parallels*, by Dr. Leonard Peikoff, *Shindler's List* is somewhat of a disappointment in its lack of explicit identification of the cause of Nazism. In explicit terms, *Shindler's List* presents Nazi Germany like an anonymous car crash of history—it was terrible, but no one can tell what caused it. In contrast, *Judgement at Nuremberg*, for example, explicitly inquires into its cause. While *Judgement at Nuremberg* explicitly and dramatically affirms the value of the individual and the need for principle, it suffers from an inadequate explanation for the rise of Nazism. (The need for "national pride" after the humiliation of World War I and the depression is an issue derived from more fundamental ideas, as identified by Dr. Peikoff, and the lack of such pride has not led

to the same effect elsewhere.)

But where *Shindler's List* lacks explicit identification of issues and causes, its implicit focus is rare in today's intellectual environment: individualism vs. collectivism.

Time after time, Spielberg dramatizes Shindler's commitment to the non-interchangeable and therefore irreplaceable value of the individuals on his list. Shindler saves individuals useless to his enterprise, old and young, at one point saving a handful of children by asserting their "essential service" of polishing the insides of artillery shells.

Shindler makes a great effort to save his accountant, who is shipped out when he fails to carry identification papers.

Shindler risks his precarious position with a commandant in order to save the commandant's housekeeper, a Jewish woman who is destined for destruction because of the commandant's love for her.

When women working for Shindler are mistakenly sent to Auschwitz, Shindler, in his attempt to save them, refuses the offer of another group of women from an official. This scene crystallizes the two points of view: To the collectivist bureaucrat, one herd is as good as another. To the individualist, an exchange is a complete loss.

Spielberg, whose movies have always emphasized a special regard for children, provides vivid contrast to the collectivist view by technically coloring the coat of a little girl, in a movie which is otherwise printed in black and white. The little girl is presented twice—the first time to show her value, the second to emphasize a tragic loss.

Near the end of the movie, Shindler profusely apologizes to his workers for not having saved more people, regretting any wealth he retained, which would have purchased even one more life. At the time of viewing this, I thought it extremely unjust of Spielberg to give such emphasis to Shindler's display of guilt, until I realized that it was an additional means of re-emphasizing Spielberg's theme of the inestimable value of the individual.

Spielberg celebrates individualism and contrasts it with the explicit collec-

tivism of the Nazis. The Nazis are shown to take it seriously.

The Nazis do regard human beings as interchangeable, replaceable, and expendable.

Shindler explains the camp commandant's arbitrary killing at one point, as not of hatred, but of dis-value: the killing of a Jew is not good or bad to him but of no import. Although the Nazis are shown to act on this idea, it is also shown that no human being could, in full consciousness, accept it, as when the Commandant is attracted to his Jewish housekeeper.

Shindler's List is not a horror movie, although it is filled with horror. In a sense, it is worse than those newsreel pictures of heaps of emaciated bodies—because it shows actual murder of the living, not its aftermath. Yet, despite the number of murders committed, Spielberg portrays each as a tragedy, even when viewed from a distance. It never becomes casual to the viewer.

As stated previously, Spielberg does not explicitly address the cause of German Nazism. But another value of the film is that many elements identified and integrated by Dr. Peikoff in *Ominous Parallels* are at least portrayed in *Shindler's List*:

The view of the intellect as a threat, even when offered by an inmate to help the Nazis. This is graphically presented when a Jewish engineer offers her services.

The demand for absolute obedience and its expression in the form of lowered heads and averted eyes.

The terrorization of people as a tool of disorientation and obedience.

The contempt of the Nazis for productiveness in slave camps, implying other purposes which their enslavement served.

The Nazi war against the mind is well in evidence in this film.

A final and extraordinary expression of individual value in *Shindler's List* is Spielberg's moving tribute at the end of the film to the survivors and to Shindler himself. The film steps out of character to pair several survivors with the actors who portrayed them, in paying homage at Shindler's grave site. Such a solemn tribute to the efforts of

one man cannot be associated with the sacrifice of values or dramatize the idea that our actions are determined and therefore unworthy of praise or blame. We are not all equal.

I left the theater drained and spiritually wounded but filled with a fervor for justice—today, a rare response to a movie.

Although Spielberg zeroes in on collectivism as the central existential evil of Nazi Germany, he nevertheless leaves unexamined how such a monstrous view of man's existence came about. He knows evil but not its genesis, and this is not a new phenomenon for this director.

Spielberg's career began with a television movie called *Duel*, in which the driver of an eighteen-wheeler relentlessly and sadistically harasses and finally tries to kill a man innocuously driving across the country. The driver of the truck is never shown, only his intimidating truck, and his motivation is never revealed.

In *Jaws*, an enormous shark takes up residence at a summer resort, and, when hunted, displays more than a hint of purpose and hatred. Evil is real but mysterious and unexplainable.

At other times, Spielberg defers to contemporary ideas to explain evil. The threat to E.T.'s safety comes from scientists, and adults in general. In *Jurassic Park*, the real threat is not the dinosaurs but man himself, through his attempt to understand and thereby control nature for his own benefit.

Given these alternatives of depicting evil in Spielberg's movies, ignoring its genesis or deferring to contemporary ideas, it is probably a god-send that Spielberg chose the former for *Shindler's List*.

Similarly, Spielberg has trouble in depicting ideals of the good in his films. His benevolent and playful aliens in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* follow the archetype of science fiction: candescent, fragile creatures with big heads (to hold all that intelligence). These sci-fi angels float, just as does Spielberg's conception of the good.

When "good" is brought down to earth to depict heroes, Indiana Jones emerges as a cardboard character of

cartoonish romanticism. Jones is fine for children's matinees, from which he was copied, and superficial fun, but he cannot be taken seriously for adults.

Spielberg's "realistic" protagonist is the policeman in *Jaws*, a conventional guy, who, although he has moved to a resort town to avoid conflict, has it thrust upon him and, despite his hand-wringing angst, is forced to take some kind of decisive action. Earlier, chance encounters with sharks also determine the course of life taken by the other main characters in *Jaws*, the scientist and the shark hunter. The pattern continues with *Duel* and *Shindler's List*. Shindler is a pragmatic businessman forced to side with evil or secretly combat it. He fights the necessity to make such a decision, and he finally makes it out of view of the camera. In Spielberg's view, adults who initiate the pursuit of values are only those such as Indiana Jones.

Contrast this determinism with the statue of David by Michelangelo. Steeped in Renaissance awareness of Greek ideas, Michelangelo sought to portray the root of David's victory. Unsatisfied with previous depictions of David, Michelangelo chose what he considered to be the important moment. The body of David is powerful and confident but still relaxed. The sling has yet to be used. But the face of David is intense in the act of decision. All lesser events derive from this moment.

While Spielberg seems to reject as real the self-initiating hero, he nevertheless gives us depictions of good and evil, a view of life as exciting and adventurous, happy endings (brought to *Jaws* over the objections of the book's author) and, in movie after movie, the importance of personal values. All these are accoutrements of romantic art, the cause of which, as Ayn Rand has explained, is the capacity of free will.

Spielberg's romantic aspects are the source of his success with the public and of his failure with the critics until this year with *Shindler's List*.

Even with the accolades for *Shindler's List*, however, the oblique criticism emerges as the intellectual

establishment, seemingly as one, wonders aloud what could have motivated Shindler to act as he did. If heroism is not quite real to Spielberg, it is a black hole to his critics. By implication, such people do not find mysterious or unreal the nihilism of the Nazis. (Is Shindler's behavior genuinely a puzzle? If mass murderers had taken over your country, would you feel secure in your rights because only your neighbors were being shot? Six million Jews were killed, but a total of fourteen million people died in WWII—including approximately five million non-Jewish Germans.)

If critics are typically contemptuous of Spielberg's best aspects, the explicit ideas of Spielberg's movies are typically also in conflict with his best views. Runner-up to *Shindler's List* at the Academy Awards was *Jurassic Park*, a movie brimming over with ecological hatred of man's control over nature and featuring Michael Creighton's effort to invalidate causality.

Just as the theory of relativity was used early in this century to "scientifically" justify moral relativism, so a segment of control theory, trendily and mistakenly called chaos theory, is said to invalidate the Law of Causality. The fact that causality gives rise to science gives no pause to such context droppers and "stealers" of concepts.

Causality, an application of the Law of Identity to action, states that existents act according to their nature. In order to predict, or prevent, an effect, therefore, an inquiry into the nature of an existent is required. Causality applies not only to inanimate matter but to political systems, including Nazism. If it were invalid, it would be senseless to search for the non-existent cause of the Holocaust. It would even be useless to regret that it happened or to hope to prevent its re-occurrence. As a current bumper-sticker so charmingly puts it, "Shit happens" and it could not have been otherwise.

Weimar Germany rejected causality, too, as well as other fundamentals necessary for human survival.

For Spielberg, to depict Nazi Germany while ignoring fundamentals is ironic in many ways. His conflict with critics, the conflict between his explicit

ideas and his implicit ones, the conflict between his superficial regard for fundamental ideas and his eloquent tribute to Shindler: the source of all these conflicts is fundamental German ideas—the same ideas which brought about the events portrayed in *Shindler's List*.

In *The Ominous Parallels*, Dr. Peikoff quoted a German intellectual looking back at the Hitler years:

Most of us did not want to think about fundamental things and never had. There was no need to. Nazism gave us some dreadful, fundamental things to think about—we were decent people—and kept us so busy with continuous changes and "crises" and so fascinated, yes, fascinated, by the machinations of the "national enemies," without and within, that we had no time to think about these dreadful things that were growing, little by little, all around us. Unconsciously, I suppose, we were grateful. Who wants to think?

Those on Shindler's list had to depend on an outsider to save them. But there exists no force external to the United States to halt the accelerating loss of rights in the United States. Ayn Rand wrote that a mixed economy is one in transition to a dictatorship if the process is not halted, and that process is visibly at work today.

It is not passive, conventional or merely reactive protagonists, such as those in *Jaws* or in *Shindler's List*, who can save themselves. The achievement, or defense, of values is conditional because life, the phenomenon which gives rise to values, is conditional. For man, values must be actively chosen and pursued. "Good" is *made* to happen. §

CALENDAR of HOS Events
for 1994

**PHILLIPS
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666-6968
Brian Phillips Dawn Phillips

Nearly every Sunday:
Understanding Objectivism
Call Brian & Dawn Phillips
at

April 9: Pamphleteer
ing—Warren Ross.

May 14: Objectivism at work and play—Johnnie McCulloch.

June 11: Current events and essays—Keith Robertson.

July 9: Mock trial—
Matthew Gerber.

August 13: Arguing ideas—Clark Hamilton.

September 10: Guest speaker.

Announcements

\$ Atlas Conferences has announced that it will present a conference in Houston on the weekend of February 10, 1995. It will feature Gary Hull, Andy Bernstein and Richard Salsman.

\$ The Objectivist Health Care Professionals Network (OHCPN) is an organization dedicated to the restoration and preservation of freedom in health care through the spread of the philosophy of reason. Their "Self-Defense Kit" is available from OHCPN, 500 Metropolitan Ave., Suite 453, Brooklyn, NY 11211. The price is \$7, payable to Salvatore J. Durante. OHCPN publishes *The Forum*, available for \$15, payable to Pamela L. Benson, at *The Forum*, P.O. Box 4315, South Colby, WA 98384-0315.

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