

# Houston Objectivism Society Newsletter

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## THE POSITIVE AS STRATEGY

by Dwyane Hicks

In a city of statues, London gives special prominence to the statues in Parliament Square. Across the street from Parliament, singular figures face the Gothic site of political debate in England and stand in various poses. Lincoln is the sole non-Englishman, and there is but one woman, Boadecia. This leader of a British tribe stands defiant in her chariot, just prior to the release of her angry horse, which would rush into a sea of Roman soldiers pulling her scythe-equipped chariot. But these statues do not stand on the grounds of Parliament itself; even Churchill resides across the street. Only two representations of great men stand on the grounds of Parliament, looking out at the public from Parliament as if to say: This is who we truly are.

The first statue is of Richard the Lionhearted, in battle dress and astride a great horse. He is big and powerful, and his focus is outward, his sword raised in a grand gesture. He speaks of the proud strength of a people. The other statue is of Cromwell, who stands brooding in contemplation, an unraised sword in one hand, a book in the other. Less grand and ostentatious, his figure is, nevertheless, weighty and intriguing. Richard's focus is outward, greeting the crowd of the ages. Cromwell, also a man of action, looks inward, and we are drawn to something more subtle.

A few years ago, Richard Harris starred in an interesting historical movie called "Cromwell". The movie had its

flaws, but it's worth seeing. Harris' Cromwell annoys with too many oaths to God in the short span of two hours, the story is somewhat historically inaccurate and the movie could have been more articulate in explaining Cromwell's role in transferring sovereignty from the Crown to Parliament. But via the power of art to encapsulate and show the essentials, it is an informative work. In particular, one important scene is entirely inaccurate in detail and yet true and legitimately powerful. And it illustrates a theme important to any advocate of values.

The movie presents us with Parliament recalled, after an eleven-year absence. Charles I has acquiesced in order to obtain the funds necessary to ward off an army from Scotland. But having been recalled, Parliament is not willing to raise the funds without getting something in return: A handful of representatives presents the protestations and demands of Parliament to an autocratic ruler. But complaining to their sovereign is not all they have in mind: his sovereignty over the land, as opposed to that of Parliament, is the issue at hand. The king's response is to enter the House of Parliament with one hundred soldiers and a warrant for the arrest of five members of Parliament. Warned in advance, all have flown but Cromwell, who sits unarmed and defenseless, or so it would seem. Were you Cromwell in this situation, when the king ordered his captain to arrest you, what would you do? Would you physically fight, putting up a



## ANALYZING THE NEWS

On Saturday, October 14, Jim Brents will coordinate a workshop on analysis of network news.

This is a repeat of a similar workshop held at a past meeting, which was very popular. Members will view the coverage of a common event by three (or more) television networks. We will then analyze the coverage, identifying similarities and differences.

We will answer questions like: Is one network's coverage more objective than the others? Which network is the most blatantly nonobjective?

Ultimately, we will be developing our abilities to extract an objective account of an event from the news coverage available to us. We will perform this analysis on two to three events, depending on time.

Time and Location: 6:30 p.m., U. of H. University Center. Take Calhoun exit off I-45. The room will be posted on event bulletin boards, and signs will be posted.

futile resistance? Or would you plead or condemn the authority at hand? What words could you call upon in defense against the power of the land? Would you protest that he was corrupt or that you were innocent of such charges? Would you condemn his authority and the cowardice of your peers, as they failed to support you? At the moment of losing, would you leave quietly, or leave a trail of sarcasm directed at all who remained?

Every boxer learns that the best defense is a good offense, but what does this say about an intellectual and moral conflict?

In the movie, Cromwell says the following as the King's captain makes his advance: "Any action against any member of this House is a breach of privilege, and I move this House declare as public enemy any who lay hands on its members. And I further move that any such action against this House be considered a crime against the people and treason against this nation."

For those who have not seen this movie, I will not reveal the outcome. But I can say, without spoiling this scene, that it is inaccurate, historically. The King did visit Parliament serving a warrant, but his entire quarry had flown. And at that time Cromwell was not yet prominent enough even to be listed on the warrant.

Still, the scene is accurate in that it dramatizes the nature of the conflict, the protagonists and the source of Parliamentary authority to which Cromwell referred. But the importance to me of the scene is that it dramatizes the fact that any authority which rests on one standard must be opposed by one which rests on an alternative standard, if the latter can achieve success. When confronting an authority in any field, his strength must be countered with a supe-

rior strength, and his position must be undermined by a standard which you have raised.

One would think that this would be obvious; yet, observe that Conservatives have never had such a standard, have for years evaded the intellectual and moral need for one, have condemned the only standard requisite to the task of defending freedom, provided by Ayn Rand, and floundered against even a corrupt and unpopular ideology. Merely being against some position is inadequate to the task of defeating it.

This aspect of Conservatism is also apparent in that it is suffused with negativism. However immoral and impractical the practices of Liberals appear, it is their standards of morality and politics which resolve today's issues, set agendas, determine long-range outcomes and establish the direction of a country. Without a genuine standard in opposition, Conservatives can only follow agendas set by others, criticize and make personal attacks, generate delaying tactics and appeal to God and tradition. In recent years, Conservatives have pumped up the importance of procedure, focusing on the means of effecting action rather than the ends. Thus, energy is wasted on Constitutional amendments, and Conservatives study in classrooms such things as "the prisoner's dilemma", the mechanics of "winner takes all" or States' rights.

Serious opposition requires that one take on the responsibility of presenting a positive alternative. Only then should criticism, by reference to that alternative, be leveled.

The scene in "Cromwell" shows the power of that approach, and the victory of Parliamentary forces in the English civil war demonstrates the possibilities. The same principle is evident in the Declaration of Independence, where a long list of grievances against the crown



is presented only after the succinct but substantive view of rights. Those who have seen some of the debates against socialists made by Objectivists should observe that the initial arguments are almost entirely the positive position and justification of rights, as opposed to negative rhetoric. The effect is wholly disarming to the socialists, and there is no suspense as to the outcome.

Numerous other examples could be provided, but it should be noted that in Brian Phillips' recent testimony before the Houston City Council in regard to the preservation ordinance, his opposition was based on the positive presentation of freedom and rights. It was this positive approach which provoked a positive response from the audience and put the Council in the position of defending itself. It's true that some members of the Council then attacked Phillips, rather than simply letting his testimony pass, but this indicates that his testimony was empowered beyond that of mere naysayers and that the Council was made vulnerable.

The power of the positive is also evident in everyday activities, anytime where values are at issue. Thus, for example, in a business meeting, it is not enough to find fault with the opposition or be sarcastic. One needs to prepare and present a positive case for a positive viewpoint, in reference to which alternatives can then be criticized. One can be sure that others will always be present to oppose one's position, but such opposition alone will be effective only if one's case is weak.

The "positive" is not arbitrary nor a grammatical construct. The

fact that it is absolute, not relative, is the source of its power. In ethics, Ayn Rand showed that "value" arises within the context of "life"; therefore, "value" can no more be ascribed to irrational practices than jumping off cliffs can be said to increase one's life span. And "the good" is a subset of the true. It is an evaluation of something in relation to the purpose of living. Truth, said Ayn Rand, is recognition of reality, and only reality exists. Reality, that which exists, is all that exists. The "positive" is powerful because it is the only thing to which one can refer.

This is why issues should be traced back to fundamentals. Liberals, for example, are able to maintain altruism as a standard only because the opposition of Conservatives will not identify altruism as the negative it is. As the impracticality of statism has become increasingly obvious through the years, Liberals have increasingly relied on the moral authority which altruism unchallenged grants them. In refusing to challenge altruism, Conservatives serve as the ideal opponent for Liberals. The value of the positive is granted to the negative. Moral authority is granted to the destructive.

Consistently embracing the positive is not without cost. It is the approach that requires work, as does the achievement of any value: values are conditional. Presenting the positive means discovering what it is and learning how to present it in an intelligible way. But this means that one is pursuing values and reaping their reward. It also empowers one in a way that an emphasis on the negative never can. Aside from reaping concrete benefits, the emphasis

on the positive elevates the person to the level of that which he is presenting. Ayn Rand's legendary status is due not only to her genius but to the fundamentality of the ancient issues to which she applied that genius.

Another cost of embracing the positive is that one becomes the target of those who will always attack any positive proposal. Being negative is easy. But if one's positive case is sound, the opposition of such people will be not a threat but an opportunity to reaffirm one's case and expose the irrational.

Both Gail Wynand and Dominique Francon held the mistaken view that the irrational has power. Roark showed them to be wrong. But for those who are unconvinced by fiction, consider Ayn Rand herself. She was born into the worst dictatorship in history, made possible by a twenty five hundred year tradition of philosophical mistakes piled on top of one another. Ayn Rand's distinction is that she discovered and presented a temple to the positive, from man's rights and romantic art to the base, "existence exists." By reference to the positive, she said that the Soviet Union was impotent and could not stand on its own. It is not an accident that the Soviet Union no longer exists, and the power of the positive predicts the fall of much else. The statues of Eastern Europe have fallen in the past few years, but certain mistaken but brittle monuments in philosophy remain.



## INTELLECTUAL ACTIVISM:

### Testifying to City Council

by Janet Lee Wich

At the June HOS meeting, as head of the Government Subcommittee of the Committee for Property Rights, I asked members to consider speaking in front of the Houston City Council in support of property rights. I thought it only proper that I should go to the City Council chambers myself to get first hand experience; after seeing the opposition firsthand, I can say that there is nothing to be intimidated by. I'd like to chronicle the events of my afternoon observing and participating in city government so that you'll know what to expect when you volunteer to go down to city council.

First, I decided to arrive at the City Hall Annex Building early so that I could get the "lay of the land". I expected the city council chambers to be very formal and intimidating. Instead, I was somewhat surprised at how informal it was and the proximity of the council members to the audience. The public seating area in the back of the room consisted of about fifty grey plastic chairs placed in six rows. The city council sits in the front of the room at a large semi-circular table. Separating the council from the audience is a counter the length of the room with a podium and microphone. I've seen pictures of the chambers and the council members on the news, and it was interesting to see everything in person.

During the first part of the session, five or six organizations went

to the podium to thank the city council for their help and to showcase their community projects. There was a lot of handshaking, back-patting, and picture taking going on. I couldn't help but think that I might burst a few bubbles with my talk. After about thirty minutes of this, they started calling the people on the public speakers' list. I was listed about six people down on the list as Janet Reed Wich speaking on the topic of property rates-- oops! Only two people in front of me on the list bothered to show up. The first woman to speak was just your average working class person who wanted the city council to pass a zoning law prohibiting auto repair shops from being within one hundred feet of houses or apartment buildings. For her reasons she cited the noise and the unsightliness of these establishments. I didn't think this woman would be too sympathetic to my speech; but the council sympathetically asked her about five questions, and the mayor said they would look into the problem immediately. The next speaker, wearing just a T-shirt and workpants, complained to the city council about a pole and a building which he felt should be demolished by the city. I'm bringing up these examples so that you can get an idea of the type of people and the problems the city council deals with on a weekly basis. Basically, you don't need a Ph.D. to be qualified to speak to the city council-- or to make a good impression.

Then it was my turn. I first had

the pamphlet "The Government vs. Freedom: In Defense of Property Rights" distributed to all of the city council members. Even though my subcommittee sent each of them a pamphlet in April, I would imagine that most of those pamphlets went unnoticed and unread. By passing the pamphlets out, I was forcing them to notice it, and I did observe some of the city council members reading the Ayn Rand quote on the back of the pamphlet. In terms of my strategy, I decided not to be too confrontational; instead, I decided on two reasonable goals: to let city council know that the Committee for Property Rights exists and to inform them that there are people in Houston who are concerned about their property rights. The following is the text of my talk:

*Good afternoon, my name is Janet Lee Wich, and I'm not here to today to speak about a specific ordinance; rather, I'm here to speak on a topic of a more general nature and of great importance: the topic of property rights. Recently, a group of Houstonians formed an organization called the Committee for Property Rights. This committee was formed to provide a moral defense for property rights.*

*The people who have joined the Committee for Property Rights are especially concerned about certain ordinances supported in the past by the city council. These ordinances include the recently defeated zoning ordinance as well as the recently passed historic preserva-*



tion ordinance.

*As a member of this organization, I sent each of you on the city council a letter accompanied by the pamphlet entitled "The Government vs. Freedom: In Defense of Property Rights". To date, I've received only one acknowledgment of the pamphlet. Now, I realize that each of you must receive a large quantity of mail, but I would urge each of you to carefully read over this pamphlet. As elected officials, I would like to think that you would want to know and would want to consider the views of your constituents-- especially when you are making decisions which directly affect our lives and our property.*

*As recent national congressional elections indicated, voters are becoming leery of the government interfering in their lives and violating the very rights the government is supposed to be protecting. Now, you may be thinking, "Well, what's her problem, of course we take rights seriously; we all know that our government was founded on the idea of individual rights." But just last week in the Houston Chronicle, one city council member was quoted as saying, "Your rights end where my nose begins." This quote indicates to me that there is at least some confusion as to what the concept of rights entails. So I would once again urge each of you to read the pamphlet and to give it serious thought and consideration because some of your constituents in Houston do take their rights, especially their property rights, seriously.*

The response to my speech was interesting. Not one council member asked me about the content of my speech. Instead, I had one member ask me if I lived in Bellaire (a zoned city) since the return address on the pamphlet is a post office box in Bellaire. I politely answered "no". One council woman wanted to know how long I've lived in Houston-- another substantive question. I politely let her know I've lived here for four years. Then Ms. Huey, in a slightly sarcastic tone, asked me if I've spoken in front of the city councils of Bellaire, Baytown, and she went on to list about five other communities that all have zoning. Her real question seemed to be: Why are you spending your time speaking to us, a city which doesn't have zoning, when all these other communities do have zoning? I responded, "No, I haven't spoken with those city councils, but that's a very good idea and I'll definitely look into doing just that in the future. Thank you for the suggestion." She immediately wanted to set the record straight by stating that she didn't support my position. I got one last question concerning the non-profit status of our organization and who exactly was on the board of directors.

When I left the city council chambers, I felt successful because I had made the City Council aware of CPR, and I perhaps planted a seed of doubt in their minds. I also felt good because I had taken action and defended a principle in which I strongly believe.

## INTELLECTUAL ACTIVISM

HOS members have engaged in numerous forms of intellectually activism in the past several months.

A letter by Keith Robertson appeared in the July 22 issue of *Creative Loafing*, a weekly newspaper in Charlotte, NC.

A letter by Pete Jamison appeared in the July 27 issue of the *Houston Press*.

On September 4 a letter by Paul Sean Hill was printed in the *Houston Chronicle*.

In early September Dale Schwartz testified to City Council on the issue of property rights.

In August, Brian Phillips was contacted by a member of the Association of Objectivist Businessmen regarding the Committee for Property Rights. Brian sent this individual several pieces of CPR literature, and the literature was then passed on to the President of the New Hampshire Landowners Alliance.

In early September, the President, Cheryl Johnson, called Brian. She told him that she would be speaking at an environmentalist conference in September, and intended to read the pamphlet "Government vs. Freedom: In Defense of Property Rights" everyday to prepare for her talk. She was to be the only pro-property rights speaker at this conference, and CPR literature was to be a major component of her preparation.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect is: the keynote speakers at this conference are Al Gore, Bill Clinton, and Mikhail Gorbachev.



## HOS Meeting Summaries

### Thinking in Essentials

August 1995

By Sean M. Rainer

The message of the August HOS meeting was, in essence, "think in essentials." The workshop-styled meeting, which was held at the University of Houston, used Academy Award winning movie *Forrest Gump* to help apply the methodology presented in the first half of the meeting. The meeting was co-hosted by Warren Ross and Pravin Shah.

Warren began the meeting with the introduction and motivation. An essential, he said, is the distinctive core of a thing. Warren cited Dr. Leonard Peikoff's "The Art of Thinking" lecture course as a source for in depth discussion of this issue. In that lecture Dr. Peikoff quoted Linda Rearden: "Thinking in essentials is the indispensable process of programming the subconscious mind for the instantaneous recall of everything one knows about the subject...The recall of this information is the formation of a context."

Why essentialize? Warren offered four reasons:

1) To make sense of the world. To be able to deal with things such as events, people and subjects. With the method of essentializing, one can disregard countless amounts of irrelevant information, making the thing more understandable. For example, Ayn Rand looked at the modern state of politics where liberals fight for federal control and conservatives fight for state control and pointed out that they are *essentially* the same thing. Both are fighting

for government control and only quibbling over who (or what entity) has it.

2) Communication. The receiver will get the message easier and with more understanding if the sender essentializes. Delimiting your message to its essentials is absolutely crucial in effective communication. If one wanted, say, to teach a beginner how to ride a bike, it would be dubious to start by instructing him on the proper methods of "popping a wheelie."

3) Discover new principles. Analysis by essentials is the first step toward thinking in principle. The ability to identify essentials may be the only way to apply absolutes across any number of units regardless of their particulars as against the Pragmatists who reject all principles and demand volumes of irrelevant data to make a decision of any kind.

4) Philosophical self-protection. Developing the skill of thinking in essentials can help protect one's self from absorbing non-essentials. Imagine the effect if one were to act on the principle that the essence of communism is long lines. It is true, of course, that communist countries are marked by hour long lines at stores but that is not the *essential* characteristic. Would one then conclude that a long line at the grocery store means one's own country is communist? Besides personal self-protection, thinking in essentials is an enormous benefit in the arena of ideas. Warren noted the debate between Dr. Peikoff and a socialist in which Dr. Peikoff was able to fully present his theory of individual

rights in a short time while his opponent used the allotted time to tell irrelevant anecdotes.

At this point, Warren led members through the methodology of essentializing. Warren's handout offered this outline: A) collect data, B) discard nondistinctive characteristics, C) discard again more selectively, D) integrate the remaining data and E) check your conclusion.

A) Begin by listing the characteristics of the thing (Warren used a movie review as an example). This initial list should include any information that might be useful. Warren said that it is a tremendous help to him to actually write out this list.

B) Now eliminate those characteristics which are nondistinctive. For example, special effects are not a distinctive part of *Forrest Gump*.

C) From what is left on the list, discard what might be distinctive but does not explain all or most of the other characteristics. It may be true, in other words, that a particular characteristic is distinctive to the thing, i.e. particular to it only, but it is not the "core" part of its definition.

D) Integrate the remaining elements to identify the essence. It might be helpful at this point to write down a short list of possible candidates if it is still not clear.

E) Check your conclusion by asking: "Is this really what this is about?" List one or two characteristics that your essence explains or integrates. Then play a kind of devils advocate and come up with some alternatives that might also explain



the thing and see why those alternatives are insufficient.

Using this method, Pravin moderated a discussion about the theme of *Forrest Gump*. Members divided into groups and tried to identify the essences of the two main characters, Jenny and Gump. Members tried to use the methodology previously presented.

From a list of scenes in the movie that Warren had prepared, we first tried to eliminate the scenes that did not give much evidence about the character. Then we narrowed it down to the handful of scenes that really defined the character and then combined this with the other characters and scenes in the movie. Next, we tried to articulate, in a phrase or two, the essence (or, in this context, theme) of the movie.

Members offered two alternatives for the essential meaning of the movie: 1. Doing the "right" thing leads to good results; and 2) Man has no choice in what happens to him.

Pravin noted that this first alternative is the conventional view of the movie (particularly among political conservatives), and on the surface, can seem plausible. Being humble and obedient, according to Christian ethics, is the path to success. Pravin pointed out that, without essentializing the meaning of the movie, one could implicitly accept this view, and hence, fall victim to a destructive message.

It was generally agreed that the second alternative more closely states the essential theme of the movie. Any "success" enjoyed by the characters in the movie was the result of luck. Virtually any time a character consciously chose a goal, he was defeated in his attempt to

attain it. This statement of the theme also explained the feather floating in the wind which opens and closes the movie, as well as the repeated line: "Life is like a box of chocolates-- you never know what you're going to get."

Thinking in essentials is not always an easy process. It sometimes takes years to collect enough data to draw a conclusion. But it is important to make it an ongoing process. "The bottom line," said Warren, "is practice."

### **Ethical Crises in Science** **September 1995**

by J. Brian Phillips

The September HOS meeting featured a paper presented by Steve Miller titled "Ethical Crises in Science: Fact and Fiction."

In recent years, both scientific journals and the popular press have reported numerous cases of "misconduct" by scientists. Instances of plagiarism, falsifying the results of experiments, misuse of research grants, etc. have led many to conclude that scientists must be taught ethical conduct.

While it is true that scientists need ethics, it is also true that house painters, teachers, and indeed, every human needs ethics, regardless of his profession. To focus on "scientific ethics," Steve said, is to imply that scientists have different ethical needs than other people.

While most commentators on the issue suggest that this misconduct threatens the future of science, Steve suggested that the real threat lies in the lack of freedom and reason which is evident in science to-

day. This, he said, is the real ethical crisis in science.

The Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Research Integrity (ORI) is responsible for investigating researchers who receive National Institutes of Health grants and have been accused of misconduct. On the surface, Steve noted, this might seem plausible, until we remind ourselves that the government should not be funding scientific research. Steve said that he was not aware of any instances of the ORI sinking to the level of the IRS or EPA, but questioned how long it would be before ORI bureaucrats abuse their positions.

To demonstrate the incompatibility of force and scientific inquiry, Steve presented the case of the Lysenko affair. Trofim Lysenko was a Russian agronomist who had no formal scientific training. Because he had the support of the Communist Party, he was able to avoid scientific scrutiny and impose his ideas upon the entire nation. For example, when he "discovered" that chilling winter wheat seeds and seedlings would increase the subsequent yield (something known in the West for about 70 years prior), he declared the same would hold true of spring wheat, tubers, and cuttings. The result was devastating to Soviet agriculture. Steve concluded that Lysenko probably set Soviet agriculture back by half a century.

Steve then turned to the banning of DDT in the United States. Widely used as a pesticide, and responsible for saving millions of lives, DDT had been shown to have no detrimental effects on humans or animals (other than the pests it was



intended to eradicate). William Ruckelshaus, head of the EPA at the time, was also a member of the board of and fund-raiser for the Environmental Defense Fund, the organization which led the fight to ban DDT. Ruckelshaus ignored the scientific evidence and, with a stroke of his pen, banned DDT.

While the lack of freedom resulting from agencies such as the EPA certainly harm science, Steve noted that the scientific community itself is also responsible for much of the crisis. Simply being free of

government coercion is not enough - scientists must also use the proper epistemology.

For example, rather than simply dismiss arbitrary claims about paranormal phenomenon such as ESP and telekinesis, scientists routinely attempt to disprove such phenomena. Increasingly, real scientists are studying such subjects, and prestigious scientific journals such as *Science* do not question such research, but instead criticize such research as "poorly designed" and "badly managed".

Similarly, quantum mechanics and the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle are used by scientists to "prove" that certainty is impossible. Thus, "science" is used to demonstrate the unreliability of science and scientists are declaring that the world they are charged with studying does not exist.

Steve concluded that the ethical problems facing scientists are no different than those facing all members of society. The antidote to this irrationality, Steve said, is Objectivism.

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

\$ Michael Mazzone has been elected President of The Association for Objective Law.

\$ The September 11 issue of *Newsweek* contains a short article titled "Ayn Rand Goes Multimedia." Noting Miss Rand's current popularity, the article reports, among other things, that Oliver Stone may remake *The Fountainhead*; Madonna is interested in optioning the short story "Her Second Career,"; and a documentary is due next year.

\$ At the September HOS meeting Warren Ross announced the winners of *The Fountainhead* and *Anthem* essay contests. Because the winner of *The Fountainhead* contest is now attending college in North Carolina, an awards ceremony will not be held this year. Instead, the November issue of the HOS Newsletter will be devoted to the essay contests, with at least one of the winning essays being published.

\$ Michael Gold is attempting to bring an Objectivist speaker to Houston to speak at an "in service" day at his high school. This is an excellent opportunity to introduce teachers to Objectivism. Because the school district will pay only a portion of the expenses, Michael needs to raise the remainder. Contact Michael at 894-3096 for more details.