

Houston Objectivism Society Newsletter

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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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The Pursuit of Happiness

by J. Brian Phillips

We hold these truths to be self-evident," declares The Declaration of Independence, "that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men." The Founding Fathers sought to create a society in which government protected the right of individuals to pursue their values, i.e., happiness.

While the Founding Father's words are a profound statement linking three crucial philosophical concepts-- the standard of value (life), the purpose of life (happiness), and the basic social condition necessary for the achievement of happiness (liberty)-- they attempted to erect political freedom on the ethics of altruism. Though his views on ethics were inconsistent, even Thomas Jefferson denounced egoism: "Self-love, therefore, is no part of morality. Indeed it is exactly its counterpart. It is the sole antagonist of virtue, leading us constantly by our propensities to self-gratification in violation of our moral duties to others." (*The Portable Thomas Jefferson*, edited by Merrill D. Peterson, Penguin Books, p. 541)

Not surprisingly, the Founding Fathers were influenced by Christian ethics. Again, Jefferson voices the predominant view: "His [Jesus] moral doctrines, relating to kindred and friends, were more pure and perfect

than those of the most correct of the philosophers, and greatly more so than those of the Jews; and they went far beyond both in inculcating universal philanthropy, not only to kindred and friends, to neighbors and countrymen, but to all of mankind, gathering all into one family, under the bonds of love, charity, peace, common wants and common aids." (Ibid, p. 494) Thus, while explicitly endorsing individual happiness-- i.e., the pursuit of values-- in the Declaration, they contradictorily endorsed an ethical code which advocates the sacrifice of values and makes happiness impossible.

As Dr. Peikoff notes in *The Ominous Parallels*, "[t]he Americans were political revolutionaries but not ethical revolutionaries." (p. 117) Thus, while they identified the purpose of a rational ethics-- happiness-- they did not advocate the moral means for its achievement.

In "The Objectivist Ethics", Ayn Rand defines happiness as "that psychological state which proceeds from the achievement of one's values." Happiness is the psychological reward resulting from the successful pursuit of values. And virtue-- i.e., rationality and its corollaries-- is the means by which one obtains and keeps values.

No human value, including life itself, is acquired automatically or without effort. Every value, i.e., effect, requires a certain course of action, i.e., cause. To achieve the effect one desires, one must identify and enact its

Vegetarianism

In the August meeting of HOS, Steve Miller will discuss vegetarianism.

Although vegetarianism is not new, it is becoming increasingly common in our culture for many reasons. Given the relatively recent scientific evidence supporting the medical benefits of vegetarian or largely vegetarian diets, many are becoming vegetarian out of concern for their own health.

However, many others are adopting bizarre dietary regimens which are actually only aspects of contrived "lifestyles," such as veganism, which precludes the use of animal products of any kind, not only in the diet, but for any other purpose, like clothing or medical research. Are vegans and other "ideological" vegetarians merely deluded, but harmless, individuals or are they symptomatic of the underlying philosophical and moral decay of our culture? If so, what dangerous ideas are being advanced by those who advocate vegetarianism for ethical or political reasons? This lecture will demonstrate that this apparently harmless trend is more than a passing fad and represents a serious threat to the concept of individual rights.

The meeting will be held on June 8 at 6:30 p.m. at the Clubroom of The Meridian apartment complex, 6263 Westheimer (between Hillcroft and Fountain-view), across from Payless Shoes.

NOTE: We are asking each member who attends 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. In addition, in an effort to reduce club expenses, those attending are asked to bring snack items.

cause.

While virtue will not guarantee one success, it is the only means by which success can be attained. Values can only be attained after one has established the proper relationship between one's mind and reality, a relationship which is established in metaphysics and epistemology. It is in metaphysics and epistemology that one determines whether reality is knowable and benevolent, or a murky, mysterious realm ruled by malevolent forces. It is one's answers to the issues of metaphysics and epistemology which determine whether one regards values as possible and one competent to achieve them, or values as a mere pipe dream to be arbitrarily destroyed at any moment by forces outside of our control.

As Dr. Peikoff explains in *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, a certain kind of happiness-- which he calls metaphysical happiness-- results from having the proper kind of relationship with reality. This kind of happiness results, not from the achievement of one's values, but from the knowledge that values are possible and one is competent to achieve them. It is the kind of happiness experienced by Roark even while working in the quarry, and by Galt during the long years of his struggle.

Metaphysical happiness is the consequence of the proper relationship between one's consciousness and reality. If one believes that one's mind is competent to grasp reality and one is capable of acting accordingly, one remains certain that values can be attained.

This point is brilliantly dramatized in the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*. Andy Dufrane, the main character, is wrongly convicted of murdering his wife and her lover and sent to Shawshank Prison for an undetermined time. Nearly every action he takes is regulated by guards, and the pursuit of virtually every value denied. Despite this, Andy retains a certain quality which the narrator-- another prisoner named Red-- notices early in the movie. Andy, Red notes, does not carry himself like other prisoners.

In one scene Andy overhears a guard complaining about the taxes he will pay on an inheritance. Andy suggests a legal loophole which he, as a former banker, can execute to eliminate all of the taxes. In exchange, he asks that the guard arrange for the men working on a roofing project be given three bottles of beer. Even though Andy does not drink any of the beer, we see him much more satisfied with the experience than any of the other prisoners. As the scene ends, Red notes that Andy did it just to feel human again-- he was motivated by the pleasure, not of drinking a cold beer, but of pursuing and achieving a value, even when it required extraordinary means.

In a later scene, Andy plays a Mozart Oratorio over the prison loudspeaker. The warden punishes him with time in solitary confinement. Upon his release, Andy tells the other prisoners that the punishment was well worth the experience he received from the music. The music, he says, touches a part of him which the warden and his guards can't touch.

In these two scenes we see a man who retains his ability to value, despite brutal and undeserved confinement. We see a man who knows that values are possible, and that he is competent to achieve them. Andy refuses to surrender his soul. While prison has removed his ability to pursue his highest values, Andy continues to value, and to pursue those values whenever possible.

After a month in prison, he approaches Red-- a man with an ability to obtain contraband for other prisoners-- and asks to purchase a rock hammer. When Red jokes that it would take a man 600 years to break out of prison with such an object, Andy responds that the rock hammer is for carving chess pieces from rocks found around the prison. At the movie's climax we learn that not only was Andy pursuing the more immediate goal of carving chess figures, but also that for twenty years he tortuously tunneled his way through the prison wall.

Andy's relationship to reality prevents him from becoming "institutionalized"-- the psychological state many prisoners reach after years of confinement. Conditioned by years of regimentation, such individuals are incapable of living outside of prison-- they are unable to pursue their own values because prison has taken that ability from them (if they ever possessed it). By contrast, upon his imprisonment, Andy's inner life remains essentially the same. What changes are the values possible to him.

In prison, regaining his freedom becomes his highest

value. For twenty years he purposefully labors to achieve that goal.

Andy does not allow prison to numb his mind and destroy his ability to value. He prefers more intellectually demanding activities, such as chess rather than checkers. He obtains a job as the warden's bookkeeper, which removes him from the monotony of the laundry room. He plots and executes-- unbeknownst to the viewer-- a daring escape.

Throughout the movie, Andy speaks to Red about the importance of retaining hope. In the context of the movie, Andy means the ability to value. Andy believes that to give up hope, to quit valuing, is to surrender one's humanity.

This point is shown through three characters-- Andy, Red and an elderly man named Brooks, who has become "institutionalized" after 40 years in prison. Brooks is paroled and given a job as a grocery sacker. Brooks is unable to deal with the outside world and soon commits suicide. To Brooks, the mind-numbing confinement of prison was preferable to a life of freedom. To Brooks, prison offered comfort, the "comfort" of not thinking. Prison removed the need to make choices, to learn, to value.

Red, when faced with the same situation as Brooks, initially reacts similarly. It is not mere symbolism that he has the same experiences Brooks did earlier, such as working in the same store, staying in the same half-way house room, or feeling a strong desire to commit a crime to return to prison. Years of imprisonment dulled his ability to value, and it is only Andy's

intervention which leads him to a different conclusion than Brooks.

The movie ends with Red and Andy re-uniting on a beach in Mexico. Through the long years of unjust imprisonment, Andy had dreamed of owning a charter fishing company in Mexico. It was this desire which fueled him, it was this value which he never abandoned. His escape from prison was not his final cause, but rather the means to a greater end.

The power of Shawshank lies in its theme-- to be human is to value. In Brooks (and many of the other inmates) we see the misery of a man who does not possess the ability to value. In Red we see a man who is still capable of valuing but has lacked the strength to do so; with Andy's help he rediscovers that ability. In Andy we see the heroic possibilities open to man; we see man the valuer.

While Andy's plight is tragic, his struggle is inspiring. Denied his freedom, he retains the one thing "they can't touch"-- his ability to value. He seeks values whenever possible, whether it is obtaining beer or building a library. His story makes us appreciate not only our freedom, but the value of valuing.

Unlike other animate entities, man does not select or pursue his values automatically. He must choose his values and obtain the knowledge of how to achieve them. He must choose the ends to which he will live his life, as well as the means by which he will pursue them. The purpose of ethics is to provide the principles by which man should live.

The Objectivist ethics begins by identifying why man needs values. Objectivism holds that man's life qua man, i.e., life as a rational being, is the standard of value because man faces the fundamental alternative of life or non-life. It is this standard by which all intellectual and existential actions must be judged.

Life as the standard does not mean life under any conditions or by any means. It means life in accordance with man's essential nature. Unlike the Founding Fathers, Ayn Rand explicitly identified man's essential nature-- his rational faculty-- and the essential obstruction to virtue in a social setting-- the initiation of force.

Objectivist ethics consists of identifying the applications of rationality to the various aspects of man's life. Government's purpose, as the Founders stated, is the protection of the individual right to act according to his nature, i.e., by reason.

To pursue his values, man must be free to act according to his own rational judgment. He must not be compelled to act contrary to his judgement. It is government's purpose to protect man's right to act rationally, to be virtuous, to pursue values.

Objectivist political theory is, as Dr. Peikoff has stated, one of the highest floors in philosophy's skyscraper. The lower floors, i.e., politic's foundation, consists of metaphysics, epistemology and ethics. The starting point of politics is the end of ethics.

The Declaration of Independence identifies two vital ethical concepts. But those

concepts are at opposite ends of ethics-- much lies between life as the standard and happiness as one's purpose. Ayn Rand identified what lies between, and developed an integrated philosophical system.

Freedom is a concept which arises in politics. Politics rests on ethics, and ethics is derived from epistemology. While attempting to defend freedom, the Founding Fathers denounced its ethical root-- egoism-- and lacked a proper view of man's means of acquiring knowledge.

(This is not meant to denigrate the Founding Fathers or their achievements. That we still retain many elements of the system they created is testament to their heroism. But they could not protect freedom for the long-term because they lacked the proper philosophical context.)

For centuries philosophers have offered mankind altruism in a variety of forms. Altruism, because it proposes the sacrifice of values, has led to the kind of resignation toward values portrayed by the "institutionalized" prisoners in *Shawshank*. Ayn Rand rejected altruism and the irrationalism on which it is based. Most important of her achievements is her portrayal in her novels of the kind of unconquerable attitude toward valuing that distinguished Andy Dufrane from the other prisoners. She provided a moral defense for individual liberty. However, her achievements make possible not only a free society, but also give us the motivation and the means by which to achieve the highest glory possible-- personal happiness.

Objectivism as a Guide to Self-Change

The September HOS meeting will feature a course taught by Dr. Ellen Kenner, a Clinical Psychologist in private practice in Rhode Island. This course is being presented by Lyceum International and will take place on September 7.

After reading Ayn Rand's novels, most of us become keenly interested in our own thoughts and behaviors. We admire Hank Rearden's and Dagny Taggart's radiant sense of life and we want to understand and emulate them. This course focuses on the process of self-change-- on how to identify problem areas in ourselves, on what to realistically expect in terms of uprooting self-defeating thoughts and habits and on how to catalyze healthy self-change.

This course also focuses on recognizing virtues in ourselves and nurturing them. Topics include: maintaining independent judgement, tuning into uncomfortable emotions, translating these emotions into underlying thoughts, gaining and holding full context, recognizing choice points, making a commitment to action, acting effectively in the face of failure, and increasing one's desire for value experiences.

Exercises and demonstrations will be used which emphasize the need for benevolence towards oneself in the face of change, e.g., the need to avoid unearned self-blame in the face of error.

Lyceum International will be mailing information regarding this course to HOS members in early August.

HOS Meeting Summaries

by J. Brian Phillips

Identifying Context June 8, 1996

The June HOS meeting featured a workshop titled Identifying Context led by Brian Phillips.

Context, as defined by Dr. Leonard Peikoff in *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, is the sum of cognitive elements conditioning an item of knowledge. "This sum," writes Dr. Peikoff, "is what enables us to reach the new conclusion, to prove it, to interpret it, to apply it. This sum, in short, is what sets the item's relationship to reality and thus the item's meaning and proper use." In other words, the reasons for an item of knowledge are necessary for understanding the meaning. As Peter Schwartz has put it, the why determines the what. Thus, if we want to understand some item of knowledge, we must identify the context which gave rise to it.

Because all knowledge is interrelated, holding context is a requisite part of proper cognition. Through integration, the process allows man to expand the range of his consciousness through unit reduction. The process of integration is a combining of many units into a new unit.

The methodology of identifying context is essentially the same as thinking in essentials-- collect data, integrate and differentiate. However, when thinking in essentials one is narrowing one's focus, i.e., making more precise distinctions. When

identifying context, one is expanding one's focus, i.e., making wider integrations.

In identifying context, one is seeking to identify the relationship among one's knowledge. In this manner abstract ideas and concepts remain tied to reality.

With this background, attendees then sought to identify the context, and therefore the meaning, of two statements: "I prefer boys," and "I support freedom."

The first statement was examined in the context of a 5-year-old boy, a 17-year-old girl, and Michael Jackson.

For the 5-year-old boy, the statement means that he prefers to play with boys, rather than girls, because of the interests each has at that age. For the 17-year-old girl, the statement means that she now regards boys in a romantic and/ or friendship relationship, because of her maturing. For Michael Jackson, the statement means an abnormal basis of companionship, because of his known proclivity for entertaining young boys at his FantasyLand Ranch.

While discussing Michael Jackson's context, it was noted that there are many allegations and rumors about Jackson and young boys, but few known facts. In other words, our context is limited. Therefore, the conclusion one reaches must reflect that limited context.

There are often situations in which we must reach a conclusion, such as when one is faced with an

emergency repair on one's home, when one cannot obtain more information to identify the full context. In such instances one must still hold context-- we must still identify what one knows and how it relates.

The second statement, "I prefer freedom," was first studied in the context of the Founding Fathers. Attendees listed many facts known about the Founding Fathers, such as: their revolutionary politics, they were slaveholders, had experienced tyranny, influenced by Locke, fought for freedom, were influenced by religion, and were well-educated. In the process of integrating these facts, attendees distinguished two sets of ideas: those influenced by reason, and those influenced by religion. Thus, to the Founding Fathers, freedom meant the protection of individual rights in most instances, but exceptions were allowed.

Next, the same statement was examined from the context of Libertarianism. The known facts listed included: Libertarianism embraces no single philosophical foundation, the movement includes anarchists, acceptance of pedophilia, and support for North Vietnam. These facts were integrated and it was concluded that to the Libertarian, "freedom" means whim worship.

Finally, the same statement was examined from the context of Ayn Rand. Among the facts listed were: she was a philosopher, she had an integrated system, she identified the initiation of force as the only

means by which rights can be violated, and she defined a rational ethics. To Ayn Rand, "I support freedom" meant the absence of the initiation of force within the framework of an ethical system that rests on reason.

For the Founding Fathers, the concept of "freedom" arose in a mixed context predominantly resting on reason; for Libertarians, the concept has no context and thus no meaning, i.e., is arbitrary; for Objectivism the concept arises in a hierarchical philosophical context.

These two exercises demonstrated how the same words, spoken in different contexts, can have vastly different meanings. Thus, to understand any idea we must integrate it to all of our knowledge, with the result being a unified, consistent body of knowledge.

Rational Care of the Body July 13, 1996

The July HOS meeting featured a presentation by Dr. Harry King titled "Rational Care of the Body". Harry began his presentation by identifying the body's 6 essential

needs-- oxygen, water, sleep, nutrition, exercise and gravity. If man is deprived of these needs, his health will deteriorate and/ or he will die. Harry noted that sunlight may also be an essential need.

The human body, Harry said, is a chemical factory. That factory requires fuel and maintenance. The fuel comes in the form of oxygen, water and food; the maintenance in the form of sleep and exercise.

Food is simply a collection of chemicals which our body must process. The nature of the chemicals we consume has a direct bearing on how well our body functions, i.e., our health. Food consists of three components-- fats, proteins, and carbohydrates. In addition, our body also needs certain vitamins and minerals.

While medical scientists can establish ranges for the proper quantities of each of these nutrients, each individual is unique in what his body requires. Harry stressed that each individual must understand how his diet and exercise pattern will influence his health, both today and in the long term.

Much of what was once considered a consequence of aging

is now known to be a result of a lack of exercise. When unused, the cellular structure of muscles begins to deteriorate; simultaneously the body begins to accumulate fat. The result is the slow loss of health.

The three factors most affecting health in Americans is fat and cholesterol intake, obesity and a lack of exercise. Fat intake contributes to high cholesterol levels and heart disease, the leading cause of death among Americans. Simply by limiting fat intake and exercising, Americans would be much healthier.

Harry concluded by explaining how individuals can monitor their health. He said that 4 items-- a bathroom scale, a food scale, the book *Food Values*, and a device for measuring body fat-- were sufficient. Food Values and the food scale will allow one to monitor fat intake, while knowing one's weight and body fat percentage will indicate the effects of one's diet and exercise.

Following his prepared presentation, Harry answered a wide range of questions from the audience.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

\$ Two articles written by Brian Phillips and originally published in *The Freeman* have recently been reprinted. "Tom Paine's Revolution" was printed in the July/ August issue of *AOB News*, and "Private Cities" was printed in an anthology of articles from *The Freeman*.

\$ HOS now has a home page on the Web. The address is <http://members.aol.com/WSRoss/hos.html>

\$ Anyone interested in attending an OPAR study group should contact Brian Phillips at 665-2680.

\$ An awards ceremony for essay contest winners will be held in August. Details will be announced.