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John Ridpath giving a lecture on Objectivism sponsored by the York Objectivism Club.

Q. Does that mean that Ayn Rand's philosophy is hard to understand?

A. I think that one of the characteristics of a good student is that he sees connections faster. It is not an issue of being morally good or bad. The good students are the ones who are more aware of problems in their personal lives and problems in their society. They are the ones who are most interested in the deepest questions and in philosophical answers. Any student who is looking for some second-hand set of rules to live his life by, some one who doesn't think for himself, is not right for Objectivism. Objectivism is championing the independent rational mind. Ayn Rand's philosophy is offering what she has discovered is true of Man's life and its requirements, but she is not offering it in the form of Ten Commandments, as with other philosophies. Objectivism is a philosophy for each person to consider and accept or reject on their own. As such, it is in its essence profoundly anti-dogmatic, unlike many other prominent twentieth century viewpoints.

Q. If you came into a culture that was Objectivist what could you expect to see in the politics of that culture?

A. The basis of an Objectivist culture would be the endorsement of the rational life in the behaviour of the members of that culture. A part of that would be the endorsement of voluntary exchanges between people. An Objectivist culture would be significantly non-mystical. It would be a culture where science, technology, business and reason were highly respected. It would be a culture in which economic behaviour would be based on respect for reason, the use of the mind, the pursuit of productive values and the free trade of these values on the market. I think this would result in a very high standard of living. It would be a society in which people would take responsibility for their own lives, which really to a growing extent, is not true today.

The fundamental characteristics of an Objectivist culture, if you arrived in one, would be its productivity, its benevolence, its stability and its wealth. In terms of what its politics would be like, the government would be, relative to what we have today, a small institution whose functions would be severely limited by a written constitution geared to the purpose of protecting individual rights. The Government's functions in essence would involve a police force and an armed force for protecting its citizen's rights and a court system for resolving disputes. That, relative to our culture, would be a very dramatic decrease in the role government plays in society. Many of the things that are presently being done by government in our society would have to be done, and would be done very much better, by private institutions.

Q. What about morality questions, abortion for example?

A. The Objectivist view of abortion is based on the principle that the purpose of government is to protect the rights of citizens and that the concept of rights pertains to the non-coercive type of social relationship that people have to enter into with each other. By people we mean actual existing people. As far as the mother and the fetus are concerned there is no issue of rights whatsoever, because there is no social relationship between the mother and the fetus. There is only one actual person.

It is the mother's right to her own life and to her own body that gives her the right to terminate the life of a growth in her body if she so chooses. The father doesn't have the right to dictate to the woman what she does with her body. The mother has sovereignty over her life and body, which means that we have to leave her alone. The key point is that a potential human being, i.e. the fetus in the process of growth, does not have claims over the rights and body of an actual human being.

It is a real shame, a tragedy, that in the abortion debate the people who are enemies of the mother's rights are calling themselves the "Right-to-Life" group and the people who are in favour of rights are reduced to the position where they have to say they are for "choice." The pro-abortion people, who actually have morality on their side, have given the moral grounds of "the right to life" away, and because of this I don't believe the future bodes well for them.

Q. In what way would Objectivism change the concept of Unions?

A. My reaction to that is that the question is a big jump from philosophical issues. I think that it is important that people realize, not in the defence of Objectivism alone but more in the defence of philosophy, that philosophy deals with the most fundamental and general principles available to us. It provides the most general integrators with which we try to deal with specific situations. The truth or the falseness of a philosophical principle is determined at the philosophical level. If we discover that the facts of reality justify the claim of a certain philosophical principle to be true, then that philosophical principle remains true no matter what complexities might develop in less philosophical areas. To bring up an issue that some people are concerned about is perfectly appropriate as long as you realize that if a philosophical principle leads to a conclusion in a more non-philosophical area that you are not too emotionally comfortable with, that it is not grounds for rejecting the philosophy.

The Objectivist position on labour unions is a product of its view of the nature of man's rights. Men are all morally individual sovereign entities that have to be left free from the use of physical force to act as they choose in the pursuit of their values, as long as the actions they choose do not involve the violation of other people's rights. Clearly, individuals can decide to join together and act as a group if they think they may achieve their objectives better as a group rather than as individuals. That is their right. Objectivism philosophically is in favour of these kinds of associations among men. Therefore Objectivism is perfectly comfortable with the existence of labour unions. The place where Objectivism and unions clash is not with regard to the appropriateness of unions but with regard to any economic organization turning to the government to have the government use its powers to support the ends of the particular organization. Through government action labour unions have been able to participate in actions which are blatant opposition to people's rights, for example, the use of physical force in picket lines, and, more subtly, the reliance on government macro-economic policy to alleviate problems with unemployment that union policy may create.

Q. You teach a course the premise of which is that philosophy determines social change. In that view, what is the philosophical basis of society today?

A. If it is true that philosophy determines our future, which I think is absolutely true, then our future will ultimately be explained by the philosophical guidance we accept today. If you look at our culture today, I would say that it is, on the surface, significantly non-philosophical. There is a so-called philosophical system called Pragmatism which basically argues against philosophy and the validity of philosophical principles. Pragmatism is against the following of abstract principles in life and is in favour of dealing with things pragmatically at the time. That has helped to philosophically castrate our society. This goes right up to the highest offices. However, I do think that, underneath, our society is in fact very importantly influenced by Christian moral theory and the morality of altruism. That relates to the mixed economy and the welfare state.

Our society is also very importantly influenced by the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, who is the most important philosopher for understanding the social developments of the last 200 years. Kant has argued very profoundly for Christian altruism as a moral duty. He has also argued for extreme limits on the extent to which the human mind can know the world. He is, in essence, saying that man's mind is incapable of knowing and understanding the nature of objective reality, and nothing could be more destructive of successful human life than this.

Our culture then seems on the surface to be significantly non-philosophical but under the surface it is guided by philosophical ideas with which Objectivism is in profound disagreement. That is why Objectivism is treated by the philosophical heart of our society as some sort of non-philosophical activity. The future of our culture is open to any philosophy that we choose to follow. Even though our culture is in the grip of very destructive philosophical ideas, Objectivism is available as an

alternative for men to consider. Given that men have free will we can't make any definitive predictions about what the future holds. But the philosophical basis of our society today is deeply wrong, which is why social trends such as growing statism, violence, subjectivism, artistic disintegration, inflation, and despair are so ominous.

Q. Why is Objectivism denied by the philosophical community?

A. Ayn Rand's philosophy of Objectivism is, to me, as the result of over twenty years of study, a very deep philosophical argument. I see it as one of the great philosophical breakthroughs in human history, but it is a very fundamental challenge to the philosophical outlook which has been dominating our culture for the last 200 years. Many people in the intellectual community are already so thoroughly entrenched in their own philosophical outlook, as a result of their own philosophical training, that they are virtually rendered incapable of approaching Objectivism objectively.

Objectivism is denying many important philosophical distinctions and principles that the whole intellectual community is based on. Consequently the reaction of people to a challenge like this, unless they are open to the challenge and are interested in pursuing it, is to react negatively against it, to dismiss it as not being philosophical. I must say that according to some twentieth century notions of what philosophy is, Objectivism is not philosophical in their definition of the term at all.

Their reaction is to dismiss it as not being worthy of consideration. The philosophical community has reacted very negatively to Ayn Rand presenting philosophical ideas in the context of a novel (*Atlas Shrugged*) and they are not overly familiar with her non-philosophical writings. They by and large dismiss her out of hand as not a serious thinker.

Q. How do you respond to the accusations that Objectivism is fascist, unemotional and atheistic?

A. Often you hear sneers made about Objectivism along the grounds that it is extremely right wing and therefore suspected of being in the league with fascism. That is incredibly wrong. It is so wrong that it is an error that can't be made innocently and in fact it shows you how unfair and malicious people are and how threatened people are by Ayn Rand's ideas that they would be reduced to that. If someone is familiar with her ideas at all they know that she is an advocate of limited government. They know that she is an advocate of the rights of man. She is arguing for a social system in which everyone is free. The government has very limited functions. Fascism is a form of tyranny and totalitarianism. It is a vicious form of collectivist tyranny which has surfaced in the twentieth century.

That anyone could say that there is any connection at all between Ayn Rand's philosophy and fascism is making an assumption at the most crude and unphilosophical level. Anyone who writes her off as a fascist is at best totally ignorant and shouldn't be talking about her ideas at all but I think it is even worse than that. They know they are consciously misrepresenting her theory.

There are many people who don't understand the connection between reason and emotions and so they are very accustomed to acting on the basis of feeling. Some people's philosophical ideas are rationalizations of their basic feelings on a lot of things. It is their view that reason is totally cold and the rational person has no emotions. Our emotions are caused by our thinking. They are by-products of the experiences we've had and the intellectual judgements we make as to what the significance of those experiences are. It is not the case that emotions and the mind are divorced from each other. It is possible to rationally identify the value of certain things and to have very strong emotional feeling about those values. Emotions and reasons can go together in a completely compatible way. I have found in my own life that my capacity to be emotional has increased with my ability to understand things rationally.

What Objectivism is against is leading an emotional life without understanding where your emotions come from and treating your emotions as a kind of beginning point and building from that. Emotions are value responses. When you have a positive emotion it is because you see a value that you hold important being achieved in some way. When you have a negative emotion it is because some value you hold is being attacked in some way.

Objectivism is an atheistic philosophy. Objectivism is not so excited about the negative criticism that it has to make. It takes the Aristotelian view that reason is man's only means to knowledge like faith, divine inspiration and revelation. There has never been in the history of philosophy a valid rational argument put forward for the existence of God.

Q. As a professor and an Objectivist, what do you feel is the most important thing that your students get from your courses? Are you aiming for an Objectivist training, or a society in which philosophy is the guiding force in people's lives?

A. Neither. What I am aiming for is something different. I am trying to help them become philosophically serious about their lives, not sell a particular philosophy. The study of one's philosophical ideas and the choice of the philosophical principles by which one is going to live one's life, is a demanding exercise to engage in. It is also the most crucial choice students are going to make in their lives. They should take this question of the philosophy by which they are going to lead their lives very seriously. They should not be dissuaded of their investigation of different philosophical viewpoints by peer pressure, or by sneers and sarcasm on the part of their professors or by the fact that it is not presented to them as a serious alternative. My first concern is not to sell Objectivism, but to contribute to the quality of their lives, and to show them the value of thinking independently and fundamentally. Only secondarily as a small part of my teaching, do I bring to their attention a philosophy which, I think, is very well worth their considering. I personally have found it to be the crux of what I consider to be a very rewarding life, and particularly in view of the apathy, cynicism and self-doubt that threatens to engulf students as they struggle to learn, I recommend, with passion, that they read Ayn Rand.