

BOOK REVIEW

of

John W. Robbins,

Without a Prayer: Ayn Rand and the Close of Her System,
The Trinity Foundation, 1997.

This book is in the Evangel Library,
and this review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

Some of you may have read books by Ayn Rand and been influenced by her, but others may have only heard of her and wonder how valuable a review of a book about her at this date might be. Simply put, Ayn Rand was one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century. What is surprising to me is how influential she still is some twenty two years after her death. Although she wrote nonfictional books about her “objectivist” philosophy, she chose to communicate it mostly through works of fiction. Her most popular works of fiction are *Atlas Shrugged*, *The Fountain Head*, *Anthem*, and *We the Living*. These books have sold in the tens of millions. In November, 2004, on Amazon.com, *Atlas Shrugged*, published in 1957, had an Amazon sales rank of 564, which is very high. Only 563 books are currently selling better. There were 1,146 reviews of the book posted. *The Fountain Head*, published in 1943, had an Amazon sales rank of 1,094 and had 784 posted reviews. *Anthem*, published in 1938, had an Amazon sales rank of 4,451 and had 368 posted reviews. *We the Living*, published in 1936, had an Amazon sales rank of 20,672 and had 100 posted reviews. Amazon.com has over 100 items authored or co-authored by Ayn Rand for sale. What is it about her books and thoughts that is so appealing? She is supposedly the champion of rational thought and personal freedom. Unfortunately, she was an atheist. In her system, man is the highest being in the universe. Does that mean that all of her ideas were wrong? No, not according to Robbins. He agrees with some of her conclusions, but not with her arguments for them. *Without a Prayer* “is an analysis and refutation of the ideas that Rand set forth so persuasively in both her fiction and non-fiction works.”

John W. Robbins earned his doctorate at The Johns Hopkins University, has served as chief of staff to a Member of Congress, has been a college Professor, and is founder and president of The Trinity Foundation and The Freedom School. He publishes a monthly newsletter, *The Trinity Review*. Of this book, *Without a Prayer*, D. James Kennedy, pastor of the PCA Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, writes “This is a powerful book – a book of strong reasoning, sound apologetics, passionate persuasion, and brilliant logic – all aimed at dismantling the error with which Ayn Rand mesmerized perhaps a generation or two. Dr. Robbins removes, with surgical accuracy, the attractive outer layer of Rand’s lethal philosophy to reveal the familiar underlying corruption of humanism and atheism.”

Part of the reason for Ayn Rand’s success as a promoter of objectivist philosophy is, as noted above, her use of fiction to convey her message, and that many if not most followers of Ayn Rand have only read her fiction. Since she is an excellent writer of fiction, those who have read her books may be persuaded of her philosophy without really having studied it carefully. Narrative and rhetoric can be powerful means of communicating a message, but the intelligent reader must be careful to consider the logic, facts, and implications of the message before allowing themselves to be persuaded. In *Without a Prayer*, Robbins considers Ayn Rand’s nonfiction works as well as fiction to get a better understanding of her philosophy. In this very thorough analysis and refutation of Rand’s philosophy, Robbins considers, in seven chapters, objectivist epistemology, objectivist theology, objectivist ethics, and objectivist politics.

Robbins claims that Ayn Rand’s philosophy is based on the concept that a man’s mind at birth is a *tabula rasa* (a blank tablet). Robbins writes “Now this assertion that man’s mind is a *tabula rasa* is important to Rand’s philosophy, as it is to all varieties of empiricism. Notice that it is not a conclusion for which arguments are presented; it is simply asserted. Of course, it is required by Rand’s assumption that all our knowledge comes through the senses. If there were something already in the mind, then all our knowledge would not come through the senses. But Rand does not bother to prove that man’s mind is *tabula rasa*; she simply asserts it as a corollary of her empiricism.” Robbins acknowledges that all philosophies have axioms that are asserted and not proved, but he goes on to show that *tabula rasa* coupled with empiricism leads to a contradiction and therefore cannot be true. A child that knows nothing and yet has a conscious mind is a contradiction. “A consciousness conscious of nothing is simply not a consciousness. A mind that is empty is not a mind . . . This egregious contradiction lies at the foundation of Rand’s epistemology”.

At the age of thirteen Ayn Rand decided she was an atheist. Not an atheist in that she had no concept of God, but that she chose not to believe in Him. She based her decision on two reasons: she didn’t think that there were sufficient reasons to believe in God’s existence, and she also rejected God on what she thought were moral grounds. Robbins notes that “Rand’s belief in the immorality of God is pervasive in her works and philosophy.” She believed “that the concept of God is immoral because such a concept would mean that man is not the highest being in the universe.” “Objectivism holds that man, including man’s capacity to reason, is a product of inanimate nature. Nature has determined that man shall not be determined. This position is logically impossible. Mind, consciousness, in both Marx and Rand, is an epiphenomenon of matter, yet mind has the capacity to master matter. The derivation of mind from matter, of reason from unreason, of consciousness from unconsciousness, of freedom from mechanism, is an enormous and insoluble problem for Objectivism, as it is for other varieties of naturalism.”

Rand had lists of virtues based on her rational self-interests, some of which bear resemblance to Christian teaching. But Robbins quotes Nietzsche to remind Rand’s supporters that one cannot pick and choose when it comes to the Christian faith: “When one gives up the Christian faith, one pulls the right to Christian morality out from under one’s feet.”

Robbins concludes that to clarify Rand’s ideas is to refute them. “Once the ideas are examined, stripped of Rand’s literary prose, it becomes clear that they are blatantly self-contradictory.” One “ought to examine the premises of the various philosophies, and there one finds a common element: the rejection of propositional revelation. All secular philosophies – indeed, most religious philosophies – reject Biblical revelation. . . . Rand recognized the law of contradiction as governing all thought, and yet chose – worse, she created – a philosophy full of contradictions. She stands condemned by her own standard.”