

BOOK REVIEW

of

Michael B. Yang,

Reconsidering Ayn Rand,
Winepress Publishing, 2000.

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 five years after her death. Although she wrote nonfictional books about her “objectivist” philosophy, she chose to communicate it mostly through works of fiction. Her two most popular works of fiction are *Atlas Shrugged*, and *The Fountainhead*. Rand’s books have sold in the tens of millions. In May, 2007, on Amazon.com, *Atlas Shrugged*, published in 1957, had an Amazon sales rank of 250, which is very high. Only 249 books are currently selling better. Amazon reports that 572 books cite *Atlas Shrugged*. There were 1,395 reviews of the book posted. *The Fountainhead*, published in 1943, had an Amazon sales rank of 697 and had 905 posted reviews. Amazon.com has over 490 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, personal freedom, and personal achievement. Unfortunately, she was an atheist. In her system, man is the highest being in the universe. She is a very persuasive and good writer. It really is no wonder that she has influenced so many, and continues to do so.

This book by Michael Yang is very compelling for two reasons. First, because it is a very personal and interesting account of how Yang was influenced by Rand in his youth, and was persuaded to adopt her philosophy, including atheism, and how he came out of her philosophy in later years and was converted to Christianity. Second, because it contains a very serious analysis of Rand’s philosophy (something that Yang had failed to do in his youth), and in comparing Rand’s philosophy to the teachings of Jesus Christ he has found Rand seriously in error in a number of ways. So, whether a compelling account of one’s journey in life, reading like a novel, interests you, or whether a philosophical critique of one of the twentieth centuries most compelling atheistic philosophies interests you, in either case, this book is a very good read.

Michael B. Yang obtained a B.S. degree in biomedical engineering from The Johns Hopkins University and an M.D. degree from the Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts Institute of Technology Joint Program in Health Sciences and Technology. He is a physician who practices ophthalmology. In Chapter 1, Introduction, Yang gives an introduction to Ayn Rand and tells of his personal journey into and out of Rand’s philosophy. He opens his book as follows: “‘*Atlas Shrugged* changed my life.’ Thousands, perhaps millions, of people have spoken those words, and I was one of them.” He explains that he was fourteen when he was first exposed to Ayn Rand. He describes how *Atlas Shrugged* was “a novel unlike any other I had ever read before. The plot was thrilling, and the ideas behind the story were inspiring and provocative. I had great difficulty limiting myself to just a few hours with *Atlas Shrugged* each day. Schoolwork was boring by comparison with my newfound love. When I finished reading the book, I felt pleasantly exhausted and joyously elated. I knew the course of my life had changed forever. I scribbled on the last page of the book: ‘December 27, 1981. Date of my intellectual rebirth.’” Yang reports on page 18 that “Perhaps a measure of the book’s continuing influence may be estimated from the results of a survey conducted jointly by the Library of Congress and Book-of-the-Month Club in 1991. The survey asked readers which books had made a difference in peoples’ lives. The results found *Atlas Shrugged* placing second only to the Bible.” However, as Yang grew intellectually he began to question the philosophical ideas that were behind Rand’s teachings. “That quest resulted in my acknowledging the truth and the reality of Christ – that he is the resurrected Savior and the Lord of all. I began that journey by reconsidering Ayn Rand and the philosophy of Objectivism, and I have continued to grow in my understanding of her philosophy in the years since I came to know Christ.”

In Part One: The Fiction and the Practice, Yang primarily analyzes Rand’s two most significant novels, *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead*, and questions whether the ideas presented in those two novels stand the tests of logic and experience. Part One consists of Chapter 2, Establishing the Foundations: A Synopsis of Rand’s Two Major Novels, Chapter 3, Self-Esteem, Confidence, and Human Worth, Chapter 4, The Code of Competence, Chapter 5, Romantic Love: Objectivism and Christianity, and Chapter 6, In Pursuit of Objectivist Love. Rand presents herself as the champion of self-esteem, confidence, human worth, competence, and romantic love. Yang questions whether Rand’s ideas hang together logically and really accomplish in practice what she claims. One of Yang’s discoveries was that Rand had an agenda against Christianity, and she didn’t shrink from misrepresenting it.

In Part Two: The Philosophy, the larger of the two parts, Yang looks critically at Rand’s philosophy. Although Yang is not a professional philosopher, he may well have written the most thorough analysis of Rand’s teaching to date. Part Two consists of Chapter 7, A Survey of Objectivism, Chapter 8, Reason and Reality, Chapter 9 Morality and Government, Chapter 10, Science and Christianity, Chapter 11, Bridging the Chasm, and Chapter 12, Epilogue: In the Name of the Best within Us.

In Chapter 8 Yang writes: “Objectivism believes man’s mind is blank, or *tabula rasa*, at birth. As we mentioned before, the *tabula rasa* requirement for consciousness comes from a need to avoid preexistent ideas, categories, or forms in the mind that can distort the material provided by the senses. Quite obviously, it is also necessary because, for Rand, all knowledge came through the senses. . . . we are asked to take the validity of senses for granted. Then we are told that undifferentiated sensory chaos is transformed into percepts in a mysterious but reliable manner by a blank mind.” Then Yang perceptively asks, “Are these not the very assertions in need of demonstration?” A few pages further on, Yang writes: “If the foregoing argument has been correct and universals are necessary for the identification of individuals, then Rand’s initial premise, that the mind is free of *a priori*, preexistent forms or categories, is also false. Universals are necessary for learning to begin, and the *tabula rasa* mind that Rand insists upon simply does not exist.” A few more pages further, Yang writes: “We may conclude from our discussion up to this point that Rand failed to demonstrate the validity of the senses, she failed to give a valid account of concept formation, and she failed to demonstrate how her contextually absolute and open-ended concepts could reach truth.”

Rand taught that her philosophy was objective, and not just beliefs or opinions. She taught that it was scientific, and just as valid and accurate as any of the sciences. In Chapter 10 Yang writes, referring to Karl Popper, the very well known and respected philosopher of science: “Popper suggested that conjectures and refutations could get us closer to the truth. It is this belief, that there is a truth that could be approximated, if not reached, and that the universe is ultimately rational, that urges us onward in the field of science. But isn’t that belief a kind of faith, a presupposition that is not empirically verifiable? How does one derive a belief in the rationality and uniformity of nature from empirical observation?” Yang also refers to Stanley Jaki, another well known author that has written in the area of philosophy of science: “In *Science and Creation*, Stanley Jaki asks just that question: What were the preconditions that helped science become a self-sustaining and dynamic force? He observes: ‘In a world history that had witnessed at least half a dozen great cultures, science had as many stillbirths. Only once, in the period of 1250–1650, did man’s scientific quest muster enough zest to grow into an enterprise with built-in vitality.’ After a masterful study of the great ancient cultures, including the Chinese, Indian, Babylonian, and the Greek civilizations, Jaki comes to this astounding conclusion: The precondition for the emergence of science was that for the first time in history the belief in a personal, rational, and transcendent Creator permeated an entire culture, the European culture.”

It is perhaps difficult to summarize Yang’s book. But it appears to me that he has given a very fair presentation of Ayn Rand’s ideas. And he readily admits that he was persuaded by them earlier in his life. But he has also presented a very thorough critique of those ideas, comparing them with the teachings of Christianity, and has found them to be, upon careful analysis, inadequate, misleading, and in serious error.