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The Pop Psychology Of Self-Esteem And The Ayn Rand's Cult

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Scholars have focused on Ayn Rand's impact on neoliberal and right-wing politics because of her reputation as a supporter of unbridled capitalism and tough individualism. The psychologically incorrect conception of self-esteem in Ayn Rand's ethics, which may still be prevalent in today's self-help culture, is the main topic of this essay. Rand approved of her lover and follower Nathaniel Branden as the circle's official therapist. He preached the benefits of living by Randian ideals for mental health in this capacity. In this way, Rand's so-called objectivism offers not only a dubious philosophical foundation for neoliberal politics, but also—and perhaps most importantly for its adherents a set of rules for the self-optimization effort. Rand's ideal of radical self-sufficiency is ultimately psychologically implausible, which renders its use in applied psychotherapy detrimental and ineffectual. The article provides a cultural-historical case study on the ideological connections between clinical negligence and pop-psychological and philosophical ideas.

Keywords: Clinical Misconduct, Ethics, Philosophy, 20th Century, and History of Self-esteem.

Introduction

Ayn Rand (1905–1982) is a well-liked figurehead for libertarian and right-wing political activists because of her reputation as a champion of tough individualism and laissez-faire capitalism. Her writing's popularity is a fascinating cultural phenomena. American studies scholar Claudia Franziska Bruhwiler in Out of the Gray Fog: Ayn Rand's Europe asserts that Rand is "undoubtedly one of the most politically influential fiction writers of the twentieth century" (2), despite the fact that her rigour and talent as a philosopher and literary author have been questioned from the start. Her popularity in conservative circles has led to a scholarly focus on the ideological tangents that grow from her work to the politics of neo-liberalism as well as the culture of greed or age of selfishness that allegedly contributed to the 2008 financial crisis. For the sake of this study, however, I am interested in the psychologically implausible conception of self-esteem that forms the basis of Ayn Rand's ethics and that may be prevalent in some aspects of contemporary self-help culture.

One of the fundamental tenets of Rand's philosophy is explored in The Virtue of Selfishness as: "man must be the beneficiary of his own moral actions" (xi). This means that acting on behalf of another is viewed as immoral. Rand defines her ethics, which she called objectivism,

as a "morality of rational self-interest – or of rational selfishness" (xi). This is not to say that she supports an unchecked pursuit of one's individual desires, as these can be irrational.

‘The basic social principle of the Objectivist ethics is that just as life is an end in itself, so every human being is an-end in himself, not the means to the ends or the welfare of others – and, therefore, man must live for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself.’ (30)

At a social and political level, this concept results in the rejection of the welfare state for which Rand is renowned and, in some political milieus, admired, even though the last half of the statement appears to be incompatible with the exploitative structures of unchecked capitalism. Thus, it should come as no surprise that Rand's writings mock social work, taxation, and government-funded communal initiatives.

However, American cultural studies expert Lisa Duggan contends that Rand's power to arouse readers' passion and desire for aspiration, self-actualization, and control is more potent than her political and philosophical beliefs themselves. As well as the "age of selfishness" or "culture of greed" that Duggan discusses. Additionally, Rand biographer Jennifer Burns in Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right states: "for all her emphasis on reason, it is the emotional and psychological side of her novels that make them timeless" (286). Ironically, Rand's writings support affective investments in neoliberal and individualist ideals even though they uphold an ideal of extreme rationality and emotional detachment. Understanding the academic and personal entanglements between the Randian school of objectivism and the popularisation of the psychology concept of "self-esteem" is made easier by this acknowledgement of the psychological side of Rand's work.

Self-worth in Objectivist Philosophy

In Rand's own writing, the word "self-esteem" appears frequently. Indeed, according to John Galt, the main character in her masterpiece, Atlas Shrugged (1957), it is one of the three things that man must hold "as the supreme and ruling values of his life: Reason – Purpose – Self-Esteem (1018). Any attempt to refute Rand's definition of "rational selfishness" is explored in The Virtue of Selfishness as: "attack on man's self-esteem" (xi). Rand was infamously uninterested in traditional psychological questions, such as how a person's family, personal history, and inner life influence their personality and perception of the world: "When I am questioned about myself, I am tempted to say, paraphrasing Roark [protagonist of her breakthrough novel The Fountainhead (1943)]: "Don't ask me about my family, my childhood, my friends, or my feelings." Yet, the importance of self-esteem in her writing clearly connects her ethics to psychological well-being. “Ask me about the things I think” (669).

Nathaniel Branden (1930–2014), in a psychology graduate and Rand's devotee and (for a time) boyfriend, was then in charge of advancing this connection—that is, the benefits of living an objectivist life on mental health. These endeavours were not confined to a theoretical realm. A lecture series on "The Basic Principles of Objectivism" was initiated by Nathaniel and his first wife, Barbara. The Nathaniel Branden Institute (NBI), a full-fledged educational organisation established in 1958, was developed as a result of the success of this series. Rand considered Nathaniel to be her heir apparent. In his memoir My Years with Ayn Rand, Branden humbly recalls, "She had described me as its [her philosophy's] most consistent embodiment" (1). Naturally, this assessment of Branden's character would change later when he rejected

Rand's attempts to resume their sexual relationship and when she discovered that he had started an affair with a third, younger woman, who would later become his second wife. The NBI was dismantled in 1968 as a result of this relationship break, but Rand fully supported Branden in the initial years following its establishment.

This intimate relationship with Rand had a direct positive impact on Branden's work as an unlicensed psychotherapist: "he had already begun to establish himself as a therapist on Rand's coattails, drawing patients primarily from those who found her work interesting." Using Rand's ideas, he now founded a second company, the NBI. This company in turn benefited the first one: "Nathan and [his cousin, the psychiatrist] Allan Blumenthal received the bulk of their therapy clients from NBI students." Rand "endorsed Nathaniel Branden as official therapist to everyone in [her circle], to root out irrationalities in compatible with the perfect Objectivist character expected of those closest to Rand." Following this model, almost everyone in the larger group of New York City Objectivists was soon seeing an Objectivist psychotherapist. This included Nathan, his cousin Allan Blumenthal, or someone approved by both of them. According to journalist Joan Kennedy Taylor, an early objectivist, the goal of seeing an objectivist therapist was to "get your premises straightened out."

However, what did these premises actually include? In addition to their exceptional talent and physical beauty, Rand's heroes are appealing characters for narcissistic illusions of self-actualization because of their disregard for other people's approval. Dreams? The narrator of The Fountainhead remarks, "The misery of knowing how strong and able one is in one's own mind, the radiant picture never to be made real." Seeking confirmation from others is unempathetically defined as a moral weakness that impedes such self-actualization. Self-deception? Or an unborn reality that has been slain by that nameless, corrosive emotion—fear, need, reliance, and hatred? (709). Naturally, Roark, the main character, does not suffer from the type of "chronic [...] fear, in which they all [i.e. the common people] lives' (709) and which seems to be preventing them from realising that bright self-image. Roark is able to attain true grandeur and unadulterated self-esteem because of the lack of this fear. Thus, in addition to provide an ethical foundation for laissez-faire capitalism, Rand's philosophy also gives a set of rules for the self-optimization project based on objectivist ideas, which Branden later expanded upon.

Extreme Self-sufficiency

Branden in “Mental Health Versus Mysticism and Self-sacrifice” shed some light on how Rand's narrator's perception of self-worth is related to the anxiety she alludes to. While anxiety and guilt are the "antipodes of self-esteem and the insignia of mental illness," he suggests that "self-esteem" is the necessary condition for leading a life "committed to reason" in the essay "Mental health versus mysticism and self-sacrifice" (1963) (41). It is undoubtedly no accident that, in classic psychoanalysis, both anxiety and guilt are seen to occur primarily relationally: as functions of the superego, they keep the individual's aggressive and antisocial impulses in The "social anxiety" that Sigmund Freud referred to as a "fear of loss of love" (124) sounds a lot like the fear that Rand's narrator describes. For Freud and attachment theorists who came after him, this attachment to the other is not a choice but rather a necessary component of subject formation. Individualisation of the self is undoubtedly a part of growing up, but this does not imply a total break with attachment, according to Scottish psychiatrist and

psychoanalyst W. According to Ronald D. Fairbairn, in Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality transition occurs from "infantile dependency" to "mature dependency" (40), which is a reciprocal, reciprocal type of other-reliance. According to psychoanalysis, the superego still controls us through emotions of dread and guilt. These can undoubtedly manifest in abnormal ways, but they are also a natural component of being a person in a community.

However, such attachment to and reliance on others are portrayed as constrictive and as indications of a lack of integrity in both Rand's theory and Branden's psychological interpretation of it. Naturally, it is indisputable that a person's self-esteem would suffer and their sense of self will suffer if they rely too much on the praise of others. But in the strictest sense, Rand's "ideal man" is a "end in himself." Other individuals are not necessary for a Randian hero unless they serve to help him realise his innate greatness. In The Fountainhead, architect Howard Roark states, "I need people to give me work." "Do you think I should require them in any other manner?" More intimately, more intimately? Furthermore, Roark replies unequivocally, "No," when his conversation partner emphasises, "You don't need anyone in a very personal way" (158). Roark's lack of interest in interpersonal connection makes him a psychological ideal of radical emotional detachment. His disregard for other people's needs and feelings extends to how they see him: he doesn't give a damn about what they think of him. The figure of Peter Keating, whose connection with his controlling mother is just one instance of his reliance on others and the external reinforcement they provide, heightens the poignancy of this idealised lack of commitment. He therefore serves as a counterpoint to Roark's extraordinary self-sufficiency as a quintessential "social metaphysician," for whom the "moral appraisal of himself by others is a primary concern" (165).

This type of interpersonal detachment is fostered by all of Rand's main characters. The heroine of Atlas Shrugged, Dagny Taggart, observes that "the sense of detachment one feels when looking at the earth from a plane was the same sense she felt when looking at people: only her distance from people seemed longer" (832). Without the demands and distractions that come with relational bonds, Rand's heroes are able to pursue their objectives. Nevertheless, Rand herself endured the agonising experience of falling short of her own psychological ideal of emotional distance and unwavering self-worth. Branden in My Years with Ayn Rand maintains that she was initially a model objectivist character: she "acted equally indifferent to praise and criticism" and "conveyed a stony calm of someone who is settling in for a long siege" (203). However, after a while, she fell into a deep depression when the reception of Atlas Shrugged did not live up to Rand's overly ambitious expectations. "Galt [the protagonist of Atlas] would handle all... differently," she remarked, acknowledging that this was incompatible with the ideal of emotional detachment and self-sufficiency she had developed in her works. He would be more unaffected by it somehow. "I would hate for him to see me like this" (213). Rand's personal situation thus demonstrates that it is not feasible nor healthy to be completely unaffected by the other.

Medical Negligence

Adam Phillips, a psychoanalyst, in On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored has described the excessive ideal of self-reliance in Rand's writings as a "superstition of confidence in the integrity of the self" (42). This superstition manifests itself in an extreme type of emotional composure:

There is a recognisable kind of poise that gives the impression of self-possession. In addition to managing a distance from everyone else, the mind also creates a gap in the self [from its own desire, from the emotive core of the self]. [...] One's need for other people, not other people, is hell (45).

Phillips clarifies that this form of extreme self-sufficiency is not a feasible or even desirable way of life by calling it a "superstition."

Thus, a psychotherapeutic strategy founded on the impractical objectivist psychological ideal would be, at best, ineffectual and, at worst, highly detrimental. Albert Ellis, a psychologist and the creator of the rational emotive behaviour therapy (REBT) method, acknowledged this in Is Objectivism a Religion?. He was eager to emphasise that, despite "many superficial resemblances" to his practice, "objectivist teachings are unrealistic, dogmatic, and religious, that [...] they are likely to create more harm than good [...], and that they result in a system of psychotherapy that is inefficient and unhelpful" (11). Based on Walker's compilation of numerous instances of clinical malpractice by objectivist therapists, this was the exact result of many psychotherapeutic treatments carried out in object.

Following his split from Rand, Branden in The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem went on to create his own pop-psychological brand based on the objectivist concept of self-esteem. He authored over a dozen self-help books between 1969 and 1998, all of which focused on the concepts of self-realization and self-worth. He implicitly kept many of Rand's objectivist tenets even if he disassociated himself from her personally. In one of his final books, The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem (1994), he states: "Never ask someone to act against his or her self-interest as he or she understands it" (113). In a very Randian fashion, he contends that "teaching cognitive skills, the values of works ethic, self-responsibility, interpersonal competence, the pride of ownership" is crucial in the fight against poverty because the "philosophy of victimhood has not worked" (298). He laments the alleged cultural tendency to value "self-sacrifice" more than "intelligent selfishness" (121), a passage that could be lifted directly from The Fountainhead or Atlas Shrugged. Rand's ideal of complete self-sufficiency was modified by Branden, but the book's emphasis on self-reliance still seems extreme: "No one is coming" was one of the motivational quotes he used in his therapy groups to encourage self-responsibility in his clients. It should come as no surprise that Branden's concept of self-esteem "represents in some ways the exact reverse" of the concept of self-esteem "which became influential in education and elsewhere" and which de-coupled praise and rewards from achievement (166). He undoubtedly both benefited from and helped the concept's increasing popularity.

A mental health professional like Branden adopting and applying objectivist principles in his work may be especially pernicious for two reasons. First, the objectivist movement made its adherents to seek psychotherapy because it constructed a psychological ideal that was ultimately unachievable, which made them want to better themselves. Second, objectivism was, in the first place, an ethical framework, and as such, any unwillingness to get treatment was logically equivalent to moral insufficiency, as was failing to live up to its principles. At that time, having poor self-esteem was seen as a sign of both mental health issues and a refusal to accept objectivist principles. In addition to rejecting the welfare state and an alleged "victim culture," Rand and Branden's view of self-esteem is particularly harsh since it holds each person solely accountable for their mental health and denigrates those who struggle with low

self-esteem and other mental health issues like anxiety and depression. In this sense, Rand and Branden's code of conduct is consistent with what Gary W. Wood has called the "guru-ization of self-help." One aspect of this guru-ization is the connection between self-esteem and "unrealistic "change your life" goals," which leads to a certain dilemma. In fact, objectivism's belief that "we have the power to control our lives if only we knew how to harness it" is consistent with other prevalent self-improvement movements.

Optimising Oneself in the era of Homo economicus

One of the main illusions that are commonly spread in self-help books is the notion that we are in total control of—and thus exclusively accountable for—our lives. This myth supports policies that cut back on state funding for mental health and poverty programs. Therefore, it may not come as a surprise that Thomas Szasz, a libertarian anti-psychiatrist who is clearly not a fan of either Rand or Branden, praised Rand for rejecting depression as a medical condition. Szasz's affirmative nod to Rand highlights the ironic and unlikely alignment of the anti psychiatry movement's revolutionary goals of abolishing asylums with the politics of austerity that promoted the decimation of state-funded mental health care provision, as criticised by Peter Sedgwick in his Psycho Politics.

The connection between the emphasis on self- responsibility and rationality on one hand and the propagation of unregulated capitalism on the other has been well- recognised beyond the context of Rand's work, of course: in a society increasingly oriented towards market values, 'the self is driven to constantly improve, change and adapt' and becomes a 'entrepreneurial self' (back cover). In terms of the primary emphasis on rational self-interest, Rand's ideal man corresponds to the figure of Homo economicus that provides the model for the capitalist subject guided by utility and optimisation. For Giovanni Stanghellini, the rise of Homo economicus in capitalist culture has transformed narcissism 'from a niche phenomenon' and a 'psycho pathological category' into a 'mass phenomenon' and a 'idealizedmodel'. Stanghellini abstains from the kind of reactionary cultural pessimism one can find in Christopher Lasch's 1979 diagnosis of 20th century US-American culture as a 'culture of narcissism': without the underlying nostalgia for the traditional patriarchal family palpable in Lasch's writing, Stanghellini characterizes the narcissism of Homo economicus as an inability to tolerate the other in their otherness. The other must either be eaten and taken, or if that is not possible, destroyed. It is not permitted to remain in isolation. To put it another way, people either help us or get in our way. One excellent illustration of how Rand's work is consistent with the core principles of Homo economicus is the way Fountain Head protagonist Roark restricts his need for others to the ways in which they might help him realise his architectural projects.

However, the fact that emotion and desire are central to Rand's protagonists' personalities sets them apart from Homo economicus's aseptic nature. This is because they are experts at delaying pleasure. Rand's heroes and heroines will always choose the promise of achieving perfection in a far-off future above the offer of momentary comfort or satisfaction in the here and now, in contrast to Homo economicus, which Stanghellini describes as having little tolerance for the terrible sensation of not-having. This maintains the element of distance that is missing from the Homo economicus world, where consumer-ready proximity takes the place of both the closeness required for intimacy and the distance required for desire. One might assume that this element of passion is what gives Rand's writing its emotional appeal.

The phantasy of a Rogerian actualising function that is impervious to any kind of "social mediation" is ultimately the Randian promise of a dormant "radiant picture" of the self that could awaken if we simply stopped putting others' needs ahead of our own. I think it is this alluring illusion that is readily exploited through the "guru-ization" of self-help.

Conclusion

The desire to live a more independent life and to care less about praise from others is perfectly acceptable. Today, this objective is the focus of many self-help publications, some of which will surely be beneficial to individuals. Therefore, my goal is not to minimise the effectiveness of self-help or self-directed "bibliotherapy" in enhancing people's lives. Furthermore, people who were raised as women may benefit most from developing the capacity to "not care," as they are more likely to have been conditioned to put the needs of others before their own due to patriarchal gender roles. Lastly, acknowledging that people can and frequently do "improve" themselves does not inevitably result in a Randian dismissal of caring for others. According to life coach and cultural historian Anna Katharina Schaffner, "the point of all worthwhile self-improvement" is to "free up our energies so that we can direct them towards other people and towards creative projects" rather than to optimise oneself.

However, I believe that Rand's books' superstition of composure and their continued success teach us something about a desire for what Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito refers to as "immunity": a sense of being "immune" to the demands and restrictions that the shared obligations of living in community with others put on us. Branden makes this immunitary logic in his understanding of self-esteem unmistakably clear by calling it "the immune system of consciousness". "In modern societies, '[the thrust towards self-realization] is also associated with political freedom, with the liberation of humankind from servitude from one tribe or another" (124). Undoubtedly, Branden softens the Randian individualism by asserting that the two complementary tracks for successful self-esteem are that of individuation and that of relationship. However, his book doesn't go into great detail regarding the ambivalence and frustration that are essential components of any relationship.

Randian myths of calmness may be facilitated by the significant fact that self-help books (as well as life-coaching social media accounts and YouTube channels) are unable to offer a "therapeutic relationship, which is a core factor in the healing process." When this lack of a therapeutic relationship is hidden by the para-social attachment that might develop to the author's or other self-help gurus' public persona on social media, it can become potentially harmful. Although the genre does not promote such superstitions in general, it may be argued that individuals who wish to do so find it easier to do so. This is more likely to occur when a self-help provider's goal is to "entertain or sell" rather than to educate.

The fact that self-improvement movements may be readily used to perform the grunt work for neoliberal institutions by blaming only the individual for success or failure is not new. As a result, they may weaken efforts to foster empathy, camaraderie, and concern among all. This hyper-individualistic thinking has ideological roots beyond Rand's writings, but the cultural history of objectivism offers a particularly vivid example of the self-improvement industry's capacity for exploitation. Furthermore, their case study highlights how readily the promise of improved mental health may be used to further broader ideological goals, especially in light of the therapeutic cult that developed around Rand and Branden's personas. Critical awareness

of these tendencies and the potential for (pseudo-)clinical malpractice appears to be essential for mental health professionals.

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