



# Homo Hijackers? (2)

## Sciabarra's Rejoinder to Firehammer

I want to thank Reginald Firehammer for his good-natured response. While I wish to compliment Firehammer on a number of fine points, I will focus here on only a few issues.

I accept Firehammer's view that if we remove, add, or alter certain aspects of Rand's corpus, "the word Objectivism ceases to identify anything." But I have argued that not all aspects are created equal, and that it is crucially important to distinguish between those aspects that are *essential* and those that are *nonessential* to Objectivism.

### Rand and Branden

It is true that Rand sometimes had a way of making everything *seem* essential to her philosophy; as Nathaniel Branden once observed, she (and her sycophantic followers) had a tendency to identify her pronouncements with the Voice of Reason. For example, she could provide philosophical justifications for every statement of aesthetic and sexual preference; but to equate those personal preferences with universal philosophical truth is to make Objectivism into nothing more than Randian Solipsism. If we can't adopt the broad fundamentals of her philosophy to our own contexts, then it is useless as a guide to individual action.

The fact is, however, that there is not a single "Objectivist" or even Objectivist-sympathizer alive—not even the most orthodox among us—who does not abstract from, or "bracket out" aspects of, Rand's work to suit his or her particular context. It is then incumbent upon each of us to *argue for* the consistency of that contextual application with the formal philosophy of Objectivism.

Firehammer, however, does not recognize that he himself has engaged in the same process of abstraction of which he accuses me. For example, he objects to my discussion of Branden's concepts of the "subconscious" and "repression," which he rejects as "whacky" and "inane psychobabble." Well, then, he too is departing from Objectivism as Rand conceived it. Here is what Rand had to say in her official "Statement of Policy," published in June 1968 *after* her break with the Brandens. The "*only* authentic sources of information on Objectivism," Rand declared, were

my own works (books, articles, lectures), the articles appearing in and the pamphlets reprinted by this magazine

(*The Objectivist*, as well as *The Objectivist Newsletter*), books by other authors which will be endorsed in this magazine as specifically Objectivist literature, and such individual lectures or lecture courses as may be so endorsed. (This list includes also the book *Who is Ayn Rand?* by Nathaniel Branden and Barbara Branden, as well as the articles by these two authors which have appeared in this magazine in the past, but does not include their future works.)

As an aside, in this same essay, Rand "repudiate[s]" the establishment or endorsement of "any type of school or organization purporting to represent or be a spokesman for Objectivism." Oh, if only some of her followers would take to heart *that* formulation!

In any event, the definitions of the "subconscious" and of "repression" offered by Nathaniel Branden were fully endorsed by Rand. *All* of Branden's work that appeared in Rand's periodicals—essays on causality, free will, determinism, emotions, ethics, self-esteem, romantic love, social metaphysics, alienation, anxiety, education, economics, and, yes, the *subconscious* and *repression*—were sanctioned and regarded by Rand as part and parcel of Objectivism. So much for the desire "never [to] quote Nathaniel Branden." Indeed, the very definition of "repression" that I cited from Branden's *The Psychology of Self-Esteem* was first published in the August 1966 issue of *The Objectivist*. This is not part of Branden's "post-Randian" work. If Firehammer wishes to adhere to his own belief that Objectivism is what Rand said it is, then he'll need to reintegrate Branden's definition of "repression"—which depends upon equally Rand-approved *objective* notions of consciousness, awareness, volition, and mental health—into the Objectivist corpus.

Now, it is true that Branden's discussion is more psychology-centered. But just as Branden believed his approach was a *philosophical* psychology, so too did Rand believe that her own system had vast *psychological* implications (she fully endorsed Branden's claim that hers was the first "*psychological* morality" in history, for instance).

I think that Objectivists, especially orthodox ones who are still fighting the War of '68, have seriously undermined the integrity of the philosophy by their unwillingness to deal with the formidable contributions of Branden to "Objectivism." My own *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical* attempts to redress that imbalance and to reintegrate his contributions quite explicitly.

### The "Normal"

Firehammer spends a lot of time on the term "normal." Rand herself used the term "normal" on occasion; in different contexts, she might mean "average" or "thoroughly conventional" or "natural" (as in "the nature of things," akin to Firehammer's usage). At one point, however, she actually distinguishes between the "sub-normal" and the "above-normal" individual, arguing that it is the *latter* who is more deserving of help. She even protests when somebody characterizes an unconventional or extraordinary person as "a 'normal individual'?" I think he's much more than that. As you must have guessed," she explains in her letters, "I am not very enthusiastic about such conceptions as 'normal' or 'average'."

I think Firehammer wields the term "normal" as a moral sledgehammer: "Normal means that which is appropriate to the body and its organs, determined by the requirements of their nature, that is, their identity. ... *Pica* is a desire to eat abnormal things, like dirt, ashes, chalk, hair, soap, toothbrushes, burned matches, or coins ..." Well, okay. But I can't resist: Is it "normal" to want to "eat" your partner? Does this go beyond the "proper use and function" of the tongue and mouth, which are "normally" used for eating food and speaking words? Forget gay sex! Is it "normal" for *heterosexual* couples to want to use their mouths and tongues on each other's erogenous zones? Where does "normal" end and "abnormal" begin?

I just don't think much is achieved by reifying what one person regards as "normal" as if it constitutes the whole of human experience. Yes, of course, it is anti-life to put poisonous things in one's mouth. But it is not at all clear to me why we should be so willing to characterize as poison, other things being equal, the wonderful creativity of human beings of whatever sexual orientation who seek to pleasure one another, especially when such pleasure is, as Branden once said, "a metaphysical concomitant of life ..."

## Dialectics

It is true that I found it necessary to explain my definition of “dialectics” so as to distinguish it from what others have meant by that term in the history of philosophy. Why is this so abnormal? If Rand had operated with “normal” or conventional notions of “selfishness” or “capitalism”—“guilt by association” with images of club-wielding brutes and fascist robber barons, respectively—without carefully distinguishing her own conception from previous ones in intellectual history, she would not have been the revolutionary thinker that she was.

My conception of dialectics is fully explicated in the culminating book of my “Dialectics and Liberty” trilogy, *Total Freedom: Toward a Dialectical Libertarianism* (*Marx, Hayek, and Utopia* and *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical* are the first two books in the trilogy). I regard dialectics as one of five species of the genus, “methodological orientation” (along with “atomism,” “organicism,” “monism,” and “dualism”), and, in that book, I fully define what is meant by each of these terms. (I also define what is meant by “extending the units of one’s analysis across time and space”: it simply means that, in an appropriate context, one must analyze the objects of inquiry in terms of their past, present, and potential future forms, just as one must place these objects within the larger system of relationships that they jointly constitute.) Nevertheless, I have used a short-hand definition for dialectics as “the art of context-keeping” because I think it encapsulates the *essence* of that approach.

With regard to sexuality, however, Firehammer believes that I am dropping context by bracketing out “reproduction” from any discussions of the subject. But Rand did the same thing; *human* sexuality and its connection to *romantic love*, in Rand’s view, had nothing to do with procreation. In fact, one will be hard pressed to find *any* discussion of procreation in the entire Objectivist corpus. This may be a *falling* of that corpus, but, based on Firehammer’s own premises, I think it is pretty clear that his discussion is quite beyond the scope of Objectivism as its founder conceived it.

Ultimately, it matters not to me what is consistent or inconsistent with “Objectivism.” What matters to me is what is consistent with *reality*. And, in my view, if we accept Firehammer’s—and Rand’s—contention that homosexuality is inconsistent with Objectivism, then I think it’s time to reject Objectivism as inconsistent with reality.

Or better still: Let us fashion a post-Randian reality-based philosophical outlook that preserves what is *essential* to Objectivism, while dispensing with the *nonessential* personal preferences of its founder.

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