

# The Fountainhead

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August 25, 2012

I WAS NOT interested in Paul Ryan, the man about to be nominated by the Republican party for the office of Vice President, until the name Ayn Rand popped up.

Ayn Rand, it was said, was one of the main inspirations for his particular philosophy. Since Ryan is being represented not as an ordinary, run-of-the-mill politician, like Mitt Romney, but as a profound political and economic thinker, the inspiration deserves some scrutiny.

LIKE MOST people in this country, Ayn Rand first entered my life as the author of *The Fountainhead*, a novel that came out four years before the birth of the State of Israel. It quickly became a bestseller. The movie based on it, with Gary Cooper playing the main role, was even more popular.

It is the story of an architect of genius (roughly similar to Frank Lloyd Wright) who follows his own individual style and disdains the tastes of the masses. When his architectural design for a housing project is altered by the builders, he blows the buildings up, defending his actions in court in a stirring speech in defense of individualism.<sup>1</sup>

I started to read her second bestseller, *Atlas Shrugged*, in which she set out her philosophy in detail. But I must confess, to my eternal shame, that I never finished it. It bored me.

ONE DAY IN 1974, my friend Dan Ben-Amotz called me and demanded that I immediately meet a young genius he had discovered called Dr. Moshe Kroy.

Ben-Amotz was a character by himself. A man of my age, he was at the time Israel's most conspicuous humorist and an icon of the generation that fought in the 1948 war and created the new Hebrew culture. Ben-Amotz, like many of us, was not only a self-made man, but also self-invented. He was known as the ultimate Sabra (native-born Israeli). Much later it transpired that he was actually born in Poland, arrived in Palestine as a boy and adopted the very Hebrew-sounding name to replace his original name - Moshe Tehilimzeigger ("reciter of psalms" in Yiddish).

He brought Kroy to my home and I was impressed. Here was an unusually erudite 24-year-old youngster, already a lecturer at Tel Aviv University, with thick glasses and very outspoken philosophical views.

It appeared that he was a True Believer in the teachings of Ayn Rand, which she called Objectivism. This proclaimed that egoism was the basic duty of every human being. Any kind of social commitment was a sin against nature. Only by serving his own interest and cleansing himself of any trace of altruism can a person truly fulfill himself. Society at large can progress only when it is based on such individuals, each one striving to serve only himself (or herself).

Such an outlook can be hugely attractive to a certain kind of individual. It provides them with a philosophical justification for the extreme exercise of egoism, not giving a damn for anyone else.

Kroy, and of course Ben-Amotz, were religiously devoted to this new creed.<sup>2</sup> When I caught Ben-Amotz doing something which could be construed as beneficial to others, he went to great lengths in justifying it by proving that in the long run it was to his own ultimate advantage.

Kroy himself was obviously a very disturbed being. At the age of 41, he committed suicide. I was not certain whether Ayn Rand disturbed his mind or whether he was attracted to her because he was disturbed to start with.

AYN RAND was born as Alisa Zinovyevna Rosenbaum in Saint Petersburg, which later became Petrograd, which later became Leningrad. She was 12 years old when the Bolshevik revolution broke out in that city. The pharmacy of her parents was taken over by the regime, and the bourgeois family fled to the Crimea, which was held by White Russian forces. Later they returned to their native city, where Alisa studied philosophy and even published a book in Russian. In 1926 she reached the US, leaving her parents behind.

She adopted the name of Ayn (rhymes with "swine", as she herself was wont to explain). She probably took the word from the Hebrew, where it means "eye". The surname Rand may be a contraction of her original German-Jewish family name.

Her early history may in some measure explain her abiding hatred for Communism and any kind of collectivism, including social democracy, as well as any kind of religion or statism. For her, the state was the enemy of the free individual. This led her naturally to embrace an unbridled laissez faire capitalism (what Shimon Peres called "swinish capitalism") and to reject any form of welfare state or safety net.

All this was well structured in her philosophy, which was adopted by believers all over the world. She once called herself "*the most creative thinker alive*". On another occasion, she asserted that in all the annals of philosophy, there were only three great thinkers, all starting with an A: Aristotle, Aquinas and Ayn Rand.

She must have been an unabashed racist, too: during the 1973 Yom Kippur War she said that it was "*civilized men fighting savages*", comparing Israelis to the White Americans fighting the Red Indians.

No wonder that she posthumously became the darling of the Tea Party fanatics who are now dominating the Republican Party. And no wonder that Paul Ryan proudly cites her as one of his most important mentors.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Honest disclosure: I have often dreamed of doing the same to certain buildings in Tel Aviv, especially the luxury hotels built between my home and the sea.

<sup>2</sup>This is, of course, an oxymoron, since Ayn Rand was a total unbeliever, condemning any form of religion, including the Jewish religion of her parents.

<sup>3</sup>Rand herself died in 1982 at age 77. Her funeral was attended by her devotees, including Alan Greenspan, one of the gravediggers of the US economy.

There is something in the teachings of this Jewish White Russian preacher of extreme egoism that appeals to the primitive American myths of rugged individualism, gun-toting Wild West self-reliance, suspicion of the domination-hungry state (going back to King George the Third). But this is not the 18th century, for God's sake.

I NEVER studied philosophy, though on my path I have picked up a few dozen books about it here and there. But Ayn Rand's theories always struck me as, well, juvenile.

There is a picture in my mind. The late Israeli writer Pinchas Sadeh described how once, as an adolescent, he had climbed a ladder in the library of his kibbutz, taken out a book of Nietzsche's and stood there, at the top of the ladder, for several hours, unable to stop reading. It was, I suppose, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, a dangerous book for young people. It also had a huge impact on Ayn Rand in her younger years.

Nietzsche castigates the "Jewish pity morality", which has infected the adorable "blond beasts". Compassion for the weak is a sin, because it blunts the capabilities of the strong, those on the way to becoming supermen. Which young person does not see themselves as a potential superman (or, I suppose, superwoman)?

When Dan Ben-Amotz tried to convince me of the "rational egoism" of Ayn Rand, I countered with a simple argument: when I was wounded in 1948 and lay completely exposed to enemy fire, four soldiers of my squad came up and rescued me, risking their lives. Their egoism must have told them that this was an extremely silly thing to do. Risking their most precious possession – their very lives – for another human being was inexcusable according to Ayn Rand. They had nothing to gain from it. They had everything to lose.

I have seen in my life innumerable acts of altruism, large and small. Indeed, what is love, real love, but a pure form of altruism?

Sure, every person is, to some extent, an egoist. But every person is also, to some extent, an altruist. Human beings are social animals, their social instincts deeply imbedded in their nature. Without them, human society could not function.

I TOO was captured by Nietzsche in my youth. But "Jewish pity morality" won. That's why I, like many Israelis, cannot even begin to understand American social attitudes, as illustrated yet again in the present election campaign.

For us it is self-evident that the state has a duty to help the sick, the old, the children, the handicapped and the disadvantaged. An ancient saying goes "Israel (meaning all the Jews) are responsible for each other". Long before the State of Israel was born, we already had a strong system of health insurance and social services. Social insurance, instituted in Germany by the right-wing politician Otto von Bismarck in Nietzsche's time, is for us Israelis self-evident.

Binyamin Netanyahu is an American-style Republican, a strong supporter of Mitt Romney. He has done incalculable damage to the Israeli social net, both as Finance Minister and as Prime Minister. But not even he would advertise himself as a disciple of Ayn Rand. He has, however, one thing in common with Paul Ryan: both are pushed forward and financed by Sheldon Adelson.

I can think of no purer personification of Ayn Rand's vision than this Casino billionaire. She would have adored him. He is the perfect egoist. He has become super-rich by exploiting the pitiful addiction of weak human beings. His business practices have been questioned. Yet even here there is some room for doubt: does Adelson spend hundreds of millions on people like Romney, Ryan and Netanyahu only to further his own business interests? Or do we detect even here a trace of altruism, a desire to fulfill his national and social visions, objectionable as they may be?

SINCE AYN RAND was an atheist and abhorred anything that was not purely rational, while the Tea Party is strictly religious (never mind what religion), Ryan is now compelled to distance himself from his mentoress, who was also a militant advocate of abortion.

Actually, I don't believe in either the intellectual prowess or the political honesty of the man. He looks to me slightly phoney. I am not sure that Ayn Rand would have liked him either. If only Gary Cooper could play him, he might look more convincing.