Philosophy and Religion

Objectivism and Christianity

Eric B. Dent

Christianity and Objectivism provide the two primary philosophies upholding reason in the United States today. Although Ayn Rand was an atheist, Christianity and Objectivism are very similar in most respects. No foundational elements of her philosophy depend on holding an atheistic belief (Toner 2007). Rand (1943a) herself claimed that “my statement of man’s proper morality does not contradict any religious belief, if that belief includes faith in man’s free will” (2). In her lifetime, Rand produced an impressive body of work. At the same time, that work was not complete and needs to be improved because science and philosophy have continued to develop since her death in 1982.

This paper will demonstrate how similar Christianity and Objectivism are as systems of thought. Unfortunately, at first blush, most people who know something about Christianity and/or Objectivism will find there is a chasm between the two. Rand (1968) certainly fostered the gap by making condemning statements about religion generally. Christians are not likely to see common ground with Rand’s work because of her ardent atheism, her condemnation of altruism, and her glorification of selfishness. However, as these are the two primary philosophies in Western society upholding an objective reality, Christians can learn from the work of Objectivists and Objectivists can learn from the work of Christians.

We will see in this article that “[t]he truth or falsehood of all of man’s conclusions, inferences, thought and knowledge rests on the truth or falsehood of his definitions” (Rand 1990a, 49). Where there seem to be broad gulfs between Christianity and Objectivism, they can often be easily crossed by examining how terms are defined. Christianity and Objectivism also share the fact that both are widely misunderstood (Parnell and Dent 2009). Followers of each should especially appreciate a specific
delineation of definitions and a depth of understanding that makes the concepts clear.

This paper will show how both Objectivism and Christianity elevate reason to a vaulted state. Where they seem to be in great opposition, it will be shown that such opposition is removed when terms are defined similarly. This paper will review the subjects of creation; tabula rasa; life as the ultimate standard; romantic love, sex, and marriage; and altruism and the trader principle; and show how similar the Christian and Objectivist perspectives are. In each case, though, this paper will then suggest that some aspects of Rand’s work could be enhanced by including elements provided by Christianity.

To Objectivists, one of the most offensive aspects of Christianity is the acknowledgment of a transcendent entity. This paper will not attempt to make the case for the existence of something that transcends material existence. At the same time, the aspects of Christian philosophy addressed in this paper do not depend on the existence of anything transcendent. In a similar vein, Rand (1943a) has noted that if transcendence does happen to be true, “if it is held that man is created by God, endowed with an immortal soul and with reason as an attribute of his soul, it still holds true that he must act in accordance with his nature, the nature God gave him, and that in doing so he will be doing God’s will” (2). The only topic in the paper where the subject arises is the discussion of “life as the ultimate standard,” and that section simply provides a comparison of empirical data about various aspects of longevity and health between those who acknowledge a transcendent being and those who do not. So, this paper focuses on elements of the metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics of Christianity and Objectivism.

It is prudent, first, to lay the groundwork for Objectivism and Christianity, especially since the latter is so widely misunderstood (at least in the writings of Rand, Peikoff, Branden and others, as described below). This groundwork begins with a differentiation between reason and faith, the necessity of initial philosophical axioms, and bare-bones illustrations of both Objectivism and Christianity.

Reason and Faith

Perhaps one of the thorniest areas of definition has to do with reason and faith. Taking the latter first, consider Rand’s definition of
faith, which she equates with mysticism: “the acceptance of allegations without evidence of one’s senses and one’s reason. [It is] the claim to some nonsensory, non-rational, non-definable, non-identifiable means of knowledge . . .” (1982, 62). Her self-declared intellectual heir, Leonard Peikoff (1982), has also written, “‘Faith’ designates blind acceptance of a certain ideational content, acceptance induced by feeling in the absence of evidence or proof” (54). This second definition is included because it uses the word blind, which allows for a helpful distinction between this definition and that of the Christian Bible.

In everyday vernacular, it is more common for Peikoff’s statement to be a definition of blind faith. However, such an expression is the complete opposite of how faith is defined in the Bible. The Christian definition of “faith” is analogous to inductive reasoning. It is defined primarily in the text in Hebrews 11:1: “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” To place this scripture in context, what follows this verse are more than 20 examples of people being given an assurance by God and having that assurance demonstrated at a later point in time (such as Sarah having a baby at an advanced age). Objectivism is a philosophical framework that is “not primarily deductive but rather inductive” (Locke 2007, 478). Likewise, Christians are taught to use “reason and logic as the primary guide to religious truth. But from the early days, the church fathers taught that reason was the supreme gift from God and the means to progressively increase their understanding of scripture and revelation” (Stark 2005, x).

As Popper (1985) and others have demonstrated, inductive reasoning is not definitive proof. However, inductive reasoning takes into account all of the known evidence about a phenomenon and makes an inference to the best explanation (IBE). Harman (1965) first used the term “inference to the best explanation” for when “one infers from the premise that a given hypothesis would provide a ‘better’ explanation for the evidence than would any other hypothesis, to the conclusion that the given hypothesis is true” (89). From a Christian perspective, faith is analogous to theoretical work at a time before empirical evidence is available. Similarly, Einstein developed theory to the point in 1915 where the best explanation was that light was deflected by the sun. At that point, such a conclusion was a
matter of faith. It wasn’t until at least 1919 that events occurred which confirmed his theory (Hawking 1988). Consequently, for the Christian, a “leap of faith” is accepting a belief supported by the preponderance of information available at the time. In other words, Christians use the term faith for situations where empirical testing is not yet possible. Below is a more detailed example by Francis Schaeffer (1972, 99–100) of the differences in what is meant by the word faith.

**Detailed Example of the Different Meanings of Faith**

One must analyze the word faith and see that it can mean two completely opposite things. Suppose we are climbing in the Alps and are very high on the bare rock and suddenly the fog shuts down. The guide turns to us and says that the ice is forming and that there is no hope; before morning we will all freeze to death here on the shoulder of the mountain. Simply to keep warm, the guide keeps us moving in the dense fog further out on the shoulder until none of us have any idea where we are. After an hour or so, someone says to the guide: “Suppose I dropped and hit a ledge ten feet down in the fog. What would happen then?” The guide would say that you might make it till the morning and thus live. So, with absolutely no knowledge or any reason to support his action, one of the group hangs and drops into the fog. This would be one kind of faith, a leap of faith. Suppose, however, after we have worked out on the shoulder in the midst of the fog and the growing ice on the rock, we had stopped and we heard a voice which said: “You cannot see me, but I know exactly where you are from your voices. I am on another ridge. I have lived in these mountains, man and boy, for over sixty years and I know every foot of them. I assure you that ten feet below you there is a ledge. If you hang and drop, you can make it through the night and I will get you in the morning.” I would not hang and drop at once, but would ask questions to try to ascertain if the man knew what he was talking about and if he was not my enemy. In the Alps, for example, I would ask him his name. If the name he gave me was the name of a family from that part of the mountains, it would count a great deal to me. In the Swiss Alps there are certain family names that indicate mountain families of that area. For example, in the area of the Alps where I live, Avaney would be such a name. In my desperate situation, even though time would be running out, I would ask him what to me would be the sufficient questions, and when I became convinced by his answers, then I would hang and drop. This is faith, but obviously it has no relationship to the first instance. As a matter of fact, if one of these is called faith, the other should not be designated by the same word symbol.
ity and Objectivism address situations in which there is not sufficient evidence to draw an airtight conclusion. Both perspectives would contend that the rational approach would be to hold a tentative conclusion based on all of the evidence at hand, and prepare to change that conclusion if new evidence is forthcoming. In Rand’s (1990a) words, “Since man is not omniscient, a definition cannot be changelessly absolute, because it cannot establish the relationship of a given group of existents to everything else in the universe, including the undiscovered and unknown” (47).

Blind Faith

There is a sense in which both Christians and Objectivists have blind faith. All philosophies assume starting axioms that cannot be deduced from within them. Rand (1969) has rightly observed, “In order to live, man must act; in order to act, he must make choices; in order to make choices, he must define a code of values; in order to define a code of values, he must know what he is and where he is—i.e., he must know his own nature (including his means of knowledge) and the nature of the universe in which he acts—i.e., he needs metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, which means: philosophy. He cannot escape from this need; his only alternative is whether the philosophy guiding him is to be chosen by his mind or by chance” (30). Everyone has a philosophy, whether intentionally formed or not. Brown (n.d.) notes that “both ‘science’ and ‘religion’ . . . require certain beliefs in the invisible and unprovable. Perhaps even, at heart, some of the same beliefs. Both are fundamentally matters of faith.” In other words, every philosophy or belief statement contains starting propositions that cannot be proven and are taken on “faith.” Such starting premises may be true, false, accurate, inaccurate, realistic, or unrealistic, but such a judgment cannot be made using other components of the belief system. An excellent example of an unproven starting axiom is provided by Lewontin (1997, 29):

We take the side of science in spite of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, in spite of its failure to fulfill many of its extravagant promises of health and life, in spite of the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a
commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our a priori adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counterintuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.

Lewontin makes clear in this quote that the “religion” of atheism makes an a priori commitment, a “leap of faith,” if you will, in materialism. So one of the starting premises for materialism is the belief that all phenomena have material causes. As he points out, there is nothing within this philosophy that can lead to this conclusion. All philosophies or belief systems have such a priori commitments. Knowing what one’s a priori commitments are may be a non-trivial task. For example, the sanctity of life, upheld by both Objectivists and Christians, is a belief statement that cannot be derived within Objectivism or Christianity. With regard to blind faith, then, any philosophical system places faith in the starting axioms that cannot be derived. Objectivism and Christianity choose different starting axioms, but the outcomes are strikingly similar. As Rand notes above, being clear and specific about these definitional statements is critical for understanding. The following sections will illustrate these statements for Objectivism and Christianity.

**Atheist Objectivism**

To Rand’s credit, she was more specific in laying out the foundational elements of her philosophy than many other philosophers have been. Rand also makes clear that she understands that all belief systems make irreducible commitments. Rand (1990a, 55) has written:

> An axiomatic concept is the identification of a primary fact of reality, which cannot be analyzed, i.e., reduced to other facts or broken into component parts. It is implicit in all facts and in all knowledge. It is the fundamentally given and
directly perceived or experienced, which requires no proof or explanation, but on which all proofs and explanations rest.

Rand has identified three axiomatic concepts—existence, identity and consciousness. What is real exists. Reality is existence. “Consciousness is the faculty of awareness—the faculty of perceiving that which exists” (29). For the purposes of this paper, the primary aspects of Rand’s philosophy are nicely encapsulated in this statement:

At a sales conference at Random House, preceding the publication of Atlas Shrugged, one of the book salesmen asked me whether I could present the essence of my philosophy while standing on one foot. I did as follows:

1. Metaphysics: Objective Reality
2. Epistemology: Reason
3. Ethics: Self-interest
4. Politics: Capitalism

If you want this translated into simple language, it would read: 1. “Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed” or “Wishing won’t make it so.” 2. “You can’t eat your cake and have it, too.” 3. “Man is an end in himself.” 4. “Give me liberty or give me death.”

My philosophy, Objectivism, holds that:

1. Reality exists as an objective absolute—facts are facts, independent of man’s feelings, wishes, hopes or fears.
2. Reason (the faculty which identifies and integrates the material provided by man’s senses) is man’s only means of perceiving reality, his only source of knowledge, his only guide to action, and his basic means of survival.
3. Man—every man—is an end in himself, not the means to the ends of others. He must exist for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself. The pursuit of his own rational self-interest and of his own happiness is the highest moral purpose of his life.
4. The ideal political-economic system is laissez-faire capitalism. It is a system where men deal with one another, not as victims and executioners, nor as masters and slaves, but as traders, by free, voluntary exchange to mutual benefit. It is a system where no man may obtain any values from others by resorting to physical force, and no man may initiate the use of physical force against others. The government acts only as a policeman that protects man’s rights; it uses physical force only in retaliation and only against those who initiate its use, such as criminals or foreign invaders. In a system of full capitalism, there should be (but, historically, has not yet been) a complete separation of state and economics, in the same way and for the same reasons as the separation of state and church. (Rand 1962, 35)

Some have argued that aside from Aristotle, Plato, and Kant, Rand is the only person to have offered a complete philosophy (Locke 2007). As will be seen in the next section, others would include Christianity in this list.

**Christianity**

Christianity has had a much longer history than Objectivism and many more people have written about it, so in some ways, it is more difficult to encapsulate. For this paper, anything referred to as Christian will have a base in the Bible and we will hold to what are considered “essentials.” As Keller (2008) notes, all Christians accept the great ecumenical creeds of Christianity but no Christian believes only these things. Such creeds include:

- God in three persons or essences (commonly labeled Father, Son, and Holy Spirit or Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer) created the world;
- Humanity has fallen into sin and both good and sinful tendencies are within each person;
- God became incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth to allow sinful people to have a personal relationship with God;
- In his death and resurrection, Jesus made possible salvation for everyone so they can elect to be received by grace;
- Jesus established the church, his people, as the vehicle through
which he continues his mission of rescue, reconciliation, and salvation;
  • Finally, “that at the end of time Jesus will return to renew the heavens and the earth, removing all evil, injustice, sin, and death from the world” (117).

This panoramic view of history together with other scriptural passages results in several axiomatic statements including:
  • Every human being has innate dignity: “So God created man in His own image” (Genesis 1:27);
  • Each person’s character is of great importance: “Man looks at the outward appearance but the Lord looks at the heart” (I Samuel 16:7);
  • God loves people and consistently acts in their long-term best interests;
  • Human beings are fallible and will often make decisions not in their long-term best interest;
  • Humankind is responsible for taking care of the planet and its life;
  • People should stand against injustice wherever it is found: “Hate evil, and love good and establish justice” (Amos 5:15);
  • The goal for Christians is to strive for perfection. “Be perfect as the Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48);
  • The source of knowledge is revelation in Scripture and in creation. “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities —his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made” (Romans 1:20).

Logically flowing from these starting principles are notions of private property, working and prospering from one’s work, investment and risktaking (the Parable of the Talents). Moreover, Christianity condemns laziness (Proverbs 12) and certainly doesn’t advocate socialism (“For to everyone who has shall more be given, and he shall have an abundance” [Matthew 25:14–30 and Luke 19:12–27]). As Yang (2000) notes, “the Scriptures neither argue against self-interest nor disparage prosperity. Christianity advocates a form of egoism, which . . . merely means the pursuit of an individual’s ‘good’” (259).
The Oxford English Dictionary (dictionary.oed.com) defines the verb *reason* as: “To argue, conclude, or infer,” or, “To think (something) through, work out in a logical manner.” As noted at the beginning of this paper, both Objectivism and Christianity place an extremely high value on reason, and for Objectivists, the highest. But what exactly is *reason*? As the definition above implies, *reason* is a fairly ambiguous term. When we apply reason, we are arguing, concluding, inferring, working out in a logical manner. Of the terms in this definition, the only one with a precise definition is *logic* and even here the definition mentions not *logic*, but “a logical manner.” In mathematics, a *system* of logic has been developed that includes a step-by-step process for validly making an inference. However, most vernacular or academic discourse does not meet the narrow definition of logic. *Reasoning* is a “process of generating beliefs, opinions, points of view, and daily explanation of our experience in the world . . . and it is far from a pure and predictable process. Rather than a food processor which slices, dices, and purees reality at the operator’s command, giving everyone who uses it correctly similar results, reason . . . is more like Saturday’s soup made out of the week’s leftovers” (Haught 2008, 50).

Even within the community of those who exalt reason, there is disagreement when both parties use reasoning and rationality. At a plenary debate at the 2010 Association for Private Enterprise Education conference, James Otteson and Yaron Brook disagreed on the strategy for convincing others about the merits of the free market. Both used reason and rationality to arrive at their positions. Neither argued that he used “more” or “better” reason than the other. It is simply the case that reasoning is not a refined enough process to provide the best decision. The flawless use of reason does not guarantee that two people will arrive at the same outcome. For reason to be the most superior cognitive process, it needs to be developed into a *system* in the same manner as logic.

Having said this, both Objectivists and Christians have incentive to clarify what, exactly, is meant by the reasoning process. Rand (1999) notes that “reason is man’s only means of grasping reality and of acquiring knowledge” (162). Likewise, Paul, the primary communicator of Christianity, constantly uses reason to argue for the truth of the Christian message. Acts 17:2 reports that “as his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned
with them from the Scriptures” [emphasis added]. In Athens (Acts 17:16), Paul reasons “in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.” The Bible regularly reports that Paul goes to a new location and reasons with the people there. At the same time, the Scriptures are not more specific and detailed about what, exactly, reasoning constitutes, so both Christians and Objectivists need to develop this area of philosophy. The next section of the paper explores five areas of differences in philosophical assumptions of Objectivism and Christianity.

Creation

For this author, the most obvious part of Rand’s philosophy in need of updating is that of existence and creation. For most of Rand’s adult life, the consensus view among leading cosmologists was that the universe had no beginning. This view was shared by all non-Christian early philosophers such as Aristotle (Schaeffer 2003), who had a great impact on Rand. It is not surprising, then, that Rand (1982) would write, “to grasp the axiom that existence exists, means to grasp the fact that nature, i.e., the universe as a whole, cannot be created or annihilated, that it cannot come into or go out of existence” (25). However, this consensus had changed during at least the last twenty years of her life. Nonetheless, current Objectivists are still writing, “this is why the universe [existence] cannot have been created and cannot have an age” (Locke 2005, 487).

Even among atheists, it is widely known that the Bible tells the story of the creation of the universe. In fact, for millennia it was the only document to describe the expanding universe (e.g., Job 9:8; Zechariah 12:1). Today, the consensus scientific view is that the universe did have a starting point, continues to expand, and the dimension of time that humans know did have a beginning. The universe did “come into existence.” The Christian starting axiom is more realistic than Rand’s axiom that the universe as a whole could not have been created. As science has developed, there is greater confirmation of the correctness of this starting assertion.

Tabula Rasa

Perhaps, the second-most obvious part of Rand’s philosophy in need of updating is the notion of tabula rasa. Rand’s (1964a) view on
this subject is that “man is born with an emotional mechanism, just as he is born with a cognitive mechanism; but, at birth, both are ‘tabula rasa.’ It is man’s cognitive faculty, his mind, that determines the content of both” (28). According to Rand, “people do not have inborn emotions, temperaments, desires, personality characteristics, or ingrained behavior of any kind” (Youkkins 2005, 97). Again, for most of Rand’s adult life, the consensus view among leading scientists was that the “blank slate” was the leading hypothesis. The notion first appears in Aristotle’s work and was championed by John Locke. These individuals, of course, had a great influence on Rand’s thinking. However, considerable scientific progress has been made in this area since Rand’s death. During Rand’s lifetime, the fields of cognitive science, cognitive neuroscience, behavioral genetics, and evolutionary psychology either essentially didn’t exist or were only in their infancies. The scientific findings from each of these fields is disconfirming the blank slate hypothesis and providing evidence that humans are “pre-programmed” in a, perhaps, surprising number of ways.

Evolutionary psychology, for example, has shown that there are universals found in every recorded gathering of human beings on the planet now or in history. These include fearing snakes, mourning the dead, trading value for value, and dozens of others (Brown 1991). Now that behavioral geneticists have sequenced human DNA, it is clear that “small differences in the genes can lead to large differences in behavior. They can affect the size and shape of the different parts of the brain, their wiring, and the nanotechnology that releases, binds, and recycles hormones and neurotransmitters” (Pinker 2002, 45). Studies of identical twins separated at birth suggest that a substantial amount of what is considered the makeup of a human being and his/her personality is imprinted genetically.

This has always been the claim of Christianity. The Christian axiom is that human beings are created in the image of God. Consequently, humans have innate characteristics such as being creators. At the same time, human beings are not God and, therefore, they also have an innate propensity not to do good. Paul has nicely captured the real human condition: “So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the
members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members” (Romans 7:21–23). Millennia of empirical evidence confirm this condition.

**Life as the Ultimate Standard**

Rand has declared that the ultimate value for individuals is life (Younkins 2005). In her words, “An ultimate value is that final goal or end to which all lesser goals are the means—and it sets the standard by which all lesser goals are evaluated. An organism’s life is its standard of value: that which furthers its life is the good, that which threatens it is the evil” (Rand 1964a, 17). She links this standard with the pursuit of happiness via statements such as, “The maintenance of life and the pursuit of happiness are not two separate issues. To hold one’s own life as one’s ultimate value, and one’s own happiness as one’s highest purpose are two aspects of the same achievement” (29) and “If a man values productive work, his happiness is the measure of his success in the service of his life” (28). On the importance of work, Objectivists and Christians will find great agreement. The word “work” appears 2005 times in the Bible, according to a word search on Bible.org.

For Christians, the ultimate value is that “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37). Love is a decision to value and aspire to be like God, who is the ultimate Creator and who is omniscient. God is also transcendent, so Christians are invited into a relationship with an entity that transcends material existence. The last statement is at great odds with Objectivist philosophy. Since the objective of this paper is not to argue for the existence of a transcendent being, for the purposes of this paper, we will use Rand’s standard of “life” as the ultimate value. Consider, though, a comparison, using Rand’s standard, of people who claim to acknowledge transcendence with those who do not. There is an enormous body of work that has concluded that those who acknowledge transcendence have longer, happier lives than those who do not. The “transcenders” come out better on any measure of physical health, mental health, satisfaction, wealth, and any related measure. If “that which furthers its life is the good,” than acknowledging a transcendence is good because it helps achieve
Rand’s ultimate value and one’s happiness.

There have been hundreds of studies that have examined a variety of populations, which differ in nationality, gender, religion, Protestant denomination, spirituality, worship attendance, and many others. There is not a study that specifically compares a Christian population with an Objectivist one. In comparing and contrasting the atheism of Rand’s work with the belief in transcendence among Christians, we should expect to see that any findings related to atheists generally would hold for Objectivists also. A brief sampling of studies comparing Christians and atheists shows the following:

- A longitudinal follow-up study of 8,450 American men and women age 40 years and older who were followed for an average of 8.5 years found that Christians demonstrated a lower risk of death independent of confounders among those reporting religious attendance at least weekly compared to never (Gillum et al. 2008);
- In a study of 200 Latinos who suffered from arthritis, the religious participants reported statistically lower levels of pain and depression and statistically higher levels of psychological well-being (Abraído-Lanza, Vásquez, and Echeverría 2004);
- 1,174 elderly people in the MacArthur Study of Successful Aging were followed for an average of 4.6 years and tested for pulmonary and respiratory decline. Those who attended religious services regularly had significantly less pulmonary decline than those who never attended religious services (Maselko et al. 2006).

These are only a few of hundreds of studies that can be cited. In a book devoted to psychoneuroimmunology and religion, the authors note that “during the past three decades, hundreds of separate research studies conducted by different investigators studying different populations throughout the world have reported a relationship between religious involvement, better physical health, and greater longevity” (Koenig and Cohen 2002, 3). The empirical data are clear that incorporating religion into one’s life is consistent with Rand’s ultimate value.

**Romantic Love, Sex, and Marriage**

If creation and *tabula rasa* are the two most striking parts of Rand’s philosophy in need of updating, then her philosophy of romantic love, sex, and marriage may be the area in greatest need of
clarity, consistency, and improvement. As with all elements of philosophy, it is very important to define terms. Rand (1990b) defines romantic love as “an emotion possible only to the man (or woman) of unbreached self-esteem: it is his response to his own highest values in the person of another—an integrated response of mind and body, of love and sexual desire. Such a man (or woman) is incapable of experiencing a sexual desire divorced from spiritual values” (54). She defines sex as “a physical capacity, but its exercise is determined by man’s mind—by his choice of values, held consciously or subconsciously. To a rational man, sex is an expression of self-esteem—a celebration of himself and of existence. To the man who lacks self-esteem, sex is an attempt to fake it, to acquire its momentary illusion” (54). Her philosophy about sex and marriage is encapsulated in her writing, “[Sex should] involve . . . a very serious relationship. Whether that relationship should or should not become a marriage is a question which depends on the circumstances and the context of the two persons’ lives. I consider marriage a very important institution, but it is important when and if two people have found the person with whom they wish to spend the rest of their lives—a question of which no man or woman can be automatically certain. When one is certain that one’s choice is final, then marriage is, of course, a desirable state. But this does not mean that any relationship based on less than total certainty is improper. I think the question of an affair or a marriage depends on the knowledge and the position of the two persons involved and should be left up to them. Either is moral, provided only that both parties take the relationship seriously and that it is based on values” (Rand 1964b).

There are several elements of Rand’s philosophy that are consistent with the Christian view of romantic love, sex, and marriage. For example, Christian philosophy would agree that romantic love involves a choice (not a feeling) and that sexual desires should be linked to values—even Rand writes “spiritual” values. A primary difference of course is that Christian theology limits the sexual relationship to within a marriage (Exodus 20:14). Both exalt the sexual relationship as something very special, not to be entered into casually. Rand’s one-time heir Nathaniel Branden has written about the Christian view of romantic love, but his writings are inconsistent with what is written in the Bible. Yang (2000) has nicely summarized
Branden’s writing: “Christianity was hostile to physical existence, earthly life, and sexual pleasure. Christianity held a view of love that was nonsexual and selfless. The source of that selfless love was God; the source of sex was the devil. In Christianity, the woman was viewed as the temptress who brought about man’s spiritual downfall. Christianity was antifeminine, and women became vassals under this system. Christianity intensified the mind-body dichotomy: There is the woman one admires and the woman one desires” (100–1). Each of these conclusions is non-Biblical, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to make that case. (To read an example of this argument, see Yang 2000.)

Rand’s philosophy leaves several questions open and does not provide the complete answer that the Christian approach does. The primary issue is the impermanence of her approach. As noted above, she writes that no one can be certain whether he has found the person he should spend the rest of his life with. Consequently, each person should constantly be on the lookout for a partner who is of greater value than the present one. In Atlas Shrugged, Dagny Taggart switches her primary affection from Hank Rearden to John Galt. There is enough information in the novel to conclude that Rearden does not embody Objectivist values as extensively as Galt does, so this decision is clear. However, the characters of Francisco d’Anconia and Ragnar Danneskjöld do not exhibit the deficiencies in values that Rearden did. Why should Galt be preferred over these two? On what basis does one systematically evaluate the values of a partner or potential partner?

A second issue of impermanence is how frequently should such an evaluation, and possible switch, take place? Yang (2000, 129) poses the insightful question, “Imagine a person entering a relationship not having committed himself to his partner. Instead, he has an eye out for a higher person who may come along. Without cutting off all the bridges, how can he possess the resolve and perseverance necessary to overcome the conflicts and obstacles that inevitably come with marriage and life?” Rand’s work is famous for not including children, for example. Any two people who partner at the deepest level are likely to develop a variety of bonds from which it is difficult to disentangle, children being the most obvious example. Rand’s philosophy does not take into account the fullness of the human
relationship between two people.

Moreover, her writing is unclear about how expendable a person’s most valued partner is. She has written, “If [men] place such things as friendships and family ties above their own productive work . . . then they are immoral” (Rand 1964b). Yet, she has also written, “Concern for the welfare of those one loves is a rational part of one’s selfish interests. If a man who is passionately in love with his wife spends a fortune to cure her of a dangerous illness, it would be absurd to claim that he does it as a ‘sacrifice’ for her sake, not his own, and that it makes no difference to him, personally and selfishly, whether she lives or dies” (Rand 1964a, 44). These two statements are inconsistent. In the second instance, an individual is clearly placing a family tie above his own productive work. The Christian view of love and marriage, on the other hand, calls for two people to make a decision based on the highest ideals, and then to remain committed to that decision.

**Altruism**

Perhaps more than any other notion, Rand is known for opposing altruism. This view seems to fly in the face of the American way. Consider how Rand defines altruism:

The basic principle of altruism is that man has no right to exist for his own sake, that service to others is the only justification of his existence, and that self-sacrifice is his highest moral duty, virtue and value.

Do not confuse altruism with kindness, good will or respect for the rights of others. These are not primaries, but consequences, which, in fact, altruism makes impossible. The irreducible primary of altruism, the basic absolute, is *self-sacrifice*—which means: self-immolation, self-abnegation, self-denial, self-destruction—which means: the *self* as a standard of evil, the *selfless* as a standard of the good.

Do not hide behind such superficialities as whether you should or should not give a dime to a beggar. That is not the issue. The issue is whether you *do* or do *not* have the right to
exist without giving him that dime. The issue is whether you must keep buying your life, dime by dime, from any beggar who might choose to approach you. The issue is whether the need of others is the first mortgage on your life and the moral purpose of your existence. The issue is whether man is to be regarded as a sacrificial animal. Any man of self-esteem will answer: "No." Altruism says: "Yes." (Rand 1982, 61)

Consider the definition of altruism in the *Oxford English Dictionary* at dictionary.oed.com: “Devotion to the welfare of others, regard for others, as a principle of action; opposed to egoism or selfishness.” There are clear differences between Rand’s use of the term and the everyday vernacular. In Rand’s words, altruism is placing self-sacrifice as the highest virtue. She specifically defines it not to be “regard for others.” However, that is precisely how it is defined in common use. Bass (2006) has gone so far as to say that Rand has misdefined altruism. However, Campbell (2006, 362) has shown that Rand has remained true to the “crisp and uncompromising” definition of Auguste Comte. Comte was a devout collectivist who clearly placed regard for others higher than regard for self.

How does Christianity define altruism? The concept of altruism is not included in the Bible. Although *reason* appears 588 times (according to Bible.org), no word or phrase in the Bible would typically be translated as altruism. Then why did Rand so frequently use Christianity as her foil and exemplar of altruism? As Objectivist Edwin Locke (2007, 486) writes, “wealth—as many New Testament parables assert—is immoral and prevents the salvation of one’s soul.” As an aside, wealth is heralded in many parts of the Bible (Genesis 26:13; I Chronicles 4:10; Job 42:10). However, Locke is probably referring to the story of the rich young ruler. In this story, a man is told by Jesus that if he wants eternal life he must sell all that he has. By reading the Bible in context, it can be inferred that this man has placed wealth accumulation above all of his principles. Although Rand would certainly advocate each person acquiring as much wealth as possible, would she counsel someone who had placed wealth above principle to continue on this path? In this area, there is agreement between Rand and Jesus. Indeed, a parallel illustration can be found
in Rand’s character, Howard Roark, from *The Fountainhead* (1943b), who routinely refuses opportunities to increase his wealth because he holds to his ideals, even to the point of impoverishment.

The closest the Bible comes to the subject that Rand addresses is the famous maxim, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 19:19). Even Christians have misunderstood this maxim. C. S. Lewis (1980, 25) provides the necessary correction:

If you asked twenty good men today what they thought the highest of the virtues, nineteen of them would reply, Unselfishness. But if you had asked almost any of the great Christians of old, he would have replied, Love. You see what has happened? A negative term has been substituted for a positive, and this is of more than philosophical importance. The negative idea of Unselfishness carries with it the suggestion not primarily of securing good things for others, but of going without them ourselves, as if our abstinence and not their happiness was the important point. I do not think this is the Christian virtue of Love. . . . If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is no part of the Christian faith. (25)

Perhaps, surprisingly, Rand (1943a) understood clearly the very point Lewis is making. She wrote, “Christianity was the first school of thought that proclaimed the supreme sacredness of the individual. The first duty of a Christian is the salvation of his own soul. This duty comes above any he may owe to his brothers. . . . Christ did say that you must love your neighbor as yourself, but He never said that you must love your neighbor better than yourself” (2–3). Rand recognized that the concept of altruism, introduced hundreds of years after Christian scriptures, represented a basic contradiction with Christian philosophy, and that the Christian church had not yet fully dealt with that contradiction. Consequently, there is no difference between Objectivists and Christians on the matter of self-immolation. Both oppose it.
Trader Principle

Yet, the Christian premise of interaction between people provides a direct, logical flow to the Trader Principle. Objectivists define egoism in these terms: “each man’s primary moral obligation is to achieve his own welfare, well-being, or self-interest. . . . whatever man’s proper self-interest consists of, that is what each individual should seek to achieve” (Peikoff 1993, 230). From this premise, Objectivism also promotes a definition of “justice” embodied in the “trader principle”—that human beings should trade value for value. However, this principle does not flow from the foundation of egoism. As Yang (2000, 241) has noted, “if the standard of value for an individual is his own physical survival and happiness, why should that individual regard another person as an end in himself? Why should he take another person’s physical survival into consideration when contemplating a course of action?” Should not a person take advantage of another if it benefitted his self-interest?

The trader principle can be a direct conclusion from the Christian principle “Love your neighbor as yourself” and the so-called Golden Rule or ethic of reciprocity, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Matthew 7:12). These axioms require one to love one’s self and then interact with others in a way where value for value is traded. Recent brain research, for example, has discovered a neurological basis for an ethic of reciprocity. Using fMRI scans, Rilling et al. (2001) found that mutual cooperation “was associated with consistent activation in brain areas that have been linked with reward processing” (795). De Quervain et al. (2004) replicated the findings of Rilling et al. and further discovered through positron emission tomography (PET) that people will sanction others who do not go along with norms of caring about other people. As with the other aspects of this paper, there is greater empirical support for the Christian philosophical assumption.

Evaluating Different Philosophies

Given that there are a number of philosophies that have been offered, how is one to know which to accept? Different philosophical systems can be compared, but the basis of comparison results in another set of philosophies. At some point, the standard for comparison comes down to a matter of faith. Locke (2005) poses the
question: “how, then, does one know that a philosophical axiom is true, that one’s starting point is correct?” and answers that “an axiom is self-evident to perception” (479). This statement seems to beg the question since what is self-evident to one person may not be to another. Rand would likely agree with my own faith statement that the best philosophy is the one that is true. She (1982) advocated the “correspondence theory” as the best method of determining truth.

This analysis has shown that there is a great commonality between the philosophies of Objectivism and Christianity. Both elevate reason as the primary human faculty. Both oppose blind faith. Both exalt productive work and private property. Both oppose altruism as Rand defines it and both support ethical egoism. Both hold the sexual act in a very high regard, reserving it for very specialized circumstances. Both are similar in ways not discussed in this paper such as promoting an objective reality. There are several areas in which the philosophies differ, and this paper has shown that in each case, the Christian perspective better corresponds with truth. In other words, the Christian perspective better represents objective reality in these areas.

First, the Christian axiom that the universe had a beginning in time is much better justified by the empirical evidence supporting the Big Bang hypothesis. Rand’s acceptance of the tabula rasa is also not holding up in the face of recent scientific evidence. It seems quite clear now that humans are born in ways that are pre-set far beyond what Rand thought possible. With regard to romantic love, sex, and marriage, Rand’s writings have been shown to include logical inconsistencies and not to have as much experiential relevance as the Christian sense of commitment that allows for children to be raised in an environment of structure. This commitment also allows for greater wealth accumulation and overall greater life satisfaction.

This paper has shown that the Trader Principle is not logically consistent with Rand’s definition of selfishness whereas it is logically consistent with the Christian notion of the Golden Rule. Moreover, recent brain research provides greater empirical support for the Christian assumption. Finally, there is overwhelming empirical evidence that individuals who are practicing the Christian philosophy are happier, longer-lived, healthier, and higher on other measures related to the ultimate standard of life. According to Rand’s standard of life, it is logically consistent to be a practicing Christian because
such practice contributes to what she holds in highest regard.

**Conclusion**

Both Rand’s corpus and the Bible, and derivative works from each, have resulted in a comprehensive philosophy worthy of study. As noted above, both have been widely misunderstood. Elements of each may be easily understood or within the intuition of most people. For example, Rand’s strong assertion (following that of Aristotle) of the importance of “A is A.” Likewise, Budziszewski (2003) has a book entitled *What We Can’t Not Know* that argues there is a natural law that all human beings should know, unless they consciously evade the knowledge.

However, both bodies of work also include elements that require extensive study. For example, Rand’s notion of romantic love and Christianity’s exhortation “For whosoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it” (Luke 9:24). By way of analogy, many scientific understandings require a great deal of study to comprehend firsthand. Although learning about the properties of gravity doesn’t require much work, knowing, firsthand, that the universe is expanding requires years of study about mathematics, physics, and the operation of sophisticated equipment. Rand (1962) points out that in philosophy also, to have a totally consistent philosophical system “requires volumes of thought” (35).

Consequently, anyone who truly desires firsthand knowledge must engage in the study necessary to become knowledgeable with the body of work. As Rand (1961) has noted, “no substitute can do your thinking” (128). Rand has acknowledged her debt to predecessors such as Aristotle and Nietzsche. It is surprising that she doesn’t also acknowledge how much Christianity is embodied in her work. This inclusion is not surprising since Christianity is the most influential philosophy the world has ever known. This paper suggests that including additional elements from Christian philosophy helps solve problems in Objectivism that were incomplete or unaddressed when Rand died.

**Notes**

1. Toner (2007) makes this case, at least, for Rand’s views on consciousness. His paper “does not aim to ‘refute’ the Objectivist metaphysics.” Toner notes, “even
if it were granted that my arguments are wholly successful, Objectivism's central axioms would remain altogether untouched, since the paper proceeds on the assumption that those axioms are true” (211).

2. Christianity certainly espouses free will.

3. Rand (1982) was known for asserting a correspondence theory of truth. The Objectivist community today is certainly not a monolithic one. Peikoff (1993) writes of a contextual certainty with which some Objectivists have taken issue on various online forums, such as that hosted by the “Sense of Life Objectivists.” For Christians, faith is synonymous with contextual certainty or the inference to the best explanation.

4. Rand, however, did not develop a philosophy of science (Campbell 1999).

5. Christians fully support fields such as evolutionary psychology, which examines psychodynamic phenomena within the human species. Many Christians are known for not being convinced by “macro-evolution,” the process by which one species is transformed into another because, for example, of the lack of an explanation for how consciousness arose within humans and for the lack of transitional forms in the fossil record, for which there ought to be millions according to Darwinian theory.

6. Sixty-nine percent of the sample was from the Dominican Republic. The population of that country is at least 90 percent Christian.

7. Participants were not asked to specify their religion. However, the catchment area of the study is such that the vast majority of those with regular attendance would be Christians. In the context of this paper, those who never attend are the proxies for those who do not accept transcendence.

References


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