

TEMA DE DEBATE:

PAUL RYAN CAN BE A CATHOLIC AND STILL WORSHIP AYN RAND

Por Will Wilkinson

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U.S. Representative Paul Ryan, Mitt Romney's running mate on the Republican presidential ticket, has said that Ayn Rand, the author of "The Fountainhead" and "Atlas Shrugged," lit the inner fire that led him to public service.

Rand's individualistic, free-market philosophy "taught me quite a bit about who I am and what my value systems are, and what my beliefs are," the Wisconsin Republican said in a 2005 speech to a group of Rand's devotees.

Trouble is, Rand was a staunch atheist, and Ryan is a conservative Roman Catholic. When a few of Rand's incendiary comments about religion were lobbed his way, he repudiated her aggressive secularism. "I reject her philosophy," Ryan said in an interview this year. "It's an atheist philosophy. It reduces human interactions down to mere contracts and it is antithetical to my worldview. If somebody is going to try to paste a person's view on epistemology to me, then give me Thomas Aquinas. Don't give me Ayn Rand."

So if Rand is really so bad, how did she manage to work her way into his personal pantheon? Ryan would ban abortion; Rand held that "abortion is a moral right." Ryan aims to save the welfare state by putting it on a sound fiscal footing; Rand would have eliminated it altogether. Why didn't his robust Catholicism reject all of objectivism -- Rand's name for her philosophy -- as a virulent strain of heresy?

Compatible Ethics

The truth is that the ethical philosophies of Rand and Aquinas, the titan of medieval Catholic philosophy, are more simpatico than one might imagine. It's telling that Ryan, in his statement rejecting Rand's philosophy, chose to draw a contrast between Aquinas's and Rand's epistemologies -- their theories of knowledge -- but not between their ethics. The former is where the sharper difference lies.

This difference, naturally enough, does find expression in their moral philosophies. As the philosopher Douglas Rasmussen, a St. John's University scholar of both Rand and Aquinas, told me, "Ultimately, they differ in that Aquinas holds that the ultimate good is God and that human beings cannot find fulfillment in this world but only the next. Thus, Aquinas requires that theological virtues must transform the natural moral virtues." Aquinas held (and Rand most certainly did not) that without divine revelation, we fall short of ultimate truth.

That said, atheist and saint both build from the blueprint of Aristotle's virtue ethics, and thus the contours of their moral philosophies are much the same. "Both Rand and Aquinas believe that the key to understanding the moral good and moral obligation is to be found in terms of what will be self-actualizing," Rasmussen says. "Both think that self-actualization is to be understood in terms of human nature."

For Aristotelians, self-actualization is a matter of functioning well as the kind of creature one is. For humans, that means consistently exercising habits of character, or virtues, fine-tuned to realize the demands of reason, the essential and definitive human capacity. Virtue ethics in the Aristotelian vein differs from theories that begin with a rule of right action (for example, obey divine commands, period; never do things that would lead to disaster if everyone did them), which then place limits on the pursuit of self-realization.

For virtue ethicists such as Rand and Aquinas, the individual human good comes first. Then rules of right conduct are defined and justified in terms of their contribution to the good. This priority

of “the good” over “the right” puts the two thinkers on the same team against the mainstream of moral theorizing since the 18th century.

Channeling Aristotle

In “Requiem for Man,” a spirited 1967 attack on a papal encyclical, Rand lavished praise on Aquinas and his onetime primacy within the Catholic intellectual tradition. The Catholic Church’s “long, illustrious philosophical history was illuminated by a giant: Thomas Aquinas,” Rand wrote. “He brought an Aristotelian view of reason (an Aristotelian epistemology) back into European culture, and lighted the way to the Renaissance.” She continued: “The grandeur of his thought almost lifted the Church close to the realm of reason.”

Ryan’s Catholic hero, it turns out, was also a hero to Rand.

Indeed, in early plans for her magnum opus, “Atlas Shrugged,” Rand included a sympathetically drawn character who was a Thomist priest, Father Amadeus. She intended for Amadeus to gradually discover that religious faith hobbles rather than complements reason, which is the springboard toward the full realization of human potential, a state achieved by her story’s romantic hero, John Galt. But Rand couldn’t make this subplot work, so Father Amadeus was cut from an already overstuffed book.

If we wish to understand how a wholehearted Catholic such as Ryan might also harbor an affinity for Rand, we should look to the ill-fated Father Amadeus for answers. Right-leaning Catholics have long resisted the soft-socialist political economy advocated by church leaders in Rome. Ryan recently offered a Catholic defense of his budget proposals in response to a stern attack from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Ryan argued that big government is a misapplication of the Catholic principle of solidarity, and threatens to harm rather than help the vulnerable.

Moreover, Republican plans to cede federal power to state and municipal government embodies the principle of “subsidiarity,” or “respect for the relationships between individuals and intermediate social groups.”

Yet it seems that a revisionist reading of Catholic social principles can only get the Catholic capitalist so far. What’s missing is a captivating, comprehensive moral vision, and that’s exactly what Rand hawked.

Capitalist Faith

No doubt, when some conservative Catholics first encounter Rand’s moral case for capitalism, they find her Aristotelian language of virtue and self-realization both familiar and attractive. Rand’s exciting argument that capitalism alone creates the conditions for full human flourishing (for rich and poor alike!) is most welcome to minds already inclined toward free markets and limited government. If her argument dismisses divinely revealed truth, she nevertheless lays it out in terms that may seem to many right-leaning Christians, especially Catholics, readily amenable to a faith-based reframing.

Purists both Randian and Roman will say that any such synthesis of piety and profits is unstable. That was the point of Father Amadeus, after all, whose Roman faith wavers in the face of Randian reason. But the human capacity for sustaining an equilibrium of incoherence is far greater than Rand allowed, and rather less risky for the soul than the Vatican contends. Ryan’s personal philosophy may be plagued by contradictions more severe than any experienced by poor Father Amadeus, but they won’t be his undoing, and they won’t get him written out of this election’s story.

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