

From *Skeptic* vol. 2, no. 2, 1993, pp. 74-81.

The following article is copyright © 1993 by the Skeptics Society, P.O. Box 338, Altadena, CA 91001, (818) 794-3119. Permission has been granted for noncommercial electronic circulation of this article in its entirety, including this notice. A special Internet introductory subscription rate to *Skeptic* is available. For more information, contact Jim Lippard (lippard@skeptic.com).

THE UNLIKELIEST CULT IN HISTORY

BY MICHAEL
SHERMER

Contents:

- [Introduction](#)
- [Bibliography](#)

Freudian projection is the process of attributing one's own ideas, feelings, or attitudes to other people or objects--the guilt-laden adulterer accuses his spouse of adultery, the homophobe actually harbors latent homosexual tendencies. A subtle form of projection can be seen in the accusation by Christians that secular humanism and evolution are "religions"; or by cultists and paranormalists that skeptics are themselves a cult and that reason and science have cultic properties. For skeptics, the idea that reason can lead to a cult is absurd. The characteristics of a cult are 180 degrees out of phase with reason. But as I will demonstrate, not only can it happen, it has happened, and to a group that would

have to be considered the unlikeliest cult in history. It is a lesson in what happens when the truth becomes more important than the *search* for truth, when final results of inquiry become more important than the *process* of inquiry, and especially when reason leads to an absolute certainty about one's beliefs such that those who are not for the group are against it.

The story begins in 1943 when an obscure Russian immigrant published her first successful novel after two consecutive failures. It was not an instant success. In fact, the reviews were harsh and initial sales sluggish. But slowly a following grew around the

novel, word of mouth became the most effective marketing tool, and the author began to develop what could, with hindsight, be called a "cult following." The initial print-run of 7,500 copies was followed by multiples of five and 10,000 until by 1950 half a million copies were circulating the country. The book was *The Fountainhead* and the author Ayn Rand. Her commercial success allowed her the time and freedom to write her magnum opus, *Atlas Shrugged*, published in 1957 after ten years in the making. It is a murder mystery, not about the murder of a human body, but of the murder of a human spirit. It is a broad and sweeping story of a man who said he would stop the

ideological motor of the world. When he did, there was a panoramic collapse of civilization, with its flame kept burning by a small handful of heroic individuals whose reason and morals directed both the fall and the subsequent return of culture.

As they did to *The Fountainhead*, reviewers panned *Atlas* with a savage brutality that, incredibly, only seemed to reinforce followers' belief in the book, its author, and her ideas. And, like *The Fountainhead*, sales of *Atlas* sputtered and clawed their way forward as the following grew, to the point where the book presently sells over 300,000 copies a year. "In all my years of

publishing," recalled Random House's owner, Bennett Cerf, "I've never seen anything like it. To break through against such enormous opposition!" (Branden, 1986, p. 298). Such is the power of an individual hero . . . and a cult-like following.

What is it about Rand's philosophy that so emotionally stimulates proponents and opponents alike? Before *Atlas Shrugged* was published, at a sales conference at Random House a salesman asked Rand if she could summarize the essence of her philosophy, called Objectivism, while standing on one foot. She did so as follows (1962):

1. *Metaphysics*: Objective Reality

2. *Epistemology*: Reason
3. *Ethics*: Self-interest
4. *Politics*: Capitalism

In other words, nature exists independent of human thought. Reason is the only method of perceiving this reality. All humans seek personal happiness and exist for their own sake, and should not sacrifice themselves to or be sacrificed by others. And *laissez-faire* capitalism is the best political-economic system for the first three to flourish, 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," and where "no man may initiate the use of physical

force against others" (p. 1). Ringing throughout Rand's works is the philosophy of individualism, personal responsibility, the power of reason, and the importance of morality. One should think for one's self and never allow an authority to dictate truth, especially the authority of government, religion, and other such groups. Success, happiness, and unrestrained upward mobility will accrue to those who use reason to act in the highest moral fashion, and who never demand favors or handouts. Objectivism is the ultimate philosophy of unsullied reason and unadulterated individualism, as expressed by Rand through her primary character in *Atlas Shrugged*, John Galt:

Man cannot survive except by gaining knowledge, and reason is his only means to gain it. Reason is the faculty that perceives, identifies and integrates the material provided by his senses. The task of his senses is to give him the evidence of existence, but the task of identifying it belongs to his reason, his senses tell him only that something is, but what it is must be learned by his mind (p. 1012).

In the name of the best within you, do not sacrifice this world to those who are its worst. In the name of the values that keep you alive, do not let your vision of man be

distorted by the ugly, the cowardly, the mindless in those who have never achieved his title. Do not lose your knowledge that man's proper estate is an upright posture, an intransigent mind and a step that travels unlimited roads. Do not let your fire go out, spark by irreplaceable spark, in the hopeless swamps of the approximate, the not-quite, the not-yet, the not-at-all. Do not let the hero in your soul perish, in lonely frustration for the life you deserved, but have never been able to reach. Check your road and the nature of your battle. The world you desired can be won, it exists, it is real, it is possible, it's

yours (p. 1069).

How, then, could such a philosophy become the basis of a cult, which is the antithesis of reason and individualism? A cult, however it is defined, depends on faith and deindividuation--that is, remove the power of reason in followers and make them dependent upon the group and/or the leader. The last thing a cult leader wants is for followers to think for themselves and become individuals apart from the group.

The cultic flaw in Ayn Rand's philosophy of Objectivism is not in the use of reason, or in the emphasis on individuality, or in the belief that humans are self motivated, or in the conviction

that capitalism is the ideal system. The fallacy in Objectivism is the belief that absolute knowledge and final Truths are attainable through reason, and therefore there can be absolute right and wrong knowledge, and absolute moral and immoral thought and action. For Objectivists, once a principle has been discovered through reason to be True, that is the end of the discussion. If you disagree with the principle, then your reasoning is flawed. If your reasoning is flawed it can be corrected, but if it is not, you remain flawed and do not belong in the group. Excommunication is the final step for such unreformed heretics.

If you find it hard to believe that such a line of reasoning could lead a rational, well-intentioned group down the road to culthood, history demonstrates how it can happen. The 1960s were years of anti-establishment, anti-government, find-yourself individualism, so Rand's philosophy exploded across the nation, particularly on college campuses. *Atlas Shrugged* became the book to read.

Though it is a massive 1,168 pages long, readers devoured the characters, the plot, and most importantly, the philosophy. It stirred emotions and evoked action. Ayn Rand clubs were founded at hundreds of colleges.

Professors taught courses in the philosophy of Objectivism and the

literary works of Rand. Rand's inner circle of friends began to grow and one of them, Nathaniel Branden, founded the Nathaniel Branden Institute (NBI), sponsoring lectures and courses on Objectivism, first in New York, and then nationally.

As the seminars increased in size and Rand's popularity shot skyward, so too did the confidence in her philosophy, both for Rand and her followers. Hundreds of people attended classes, thousands of letters poured into the office, and millions of books were being sold. Movie rights for *Atlas* were being negotiated (*The Fountainhead* had already been made into a film). Her rise

to intellectual power and influence was nothing short of miraculous, and readers of her novels, especially *Atlas Shrugged*, told Rand it had changed their lives and their way of thinking. Their comments ring of the enthusiasm of the followers of a religious cult (Branden, 1986, pp. 407-415):

- After reading *Atlas* a young woman in the Peace Corps wrote: "I had undergone the loneliest, most inspiring, and heartrending psycho-intellectual transformation, and all my plans upon returning to the United States had changed."
- A 24-year old "traditional housewife" (her own label) read

Atlas and said: "Dagny Taggart [the book's principle heroine] was an inspiration to me; she is a great feminist role model. Ayn Rand's works gave me the courage to be and to do what I had dreamed of."

- A businessman began reading *Atlas* and said "Within a few hundred pages I sensed clearly that I had ventured upon a lifetime of meaning. The philosophy of Ayn Rand nurtured growth, stability and integrity in my life. Her ideas permeated every aspect of my business, family and creative life."
- A law school graduate said of Objectivism: "Dealing with Ayn Rand was like taking a post-

doctoral course in mental functioning. The universe she created in her work holds out hope, and appeals to the best in man. Her lucidity and brilliance was a light so strong I don't think anything will ever be able to put it out."

- An economics professor recalled: "After you read *Atlas Shrugged* you don't look at the world with the same perspective."
- A philosophy professor concluded: "Ayn Rand was one of the most original thinkers I have ever met. There is no escape from facing the issues she raised. . . . At a time in my life when I thought I had learned at least the essentials of most

philosophical views, being confronted with her . . . suddenly changed the entire direction of my intellectual life, and placed every other thinker in a new perspective."

- Another philosophy professor, this one disliking Rand and disagreeing with Objectivism, recalled after an all-night discussion with the philosopher-novelist: "She's found gaping holes in every philosophical position I've maintained for the whole of my life--positions I teach my students, positions on which I'm a recognized authority--and I can't answer her arguments! I don't know what to do!" (p. 247).

There are thousands more just like these, many from people who are now quite successful and well-known, and give credit to Rand. But to the inner circle surrounding and protecting Rand (in ironic humor they called themselves the "Collective"), their leader soon became more than just extremely influential. She was venerated as their leader. Her seemingly omniscient ideas were inerrant. The power of her personality made her so persuasive that no one dared to challenge her. And her philosophy of Objectivism, since it was derived through pure reason, revealed final Truth and dictated absolute morality.

One of the closest to Rand was Nathaniel Branden, a young philosophy student who joined the Collective in the early days before *Atlas Shrugged* was published. In his autobiographical memoirs entitled *Judgment Day* (1989), Branden recalled: "There were implicit premises in our world to which everyone in our circle subscribed, and which we transmitted to our students at NBI." Incredibly, and here is where the philosophical movement became a cult, they came to believe that (pp. 255-256):

- Ayn Rand is the greatest human being who has ever lived.
- *Atlas Shrugged* is the greatest human achievement in the history of

the world.

- Ayn Rand, by virtue of her philosophical genius, is the supreme arbiter in any issue pertaining to what is rational, moral, or appropriate to man's life on earth.
- Once one is acquainted with Ayn Rand and/or her work, the measure of one's virtue is intrinsically tied to the position one takes regarding her and/or it.
- No one can be a good Objectivist who does not admire what Ayn Rand admires and condemn what Ayn Rand condemns.
- No one can be a fully consistent individualist who disagrees with

Ayn Rand on any fundamental issue.

- Since Ayn Rand has designated Nathaniel Branden as her "intellectual heir," and has repeatedly proclaimed him to be an ideal exponent of her philosophy, he is to be accorded only marginally less reverence than Ayn Rand herself.
- But it is best not to say most of these things explicitly (excepting, perhaps, the first two items). One must always maintain that one arrives at one's beliefs solely by reason.

It is important to note that my critique of

Rand and Objectivism as a cult is not original. Rand and her followers were, in their time, accused of being a cult which, of course, they denied. "My following is not a cult. I am not a cult figure," Rand once told an interviewer. Barbara Branden, in her biography, *The Passion of Ayn Rand*, recalls: "Although the Objectivist movement clearly had many of the trappings of a cult--the aggrandizement of the person of Ayn Rand, the too ready acceptance of her personal opinions on a host of subjects, the incessant moralizing--it is nevertheless significant that the fundamental attraction of Objectivism . . . was the precise opposite of religious worship" (p. 371). And Nathaniel

Branden addressed the issue this way: "We were not a cult in the literal, dictionary sense of the word, but certainly there was a cultish aspect to our world We were a group organized around a charismatic leader, whose members judged one another's character chiefly by loyalty to that leader and to her ideas" (p. 256).

But if you leave the "religious" component out of the definition, thus broadening the word's usage, it becomes clear that Objectivism was (and is) a cult, as are many other, non-religious groups. In this context, then, a cult may be characterized by:

- *Veneration of the Leader:*

Excessive glorification to the point of virtual sainthood or divinity.

- *Inerrancy of the Leader*: Belief that he or she cannot be wrong.
- *Omniscience of the Leader*: Acceptance of beliefs and pronouncements on virtually all subjects, from the philosophical to the trivial.
- *Persuasive Techniques*: Methods used to recruit new followers and reinforce current beliefs.
- *Hidden Agendas*: Potential recruits and the public are not given a full disclosure of the true nature of the group's beliefs and plans.
- *Deceit*: Recruits and followers are not told everything about the leader

and the group's inner circle, particularly flaws or potentially embarrassing events or circumstances.

- *Financial and/or Sexual Exploitation*: Recruits and followers are persuaded to invest in the group, and the leader may develop sexual relations with one or more of the followers.
- *Absolute Truth*: Belief that the leader and/or group has a method of discovering final knowledge on any number of subjects.
- *Absolute Morality*: Belief that the leader and/or the group have developed a system of right and wrong thought and action

applicable to members and nonmembers alike. Those who strictly follow the moral code may become and remain members, those who do not are dismissed or punished.

The ultimate statement of Rand's absolute morality heads the title page of Nathaniel Brandon's book. Says Rand:

The precept: "Judge not, that ye be not judged" . . . is an abdication of moral responsibility: it is a moral blank check one gives to others in exchange for a moral blank check one expects for oneself.

There is no escape from the fact

that men have to make choices; so long as men have to make choices, there is no escape from moral values; so long as moral values are at stake, no moral neutrality is possible. To abstain from condemning a torturer, is to become an accessory to the torture and murder of his victims.

The moral principle to adopt . . . is: "Judge, and be prepared to be judged."

The absurd lengths to which such thinking can go is demonstrated by Rand's pronounced judgements on her followers of even the most trivial things. Rand had argued, for example, that

musical taste could not be objectively defined, yet, as Barbara Branden observed, "if one of her young friends responded as she did to Rachmaninoff . . . she attached deep significance to their affinity." By contrast, if a friend did not respond as she did to a certain piece or composer, Rand "left no doubt that she considered that person morally and psychologically reprehensible." Branden recalled an evening when a friend of Rand's remarked that he enjoyed the music of Richard Strauss. "When he left at the end of the evening, Ayn said, in a reaction becoming increasingly typical, 'Now I understand why he and I can never be real soul mates. The distance in our sense of life is too great.' Often, she

did not wait until a friend had left to make such remarks" (p. 268).

With this set of criteria it becomes possible to see that a rational philosophy can become a cult when most or all of these are met. This is true not only for philosophical movements, but in some scientific schools of thought as well. Many founding scientists have become almost deified in their own time, to the point where apprentices dare not challenge the master. As Max Planck observed about science in general, only after the founders and elder statesmen of a discipline are dead and gone can real change occur and revolutionary new ideas be accepted.

In both Barbara's and Nathaniel Branden's assessment, then, we see all the characteristics of a cult. But what about deceit and sexual exploitation? In this case, "exploitation" may be too strong of a word, but the act was present nonetheless, and deceit was rampant. In what has become the most scandalous (and now oft-told) story in the brief history of the Objectivist movement, starting in 1953 and lasting until 1958 (and on and off for another decade after), Ayn Rand and her "intellectual heir" Nathaniel Branden, 25 years her junior, carried on a secret love affair known only to their respective spouses. The falling in love was not planned, but it was ultimately "reasonable" since the

two of them were, de facto, the two greatest humans on the planet. "By the total logic of who we are--by the total logic of what love and sex mean--we had to love each other," Rand told Barbara Branden and her own husband, Frank O'Connor. It was a classic display of a brilliant mind intellectualizing a purely emotional response, and another example of reason carried to absurd heights. "Whatever the two of you may be feeling," Rand rationalized, "I know your intelligence, I know you recognize the rationality of what we feel for each other, and that you hold no value higher than reason" (B. Brandon, p. 258).

Unbelievably, both Barbara and Frank

accepted the affair, and agreed to allow Ayn and Nathaniel an afternoon and evening of sex and love once a week. "And so," Barbara explained, "we all careened toward disaster." The "rational" justification and its consequences continued year after year, as the tale of interpersonal and group deceit grew broader and deeper. The disaster finally came in 1968 when it became known to Rand that Branden had fallen in love with yet another woman, and had begun an affair with her. Even though the affair between Rand and Branden had long since dwindled, the master of the absolutist moral double-standard would not tolerate such a breach of ethical conduct. "Get that

bastard down here!," Rand screamed upon hearing the news, "or I'll drag him here myself!" Branden, according to Barbara, slunk into Rand's apartment to face the judgment day. "It's finished, your whole act!" she told him. "I'll tear down your facade as I built it up! I'll denounce you publicly, I'll destroy you as I created you! I don't even care what it does to me. You won't have the career I gave you, or the name, or the wealth, or the prestige. You'll have nothing" The barrage continued for several minutes until she pronounced her final curse: "If you have an ounce of morality left in you, an ounce of psychological health--you'll be impotent for the next twenty years!" (pp. 345-347).

Rand's verbal attack was followed by a six-page open letter to her followers in her publication *The Objectivist* (May, 1968). It was entitled "To Whom It May Concern." After explaining that she had completely broken with the Brandens, Rand continued the deceit through lies of omission: "About two months ago . . . Mr. Branden presented me with a written statement which was so irrational and so offensive to me that I had to break my personal association with him." Without so much as a hint of the nature of the offense Rand continued: "About two months later Mrs. Branden suddenly confessed that Mr. Branden had been concealing from me certain ugly actions and irrational behavior in

his private life, which was grossly contradictory to Objectivist morality " Branden's second affair was judged immoral, his first was not. This excommunication was followed by a reinforcing barrage from NBI's Associate Lecturers that sounds all too ecclesiastical in its denouncement (and written out of complete ignorance of what really happened): "Because Nathaniel Branden and Barbara Branden, in a series of actions, have betrayed fundamental principles of Objectivism, we condemn and repudiate these two persons irrevocably, and have terminated all association with them " (Branden, 1986, pp. 353-354).

Confusion reigned supreme in both the Collective and in the rank-and-file membership. Mail poured into the office, most of it supporting Rand (naturally, since they knew nothing of the first affair). Nathaniel received angry responses and even Barbara's broker, an Objectivist, terminated her as his client. The group was in turmoil over the incident. What were they to think with such a formidable condemnation of unnamed sins? The ultimate extreme of such absolutist thinking was revealed several months later when, in the words of Barbara, "a half-demented former student of NBI had raised the question of whether or not it would be morally appropriate to assassinate Nathaniel

because of the suffering he had caused Ayn; the man concluded that it should not be done on practical grounds, but would be morally legitimate. Fortunately, he was shouted down at once by a group of appalled students" (p. 356n).

It was the beginning of the long decline and fall of Rand's tight grip over the Collective. One by one they sinned, the transgressions becoming more minor as the condemnations grew in fierceness. And one by one they left, or were asked to leave. In the end (Rand died in 1982) there remained only a handful of friends, and the designated executor of her estate, Leonard Peikoff (who presently carries on the cause through the Southern

California based Ayn Rand Institute, "The Center for the Advancement of Objectivism"). While the cultic qualities of the group sabotaged the inner circle, there remained (and remains) a huge following of those who choose to ignore the indiscretions, infidelities, and moral inconsistencies of the founder, and focus instead on the positive aspects of the philosophy. There is much in it from which to choose, if you do not have to accept the whole package. In this analysis, then, there are three important caveats about cults, skepticism, and reason:

1. *Criticism of the founder of a philosophy does not, by itself,*

constitute a negation of any part of the philosophy. The fact that Christians have been some of the worst violators of their own moral system does not mean that the ethical axioms of "thou shalt not kill," or "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," are negated. The components of a philosophy must stand or fall on their own internal consistency or empirical support, regardless of the founder's personality quirks or moral inconsistencies. By most accounts Newton was a cantankerous and relatively unpleasant person to be around. This fact has nothing at all to do

with his principles of natural philosophy. With thinkers who proffer moral principles, as in the case of Rand, this caveat is more difficult to apply, but it is true nonetheless. It is good to know these things about Rand, but it does not nullify her philosophy. I reject her principles of final Truth and absolute morality not because Rand had feet of clay, but because I do not believe they are either logically or empirically tenable.

2. *Criticism of part of a philosophy does not gainsay the whole.* In a similar analogy as above, one may reject parts of the Christian philosophy while embracing others.

I might, for example, attempt to treat others as I would have them treat me, while at the same time renounce the belief that women should remain silent in church and be obedient to their husbands. One may disavow Rand's absolute morality, while accepting her metaphysics of objective reality, her epistemology of reason, and her political philosophy of capitalism (though Objectivists would say they all follow from her metaphysics). Which leads me to the third caveat.

3. *The critic of part of a philosophy does not necessarily repudiate the whole philosophy.* This is a personal caveat to Objectivists and

readers of *Skeptic* alike. Rand critics come from all political positions--left, right, and middle. Professional novelists generally disdain her style. Professional philosophers generally refuse to take her work seriously (both because she wrote for popular audiences and because her work is not considered a complete philosophy). There are more Rand critics than followers. I am not one of them. Ayn Rand has probably influenced my thinking more than any other author. I have read all of her works, including her newsletters, early works, and the two major biographies. I have even

read the Brobdingnagian *Atlas Shrugged* no less than three times, plus once on audio tape for good measure. Thus I am not a blind critic. (Some of Rand's critics have attacked *Atlas* without ever reading it, and Objectivism, without ever knowing anything about it. I have encountered many of these myself. Even the pompously intellectual William Buckley spoke of the "desiccated philosophy" of *Atlas*, "the essential aridity of Miss Rand's philosophy," and the tone of *Atlas* as "over-riding arrogance," yet later confessed: "I never read the book. When I read the review of it and saw the length of the book, I

never picked it up." Nothing could be more irrational.) I accept most of Rand's philosophy, but not all of it. And despite my life-long commitment to many of Rand's most important beliefs, Objectivists would no doubt reject me from their group for not accepting *all* of her precepts. This is ultimately what makes Objectivism a cult.

I believe (and here I speak strictly for myself and not for the Skeptics Society or any of its members) that reality exists and that reason and science are the best tools we have for understanding causality in the real world. We can achieve an ever-greater understanding of

reality but we can never know if we have final Truth with regard to nature. Since reason and science are human activities, they will always be flawed and biased. I believe that humans are primarily driven to seek greater happiness, but the definition of such is *completely personal* and cannot be dictated and should not be controlled by any group. (Even so-called selfless acts of charity can be perceived as directed toward self-fulfillment--the act of making someone else feel good, makes us feel good. This is not a falsifiable statement, but it is observable in people's actions and feelings.) I believe that the free market--and the freer the better--is the best system yet devised for

allowing *all* individuals to achieve greater levels of happiness. (This is not a defensible statement in this forum. I am just setting the stage for my critique of Rand.) I believe that individuals should take personal responsibility for their actions, buck up and quit whining when facing the usual array of life's problems, and cease this endless disease-of-the-month victimization. Finally, I wholeheartedly embrace Rand's passionate love of the heroic nature of humanity and of the ability of the human spirit to triumph over nature.

So far so good. I might have even made it into the Rand inner circle. But I would have been promptly excommunicated as

an unreformed heretic (the worst kind, since reformed heretics can at least be retrained and forgiven), with my belief that no absolute morality is scientifically or rationally tenable, even that which claims to have been derived through pure reason, as in the case of Rand. The reason is straightforward. Morals do not exist in nature and thus cannot be discovered. In nature there are just actions--physical actions, biological actions, and human actions. Human actors act to increase their happiness, however they personally define it. Their actions become moral or immoral when someone else judges them as such. Thus, morality is a strictly human creation, subject to all the cultural influences and

social constructions as other such human creations. Since virtually everyone and every group claims they know what right and wrong human action is, and since virtually all of these moralities are different from all others to a greater or lesser extent, then reason alone tells us they cannot all be correct. Just as there is no absolute right type of human music, there is no absolute right type of human action. The broad range of human action is a rich continuum that precludes its pigeonholing into the unambiguous yeses and noes that political laws and moral codes require.

Does this mean that all human actions are morally equal? No. Not any more

than all human music is equal. We create standards of what we like and dislike, desire or not, and make judgments against these standards. But the standards are themselves human creations and not discovered in nature. One group prefers classical music, and so judges Mozart to be superior to the Moody Blues. Similarly, one group prefers patriarchal dominance, and so judges male privileges to be morally honorable. Neither Mozart nor males are absolutely better, only so when compared to the group's standards. Thus, male ownership of females was once moral and is now immoral, not because we have discovered it as such, but because our society has realized that

women also seek greater happiness and that they can achieve this more easily without being in bondage to males. A society that seeks greater happiness for its members by giving them greater freedom, will judge a Hitler or a Stalin as morally intolerable because his goal is the confiscation of human life, without which one can have no happiness.

As long as it is understood that morality is a human construction influenced by human cultures, one can become more tolerant of other human belief systems, and thus other humans. But as soon as a group sets itself up to be the final moral arbiter of other people's actions, especially when its members believe

they have discovered absolute standards of right and wrong, it is the beginning of the end of tolerance and thus, reason and rationality. It is this characteristic more than any other that makes a cult, a religion, a nation, or any other group, dangerous to individual freedom. This was (and is) the biggest flaw in Ayn Rand's Objectivism, the unlikeliest cult in history. The historical development and ultimate destruction of her group and philosophy is the empirical evidence to support this logical analysis.

What separates science from all other human activities (and morality has never been successfully placed on a scientific basis), is its belief in the tentative nature

of all conclusions. There are no final absolutes in science, only varying degrees of probability. Even scientific "facts" are just conclusions confirmed to such an extent it would be reasonable to offer temporary agreement, but never final assent. Science is not the affirmation of a set of beliefs but a process of inquiry aimed at building a testable body of knowledge constantly open to rejection or confirmation. In science, knowledge is fluid and certainty fleeting. That is the heart of its limitation. It is also its greatest strength.

Bibliography

Branden, B. 1986. *The Passion of Ayn Rand*. New York: Doubleday.

Branden, N. 1989. *Judgment Day: My Years With Ayn Rand*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Rand, A. 1943. *The Fountainhead*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill.

_____. 1957. *Atlas Shrugged*. New York: Random House.

_____. 1962. "Introducing Objectivism." *Los Angeles Times*, June 17.

Michael Shermer is Publisher of *Skeptic*, Director of the Skeptics Society, and Adjunct Professor of History of Science at Occidental College. He has published *Teach Your Child Science* and co-authored *Teach Your Child Math* and *Mathemagics* with Dr. Arthur Benjamin. Dr. Shermer has just finished two books, *Heretic-Scientist*, a biography of Alfred Russell Wallace, and *The Chaos of History*, on the application of chaos theory to human history. He has also written numerous cycling books based on a ten year professional career as a ultra-marathon cyclist and competitor in the transcontinental Race Across America.