Confero | Vol. 8 | no. 1 | 2021 | pp. 51-76 | doi: 10.3384/confero.2001-4562.211215

‘As If He Had Come into the World Like Minerva’: Ayn Rand’s (Anti)Educational Philosophy

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> *Once, an elderly professor of literature…saw them on top of a pile in a junk yard, dismantling the carcass of an automobile. He stopped, shook his head and said to Francisco, ‘A young man of your position ought to spend his time in libraries, absorbing the culture of the world.’ ‘What do you think I’m doing?’ asked Francisco*.
>
> Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (2007a, p. 95)

In 2017, venture capitalist and co-founder of PayPal Peter Thiel created a fellowship for students under the age of twenty-three to give them the opportunity to drop out of college and pursue ideas of “radical innovation” outside universities that are “overpriced relics” holding back true creativity (Clynes, 2017). Whilst this initiative raised some eyebrows, Thiel’s argument, pitting old-fashioned educational institutes against innovate businesses, is not surprising. Indeed, this line of reasoning is part of a larger neoliberal discourse on education, in which market-ideology, business-models, and competition are all-pervasive (Burch, 2009). In this essay, I present a reading of two literary works by a philosopher who is often perceived as one of the most radical defenders of this market-ideology: Ayn Rand. Indeed, the famous Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek once even argued that unlike communism, capitalism does not have a specific manifesto—but the fictional works by Rand seem to be as close as one can get to a capitalist version of a manifesto (Žižek, 2009). With her famous novels *The Fountainhead*

(1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), Ayn Rand painted a bleak picture of what the United States would look like if the idea of capitalism gave way to socialism. Rand intended her novels to be more than just fiction: she wrote them as a literary presentation of her philosophy of 'Objectivism', which can be summarized as a political philosophy of laissez-faire capitalism and a moral philosophy of rational self-interest. Despite the length of her novels, featuring characters mostly serving as mouthpieces for Rand's philosophy, both books are still selling hundreds of thousands of copies in the US[1]; a survey conducted in the 1990's by the Library of Congress even proclaimed *Atlas Shrugged* as the most influential book in the US, after the Bible (Geoghegan, 2012). In 2009, sales spiked as the economic crisis raised questions on government interference in the markets (Burns, 2009).

Rand published extensively on education during the mass student protests at universities in the sixties. Her ideas on education boil down to "minimizing government interference, maximizing market forces, and re-affirming the primary role of parents in determining what kind of schooling their children receive" (Reid, 2013, p. 76). As the historian Jason Reid (2013) rightly argues, these ideas "would animate neoliberal critiques of the American educational system well into the 21st century" (p. 76).

Discussing Ayn Rand in an academic setting is, however, contentious. During her life, Rand looked down on academic philosophy - and the feeling was, and still is for many, mutual. Rand enjoyed discarding the whole of Western philosophy since Kant, and her "shock tactics" (Nighan, 1974, p. 125) and attack on "the cult of moral grayness" (Rand, 1964, p. 75), alienated many nuanced thinkers, both in and outside academia. Furthermore,

[1] However, some have argued that the immense popularity of Rand's novels should be attributed to the fact that the Ayn Rand Institute distributes free copies of her work in secondary education (Trubek, 2010). For a critical discussion on how this Institute is involved in college curricula as well in the US, see Jones (2010) and Beets (2015).

while she might have taken a progressive stance on some issues, such as abortion, her novels were understandably frowned upon by many feminists, for example for the following description of the female protagonist in *Atlas Shrugged*: "… the diamond band on the wrist of her naked arm gave her the most feminine of all aspects: the look of being chained" (Rand, 2007a, p. 136). As Susan Love Brown argues in her essay on Rand and feminism: "Although Rand's expressed attitudes support the equality of women, the undercurrents of her fiction and her explicit statements [such as her statement that she would not want a woman president, AZ] often belie this position" (Love Brown, 1999, p. 275).

Yet, in times of marketization, privatization and the discourse of neo-liberalism, Rand's philosophical novels provide an insight into a laissez-faire capitalist point of view on education, and the values associated with this ideology. Furthermore, whilst it has been observed that Rand and the followers of Objectivism have had strong convictions on educational-philosophical issues (Carson, 2005; Reid, 2013), recent publications hardly refer to the novels *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, despite the fact that they are key sources for understanding Rand's ideas. Finally, one can also argue that her novels are of value in understanding Rand's ideas on teaching and schooling, because these works were intended to have an educational value themselves as well. As the official heir to Objectivism, Leonard Peikoff, explained in his work on Rand's educational ideas: her literature forms a concretization of her philosophy and is therefore highly useful in the teaching practice (Peikoff, 2014).

In this essay, I will therefore read the two most well-known fictional works by Rand through an educational lens, which allows me to discuss the main values that come to the fore in Objectivists' understanding of teaching and schooling. My reading strategy is inspired by a deconstructivist approach to "close reading", which entails paying "attention to what seems ancillary" and "to the implication of figurality" (Culler, 1985, pp. 242–243). Drawing on two specific scenes from both novels, I will at first treat these scenes indeed, following Peikoff's suggestion, as concretizations of Rand's philosophy, working from the assumption that there is a

strong coherence between Rand's essays and fictional narratives. I will then read these scenes "against the grain" (p. 214): by paying close attention to imagery and apparently marginal details, I will critique Rand's ideas by arguing that these fragments also reveal a fundamental 'anti-educational' stance, which does not correspond to the ideals of teaching and schooling professed by Rand. This deconstructivist reading draws on an established methodology in literary studies; however, my aim in this essay is not to provide a comprehensive literary analysis of both novels by Rand. By close reading two scenes, I wish to contribute to the philosophical debate on Rand's ideas about teaching and schooling and her system of thought in general; my argument works towards the conclusion that the anti-educational stance revealed in these fragments is not only problematic for the consistency of Rand's thinking, but for the philosophy of Objectivism as a whole.

Objectivism

Rand was once asked, during a press event following the appearance of her novel *Atlas Shrugged*, if she could explain her philosophy of Objectivism standing on one foot. She did so, by summarizing her philosophy in four 'slogans': its metaphysics understand the world as an objective reality, its epistemology is concerned with reason, its ethics is the theory of rational self-interest, and its politics a defense of capitalism (Rand, n.d.). To understand Rand's role in the history of philosophy, it should first be underlined that her ideas are indebted to Aristotelianism. From a metaphysical point of view, she is radically against any form of Platonism, arguing that philosophy that gives room to a reality that is outside our world is not philosophy but mysticism. Reality exists as an absolute, and facts are facts, as she posits. Epistemologically, reason alone provides one's access to reality, defined by Rand as the faculty that identifies and integrates the material provided by one's senses. Reason is therefore one's only source of knowledge, and one's only guide to action. As stated above, the notion of self-interest is crucial to her ethics. In short, one can say that this implies that every man is an end in himself, and not the means to

an end for others. A human being must exist for his or her own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others, nor sacrificing others to himself. In the field of ethics, Rand's ideas have been labelled 'ethical egoism' (Torbjörn, 2013), or the idea that each person ought to pursue his or her own self-interest - a theory that is crucially different from psychological egoism, as the latter is a descriptive theory. Ethical egoism, however, is a prescriptive theory - it tells you that you should choose in your own self-interest, or in the words of Rand from her famous essay *The Virtue of Selfishness*:

> The Objectivist ethics holds that the actor must always be the beneficiary of his action and that man must act for his own *rational* self-interest. But his right to do so is derived from his nature as man and from the function of moral values in human life—and, therefore, is applicable *only* in the context of a rational, objectively demonstrated and validated code of moral principles which define and determine his actual self-interest. It is not a license "to do as he pleases"…(Rand, 1964, p. x, emphasis in original)

Just as Rand's adversary in metaphysics is Plato, her adversary in ethics is Christianity, or more broadly speaking: the philosophy of "altruism". Any moral theory that claims that one should first and foremost take the other into account, that praises the practice of self-sacrifice, or that glorifies suffering in the hands of others, is, according to Rand, not a philosophy of life, but a cult of death (Rand, 1964). According to Objectivism, the pursuit of one's own rational self-interest and happiness is the highest moral purpose of one's life. The only political-economic system that provides the opportunity for individuals to work towards this purpose is laissez-faire capitalism ("pure, uncontrolled and unregulated", p. 33) - a system, according to Rand, in which individuals can interact not as victims and executioners, nor as masters and slaves, but as traders: by free, voluntary exchange to mutual benefit (Rand, n.d.). These individuals should be able to interact without too much interference of the government - an institution that Rand understands as merely there to protect the individual's property and a country's wealth, which means that justice, the police, and armed forces are the only branches necessary, subsidized by a form of voluntary taxes. Long before the eighties when politicians as

Margaret Thatcher welcomed the idea of society as a sum total of individuals, Rand already stated that "there is no such entity as 'society', since society is only a number of individual men" (Rand, 1964, pp. 14-15). As "only individual men have the right to decide when or whether they wish to help others" and "society – as an organized political system – has no rights in the matter at all" (p. 80), systems such as social welfare and health care, are thus better off as private enterprises. Even though Rand did not perceive the United States as having achieved this level of laissez-faire capitalism - she argued that the US was still a "mixed economy", with capitalist and socialist elements (Rand, 1971a) - Rand became a champion of, in her eyes, the land of the free, where one can be in pursuit of one's own happiness.

Of course, the obvious adversary in this political perspective is communism - a system with which Ayn Rand was more than familiar. Born as Alisa Rosenbaum in 1905 in Russia, she grew up in a bourgeois Jewish family under the reign of Czar Nicholas the second. In 1918, the Red Guard pounded on the door of her father's chemistry shop, signaling it had been seized in the name of the people (Burns, 2009). The Bolshevik Revolution caused her family to flee St. Petersburg to the south, where they lived in distressed circumstances. After her studies, Alisa managed to escape to the United States, where she hoped to make a living as a screenplay writer. She re-invented herself with a pseudonym and made a name for herself as a philosopher. The publication of *The Fountainhead* in 1943 was an immense success, and turned her into a cult-figure in the US. She gathered a group of loyal followers, who called themselves 'the class of '43', or also – a bit more tongue-in-cheek – 'the collective'. She died in 1982 in New York, and at her funeral a six-foot floral arrangement in the shape of a dollar sign was placed beside her coffin.

As indicated earlier, this essay will focus on the educational aspects of Objectivism. Rand began to publish more extensively on education during the mass student protests at universities in the sixties - a phenomenon she perceived as the result of the rise of progressive education in the United States. Her collection of essays

entitled *The New Left: The Anti-Industrial Revolution* from 1971 is a result of her critique of the revolutionary sentiment in American academia at that time. A critical analysis of this crisis in education was also the topic of some lectures she delivered at the Ford Hall Forum, where she had been invited to speak in 1961 and often returned to for speeches on current educational issues with alarming titles such as 'The Intellectual Bankruptcy of Our Age', 'The Moratorium on Brains', and 'The Age of Mediocrity'.[2] In 1984, Leonard Peikoff gave a series of lectures on a philosophy of education based on the ideas of Ayn Rand, later published under the title *Teaching Johnny to Think* (Peikoff, 2014). Here, he argues that thinking about education from Rand's perspective is necessarily interrelated with the Objectivists' ideas on epistemology (rationality) and ethics (self-interest). He summarizes Rand's ideas on education as follows: "Education is the systematic process of training the minds of the young, both in essential content and proper method" (p. 13). By teaching subjects (or content), the values of Objectivism – namely integrity, honesty, productiveness, justice, independence, and pride – should be conveyed to the child. Children should thus become "cognitively self-sufficient" (p. 14) through the process of education, which gives them the capacity for individual judgment, so needed in "today's climate of skepticism, agnosticism, and relativism" (p. 40). Perhaps Rand's interest in education was not only the result of the sixties student protests; in some interviews, she disclosed how unhappy she had been as a young schoolgirl. In 1979, for example, she was interviewed by Tom Snyder for *The Tomorrow Show*, during which she revealed some of her personal experiences as a gifted child that was educated at Russian, and after the Bolshevik Revolution, Soviet schools. She considered the time she spent in the classroom to be very tedious, as the pace was just too slow for a "top student". She would always try to sit in the back of the room with a book in front of her, which allowed her to hide the fact that behind that book, she, already at the age of ten, was writing novels. Just by reading ahead, she knew what the teacher would say, and

[2] See https://courses.aynrand.org/campus-courses/ayn-rand-at-the-ford-hall-forum/ for these and other lectures in this series.

writing was the only way to escape the boredom she experienced. In this interview, she argues that school had a very negative effect on her working discipline: "it was too easy, and too boring. I never had to make an effort" ("Ayn Rand interview with Tom Snyder," 1979). Yet another negative personal experience in school is described by Anne Heller in her biography of Rand. For one of her school assignments, "the girls were asked to write a few paragraphs about why being a child is such a joyous thing. Rand didn't agree that it *was* joyous and shocked her classmates with 'a scathing denunciation of childhood'". Her point was that "children couldn't think as clearly as they would be able to once they had grown up" (Heller, 2009, p. 19). Heller states,

> This memory formed the basis for a revealing flashback in her third novel, *The Fountainhead* (1943); there, a brilliant and exuberant little boy named Johnny Stokes humiliates the book's archvillain, Elsworth Toohey, by composing a masterly, rebellious grade-school essay on hating school, while Ellsworth sucks up to the teacher by pretending to love school. (p. 19)

It is these personal experiences of boredom and frustration in school that might have inspired this and other educational scenes in *The Fountainhead*, but also in the other extensive work of fiction that Rand published, namely *Atlas Shrugged*. The next paragraphs turn to analyze both novels as a source for a more thorough understanding of Rand's educational philosophy.

Selflessness and collectivism: *The Fountainhead* as an educational dystopia

The Fountainhead was published in 1943 and meant a break-through for Rand: it was well-received and allowed her to set forth the fundamentals of Objectivism to a large audience. The novel tells the story of the top architect Howard Roark, who finds himself surrounded by mediocre colleagues aiming to ruin his works of genius out of envy. Rand herself characterized her book in the introduction to an edition from the late sixties, marking the twenty-fifth year of this title in print, as a work on the "essential division"

between two camps in humanity: "those dedicated to the *exaltation* of man's self-esteem and the *sacredness* of his happiness on earth- and those determined not to allow either to become possible" (Rand, 2007b, p. xii, emphasis in original).

The original title for *The Fountainhead* was actually *Second-Hand-Lives*. Rand was fascinated by the, in her view appalling, idea that most people live their lives based on values derived from other people; they do not seem to have a personal "sense of life", but are more copycats of ideas and ideals upheld by other people - they live their lives, according to Rand, as 'selfless', that is to say in Rand's idiosyncratic use of the word, without a 'self'. This attitude, Rand concluded, is brought about by the so-called "collectivist motivation": "the drive to seek the meaning of one's life outside oneself" (Heller, 2009, p. 110), which results in people leading 'second-hand-lives'. It is precisely this attitude of selflessness and collectivism that is examined in *The Fountainhead*. My analysis of the excerpt below, the opening scene depicting the highly talented protagonist Howard Roark in conversation with the dean of the Architectural School of the Stanton Institute of Technology, will therefore be structured around these two concepts of 'selflessness' and 'collectivism'. In many ways, a dystopian picture of education is painted by Rand in this scene between teacher and student, as collectivism and selflessness obviously form the precise opposite of a Randian interpretation of a good education.

The reason for the meeting between the dean and the young Roark in the opening scene of *The Fountainhead* is that the latter has just been expelled from the Architectural Institute. Even though Roark does excellent work on courses that involve engineering, he refuses to spend time on great architectural styles and famous predecessors. Exercises in historical styles – "a Tudor chapel, or a French opera house to design" (Rand, 2007b, p. 10) – are either not submitted or ridiculed by Roark. The dean attempts to reason with Roark by underlining the importance of collectivity in the creative process as follows:

> The voice of the past is the voice of the people. Nothing has ever been invented by one man in architecture. The proper creative process is a slow, gradual, anonymous, collective one, in which each man collaborates with all the others and subordinates himself to the standards of the majority. (p. 13)

The fact that the Architectural Institute emphasizes a traditional approach in its curriculum is already apparent from the description by Rand of the stifling building: it is compared to a medieval fortress, and includes a Gothic cathedral (p. 8). In line with this historic surrounding, the dean thus argues: "there is a treasure mine in every style of the past. We can only choose from the great masters. Who are we to improve upon them? We can only attempt, respectfully, to repeat" (p. 11). Collectivity, collaboration and subordination to the majority and historic predecessors are thus key concepts in this educational approach. The twenty-two year old Roark defends a Randian perspective in response, underlining the concept of the individual genius as opposed to the collectivism propagated by the dean: "But the best is a matter of standards - and I set my own standards. I inherit nothing. I stand at the end of no tradition. I may, perhaps, stand at the beginning of one" (p. 13). This last line indicates an important feature of Rand's critique on teaching and learning in those days. Where it is understood that students need help on more practical, or technical topics such as engineering, there is in other courses no room for individual creativity, or the formation of the 'self', as 'collectivism' is the basic tenet of the curriculum and more general, the educational philosophy. It is only repetition and collaboration that are forced upon students, and this is why Roark concludes that he has "nothing further to learn here" (p. 10).

The ones who do fit in, the ones who 'excel' in schools, are students of mediocre talent, willing to subordinate themselves to the collective - of teachers, of examples from the past, and whims of their clients. Peter Keating, top student from Roark's class, is the epitome of a Randian form of 'selflessness' in this novel: a character that is not guided by his own dreams and ambitions, but by the expectations of family and peers - both in his professional and private life. With his unexceptional talent, Keating is only able to

succeed in the architectural business by leaning on the creativity of Roark and stealing his ideas; a dependence that proves to be fatal as Roark demolishes Keating's prestigious housing project since the latter has failed to fulfill Roark's explicit wish to construct the project exactly as he had (secretly) designed it for Keating. Towards the end of the novel, Roark looks back on the discussion with his dean in the opening scene, thinking about "the principle behind the dean who fired me", and Roark comes to the following conclusion: "It's what I couldn't understand about people for a long time. They have no self. They live within others. They live second-hand" (p. 633). With this insight of Roark, referring to the original title Rand had in mind for her novel, the core of Rand's critique of the school system becomes apparent as well. Educational institutes are depicted as places where one is forced into a mold, risking the loss of a 'self' and individual creativity. In schools there is no room for true genius, is the message, as the talented Roark was forced to find work without his diploma.[3]

Rand's thoughts on selflessness and collectivism are obviously recognizable in many current critiques of our school systems - even though such ideas are not explicitly formulated in these Objectivist terms. The before-mentioned fellowship instigated by Peter Thiel to drop out of college and pursue truly innovative ideas outside universities is one example, but Rand's discourse on individual talents and the stifling uniformity of the school system also resonates in less radical proposals and analyses of current educational issues, both in the US and the EU - ranging from the much-viewed TED talk by Ken Robinson on how schools ruin the creativity of children ("Do schools kill creativity? Sir Ken Robinson," 2007) to the many calls for a more personalized approach in education to let individual talents flourish.

[3] These educational ideas in *The Fountainhead* were aptly summarized by the makers of *The Simpsons*, the famous cartoon series from the US, in which the talented baby Maggie finds herself in a daycare that does not understand or accept her genius (episode 20, season 20, "Four Great Women and a Manicure").

Rand's critique on the educational system voiced in *The Fountainhead* can also be found in her later essays on progressive education and American academia. Especially her essays in *The New Left: The Anti-Industrial Revolution*, published in 1971, take up many ideas already indicated in the dystopian depiction of schooling in *The Fountainhead*. Rand argues here that the student protests on campuses are the result of poor education in primary and secondary progressive schools - institutes working with students only "to adjust him to society":

> The primary goal of a Progressive nursery school is "social adjustment"; this is to be achieved by means of group activities, in which a child is expected to develop both 'self-expression' (in the form of anything he might feel like doing) and conformity to the group. (Rand, 1971b, p. 155)

Rand describes the disastrous effects such a system has in her view on talented children:

> The 'socializing' aspects of school, the pressure to conform to the pack, are, for him, a special kind of torture. A thinking child cannot conform—thought does not bow to authority…. When, on top of it, the outsider is penalized or reprimanded for his inability to 'get along with people', the rule of mediocrity is elevated into a system. ('Mediocrity' does not mean average intelligence; it means an average intelligence that resents and envies its betters.) Progressive education has institutionalized an Establishment of Envy. (p. 178)

This observation comes as no surprise for the readers of *The Fountainhead*, which indeed depicts the genius Roark confronted with the "Establishment of Envy", both in the Architectural Institute and in the outside world. And as Roark managed to survive as outcast and non-conformist, Rand argues in her later essays that "it is the little 'misfits' who have the best chance to recover" (p. 169), those children and young adults who have in common "*the inability to fit in*, i.e., to accept the *intellectual* authority of the pack" (p. 170, emphasis in the original). The idea that progressive education ruined generations of American students takes the form of a more personal attack in *Atlas Shrugged*, which features the main culprit in Rand's eyes: the educational philosopher John Dewey. The next

section will focus on Rand's critique of Dewey in light of the more general depiction of educational values in this latter novel.

Rationalism and individual liberty: *Atlas Shrugged* as an educational utopia

In 1957, the highly anticipated novel *Atlas Shrugged* was published, which tells the story of a group of very successful industrialists, artists, and scientists who go on strike in the United States. The narrative depicts the elite of society, or the 'Atlasses', led by the enigmatic steel industrialist John Galt, secretly leaving their businesses one by one, frustrated by the socialist policies of the government. Žižek rightly emphasizes the importance of this departure by the Atlasses:

> The ideological gain of this operation resides in the reversal of roles with regard to our everyday experience of strikes: it is not workers but the capitalists who go on strike, thus proving that they are the truly productive members of society who do not need others to survive. (Žižek, 2002, pp. 216–217)

Galt has created a secret, new society which is named after him, 'Galt's Gulch', characterized by Rand as "the utopia of greed" (Rand, 2007a, p. 752). This hide-out forms a blueprint for Rand's philosophy in practice:

> …a small town in which unbridled market relations reign, in which the very word 'help' is prohibited, in which every service has to be reimbursed with true (gold-backed) money, in which there is no need for pity and self-sacrifice for others. (Žižek, 2002, p. 217)

When the United States, worn down by socialism, is on the point of total collapse, the Atlasses return to save the day; their return is marked by the famous speech by John Galt, who takes over radio and television to explain to the citizens of the US the departure of Atlasses and to provide an analysis of all the wrongs in society. This seventy-page lecture, on which Rand had worked for two years, is often perceived as the best introduction to her philosophy of

Objectivism.[4] The novel was not well-received in the world of professional reviewers and academia – the misanthropic tone, Manichaean worldview and unrealistic storyline led to some harsh criticism – but the work made Rand a hero for many businesspeople and executives, even to the point that some owners of corporations asked Rand permission to reprint Galt's speech for internal distribution, thrilled as they were by a novel that acknowledged their importance in society (Burns, 2009).

The scene we will zoom in on is in many ways the exact opposite of the one in *The Fountainhead*. Instead of a parting between student and teacher, it features a reunion between three former students (all highly talented men, one of which is the main protagonist John Galt) and their former philosophy teacher, Dr. Akston, set in this utopian society instigated by Galt and populated with gifted industrials, artists, and scientists who have all turned their back on a society with increasingly socialist policies. The scenes from both novels thus mirror each other, and provide crucial information on the educational ideas in Objectivism. In my analysis of this utopian educational setting with Dr. Akston as the embodiment of the ideal teacher, I would like to start with the precise opposite character in *Atlas Shrugged*, namely Dr. Simon Pritchett, because it is, in my view, the best way to understand the character of Dr. Akston - and in a broader sense, Rand's ideas on education.

Dr. Simon Pritchett is Dr. Akston's successor as the Head of the Department of Philosophy, one of the best-known philosophers in the 'socialist' United States depicted by Rand, and often invited as a guest at social events. Rand portrays Pritchett as one of the root causes of the demise of philosophy and education in society, as he

[4] It has been pointed out that Alan Greenspan, former Chair of the Federal Reserve of the United States and part of the inner circle around Rand, was probably involved in the creation of Galt's speech. Greenspan, who then owned a successful economic consulting business, had done research into the steel industry and provided Rand with crucial information for this speech and the novel in general (Achterhuis, 2011; Burns, 2009).

lightens up parties with statements such as "the purpose of philosophy is not to seek knowledge, but to prove that knowledge is impossible" (Rand, 2007a, p. 133) and that man's metaphysical pretensions are "preposterous", as man is "just a collection of chemicals with the delusion of grandeur" (p. 131). In short, Pritchett provides the philosophical justification for a world where "genius is a superstition", "a man's brain is a social product" and "all thought is theft" (p. 540). This character is, according to one of Rand's biographers, modelled after a real-life and well-known educational philosopher, namely John Dewey (Heller, 2009). Rand blamed Dewey for the – in her eyes – many faults in progressive education, and some have argued that the term 'Objectivism' was chosen by Rand to oppose herself to the epistemological 'subjectivism' propagated by Dewey and his followers (p. 278).[5] In her view, Dewey's emphasis on the social construction of knowledge denied the fact that learning is individual, and that knowledge is the result of the use of one's reason; a line of thought she later elaborated in the above-mentioned essay-collection *The New Left* on the crisis of education:

> John Dewey, the father of modern education (including the Progressive nursery schools), opposed the teaching of theoretical (i.e., conceptual) knowledge, and demanded that it be replaced by concrete, "practical" action, in the form of "class projects" which would develop the students' social spirit….
>
> Look at the writings of Kant, Dewey, Marcuse and their followers to see pure hatred—hatred of reason and of everything it implies: of intelligence, of ability, of achievement, of success, of self-confidence, of self-esteem, of every bright, happy benevolent aspect of man. (Rand, 1971b, pp. 172, 194)

Dewey's influence led to progressive schools with only one goal: "social adjustment" (p. 154), understood by Rand as indoctrination with a "mob spirit", or "pack" mentality (p. 175), leaving no privacy for individual children to learn to think, caught as they are in

[5] Indeed, Leonard Peikoff, later the official spokesperson for the legacy of Rand, was initially banished for two years from the group around Rand for expressing sympathy for the ideas of John Dewey (Heller, 2009).

useless rounds of discussions and "learning by doing" that will result in "painful boredom" (Peikoff, 2014, p. xx).

Obviously, such representations of Dewey and the didactics of progressive schools are not very fair—and not even accurate, as it has been argued by others. Heller (2009) underlines the fact that Rand's representation of Dewey does not take into account the historical setting of Dewey's ideas, whilst Raymond A. Nighan (1974) states in his dissertation on Rand's concept of an educated man that she actually critiques the excesses of progressive education, and not so much Dewey himself, as the latter also "criticized Progressive educational excesses, including its failure to come to grips with subject matter" (p. 138). Reid (2013), furthermore, convincingly showed that "the various attempts by Rand and her peers to characterize Dewey as a rabid collectivist oftentimes ignored his healthy respect for self-interest and individual initiative in bringing about positive educational outcomes. Dewey was no socialist" (p. 78).[6]

Yet, the misrepresentation of Dewey is not the point I wish to make here; I want to analyze the Deweyan character of Dr. Simon Pritchett in *Atlas Shrugged* because it provides a framework for understanding Rand's educational philosophy in this novel. Pritchett is the reason, as Rand aims to convince her readers, that a philosophical change in our culture is necessary to turn schools once again into bastions of knowledge. This philosophical change is promoted in *Atlas Shrugged* by Rand's portrayal of the precise opposite of Pritchett, in the figure of another philosopher and teacher: Dr. Akston, the great proponent of rationalism and indeed the last defender of reason. Each year, three of his most talented pupils organize a reunion with their former teacher. During their

[6] Reid (2013) argues that one of the reasons that Dewey is turned into a scapegoat by Rand, is just the fact that he was the most recognizable figure in progressive education during the postwar years, and he continues: "It is worth noting, however, that Rand and her followers seemed to have conflated Dewey's ideas on education with those of his star pupil, William Heard Kilpatrick" (p. 81).

reunion in Galt's Gulch, Akston tells the female protagonist, Dagny Taggart, about his experience in teaching these former students. His success in having taught three of the greatest talents of their time, Akston underlines, is solely based on the fact that he allowed them to stay untouched by the "brain-destroying influences of the world's doctrines" and to "remain human", which meant: to remain rational (p. 786). As soon as these three young students entered his classroom during a lecture series for advanced studies in philosophy, he realized they were special. After class, he talked with them for hours, and as they were majoring in two subjects – physics and philosophy – Akston…

> suspended all rules and restrictions for these three students, we spared them all the routine, unessential courses, we loaded them with nothing but the hardest tasks, and we cleared their way to major in our two subjects within their four years. They *worked* for it. (p. 787, emphasis in original)

The gifted students are thus offered a personalized approach to education: an individual path is set out for them. This sense of individualism is a crucial feature of the educational ideas of Rand and Objectivism: thinking presupposes a sense of privacy, and learning is an individual, 'selfish' process. This is exactly the reason why Rand and her followers were such avid defenders of the approach to education by Maria Montessori: she is perceived as one of the few educational philosophers that leaves room for young people to be alone during their time in school and therefore "a hopeful movement" (Rand, 1971a) in education. What attracted Rand to the Montessori method of teaching, Nighan (1974) argues, was the fact that this method was founded on the liberty of the individual child, the importance to recognize and respect the distinct personality of students, and the didactical materials geared towards conceptual thinking (pp. 182 – 86). In short, according to Reid, it was the importance of "reason, reality, and the rights of the individual" in Montessori's thoughts that "seemed to complement the basic tenets of Objectivism" (Reid, 2013, p. 83).

Again, one can argue that this representation of Montessori does not do justice to all of her educational ideas, as Reid (2013) for

example has done.[7] However, the main issue at hand here is that "the establishment of the Dewey–Montessori binary" (Reid, 2013, p. 84), translated into fiction by Rand in the shape of the 'Dr. Pritchett–Dr. Akston' binary, allows her to create an educational dystopia in stark contrast to an educational utopia. Nuanced references to educational philosophers might blur or problematize this dichotomy. Whereas Dr. Pritchett from *Atlas Shrugged* appears on a par with the dystopian schooling system depicted in *The Fountainhead* and its curriculum designed to further collectivism and selflessness, in the educational utopia personified by Dr. Akston in *Atlas Shrugged*, rationality prevails, individual talents are recognized, and personal liberty is created in a curriculum to let these talents flourish and reach their goals. Between both novels, Rand fleshed out her ideas on education by endorsing Montessori and damning Dewey, mostly in publications on the state of universities and the emerging student protests. Yet, despite this Randian black-and-white opposition in the fictional depiction of education, an interesting parallel between both scenes from *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* can be drawn. It is precisely the similarity in both scenes that indicates a crucial problem in the ways in which Rand understands issues of education.

Eternal superheroes en perpetual students

The previous sections aimed to understand the educational values of Objectivism by reading the most important works of fiction by

[7] Reid (2013) argues a misunderstanding of Montessori by Objectivists on two crucial issues - that of 'thinking and working alone'("Objectivists have proven themselves incredibly reluctant to discuss Montessori's belief that intellectual development depended, in large part, on emulation, in allowing children to copy each other and share insights with each other", p. 85) and the supposed rationalism propagated by Montessori ("Though some of Montessori's basic ideas on education may have seemed sufficiently rational to Objectivists, it is hard to conclude that Montessori herself was in any way a proponent of rationalism. After all, Montessori was a devout Roman Catholic who often peppered her works with biblical quotes and calls for divine guidance", p. 87).

Ayn Rand through an educational lens and zooming in on two scenes that mirror each other. *The Fountainhead* features the farewell between student and teacher, and summarizes the negative aspects of education – collectivism and 'selflessness' – whereas *Atlas Shrugged* presents a utopian picture of education, during a discussion at a reunion with a former teacher and his students, which is built upon rationality and individual liberty. Yet, reading both novels through this educational lens, a parallel between both works presents itself, which prompts the start of my reading of both scenes now *against* the grain instead of with the grain. Close reading both scenes – paying attention to imaginary and apparently marginal details – allows me to tease out an inconsistency in Rand's educational ideas.

A striking similarity in details can be observed in the ways in which the two main characters of *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* are perceived by their respective teachers in the scenes analyzed in the previous sections: both deny that Howard Roark and John Galt have ever been children, or that they have ever been part of a family-structure. Howard Roark appears to have had no family whatsoever, as the dean contemplates during their final dialogue in *The Fountainhead*:

> He thought of what he had heard about Roark's past. Roark's father had been a steel puddler somewhere in Ohio and had died long ago. The boy's entrance papers showed no record of nearest relatives. When asked about it, Roark had said indifferently: "I don't think I have any relatives. I may have. I don't know." He had seemed astonished that he should be expected to have any interest in the matter. (p. 14)

John Galt is characterized in a similar manner by Dr. Akston in *Atlas Shrugged*:

> …John, the self-made man, self-made in every sense, out of nowhere, penniless, parentless, tie-less. Actually, he was the son of a gas-station mechanic at some forsaken crossroads in Ohio, and he had left home at the age of twelve to make his own way—but I've always thought of him as if he had come into the world like Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, who sprang forth from Jupiter's head, fully grown and fully armed…. (p. 786)

These descriptions by their former teachers imply (besides Rand's apparent dislike of the state of Ohio) that the main characters did not undergo a process of coming-of-age, of emerging adultness, growing insight, or evolving personalities. Indeed, a deconstructive approach reveals how it is precisely figurative speech (Culler, 1985) that undermines this scene: the analogy of Minerva subverts *any* ideal of an educational process. Just as Minerva sprang fully formed from her father's head, Howard Roark and John Galt were fully formed in their morality, rationality, and eagerness to turn their goals into reality.

This observation has repercussions, I argue, for the way we should look at Rand's educational philosophy, and its weaknesses. The imagery of Minerva and seemingly minor details in characterization from both scenes reveal that Rand apparently has no interest in showing her audience the *Bildung* of her main protagonists, understood as the gradual formation of personality and mind in a process of trial and error, and her novels give no evidence of pedagogical interest as such. Roark and Galt are put in settings with teachers, and they indeed 'learn' - but we would not understand them as going through a process of 'education'. Roark and Galt have learned what they needed to become successful in life, but they never made mistakes, nor suffered from lack of self-confidence, and were not forced to work with people wholly different from themselves. Thus, instead of educationally more interesting round characters, finding their way in life's challenges, Rand's readers are confronted with flat characters, navigating unrealistically clear-cut dilemma's as superheroes. And even though Rand has avidly defended her use of characters as static, moral exemplars [8], the similarity between both scenes in *The*

[8] Rand has always propagated 'Romantic literature', which features characters as concretizations of a moral ideal (as opposed to 'Naturalistic literature' with real-life characters), as she stated in her essay 'The Goal of My Writing': "The motive and purpose of my writing is the projection of an ideal man. The portrayal of a moral ideal, as my ultimate literary goal, as an end in itself" (Rand, 1963). Thus, the suggestion that Howard Roark and John Galt had gone through a process of education would diminish their status as moral heroes.

Fountainhead and *Atlas Shrugged* reveals, I think, a profound flaw in her educational philosophy that can also be traced in current discourses on learning as individual trajectories, the development of personal talents and the cultivation of the qualities of each single student: it provides only a very narrow understanding of what education actually involves. As such, Rand's narratives foreshadow the rise of an instrumental discourse on education that the Dutch educational philosopher Gert Biesta characterizes as the 'language of learning', where the student becomes a consumer working towards individual self-improvement and schooling a commodity to obtain that goal; a discourse that goes hand in hand with a neoliberal ideology and marketization of education. We therefore need to return to the notion of 'education' instead of 'learning', according to Biesta, to recognize the inherent risk in education, the importance of educational relations and the exposure of students to otherness of difference (Biesta, 2013).

I would like to take one step further in drawing conclusions from my analysis of both scenes, and especially from the apparent lack of a pedagogical dimension. In the similarity between Rand's two main protagonists, we can not only observe the emergence of a discourse on education as the individual self-improvement by learning - we can also understand something about the educational effect Rand intended to exert with her novels. As I indicated earlier, Peikoff (2014) has emphasized the importance of Rand's fiction in teaching her philosophy: "Philosophy is the theory, the abstractions; art is the model builder, the engineer. The difference is contained in the difference between an abstract lecture on rationality and independence and reading *The Fountainhead* and getting the image of Roark" (pp. 54-55). One can thus argue that with *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand aimed to teach her readers by means of narratives of superheroes for adults, as concretizations of moral ideals in the shape of her main protagonists Howard Roark and John Galt, to hold up to her

readers.[9] Both novels also contain prolonged speeches, during which readers are almost literally 'lectured'. This is the reason why Rand used these works during most courses she taught on Objectivism. Given Rand's educational utopia depicted in *Atlas Shrugged*, based on the values of individualism and rationalism, one would expect her to have engaged her students in frank discussions, stimulating critical thinking, and exploring individual perspectives. Yet, it can be gathered from biographical information that her educational utopia is a far cry from her own teaching practice and how she intended to educate her audience with her works of fiction. Rand never accepted her students of Objectivism to become full-fledged 'Objectivists', as both of her biographers remarked. Burns (2009) refers to a quote by Rand as follows: "She emphasized that students of Objectivism 'cannot be and must not attempt to be theoreticians of the subject they are studying'" (p. 252). This attitude leads, according to her other biographer Anne Heller (2009), to the following situation: "As a result, she [Rand] decreed that only she, Nathaniel, and Barbara could call themselves 'Objectivists'. Everyone else had to refer to himself as a 'student of Objectivism'". Enrollees to courses in Objectivism had to "declare their agreement with the major tenets of John Galt's speech" and "Rand was likely to explode in anger if questions suggested doubt or disagreement" (p. 302). Rand's teaching practice thus shows remarkable resemblances with how she portrayed the characteristics of progressive education: there was a pressure to conform to the pack. Where Peikoff (2014) argued the importance of training the capacity for individual judgment in education, he does not take into account the, in Rand's own words, obvious "mob spirit" (Rand, 1971b, p. 175) in the teaching practice of Objectivism. My point here is that this teaching practice, so far from the educational ideals professed by Rand and her followers, might not have been surprising to the readers of *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas*

[9] Indeed, Rand stated that "many readers of *The Fountainhead* have told me that the character of Howard Roark helped them to make a decision when they faced a moral dilemma. They asked themselves: 'What would Roark do in this situation?'" (Rand, 1965).

Shrugged. Despite the fact that Rand aims to educate her readers, it is precisely these works of fiction that reveal her fundamental anti-educational attitude: Rand not only has no interest in depicting the protagonist's 'education' as a gradual character formation (and therefore displays an instrumental, narrow understanding of education in terms of 'the language of learning') - she also prevents her readers to evolve or grow with them; by erasing childhood from her fictional characters and portraying them as unattainable 'ideals', Rand leaves her audience in a state of permanent immaturity. Both the readers of Rand's novels and the students of Objectivism are therefore placed in a position where individuality, non-conformity, critical thinking and rationality – i.e., the educational values propagated by Rand and her followers – are not appreciated. The fact that the educational value *of* Rand's novels does not correspond to the educational values propagated *in* these novels, is not only problematic for its inconsistency. Perpetual 'students of Objectivism' do not have the opportunity to evolve into teachers or theoreticians; this educational issue might explain as well why Ayn Rand not only stood at the beginning of the tradition of Objectivism - she also stood at the end of it.

Acknowledgments

The initial draft of this article was written as a paper presentation for the "Ethics and Education Conference" at the University of Warsaw, Poland in November 2019. The conversation that followed that presentation, especially with prof. Nicholas Burbules, was inspiring. I am also indebted to the careful reading and helpful comments by the anonymous reviewer of *Confero*.

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