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Reply to Whittaker Chambers

Leonard Peikoff

Editor's note: *Leonard Peikoff wrote this letter to the editors of the National Review (William F. Buckley and Frank S. Meyer) in response to Whittaker Chambers' review of Atlas Shrugged in the December 28, 1957, issue. (Dr. Peikoff's letter was also dated December 28.) The National Review did not publish it. The original letter is located in the Ayn Rand Archives; it is published here for the first time. Note that although Ayn Rand's disagreements with conservatives go back to the 1930s, at the time this letter was written she and her associates (including Dr. Peikoff) still used "conservative" to refer broadly to anyone who claimed to defend capitalism and the original political philosophy of the American Founding Fathers.*

Sirs:

Whittaker Chambers' irresponsible review of Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, in your issue of Dec. 28th, is a combination of distortion and fear-inspired invective. It is a review which a respectable magazine—to say nothing of a conservative one—would not publish.

To compare Miss Rand's heroes to Nietzschean supermen, to say of her that she "consistently mistakes raw force for strength," to identify her politically with the Hitlerian "Right," and to attribute to her the advocacy of a Big Brother-technocratic elite "living and acting beyond good and evil"—is not stupidity on Mr. Chambers' part. It is willful perversion. Were I in philosophic agreement with Mr. Chambers, I would say that his review is the proof of his doctrine that men are born with Original Sin and are inherently corrupt. But I am not in agreement with Mr. Chambers. He cannot blame Adam or God for that review. It is his responsibility.

Miss Rand's philosophy, unequivocally stated and demonstrated in *Atlas Shrugged*, is that man's life depends upon the constant and unremitting use of his mind in the task of identifying reality and gaining knowledge; it is, she shows, the process of thinking, the adherence to logic, the exercise of

rationality, that makes it possible for man to take the productive actions necessary to achieve the values upon which his survival depends. The heroes of *Atlas Shrugged*, as an expression of this philosophy, are the men of greatest rationality and greatest achievement. Where in this does Mr. Chambers discover any vestige of the Dionysian frenzy and anti-reason rampant in Nietzsche's characterization of his supermen? Where in this does Mr. Chambers discover the advocacy of raw force by Miss Rand, or the equation of raw force with strength?

Miss Rand's philosophy states further that, since the use of the mind is man's cardinal virtue, a moral social system must guarantee each and every man the inalienable right to freedom—freedom of thought and of action, and the freedom to keep the property his thought and action have created. Miss Rand clearly states that there are only two choices in the construction of political systems: a system that respects individual rights—or all those systems which violate them. She points out that contemporary political theorists argue only over *whose* rights are to be violated, by whom, and for whom, but that all agree that the sacrifice of some men to others is a moral ideal and a political necessity. To dramatize her unalterable opposition to any form of human sacrifice, to any form of the idea that a ruling elite may dispose of the lives of other men and live and act “beyond good and evil,” she has her hero, John Galt, offered by the collectivists total dictatorial power over America. He refuses. He is tortured by the collectivists for refusing to rule. The collectivists, the advocates of raw force, all but kill him, but he remains adamant. In the name of his vision of a country where there will be no masters and slaves, no rulers and ruled, no commissars or Gestapo or ruling elite of any kind, he is willing to risk his life. There is no honest way of interpreting this philosophy as akin to Hitler, Big Brother, or technocracy.

Mr. Chambers declares that Miss Rand's philosophy is materialism. How can a philosophy which worships the creative, thinking mind be called materialism? How can a philosophy be called materialism which declares that one should go on strike against the world and abandon all its goods rather than renounce his mind? It could only be so called by a mystic such as Mr. Chambers, for whom there are only two alternatives: either you love life on earth—in which case you are a vulgar materialist; or you hate life on earth and believe in a mystical super-dimension whose existence and nature you know by blinding revelations—in which case your anti-materialism consists in hating everything material.

Mr. Chambers is an ex-Communist. He has attacked *Atlas Shrugged* in the best tradition of the Communists—by lies, smears,

and cowardly misrepresentations. Mr. Chambers may have changed a few of his political views; he has not changed the method of intellectual analysis and evaluation of the Party to which he belonged. And the *National Review*, an ostensibly conservative publication, permitted these tactics to be used on the first book which has ever provided a philosophic, rational basis for capitalism.

I am a lecturer in philosophy at two New York universities. I have occasion frequently to discuss with students the unfortunate state of political affairs in America and to recommend conservative publications to them. I will sooner in future recommend the *Daily Worker* than the *National Review*. The *Daily Worker* at least is open and honest in stating its political position. It is a tragedy of America that it is the *National Review*, which is supposed to serve as the conservative counterweight. The desperate state of America is easily explained if it is you at the *National Review* who represent contemporary conservatism.