

Houston Objectivism Society Newsletter

Vol. 10, No. 1

January 1997

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The Houston Objectivism Society supports Objectivism and the Ayn Rand Institute; however, we do not purport to represent or speak for the same. HOS membership dues are \$15 per year (single); \$25 (couple). \$5 (student). The Newsletter address is: P.O. Box 112, Bellaire TX 77402.

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Intellectual Activism: OpEd Articles

by J. Brian Phillips

Since its founding, HOS has encouraged members to write letters to the editor as a means of spreading rational ideas. During the past ten years, HOS members have had more than 50 letters to the editor printed in various publications.

While letters to the editor provide a means for presenting rational alternatives to the general public, the nature of the forum necessarily limits the scope of one's argument-- letters to the editor are generally less than 200 words. As a result, it is often difficult, if not impossible, to adequately address a particular issue.

OpEd articles provide a forum for a more extensive presentation. Such articles are generally between 750 and 1,200 words long, giving a writer a greater opportunity to develop and concretize his argument.

The same rules for writing letters to the editor-- essentialize and concretize-- apply to writing OpEd articles. However, the expanded length should not be used to raise or address related issues. Instead, focus on the primary issue involved. For example, if one is writing about a proposal to restrict sexually oriented businesses, one should not attempt to address the mind-body dichotomy. Though this latter issue is philosophically relevant, it would most likely sidetrack one's argument and be lost on most readers.

It is imperative to keep the

audience in mind. OpEd articles are written for the general public, not students of philosophy. Address philosophical issues in terms that the general public can understand. This does not mean "writing down", but rather identifying the context of the readers. A brilliant and lucid article will be useless if it is written for the wrong audience.

Concretizing with examples most readers can understand is one of the most effective means of presenting philosophical ideas. Such examples make the idea real, and help the reader understand how a particular idea will effect his life. The proposal to restrict sexually oriented businesses is appealing to many Houstonians, who think that such restrictions will improve their community. However, the principle involved grants City Council the authority to restrict all businesses, and more broadly, control over all property. This is the same principle which voters rejected in the 1993 referendum on zoning.

Editorial page editors look for articles which are timely. In this regard, future topics can often be anticipated. For example, the debate over raising Houston's minimum wage was first raised in 1995, and the recent referendum has been scheduled for months. I first began writing the following article last fall, in anticipation of submitting it just prior to the referendum.

AYN RAND ON DONAHUE, SNYDER

The February HOS meeting will feature a video presentation of Ayn Rand's appearances on the Phil Donahue Show and Tom Snyder's Tommorrow. These appearances were made after the publication of *The Virtue of Selfishness*.

Prior to the video presentation, members will enjoy a pot luck dinner.

The meeting will be held on February 8 at 6:30 p.m. at the Clubroom of The Meridian apartment complex, 6263 Westheimer (between Hillcroft and Fountainview), across from Payless Shoes. The Club Room is located up the stairs on the west side of the building facing Westheimer.

NOTE: We are asking each member who attends to contribute \$2 to help pay for the expenses of renting this clubroom. We have not been recovering rental costs, and would like to encourage those who have not been contributing to do so. In addition, in an effort to reduce club expenses, those attending are asked to bring snack items.

The prospective OpEd writer should also remember that Objectivism offers a unique alternative to the ideas presented by liberals and conservatives. Non-Objectivists presented many correct and important arguments against the minimum wage proposal, but those arguments were limited almost entirely to economics. Since OpEd pages seek "fresh" ideas, writing from an Objectivist perspective, i.e., showing philosophy in action, will increase the chances an article will be published.

As with letter writing, newspapers receive many more articles than they have space to print. Rejection should not discourage you from writing and submitting articles in the future. Not only do you benefit from the experience of writing the article and clarifying your arguments, those who do read the article might be influenced by the ideas presented. The editors who read and select OpEd articles influence the paper's editorial positions, and an articulate article could have an impact on those positions.

The following article was submitted to the Houston Chronicle ten days prior to the January 18 referendum on raising Houston's minimum wage. The article was not printed.

The referendum was defeated by a vote of 3 to 1. Supporters of the referendum vowed to increase union membership in Houston, and indicated that they would not pursue another referendum.

"The Tyranny of Consensus"

When I was a child, one of the favorite summer past times for kids in

my neighborhood was to build tree forts. Each of us owned a number of boards, and we would each contribute our materials for the construction of a fort. When disputes arose, and we no longer wished to associate with our fort buddies, we would take our respective boards and negotiate an agreement with other children for the construction of a new fort.

Each of us used our property as we chose, and when a particular arrangement was no longer acceptable, we sought something better. The new fort may have been an improvement, or as was sometimes the case, a step backward. But the decision was ours to make, and we benefited or suffered according to the wisdom of our decision. This childhood experience taught me that my decisions determine the quality of my life.

The same principle applies to life as an adult. Each of us is faced with countless decisions in life, and the choices we make determine the quality and success of our lives. It is our responsibility to choose and pursue the values which will make our lives meaningful, to determine the course which will lead to the successes we desire.

This may seem like an obvious fact, yet many Houstonians (and Americans as well) disagree. They argue, sometimes explicitly, that life should come with certain guarantees, such as health care, an education, shelter, food, or a "living wage". They argue that the decisions and actions of individuals should not determine the success of their lives, but that individuals should be sheltered from the consequences of their decisions.

On January 18 Houstonians will be asked to address this fundamental moral question.

Both proponents and opponents of the referendum on raising Houston's minimum wage to \$6.50 per hour have focused their arguments on the economic aspects of the proposal. But the fundamental issue has nothing to do with economics.

Proponents of the minimum wage proposal implicitly argue that an individual's skills, education, and experience are irrelevant factors in determining his productive capacity. An individual, they argue, should be guaranteed a "living wage", regardless of his choices in regard to obtaining the skills necessary to increase his earning power. An individual, they imply, should not be responsible for his decisions and their consequences.

At the same time, individuals who take responsibility for their decisions would be prevented from acting accordingly. A small business owner, who heroically struggles to make a better life for himself, would be prevented from deciding the economic value of his employees. And yet, he would be forced to bear the responsibility of the decision of voters. In short, his judgment is rendered irrelevant, as the will of the majority is imposed upon him.

While the business owner may be the most visible victim, the unskilled worker who wishes to take a low paying job to obtain experience and skills is prohibited from accepting a lower wage. A responsible, rational individual knows that wage levels are not arbitrarily imposed by employers, but are determined by the market and the individual's skills,

experience, and knowledge. Such an individual is willing to accept a lower wage to obtain the skills necessary to increase his earning power. Again, minimum wage laws render his judgment irrelevant.

Consensus building absolves the irresponsible, and burdens the responsible. When given the power of law, the will of the majority becomes a tyranny.

Underlying consensus building is the premise that individuals are to be subservient to the majority, that individuals are to subordinate their own judgment to public opinion. And those who refuse become criminals, subject to fines of \$200 per day per employee (in the case of the minimum wage proposal). Stripped of all of the rhetoric and claims of minimum wage advocates, the proposal amounts to nothing more than an attempt to criminalize disagreement with the proponents of a "living wage".

The minimum wage referendum has little to do with economics. It has everything to do with how Houstonians are permitted to live. It is about whether Houstonians will be permitted to choose their values and peacefully pursue them, or whether a majority of voters will be permitted to impose their values on others by force.

Like my childhood playmates, each us possess certain assets (whether physical, intellectual, or both). And like my childhood playmates, we should be free to use those assets as we choose, in pursuit of the values we select.

The consensus builders want

us to believe that the truth and propriety of an idea is determined by the number of its supporters. They want us to believe that the majority is right, because it is the majority. Christopher Columbus, Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, and many, many others have demonstrated the error of this belief.

The consensus builders depend upon the moral and intellectual uncertainty of their victims. They insist that their proposals are intended to benefit the "public welfare", the "common good", etc. Yet they ignore the fact that the public consists of individuals, and those individuals seek different values in life.

If the term "public welfare" is to have any meaning, it must refer to the one value which all individuals share-- the freedom to pursue one's values without interference from others. It is this value which the consensus builders seek to destroy.

Unlike my childhood playmates, the consensus builders cannot accept the fact that others may not agree with them. They seek to implement their ideas, not by presenting a rational argument to those who disagree, but by forcing individuals to act contrary to their own judgment.

The choice on January 18 then, is between allowing individuals to pursue their own values, or allowing the majority to impose their values upon others. The choice is between individual freedom, and the tyranny of consensus.

Intellectual Activism on the Internet

by Steve Miller

During the month of November, I found myself unexpectedly engaged in a new sort of activism made possible by the Internet. Interestingly enough, both cases involved *The Fountainhead* essay contest.

On a Friday night, I was at the tail end of a work session when I decided to surf the Internet briefly. On a lark, I decided to try to find "Ellsworth Toohey." One of the first items found by the search engine was the home page of a high school student from Louisiana. Not expecting much, I looked anyway. I was pleasantly surprised to find a lengthy quotation from *The Fountainhead* followed by some intelligent comments. I e-mailed the student, telling him about the on-line registration for the high school essay contest. Sadly, Houston never got around to annexing Louisiana, so I could not enroll him in the local contest. Based on this student's reply, I have probably managed to get another entrant into this year's contest. I have high hopes for him. His signature line is, "If you want a guarantee, buy a toaster."

My second encounter with the essay contest was much more ordinary in the sense that it was instigated by an editorial I had written in the student paper at Rice before the elections. The sidebar to my editorial got the attention of someone who had written a pro-Libertarian editorial. He e-mailed me, telling me that

my views might make me good material for the Libertarian Party. I responded politely, telling him that I was quite familiar with the Libertarian movement and that I did not agree that it was beneficial to the cause of freedom. We had a lengthy and intelligent debate via e-mail until I concluded that it might be worth sending him a copy of "Libertarianism: The Perversion of Liberty," by Peter Schwartz. About three weeks later, when I had despaired of ever hearing from him again, I got an e-mail that read, in part, "Well, chalk one up for pamphleteering - that article showed me the errors of the Lib[ertarian] way. I especially was convinced by the 'anti-state vs. anti-statism' argument." I plan to meet with him sometime and possibly also introduce him at an HOS meeting soon. It turns out that this individual learned of Libertarianism indirectly because of his familiarity with Rand. He had learned of Rand through *The Fountainhead* essay contest while he was in high school.

I am convinced that the Internet will prove to be an excellent means of waging the war of ideas, especially for professionals who might be too busy for some of the more traditional forms of activism. E-mail combines the best aspects of telephone and "snail mail" in that rapid and convenient communication occurs, but it is a written medium that allows for

better articulation of ideas. The Internet makes it possible to "read" a potentially interested person before contacting him, making it possible to be highly efficient at spreading ideas. Furthermore, these two examples show that "Internet activism" can also improve the work done in more traditional fields of intellectual activism. In this case, I recruited a new *Fountainhead* contestant via the Internet and I corrected the damage done by the Libertarians to a past contestant.

Editor's note: E-mail can also be used to direct others to locations on the Internet which contain Objectivist articles, information and literature. Such locations include the HOS home page (<http://members.aol.com/WSRoss/hos.html>), the Ayn Rand Institute home page (www.aynrand.org) and The Intellectual Activist home page. While copyrighted articles should not be distributed over the Internet, an interested individual can be directed to the article.

The HOS Web site, in conjunction with links from other sites, allows individuals to contact the club. The Internet attracts approximately six requests per month for information about HOS.

HOS Meeting Summaries

Christmas Party December 14, 1996

The annual HOS Christmas Party was held on December 14. The party featured a pot luck dinner and progressive gift exchange, both organized by Janet Lee Wich.

Among those attending the party were Dwyane Hicks and Jeri Egan, who made their first trip back to Houston since moving to London in September 1994.

Planning Meeting January 11, 1997

The annual HOS planning meeting was held on January 11. The meeting began Janet Lee Wich reporting on the success of last year's pamphleteering project. She reported that 635 pamphlets had been pledged, and 600 were mailed. This was a considerable improvement in both the quantity of pamphlets mailed and the percentage of pledges met.

Those in attendance then answered a member questionnaire and discussed a number of suggestions for improving or changing HOS operations. Warren announced that the Executive Committee would meet later to discuss the questionnaires.

After meeting ideas were discussed, a vote was taken for the 1997 meeting schedule. The tentative schedule for 1997 is:

February: Video presentation of Ayn Rand on the Phil Donahue Show and Tom Snyder's

Tomorrow. A pot luck dinner will precede the presentation.

March: Janet Lee Wich will lead a campaign to bring Dr. Leonard Peikoff's radio program to Houston. The meeting will include a playing of tapes from Dr. Peikoff's program and letter writing to area radio stations.

April: "Brains of Steel II" by Chris Land. This presentation will help members identify limits on their context of knowledge in particular situations and propose methods for expanding that context.

May: Iyceum International will present "From the Archives of the Ayn Rand Institute" by Scott McConnel and Dina Garmong.

June: "Chewing the Virtue of Honesty" by Brian Phillips. This workshop will help members identify the context which gives rise to the Objectivist virtues (with the emphasis on the virtue of honesty), and therefore the meaning and application of the virtues.

July: Fourth of July party. Time and location to be announced.

August: Warren Ross will present a review of Dr. George Reisman's book *Capitalism*. Warren's review will include suggestions on how the book should be studied.

September: Video presentation of Dr. Peikoff's "My Thirty Years with Ayn Rand." Following the video, members will read selected letters from *Letters of Ayn Rand*.

October: "Heroes in Business and Industry" by Clark Hamilton.

While heroes such as Bill Gates are well known, many heroic accomplishments go unnoticed. Clark's presentation will focus on these lesser-known heroes.

November: Pete Jamison will present the work of Frank Lloyd Wright.

December: Annual Christmas Party.

Executive Committee Meeting

Members of the HOS Executive Committee met on January 25 to discuss suggestions made by members at the annual planning meeting.

The survey indicated that members desire more social activities. Adding a July 4th party to the year's agenda is one step toward meeting this request. In addition, a member directory will be published in the next newsletter, which will help members contact one another. Any member wishing to be excluded from the directory should contact Brian Phillips before March 1.

Members would also like to see greater promotion of HOS. Past ideas relating to promoting HOS will be studied.

To promote greater access to the library, selected items from the library will be present at each HOS meeting. Members wishing to borrow a particular item should contact Brian Phillips prior to the meeting.

Additional suggestions will be solicited at the February HOS meeting.

Intellectual Activism: An Act of Justice

In January, HOS President Warren Ross was on the jury panel for a malpractice lawsuit. Warren was not selected for the jury, but did hear many of the facts of the case. He wrote the following letter, which he read at the January HOS meeting, as an act of justice.

Dear Dr. :

I want to express my strong moral support for you in your malpractice trial. I was on the jury panel, but wasn't picked. What I heard of the facts convinced me that this was a typical case of a person willing to use the coercion

of the courts to provide for her (and her children's) sustenance. I have nothing but contempt for such people and the lawyers who take their cases (or more likely urge them on). And I have nothing but respect and sympathy for the doctors who spend their lives learning, thinking and trying their hardest to solve sometimes intractable medical problems. I especially have sympathy for that group of doctors (ob/gyn) who seem to be the most prevalent target of lawyer-assisted plunder.

It would not surprise me if during a trial like this you contemplate retirement, or some

form of retreat from the frontlines where you are exposed to the risk of future such suits. That, of course, is your decision to make. I personally hope you will continue your valuable work. Whatever you choose to do, you must know that there are people out here who don't attack and misrepresent you, but on the contrary have the highest regard for your knowledge, competence and dedication.

Sincerely,

Warren S. Ross

ANNOUNCEMENTS

\$ A number of items are missing from the HOS Library. Any member in possession of library materials should contact Brian Phillips at 464-1774. Any member wishing to use library materials should contact Brian.

\$ The HOS Web site contains a number of articles from this newsletter. The URL is <http://members.aol.com/WSRoss/hos.html>

\$ Don't forget to renew your HOS membership.

\$ George Reisman's recently published book, *Capitalism*, has been purchased by HOS for the library.

\$ A directory of HOS members will be distributed in the next newsletter. Any member wishing to be excluded should contact Brian Phillips before March 1.

\$ Lyceum International is presenting a fifteen hour course by Dr. Leonard Peikoff titled "Objectivism Through Induction". The course, which is being offered via audio feeds, will begin on March 8. For more information, contact Lyceum International at (360) 479-4765.