

The Undercurrent

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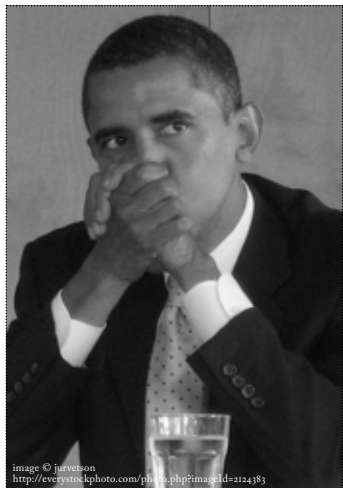
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"It was as if an underground stream flowed through the country and broke out in sudden springs that shot to the surface at random, in unpredictable places." Ayn Rand

OBAMA THE INTELLECTUAL?

Some say we finally have a President who is a thinker. Do we?



by **Gena Gorlin**

An "open, out-of-the-closet, practicing intellectual"—this was *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof's laudatory description of America's new president. Kristof, echoed by a chorus of similar commentators, was expressing hope that Obama might help combat a growing anti-intellectual climate in America today.

Obama seems to fit the bill. Citing as evidence both his technological savvy and the fact that he is actually well read, some affectionately hail him as our first "geek" president. And his eloquence as a speaker is certainly indisputable.

But Kristof and others like him refer to something different when heralding Obama's intellectualism. Their evidence is not Obama's book knowledge or his wit, but his basic approach to ideas. Unlike those who, as Kristof puts it, ignore the "uncertainties" and "contradictions" inherent in human life and "become too rigid and too intoxicated with the fumes of moral clarity," Obama embraces uncertainty and the existence of gray areas. Obama is identified as an intellectual, in short, because he subscribes to skepticism—the theory that teaches that truth, knowledge, and certainty are not possible, and that one can only answer the questions of life in approximate shades of gray.

This enlightened strategy supposedly distinguishes Obama from his less
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by **Jared Seehafer**

Republican Party. Former President Bush left office with record-low support, and both houses of Congress, along with the White House, are now solidly Democratic. Michael Steele, a former lieutenant governor and recently elected chairman of the Republican National Committee, attributed the Republican loss in the last election to a lack of understanding of what the party stood for. In his words, "We didn't have anything to say to the American people other than, 'We're not Democrats.'" Saxby Chambliss, the newly re-elected Republican senator from Georgia, has echoed Steele, calling on the party to return to its principles.

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THE REPUBLICAN PARTY'S IDENTITY CRISIS

OBJECTIVISM

The Undercurrent's cultural commentary is based on Ayn Rand's philosophy, Objectivism. Objectivism, which animates Ayn Rand's fiction, is a systematic philosophy of life. It holds that the universe is orderly and comprehensible, that man survives by reason, that his life and happiness comprise his highest moral purpose, and that he flourishes only in a society that protects his individual rights. In these pages we hope to defend these values. To learn more about the ideas behind them, you can begin by reading Ayn Rand's books, such as *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, or by visiting aynrand.org.

THE UNDERCURRENT

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OBAMA THE THINKER?

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cerebral predecessors. He is held in direct contrast to George W. Bush, who once said of himself, "I'm not a textbook player, I'm a gut player."

Yet if one compares Obama's positions with Bush's, it's the similarity in their intellectual approaches that is striking. Both make decisions on the basis of pragmatic, momentary considerations rather than an intellectually defined standard. Just as Bush employed a seemingly random grab bag set of strategies, going with his "gut," so Obama is already switching positions on policy after policy.

For example, Obama had promised throughout his campaign to "immediately" begin withdrawing the troops once he became president. Then he changed his tune by maintaining that he would "refine" this policy based on advice from commanders on the ground. Liberal and conservative pundits alike observed that his position on Iraq had become well-nigh indistinguishable from McCain's.

So too with Obama's healthcare plan. He had adamantly opposed Hillary Clinton's proposal of a mandate forcing every American to get medical coverage; later, Obama's campaign adviser announced that Obama was "not opposed to the idea" of an individual mandate and will consider implementing it as part of his own plan.

Other examples of Obama's "flip-flops," as the media calls them, abound. From his changing position on corporate taxes and immigration, to his measured opposition to gay marriage, Obama operates on the same see-what-works, "seat-of-the-pants" basis as Bush did (and McCain would have done)—and thus is equally unpredictable in his ever-shifting policies.

In action, Obama is clearly not an intellectual. He, like Bush and other politicians, is a pragmatist—the exact opposite of an intellectual. Issue after issue, including taxes, the Iraq war, and the environment, reveals that Obama has made decisions, not with reference to firm principles derived from a careful and scholarly investigation of the facts, but by trying to find some middle ground in a landscape of competing opinions.

What is different about Obama is that he self-consciously knows and proclaims his approach. But what's so significant about that, if the approach itself is anti-intellectual? Obama openly embraces the view that it is impossible to use the intellect to ascertain the right way to handle the war or deal with the economy, and so he adopts the tack of just trying things and seeing what happens. Consider Obama's claim that his "core economic theory is pragmatism, figuring out what works" ("Obamanomics," NYT, 8/20/08). How is this any different from prior, allegedly non-intellectual politicians, other than that those politicians didn't happen to be explicit about their

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Undercurrent authors.

REPUBLICAN PARTY

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But what principles are those? Historically, the political philosophy of the Republican Party has been an amalgam of advocacy for small government and capitalism, combined with support for religion and traditional values. The more capitalist element of the party tends to concern itself primarily with economic policy, traditionally supporting less government spending, lower taxes and deregulation. By contrast, the religionist element of the party tends to focus on social policy. It is the driving force behind Republican support for increasing the role of religion in public life, the repeal of *Roe v. Wade*, and various attempts to ban gay marriage.

But the line between economic and social policies has become increasingly blurred. Though the capitalist and religionist elements have each tried to grant the other autonomy within its own area of interest, the differences in their fundamental principles have resulted in conflicting policy approaches. Most religionists, for example, don't seem to have a problem with the growth of the welfare state, as long as faith-based initiatives get a piece of the pie (as they did in the case of the Bush Administration's "social service grants" for religious organizations, which handed out \$2.2 billion in one year alone). The capitalist Republicans, on the other hand, tend to advocate for reducing government programs and handouts. A reduction in welfare recipients, for example, was a key ingredient of the Republican Party platform in the mid-90s.

The conflict between the two camps is not limited to entitlements. While the religionists support greater policing of the airwaves for objectionable content, the capitalists are inclined towards less government control over media outlets. The religionists want to maintain and improve public schools but ensure religion has an influence on the curriculum (such as how evolution is taught), while the capitalists have tended to support things like school vouchers, which some see as a step towards privatizing education.

This clash in policy positions is the result of two distinct sets of political principles. In the past, both sides coexisted in an uneasy alliance, but over time the disagreements between them have become too great to reconcile. This is unsurprising: the two sets of political principles are grounded in two opposing ethical systems.

Capitalism upholds each individual's right to exist for his own sake, independent from any group. Its moral foundation is rational self-interest. According to this morality, the good is the pursuit of one's own happiness. Religion, on the other hand, implies a system where each individual exists to serve the group or greater good. Christian tradition is rife with admonishments against selfishness: "we are our brother's keepers" is an obvious example. This

sentiment represents the moral code of altruism, which holds fulfilling the needs of others as a moral imperative. The welfare state is a natural extension of this tenet. People need money, education, sanitation, transportation, etc. Under a religious (i.e. altruistic) morality, we are obligated to satisfy these needs for those unwilling or unable to do so themselves.

How can one reconcile these opposing beliefs? How can one unite the religious demand to selflessly help the needy through welfare state agencies (such as Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid) with the capitalist insistence that an individual's primary responsibility is achieving his own well-being? Where is the compromise between the religionist's call to force children to pray in school and the capitalist's call to maintain a barrier between church and state? How can one bring together the principle that a woman's life is her own (the morality of rational self-interest), with the edict that a woman has a duty to protect the growth of an embryo (the morality of religion)?

The answer is that one can't. There is no way to reconcile an individualistic, self-interested morality and an altruistic morality of religious duties. Politically, this means there is no way to support both capitalist and religious policies. "The party of principle," as the GOP often calls itself, is currently governed by two sets of principles that fundamentally contradict one another.

The first years of President Obama's administration provide the Republican Party with an opportunity to redefine itself. To do so, Republicans first need to decide what they stand for. They can become the party that promotes individual rights, small government, and capitalism, or they can become an ever more theocratic, intrusive, and socialist party.

Thus far, the signs are not good for those Republicans who support capitalism. The Bush administration solidified the prominence of religionists within the party. As evidence of the party's current direction, Sarah Palin, McCain's devoutly religious running mate, is already being considered as a candidate for 2012. But the opportunity for a new direction remains.

Republicans who support capitalism need to understand that those who combine religion with politics are their enemies, and must be ostracized from the party. In order to be successful, they need to defend capitalism on ethical grounds, which means recognizing that their best pitchman is not Jesus Christ, but John Galt.

Jared holds an M.S. in Medical Device and Diagnostic Engineering from USC and a B.A. from the University of Colorado at Boulder. He currently manages product development for a medical device company, and plans to found a neurotechnology startup.



AYN RAND'S NON-RELIGIOUS CONCEPTION OF MORALITY

Staff Editorial

In our parents' generation, academia was a bastion of secularism, and a threat to religion. Amid peace and love, political activism, one small step for man and several giant leaps in science and technology, college campuses had little room for faith.

The picture today is quite different. Religion has returned full force into American colleges, as can be seen in the dramatic growth of faith-based campus clubs, increasing enrollment in courses investigating religion, and an accelerated creation and funding of religious programs across departments. Professor Peter G. Gomes, Harvard University's resident preacher, tells us that on his campus "[t]here is probably more active religious life now than there has been in 100 years."

It's hard to argue with Professor Gomes when one can no longer leave classes in the evening without being invited to Bible study. Rather than work hard, play hard, the fashionable attitude now seems to be work hard, pray harder. Whether in abstinence clubs or Christian socials, students are affirming their faith in droves. Somehow, in a few short decades, it's become hip to deny the flesh and fix one's gaze on high.

Where did this religious resurgence come from? What is it religion offers that is appealing to so many of today's students?

Simply put, religion offers the promise of answers.

College students, by virtue of the coming-of-age transition that is postsecondary education, face deeply personal questions about the events of the world and their own lives. For the first time, they are free to make fully independent choices. How should they make such choices, and why? Religion has something fundamental to say in response.

And today, religion seems to be the only source of such guidance. Academia once held out the promise that a mind dedicated to learning could come to know profound truths about man, life, nature, science, art and love, but over the decades it has failed to deliver on that promise. Academia has instead come to pride itself on the fact that it offers no claim to truth, and particularly no moral guidance. The modern scholar is dedicated to the proposition that moral clarity does not exist. Truth is subjective; moral certainty, juvenile; equivocation, enlightenment.

Students interested in morality are confronted by a choice: fol-

low a secular approach empty of moral guidance or a religious approach that promises fundamental moral direction. We can either capriciously do whatever feels good, without guidance, standards, or meaning, or we can seek a "higher calling," which we are told is the only way to achieve a life of purpose and fulfillment.

In the long run, such a contest can only be won by religion.



The decent among us care too much about being decent to actually remain indifferent to morality. Over time, the desire to be good will trump other motivations because moral goodness matters to most people, people who want to do right by themselves and their world.

So does that mean religion will continue to grow?

Not necessarily. We at *The Undercurrent* agree that moral questions are important, but we think that morality is possible without religion. As you probably know, we have made it our purpose to promote just such a secular ethical system: the morality expressed in the philosophy of Ayn Rand.

Rand, a 20th century writer and philosopher, is most well known for her novels *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*. Rand's fiction dramatizes her philosophical ideas, which include a secular conception of moral heroism. In creating her protagonists, Rand dispenses with the usual archetypes one typically finds in literature: chaste "Christ figures" who die for a noble cause; hopelessly deluded Don Quixotes who live in their own moral dream world; Heathcliffs who recklessly sow destruction to achieve their misguided ends. Her heroes instead turn out to be business executives, architects, scientists, and students who, rather than martyring themselves to save mankind or sacrificing their ambitions to preserve the rainforest, are heroic because they refuse to surrender claim to their independent judgment, their personal values, and their lives.

In direct contrast to the Christian conceptions of a hero, Rand's protagonists are motivated fundamentally by a commitment to their own happiness. (Discovering the proper means of achieving true happiness turns out to require more thought than a



Heathcliff would be capable of exercising.) Through those protagonists, Rand gives readers an opportunity to project a non-religious, non-altruistic image of a moral man. She shows, and then in her non-fiction explains, that morality does not require God.

Morality is a code of principles that guide human choices and actions. The purpose of morality, in Rand's view, is to identify those principles that an individual must follow not to please God, but to achieve happiness in life. Morality is the science of living well, with life on this earth as an end in itself.

Rand advocates a morality of rational egoism. Most people assume that egoism, i.e. self-interest, is automatic, and morality's purpose is to act as a check and limit on selfish behavior. Rand's view is through and through the opposite—no human value is automatic, and morality's purpose is therefore to identify precisely how to be self-interested, how to live and make choices in such a way as to achieve long-term fulfillment. In Rand's ethic, being good and everything implied by that—honesty, integrity, justice, courage—means being good at living.

When faced with the choice between a life devoid of moral certainty and a life of religious duty, *The Undercurrent* argues that one should deny the false alternative. We urge our readers to consider instead the third option: self-consciously taking principled action in pursuit of personal happiness and fulfillment. We urge our readers to be moral and of the world.

If the presence of religion on our campuses and in our culture is to wane—if abortion is to remain a right, birth control legal, homosexuality free from persecution, evolution free to be taught, personal happiness free to be pursued—it will do so only because people have access to a different conception of morality, one that challenges religion's monopoly on righteousness. That is what Ayn Rand's fiction and nonfiction provides. It is the only substantive challenge to the steady and otherwise inevitable growth of religion in academia and beyond.

THE EFFECT OF RELIGION ON THE NON-RELIGIOUS: THE EROSION OF MORALITY

Many of us have encountered the idea that a lack of religion leads to an erosion of morality. In fact, however, the opposite is true. It is the ubiquity of religion that causes so many people to stop taking morality seriously.

Even in rejecting religion as an actual life guide, many of us accept the underlying religious conception of morality—altruism. We decide not to practice the mores of religion, but grant that practicing those mores is what it would actually mean to be concerned with morality. When someone goes around denouncing all sexual pleasure as corrupt, we dismiss him—but also identify him as a moral puritan. When someone insists on censorship of “indecent” movies, or accuses us of devoting too little time and money to charities, or tries to squeeze all the fun out of life by telling us not to be selfish—we again dismiss him, but think of such a person as too concerned with morality, and grant that we ourselves are less concerned.

People who try to live up to the moral ideals of religion are regarded as hopelessly idealistic. The example left by Mother Teresa is revered by many, but notice that she is admired from afar. Few parents would encourage their children to follow in her footsteps. Her life is not for them—and yet, nobody questions the propriety of regarding her as a moral ideal.

Is it any wonder then that the majority of people feel that morality is best approached in moderation? They see that those who try to practice religious moral ideals usually crack under the pressure of their sex drives, the tightness of their wallets, or their simple desire to enjoy themselves—and they recognize that such ideals cannot really be practiced. But look at the common consequence: rather than question the ideals themselves, most people continue assuming that the ideals are valid, and instead come to treat “idealistic” and “unrealistic” as synonyms.

The consequence, in other words, is a loss of genuine moral idealism and ambition. What begins as skepticism towards the dictates of some God on high, turns into a suspicion of moral values and principles as such. The desire to be good is gradually replaced with a muted, “practical,” value-neutral approach to life—with an accompanying feeling that something real and important is missing. This approach and feeling is the insidious indirect effect of religion in our lives and our culture.

To reject religion without rejecting morality, we must first consider the question of whether there is an alternative moral compass to religion—a standard of morality that is secular, focused on and derived from the facts on the ground, and aimed at helping us achieve the noble and worthwhile here and now, in our own lives.

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OBAMA THE THINKER?

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methodology?

However much Obama seems to sport the trappings of an intellectual—and clearly he does—in practice, his policy consists in shooting from the hip, making short-range decisions without adherence to any firm set of guiding convictions.

To commit to certain principles and act on them consistently—be it a pro-free-market or pro-big-government principle in economics, for example—would be to claim that one principle is superior to another and can be counted on to ensure better results. Obama's alleged intellectualism is precisely what does not permit him to make such claims. Instead, it leads him to treat every issue as a playground of conflicting viewpoints among which he must strike a compromise—and then hope for the best. This is a rejection, not an embrace, of conceptual thinking.

Obama explicitly grasps and endorses the postmodern disdain for principled action. But this type of “intellectualism” does not actually guide him in making wiser, more informed decisions than his nonintellectual counterparts. On the contrary, it deliberately blindfolds him to any knowledge or principles that might inform his actions. As accepted wisdom proclaims, shrewd and sophisticated is he who knows that he knows nothing—and acts accordingly.

Kristof is right in wanting a more cerebral President. Neither America as a nation nor her individual citizens as human beings can survive for long without some form of real intellectual

guidance. As we have seen over the course of several administrations, and as anyone knows who has tried to apply the “gut player” mentality to his own life, he who shoots from the hip is liable to miss.

Obama, however, is not the President to provide that guidance. What we need, if we want to rekindle a respect for the intellect as a practical tool, are not “intellectual” role models who act out of blind, spur-of-the-moment pragmatism, but a new kind of intellectual—one who reaches conclusions methodically and scientifically, on the basis of acquired knowledge and expertise, and then applies those conclusions with bold certainty to his actions. Such an intellectual would choose an economic position, for instance, on the basis of sound principles that he formed by rigorously examining the evidence of history and human nature. He would then adhere to those principles unbendingly, because he would be certain of their truth and of their efficacy in action. Such a leader, not unlike this nation's Founders, would be an intellectual in the truly worthy sense—for he would apply his knowledge and intellect to the achievement of real, practical values.

Gena graduated summa cum laude from Tufts University in 2008, earning a B.S. in psychology and philosophy. She currently works as a clinical interviewer and research assistant in the Massachusetts General Hospital psychiatry department, and intends to enter a Ph.D. clinical psychology program in Fall of 2010.

**In *Atlas Shrugged*, Ayn Rand offered the world
a revolutionary new philosophy.**

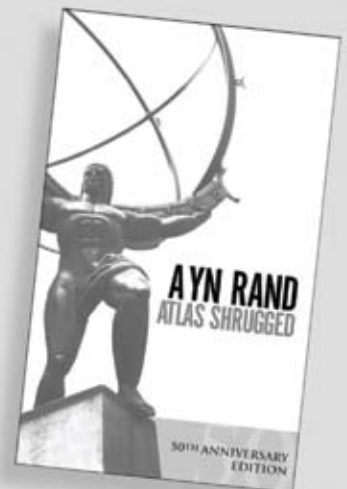
She named her philosophy Objectivism.

To learn more about it, visit

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NO "FOOTPRINT," NO LIFE

by Dr. Keith Lockitch

As environmentalism continues to grow in prominence, more and more of us are trying to live a "greener" lifestyle. But the more "eco-friendly" you try to become, likely the more you find yourself confused and frustrated by the green message.

Have you tried giving up your bright and cheery incandescent light bulbs to save energy--only to learn that their gloomy-but-efficient compact fluorescent replacements contain mercury? Perhaps you've tried to free up space in landfills by foregoing the ease and convenience of disposable diapers--only to be criticized for the huge quantities of energy and water consumed in laundering those nasty cloth diapers. Even voicing support for renewable energy no longer seems to be green enough, as angry environmentalists protest the development of "pristine lands" for wind farms and solar power plants.

Why is it that no matter what sacrifices you make to try to reduce your "environmental footprint," it never seems to be enough?

Well, consider why it is that you have an "environmental footprint" in the first place.

Everything we do to sustain our lives has an impact on nature. Every value we create to advance our well-being--every ounce of food we grow, every structure we build, every iPhone we manufacture--is produced by extracting raw materials and reshaping them to serve our needs. Every good thing in our lives comes from altering nature for our own benefit.

From the perspective of human life and happiness, a big "environmental footprint" is an enormous positive. This is why people in India and China are striving to increase theirs: to build better roads, more cars and computers, new factories and power plants and hospitals.

But for environmentalism, the size of your "footprint" is the measure of your guilt. Nature, according to green philosophy, is something to be left alone--to be preserved untouched by human activity. Their notion of an "environmental footprint" is intended as a measure of how much you "disturb" nature, with disturbing nature viewed as a sin requiring atonement. Just as the Christian concept of original sin conveys the message that human beings are stained with evil simply for having been born, the green concept of an "environmental footprint" implies that you should feel guilty for your very existence.

It should hardly be any surprise, then, that nothing you do to try to lighten your "footprint" will ever be deemed satisfactory. So long as you are still pursuing life-sustaining activities, whatever you do to reduce your impact on nature in one respect (e.g., cloth diapers) will simply lead to other impacts in other respects (e.g., water use)--like some perverse game of green whack-a-mole--and will be attacked and condemned by greens outraged at whatever "footprint" remains. So long as you still have some "footprint," further penance is required; so long as you are still alive, no degree of sacrifice can erase your guilt.

The only way to leave no "footprint" would be to die--a conclusion that is not lost on many green ideologues. Consider the

premise of the nonfiction bestseller titled "The World Without Us," which fantasizes about how the earth would "recover" if all humanity suddenly became extinct. Or consider the chilling, anti-human conclusion of an op-ed discussing cloth versus disposable diapers: "From the earth's point of view, it's not all that important which kind of diapers you use. The important decision was having the baby."

The next time you trustingly adopt a "green solution" like fluorescent lights, cloth diapers or wind farms, only to be puzzled when met with still further condemnation and calls for even more sacrifices, remember what counts as a final solution for these ideologues.

The only rational response to such a philosophy is to challenge it at its core. We must acknowledge that it is the essence of human survival to reshape nature for our own benefit, and that far from being a sin, it is our highest virtue. Don't be fooled by the cries that industrial civilization is "unsustainable." This cry dates to at least the 19th century, but is belied by the facts. Since the Industrial Revolution, population and life expectancy, to say nothing of the enjoyment of life, have steadily grown.

It is time to recognize environmentalism as a philosophy of guilt and sacrifice--and to reject it in favor of a philosophy that proudly upholds the value of human life.

Keith Lockitch, Ph.D. in physics, is a fellow at the Ayn Rand Center for Individual Rights, focusing on science and environmentalism. The Ayn Rand Center is a division of the Ayn Rand Institute and promotes the philosophy of Ayn Rand, author of Atlas Shrugged and The Fountainhead.



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OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

Ayn Rand Institute
www.aynrand.org

Anthem Foundation for Objectivist Scholarship
www.anthemfoundation.org

Coalition for Secular Government
www.seculargovernment.us

Clemson Institute for the Study of Capitalism
http://business.clemson.edu/bbtcenter/cci

Freedom and Individual Rights in Medicine (FIRM)
www.westandfirm.org

Objectivist Clubs Network
www.oclubs.org

The Association for Objective Law (TAFOL)
www.tafol.org/index.html

The Objective Standard
www.theobjectivestandard.com