

The Peikovian Doctrine of the Arbitrary Assertion

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Though still barely known outside of Randian circles, the doctrine of the arbitrary assertion has come to occupy a prominent place in Objectivist epistemology. Ayn Rand's disciple Leonard Peikoff is responsible for its only detailed presentation in print.¹

The doctrine raises several philosophical questions. Does an epistemology firmly grounded in facts about human mental functioning, as Rand's claims to be, require a notion of the arbitrary? Is Peikoff's notion of an arbitrary assertion clear? Does the concept have the scope of application that Peikoff stakes out for it? Should arbitrary assertions all be handled as Peikoff prescribes? Are the arguments for the doctrine sound? These questions bear on the nature and quality of Peikoff's work as a philosopher, and on the viability of Objectivism construed as a closed system.²

Arbitrariness in OPAR

The doctrine of the arbitrary assertion gets its first (and, so far, its only) full explication in print in Peikoff's opus *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (hereinafter *OPAR*).³ In the chapter on Reason (Peikoff 1993, 152–86), one of the five sections is titled “The Arbitrary as Neither True Nor False” (163–71); there is some further material on arbitrary assertions in the following section on “Contextual Certainty” (171–82).⁴ Peikoff contrasts rationality with “emotionalism” (162): will thinking that respects facts and evidence prevail, or will it be feelings to which facts and evidence must conform? It is against this backdrop that “the arbitrary” makes its appearance: “Claims based on emotion are widespread today and are possible in any age. In the terminology of logic, such claims are ‘arbitrary,’ i.e., devoid of evidence” (163).

Peikoff has yet to present an example of an arbitrary claim or supply any instructions as to how to identify one. But the reader already knows that such claims are emotionalistic or irrational (which, for Peikoff, are one and the same). In other words, the reader already knows that they are supposed to be really bad.⁵ How, then, should a rational person respond to arbitrary claims?

Granted that an arbitrary declaration does not qualify as knowledge, might it nevertheless still be true? If so, should one suspend judgment? Should one allow that it is unproved but possible? Is one obliged to refute such an idea to justify rejecting it? In short, what is the epistemological status of the arbitrary, and how should claims of this kind be dealt with by an exponent of reason? (163).

Peikoff begins, then, by presuming that it will be upside-the-head obvious which assertions have no evidence going for them. More deeply, he presumes that “arbitrary” is a coherent classification from an epistemic standpoint—that all of the assertions he deems arbitrary share distinctive properties that justify special handling. *Now* he provides examples:

An arbitrary claim is one for which there is no evidence, either perceptual or conceptual. It is a brazen assertion, based neither on direct observation nor on any attempted logical inference therefrom. For example, a man tells you that the soul survives the death of the body; or that your fate will be determined by your birth on the cusp of Capricorn and Aquarius; or that he has a sixth sense which surpasses your five; or that a convention of gremlins is studying Hegel’s *Logic* on the planet Venus. If you ask him “Why?” he offers no argument. “I can’t prove any of these statements,” he admits—“but you can’t disprove them either.” (164)

The characterization is less clear than Peikoff might have hoped. And not just because he has picked as illustrations four assertions that he is convinced the reader must reject. Is an arbitrary assertion one for which there is *in fact* no evidence or rational argument—or is it one whose proponent *believes* there is no evidence or rational argument? Peikoff assumes that the proponent of an arbitrary assertion *knows* that there is no evidence: “brazen” means that the assertion has

been unleashed on purpose.⁶

Whether arbitrariness is always intentional or not, there is not supposed to be any doubt about the rational person's response:

The answer to all such statements, according to Objectivism, is: an arbitrary claim is automatically invalidated. The rational response to such a claim is to dismiss it, without discussion, consideration, or argument. (164)

"Automatically invalidated" *appears* to mean that whenever one identifies a statement as arbitrary, one is entitled, without further ado, to conclude that it is *false*, consequently ruling it out of any further consideration.

The Arbitrary as Impossible to Process Cognitively

Except that falsehood is not what Peikoff has in mind. For him, an arbitrary statement is qualitatively different from a false statement; it is on a different plane of badness. Although Peikoff never uses these words in *OPAR*, he describes arbitrary assertions in ways that imply meaninglessness or unintelligibility:

An arbitrary statement has *no relation to man's means of knowledge*. Since the statement is detached from the realm of evidence, *no process of logic can assess it*. Since it is affirmed in a void, cut off from any context, no integration to the rest of man's knowledge is applicable; *previous knowledge is irrelevant to it*. Since it has no place in a hierarchy, no reduction is possible, and thus *no observations are relevant*. An arbitrary statement *cannot be cognitively processed*; by its nature, it is *detached from any rational method or content of human consciousness*. Such a statement is necessarily *detached from reality* as well. If an idea is cut loose from any means of cognition, there is *no way of bringing it into relationship with reality*. (164; italics added)

Such statements are so strong as to pose a metalogical problem. For if what Peikoff says is true, what is the status of a correct judgment *that a claim is arbitrary*? How does one arrive at *that* judgment? How could one rationally judge an assertion to be arbitrary,

except by engaging in correct cognition in relation to reality? If “the soul survives the death of the body” is truly incapable of being cognitively processed, how can a rational person judge what evidence or arguments would be required to support it? For if the rational person has no idea what would be required, how can he or she go on to determine that the evidence or arguments have not been presented, consequently the assertion must be dismissed?

It isn't, after all, because every effort at cognitive processing fails. The statement is not gibberish; it is linguistically well-formed and appears to have a meaning. Unless the proponent of immortal souls helpfully admits to having no evidence and confesses to making the statement for no other reason besides wanting it to be true, the person who judges such a statement to be arbitrary will need to subject it to a lot of cognitive processing, merely in order to conclude that it meets Peikoff's criteria.⁷

Peikoff maintains that arbitrary statements are *completely out of context*, to the point that no previous knowledge could be brought to bear on them. Context is a key notion in Objectivism, and the injunction to keep context is one of its key principles (Rand 1990; Peikoff 1993; Sciabarra 1995). Now if arbitrary assertions are *totally* out of context, one would expect each of Peikoff's four carefully chosen examples of arbitrary assertions to be unintelligible, or impossible to evaluate. None of them are. What's more, as we shall see eventually, Peikoff offers a redemption policy for some arbitrary assertions, whereby they can somehow be reintegrated into the proper context. What never had a context ought to resist being supplied with one.

Peikoff further claims that arbitrary statements *have no place in a hierarchy*, so they cannot be related, even indirectly, to any observations or empirical evidence.

Rand on Invalid Concepts

To evaluate what Peikoff is saying about hierarchy, we need to dig further into Objectivist epistemology. According to Rand (1990) in her monograph on the subject, concept formation proceeds hierarchically, beginning with concepts that can be formed directly from perceptual data (e.g., *dog*). A concept at the next higher level in the hierarchy (e.g., *animal*), is formed by integrating previously formed

concepts at the first level (e.g., *dog, cat, squirrel, tiger*, and so on). A concept at the next level above that (e.g., *organism*), is formed by integrating previously formed concepts at the second level (*animal, plant*, etc.). Meanwhile, more finely specified concepts (e.g., *collie, beagle, poodle*, etc.) are formed by differentiating first-level concepts (*dog*, in this case). On all of these matters, Peikoff is simply following Rand's exposition, which he recapitulates in Chapters 3 and 4 of his own book (Peikoff 1993, 73–151).

Still following Rand, Peikoff claims that any valid concept will permit backward tracing of the steps by which it was formed, right down to the original first-level concepts and the perceptual data on which they depend. Peikoff (though not necessarily Rand) envisions this backward tracing as moving down through a chain of definitions toward perceptual data; Peikoff calls it “reduction” (136–37), a word that Rand never used, although she did say that all conceptual knowledge has to be able to be “reduced” to the perceptible (1990, 185, 220). “The test of any invalid concept,” Peikoff goes on to say, “is the fact that it cannot be reduced to the perceptual level. This means that nothing in reality gives rise to the concept” (137).

A critique of what Peikoff is putting forth here could proceed on several levels. A foundationalist conception of knowledge will require, as a condition of objectivity, some manner of deriving more abstract knowledge from information known perceptually, though the manner prescribed as correct may not much resemble Peikovian reduction. But a constructivist conception of knowledge cannot handle objectivity this way.⁸ If knowledge is constructed by the knower, instead of being imported from the environment through some special process involved in perception, objectivity will need to depend on the manner in which new constructions are generated, and constructions both new and old are subjected to testing against empirical data or refutation by argument. A successful argument for constructivism will necessarily lead to the rejection of the Peikovian doctrine of the arbitrary assertion; however, it will also have to cover a great deal more ground than I propose to do in this article.

But, as I will argue, the Peikovian doctrine is in deep trouble even if some type of foundationalism is correct. So, for the purposes of this article, I will proceed on the assumption, not merely that foundationalism is correct, but that the standard Objectivist accounts

of perception are basically sound, and that Rand's theory of concepts is likewise.⁹ For even when the correctness of the Objectivist theories is granted, evaluating the validity or invalidity of a concept turns out to be quite a complicated task—a good deal like evaluating the arbitrariness or nonarbitrariness of an assertion.

As Rand (1990, 49) stated:

There are such things as invalid concepts, i.e., words that represent attempts to integrate errors, contradictions, or false propositions, such as concepts originating in mysticism—or words without specific definitions, without referents, which can mean anything to anyone, such as modern “anti-concepts.” [. . .] An invalid concept invalidates every proposition or process of thought in which it is used as a cognitive assertion.

Quoting this same passage, Peikoff (1993, 137) tacks on the gloss that “any such term is detached from reality,” but he never calls invalid concepts arbitrary. Nor, more significantly, does he declare that their inclusion in a proposition that presupposes their validity makes the *proposition* arbitrary. It is intensely puzzling why he doesn't take the opportunity to draw this conclusion. After all, Peikoff considers *gremlin* an invalid concept (137) and regards assertions that presuppose the existence of gremlins as arbitrary (164).¹⁰

Now if incorporating *any* sort of error or false proposition makes a concept invalid, it will frequently not be obvious what has gone wrong. Realizing that a concept is invalid has on many occasions been a genuine discovery. *Phlogiston* (the stuff that, in mid-eighteenth century chemistry, supposedly made some materials combustible, and was used up when they burned) is an invalid concept, in Rand's sense. Exposing its invalidity took major progress in the discipline: nothing less was required than a whole new theory of combustion incorporating the radical notion that air is not an element or even a single gas but rather a mixture of several different gases (e.g., Kuhn 1970; Harré 1970). Could chemists in the 1770s and 1780s have discovered what was wrong with the phlogiston concept by diligently undertaking its Peikovian reduction and discovering that it didn't go through?

What's more, arbitrariness is a property of *statements* or *assertions*, according to Peikoff, so the principle of hierarchy has to be shown to apply to them and not just to concepts.

Peikovian Proof

To understand how all of this is meant to work, we need to consult another segment of Objectivist epistemology: Peikoff's treatment of proof. Peikoff considers proof to be a species of validation. *The Ayn Rand Lexicon* quotes him as follows:

“Validation” in the broad sense includes any process of relating mental contents to the facts of reality. Direct perception, the method of validating axioms, is one such process. “Proof” designates another type of validation. Proof is the process of deriving a conclusion logically from antecedent knowledge.¹¹ (in Binswanger 1988, 520)

In elaborating his conception of proof, Peikoff applies hierarchy and reduction to propositions. But the sum total of this elaboration is a scant three paragraphs of *OPAR*. Since Peikoff's account of the arbitrary is *stated* in terms of hierarchy and reduction, the scantiness is deeply troubling. In effect, he is asking readers of his book to accept an entire epistemological theory that he has neither developed nor argued for.

The underlying deficiency is that Rand (1990) never worked out an account of propositions. Neither did Peikoff, in this book or in any publication prior to it. Indeed, as of this writing, 17 years after the publication of *OPAR*, Peikoff has yet to deliver one in print.

Precisely because so little has been done, there is room for debate over what an Objectivist account of proof for propositions or assertions would need to be like. Would the requisite theory be linguistic in nature (accounting for the way sentences are built out of words, and for propositions as corresponding structures of concepts)? Or would the theory of propositions be logical? Would assertions be treated as a kind of speech act (a different sort of linguistic account) or would they be characterized in logical terms? (I've assumed that when one makes an assertion, what one is asserting is a proposition, but even this is not actually spelled out anywhere in the Objectivist

corpus.) And while the relationship between psychology and both logic and linguistics has often been contested, Rand in *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology* (hereinafter *ITOE*) frequently claims to be presenting truths about human cognitive psychology (Campbell 1999). So an Objectivist explication of propositions or assertions would also need to be a psychological theory. Whatever the degrees of freedom might be, then, the Objectivist epistemology remains incomplete so long as it lacks an account of propositions, or of the activity to asserting them. Yet in his lectures on logic, Peikoff (1974) has been content to stick with the same subject-copula-predicate structure for premises and conclusions that's been around for over 2000 years and still fails to address the fine structure of propositions.

Here is just about Peikoff's *entire published account* of proof for propositions:

Propositions too (if nonaxiomatic) must be brought back step by step to the perceptual level. They too are based on antecedent cognitions—on the chain of evidence that led to them—going back ultimately to direct observation. To a mind that does not grasp this chain, a higher-level proposition is arbitrary, noncontextual, nonobjective; it is detached from reality and from the requirements of human cognition. [. . .] this is why *proof* of an idea is necessary.

Proof is a form of reduction. The conclusion to be proved is a higher-level cognition, whose link to reality lies in the premises; these in turn ultimately lead back to the perceptual level. Proof is thus a form of retracing the hierarchical steps of the learning process. [. . .] Proof is not a process of deriving a conclusion from arbitrary premises or even from arbitrarily selected true premises. Proof is the process of establishing a conclusion by identifying *the proper hierarchy of premises*. In proving a conclusion one traces backward the order of logical dependence, terminating with the perceptually given. It is only because of this requirement that logic is the means of validating a conclusion *objectively*. (Peikoff 1993, 137–38)

Are Arbitrary Assertions Meaningless?

Peikoff has been less than forthcoming, then, about the requirements for proof. There is no reason to believe that he knows what they are, in most cases. Yet he is far from hesitant to judge failure to meet those requirements. Not only are arbitrary assertions readily recognized as “devoid of evidence,” Peikoff insinuates that they are entirely meaningless:

In the absence of evidence, there is no way to consider any idea, on any subject. There is no way to reach a cognitive verdict, favorable or otherwise, about a statement to which logic, knowledge, and reality are irrelevant. There is nothing the mind can do to or with such a phenomenon except sweep it aside. (164)

Well, let’s consider what happens when someone actually claims that the soul survives the death of the body. Let’s further suppose that, when asked to describe a soul, the claimant provides nothing that would successfully distinguish it from the various mental capabilities that are not known to survive the death of the organism. Let’s even further suppose that when asked for empirical data consistent with the continued existence of disembodied souls and inconsistent with permanent cessation of mental functioning on the death of an organism, he provides none. Plenty of cognitive verdicts can be rendered. For instance, that *there is no evidence in favor of the claim*. Which may, in turn, lead to *entirely rejecting the claim until and unless adequate evidence is provided*. Or concluding that *there is no point in testing hypotheses about disembodied souls or otherwise inquiring into the notion, until something further is provided to make the hypothesis plausible enough to inquire into*. Or, what is known about mental capabilities in human beings is fully consistent with the theory that they emerge from the functioning of parts of the human body, and inconsistent with the doctrine of separable souls, so the claims *ought to be rejected as false because they contradict current knowledge*. And on and on.

Every one of these *looks* like a cognitive verdict. They are all fallible (maybe the claimant provided some evidence that was misunderstood, or got overlooked). They are all reversible in the face of future evidence (maybe the claimant will come back with some, or

someone else will). But neither fallibility nor reversibility should disqualify them; famously, according to Peikoff, the cognitive verdict of certainty is fallible and reversible (1993, 179–81).

But Peikoff isn't finished. Arbitrary assertions are *unspeakable*, when rational persons are present:

An arbitrary idea must be given the exact treatment its nature demands. One must treat it as though nothing has been said. The reason is that, cognitively speaking, *nothing has been said*. One cannot allow into the realm of cognition something that repudiates every rule of that realm. (164–65)

It's hard to know what all of this is supposed to mean. There is one thing that it *doesn't* mean. Peikoff isn't really urging anyone to move right along as though the offending assertion had never been put forward. Peikoff's reaction to assertions that he deems arbitrary is to denounce them, at length, as arbitrary. Except, that is, when he is endeavoring to show that the notion of immortal souls is mistaken, or that neither evidence nor argument confer any credibility on horoscopes, or that belief in the existence of gremlins is fantastical. Which is odd, because those are responses that he would have us believe an arbitrary assertion neither needs nor deserves.

Peikoff still isn't done. He insists that "the arbitrary" is *outside all epistemological categories*.

None of the concepts used to describe human knowledge can be applied to the arbitrary; none of the classifications of epistemology can be usurped in its behalf. Since it has no relation to evidence, an arbitrary statement cannot be subsumed under concepts that identify different amounts of evidence: it cannot be described as "possible," "probable," or "certain." [. . .] Similarly, such a statement cannot be subsumed under concepts that identify different relations between an idea and reality. *An arbitrary statement is neither "true" nor "false."* (165)

What he has said here is even harder to fathom than the injunction to equate the production of an arbitrary assertion with nothing being said.

Peikovian Paralysis?

In his 1997 lectures on “Objectivism through Induction,” Peikoff compounds our puzzlement. He contends that no sooner have we recognized an assertion as arbitrary than we are *trapped in an unthinking condition*:

[I]f and when you see that a claim *is* arbitrary, then you cannot think about its cognitive status at all. You can’t think about its validity as a claim. You can’t weigh it, assess it, determine its probability, its possibility, its invalidity, its truth, its falsehood, anything. It is non-process-able. A rational mind stops in its tracks, in the face of any attempt to process such a claim.

Now, I want to introduce a word that we’re going to make big hay out of subsequently. A rational mind is functionally *paralyzed* in this context. It’s paralyzed, if it tries to do anything cognitive, to weigh, to judge, to process, to classify. There is nothing it can do to move one cognitive step in any direction, once the arbitrary sets the task. So, if you try to do it, you just sit there. [. . .] When I write my book, I’m going to have a whole chapter on paralysis. This isn’t infantile, but adult paralysis. And it’s all over [my treatment of] induction[,] as one of the most helpful techniques. Unfortunately, that’s not written down, so I can’t discuss it. (Lecture 11)

This is harder yet to fathom. None of the responses that I previously suggested could be made to assertions about the soul outliving the body are products of any such cognitive paralysis. Neither are denunciations of such assertions as arbitrary. One wonders what the supposed paralysis would feel like, and whether one might need extensive training in order to experience it. But just as the listener’s curiosity has been aroused, Peikoff, pleading an unfinished book project,¹² declines to provide details.

Besides, purportedly arbitrary assertions would seem to have a context, because the notion of the arbitrary has one. In Peikovian epistemology, it appears to have a location on the evidential continuum. And at least one epistemological category will apply to anything that gets a place on the evidentiary continuum.

Arbitrariness and the Evidentiary Continuum

Peikoff has *defined* an arbitrary statement as one for which there is *no favorable evidence*. How, then, could “arbitrary” *not* be on the same continuum as “possible,” “probable,” and “certain”? For Peikoff, each of those segments of the continuum is demarcated by the amount of evidence in its favor. Indeed, he explicates them in the very next section of *OPAR*.

So far, I have considered only two mental states, knowledge and ignorance, and two corresponding verdicts to define an idea’s status: “validated” or “unknown.” Inherent in the mind’s need of logic, however, is a third, intermediate status, which applies for a while to certain complex higher-level conclusions. In these cases, the validation of an idea is gradual; one accumulates evidence step by step, moving from ignorance to knowledge through a continuum of transitional states. The main divisions of this continuum (including its terminus) are identified by three concepts: “possible,” “probable,” and “certain.” (175–76)

Peikoff insists, in turn, that there is no way to judge what constitutes evidence for an assertion *unless one knows what would prove it*.

“Evidence,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is “testimony or facts tending to prove or disprove any conclusion.” To determine whether a fact is “evidence,” therefore, one must first define what proof of a given claim would consist of. Then one must demonstrate that the fact, although inconclusive, contributes to such proof, i.e., strengthens the claim logically and thus moves the matter closer to a cognitive resolution. *If one has no idea what the proof of a conclusion would consist of*—or if one holds that a proof of

it is impossible—one *has no means of deciding whether a given piece of information “tends to prove” it*. If the terminus of a journey is undefined or unknowable, there is no way to judge whether one is moving toward it. (176; emphasis added)

Peikoff appears not to recognize how this argument works against his own conception of the arbitrary. For if one does not know what constitutes evidence for an assertion, one also does not know when no evidence has been provided. But arbitrary *means* “devoid of evidence.” In other words, one lacks an objective basis for judging that the assertion is arbitrary.

Consequently, the Peikovian account of proof transmits its shakiness directly to Peikovian judgments of arbitrariness. Peikoff tries to stabilize them by declaring that some arbitrary assertions (the supernaturalistic variety) are *necessarily* arbitrary; there could *never* be any evidence in their favor.

This is why there can be no such thing as “some evidence” in favor of an entity transcending nature and logic. The term “evidence” in this context would be a stolen concept. Since nothing can ever qualify as a “proof” of such an entity, there is no way to identify any data as being a “part proof” of it, either. There is no way to validate such a notion as: “that which brings men closer to knowing the unknowable or proving the unprovable.” (176–77)

To make good on this claim, Peikoff must show that assertions about God, gremlins, and ESP “transcend nature and logic”—in other words, he is obliged to provide a general-purpose counterargument against them. He cannot merely dismiss them without discussion. To pronounce them transcendent of nature and logic without providing evidence or argument for that assertion would be, well, arbitrary.

What’s more, if and when Peikoff does produce a sound counterargument, shouldn’t one promptly conclude that these assertions are false, and that the purported existence of God or gremlins or ESP powers is impossible?¹³

Apparently not. Claims about God or gremlins or immortal souls or planetary control of one's fate, Peikoff says, are not contradicted by *any* facts.

The first range of the evidential continuum is covered by the concept "possible." A conclusion is "possible" if there is some, but not much, evidence in favor of it, and nothing known that contradicts it. This last condition is obviously required—a conclusion that contradicts known facts is false—but it is not sufficient to support a verdict of "possible." There are countless gratuitous claims in regard to *which one cannot cite a single contradictory fact, because they are inherently detached from facts*; this does not confer on such claims any cognitive status. For an idea to qualify as "possible," *there must be a certain amount of evidence that actually supports it*. If there is no such evidence, the idea falls under a different concept: not "possible," but "arbitrary" (176; emphasis added).

The argument moves in a tight circle. An arbitrary assertion cannot be ruled out by known facts that contradict it. Why not? Because by virtue of being arbitrary, it is "detached from reality," therefore no facts *could* contradict it.

How do we break out of the circle and determine whether an assertion is arbitrary? By trying to find facts that could rule it out, and failing? If so, we're obliged to *try* to find facts that rule it out, instead of subjecting it to instant dismissal. By constructing a counterargument against this kind of assertion? Again, we're not dismissing it as prescribed, for we have to commit the necessary resources to developing or citing a counterargument. And if we're successful, we've demonstrated that the assertion is false and that what it claims is impossible.¹⁴

By noting that the proponent of the assertion refuses to accept any proffered counterevidence or counterargument? But then, actual dialogue with the proponent is necessary—enough to establish that the proponent is indeed impervious to counterevidence or counterargument. Which, in turn, will lead us, not to instant dismissal, or to cognitive paralysis after a brief incubation period, but to rejection after some rounds of dialogue. Or by discerning in some other way

that the assertion is arbitrary, preempting any search for facts that might contradict it? But by Peikoff's own stated criteria, there need to be specific procedures for objectively concluding that an assertion is arbitrary. *What are they?*

One of the things that Peikoff seems to be doing in this passage is touching on an important issue in philosophy of science: some hypotheses aren't worth testing, because they aren't relevant enough or plausible enough. But he refers neither to the plausibility of a hypothesis nor to the criteria that have to be met for a hypothesis to be plausible.

So let's consider an example. It is a fact that Rand retained an arm's-length relationship with evolutionary ideas of any sort. As she stated in her essay "The Missing Link," whose main theme, rather oddly, was her speculative hypothesis that some human beings have undergone incomplete cognitive evolution: "I am not a student of the theory of evolution and, therefore, I am neither its supporter nor its opponent" (1982, 54).

Because such a noncommittal treatment of evolution is incongruent with Rand's thoroughgoing naturalism, it has elicited the curiosity of more than a few commentators. Parille (2004) has proposed that Rand never endorsed any theory of biological evolution because she was uncomfortable with its possible implications for some of her claims about human beings. Rand maintained that human beings have no innate knowledge, are born with no instincts, and possess free will; but as she was presumably aware, evolutionary grounds have been cited, by one thinker or another, to argue for innate knowledge, for instincts, and for determinism.¹⁵

Let's now attempt to apply Peikoff's dictum, "To determine whether a fact is 'evidence,' therefore, one must first define what proof of a given claim would consist of." What would constitute proof that Rand arrived at no "cognitive verdict" concerning biological evolution because of her discomfort with its implications? If she *said* that she was endorsing no theory of evolution because any such theory would imply innate knowledge, human instincts, and psychological determinism, that would be strong *prima facie* evidence for the contention. (Even then it presumably would not constitute proof, without some further reason to accept her statement as accurate.)

What she actually said, however, is that she had not studied evolution enough. Is that statement sufficient to rule out discomfort with the subject? Not necessarily. Rand could have distrusted evolutionary theories either for reasons that she was not fully consciously aware of, or for reasons that she was consciously aware of but chose not to state. Either of these motives could have accompanied insufficient study of the subject—even led to it.

Further evidence of discomfort comes from one of her last essays. Indignantly rejecting demands by Christian social conservatives that “creationism” be taught in public schools, Rand (1981, 6) says, “To claim that the mystics’ mythology, or inventions, or superstitions are as valid as scientific theories, and to offer this claim to the unformed minds of children, is a moral crime.” But she promptly follows with:

I must state, incidentally, that I am not a student of biology and am, therefore, neither an advocate nor an opponent of the theory of evolution. But I have read a lot of valid evidence to support it, and it is the only scientific theory in the field. The issue, however, is not the theory of evolution: this theory serves merely as a rabble-rousing excuse for attacking science, for attacking reason, for attacking man’s mind. (6)

Here Rand signals her awareness of evidence for evolutionary theories, which undermines her protestation of inadequate study and makes her reluctance to take a position all the more puzzling.¹⁶ Her later statement still gives no other reason for withholding judgment. Why might we think that Rand was uncomfortable, for unstated reasons, with evolutionary theory as applied to human beings? First of all, because it is humanly possible to distrust a line of thinking for reasons of which one is consciously unaware. Second, because it is humanly possible to lie about one’s motives.

But as Peikoff argues elsewhere in his discussion of possibility, probability, and certainty, just because it is possible *for* a human being to do something, it doesn’t follow that it is possible *that* this particular human being did this particular thing (1993, 177).

True, but what would have exempted Rand from distrusting ideas

for reasons of which she was not consciously aware? Did Rand possess conscious knowledge of every reason she had for doing everything she did? Contemporary theory and research in psychology (e.g., Piaget 1976; Campbell and Bickhard 1986; Wilson 2002) generally agree that it is impossible for a human being to become consciously aware of his or her reasons for taking every action.

Why, for that matter, would Rand have been exempt from lying about her motives? Of the 1958 revisions to her first novel *We the Living*, Rand (1959, viii) declared, “I have not added or eliminated anything to or from the content of the novel. I have cut out some sentences and a few paragraphs that were repetitious or so confusing in their implications that to clarify them would have necessitated lengthy additions. In brief, all the changes are editorial line-changes.” In fact, Rand removed a passage in which her heroine Kira called for sacrificing the many for the benefit of the few, and scorned the ideal of “justice for all” (Branden 1986, 114; Merrill 1991, 37–40). Wouldn’t Rand have had to repudiate both sentiments, instead of adding material to clarify them? Surely she knew that she was making a significant change in the content of the novel. And if she was lying about this matter, could she not lie about others?¹⁷

Now if it is allowed that Rand could have been unaware of some of her motives for not accepting evolutionary theories, or that she could have lied about her reasons, there is still a serious question, in the absence of documented admissions from her, as to what would then constitute proof of either. Inferences from what she did say and what she did write could support such conclusions, but would not prove either of them conclusively.

Figuring out what constitutes proof in such a case is a complex task. Yet, as we shall see in our final section, one disciple of Peikoff has categorically declared that any assertion to the effect that Rand was intellectually or emotionally uncomfortable with evolutionary ideas *must* be arbitrary, while providing no specification for proving any such conclusions.

On what basis, then, could Peikovians be making objective assessments of arbitrariness? According to Peikoff, if one does not know what would constitute proof of an assertion, one does not know what would constitute evidence for it. Any judgment that an assertion is arbitrary presumes, in its turn, that *one does know what would constitute*

evidence, and can therefore discern that it is altogether lacking.

In the absence of a worked-out conception of inductive proof in general, and of a philosophy of science in particular,¹⁸ Peikoff, as per his own declared standards, ought to be exercising extreme caution in identifying assertions as arbitrary. Instead, he makes sweeping declamations about which assertions are arbitrary, accompanied by virtually no effort to specify what kind of evidence would be required before any of them could be deemed possible. Peikoff's failure to follow his own advice renders most of his animadversions about arbitrariness premature, if not entirely wrongheaded.

Is Arbitrariness a Kind of Error?

As we have seen, Peikoff's attempt to segregate arbitrary assertions from those deserving a place on the evidentiary continuum has been less than a resounding success. Of course, if the assertions that he deemed arbitrary were truly meaningless, there would be no way to know what evidence could either favor them or work against them. But such specimens as "Ayn Rand was uncomfortable with something about theories of biological evolution" hardly qualify as meaningless. Further militating against Peikoff's insinuations is his overall treatment of such examples as:

- a) The soul survives the death of the body;
- b) Your fate is determined by your birth on the cusp of Capricorn and Aquarius;
- c) Some people have a sixth sense that surpasses everyone else's perceptual capabilities; and
- d) Gremlins are convening on the planet Venus to discuss Hegel's *Logic*.

Peikoff obviously rejects propositions a through d. But wouldn't he reject them, just as emphatically, if he believed them to be false? Is he really treating the propositions that he alleges to be arbitrary any differently from propositions that he is convinced are false?

Indeed, our perplexity grows when we compare his treatment of certain assertions in the 1987 article, or in *OPAR*, or in his 1997 lectures on "Objectivism through Induction," with the account he gives of the very same assertions in a widely circulated article from

1989.

Let's consider in particular the claims made by "channelers," who say they can get in touch with various of their "past lives." In his first published discussion, Peikoff classified channelers' assertions as arbitrary:

The agnostic treats arbitrary claims as matters properly open to consideration, discussion, evaluation. He allows that it is "possible" that these claims are "true," thereby applying cognitive descriptions to verbiage that is at war with cognition. He demands proof of a negative: it's up to you, he declares, to show that there are no demons, or that your sex life is *not* a result of your previous incarnation as a Pharaoh of ancient Egypt. (1987b, 6)

Less than two years later, Peikoff published "Fact and Value." In this article, Peikoff maintains that each of a wide variety of belief systems at odds with Objectivism is based on "inherently dishonest ideas."

Now we must note that falsehood does not necessarily imply vice; honest errors of knowledge are possible. But such errors are not nearly so common as some people wish to think, especially in the field of philosophy. In our century, there have been countless mass movements dedicated to *inherently dishonest ideas*—e.g., Nazism, Communism, non-objective art, non-Aristotelian logic, egalitarianism, nihilism, the pragmatist cult of compromise, the Shirley MacLaine types, who "channel" with ghosts and recount their previous lives; etc. In all such cases, the ideas are not merely false; in one form or another, they represent an explicit rebellion against reason and reality . . . (1989a)

Inherently dishonest ideas, Peikoff contends, are all false—and are all known by their proponents to be false. Peikoff hasn't wholly forgotten "the arbitrary"; he duly brings it up in "Fact and Value," but shrinks its territory down to cases in which "a man accepts an idea blindly, on faith from others or simply by his own whim, without the

effort of understanding or integrating it” (1989a).

Two and a half years after that, Peikoff published his book on Objectivism, in which claims about past lives have quit being false and reverted to the arbitrary category. The 1987 passage that I quoted above appears nearly word-for-word on page 170 of *OPAR*. Then in his 1997 lecture series, Peikoff reaffirms the arbitrariness of such claims:

Now, let’s say, in contrast to [an idea with a basis, about your past choices influencing your current actions], Shirley MacLaine [is] channeling, and her claim is that her past lives influence her daily choices. Now, I’m making up the example, but, for instance, she says she hates her brother, because he looks just like a slave that she hated when she was the pharaoh of ancient Egypt. [Audience laughs.] You’ve got to have some reason to hate him, so why not that? (Lecture 11)

Peikoff takes his audience through an imaginary dialogue with Shirley MacLaine, in which she tells her questioner that the only evidence on behalf of her assertions will come in the future, after the questioner has died and seen God. He concludes:

It’s a lot of talk; it’s not just the open “I say so,” “I say so.” This is now tricked up to sound like argument, discussion, and evidence. But it’s talk which consists of arbitrary hypotheses, and why we can’t have evidence today, but will somehow, someday. (Lecture 11)

In light of this checkered history, we are entitled to wonder whether Peikoff is genuinely able to differentiate between a false assertion and an arbitrary one.¹⁹

Yet if we take him at his word, an arbitrary claim, idea, or statement *cannot even qualify as a form of error, because it cannot be false*. This raises another question of deep importance. What *is* the Objectivist account of error? If we accept Peikoff’s sketch of proof as a form of reduction that applies to propositions or assertions instead of concepts, it seems to follow that an assertion that has successfully

undergone reduction has been proven *true*. (Otherwise there would have to be some kind of successful reduction of a nonaxiomatic proposition to perceptual information that does *not* qualify as proof—and Peikoff alludes to none.) A false proposition would have to be able to undergo *partly* successful reduction, failing at some point along the way when it is found to contradict previous knowledge. An arbitrary proposition would have to be *resistant to reduction altogether*, for, as Peikoff has already told us, it has no context and no hierarchical location.

If error consists in accepting false beliefs or acting on them, then putting forward an arbitrary assertion is *not an error*. Not that this brings any reprieve—for Peikoff, an arbitrary assertion is *qualitatively worse than an error*.

The reader of *OPAR* may be tempted to wonder, at this point, whether Peikoff can even make sense of error. If proof is a chain of logical inferences from truths of perceptual observation, and whatever corresponds to reality can be proven, the underlying alternative isn't truth versus falsehood. It's correspondence to reality (truth) versus detachment from reality (arbitrariness). Elsewhere in the book, Peikoff (1993) declares:

To derive a conclusion from arbitrary premises, which represent subjective whims, is not a process of logic. If I declare, "Apples are razors and oranges are blades; therefore, one can shave with fruit salad," this is not a process of cognition at all. It is merely an imitation of the form of logic while dropping its essence. If logic is to be the means of objectivity, a logical conclusion must be derived from reality; it must be warranted by antecedent *knowledge*, which itself may rest on earlier knowledge, and so back, until one reaches the self-evident, the data of sense. (119–20)

In other words, logic is of no positive value except insofar as it contributes to the Peikovian proof process. *The very abstraction of logical form* is suspect, because would permit arguments with false or even arbitrary premises to be judged valid. Formal logic is necessarily decontextualized. The abstraction of logical form isolates what is invariant across a wide variety of contexts; it isolates what remains the

same about the relationship between the premises of an argument and its conclusion, whether the premises are true or false. It doesn't follow that formal logic can't be used to judge the adequacy of particular arguments in context. If it did follow, formal logic would be largely useless.

Would it be improper, then, to infer any of the consequences that would follow if a speculative hypothesis were true? After all, the hypothesis has not already undergone the Peikovian proof process. If it *had* fully undergone the proof process, it would be *known* to be true, so no "what-if" questions would remain; any consequences would *have to* obtain, precisely because the hypothesis was true.

In Karl Popper's philosophy of science, there is no requirement for positive evidence for a testable universal hypothesis. Indeed, Popper would obviously have to reject the Peikovian criteria (176, 178, 179) whereby a hypothesis that is supported by some positive evidence is possible, one supported by a lot of positive evidence is probable, and one supported by all of the available positive evidence is certain.

[T]he probability of a statement (or a set of statements) is always the greater the less the statement says: it is inverse to the content or the deductive power of the statement, and thus to its explanatory power. Accordingly every interesting and powerful statement must have a low probability; and *vice versa*: a statement with a high probability will be scientifically uninteresting, because it says little and has no explanatory power. Although we seek theories with a high degree of corroboration, *as scientists we do not seek highly probable theories but explanations; that is to say, powerful and improbable theories.* (Popper 1965, 58)

A very low probability hypothesis hardly teeters on the brink of meaninglessness; on the contrary, it will have "empirical content" (in Popper's terms) so long as it has testable consequences. The adequacy of Popper's account is a topic for another discussion; indeed, many other philosophers of science would argue that to be worth testing a hypothesis needs to have something going for it. But Popper's work constitutes a *prima facie* challenge to Peikoff's claims about "the arbitrary." And Popper, unlike Peikoff, went to great lengths to

elaborate a philosophy of science.

The Wind and the Parrot

In his quest to exclude “the arbitrary” from the realm of error, Peikoff finally gets around to making his charge of meaninglessness explicit:

A relationship between a conceptual content and reality is a relationship between man’s consciousness and reality. There can be no “correspondence” or “recognition” without the mind that corresponds or recognizes. If a wind blows the sand on a desert island into configurations spelling out “A is A,” that does not make the wind a superior metaphysician. The wind did not achieve any conformity to reality; it did not produce any truth but merely shapes in the sand. Similarly, if a parrot is trained to squawk “ $2 + 2 = 4$,” this does not make it a mathematician. The parrot’s consciousness did not attain thereby any contact with reality or any relation to it, positive or negative; the parrot did not recognize or contradict any fact; what it created was not merely falsehood, but merely sounds. Sounds that are not the vehicle of conceptual awareness have no cognitive status. (Peikoff 1993, 165)

Peikoff is talking about a genuine epistemological issue. But it is a fundamental one that should have gotten attention a good deal earlier in his book. What’s at stake is the very nature of knowledge. Peikoff has recognized that knowledge cannot, at root, be a structure of symbols in the mind that corresponds to some other structure out in the environment. It can’t be, because symbols have to be interpreted; they have to be symbols *for some cognitive agent*. Human beings are capable of interpreting statements made in language. The wind blowing across the sand cannot interpret symbols; if it happens to blow the dunes into shapes readable by you and me as “A is A,” that does not constitute evidence that the wind knows anything, let alone that it understands the laws of logic. If a parrot, a fairly competent agent whose abilities nonetheless fall well short of understanding and using language,²⁰ learns to mimic “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” in English, it doesn’t follow that the parrot knows what English speakers with even minimal

mathematical competence know. Peikoff spends no time exploring the consequences of the fact that knowledge cannot merely be a structure of symbols in correspondence with aspects of the environment.²¹ Instead, he declares:

An arbitrary claim emitted by a human mind is analogous to the shapes made by the wind or to the sounds of the parrot. Such a claim has no cognitive relationship to reality, positive or negative. The true is identified by reference to a body of evidence; it is pronounced “true” because it can be integrated without contradiction into a total context. The false is identified by the same means; it is pronounced “false” because it contradicts the evidence and/or some aspect of the wider context. The arbitrary, however, has no relation to evidence or context; neither term, therefore—“true” or “false”—can be applied to it. (165–66)

So a human being, a highly competent cognitive agent, who puts forward any assertion that Peikoff deems arbitrary, drops right through an ontological trapdoor, and ceases to be a cognitive agent at all. All you have to do is endorse a proposition about the soul outliving the body, and your cognitive abilities will be downgraded to parrot level—if not forfeited entirely!

Even if we accept Peikoff’s contention that putting forward any assertion that he deems arbitrary is *ipso facto* an irrational act, it does not follow that the assertion is the product of a sudden complete interruption to one’s functioning as a cognitive agent—even if it is an interruption from which one can somehow quickly recover.

In this passage, Peikoff is no longer talking about true assertions or false propositions; he has lapsed into generic discourse about “the true,” “the false”—and “the arbitrary.” Like the ethical generics that show up elsewhere in *OPAR* (“the good” and “the evil”), these epistemological generics are unmistakable signals of rationalism and reifying.

When Peikoff speaks of “the true,” “the false,” and “the arbitrary,” he is giving expression to his Parmenidean side: the body of evidence that an assertion must fit is the *total* body of evidence; the context of knowledge includes *all* knowledge, forming a static whole. “Nothing

is a completely isolated fact, without causes or effects; no aspect of the total can exist ultimately apart from the total. Knowledge, therefore, which seeks to grasp reality, must also be a total; its elements must be interconnected to form a unified whole reflecting the whole which is the universe” (123). “Admitting to a tendency toward rationalism, Peikoff never tires of quoting Hegel’s dictum that “The True is the Whole”” (Sciabarra 1995, 121).

Such static holism is inconsistent with Peikoff’s own recognition that each individual’s knowledge develops over time, as does the range of knowledge available to human beings in general. In *ITOE*, Rand indulged extensively in speculative developmental psychology (for more about this, see Campbell 1999). Peikoff soldiers on in this tradition in *OPAR* (1993, 1, 4–5, 12–15, 17–18, 52–54, 74–79, 83–85, 91–93, 96–99, 103, 130, 134–35, 157, 192, et seq.). Besides, if Peikoff were entirely right in his totalizing, no assertion about gods or gremlins or immortal souls would be able to stand completely outside the interconnected web of human knowledge; consequently, no assertion could ever be completely out of relation with the universe.

Unless . . . somehow . . . arbitrariness *directly affirms nothingness* while rejecting reality. For Peikoff the Parmenidean, there is just everything there is; to affirm anything else is to affirm nothingness, to “embrace a zero” (248). Why such fierce condemnation of what doesn’t rise to the status of falsehood? An arbitrary assertion somehow jumps all the way down to *ultimately blameworthy* without passing through any unstable intermediate state of erroneousness.

Peikoff never provides an explicit answer. But some other statements that he makes in *OPAR* support an argument by analogy. Perhaps wrongness without falsehood is possible in the same way that a basic choice not to live makes concepts of good and evil inapplicable—yet renders the agent who has made that choice worthy of relegation to the lowest rung of hell.

In one of the most widely quoted passages in his book, Peikoff insists that moral values are entirely contingent on the prior choice to live. Only in the context of this choice can any standard of value be established; only once this choice has actually been made can any action be recognized as good or bad, right or wrong (244–45). If one has chosen to live, then the goodness or rightness of one’s actions can be assessed according to their conduciveness to “man’s life *qua* man.”

If one has chosen not to live, moral categories cannot apply to one's choice. Yet the choice not to live, which Peikoff denies can be meaningfully regarded as evil, must be singled out for superblame and hypercondemnation. Somehow it is worse than evil.

A primary choice [to live or not to live] does not mean an "arbitrary," "whimsical," or "groundless" choice. There *are* grounds for a (certain) primary choice, and those grounds are reality—all of it. The choice to live, as we have seen, is the choice to accept the realm of reality. This choice is not only *not* arbitrary. It is the precondition of criticizing the arbitrary; it is the base of reason.

A man who would throw away his life without cause, who would reject the universe on principle and embrace a zero for its own sake—such a man, according to Objectivism, would belong on the lowest rung of hell. His action would indicate so profound a hatred—of himself, of values, of reality—that he would have to be condemned by any *human* being as a monster. The moment he would announce his decision seriously he would be disqualified as an object of intellectual debate. One cannot argue with or about a walking corpse, who has just consigned himself to the void—the void of the nonconscious, the nonethical, the non-anything. (248)

Similarly, an arbitrary assertion cannot be meaningfully understood as false, yet is worse than a falsehood:

Philosophically, the arbitrary is *worse than the false*. The false has a relation, albeit negative, to the facts of reality; it has reached the field of human cognition and invoked its methods, even though an error has been committed in the process. This is *radically* different from the capricious. The false does not destroy a man's ability to know; it does not nullify his grasp of objectivity; it leaves him the means of discovering and correcting his error. The arbitrary, however, if a man indulges in it, assaults his cognitive faculty; it wipes out or makes impossible in his mind the concept of rational cogni-

tion and thus entrenches his inner chaos for life. As to the practical consequences of this difference, whom would you prefer to work with, talk to, or buy groceries from: a man who miscounts the people in his living room (an error) or who declares that the room is full of demons (the arbitrary)? (166; emphasis added)

Peikoff's final sentence poses a blatantly loaded alternative. Every day, human beings make mistakes with much higher impact than most simple miscounts will ever have. People fail college courses, run cars off roads, alienate friends, mismanage businesses into bankruptcy, crash airplanes. Conversely, from Peikoff's point of view, if a prospective seller, coworker, or conversational partner believes that his friend who recently died is now in heaven, walking on streets of gold, he is as fully in the grip of "the arbitrary," and should be as assiduously shunned, as the man who believes that his living room is swarming with demons.

What's more, in calling an arbitrary assertion "capricious," Peikoff implies that it was put forward deliberately, on whim, for the hell of it. Can Peikoff supply evidence of such motives? From Peikoff's standpoint, everyone who accepts any proposition that presupposes the existence of a god or gods has endorsed one or more arbitrary assertions. Does it follow that everyone who accepts such propositions is guilty of whim, caprice, or asserting for the hell of it? Peikoff apparently thinks so; when he questions the entire mission of formal logic he rejects logical reasoning from "arbitrary premises, which represent subjective whims" (119). Equating the arbitrary with the capricious is consistent with everyday usage (as well as Rand's nontechnical employment of the word "arbitrary," which will get more attention below). But is it consistent with Peikoff's purportedly technical exposition of an extremely broad variety of arbitrary assertions?

If Peikoff cannot supply any evidence that an assertion he deems arbitrary was put forward on purpose, his judgment about motives becomes, well, arbitrary.

The Peikovian Redemption Policy

From what Peikoff has said so far, the reader must be pardoned

for thinking that whatever qualifies as arbitrary will never escape that status. If it has no relationship whatsoever with reality, how can it acquire one? Unless Peikoff has quietly adopted a Buddhist conception of hell, how can anyone or anything ever leave the lowest rung? Nor is “inner chaos” a whole lot more reversible: Peikoff assures us that indulging in the arbitrary will entrench it for life. Most remarkably, then, it turns out that not all arbitrary claims must remain so. Some can be redeemed.²²

Here is the redemption policy:

Now let us note that some arbitrary claims (but by no means all) can be *transferred to a cognitive context* and converted thereby into true or false statements, which demonstrably correspond to or contradict established fact. It is not mere words that establish epistemological status, but their relation to evidence. A savage’s memorized recital of an arithmetic sum, for example, would be like the parrot’s, but the same utterance by a man who understands the reasons behind it would constitute a truth. (166)

Peikoff has reverted to equating arbitrary assertions with empty symbols. So it becomes imperative to ask how many of the assertions that Peikoff deems arbitrary are in fact put forward by people who genuinely fail to understand any of the concepts in them, or any possible rationale for them?

In this connection, Peikoff’s invocation of the “savage” brings little assurance. Mainly, it serves to remind the reader how little he knows of the human past. As recently as the 1940s, the Oksapmin of the New Guinea highlands were preliterate. Their traditional counting system, which worked by pointing in sequence to various parts of the upper body, stopped at 29. While the old Oksapmin counting system evidently failed to support the multiplication of seven-digit numbers, it still provided adequate grounds for asserting “Two plus two make four,” in full understanding of its truth (Saxe 1982).

Let us rather suppose, for the sake of argument, that Peikoff does not fully understand Kurt Gödel’s incompleteness theorem. Does it follow that if Peikoff were to repeat an accurate one or two paragraph summary of the theorem after reading it in a reference book, he would

be asserting this description arbitrarily? How much would Peikoff need to know of the reasons for the theorem, before his assertions concerning it were cleansed of the taint of arbitrariness? Would he have to be able to reproduce Gödel's actual proof, with appropriate commentary, or come up with a sound derivation of his own, before we could conclude that he had provided enough evidence to liberate his assertion from the realm of the arbitrary? What would it take before any of his statements made in criticism of the theorem could be deemed worthy of consideration as true or false?²³

Peikoff is utterly unclear as to *how often* arbitrary assertions can be redeemed by a person more knowledgeable or rational than their initial proponent. Nor does he establish *what makes* some arbitrary assertions potentially nonarbitrary, instead of dooming them forever.²⁴

From observing how often he has singled them out, one might think that for Peikoff theological assertions are irredeemably arbitrary. The problem is that this would make hash out of any efforts to refute them.

. . . consider the claim that there is an infinite, omnipotent creator of the universe. If the claim is viewed as a product of faith or fantasy, apart from any relation to evidence, it has no cognitive standing. If one wishes, however, one can relate this claim to an established context; one can demonstrate that the idea of God contradicts all the fundamentals of a rational philosophy. Thanks to such a process of integration, what was initially arbitrary attains cognitive status—in this case, as a falsehood. (Peikoff 1993, 166)

Even if Peikoff were wholly correct in his analysis of assertions about God as arbitrary, there are plenty of theists hanging around. Consequently, an atheist would be well advised to put in the work necessary to redeem their propositions by relating them to an established context. Otherwise, Peikoff would have to reject Rand's critique of theism as a lamentable, if not irresponsible, waste of effort (and, as we will see below, he most emphatically does not). His own critique would, at best, become a series of wild goose chases after assertions unworthy of refutation. And what would he be compelled to say about an entire book in the same vein, such as *Atheism: The Case against God*

(Smith 1974)? Or a book like Boyer's (2001) that seeks to explain, in evolutionary terms, why human beings are so prone to believe in gods?

If assertions about a god or gods can be given a rational interpretation that accords them a context and puts their propositional contents back in the hierarchy, one is tempted to wonder whether *every* supposedly arbitrary assertion can be handled the same way. Maybe every last one of these assertions is really true or false—it's just that some of the people making them are so thoughtless, ignorant, or out to lunch (well, "detached from reality") as to be in no position to know.

If so, however, most that is distinctive about the Peikovian doctrine goes out the window. "The arbitrary" neither constitutes a third truth value, nor a special condition more deserving of condemnation than the worst kind of error.

Peikoff maintains that the redemption of arbitrary assertions does nothing to undercut their unique awfulness or give them back a truth value, because any such redemption is an act of charity extended by rational people to irrational people:

Even when it is possible, however, this kind of integration is never *obligatory*. To bring unwarranted claims into relation with human knowledge is *not a requirement of human cognition*. Knowledge does not advance by a man's seizing on the arbitrary or letting it dictate the subject matter of his thought; no truth otherwise unknown can be uncovered thereby. What one can legitimately seek to achieve by such integration is not the proof or disproof of a claim, but *merely the identification of the precise nature of an error*, as in the God example—and even this is of value only to those whose mind it *is* an error (as against being the *deliberately* arbitrary). (167; italics on "is" are Peikoff's, the rest are mine)

This paragraph just intensifies the puzzlement.

First, Peikoff now says that it is *not obligatory* to make sense of an arbitrary assertion so that it can be understood (and perhaps refuted). But just three pages ago he was saying that it was *obligatory not* to try to make sense of an arbitrary assertion! "The rational response to such a claim is to dismiss it, without discussion, consideration, or argument" (164). He was insisting that refusing to respond is *the only conceivable*

rational policy: “There is nothing the mind can do to or with such a phenomenon except sweep it aside” (164).

Second, Peikoff claims that human knowledge never advances by precisely identifying the nature of an error. So, for instance, psychology did not progress when the fundamental errors of behaviorism were identified, and chemistry did not advance when the basic errors of phlogiston theory were exposed, and astronomers made no progress when they realized that there was no Vulcan perturbing the orbit of Mercury.²⁵ When one correctly identifies a type of error, one is thereby empowered to avoid it and its close relatives in the future. What makes Peikoff so sure there is no benefit in that? Why, in his first book *The Ominous Parallels*, did he seek to refute various of Immanuel Kant’s doctrines and expose their erroneous presuppositions, unless he believed there was some epistemic benefit to the exercise? Why does the entry on “Kant” in *The Ayn Rand Lexicon* run to 9 pages of passages by Rand and Peikoff, all harshly critical of the philosopher in question (in Binswanger 1988, 235–43)? Indeed, the “Kant” section is far longer than the sections on “Intelligence” and “Learning” combined.

Mark Bickhard (2001; 2002; Bickhard and Campbell 1996) has put forward a general theory of rationality as the progressive refinement of error avoidance. “Rational activity requires knowledge of how to do things in ways that avoid or overcome error” (2002, 1). Bickhard’s theory seeks to apply the basic evolutionary principles of variation and selection to questions about rational cognition. A careful comparison of Bickhard’s conception of rationality with Peikoff’s would require us to visit a number of issues outside the purview of this article. The very existence of a framework like Bickhard’s suffices to show, however, that Peikoff’s judgment of the nonvalue of exposing errors is a long way from obvious.

When he disparages learning from mistakes—whether they are one’s own or other people’s—Peikoff is again revealing his Parmenideanism. Either an assertion has been put through Peikovian proof—so it is true, and it relates to reality. Or it has not been put through Peikovian proof—so it pertains to unreality, nonexistence, the zero, is detached from reality, is arbitrary. Such an implied dichotomy between “the true” and “the arbitrary” would make error worse than epistemically profitless. It would become incomprehensible, impossible to account for. There would be no wrong answers any more—just

right answers and arbitrary assertions.

Third, when Peikoff complains that the elimination of varieties of error will not advance knowledge, he is conceding that “the arbitrary” *is* a species of error! Now the person who makes an allegedly arbitrary assertion *has* made an error, unless he or she unleashed it on purpose. Peikoff previously used such epithets as “brazen” and “capricious,” implying that every last arbitrary assertion is indulged in for the hell of it. Now he allows that a person can make an arbitrary assertion by mistake. So much for “the arbitrary” being neither true nor false, or not counting as error because it really is something worse.

On two key issues—whether arbitrariness is a form of error, and what the rational response to arbitrariness ought to be—the Peikovian position turns out to be flatly incoherent.

Protective Belts and Apostles of the Arbitrary

Peikoff has already contradicted himself on the error issue and the redeemability issue, so a cognitive verdict on his doctrine can be rendered without further delay. However, he does offer one more purported basis for considering “the arbitrary” to be beyond error. Peikoff argues that people who are *committed* to an arbitrary assertion are impervious to refutation and will reject all evidence or argument that their assertion is erroneous.

But does this mean that there is something particularly wrong with their initial *assertion*? Or merely with their subsequent *commitment* to it? Closing one’s mind to counterargument or contrary evidence is irrational. But this point can readily be made without carving out a special class of arbitrary assertions and ascribing to them a special form of awfulness.

No identification of error will affect the determined exponent of the arbitrary. If he hears his claim being related to counter-evidence, he will act promptly to insulate it from logic. For example, he will answer objections as theologians have through the centuries. “The meaning of ‘God’ is beyond the power of language to specify,” they say. “God in this sense does not involve any contradictions of man’s knowledge, as we would see clearly if only we could know Him—which we cannot, not in this life. Prove that *this* God does not exist.”

(Peikoff 1993, 167)

Here Peikoff, still admitting that arbitrariness is a species of error, is complaining about a policy of purposely insulating one's hypotheses from any sort of empirical test or rational counterargument. But such a strategy is rather widely understood to be irrational. Popper would have regarded Peikovian proof as impossible; as a constructivist, he would have explicitly rejected the Peikovian demand for positive evidence for every hypothesis.

Yet after being impressed by them in his youth, Popper concluded that neither Freudian psychoanalysis nor Adlerian individual psychology was a genuine scientific theory because

I could not think of any human behaviour which could not be interpreted in terms of either theory. It was precisely this fact—that they always fitted, that they were already confirmed—which in the eyes of their admirers constituted the strongest argument in favour of these theories. It began to dawn on me that this apparent strength was in fact their weakness. (Popper 1965, 35)

Besides, the hypotheses that have ended up being so insulated often had some initial plausibility; they did not start out meeting Peikoff's stated criterion for arbitrariness. If what is arbitrary truly has no context or place in the hierarchy or relation to evidence, a rational person won't understand it well enough to be able to get started on testing it or refuting it. But Sigmund Freud's theory of psychic energy began, circa 1895, as a plausible speculation about the functioning of the human brain and central nervous system. The problem was that Freud would not publicly admit its initial explanatory shortcomings, nor would he respond to subsequent developments in neuroscience that contradicted some of the assumptions of the theory. Worse yet, he failed to encourage his students and colleagues to test the claims made by his theory (Kitcher 1992; Sulloway 1992).

Similarly, phrenology, as initially put forward in the early 1800s, began with a distinctly nonarbitrary claim; namely, that function is localized in the human brain. Today, in fact, we know that this claim is generally correct. It was the techniques used for localizing (which

relied on the outward shape of the skull), and the lack of interest in testing specific hypotheses about correlations between bumps or dips on the cranium and traits such as “locality” or “amativeness,” that turned phrenology first into bad science and eventually into pseudoscience (Boring 1950, 50–60; Kitcher 1992).

A much more contemporary example of insulation, this time from developmental psychology, is the proliferation of “nonmoral” domains of social knowledge in Elliot Turiel’s (1983) domain theory, in order to account for judgments that are moral from the point of view of the person making them, but do not fit the theory’s narrow definition of a moral issue as always involving harm to other people (Campbell and Christopher 1996a; 1996b). Again, the initial hypothesis of a narrowly defined moral domain was not arbitrary; indeed, in the earliest days of Turiel’s research program, there was some empirical evidence to support it. Defensive modifications began when evidence was provided that some people outside of North America (e.g., orthodox Hindus in some parts of India) regard violations of dietary laws or mourning customs as comparable in their immorality to murder and theft (Shweder, Mahapatra, and Miller 1987). Instead of conceding that not everyone defines the moral domain as their theory requires, Turiel, Killen, and Helwig (1987) started introducing new domains to account for the contrary evidence, such as an “unearthly belief mediated” domain to explain the judgments made by orthodox Hindus.

As Popper (1965, 37) notes:

some genuinely testable theories, when found to be false, are still upheld by their admirers—for example by introducing *ad hoc* some auxiliary assumption, or by re-interpreting the theory *ad hoc* in such a way that it escapes refutation. Such a procedure is always possible, but it rescues the theory from refutation only at the price of destroying, or at least lowering, its scientific status.

What’s more, the “protective belts” that people sometimes wrap around their pet theories (Lakatos 1978), while epistemically objectionable, normally fall well short of the grand mystification that Peikoff cites in his complaint about theologians.²⁶ When the grand-scale mystifier declares that God is incapable of being comprehended with

any human means of knowing, yet somehow the mystifier is still able to know that nothing about God contradicts what human beings already know, the mystifier is being self-referentially inconsistent. As he has demonstrated in his coverage of philosophical axioms and axiomatic concepts (e.g., 1993, 4–12), Peikoff knows what is wrong with self-referential inconsistency. Recourse to the doctrine of the arbitrary is entirely superfluous in this context.

The Burden of Proof

The reference to God and attempts by theists to forestall refutation through mystification, however, prods Peikoff to bring still another epistemological issue in under the umbrella of arbitrariness. In the process, he reverts to his rhetoric of meaninglessness and wrongfulness beyond error.

This brings us back to the arbitrary qua arbitrary, i.e., to the kind of claim that cannot by its nature be related to any established fact or context. In order to concretize the Objectivist principle that such claims cannot be cognitively processed, I want to elaborate here on a venerable rule of logic: the rule that the onus of proof is on him who asserts a positive, and that one must not attempt to prove a negative. (Peikoff 1993, 167)

There is indeed a venerable rule of logic at work here. But again it is in no need of propping with doctrines about “the arbitrary.” If, for instance, a psychologist claims that some human beings can rapidly and accurately enumerate more than 100 items without counting them, the burden is on the person making the claim to provide a reliable observation of at least one person rapidly and accurately enumerating more than 100 items without counting them. That is because it is possible to verify the hypothesis—i.e., show that it is true by collecting evidence that supports it. It is not possible to falsify such a hypothesis: repeated failures to find a human being who can enumerate more than 100 items in the manner claimed will not suffice to rule out the existence of at least one such person among those not yet observed. If the hypothesis is true, it is possible to prove that it is true, but if it is false, it is not possible to prove that it is false.

So there is an onus of proof, all right. But what does it have to do with Peikovian arbitrariness?

The onus of proof rule states the following. If a person asserts that a certain entity exists (such as God, gremlins, a disembodied soul), he is required to adduce evidence supporting his claim. If he does so, one must either accept his conclusion, or disqualify his evidence by showing that he has misinterpreted certain data. But if he offers no supporting evidence, one must dismiss his claim *without argumentation*, because in this situation argument would be futile. It is impossible to “prove a negative,” meaning by the term: prove the nonexistence of an entity *for which there is no evidence*. (167)

Making an assertion that something exists, or that some things behave in a certain way, providing no evidence for the assertion, then demanding that one’s opponent disprove the assertion, is a good old-fashioned logical fallacy, just like the fallacy of division, or the *argumentum ad baculum*. The proper response to a fallacious argument is to point out the fallacy—not to dismiss it without argumentation. The doctrine of the arbitrary is, again, utterly superfluous in this context.

There was never a need to assimilate the onus of proof principle to the Peikovian doctrine of arbitrariness. But in trying to build a rationale for the assimilation, Peikoff compounds his confusions:

The reason is the fact that existence exists, and only existence exists. A thing that exists is something; it is an entity in the world; as such, it has effects by which men can grasp and prove it—either directly, by perceptual means, or indirectly, by logical inference (e.g., the discovery of atoms). But a non-existent is nothing; it is not a constituent of reality, and it has no effects. If gremlins, for instance, do not exist, then they are nothing and have no consequences. In such a case, to say: “Prove that there are no gremlins,” is to say: “Point out the facts of reality that follow from the nonexistence of gremlins.” But there are no such facts. Nothing follows from nothing.

(167–68)

Now presumably if gremlins existed, there would be some detectable consequences of gremlinistic activity—and some good reasons for accepting gremlinological explanations for those particular phenomena. Therefore, if the predicted data patterns did not obtain—or they did, but the gremlinological explanations for them were shown to be faulty—there would be consequences of the nonexistence of gremlins. There would indeed be facts that follow from the nonexistence of gremlins.²⁷

An example from the history of astronomy is the hypothesis, put forward in the mid-nineteenth century, that the orbit of Mercury was departing slightly from its predicted course because of a small planet located between it and the sun. But Vulcan, as the hypothetical planet was dubbed, was never reliably observed. Vulcan’s failure to exist did have consequences: “Telescopes were directed to where it would have been, had it existed, and nothing whatever was seen in that region. Compare the discovery of the planet Neptune, where a telescope did lock on, ostensibly, to something in the place indicated by the theory” (Harré 1970, 79).

Peikoff the Parmenidean insists that gremlins are nothing, and “nothing follows from nothing”; a god or gods are nothing, and “nothing follows from nothing”; by implication, phlogiston is nothing, and “nothing follows from nothing”; and, apparently, Vulcan was nothing, and “nothing follows from nothing.” He is now in danger, once again, of denying the existence of logically valid but unsound arguments.²⁸ It get worse; if there are no valid but unsound arguments, isn’t *modus tollens* going to be next in line for a one-way trip to the landfill? If gremlins are nothing, and nothing follows from nothing, how can one attempt to assess the truth or falsity of “If there really are gremlins, then X will happen”? Is one truly prohibited from arguing back that “X isn’t happening. Therefore, there are no gremlins”?

Peikoff momentarily retreats from the Parmenideanism:

For the sake of full clarity, I must add the following. One can infer from any truth the falsehood of its contradictories. For example, from “X was in New York during the Dallas shooting of Y” one can infer the falsehood of “X shot Y.”

Thus one can disprove a claim or “prove a negative” (“X is not guilty”)—but only by demonstrating that the claim contradicts established knowledge; i.e., only by relating the claim to a positive cognitive context, when this is available. What one cannot do is prove a negative apart from such a relationship; what one cannot do is establish the falsehood of an arbitrary claim *qua* arbitrary. One establishes the false by reference to the true, not by reference to nothing. (168)

It’s a relief to spy *modus tollens* still sitting on the curb after the garbage truck has passed by. But now Peikoff has established that even a pretty grossly unmotivated assertion can be shown to be false, using evidence and logical reasoning. How, then, can *any* claim be “arbitrary *qua* arbitrary”: shorn of any relation to evidence, any connection with established knowledge, any possible context? Does any theologian really claim that there are absolutely no detectable consequences of a god’s existence—that the rest of the universe is, so far as we humans could ever know, exactly the same with a god around as it would be without one?

Peikoff’s decision to spare *modus tollens* was just an interlude. He now veers back into Parmenideanizing. Referring to Rand as though she were still thinking about the issue gives the passage an oracular quality:

Objectivism’s refutation of theism, to take another example, is not a case of “proving a negative” in the sense vetoed by the onus-of-proof principle. Ayn Rand does not start with a zero and seek to discover evidence of God’s nonexistence. She starts with reality, i.e., with (philosophically) known fact, then denies a claim that clashes with it. Nor, as I have made clear, does she expect any such refutation to be accepted by apostles of the arbitrary. These individuals will merely reformulate the claim so as to protect it from evidence, then insist again, “Prove that it is *not* so.” (168)

As I noted above, protective belting is hardly limited to theists, astrologers, sixth-sensers, gremlinologists, or believers in immortal souls. What’s more, Peikoff has declared that “the arbitrary *qua*

arbitrary” cannot be refuted, because it allegedly has no relation to evidence or reasons of any kind. *If a claim can be refuted, it is not arbitrary; if it has been successfully refuted, one ought to conclude that it is false.* The “apostles of the arbitrary” may be guilty of rejecting a refutation or a counterargument that they ought to accept; if truly devoted to their unholy mission, they may start dodging refutations left and right. Their offense, however, is quite different from putting forward an assertion that cannot be refuted in the first place, because it cannot be true or false.

What does a person have to do, exactly, to merit classification as an “apostle of the arbitrary”? The designation is great street preacher language, but is there anything more to it? Besides, the street preacher’s attention has been entirely captured by his fire and brimstone. He has forgotten all about his promises of redemption.

To this demand, there is only one valid response. An assertion outside the realm of cognition can impose no cognitive responsibility on a rational mind, neither of proof nor of disproof. The arbitrary is not open to either; it simply cannot be cognitively processed. The proper treatment of such an aberration is to refrain from sanctioning it by argument or discussion. (168–69)

Only *one* valid response? Peikoff has shortened his cycle time; he is now whipping back and forth, within a single paragraph, between needn’t and mustn’t. Is there no responsibility to disprove an arbitrary assertion? Needn’t. Or is there a responsibility not to try to disprove one? Mustn’t. Needn’t. Mustn’t.

Of course, when Peikoff says that one must refrain from “sanctioning” an arbitrary assertion by discussing it, that’s a really loud Mustn’t. In Objectivism, “sanction” is a moral term (e.g., Rand 1957; Binswanger 1988, 432–33). Sanctioning the wrong things, or the wrong people, is itself morally wrong. Sanctioning an aberration is a grave moral wrong.

Somewhat surprisingly, Peikoff now turns to the issue of agnosticism. One would think that scarcely anything needs saying on the matter. Up to now, Peikoff has blown hot and cold about the correct response to an allegedly arbitrary assertion, but his oscillations have

been between two alternatives: redeem it and refute it, or leave it unredeemed and denounce it.

To dismiss a claim as “arbitrary” is not the equivalent of pleading ignorance or confessing indecision or suspending judgment. It is not the same as saying “I don’t know” or “I haven’t made up my mind” or “I have no opinion.” These responses presuppose that an issue has a connection to human cognition; they presuppose that there is some evidence pertaining to the issue and, therefore, that it is legitimate to consider, even though one may be unable for various reasons to untangle it. For example, if the field is specialized, a given individual may not have the time to study the evidence, even though it is clear and abundant. Or the data may be so evenly balanced, or so fragmentary and ambiguous—for instance, in regard to judging a certain person’s character—that one simply cannot decide what conclusion is warranted. In such cases, “I don’t know” is an honest and appropriate statement.

If someone asks a man whether there are gremlins on Venus, however, there is no justification for the reply “I don’t know.” What doesn’t he know? What evidence has he failed to study or been unable to clarify? What is the basis to believe that there *is* anything to learn on this subject? If the gremlin claim is arbitrary, there is no such basis. In this situation, the proper response is, “I *do* know. I know that any such claim is to be thrown out as inadmissible.” (169)

Isn’t the appropriate response to “Are there gremlins on Venus” more along the lines of, “Why on earth do you think so?” or “I don’t know of any reason to think that there are gremlins. Do you know of any that I’m not aware of?”? “I don’t know” is ruled out in either case.

The reason that Objectivism rejects *agnosticism* should now be clear. The term applies not only to the question of God, but also to many other issues, such as ESP, reincarnation, demonic possession, astrology, the Arab claim of an international Zionist conspiracy, and the Marxist claim that the state

will wither away. In regard to all such issues and claims, of which there are an unlimited number today, the agnostic is the man who says: “We can’t prove that the claim is true. But we can’t prove that it is false, either. So the only proper conclusion is: we don’t know; no one knows; perhaps no one can ever know?” (169)

Again, Peikoff could have made an Objectivist case against agnosticism simply by reminding readers of the axiom of consciousness, and affirming human beings’ ability to know the world. That would make much swifter work of “perhaps no one can ever know.” As for the assertions about which Peikoff complains, isn’t the appropriate response to evaluate the relevant evidence and the purported reasons for them, and decide accordingly? What need could there be for a third truth value called “the arbitrary”? Surely claims of an international Zionist conspiracy can be adequately addressed using just “the true” and “the false.” Why should a rational person faced with the *n*th reprint of “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” have to get snagged in a Peikovian tug-of-war between *Needn’t* and *Mustn’t*? Can’t he or she just evaluate the assertions (nearly always as false, in the cases that Peikoff cites) and move on?

Agnosticism is not simply the pleading of ignorance. It is the enshrinement of ignorance. It is the philosophical viewpoint that demands such pleading—in regard to effusions that are disconnected from evidence. The viewpoint poses as being fair, balanced, impartial. As should now be obvious, however, it is rife with fallacies and with prejudice. (169–70)

Peikoff could have analyzed the errors of agnosticism by reviewing the evidential requirements for different kinds of assertions. He could have gone after it on account of the fallacies and prejudices with which he believes it to be rife. He could have chewed the agnostic out for failing to conclude that certain assertions are false. Instead, he chooses to indict agnosticism for capitulating to “the arbitrary,” glossed for the moment as “effusions that are disconnected from evidence.”

The agnostic treats arbitrary claims as matters properly open

to consideration, discussion, and evaluation. He allows that it is “possible” that these claims are “true,” thereby applying cognitive descriptions to verbiage that is at war with cognition. He demands proof of a negative: it’s up to you, he declares, to show that there are no demons, or that your sex life is *not* a result of your previous incarnation as a pharaoh of ancient Egypt. (170)

Others might suppose that the agnostic has failed to apply the onus of proof principle, or has quit without rendering a cognitive verdict when available evidence and reasoning would support one, or is insufficiently in tune with evidential requirements more generally.

But no. According to Peikoff, the agnostic’s fault consists in failing to recognize that “the arbitrary” gets a third truth value all to itself. The agnostic’s weakness consists in not being ruthless enough to single assertions out for hypercondemnation as arbitrary. The agnostic’s fatal flaw consists in “applying cognitive descriptions to verbiage that is at war with cognition.” Apparently there can be no antidote to agnosticism, except the Peikovian doctrine of the arbitrary assertion.

The agnostic miscalculates. Typically, he believes that he has avoided taking any controversial position and is thus safe from attack. In fact, he is taking a profoundly irrational position. In struggling to elevate the arbitrary to a position of cognitive respect, he is attempting to equate the arbitrary with the logically supported. This is not merely an affirmation of ignorance; it is an *epistemological* egalitarianism intent on obliterating an essential distinction. Such an attitude is incomparably more destructive than any error committed by a man devoted to reason who takes definite stands based on mistaken arguments. (170)

Agnosticism, for Peikoff, ultimately consists in “obliterating” the “essential distinction” between the arbitrary and the non-arbitrary.

Is it essential?

The “Essential Distinction”

My examination of Peikoff’s manifold claims concerning “the arbitrary” has revealed how they lump together:

- 1) Asserting without adequate understanding a proposition that may, in fact, be true;
- 2) Asserting a proposition for which there is no evidence and there are no good reasons—i.e., a proposition that can and should quickly be rejected as false;
- 3) Asserting a proposition that has already been conclusively refuted—i.e., a proposition already known to be false;
- 4) Asserting the truth of a proposition that is subject to the onus of proof principle, while trying to shift the onus of proof to those who question or deny its truth; and
- 5) Hanging onto a proposition that was initially plausible and continually reformulating it or tacking on *ad hoc* assumptions or resorting to mystification, so as to shield it from counterevidence or counterargument.

In Rand’s language, the Peikovian conception of “the arbitrary” is a “package deal,” a scheme for shoving together what does not go together. In Peikoff’s present-day vocabulary (e.g., 2007), his conception of “the arbitrary” is a “misintegration.”

Peikoff makes claims about the “the arbitrary” that, taken together, are incoherent:

- 1) “The arbitrary” is contextless, without a place in the epistemic hierarchy, out of any relation with reality, and in distinct danger of meaninglessness—*but* a rational person can redeem an arbitrarily asserted proposition, giving it a context, a place in the hierarchy, and a relationship with reality, thereby rescuing it from meaninglessness.
- 2) “The arbitrary” cannot be “cognitively processed”—*but* it presents no impediment to the cognitive processing required to identify it as arbitrary, or (whenever redemption is possible) to the cognitive processing needed to redeem it.
- 3) “The arbitrary” has a third truth value, for it can be neither true nor false—*but* nearly every proposition that Peikoff (1993) cites as arbitrary he appears to believe is false, and if it is a proposition about

the supernatural, he claims to *know* that it is false (31–33).

4) “The arbitrary,” being neither true nor false, is not a species of error—*but* one need not put forward the effort to identify what kind of error it involves—*but* identifying what kind of error it involves never makes a positive contribution to human knowledge—*but* it constitutes an “aberration” that is worse than an error, just as a “pre-moral” choice not to live is neither moral nor immoral, but worse than immoral.

5) “The arbitrary” *need not* be dignified with discussion or argumentation that might serve to redeem it—*but* it *must not* be dignified with discussion or argumentation, which would amount to “sanctioning” it.

The misintegration and the incoherencies are sufficient to sink the Peikovian doctrine. Neither obviously misintegrated nor obviously incoherent, but still troubling, is a stand that Peikoff takes in the course of defending it. According to Peikoff, only truths derived from other truths are of epistemic value. Identifying the precise nature of an error never advances human knowledge (167); at best, it rectifies the benighted state of the individual who has avoidably committed one particular error. Nothing, in other words, is ever added to human knowledge as a whole by showing falsehoods to be false. The Peikovian stricture applies to falsehoods that were once arbitrary and have undergone redemption, but if valid it obviously applies more broadly. A full exploration is beyond the scope of this article, but Peikoff’s insistence on the non-value of learning from our mistakes certainly opens up Objectivism to sharp critique from other epistemological points of view.

On account of its package dealing and its incoherencies, “the arbitrary” is, by Rand’s own criteria, an invalid concept. Therefore, the distinction between the arbitrary and the nonarbitrary cannot be essential to a rational epistemology. And a critique of agnosticism that centers on its purported failure to distinguish between the arbitrary and the nonarbitrary cannot be sound.

What is essential, rather, is the distinction between truth and falsehood, along with the distinction between ways of thinking that promote the production of true conclusions versus those that promote the adoption of false conclusions. There is no need for an allegedly deeper distinction between arbitrary and nonarbitrary.

A Passion for the Arbitrary?

There is nothing further to say about the substance of Peikoff's doctrine. But his manner remains of interest. His assertion that the central failing of agnosticism is its squishy-softness on "the arbitrary" opens a vent of superheated rhetoric:

A passion for the arbitrary does not derive from concern for logic. Its root is a feeling that has been given precedence over logic. In some agnostics, the feeling is cowardice, the simple fear that a stand on contentious issues will antagonize people. In other agnostics, the feeling is more convoluted. It is akin to glee, the malicious glee of subverting all ideas and thus of baiting the men who have the integrity required to hold convictions. This is the glee of the destroyer, the mind-hater, the nihilist.

Of all the variants of emotionalism, nihilism is the ugliest. Don't let its exponents infect your mind or your methodology. (170)

It's hard to find any epistemology going on here. But there is no shortage of moral judgment pretending to objectivity.

If there were such a thing as a *passion* for the arbitrary, its poster children would not be agnostics. Rather, they would be religious fanatics, or cranks who profess unshakable confidence in their off-the-wall theories. But such ill conceived and poorly directed moral judgments nonetheless have motivational significance.

If you have the temerity to defend any proposition that Peikoff has pronounced arbitrary, you are an emotionalist; i.e., an irrationalist. Indeed, you are the worst kind of irrationalist (if the badness of irrationalism admits of degrees), for you are indulging a "passion for the arbitrary." If you fail to dismiss out of hand any assertion that Peikoff deems arbitrary, you are a miserable coward, or a mind-hating nihilist. *You'd better be sure, then, never to advance or defend any proposition that Leonard Peikoff has branded arbitrary.*

To pursue truth implies that one wants to find it. The purpose and responsibility of a cognitive quest is to achieve

the very thing the agnostic dreads most: cognition. (170–71)

Peikoff has exhibited little restraint in making claims about the motives of anyone who puts forward an assertion that he deems arbitrary. If the imputations were being made by anyone but himself or his disciples, he would excoriate the claimant for shameless “psychologizing.” He might even deem the assertions about motives arbitrary...

Let me conclude the present discussion by stating its broader significance. Logic *is* man’s method of knowledge, and it cannot be defaulted on with impunity, as the emotionalists of all varieties seek to do. Any such default exacts a fearsome toll—epistemologically, the worst there is: it ejects the mental process in question from the realm of cognition. (171)

That last sentence seems to be in need of a completion. Unfortunately, Peikoff’s atheism, and his denial of an afterlife, preclude references to the Fire that is prepared for the unbelievers.

But Peikoff does turn out in the end to have something epistemological to say:

One cannot get something for nothing—not in the field of material wealth, and not in the field of knowledge, either. One cannot reach truth, any more than knowledge, by accident. One can reach it only by a process of reason. (171)

Here, Peikoff is ruling out any role for *chance* in human cognition. Consequently, he must rule out all cognitive risk taking. Peikoff cannot accept any variation and selection conception of rationality, for reasons that run much deeper than his proclaimed exclusion of evolution from philosophy.²⁹ The evolutionary starting point for variation and selection conceptions is blind, unguided trial and error (D. T. Campbell 1987). Whereas, according to Peikoff, variations blindly generated are arbitrary, hence every last one of them is “ejected from the realm of cognition.” Nor, as we noted above, is Peikoff comfortable with logical inferences from false premises, let alone premises that he deems arbitrary—for such inferences pose the danger of leading one from

false or even arbitrary premises to a true conclusion. It's hard to imagine, then, how Peikoff could accept hypothesis testing as an epistemological procedure, whether confined to science or understood as a more general practice. *Would any hypothesis that moved beyond the least adventuresome description of the available data escape condemnation as arbitrary?* What would be the fate of a new theory or research direction that significantly deviated from the previously accepted ontology in any discipline? Wouldn't it provoke Peikovian paralysis?

The Pedigree

As presented by Peikoff, the doctrine of the arbitrary assertion is an epistemological embarrassment. Questions of its ultimate authorship are of secondary interest, for the doctrine needs major repair or outright replacement no matter who came up with it.

Still, Peikoff's *modus operandi*, in *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, is to attribute every idea and argument to the person named in its subtitle. "Since some of Ayn Rand's most important ideas are expressed only briefly or not at all in her books, the absence of a reference note in my text does not imply that the point is my own. On the contrary, where no reference is given, the material in all likelihood is taken from the lengthy philosophic discussions that I had with Miss Rand across a period of decades" (1993, xiv). He denies making any creative contribution whatsoever: "Our discussions were not a collaboration: I asked questions, she answered them" (xv).

Yet on the evidence of an article and a book published some years after her death, we cannot be sure whether Rand was the originator of this doctrine, or whether she would have approved its final rendition as delivered by Peikoff. While freely admitting (xv) that she might not have conferred her sanction on the final doctrine, Peikoff firmly insists that she was the source for it.

The problem is that Rand published no statement of the doctrine while she was alive. She used the word "arbitrary" rather often, but never in a way that signals the technical meanings that Peikoff expounds in *OPAR*. Since for Rand "arbitrary" is an epistemological notion, and the metaphysics and epistemology of Objectivism were worked out in large part during the 1950s, one would expect published uses of the word with a philosophical meaning to begin with *Atlas Shrugged*. As indeed they do. The earlier sections of the novel, before

Galt's speech, refer to "arbitrary ... violence" (Rand 1957, 742), "arbitrary power" (385), "arbitrary mercy" (744, 858), and an "arbitrary wish" (686). Because of the overtly philosophical nature of the speech, one would expect the uses to pick up speed, as in fact they do: "arbitrary whim" (953), "arbitrary choice" (956), "arbitrary power of their will" (958), "arbitrary wishes" (958), "arbitrary orders" (960–61), "arbitrary whims" (978), and, finally, "the arbitrary" plain and simple (982). But nary an "arbitrary assertion." Indeed, none of the uses of "the arbitrary" in *Atlas Shrugged* seem any more technical than Rand's uses of the word a decade later, in her *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*.

Arbitrariness is once again targeted as the Western philosophers pop up and get shot down in "For the New Intellectual." "[T]he philosophers were unable to refute the Witch Doctor's claim that their concepts were as arbitrary as his whims" (Rand 1961, 30). She further refers to "the view of man's conceptual faculty as a mechanism for producing arbitrary 'constructs' not derived from experience or facts" (32), and to the notion that "anyone who holds any firm convictions is an arbitrary, mystic dogmatist, since reality is indeterminate and people determine its actual nature" (34). Of the Logical Positivists she declares:

Knowledge, they said, consists, not of facts, but of *words*, words unrelated to objects, words of [sic] an arbitrary social convention, as an irreducible primary; thus knowledge is merely a matter of manipulating language. The job of scientists, they said, is not the study of reality, but the creation of arbitrary constructs by means of arbitrary sounds, and any construct is as valid as another, since the criterion of validity is only "convenience" and the definition of science is "that which the scientists do." (35)

Rand's only extended work on knowledge, the *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, was first published in installments during 1966 and 1967. The monograph once again speaks ill of arbitrariness—and once again never mentions arbitrary *propositions* or *assertions*. Not even when she says that the presence of an invalid concept invalidates any proposition in which it is used as a "cognitive assertion" (1990, 49; see also above).

Instead, Rand employs the term as she had in “For the New Intellectual.” “Do [concepts] refer to something real, something that exists—or are they merely inventions of man’s mind, arbitrary constructs or loose approximations that cannot claim to represent knowledge?” (1990, 1). Being contextual “does not mean that conceptualization is a subjective process or that the content of concepts depends on an individual’s subjective (i.e., arbitrary) choice” (43). “The nominalist and the conceptualist schools regard concepts as *subjective*, i.e., as products of man’s consciousness, unrelated to the facts of reality, as mere ‘names’ or notions arbitrarily assigned to arbitrary groupings of concretes on the ground of vague, inexplicable resemblances” (53). “[A]xiomatic concepts refer to facts of reality and are not a matter of ‘faith’ or of man’s arbitrary choice . . .” (59). Unspecified twentieth-century philosophers teach that “a concept denotes nothing but its defining characteristic, which represents nothing but an arbitrary social convention . . .” (69). “The requirements of cognition forbid the arbitrary grouping of existents, both in regard to isolation and to integration” (70).

In the last chapter of *ITOE*, we find an indictment of Ordinary Language Analysis: “Linguistic Analysis holds that words are an arbitrary social product immune from any principles or standards . . .” and that “we can ‘dissolve’ all philosophical problems by ‘clarifying’ the use of these arbitrary, causeless, meaningless sounds which hold ultimate power over reality . . .” (77). Rand proclaims that “To grasp and reclaim the power of philosophy, one must begin by grasping why concepts and definitions may not be arbitrary” (78). Finally, there is the passage that was later excerpted in *The Ayn Rand Lexicon*, as Rand’s only contribution on “the arbitrary”: “there is no room for the *arbitrary* in any activity of man, least of all in his method of cognition —and just as he has learned to be guided by objective criteria in making his physical tools, so he must be guided by objective criteria in forming his tools of cognition: his concepts” (82).

Rand never explicates or defines the word “arbitrary” in the original text of *ITOE*, nor, for that matter, in any other work that she saw through to publication. The best one can do is infer its meaning from the contexts in which she uses it. It functions as a close synonym for “nonobjective” or “irrational.” In some settings (e.g., the quotations from pages 53 and 77), “subjective” will do just as well.³⁰

Allowances duly made for the fact that her monograph is about concepts, there's still no way to extract the Peikovian doctrine out of anything in it.

If one looks up "Arbitrary" in the *Ayn Rand Lexicon*, one will find a long entry from Peikoff followed by the aforementioned much shorter one from Rand. The long entry on arbitrariness is an edited transcript from Peikoff's 1976 lectures on Objectivism that, as we shall see, comes close in tone and content to what he ended up publishing in *OPAR*.

There are just three other indications in print of what Rand thought about "the arbitrary." The only statement of her own was not published during her lifetime; the other two were the work of other authors writing for her periodicals. In some edited material from the epistemology workshops that she conducted between 1969 and 1971, later made available as an appendix to the second edition of *ITOE*, Rand warned against "the idea that it is legitimate to form arbitrary hypotheses. Never try to justify or to tie to reality—or to negate for that matter—some hypothesis or some 'What if?' proposition for which there is no basis at all" (1990, 306). It gives direct evidence that by 1969 Rand equated arbitrary propositions with those that are groundless, and recommended against trying to prove or disprove them. But it stops well short of the panoply of ascriptions about "the arbitrary" that we find in *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*.

Rand, however, had endorsed *some* components of the doctrine several years earlier. This can be reliably inferred from a short article published under her supervision in *The Objectivist Newsletter*:

In the pursuit of knowledge, there is no place for *whims*. Every claim, statement, or proposition has to be based on the facts of reality; nothing can be claimed causelessly, groundlessly, *arbitrarily*.

Even a hypothesis has to have some factual basis, some factual evidence indicating that it might be true. A hypothesis based on nothing but a blind guess is not admissible into rational consideration. Reason deals only with that which exists; any hypothesis or supposition that some hitherto unknown fact may exist, has to be based on the evidence of

facts *known* to exist.

Rational demonstration, an appeal to facts, is necessary to support even the claim that a thing is *possible*. It is a breach of logic to assert that that which has not been proven to be impossible is, therefore, possible. An absence does not constitute proof of anything [. . .].

When a person makes an assertion for which no rational grounds are given, his statement is—*epistemologically*—without cognitive content. *It is as though nothing has been said*. This is equally true if the assertion is made by two billion people. (Branden 1963, 15, all italics his)

In the absence of any comparable exposition by Rand herself, the article should have been excerpted in *The Ayn Rand Lexicon*. It should also have been cited in *OPAR*. Unfortunately, those who know the internal politics of the Objectivist movement will understand precisely why Harry Binswanger kept it out of the former³¹ and Leonard Peikoff refrained from citing it in the latter.³² The motives have nothing to do with the content of the article, and everything to do with the identity of its author: Nathaniel Branden.³³

As Branden's title indicates, his article is not about arbitrariness. It's about what's wrong with theism,³⁴ and why what's wrong with theism merits nothing short of its outright rejection. He gives every indication of believing that theists' assertions about God are false. Well before he introduces arbitrariness—a notion that makes its entrance about two thirds of the way through the essay—Branden establishes the context:

[I]t is necessary to remember that no theist has ever been able to adduce evidence in support of his belief in God; that all of the theist's alleged proofs, such as the "argument from a first cause," the "argument from design," the "ontological argument," etc., have been refuted by philosophers many times; that no theist has ever succeeded even in providing an intelligible and non-contradictory definition of what he *means* by "God"; and that one can believe in God only as an act of

faith. Faith is the acceptance of ideas without sensory evidence or rational proof. (15)

Despite its lead role in the Randian lexicon, the word “faith” appears just once in Peikoff’s entire published account of “the arbitrary.” Faith is also mentioned just once in his 1997 lecture on the subject. Could this be because Peikoff would not be able to convince readers that propositions accepted on faith are so strange and egregious as to deserve a third truth value all to themselves?

Branden saw arbitrariness as being at one end of an evidentiary continuum: he emphasized the need for evidence or reasons as a precondition for rationally considering anything to be possible.

He was indulging in hyperbole (at best) when he equated an arbitrary assertion with nothing having been said. But Branden restrained himself from concluding that “arbitrary” is a truth value, or a way of being wronger than wrong, and he tried to qualify his claim that arbitrary assertions are “without cognitive content.” He neither declared that arbitrary assertions “cannot be cognitively processed,” nor offered comparisons with dunes shifted by the wind or speech sounds mimicked by a parrot. Branden indicted agnostics for cowardice, but not for zero-embracing nihilism. The focus of his article was on the irrationality of demanding evidence or argument in violation of the onus of proof principle.

The main fault of the piece was its implied rejection of blind trial and error at any level. Branden’s antagonism toward trial and error appears to flow out of the underlying Randian commitment to foundationalism; indeed, the reader can already sniff out a few Parmenidean tendencies. In arguing for the onus of proof principle (which takes up the middle third of the article), Branden declares:

“Proving a negative” means: proving the non-existence of that for which *no evidence of any kind exists*.

Proof, logic, reason, thinking, knowledge pertain to and deal only with that which exists. They cannot be applied to that which does *not* exist. Nothing can be relevant or applicable to the non-existent. The non-existent is *nothing*. (15, his italics)

The issues raised by foundationalism are of high importance, but as already noted they lie largely outside the range of this article.

Most important for our purposes is what Branden did not try to do. He did not turn “the arbitrary” into a basic epistemological category, or give it a new truth value all its own. He regarded the distinction between faith and reason as fundamental, not the distinction between the arbitrary and the non-arbitrary. He did not assimilate arbitrariness to the production of symbols that the producer lacks the competence to interpret.

The 1963 article is brief. But its broader context is easily recovered, because the article reworks, with minimal alteration, material from the lecture course that Branden had been giving on *The Basic Principles of Objectivism*. This was the first systematic presentation of Objectivism anywhere. What’s more, it is the oldest documentary source, unless unpublished notes or drafts still lurk in the Ayn Rand Archives, for those parts of the Objectivist metaphysics and epistemology that did not find their way into Galt’s speech, Rand’s published essays, the posthumous appendix to *ITOE*, or the published portions of her journals.³⁵

Arbitrary assertions figure in two of Branden’s twenty lectures. In the third lecture, titled “Logic and Mysticism,” the onus of proof principle is central:

Before concluding our discussion of logic, there is one final issue to which I should like to turn. I want you to understand a very important methodological principle; namely, that it is impossible to prove a negative, and irrational to attempt it.

By a negative, in this context, I mean a negative for which no positive exists, such as the attempt to prove that one is not guilty when no positive proof of one’s guilt has been offered, or the attempt to negate something for which there is no positive evidence. In colloquial terms, this fallacy would consist of some arbitrary assertion, followed by the challenge, “Prove that it *isn’t* so.” (Branden 1967, Lecture 3)

The metaphysical basis for the onus of proof principle is Parmenidean, drawing on the distinction between existence and

nonexistence that Branden laid out in his Lecture 1:

Proof, logic, reason, thinking, knowledge pertain to and deal with only that which exists. They cannot be applied to that which does not exist. Nothing can be relevant to or applied to the nonexistent. The nonexistent is nothing. [. . .] Any human statement and any claim to knowledge must refer to something that exists or derive from something that exists or be based on something that exists. (Lecture 3)

Part of this passage can be spotted nearly verbatim in the 1963 article.

The lectures shows us exactly how far Branden went in questioning the meaning of arbitrary assertions:

But an arbitrary assertion about nothing can be said to exist only in the sense that is a series of sounds uttered by a human being. As far as its content is concerned, it refers, epistemologically speaking, to nothing. (Lecture 3)

Assertions about witches or goblins refer to nothing, so far as Branden is concerned. It does not follow that they fail to exist *as assertions*. If I scat-sing the first 7 notes of “King Porter Stomp,” I have uttered a series of sounds. But unless you have just asked me which Jelly Roll Morton composition became a hit for Benny Goodman, or something along those lines, I have made no assertion, arbitrary or otherwise. If, on the other hand, I say that witches make people ill by shooting them with invisible darts, then I *have* made an assertion, even though it is about witches, and can therefore be taken to refer to nothing.

Indeed, Branden does not declare that arbitrary assertions cannot be cognitively processed:

A positive statement derived from some erroneous evidence can be refuted by means of proving the errors of the alleged evidence. Such a refutation would be the disproving of a positive. This is not the same thing as proving a negative; that is, proving an error or the falsehood of a statement for which no evidence of any kind exists. For instance, if I said that the

side of the moon which we see consists of mountains and dead volcanic craters, I would have to offer you scientific evidence to prove it. But if I said that the other side consists of rose gardens and Coca-Cola factories and you asked for proof and I answered, “My proof is the fact that you can’t *disprove* it,” no one could blame you if you decided not to pursue the conversation any further, and, thereafter, not to hold any serious conversations with me at all. (Lecture 3)

A rational decision not to continue a conversation, or to pursue serious conversations in the future, does not require a judgment of meaninglessness, or an inability to cognitively process what the other party has said, let alone a fulminating onset of Peikovian paralysis. And, in fact, there is no difficulty *understanding* an assertion about rose gardens and Coca-Cola factories on the dark side of the moon. What is lacking is any reason to believe that it might be true.

Branden’s Lecture 3 is premised on a tight coupling between faith or mysticism³⁶ and arbitrariness. Of the claim about the dark side of the moon, followed by a peremptory demand for disproof, Branden draws the lesson:

But much as my method of thinking would be reprehensible in such a case, there is a mental attitude more reprehensible still. This is the attitude of some third person, who, after hearing our conversation, would shrug and draw the following conclusion: “Well, maybe the other side of the moon *does* consist of rose gardens and Coca-Cola factories, and maybe it doesn’t. Who am I to know?”

If I, in this example, acted like a mystic openly at war with reality, then he, the neutral observer, did something worse: He granted equal status to mysticism and reality, refusing to differentiate or take sides between them. (Lecture 3)

In Lecture 4, Branden goes on to develop this critique of agnosticism, in terms already familiar to readers of his 1963 article: “An atheist’s refusal to believe that for which no evidence exists is classified by the agnostic as an act of faith. What the agnostic demands of the

atheist is proof of a negative—proof of the nonexistence of God.” Acceptance of arbitrary assertions was, for Branden, one and the same as acceptance of ideas on faith:

But if one introduces an arbitrary element into one’s consciousness, if one introduces into one’s knowledge and convictions an idea that one holds without rational justification—an idea which is not derived from reality and which is not subject to rational examination—that is, an idea accepted on faith—why, then, no further integration is possible. Such an idea cannot be placed within a logical hierarchy or structure of concepts. It acts to paralyze the thinking process by setting up irreconcilable conflicts. (Lecture 4)

Here, obviously, is where several of Peikoff’s claims originated.³⁷ Branden is saying that “the arbitrary” is not locatable within a hierarchy of concepts; that arbitrary assertions resist what Peikoff would later call “reduction” (because they are not derived from reality and are off-limits to rational examination); even that “the arbitrary” induces “paralysis.”

But *are* these Peikoff’s claims? Not exactly.

For Branden goes right on to link arbitrariness with believing on *faith*, and accepting arbitrary assertions with generating *contradictions* in one’s thinking.

Faith is the acceptance of an idea without evidence or proof—without sensory evidence or logical demonstration. Because no idea taken on faith can be rationally integrated, but can only leave the total of one’s premises in a state of unresolved contradiction, the introduction of any idea taken on faith results in the total undercutting of man’s knowledge. Because man’s power of integration has been sabotaged, man, in effect, loses the capacity to be certain of anything. (Lecture 4)

Contradictions, Peikoff (1993) would hasten to remind us, are the mark of falsehood—not of a third truth status called “arbitrary.” For Branden, the negative consequences of accepting arbitrary assertions

are one and the same as the negative consequences of supposing that faith is a shortcut to knowledge.

And, further, man is forced to feel that reason and thinking are superfluous. If reason is not the only means of perceiving reality, if one can gain knowledge by some other method, then man has no cause to maintain the rigorous, exacting discipline of rational thought, since some other means of information may contradict and negate these results at any time and in any issue. This is what Galt meant when he said that “The alleged short-cut to knowledge, which is faith, is only a short circuit destroying the mind.” (Branden 1967, Lecture 4)

Finally, Branden makes clear that both true and false ideas can be accepted on faith. He carves out no space for a third truth value.

Now these considerations apply to any act of a faith regardless of the content of the idea that a man decides to accept on faith. The efficacy of his consciousness would be impaired even if it were a *true* idea that a man accepted on faith; that is, accepted without understanding, without the necessary chain of proof, without first-hand knowledge or logical conviction. But the damage to his consciousness becomes multiplied many times when he accepts ideas on faith that *contradict* reality and therefore contradict and undercut the rest of his knowledge. (Lecture 4)

For Branden, accepting a false proposition on faith is more harmful than accepting a true one, whereas, for Peikoff, any one indulgence in the arbitrary is just as totally mind-destroying as any other.

In his presentations over the past 40 years, Peikoff has used nearly all of the same language that Branden once did. But his interpretations of that language have changed, sometimes sharply. Do any of his changes constitute improvements?

One reinterpretation became apparent rather quickly. In 1965, Peikoff gave a set of lectures on *Objectivism's Theory of Knowledge*. From 1966 to 1968, tapes of these lectures were made available to subscribers

by the Nathaniel Branden Institute. Lecture 9 covered the familiar conjunction of agnosticism and arbitrary assertions. It was in these lectures that Peikoff introduced the third truth value: “An arbitrary assertion, so long as it remains arbitrary, is neither true nor false. It is to be dismissed out of hand.” Peikoff also introduced the wind blowing the dunes into the shape of “A is A” and the parrot squawking “Two plus two equal four.”³⁸

Providing further context is a review by Robert Efron, published in *The Objectivist* in 1967. Efron’s topic was a book by C. E. M. Hansel titled *ESP: A Scientific Evaluation*. Since Branden had enunciated an early version of the doctrine of the arbitrary assertion, and Peikoff had already begun to extend it, one might expect the doctrine to show up in this kind of article. It almost does:

Prove that pink elephants do not exist. Prove that you did not assassinate J. F. Kennedy. Prove that extrasensory perception (ESP) does not exist.

To accept such a challenge is to invite an epistemological disaster. Any attempt to disprove an assertion for which no positive evidence is provided, sanctions the legitimacy of the unsupported assertion and the use which may be made of your failure to disprove that assertion. (Efron 1967, 8)

Efron never uses the word “arbitrary” in his review. He refers to “unsupported” assertions. Despite his invocation of sanction, he does not urge the reader, as Branden (1963; 1967) had, to dismiss such assertions as though nothing has been said. Nor does he claim that such assertions are neither true nor false, as Peikoff (1966) was by then urging. He merely applies the onus of proof principle: Efron praises Hansel for asking what evidence is taken to support alleged ESP powers, for examining that evidence, and for showing that none of it actually supports the existence of ESP.³⁹

It was over the next decade that Peikoff firmly consolidated arbitrary, unsupported, and automatically invalidated assertions into a single category.⁴⁰

In the sixth of his 1976 lectures on *The Principles of Objectivism* (quoted here as edited for inclusion in *The Ayn Rand Lexicon*), Peikoff

makes most of the declarations that have become familiar. He proclaims that an arbitrary assertion “has no relation to reality or to human cognition” (in Binswanger 1988, 30). It is consigned to a third truth value: “such a claim is not to be regarded as true or as false; if it is arbitrary, it is entitled to no epistemological assessment at all” (31). Actually going farther than he would in *OPAR*, Peikoff writes off arbitrary assertions as utterly senseless: “The arbitrary [. . .] has *no* relation to evidence, facts, or context. It is the human equivalent of [noises produced by] a parrot . . . sounds without any tie to reality, without content or significance” (31; the bracketed passage about noises is Peikoff’s).

Peikoff hints, for the first time, at a redemption policy: “the *words* expressing an arbitrary claim may perhaps be judged as true or false in some other cognitive context (if and when they are no longer put forward as arbitrary)”⁴¹ (in Binswanger 1988, 31). The same statement, he says, is asserted arbitrarily when put forward by someone who does not know what it means or what the reasons for asserting it might be; “when the speaker does know the meaning and the reasons” (31), the same words can be used to assert a proposition that is true or false.

And Peikoff’s lecture already oscillates between Needn’t and Mustn’t, though not so protractedly or painfully as the treatment in *OPAR*. The excerpt concludes:

It is not your responsibility to try to refute someone’s arbitrary assertion—to try to find or imagine arguments that will show that his assertion is false. It is a fundamental error on your part even to try to do this. The rational procedure in regard to an arbitrary assertion is to dismiss it out of hand, merely identifying it as arbitrary, and as such inadmissible and undiscussable. (31–32)

The same lecture yokes Peikoff’s treatment of agnosticism to his account of the arbitrary, just as Branden had done before him.

As excerpted in Binswanger’s entry on “Agnosticism” (1988, 3–4), Peikoff criticizes the agnostic for violating the onus of proof principle. He goes beyond Branden in concluding that the agnostic is not merely a coward, but is functioning as an “epistemological destroyer” (4).

See how many fallacies you can find in [agnosticism]. Here are a few obvious ones. The agnostic allows the arbitrary into the realm of human cognition. He treats arbitrary claims as proper to consider, discuss, evaluate—and then he regretfully says, “I don’t know,” instead of dismissing the arbitrary out of hand. Second, the onus-of-proof issue: the agnostic demands proof of a negative in a context where there is no evidence for the positive. It’s up to you, he says, “to prove that the fourth moon of Jupiter did not cause your sex life [. . .].” Third, the agnostic says, “Maybe these things will one day be proved.” In other words, he asserts possibilities or hypotheses with no jot of evidential basis. (4)

The discerning reader will note that because “arbitrary” is defined as “devoid of evidence,” the third fallacy is identical to the first. Otherwise, the treatment of agnosticism in Peikoff’s 1976 lectures is virtually identical to what we have encountered in *OPAR*.

So by 1976 the doctrine of the arbitrary assertion had pushed out most of its tendrils and excrescences. Just three sprouted later. One is the reliance on reifying generics; nowhere in his lectures did Peikoff contrast “the arbitrary” with “the true” and “the false.” These expressions make their debut in the 1987 article, then take an encore in “Fact and Value.” The second is the overt denial of any positive epistemic value to be gained from redeeming and refuting arbitrary claims; though this was strongly implied by stands that Peikoff took earlier, it is in the 1987 article, and subsequently in *OPAR*, that the conclusion is explicitly drawn. The third is the doctrine that cognitive paralysis—that purported inability to make a rational move in any direction—is brought on by exposure to an arbitrary assertion.

In his preface to the *Ayn Rand Lexicon*, Binswanger states (1988, ix) that he had completed the letter “A” before 1980 and that Rand read through that portion of the manuscript. So we may safely conclude that Rand approved, not just of Peikoff’s lecture series, but also of these two published excerpts. What she would have thought about “the true,” “the false,” and “the arbitrary,” or the denial that anything is ever gained by learning from mistakes, or full-blown Peikovian paralysis, we of course do not know.

Still, Peikoff (1997) makes a revealingly odd claim about Rand's thought processes on the subject. She would not, he says, have needed to encounter or consider Peikovian paralysis in order to endorse his latter-day conception of the arbitrary:

It is theoretically possible for someone, at this point, to deduce, from the anti-cognitive nature of the arbitrary, the ultimate conclusion that arbitrary statements are neither true nor false. But I hasten to add, I do not believe that anyone, apart from Ayn Rand, would actually be able to make such a deduction meaningfully, as against rationalistically, unless he first performed one more induction, a second induction. (Lecture 11)

That second induction allegedly consists of noting that whenever one recognizes an assertion as arbitrary, one promptly succumbs to complete paralysis of the rational faculty—absolute inability to think about the assertion's meaning or implications.

Peikoff's declaration raises a lot more questions than it was intended to. Rand, after all, would not have needed to generalize about Peikovian paralysis if she had never heard or thought of such a thing. Nor would she have needed to perform that bit of inductive reasoning, if she was not in fact the first to draw the conclusion that an arbitrary assertion is neither true nor false. Why, in any event, is Peikoff talking about the way Rand *would* have reasoned about arbitrary assertions? Didn't Rand present him, as per the introduction to *OPAR*, with a fully formed doctrine that he gratefully received and communicated to the rest of the world? And didn't she patiently explicate to him the thought processes behind every last one of her teachings, as he insisted she had in "My Thirty Years with Ayn Rand" (Peikoff 1989b)? Was Rand the primary author of the doctrine of the arbitrary assertion? The historical record gives us grounds for doubt, which Peikoff's 1997 statements do nothing to relieve.

The Sociological Function of the Peikovian Doctrine

Among the Peikovian doctrine's many failings is its proclamation within an uncompleted epistemological framework that fails to specify clear rules of evidence. Without such rules, it becomes extremely

difficult to judge which assertions are arbitrary and which are not. Another key failing is its contradictory recommendations for action. Is the upshot of the doctrine truly that no rational person *could* refute “the arbitrary”? Or is it rather that every rational person must be *strongly discouraged from trying*?

The actual employment of the doctrine by Peikoff’s colleagues and disciples suggests that it is not really designed to deter fallacious reasoning or intellectually unproductive discussion. Those objectives can be accomplished without dragging in the massive confusions and mighty exaggerations that it entails.

What the doctrine of the arbitrary assertion really encourages is the replacement of careful assessments of evidence and argument with indiscriminate moral condemnation. It may, on occasion, be used to press Objectivists to shun critics of their philosophy instead of responding to the criticisms. But its primary impact falls *within* the Randian community.

First, the use against non-Randians: Objectivists may employ the doctrine of the arbitrary assertion against religious or supernatural beliefs, which have been a prime target ever since Branden’s original presentation. Over time, as became clear above, there has been a further application to Karl Popper’s philosophy of science, which overtly and emphatically rejects Peikovian proof. Thus, Peikoff’s protégé David Harriman (2008) repeatedly contrasts the methods employed by Isaac Newton (which he takes to be instances of Peikovian proof) with arbitrary hypotheses or arbitrary speculation. But Harriman gives virtually no examples of physicists actually proceeding with arbitrary hypotheses; nor does he attempt to apply the doctrine in its full Peikovian splendor to any of the alleged cases.

Who outside of Objectivist circles would really be fazed by an accusation of arbitrariness? The doctrine in its final form, after Peikoff ran wild with it, is so confused that non-Objectivists will most likely find it incomprehensible. If they do understand it, they will almost certainly reject it. The kernel of the doctrine, before Peikoff ran wild, already presupposes a commitment to epistemological foundationalism that followers of Peirce, Popper, and Piaget will not share.

Who, then, will actually be upset if his or her statements are judged arbitrary? Only someone who subscribes to the doctrine; i.e., another Objectivist.

During internecine struggles within the Objectivist community of the 1960s, the accusation of arbitrariness was not a standard rhetorical weapon. Charges of evasion, subjectivism, and “whim-worshipping” were the common currency. In the 1970s, indictments for “psychologizing” were added.⁴² In the 1980s, “emotionalism,” rationalism, and opposition to moral judgment would join them on the bill of particulars.

Peikoff’s “Fact and Value” (1989a) is the single most important blast at anyone in Rand-land who might be tempted to dissent from the author’s brand of orthodoxy. “Fact and Value” alleges the gross immorality of tolerating any proponent of “inherently dishonest ideas” (i.e., of virtually any point of view that disagrees with Peikovian Objectivism). But what makes the ideas “inherently dishonest” is their falsehood, not their arbitrariness. Today every weapon, from the imputation of subjectivism to the insinuation of rejecting moral judgment, is brandished more frequently in Rand-land than the accusation of arbitrariness. This latter makes its appearance only in connection with *one* sort of objectionable opinion.

In Objectivist circles, charges of arbitrariness are typically brought against those who criticize Rand as a person or assert that her character fell short of perfection, epistemically or morally. Peikoff’s disciple Peter Schwartz was the first to level such a charge. The occasion was the appearance of a biography of Rand that was strongly positive about her literary achievement and her ideas, but presented some of her character traits and actions in a negative light. On an extra page tucked inside his newsletter, *The Intellectual Activist*, Schwartz blasted *The Passion of Ayn Rand*, which he called “pseudo-Freudian,” and its author, Barbara Branden (1986), whom he considered worthy of nothing but moral condemnation.

It is only in this context that the question can be raised of whether to believe any of the concrete factual allegations Mrs. Branden makes about Ayn Rand’s behavior. When the truth of such allegations rests entirely upon the testimony of the author (and of unnamed “friends” she regularly cites), one must ask why she is to be believed when she has thoroughly destroyed her claim to credibility. It is very easy to accuse the dead of almost anything. I could readily assert that Ayn Rand

met with me at dawn on the first Thursday of every month to join me in secret prayer at a Buddhist temple—and who could disprove it if I maintained that no one else knew about it?

Epistemologically, conclusions reached by a categorically non-objective method have the status of the *arbitrary*. They are not true and not false, but are, rather, entirely outside the cognitive realm—because they are not genuine *attempts* at cognition. Admirers of Ayn Rand need not—and should not—feel compelled to try to rebut each and every concrete charge made by Barbara Branden (and others who are sure to follow). Let the authors of any such charges first establish their credentials as honest, objective reporters intent on presenting the truth, not on trying to salvage their own sadly wasted lives.

Encompassed in the sweep of Schwartz's dismissal were the most sensational revelations in the biography: that Rand began a love affair with Nathaniel Branden in 1954, which was kept secret from everyone except their spouses, and that the final disintegration of that affair, in 1968, led directly to Nathaniel and Barbara's expulsion from Rand's circle and the dissolution of the Nathaniel Branden Institute.

Peikoff was still skirting around the affair in his essay "My Thirty Years with Ayn Rand" (1989b). He was promptly compelled to acknowledge that the affair had taken place.⁴³ But corroboration from Rand's own correspondence would not necessarily cleanse the taint of arbitrariness from the assertion that she and Branden had had an affair.

After all, from a strict Peikovian standpoint, *the very same proposition about Ayn Rand can be truly asserted by Leonard Peikoff and arbitrarily asserted by Barbara Branden*.⁴⁴

In a 2005 book titled *The Passion of Ayn Rand's Critics*, Peikoff's disciple James Valliant follows Schwartz in aiming the charge of arbitrariness at Barbara Branden's book and Nathaniel Branden's later memoirs.⁴⁵

Again and again, the Brandens produce suspicious evidence from "private conversations" that contradicts the entire body of verifiable information, but which conveniently helps them grind their particular axes.

We have seen that the rest of their evidence against Rand consists of purely emotional assertion devoid of fact—precisely what Rand’s philosophy terms an “arbitrary” assertion. According to Objectivism, arbitrary claims are neither true nor false. They are, in this sense, “worse” than false, *bearing no relation to reality whatever*—even a negative one. It is error even to attempt to refute them.

On the surface, the Brandens’ biographical efforts consist of factual claims made by people who knew their subject well. Therefore, the identification of their works as being arbitrary can only be made after (at least some) careful analysis. As we have seen, such analysis readily demonstrates that a sweeping dismissal is, indeed, warranted.

Even if one day some of the Brandens’ assertions are verified by more credible sources and evidence, the Brandens will not have helped to establish their truth. Considerable independent research will be necessary to accomplish this. And it does not matter whether these discoveries cast Rand in a positive or negative light.

If one day, for example, it is somehow established, to the surprise of the author, that Rand’s callous indifference drove her husband to excessive drinking, the current analysis will still stand, and the Brandens’ credibility will not have been enhanced in any way. The basis of their inferences will be no less credible and no less arbitrary.

But the historical record can become clouded with the assumptions of a tradition that is largely legendary. It would be tragic if Rand’s biography suffered the same fate at the hand of the Brandens’ viciously crafted legend. (2005, 173–74)

One might ask how helpful the doctrine really is, when Valliant has had to expend 173 pages on his endeavor to show that nearly any statement that Nathaniel or Barbara Branden has made concerning

Rand's character or actions is arbitrary. After 173 pages of impugning sources' credibility and purportedly refuting their claims, readers expect an author to issue an honest-to-goodness "cognitive verdict": in this case, that "the Brandens'" statements are false. Some of Valliant's own phrases, such as "viciously crafted legend" (above) and "writers and books rife with lies and distortions" (175), are consistent with that verdict.

It is also unfortunate that Valliant, who is familiar with Schwartz's notice (393 n.50), doesn't revisit the scope of the original charge. Less than a year after Schwartz dismissed the allegation as arbitrary, Peikoff and his followers quit denying the affair between Rand and Branden (just as well for Valliant, since more than half of his book is about the affair). Yet Valliant could have said, in perfect consonance with the Peikovian doctrine, that Nathaniel and Barbara Branden were *still* arbitrarily asserting that there had been an affair.

After all, a proposition concerning Rand's character or conduct can be arbitrary, when put forward by persons who function "nonobjectively" toward Rand (applying Schwartz and Valliant's criteria, this category includes "the Brandens" and all others who make negative judgments in public concerning Rand's character). The exact same proposition could be true, when put forward by persons who function "objectively" (these, according to the same criteria, are the ones who express nothing but adulation of Rand's character, thereby gaining the approval of Peikoff, Schwartz, and Valliant).

But claiming that "the Brandens" had asserted the existence of the affair arbitrarily, while persons acceptable to the author had asserted it truly, would have been so blatantly prejudicial as to exhaust any reader's credulity.

It is not as though Valliant adheres with any consistency to the Peikovian strictures that he has described. Some of his own claims are so poorly documented that they will induce most readers' jaws to drop. Here's what he has to say about Frank O'Connor's reaction to his wife's affair with Branden:

O'Connor almost certainly believed that his wife was an exceptional genius and a woman exceptionally loyal to her values. He may well have appreciated his wife's complex emotional—and intellectual—needs. Possessing such a

sensitive and daring soul may well have given him the capacity to embrace his wife's quest for joy, a capacity obviously not shared by the Brandens. (And he surely could have left Rand without much fear, had he truly objected to the situation.) (167)

Valliant's evidence for all of this consists, in its entirety, of two items. First, Frank O'Connor consented to the affair (ironically, since Rand kept the affair secret from the rest of the world, and there is no contemporary document attesting to the way it began, all Valliant can offer in support of O'Connor's verbal consent is the putatively emotionalistic effusions of . . . Barbara and Nathaniel Branden). Second, O'Connor never left Rand; they were still married when he died.

O'Connor left no written record of his feelings about the affair. He apparently never spoke to anyone about it except Rand, Nathaniel Branden, and Barbara Branden—and whatever he said to his wife died with her. Everything else in this paragraph is what Valliant believes would be true, *if Frank O'Connor had the attitudes that James Valliant would like to believe he had*. By Peikovian standards, what preponderance of evidence can Valliant present for his "almost certainly"? What smaller quantity of favorable evidence can he present for each "may well"? Where is the decisive case, encompassing all of the available evidence, to back his "surely"? Valliant supplies the reader with none.

So where is Valliant's loud *mea culpa*? When has he done his public penance for spreading arbitrary assertions?

Perhaps Valliant is too caught up in his own passion for the arbitrary to abjectly confess his aberration and administer his own chastisement. Where, then, are the Peikovian furies chorusing: Detachment from reality! Instant ejection from the cognitive realm! Nullified grasp of objectivity! Inner chaos for life! Wronger than wrong and worse than bad!

There is no chorus. Valliant's book was published with Peikoff's blessing.

The present-day Randian blogosphere provides a final illustration of the way charges of arbitrariness are put to strategic use. Again, the target is unacceptable suggestions concerning Rand's character and motives, this time on account of her ambivalence about evolution.

Peikoff has proclaimed, on the one hand, that after religious believers embrace Objectivism, their opposition to theories of biological evolution will fall away (1993, 126). He has favorably cited a book that accounts for teleological concepts using an evolutionary framework (468, Ch. 6 n.9). He has also pointedly excluded evolutionary considerations from the scope of Objectivist philosophy (476, Ch. 11 n.19), and derided “the intellectuals’ fad of the period, Darwin’s theory of evolution” (405).

In all of this, Peikoff is faithfully replicating Rand’s attitude toward evolution. As Nathaniel Branden (1984) recollects:

I remember being astonished to hear her say one day, “After all, the theory of evolution is only a hypothesis.” I asked her, “You mean you seriously doubt that more complex life forms—including humans—evolved from less complex life forms?” She shrugged and responded, “I’m really not prepared to say,” or words to that effect. I do not mean to imply that she wanted to substitute for the theory of evolution the religious belief that we are all God’s creation; but there was definitely something about the concept of evolution that made her uncomfortable.

Neil Parille (2004) has suggested some possible reasons for the discomfort.

First, evolution is generally seen as a deterministic and ultimately hostile to free will. [. . .]

Second, if biological evolution is true, then many areas of philosophy might need to be reexamined. For example, how can man have a qualitatively different value from animals if [he] is every bit [as much] a part of nature as animals? [. . .] The relationship between the brain and thought becomes more problematic in a Darwinian universe. [. . .] In what sense can human nature be taken as fundamental to morality if man is exclusively part of the material wor[ld]? [. . .]

Third, Rand may have been fearful of creating a biological or secular equivalent to original sin. Rand's opposition to original sin is well known, but her opposition to original sin would apply to any argument that proposes a biological weakness in man's will. A full recognition of man's biological and psychological drives might lead to a pessimistic view of human nature. Indeed, many scholars have see[n] parallels between original sin and Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic doctrines. [. . .]

Fourth, it is also possible that Rand may have believed that biological evolution did not present any problems for Objectivism, but hoped that followers more knowledgeable in biology would resolve whatever tensions exist.

Peikoff's followers have little patience with any effort to explain Rand's ambivalence. In an online essay, Don Watkins⁴⁶ dismissed Parille's argument that Rand might have suspected a connection between evolutionary theories, Freud's conception of dark instinctual impulses to sex and aggression, and the doctrine of original sin: "This is just a joke. I'm sure of it." Watkins indignantly rejected Parille's general thesis that Rand found evolutionary ideas worrisome, on account of their potential relations with instincts, determinism, or original sin. "Rand," Watkins thundered, "was not 'concerned' with anything but reality, with the facts as she was able to identify them. To claim otherwise is to label Rand dishonest and her philosophy a fraud." Watkins denounced "the unstated (and unjustified) premise that Rand was irrational."⁴⁷

Parille was not suggesting that Rand was irrational—merely that she could have been working from assumptions about evolution that led her to believe that evolutionary ideas could be inconsistent with key parts of her philosophy.⁴⁸ Watkins, on the other hand, appears to have presumed that Rand was perfectly rational—which, to him, meant that she never worked from assumptions, and would under no circumstances have stuck with an erroneous assumption.

Watkins at least credited Parille's arguments with needing some kind of rebuttal. A second Peikovian, Diana Hsieh, then stepped in, contending that none was genuinely called for, because what Watkins

had been doing was redeeming a series of arbitrary assertions.

A “charity refutation” is a refutation of an arbitrary claim, offered in generous kindness to the poor souls possibly taken in by epistemological hucksters. (The term is not my invention; I’ve heard that it traces back to Ayn Rand.⁴⁹)

Consider, for example, the Objectivist arguments against God as the creator of the universe. Because the theist can cite no genuine evidence for it, the claim is arbitrary. So the atheist has no obligation to refute it. Rather, the epistemological burden rests entirely with the theist. [. . .]

Unsurprisingly, Don Watkins offers more than a few charity refutations in his dissection of Neil Parille’s article “Ayn Rand and Evolution.” In reading that article, I’m quite blown away by the fact that Neil [Parille] never actually considers Ayn Rand’s own perfectly reasonable explanation for her hesitancy about the theory of evolution, namely inadequate study. Instead, he engages in baseless speculations about the supposed implications of evolution she wished to avoid, e.g., instinctual knowledge, determinism, and original sin. The underlying premise of the whole discussion is that Ayn Rand was not an honest intellectual. That’s why we need not consider the possibility that she accurately reported the reasons for her hesitancy or that she grounded her philosophic views in observed fact rather than desired conclusions. *Particularly as applied to Ayn Rand*, that’s a disturbingly false premise. (2005, my italics)

Typically, those who invoke the doctrine against critics of Rand do not take its details seriously. Valliant at least gives lip service to the Peikovian differentiation between a false assertion, which contradicts known facts, and an arbitrary assertion, which contradicts no known facts because it has no relation to any possible evidence. But even Valliant, as we saw, does not consistently maintain that the same proposition can be asserted arbitrarily by one person and truly by another. Nor does he act as though “the arbitrary” is impossible to

process cognitively; it would be remarkably silly to claim that “the Brandens” objectionable statements regarding Rand’s character and actions were contextless and bereft of position in a hierarchy, or that they could bring nothing but Peikovian paralysis upon any rational mind. Hsieh opines that Parille’s claims didn’t need the refutations that Watkins provided, but attaches none of the supposed distinguishing marks of the arbitrary to them. Far from branding Parille’s statements with a third truth value, or insinuating that they are all meaningless, she merely charges him with accepting a false premise about Rand.

Hsieh further fails to note that, alongside charity refutations, which one Needn’t provide, there are what we might call sanctioning refutations, which one Mustn’t. If he was genuinely contending with the arbitrary, which of these moral imperatives was binding on Watkins—and how would anyone decide? What’s more, if Watkins was performing a charity refutation of Parille’s statements about Freud, evolution, and original sin, it follows that the same statements were arbitrary when asserted by Parille, but false when Watkins endowed them with a context and then refuted them. And this asymmetry holds even though Parille had done some scholarship on Freud, evolution, and original sin, while Watkins had done absolutely none, preferring to deride without argument the scholarship of others!

Finally, one is left in the dark about the applicability of Peikoff’s remaining judgments. Does Parille’s suggestion that Rand found evolution vaguely worrisome nullify his grasp of objectivity? Does it entrench inner chaos in him for life? Is it brazen? Is it on a par with believing that his living room teems with imps and succubi? Has he instantly made himself substantially dumber than a gray parrot?

The deficiencies of the doctrine of the arbitrary assertion are excruciatingly apparent from Peikoff’s presentation. Its enlistment into apologetics for the moral and epistemic perfection of Ayn Rand merely confirms its nonobjectivity. The enlistment can’t properly be called an abuse; there is no way to ascertain the correct use for a doctrine so ill-defined and internally inconsistent. Had the doctrine been suited to even-handed application, those who insist on the moral and epistemic perfection of Rand, regardless of the available evidence, would long since have been entered on the roll of “apostles of the arbitrary.”

Conclusion

We are in a position now to address the questions raised at the beginning of this article.

Does an epistemology that respects the facts of human mental functioning require a notion of the arbitrary? No. Such fallacious or irrational activities as self-referential inconsistency, protective belting, violations of the onus of proof principle, and grand or petty mystification, are already covered by other epistemological norms. There is no need for a generalized injunction to shun “the arbitrary.” Some criteria are needed for the initial plausibility of a hypothesis—not to haul it bodily out of the chasm of arbitrariness, but to aid investigators in deciding whether it is worth testing.

Is Peikoff’s notion of an arbitrary assertion clear? No. Peikoff writes as though arbitrariness can be straightforwardly judged by any rational person, but he is expecting judgments of lack of evidence to be made in the absence of clear rules of evidence. Indeed, because the same proposition can be arbitrary when put forth by one person and true or false when put forth by another, judgments of arbitrariness will require elaborate assessments of the knowledge available to the person making the assertion, his or her sense of epistemological responsibility, etc. Peikoff can’t even decide whether putting forward an arbitrary assertion is an error.

Does the concept have the scope of application that Peikoff stakes out for it? No. He makes claims for its fundamentality that are hard to square with the rest of Objectivist epistemology. He repeatedly spies arbitrariness in places where others would find implausible hypotheses, fallacious arguments, mystification, or just plain false conclusions. As we saw from his own variable reactions to assertions about “past lives,” sometimes he spies arbitrariness (1987b; 1993; 1997) where, on other occasions, he has spied falsehood (1989a). When it comes to theology, or gremlinology, Peikoff manages to spy both contradictions of metaphysical axioms (1993, Ch. 1) and arbitrariness (Ch. 5) *in the same book*.

Should arbitrary assertions all be handled as Peikoff prescribes? Peikoff can’t make up his own mind how they should be handled. Is no one obliged to respond to an arbitrary assertion, or is everyone obliged not to? Is it worthwhile to redeem an arbitrary assertion, or not worthwhile—or not possible, because genuine arbitrariness induces

paralysis in every rational mind?

Are the arguments for the doctrine sound? Some of the most striking claims, e.g., equating a person who makes an arbitrary assertion with a parrot mimicking the sounds of human language, are advanced without argument of any kind and have no apparent function except to vilify. The thesis that “arbitrary” is a third truth value is backed by claims to the effect that arbitrary assertions lack context or a place in the hierarchy. But Peikoff comes up with no further support for contextlessness, except the allegation that promoters of the arbitrary will resort to mystification—and his own mystifying invocation of Peikovian paralysis. Meanwhile, Peikoff hasn’t developed his notion of hierarchy for propositions nearly well enough to justify the weight he piles on it. Finally, the allegation that arbitrary assertions are always put forward in the knowledge that they are arbitrary apparently requires no specific evidence about motives. Far too often in Peikoff’s presentation, moralizing invective simply takes the place of objective assessment. The same tendency is on display when Peikovians lay the charge of arbitrariness against those who question some aspect of Rand’s character or one of her stated reasons for a decision.

The implications for Peikoff’s standing as a philosopher are distinctly negative. If Peikoff lifted the core idea without attribution from Branden’s (1967) lectures, as he appears to have done, he is guilty of intellectual dishonesty. His refusal to credit Branden’s (1963) prior publication on the subject is, in any event, unscholarly. He has elaborated the doctrine significantly; however, the best that can be said about Peikoff’s own contributions is that he has performed better on many other occasions.

Because Rand accepted Peikoff’s statements about arbitrariness when she endorsed his 1976 lectures, a further implication is that everything in his account (except the reifying generics, the overt dismissal of learning from mistakes, and the invocation of Peikovian paralysis) has to be counted as part of closed-system Objectivism, Objectivism simply equated with “the philosophy of Ayn Rand.”

This isn’t going to do the closed-system Objectivist any favors. He or she is forever saddled with a badly argued, internally inconsistent doctrine that is impossible to apply because it embraces contradictory imperatives. Closed-system advocates are not permitted to correct or improve Objectivist epistemology. Consequently, they must either

accept every jot and tittle of the Peikovian doctrine of the arbitrary assertion (1976 edition), or hit the road out of Rand-land.

Some, though not all, of the doctrine's troubles stem from the incompleteness of Rand's epistemology. The closed-system advocate will have to hold on to promissory notes for an Objectivist theory of propositions, an account of inductive proof for propositions, and an entire philosophy of science. Never paid off during Rand's lifetime, they can never be fulfilled by anyone else.

If, on the other hand, Objectivism is understood as an open system capable of revision, its advocates will urgently need a replacement for the doctrine. At the very least, this will mean training the floodlights on a shadowy corner of the Objectivist corpus and clearing out the junk that has been allowed to accumulate there. If the doctrine of the arbitrary assertion just misapplies the deeper principles of Objectivist epistemology in the service of ill-conceived moral judgments, only local corrections will be needed. If the doctrine is genuinely symptomatic of underlying Parmenidean tendencies in the philosophy, or inadequacies in its foundationalism more generally, the repair work will have to become global.

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Notes

1. The evolution of the doctrine will be addressed in the second-to-last section of this article.

2. Peikoff (1989; 1993) and his followers maintain that Objectivism is "the philosophy of Ayn Rand," whose contents consist exclusively of what Rand published during her lifetime, plus what others published under her supervision. Consequently any addition to or deletion from this closed system of ideas constitutes a wholesale rejection of Objectivism—or its replacement by an entirely different philosophy.

3. All page references are to the Meridian paperback edition, published in 1993.

4. Most of the material in *OPAR*, including the discussion of arbitrary assertions, is proximately derived from a series of 12 lectures that Peikoff gave in 1976, under the title "The Philosophy of Objectivism." Although these lectures have been either for rent or for sale in some audio recording medium since they were first given, and can be obtained on CDs today, they have never been transcribed and published as a set. It is *OPAR*, and not the lecture series, that Peikoff intended for general distribution. Consequently, I will respect his priorities and take the book as the primary source for his account. The 1976 lectures will get some attention, however, when we trace the

history of the doctrine. A preliminary version of two sections of Peikoff's chapter on Reason was published in the *Objectivist Forum*; the article (1987a; 1987b) differs from the corresponding sections of *OPAR* (159–71) only in minor details. A post-*OPAR* lecture series, *Objectivism through Induction* (Peikoff 1997), goes into detail about “the arbitrary,” which is the sole topic of Lecture 11. I will quote some relevant material from this lecture, but again, priority must go to published work.

5. In *Objectivism through Induction*, Lecture 11, Peikoff (1997) employs a substantially improved procedure for introducing “the arbitrary.” Instead of condemning it in advance of describing it, as an unfiltered expression of “emotionalism,” he starts by contrasting arbitrary assertions with those for which some proof has been provided, then develops the notion by working through three examples.

6. When this passage was initially published, the asserter's first line of response to “Why?” was “Because I say so—period” (Peikoff 1987b, 1).

7. In his 1997 lecture, Peikoff admits that arbitrariness is, in general, not “self-evident.” Ferreting out the lack of evidence may, in fact, become quite challenging. “On a strictly quantitative basis, because they're all Ph.D.s, you know, in sciences, there's [a] major effort by proponents of the baseless to appear logical, rational, scientific, and unanswerable. On the face of it, it may seem, ‘God, this guy not only has a basis for his claim, he's got it proved!’ And in these cases, a great deal of thought, I repeat, a great deal of thought on your part, mental work, occasionally elaborate, is needed to grasp that the claim is baseless. It's not self-evident that a claim is baseless. It is not self-evident that a claim is baseless, unless the guy conveniently stands up and says, ‘This is true, because I say it,’ or, ‘Because God told me.’ But they don't do that in universities.” Yet in acknowledging that the arbitrariness of an assertion is rarely obvious, Peikoff never goes on to admit the need for a specific understanding of the evidence that would be required to prove that assertion true.

8. Epistemological constructivism is an extremely broad tendency; the worth of a constructivist theory of knowledge depends on what it takes knowledge to be, how it considers knowledge to be constructed, and how what has been constructed is supposed to function. So there are varieties of constructivism that embrace subjectivity outright (e.g., Jacques Derrida's deconstructionism, or Kenneth Gergen's social constructionism). Others rather patently fail to deliver on their aspirations to objectivity (as, it can be argued, is the case with Immanuel Kant's doctrine of the “forms of intuition” and the “categories of the understanding”). But I take such views to have failed in their epistemological mission—when they had one to begin with. It is the varieties of constructivism that make a credible commitment to objectivity, such as Charles Peirce's variety of pragmatism, or Jean Piaget's (1976) genetic epistemology, or Karl Popper's (1965) critical rationalist philosophy of science, that bring something valuable to bear on the question of arbitrariness.

None of these views, by the way, have a whole lot in common with what Hayek called constructivism. Hayekian constructivism is as more of an ethical or political tendency than an epistemological point of view (Diamond 1980). Its underlying commitment is to the conscious human design of moral principles and social systems; according to Hayek, the epistemological counterpart to moral and social engineering is rationalistic deduction from explicitly stated premises. So by Hayek's criterion, Descartes was a constructivist; Popper was not. Yet Descartes, as a sort of foundationalist and a denier that knowledge emerges out of anything else, was not a

constructivist in the sense employed here; Popper was.

9. The Objectivist theory of perception was sketched by Peikoff in his 1976 lectures and developed in much greater depth by Kelley (1986). The Objectivist theory of concepts was presented in some depth by Rand (1990); subsequently neither Peikoff nor his followers have added anything to it.

10. Could it be because Rand didn't use the word "arbitrary" in her own presentation? I will return to this issue when I address the doctrine's pedigree.

11. The entry on "Validation" is taken from Peikoff's 1976 series of lectures on *The Philosophy of Objectivism*, Lecture 3, question and answer period. A statement about "Proof" (Binswanger 1988, 387)—so similar that I haven't quoted it—comes from Lecture 1 of Peikoff's 1974 series on logic. To avoid confusion, it should be noted that up through the late 1960s, if not later, Objectivist writings made no distinction between proof and validation: axioms were merely said not to need proof because they are presupposed in any effort at proof (e.g., Rand 1990, 55).

12. Which book Peikoff had in mind is not clear. A decade after these lectures, he has produced no book on induction, although his associate David Harriman is presently at work on one. Harriman (e.g., 2008) has begun to publish chapters from the opus in question; none so far has taken up the topic of Peikovian paralysis.

13. In the first chapter of *OPAR*, Peikoff appears to be pressing for the conclusion that propositions expressing belief in Yahweh-God-Allah, the standard monotheistic deity, are false. "The idea of the 'supernatural' is an assault on everything man knows about reality. It is a contradiction of every essential of a rational metaphysics. It represents a rejection of the basic axioms of philosophy . . ." (1993, 31). After reviewing such divine attributes as world creating, omnipotence, infinity, and miracle working, Peikoff concludes: "Every argument commonly offered for the notion of God leads to a contradiction of the axiomatic concepts of philosophy. At every point, the notion clashes with the facts of reality and with the preconditions of thought" (32). More broadly, "Any attempt to define or defend the supernatural must necessarily collapse in fallacies" (32). In other words: God is not the sort of being that could exist; God's attributes are not attributes that any entity could possess; so affirmative claims about God are all false.

Two recent critiques of Objectivism by theists (Parrish 2007; Toner 2007) attribute to Peikoff the view that claims about God are incoherent. Reed (2008) has countered with a case that Objectivism treats claims about God as arbitrary rather than incoherent. Reed's case is perfectly consistent with what Peikoff says in Chapter 5 of *OPAR*—but tough to square with Chapter 1.

14. Constructing a counterargument is precisely what Peikoff seems to be doing in the first chapter of *OPAR*, where he contends that the existence of any supernatural being would contradict one or more of the metaphysical axioms of Objectivism (see note 13 above). Objectivism "does not accept God or any variant of the supernatural. We are *a-theist*, as well as *a-devilist*, *a-demonist*, *a-gremlinist*" (1993, 32). In their rebuttals to Reed (2008), both Parrish and Toner have pointed to statements that Peikoff makes in Chapter 1 as evidence that Peikoff does not consistently treat "God-talk" as arbitrary..

15. In a book-length critique of Rand published after her death, Greg Nyquist (2001) has indeed argued that recent findings by evolutionary psychologists militate for the existence of some forms of innate knowledge and some kinds of instincts in

human beings. Therefore, Nyquist argues, both Rand's conception of human thinking and her arguments for her ethics depend on false premises. Nyquist also cites evolutionary psychology in opposition to Rand's view of free will, as he construes it, though he stops short of rejecting free will entirely.

16. Adhering to Peikoff's criteria for possibility, probability, and certainty (1993, 176–79), Rand should have considered some variety of evolutionary theory to be probable, because there is no other scientific theory of the origin of species, and “a lot” of reliable evidence supports it. (She should not have considered the truth of evolutionary theory to be certain, because she was not convinced that *all* of the available evidence supports it.) By Peikovian standards her failure to judge evolutionary theory as probably true is an instance of agnosticism (1993, 169–71)—and is therefore irrational. Further, Peikoff informs us that all agnostics are cowards or nihilists. Could it be the apparent lapse into agnosticism that prompted the decision not to anthologize the essay after Rand's death?

17. Unless Rand genuinely did not consider her revisions to have any philosophical import, because *her* philosophy could never have undergone any alternation, regardless of the evidence indicating that it had changed. In that case, she would not have been lying; she would have been in the grip of a delusional system.

18. In one of her epistemology workshops, Rand responded to a question about the amount and nature of the evidence necessary to rule out all alternatives and conclusively prove a scientific hypothesis: “Yes. That's *the* big question of induction. Which I couldn't begin to discuss—because (a) I haven't worked on that subject enough to even begin to formulate it, and (b) it would take an accomplished scientist in a given field to illustrate the whole process in that field” (1990, 303–04; editor's italics).

19. Peikoff further contradicts himself *within* his treatise on Objectivism. In Chapter 1 of *OPAR*, on “Reality,” Peikoff claims that assertions about the supernatural, including claims about God and gremlins, contradict the axioms of Objectivism, which would imply that such assertions are false. But in Chapter 5, on “Reason,” the same assertions about God and gremlins become prime examples of “the arbitrary.” Parrish (2008) and Toner (2008) note this contradiction in their responses to Reed (2008).

20. However, Irene Pepperberg's studies (e.g., 2001) of Alex, an African gray parrot, suggest that some parrots can say words and phrases in a human language with understanding. If so, their cognitive abilities massively exceed anything that Peikoff might have expected of them.

21. If their implications were pursued, Peikoff's worries about empty symbols might undermine his commitment to foundationalism. At least, a number of philosophers and psychologists (such as Bickhard 1993; Harnad 1990) have suggested that they would.

22. The redemption policy for formerly arbitrary assertions distinguishes Peikoff from philosophers in the positivist tradition (e.g., Ayer 1952) who rail against another purported domain of assertions that are worse than false: “the metaphysical.” Some of the propositions that Peikoff wishes to throw out as arbitrary (e.g., propositions about God, or other supernatural beings) the logical positivists are equally eager to dismiss as metaphysical. There are, however, two important differences. For the positivists, metaphysical propositions are those that *cannot* be empirically verified,

whereas for Peikoff, arbitrary assertions are those for which no evidence *has been* provided. Hence, for the positivists, a claim about life on other planets has no evidence currently going for it, but it could be verified if human travelers or automated spaceships were to reach planets outside our solar system, so it is not metaphysical. For Peikoff, there is no current evidence for or against the claim, so it is arbitrary (Long 2000, 118 n. 11). But precisely because the logical positivists equate the metaphysical with that which cannot be verified, there is no escape from that status. Once metaphysical always metaphysical; nothing, they believe, will ever liberate a proposition from that realm of bogosity and nonsense. Contrariwise the Peikovians believe that future evidence—perhaps even evidence presently available to another person—can spring a proposition from the realm of the arbitrary.

23. Peikoff has repeatedly denounced Gödel's incompleteness theorem. In his most recent lecture series, on the DIM Hypothesis, he pronounces the theorem an instance of D2 (or hopeless cognitive disintegration). In his book *The Ominous Parallels*, he declared: "Even the professional mathematicians, the onetime guardians of the citadel of certainty and of logical consistency, caught the hang of the modern spirit. In 1931, they were apprised of the latest Viennese development in the field, Kurt Gödel's incompleteness theorem, according to which logical consistency (and therefore certainty) is precisely the attribute that no systems of mathematics can ever claim to possess" (1982, 215). In fact, Gödel concluded that a system of formal logic with enough power to include elementary arithmetic, using finite methods of proof, must either be incomplete (i.e., unable to prove at least one mathematical truth that lies within its scope) or inconsistent (Nagel and Newman 1958). Since Peikoff has rendered Gödel's conclusion with such sheer inaccuracy, are we entitled to infer that whenever he refers to the incompleteness theorem he is doing so without understanding, hence his assertions about it are arbitrary?

24. In his 1997 lectures, Peikoff distinguishes between the case in which a believer in past lives respects rationally defensible definitions of "life" and "mind" and "soul" and so on, versus the case in which she does not. "If Shirley MacLaine [. . .] had said the following about her past lives, it would have been OK. If she had said a speech to this effect: 'All available rational evidence is admissible, it counts. I mean by "life" exactly as scientists define it as today. I mean by "soul" just what Ayn Rand says. I accept a whole current context of knowledge, including everything we know about the consciousness' dependence on the brain. And I still say that my past lives influence my current behavior.' Then her statement would not be detached from available evidence, even though she has stated none herself. In that case, we could, if we wanted, easily relate her statement ourselves to what we already know, grasp that it's a contradiction, and pronounce her statement false. That is completely different from the epistemological situation that I gave you [. . .], when Shirley MacLaine's statement amounted to, 'I transcend and throw out some or all of our current rational definitions and context'" (Lecture 11). In other words, if the claimant resorts to mystification when challenged, her claims about past lives are arbitrary; if she does not resort to mystification, the very same claims are false. Wouldn't it then follow that a rational person redeems arbitrary claims about past lives and converts them into false ones, simply by catching and rejecting any mystification?

25. Nor, presumably, could epistemology benefit from exposing what's wrong with the doctrine of the arbitrary assertion.

26. *Mystification* as a tactic of argument is different from *mysticism* as a supposed path to knowledge, though mystification is often used to protect claims based on either mysticism or faith. We may further contrast grand mystification, which alleges the inadequacy of mere human instruments of knowing to comprehend some “special” phenomenon, with petty mystification, or *obscurum per obscurius*. Peikoff’s (1997) own appeal to an unexplicated notion of cognitive paralysis (see above) qualifies as petty mystification: It shores up the obscure (various claims about the extraordinary properties of “the arbitrary”) with the more obscure (claims about a special kind of cognitive paralysis that descends on the knower as soon as arbitrariness is recognized). Though given no explication of its own, the purported paralysis is expected to lend support to Peikoff’s declarations that arbitrary assertions are contextless, hierarchically unlocatable, incapable of being supported or contradicted by evidence, and ineligible for any “cognitive verdict.”

27. I exclude the case in which the gremlinologist asserts that gremlins exist, then goes right on to deny that anything else in the universe is the slightest bit different on account of gremlins being around. If the gremlinologist provides neither detectable signs of gremlins being around, nor reasons for preferring gremlinological explanations of known phenomena over non-gremlinological explanations, his assertion should not be taken seriously. But rational conclusion in such a case is not that “Gremlins exist” is arbitrary; it’s that the assertion is false.

28. Some in Rand-land have stepped in where Peikoff eventually draws back. They flatly deny the validity of any arguments with false premises. For instance:

“True” means in accord with reality, I. e., “real.”

“False” means contrary to reality, i. e., “unreal.” [. . .]

How, pray, does one “derive” *anything* from unreality?

[T]he laws of logic, including syllogistic reasoning, don’t arise in a vacuum, nor inhabit some abstract universe of Platonic Forms, independent of facts. Even the laws of logic themselves are inferences that have been drawn from *observations of reality*. Thus the “truth” [i.e., validity] of logical inferences arises not from their internal formalistic “coherence,” but from their direct “correspondence” to observable facts of reality.

To suggest otherwise, is to argue that the “true” and the “real” are completely unrelated.

Yet . . . that’s exactly what’s wrong with the “syllogism.” [The example had two false premises and a true conclusion: All frogs are birds; All birds are amphibians; Therefore, All frogs are amphibians.] Its major and minor premises—“All frogs are birds,” and “All birds are amphibians”—amount to nothing more than meaningless gibberish, unconnected to anything in reality. They are not “premises”; they do not mean anything intelligible—which means: they do not mean anything at all.

So [. . .]

* How can any conclusion be drawn from strings of meaningless gibberish?

* If not, how can such a conclusion be validated as “true”?

* If logic itself is not to be rooted in factual reality, how can one even distinguish a “true” premise or conclusion from a “false” one? (Bidinotto 2005)

To take these further steps, one must openly pronounce arbitrary assertions meaningless, then assimilate false propositions to arbitrary ones. The verdict of meaningfulness already follows from several of Peikoff’s claims about “the arbitrary.” Meanwhile, Peikoff’s Parmenideanism, as noted above, has trouble handling false propositions, because of its stark binary opposition between referring to what exists (meaningfully and truly) and referring to nonexistence (meaninglessly and non-truly). It is hard to believe, however, that Rand would ever have ratified the rejection of valid arguments from false premises. She had too much regard for logic, not to mention too much fondness for *reductio ad absurdum*.

29. “Darwin’s theory, Ayn Rand held, pertains to a special science, not to philosophy. Philosophy as such, therefore, takes no position in regard to it” (Peikoff 1993, 476, Ch. 11 n. 19). Peikoff is not fully consistent in his exclusion, however; elsewhere in *OPAR* he favorably quotes (191; 468, Ch. 6 n. 4) from a book by his associate Harry Binswanger. Binswanger’s monograph, *The Biological Basis of Teleological Concepts*, operates within an explicitly neo-Darwinian evolutionary framework.

30. In two books on the Objectivist ethics, published in 2000 and 2006, Tara Smith uses “arbitrary” much as Rand did—nontechnically. Though surely familiar with the Peikovian doctrine, Smith never cites it or alludes to it in either book. She bypasses Peikoff’s definition of “arbitrary” in favor of one taken from *Oxford English Dictionary* (Smith 2000, 108). In a discussion of claims about intrinsic value, she misses a cue for pronouncing them arbitrary. “Obviously, something could exist without our current awareness of any evidence for it. But what advocates of intrinsic value claim is not that intrinsic value *might* exist; they claim that it does” (2000, 69). Peikoff would not accept Smith’s formulation here, because on his view positive evidence must be presented for the *mere possibility* that there are intrinsic values. Indeed, on Peikoff’s terms an assertion about intrinsic value made by a philosopher who provided no positive evidence for it would remain arbitrary *even if evidence for the existence of intrinsic value was eventually produced by others*.

31. Those not instructed in the feuds and schisms that have periodically roiled Rand-land would never suspect that anything was missing from the *Lexicon*. Binswanger misleadingly says: “Material by authors other than Miss Rand is included only if she had given it an explicit public endorsement [. . .] or if it was originally published under her editorship in *The Objectivist Newsletter*, *The Objectivist*, or *The Ayn Rand Letter*” (1988, ix–x). Also included was some material published in *The Objectivist Forum* while Rand was still alive. In fact, the only other contributors whose material was actually excerpted were Alan Greenspan, Edwin A. Locke, Susan Ludel, George Reisman, Mary Ann Sures, Leonard Peikoff, and Harry Binswanger (Locke and Binswanger, who never wrote for Rand’s own periodicals, were included on the strength of their participation in *The Objectivist Forum*). The much longer list of

contributors whose material was not excerpted included Allan Blumenthal, Joan Mitchell Blumenthal, Edith Efron, Robert Efron, Beatrice Hessen, Robert Hessen, George Walsh, Kay Nolte Smith, Barbara Branden, and Nathaniel Branden. Those in the latter subcategory had fallen out with Rand after their articles were published; those in the former subcategory had not.

32. Peikoff's entire published discussion of the arbitrary carries just two footnotes (1993, 468, Ch. 5, nn. 8–9). The first is to Rand's definition of truth, from Galt's speech (943 in the paperback of *Atlas Shrugged*; 1017 in the hard cover). The second, attached to Peikoff's assertion that "the arbitrary . . . assaults a man's cognitive faculty" (1993, 166) points to a passage at the very end of the same speech (983 in the paperback of *Atlas Shrugged*; or 1069 in the hardback). It is not clear what passage he has in mind. The only use of "arbitrary" in the speech's final pages comes when Galt invokes "the fear you acquired in your early encounters with the incomprehensible, the unpredictable, the contradictory, the arbitrary, the hidden, the faked, *the irrational* in men" (982 or 1068). As is the case throughout *Atlas Shrugged*, no technical meaning seems intended. Does "the arbitrary" assault human cognitive faculties in ways that the faked or the incomprehensible or the contradictory do not?

33. Nathaniel Branden has stated (personal communication, 27 July 2007) that he actually introduced the notion of the arbitrary assertion to Objectivism.

34. According to Nathaniel Branden (personal communication, 27 July 2007), the original inspiration for his conception of arbitrary assertions was his boyhood experience with adults' unclear, contradictory statements about God.

35. The *Basic Principles of Objectivism* that is commercially available today is a re-recording of Branden's lectures as they were given in 1967. However, the copyright date on the lectures is 1960, and I know of no evidence that between these two dates Branden made any significant changes to the portions of Lectures 3 and 4 that pertain to arbitrary assertions.

36. In standard Objectivist parlance, faith and mysticism are equated. In point of fact, many people believe religious propositions on faith even though they personally engage in no mystical practices, and may heartily disapprove of those who do. For the sake of argument, however, I will stay with the familiar Randian usage.

37. In fact, some who were present at the time recall that in 1966 the live series of lectures on *Basic Principles of Objectivism* featured a guest appearance by Peikoff presenting Lecture 4 on "The Concept of God." Did he depart in any significant way from Nathaniel Branden's existing text?

38. These lectures have been out of circulation for many years. My thanks to Bill Dwyer, who took the course at the time, for checking his notes on Lecture 9, which quote the passage about truth values word for word.

39. A familiar note is sounded when Efron ridicules the counterargument (made by some ESP advocates) that ESP powers are inhibited in the presence of a skeptical human observer—even of a computer presenting the materials. A few go so far as to maintain that inhibition under these circumstances is a key property of ESP. "Such an argument is equivalent to maintaining that an important property of gremlins is their capacity to avoid detection" (1967, 11). According to Bill Dwyer, the pink elephant example was also used in Peikoff's lectures on "Objectivism's Theory of Knowledge."

40. Nathaniel Branden (personal communication, 14 September 2007) says that

in his lectures, and in his thinking about the subject, he never went beyond his formulation that an arbitrary assertion should be treated as if nothing has been said.

41. This way of putting things cannot be quite right, for Peikoff has already declared that arbitrary assertions have no cognitive context whatsoever. In *OPAR*, he will say that redemption gives the formerly arbitrary assertion a cognitive context where it previously lacked one.

42. I am indebted to Ellen Stuttle for this observation.

43. Extremely promptly. According to a witness (Robert Bidinotto, personal communication, 15 September 2007), Peikoff first publicly admitted that there had been an affair at the Ford Hall Forum on 26 April 1987, during the questions and answers following his first presentation of “My Thirty Years with Ayn Rand” (Peikoff 1989b). Corroboration can be had from Valliant (2005, 407 n. 42). Peikoff said to his audience that there had indeed been an affair, and that his wife Cynthia had found letters and journal entries in which Rand confirmed it.

44. In his *Objectivism through Induction* lecture, Peikoff gives the example of a person claiming, without anteing up any positive evidence, that Harry Binswanger’s bachelor party consisted of a 3-hour seminar on Hegel’s *Logic*, beginning at 4 in the morning. Although the original claimant presented no evidence, inquiry by others has turned up signed affidavits from several Objectivists declaring that they were present at the event, security video showing a bunch of them trooping into Binswanger’s apartment building during the wee hours, and so on. Does this mean that the initial claim wasn’t really arbitrary? No. Does it mean that the inquiry that ended up supporting it should have taken place? Absolutely not! “So, what causes the idea that you can objectively process an arbitrary claim? It is the failure to think in principle, the failure to insist on inductive generalization. It’s the willingness to discuss, consider, listen to, or allow into your thought an example, or a chart, or a sentence, apart from a principle. In other words, the cause of our dilemma is an unprincipled acceptance of, or indulgence in, someone’s irrationality, even if only accepted hypothetically for five minutes to follow his mental process. And of course, you know, if you uphold one instance of unreason, you destroy reason across the board in every branch of philosophy” (Peikoff 1997, Lecture 11).

45. Nathaniel Branden’s memoirs were initially published in 1989, under the title *Judgment Day*. A substantially revised version appeared in 1999 as *My Years with Ayn Rand*. Valliant frequently and misleadingly lumps Barbara Branden’s book together with Nathaniel’s, as though they were two manifestations of a single project.

46. The essay appeared in 2005 on Watkins’ blog <<http://www.angermanagement.mu.nu>>. The blog is presently inactive and the entries inaccessible. Watkins is now an employee of the Ayn Rand Institute.

47. Ironically, a strict application of Peikovian criteria to Rand’s 1981 statement on evolution would *mandate* a judgment that Rand was irrational, because she suspended judgment despite her awareness of “valid evidence” in favor of evolutionary theory. However, Parille was not aware of the 1981 statement at the time; apparently Watkins wasn’t either.

48. No doubt a second indictment for arbitrariness is being prepared against Stephen Cox. Cox recently commented: “Everything we know about her indicates that [Rand] had the kind of intellectual integrity that scorns any conscious temptation to evade a central intellectual problem. Yet she did obfuscate certain issues, in what

I would call not a conscious or an unconscious but a preconscious manner. Another way of saying this would be that she had excellent peripheral vision. She could see philosophical dangers coming in from the side, and she took instinctive steps to avoid any she did not want to run into. Examples are easy to find. One is her view of biological evolution. Because she did not believe in God, she must have accounted for the existence of the world in a purely evolutionary way. Or so one would think. Yet because she did not want to picture man's heroic race as originating in a bunch of apes (Nathaniel Branden, interview), she diverted questions about her view of the matter by saying that she had never studied evolution and was "therefore . . . neither its supporter nor its opponent" (2007, 255–56). Strictly speaking, Cox has not covered every possibility: Rand might have rejected both evolution and divine creation and opted for a strict Aristotelian view of the world as indefinitely old and *Homo sapiens* as equally so. But there is no evidence in the Randian corpus that she thought our species has been around for billions of years.

49. Rand may have used the phrase "charity refutation" in conversation, but I've found no confirmation of the usage in print. Nor does it appear in *OPAR*. Hsieh seems to imply that Rand made active use of the full, latter-day doctrine of the arbitrary assertion; as previously noted, this cannot be confirmed from anything that Rand wrote for publication.

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