

## Episode 400 – Ayn Rand: The Good and the Bad

### Guest Michael Malice

**WOODS:** I want to talk to you again because I have a topic that I think you are very well-suited to help us address, and it's a topic that I have not addressed yet, and here we are in episode number 400. How can this be that we have not talked about objectivism or Ayn Rand at all really, except fleetingly? So here's an episode on that subject. For all you folks who have been demanding one, here it is.

I have not planned out how this is going to go, because I feel like it's almost a contradiction in terms to have a planned-out Michael Malice episode, right? You can have one or the other. So I thought we would just start talking and see where the conversation goes. It will be just like, I use this example sometimes, the Beatles TV movie *Magical Mystery Tour*. The idea was they were going to drive a bus around England and record whatever happened. But it turns out basically nothing did happen and it was a huge flop. I don't think that's going to happen in this episode.

I can't imagine there are that many people who don't know Ayn Rand or what we're talking about, but do you want to give us at least a little bit of background, the basic history, where she grew up, and how she came to the U.S., and stuff like that, to get us started?

**MALICE:** Well, actually I would strongly disagree with you. I think there's a lot of people in the liberty movement who don't really know Rand. They know her reputation as this crazy lady. They know her by some of the more out-there statements that she's made, and they're comfortable dismissing her. And I think it really does her a disservice, and the liberty movement a disservice, because up until Ron Paul there's been no one, this is pretty objective, who's brought people around to a pro-liberty perspective than Ayn Rand. Don't you think that's fair to say?

**WOODS:** I don't know. I mean I would assume it's true because of the sales of her novels, and that much as I might wish it were different, the sales of Mises' books can't match that. And Mises and others acknowledge that, that we need to reach out through the popular culture through novels, and movies, and these other

ways to reach people, because people aren't going to buy *Human Action*. They're just not. Not everybody is going to do that. So it could well be that by the sheer size of her audience that she can make that claim. Maybe Milton Friedman is a close second.

**MALICE:** Oh, god. Right, okay.

**WOODS:** Yeah, we'll have a Milton Friedman episode, right? That will be episode 701, because I've already pledged you're not getting another even 100, this is it, okay? Enjoy episode 400, Malice. All right.

**MALICE:** We could talk on Milton Friedman when there's literally nothing less to discuss.

**WOODS:** All right. But I do still want you to give people her basic history in a nutshell, and then we'll talk about her ideas.

**MALICE:** Sure. She's born in Russia in 1905. She grows up there completely despising, by her own words, everything and anything about it, including the Tsarist period. Come 1926 she gets to escape leaving her family behind, and makes her way to America barely speaking the language to try to become a screenwriter. She happens upon Cecil B. DeMille in a fortuitous circumstance. He casts her as an extra in *The King of Kings*, where she also happens to meet her future husband, Frank O'Connor. They kind of fall in love, and they cross the border into Mexico and return, so that way she can get her citizenship.

Her screenwriting career doesn't really go anywhere, but she writes a couple of novels, *Anthem* and *We the Living*, which is semi-autobiographical and a book about living in Stalinism and Leninism. And her big breakthrough hit, of course, was *The Fountainhead*, which is a novel about morality and integrity. And then her magnum opus is *Atlas Shrugged*, which is just a huge brick and it's just probably the bible of libertarianism for many people, other than actual Bible.

And after that she had this protégé, Nathaniel Branden, and he started something called NBI. And she developed her thought into this philosophy that she called objectivism, which is very controversial, very intense and complex.

But again, she was very much an interesting character. She explicitly said I'm not a libertarian, because she thought libertarianism meant Murray Rothbard, and she called Anarchists hippies of the right. My hair is not that long, and I know yours is not either, used to call us hippies, is kind of odd.

So after she died in '82 her estate became something called, I think in '86 they were founded, the Ayn Rand Institute, and they really are this somewhat cult-like acolytes of her world view, which has kind of faded a little bit with Yaron Brook taking over ARI from Rand's heir, Leonard Peikoff.

**WOODS:** All right, that's a pretty good overview. I would add that one of the times that you were on, might have been the very first time, we did briefly talk about Rand as I'm recalling now, because I remember I pointed out that I'm a bit of an oddball in terms of her novels, because I think I maybe prefer her book *We the Living*, which gets overlooked. Everybody knows the two giant books, and then she has *Anthem* people know because it's so short they can breeze through it, and then *We the Living* from the 1930s, maybe 1936...

**MALICE:** Correct.

**WOODS:** ...gets overlooked. But the setting of that is Communist Russia, and it makes for a very, very interesting and compelling story, many memorable lines in that book as well.

**MALICE:** Yeah. And *We the Living* was the inspiration, one of the big ones, for my book, *Dear Reader*. Because as someone who's born in the Soviet Union, obviously I did not get through Stalinism, by the time we were leaving in the late '70s it was far removed from that era. But when you read that book and the pathos that just seeps through from every page, it really is mind-boggling.

One of the things we talked about in an earlier interview, Tom, was about not using hatred and anger as tools for libertarianism. You read that book, *We the Living*, and you do get angry, and you do hate the state, and you do realize what it means in practice. And in a sense many people, and I don't know if I'm 100% not being tongue in cheek when I say this, it's not that I love liberty so much as I'm terrified of what totalitarianism means. And I see how close it is to slip into that.

**WOODS:** All right, let's talk about her ideas, because this is really where things get interesting. Of course, what also gets interesting is how the ideas get, well, passed on, but also the people who do the passing on, and the people who spread Objectivism after Ayn Rand, because that opens up all kinds of stories about personalities, and institutional rivalries, and purges, and stuff like that.

I'd like to at least for the time being, though, stick to Rand herself and her ideas. Of course she's got a full-fledged philosophy, she's got views on epistemology, she's got views on aesthetics, but give me the ideas that let's say the average person reasonably acquainted with her is going to walk away with.

**MALICE:** Well, Rand was once asked in an interview if she can define her philosophy while standing on one foot, and she literally did so, and it was as follows: metaphysics, objective reality, meaning what is real, is what is front of us, there's one reality and that's it. Epistemology, how do we know things, is through reason. Morality is what she called selfishness but what she meant is self-interest. And politics is laissez-faire capitalism.

Now something that she talks about, which I don't think has been analyzed in terms of her work, and she's been analyzed to death, of course, both pro and con. She mentions that when she was, I don't remember what it was, either eight or ten, she had her entire philosophy deduced in her head. Now she explicitly said obviously I did not know as much as I knew later in life, but I never had to change any of my essentials.

Now this says to me either one of two things; one, it's true, in which case she's not going to have good understanding of how to get people to change the philosophy they have since a young age, or it's kind of false and she's really not being very receptive to outside feedback. So it's a very curious claim she makes that I don't think many people pick up on.

And it also speaks to something else we spoke about earlier, Tom, in an earlier appearance, is that how much of our worldview is really formed in kind of these non-rational terms. We see something is wrong on some level, and then we ask ourselves why am I having an aversion to this incident. Like if you see a cop yelling at someone and throwing his weight around, the reaction is immediate, this is

something that upsets me, and then later we can sit down and deduce why this is an issue.

**WOODS:** All right. I think the average person who knows about Rand will know nothing about her views on metaphysics. The average person is getting his views about her either by casually reading *Atlas Shrugged*, although I don't know how you can casually read a thousand-plus page book, or from what he reads in the media. And so he walks away saying Rand thinks you should be selfish, and that everybody should aspire to be some kind of ubermensch who creates and then just keeps all the fruits for himself. Really, that's what people think when they hear her name. That's certainly what anybody on Slate thinks, or Salon, or AlterNet. That's what her name means for them.

Now at the same time it's not like there isn't a grain of truth in that, but what is the truth in that?

**MALICE:** Well, I mean she was asked this when she was on a Donahue appearance, and she was on Donahue twice and you can see them on YouTube there, they're absolutely hilarious and fascinating, especially when she gets asked by some housewife if it was true that she's a member of the Illuminati. This actually happened.

So, what was your question again? I'm sorry, Tom. I lost my train of thought.

**WOODS:** Is there a grain of truth in the caricature?

**MALICE:** Right. Donahue asked her about this, and he goes, a lot of people out there think you're nuts. And she said no, they want *you* to think it. So Rand is very dangerous for people, and very useful for people who like liberty for the following reasons: she advocates strongly for a logical, conscious approach to how you act. She does not give people the leeway to have their principles in their mind and act differently in practice. And her call to integrity is really the entire message of *The Fountainhead*. It's not a political book really in any sense.

And this is something that I think more people should think about. Because if you look at Facebook, there are many people who act in a sense of salvation through faith: as long as I have the right views, and I click on the right petitions, and I post

the right updates, therefore I'm a good person. And Rand says no. You have to act as a rational actor, put your ideas in practice, do what you know to be right, and life is a blessing, and live it to its fullest.

And this is a scary message for many people because then they are forced to, you know, kind of think about what they're doing, and have to defend every action, where usually their defense is I'm just doing what everyone else is doing, and that's the popular mode at the moment. And she's violently against this kind of thinking.

**WOODS:** I recall a letter in her copious letters, there was a huge volume that came out in the 1990s, *Letters of Ayn Rand*. And I took it out of the library and found it extremely interesting. But I recall a letter she wrote, might have been to a niece of hers, who had asked her for the princely sum of \$25, and should have known her aunt better, right? I mean, who is this kid? You don't know that your aunt is Ayn Rand, for heaven's sake?

So Rand writes her this ideological response about if I do this you're going to turn out to be a parasite the rest of your life.

**MALICE:** No, no, no. That's not exactly accurate.

**WOODS:** Oh, okay. Well, I mean listen, it's 20 years since I've read it.

**MALICE:** The letter, which someone just recently posted on one of the websites as an article, like listen to this Ayn Rand article. The point she made is I lent your sister money, your older sister, and she never paid me back...

**WOODS:** Ah, okay, that's reasonable.

**MALICE:** ...and it's not fair to judge you by that standard, however it is fair to judge you as an adult. And if I'm lending you this, I expect to be repaid, and you can prove to me that you're different from your sister by putting your money where your mouth is. So she very much had this odd... she didn't really know how to deal with kids, and kids are really not an issue in any of her books. So she just really in many ways thought children are kind of miniaturized adults and spoke to them as such. And frankly, you know, she's very much reaching precocious

teenagers and young adults with her books, and I think people like that would respond to being spoken to with respect and treated as full adults even if they really aren't.

**WOODS:** And the funny thing is, as I've gotten older I've actually moved more toward her views in that letter. As I observe the world and I observe the way people are, I've actually grown more sympathetic to the letter, especially now that I am a parent and I am responsible for children.

Speaking of children, let's just be blunt and honest with each other here in this whole thing. It seems like it can't just be a coincidence that a whole lot of the objectivists, that is followers of Ayn Rand, that I know, have no children. Why is that?

**MALICE:** Well, I think it's also no coincidence that they have no sense of humor.

**WOODS:** That's also true.

**MALICE:** Yeah. She is a tricky figure and they accuse her of being a cult figure, and that's somewhat true and somewhat isn't. But if you are such a radical and you kind of conflate your personal life and you hold yourself up as an example to live by, and she did this explicitly. When she was asked during the NBI days...

**WOODS:** Tell people what NBI is.

**MALICE:** That institute that her protégé, Nathaniel Branden, made when she was promulgating her philosophy. When she was asked, you know, these characters you write about, they're not realistic, they don't comport to reality, she says don't tell me such people don't exist. You're looking at two of them, referring to herself and Nathaniel Branden, and then she said here are two more, referring to their spouses.

So she very much held herself up as someone to mimic and follow. And when you are not as bright as her, which I don't think anyone who follows her is going to be as bright as her, almost in a sense by definition, it's very, very hard psychologically, and this isn't really a flaw, but it's very hard psychologically to

separate the wheat from the chaff. So if you're going to follow someone who's right 90% of the time, 10% of the time you're going to go down the wrong path.

And her lack of humor, because she thought humor in its nature has to be derisive. Even though she used irony in her books and there's many humorous moments, she was not a funny person and didn't realize what a weapon that could be. Because she really had a reverence for humanity, she had a reverence for reason, and for liberty, and man's achievement, so to even be joking about that in her mind, it seems like, is denigrating it and giving in kind of to the masses who are trying to give everyone feet of clay.

**WOODS:** Can you try to explain what, not on a personal level but on a philosophical level, was the problem between Objectivism and libertarianism? Is it that libertarians don't have an adequate grounding for their belief in freedom? Tell us about that.

**MALICE:** She had this absolutely, I think, completely false insistence that if you're going to promulgate a political philosophy without a moral grounding it's doomed to fail.

And one of the things she said was, in 1964 she was a very big advocate of Barry Goldwater, and she believed until the day she died that if he had a more philosophical defense of capitalism he would have won. Now I don't ever imagine any politician giving philosophical speeches and doing anything but turning people away. When you start getting cerebral the audience just revolts against instinctively and it's really a problem. And she really thought this is the way to bring people to capitalism, and you have to be capitalist for the right reasons, otherwise it's not going to stick.

She has this insistence on the blank slate, that unless we derive our ideas from reasoning grounded in reality, they're not going to be binding on us psychologically or morally in some sense. And sometimes that's true, but sometimes it's really not true. And this is something that her followers insist on. Rothbard was to her what libertarianism meant. And she used this example of, he had this idea of competing defense agencies, which she said, oh, you mean like civil war. And let's suppose there's a robber robbing someone's house, and the robber has one defense agency, and I have another as the homeowner, what

happens there? You tell me, she said. It's kind of an apparently rhetorical question, which is easily answered even in a statist society. If a Canadian breaks into an American's house, there's a very simple process figuring out what to do.

So she was very uncomfortable with giving other people credit, other than people like Mises she loved, and a few others. She hated Hayek, describing him in private as pure poison.

And this is another one of her problems: she really presented everything as a package deal. And she had these extreme views on sexuality. And basically the claim is *Atlas Shrugged* integrates sex, economics, and art. And I don't think it's true that if someone is for laissez-faire capitalism that they're rationally obligated to advocate BDSM in the bedroom, but that's her implication.

**WOODS:** There are some strange things that are insisted on here, of course. Now there are some better known things that are insisted on: for example, atheism. And this, of course, seems to be the other side of the coin of reason, that if you believe in reason then you can't... because she contrasts reason with mysticism, which she assume that all religious people are simply mystics who have some kind of irrational feeling, or they have an inferiority complex, and that makes them go look for some kind of father figure in the sky, or whatever it is.

**MALICE:** Actually she's not as violently atheist as some of her followers, because she said she has some respect for religion, and she says this very condescendingly because it's what she called a canned form of philosophy. She thought it was like a primitive but basic attempt to make understanding of the universe. So she wasn't as 1,000% dismissive of religion as you think. But again, that's 99%.

**WOODS:** Right, right. Well, of course today's show notes page will be [tomwoods.com/400](http://tomwoods.com/400), very easy to remember. Slash 400. We'll like first of all the Rand on Donahue videos that you mentioned, we'll put those there, because those are worth watching, you'll enjoy those. I'm going to link to related episodes. I mean one of them will be my episode on Am I a Dummy for Believing in God. Some people loved that, some people wanted to kill me for that. That's what makes the show fun, right? I'll try and put our earlier episode on there also when we talked about this kind of stuff.

So she did insist on that. Now Rothbard insists that she insisted on that quite, well, insistently, among the people in her close circle, to the point where it became difficult for him to continue with her because he was married to a Christian woman.

Can you tell us, is there anything that we can know about the Rothbard and Rand relationship apart from Rothbard's recollections and his one-act play, *Mozart Was a Red*?

**MALICE:** Well, we know a fair amount of it. I spoke to Yuri Maltsev at PorcFest, and he says, and I'm sure he's 100% telling the truth, that until the day he died Murray Rothbard was a strong advocate of *Atlas Shrugged*. And Rothbard's problems with Rand were on a personal level. But at no point was he ever anything but a huge admirer of her work, he was just not an admirer of her social circle, and with good reason. She's kind of holding court in her house and everyone there is genuflecting. And by the end of her life she ended up living alone, not having very many friends at all, and that's not necessarily how it has to be.

But if you read *The Fountainhead*, this is one of the dangers of Rand, she really puts forth the message that when you're young, and you're precocious, and you're smarter than everyone, you realize that the teacher at the front of the room really doesn't know what they're doing, it's okay in a kind of *Catcher in the Rye* sense, it's okay to feel isolated and alone and trapped in your own thoughts. And it takes a long time to learn that that's not okay, and it's not a weakness to kind of share your emotions with people, and that you get bonds through that, and it's not a form of collectivism. Of course Rand was never saying don't have any friends, but if you read *Fountainhead* there is this underlying message that being kind of completely isolated is an aspect of heroism. And I think it's a very dangerous psychological message to put forward.

**WOODS:** Well, that's interesting. I could continue that line, but what I want to make sure we get to is what each of our own pros and cons are when viewing Rand. What do we think is good to take away, what do we think is bad to take away. What have you taken away from Rand that you say is, if not indispensably helpful, then pretty darn helpful?

**MALICE:** I'd say indispensably a couple of things. First of all I would say Rand does not have all the answers but she has all the questions. If you read her books, and you have to read them in order, make sure you read *Fountainhead* before *Atlas Shrugged*, you are going to have to face logically and rationally all the big issues that address you morally and politically. And that is a huge, huge deal that she brings to the table.

The other thing that I think she's wonderful about is people are not always persuaded rationally, they are persuaded through art, they are persuaded through vision. Rand had a vision for what a free society would look like, and to put that forward in her novels is something incomparable to advocating for praxeology in human action. It's very hard to say what would this look like in practice, and she does that.

So I think these two things cannot be taken away from her. She's really the ferryman who brings people across the River Styx and makes them realize, you know what, almost everything we're being told in the press and in school is not only a lie, and it's a lie for the following reasons. And when you start deconstructing everything you've been taught since you were a kid, it's really this kind of intoxicating perspective on the world.

**WOODS:** All right. Let me say something myself. First of all, her nonfiction essays I generally enjoy very much, because I like her punchy, rhetorical style. She writes in a way that makes you not quite feel sorry for her opponents, because she makes you utterly contemptuous of them. But they were anyone other than those people you would feel sorry for them. And you say to yourself I'm glad she never knew me and got angry at me, because I would not want to be on the receiving end of this. I love reading a great, informed, and skilled polemicist, and she was definitely that above other things.

Secondly, I know that I feel like one of the alleged drawbacks of her novels is at the same time of virtue. Her characters, it's true, at times do seem a bit wooden, and they're delivering soliloquies and so forth, but those soliloquies, of course, are often very beautiful. There's a soliloquy about the meaning of money, what money really means, that there's nothing evil about it, in *Atlas Shrugged*. If I'm remembering this right she took some of the best of these, these speeches from

her characters, and then published a book of those. Am I remembering that right, is that *For the New Intellectual*?

**MALICE:** Correct. That was her first nonfiction book called *For the New Intellectual*, and there was an introductory essay with the same title in that book, which is basically her overview of world history.

And this is one of the criticisms of Rand, she'll do things in that overview like she'll dismiss Egyptian culture, ancient Egyptian culture, in one sentence, like oh, it hasn't changed in thousands of years. And it's like, you know, these people created the tallest building on earth until like 1840, so they're not complete idiots. So you have to take a lot of what she says in there with a grain of salt.

**WOODS:** Now let me talk about some of the drawbacks. I mean obviously there's something wrong here given the problems with some of her followers. I'm going to get complaints from people, and I understand. I don't mean to say everybody who is interested in or follows Ayn Rand is a humorless automaton who doesn't want to have children. I don't want to say that. But I do know that the people who are the most committed to it I have personally found this.

I invited somebody onto this show who wrote a book on, I'd better not say the subject because then it will be obvious who it is, a book of great interest to my listeners, and he even sent me a copy of the book as a review copy back when I was at the Mises Institute. So I thought, you know what, I should have this guy on. So I wrote to him, and we got this friendly letter back. He's at one of the major Randian institutes. And he wrote back – very polite – but he said he was not able to do this at this time. And my producer and I drew exactly the same conclusion: the decision has been handed down that you can't go on my show.

So clearly there's something. And then of course we all have infighting, but the purges, I am breaking with so and so, I mean they're so dramatic. Like the world cares about what's going on at some Randian institute.

In fact a former guest on this show, Bryan Caplan, he went to a Randian or Objectivist summer seminar when he was in college, and he said there was a purge going on *during the seminar*. So we would wake up and there would be people no longer there that day, who had been there the previous day.

**MALICE:** That sounds pretty awesome. But let me just say ...

**WOODS:** All right, and then I've got one more thing.

**MALICE:** Very germane, which you just made me think of. They're very bad at being persuasive, and here's an example. During the tsunami that hit southeast Asia within the last decade, I don't remember exactly when, the Ayn Rand Institute took out a full-page ad denouncing charity as a moral obligation. And is there any worse time and a place when people are dying and homeless due to a natural disaster, is this really when people are going to be receptive to your message of selfishness? This is really the time when you say let's throw philosophy in kind of this cerebral sense out the window? Let's get the people fed and then we can discuss the implications and so on and so forth. So it's very, very tin eared.

**WOODS:** The other thing I would say is that for example in *Atlas Shrugged*, although there are important themes in it that are certainly quite valid, on the other hand, and I realized this I think only when I saw the movie versions, for which of course she bears no responsibility or blame, I could not believe how badly done they are, especially considering how many starving actors there are out there who are talented. Why did they find people who were so bad? But on the other hand you realize they do have to say wooden things, but I know some actors who could say those wooden things better than these people did.

But the point is, I realized that there is something cartoonish about *Atlas Shrugged*. Not in the way a progressive would. They would think it's cartoonish because it appreciates entrepreneurs and stuff. But the way she describes what happens in an interventionist society is clearly not the way it happens. There is no Law for the Equalization of Incomes. Could you imagine the richest people in America allowing that to happen? The implication, then, of *Atlas Shrugged* would be that a democratic society really is a democratic society, and my vote is just as important as David Rockefeller's vote. But that's not the case. There's no way David Rockefeller is going to allow a law for the equalization of incomes. It's going to be much more subtle than that.

**MALICE:** Yeah. And she was for Nixon and against Reagan, so she very much believed in the democratic process and I think she had a very poor understanding of how it actually works in practice, and how rigged it is, and pointless it is, if not downright pernicious.

**WOODS:** Let's wrap things up with let's say two recommendations from you, the fiction recommendation you would say people ought to jump into first if they're interested, and the nonfiction one.

**MALICE:** Well, I would just say, first of all, anyone who's interested in liberty has to read Rand if only to know what they're talking about when people start attacking her. And they're just novels, so I would say definitely start with *Anthem*, it's a hundred pages, you'll get it, whether you like or not, that's fair.

As for nonfiction I would say there's no point in reading her nonfiction until you've read her fiction, because I think her fiction is so much more moving and entertaining that you can get a lot of the stuff from her nonfiction, either elsewhere or after you've gone through *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*.

**WOODS:** Now I myself am, again, a little different from you on this. I didn't enjoy *Anthem* at all. And if I had started with *Anthem* I think I would have ended with *Anthem*. So I'll recommend *We the Living* as one to get started, because you don't have to make the investment of time that you would with *Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*. But I bet you'll want to look at those after you read *We the Living*.

And then secondly I enjoyed reading *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*. It has essays by other people as well. But they're really strong essays that still hold up after many decades.

All right. Do you have any final parting words? I don't want you feel like you didn't get your full say.

**MALICE:** Oh, no, no. I mean there's so much to talk about with Rand, and I just think it's very easy to criticize her and she opened herself up for that by being so antagonistic, which is to her credit. But I think people really need to recognize what an asset she was to the movement and to really understand what it is that she's trying to say.

**WOODS:** Well, everybody make sure not only to check out the show notes pages for today, [tomwoods.com/400](http://tomwoods.com/400), we'll have helpful links to some of the books we've been talking about, also links to Michael Malice. You should visit him at [michaelmalice.com](http://michaelmalice.com) where you can find out still more ways to visit him through social media. And of course get his book *Dear Reader*. Give us the 30-second plug for *Dear Reader* before you get out of here.

**MALICE:** It's the unauthorized autobiography of Kim Jong Il, if you're interested in North Korea and don't want to blow your brains out while reading a book about how depressing it is, I made it entertaining and I made it coherent.

**WOODS:** It's a wonderful book. It's a fantastic idea, I'm so glad you did it. And I'm so glad you joined me today for Episode 400. So the next time you're on it's going to be like, you know, 463, like some obscure number.

Anyway, thanks for doing it, I appreciate it, it was great.

**MALICE:** Thanks, Tom.