

It Is What It Is: My Life Course Described

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First printed in the *Isthmus*, June / July 2010



When I was very young, I was told repeatedly that I was a good little boy, polite and handsome, with an unlimited potential to do great things. I believed them when they told me this. Soon after, I was told that I was fundamentally flawed, that I was born depraved and full of something called original sin. Did I not make mistakes? Did I not have selfish desires? I did, and so I believed them when they told me this as well. The revelations kept coming, until one day I had a complete picture of what it was that I was being asked to believe.

Along with this heavy new knowledge, I was given a threat and a promise: If I refused to believe, if I did not ask a supernatural power to come into my heart, if I did not beg for forgiveness for having been bad, then I would burn in a lake of fire for all of eternity. But, if I was able to believe without proof, if I did as I was told, then an all-powerful being would remake me again someday so that I could live forever after I die. With so much at stake, I tried to believe — I really did.

I can remember attending church and feeling a sense of euphoria, like I was part of something larger than myself, like the group I worshiped with knew and felt something that the ‘World’ did not know. I was special, chosen. When something bad happened, I was being tested. When something good happened, I was being rewarded. Everything was wrapped up in a beautiful bow of circular logic. If I did something wrong, I could be forgiven just by asking. When others looked down on me for doing something wrong, I was the victim. Did I not already have the forgiveness of something so much greater than these mere humans? I put everything in the higher power’s hands, and I tried to be humble.

I can also remember having doubts. In Sunday school, and later in youth group, I used religious texts to ask unanswerable questions. I was told that the evil one knows the texts better than anyone. “You’re not with the evil one, are you?” they asked.

The beliefs of adults who I trusted, the beliefs of countless generations before me, were deeply entrenched in my mind — perhaps due to that same survival mechanism that makes a person believe an adult when they say how important it is to look both ways before crossing the street. Eventually, however, I stopped believing. I don’t remember exactly when I decided to completely reject the rituals and mythology that I was raised to accept. But I know that I did, and I know that I tried and failed to figure out the truth on my own.

Two things happened. First, I was not able to overcome the deeply learned idea that people were only good if they believe what I was raised to believe. I never felt like a good person. Second, since their “truth” was not my “truth,” I decided that it is possible for everyone to have their own truth, to have their own standards for what is good and for what is worth valuing. My life and past character are a testament to how that way of thinking plays out.

Many years later, while sitting in a prison cell, I received a book in the mail, sent to me by a person whom I had rarely ever seen or spoken to. I had always loved to read, mainly as a way to escape reality. After looking at the back cover of my new book, I decided to read it, even though it was a genre-type that I had never seen before, by an author I had never heard of before.

The book was *The Fountainhead*, by Ayn Rand, and I read it from cover to cover, all through the night, using for illumination the small diamonds of yellow light that passed through my prison window grate. By the end of the book, I had witnessed a man live the kind of life that I could have lived, the kind of life that I want to live. I was elated and disappointed at the same time. Finally, I had answers to questions that I had long ago stopped asking, and all of it too late to do anything with — other than maximize my limited potential within this tiny box.

What I was asked to believe before was grounded in the unknowable. What I had later come to believe was based on a seriously flawed premise. After reading this book, I now had what I needed to build a philosophy, a belief system, grounded in the knowable, and any argument made from my new system now had the potential to be sound. What was built on the sand could now be, truly, built on the rock. Here are the basics:

There are three all-encompassing, self-evident pieces of knowledge. First, existence exists. This seems to go without saying, but it is surprising how many people believe that nothing exists. Second, I am conscious of existence. Third, things are what they are. They have a specific, knowable identity. All self-evident truths so far, right?

What I had failed as a child to see as self-evident was the fact that existence is all that exists. There is nothing outside of existence, nothing supernatural. And this existence continues to exist whether I am there to be aware of it or not. Existence precedes consciousness. What I was asked to believe was the idea that a supernatural consciousness precedes existence, and it can alter the laws of cause and effect whenever it wants. If I prayed hard enough, maybe it would. Later, I had come to believe that my own consciousness came before all that exists. I was the one who decided what was true and good; and, if I wished hard enough, then I could change what was. Boy, was I so very wrong.

The truth is that reality does not depend on consciousness; it is actually the other way around. Truth is determined by reality. I am responsible for evaluating my sensory evidence, using every mental faculty at my disposal in search of truth. If I am wrong, reality is the judge. It is my responsibility to conform to the universe, not the other way around. I must respect reality. It is futile to wish it to be something other than it is. If I fail, I do not hold it responsible. I am not in constant conflict with reality. I master reality by obeying it.

With this new understanding, I moved on to the idea that things are what they are. To be means to be something. What am I? I am a rational animal ideally equipped to thrive in this universe. I am not omnipotent, so I make mistakes. And much of what I deal with is man-made — and relatively new to humankind. Many of my automatic tendencies are geared towards survival in a less man-made environment. This does not mean that I am depraved, flawed, or evil. It just is.

So, then, what is good? Life is good. Human life and all of its potential is what I use as a standard for good. I do what is right because it leads to a long life filled with health and mental well-being. I also do what is right so that I can maintain a high opinion of myself. I once thought that pride was a sin. Now I see that pride is essential to a quality life. I once did what was 'right' out of fear of eternal damnation, out of guilt for a man who was tortured, or because something supernatural was always watching. Later, what was right was whatever I wanted it to be. Now I do what is right for myself, and my fellow man can trust that I will do so consistently. If I fail to do what is right, I will not wish my accountability away. I will make it right, in so far as I am able to. That is the kind of world that I want to live in, the kind of world that I want to create with my choices. Not the world as it is now, but the world as it could be.

I also understand that my tool for survival, my mind, does not do the necessary work automatically. I once thought that truth had to be revealed to me, so I did not work to see. I now know that to be or not to be is really a question of to focus or not to focus.

I had once put everything in the hands of a higher power, and later I thought it was futile to make

any long-term plans at all. Therefore, I drifted when I should have been filled with purpose. If I could do it all again, I would be a long-range thinker; I would set goals that would require action over a really long span of time. What I did was seek immediate gratification. When life got hard, I evaded; I immersed my mind in a fog. I lowered my level of awareness. I now know how vital it is to do the opposite. When life gets hard, I select the problem and then I focus all of my mental energy on solving it, using the full context of my knowledge. If I discover a contradiction, I do not evade or distort it. I attack it until it is a contradiction no more.

I now understand that every element of my code, of my knowledge, must fit so that it does not contradict any other part. As part of my code, I cherish my pride, and I am committed toward achieving my own moral perfection. I was once taught that pride is a sin, and moral perfection is out of reach. They were wrong to try and stop me from being proud of how awesome I am and can be. I was also taught that judging men was a right reserved for a higher power. "Love everyone," they said. Now, I seek justice. I judge a man's character and conduct, then act accordingly, granting to him only that which he deserves. I cherish independence. I form my own judgments and live by the work of my own mind. I strive to maintain my integrity, to show uncompromising loyalty to my convictions and values. I demand from myself complete and total honesty. I refuse to pretend that facts are other than they are. And, above all, I value my ability to be productive. I was a parasite, and for that I am truly ashamed.

And that is the core of my philosophy, as derived from the teachings of Ayn Rand and Leonard Peikoff. Explorations into their writings have helped me to achieve higher and higher levels of abstraction, but all of these levels can be reduced to the three self-evident truths: Existence exists, I am conscious of existence, and a thing is what it is.

My rock is the knowable, and my life is so much more because of it.

Sources:

Rand, Ayn, (1943). *The Fountainhead*. New York, NY: Penguin.

Peikoff, Leonard. (1993). *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*. New York, NY: Meridian.