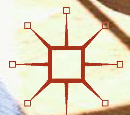
BEN MURNANE

AYN RAND AND THE POSTHUMAN

The Mind-Made Future



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To my mum, Mai—I hope this is sharp enough
and
my dad, Des—who wanted his own copy

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: A Posthuman Objective

Ayn Rand is one of the most divisive icons in America's divided cultural and political landscape. Ask a politically interested person from the United States what he or she thinks of Ayn Rand, and you will discover where on the ideological spectrum they sit. The Russian-American novelist and philosopher is fêted on the right for her exposition of what she called the morality of capitalism, while on the left she is vilified and satirized for the same.

Rand, born in St Petersburg in 1905, immigrated to the United States at the age of 21, and went on to write four novels, plus a series of nonfiction books. Rand's fiction is a vessel for the delivery of her theories, and her nonfiction references her fiction to demonstrate its points. Rand developed a philosophy she called Objectivism, which holds that reality is fixed outside of us, "objective," and knowable through investigation. Objectivism venerates productivity: the turning of the physical material of the world into products useful for humanity. The role of the human mind is to transform physical reality. Rand's celebration of productivity, and her belief that every person is an end in themselves—her individualism—made her a major supporter of capitalism, and thus a celebrant of America, at the height of the Cold War.[1]

For a body of work developed over some half a century, between the 1920s and 1970s, Rand's corpus is remarkably thematically consistent. All her works are to a greater or lesser extent about what she termed the "virtue of selfishness," and the evils of altruism. Selfishness, for Rand, was a way of life centered on the rational achievement of one's goals.

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Altruism was negation of the self in favor of a mythical and unachievable "common good." Almost akin to a Tolkien, Rand manufactures an internally consistent secondary world, a world of absolutes, morally divided between heroic producers and the evil unproductive. In Rand's reality, businessmen, industry captains, self-created individuals, are valorized, while anyone who works for the interests of others or is seen not to be thinking for him- or herself is condemned.

Whatever one thinks of her politics or her fiction, Rand is surely one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century. In 1991, in a survey supported by the Library of Congress, American readers listed her 1957 magnum opus, *Atlas Shrugged*, as the second most influential book in their lives, the first being the Bible (Heller 2009, p. xii). Historian Jennifer Burns sees Rand as a principal figure in the modern American libertarian movement. Rand's reach goes deeper still: she has entered the heart of the political mainstream. In 1987, Maureen Dowd of the *New York Times* dubbed her the "novelist laureate" of the Reagan administration (Burns 2009, pp. 255, 258, 279). Sociologist Niamh Hourigan names Rand as one of the three main influences on the dominant economic policymakers of the 1980s and 1990s, the others being Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek (Hourigan 2012).

Those who admit to being inspired by Rand include Alan Greenspan, chairman of the United States Federal Reserve for 19 years, until 2006; Paul Ryan, vice presidential nominee of the Republican Party in the 2012 election, who became Speaker of the House of Representatives in 2015; and Steve Jobs, co-founder and former CEO of one of Silicon Valley's most powerful corporations. Rand has also inspired makers of art and literature, and especially popular culture—including Steve Ditko, co-creator of Marvel Comics' Spider-Man, and the progressive rock band Rush, who acknowledge "the genus [sic] of Ayn Rand" in the liner notes to *2112* (1976). The extent of Rand's direct influence on business leaders and creators of public policy, however, is perhaps unequaled by any other twentieth-century novelist.

In recent decades, Rand's sales have only grown. In the early 2010s, average annual sales stood at three quarters of a million (Mayhew 2012, p. ix). More than 30 million copies of her books have been sold in total.[2] And, though primarily an American phenomenon, her popularity is not confined to the United States. The *Economist* reports that, in India, Rand's sales outstrip those of Karl Marx by 16 to one, while online searches for Randian topics are high, and businessmen, Bollywood stars,

and architects name her as an inspiration. The Swedish enterprise minister from 2011 to 2014, Annie Lööf, hailed Rand as "one of the greatest thinkers of the twentieth century" (*Economist* 2012). When Rand was alive, individualists traveled to the US from as far away as Africa to hear her speak (Heller 2009, p. 320).

A 2012 article for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* succinctly expressed what we might call the traditional academic view of Ayn Rand. Outlining why we should spend little or no time studying her work, Alan Wolfe, professor of political science at Boston College, declared: "In the academy, she is a nonperson. Her theories are works of fiction. Her works of fiction are theories, and bad ones at that" (Wolfe 2012). The problem with Wolfe's dismissal is that it overlooks a key element which must be central to the study of any writer: the influence of the writer on readers and on the wider culture. There can be no doubt that Rand delivered her ideas in a manner that has had enduring appeal and impact, both in the private sphere of readers' lives and the public spheres of culture and politics. This makes her a subject worthy of examination.

Rand's nonperson status within academia has been changing over the last several years. Two articles in the *Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* aptly highlight the growth in academic focus on Rand since her death in 1982. Mimi Reisel Gladstein makes a valid point when she notes that "the trajectory of Rand's critical reputation is not that different from many writers who challenge the mores and thinking of their times." She cites the early shunning of Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck as menaces to the community. Gladstein sees the turn of the millennium as a breakthrough period for literary scholarship on Rand, with the publication of the first book-length studies on each of her major novels, Douglas J. Den Uyl's *"The Fountainhead": An American Novel* (Twayne, 1999) and Gladstein's own *"Atlas Shrugged": Manifesto of the Mind* (Twayne, 2000). The year 1999 also saw the release of the critically important *Feminist Interpretations of Ayn Rand* (edited by Gladstein and Sciabarra, Pennsylvania State University Press) and the founding of the *Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* (Gladstein 2003, pp. 376–77, 384–85, 388). Chris Matthew Sciabarra notes the increasing frequency of scholarly references to Rand, and the diversity of publications in which she is mentioned: everything from *College English* to the *Harvard Journal of Law & Public Policy* to *Germano-Slavica*, a Canadian Journal of Germanic and Slavic comparative and interdisciplinary studies (Sciabarra 2004, p. 2). The number of essay collections devoted to Rand, and the number

of important scholarly articles on her work, has continued to grow throughout the 2000s. Another waypoint was reached in 2016, with the publication of Allan Gotthelf and Gregory Salmieri's *A Companion to Ayn Rand* (Wiley-Blackwell), an academic primer on Objectivist philosophical concepts that takes account of Rand's entire corpus.

Despite this, for someone with her level of influence, Ayn Rand remains understudied. While references to Rand pervade American popular culture, and journalism both promoting and excoriating her ideas abounds, most scholarship has been done by committed partisans. There is a single independent journal devoted to Rand, the *Journal of Ayn Rand Studies*. In 2009, Jennifer Burns of Stanford University broke new ground with a nonpartisan monograph covering Rand's influence on the American right, *Goddess of the Market*, published by Oxford University Press. The book included a call for further investigation of Rand's impact on cyber and computer culture, which has been "strikingly libertarian from the beginning" (Burns 2009, pp. 263, 339n48). This study responds to that call to a certain extent, by considering Rand's relationship with those operating in technological spheres, while also covering other ground. My book addresses the relationship between Rand's work and one of the major theories of twenty-first-century subjectivity, posthumanism. The essential question is this: Does Rand's philosophy support a posthuman vision—that is, a vision of man existing beyond the "naturally produced" organic body?[3] Through an analysis of Rand's work itself, and an exploration of her influence on those who create, theorize, and speculate on technological progress, I argue that it does.

Posthuman Beginnings

The novel which truly made Rand famous was her third, 1943's *The Fountainhead*. Its hero is an uncompromising red-haired architect, Howard Roark. The story charts his career from his college expulsion until he becomes master of all he surveys. He will not design with others, will only design buildings in his own inimitable style. At the end, during a lengthy speech on the rights of man, individual, and the wrongs of men, collective, Roark polemicizes: "Every great new invention was denounced. The first motor was considered foolish. The airplane was considered impossible. The power loom was considered vicious. Anesthesia was considered sinful. But the men of unborrowed vision

went ahead … . The creator's concern is the conquest of nature" (*The Fountainhead*, pp. 710–12).[4]

Roark is a conduit for Rand's philosophy. Roark's, and Rand's, viewpoint, raises a question which can only now be explored in its full implications—and perhaps not even yet. If the concern of the creative mind "is the conquest of nature," why not build a technological body, a human frame better than biology?

The posthuman is a concept of subjectivity, driven by a belief that the self is not limited to the individual organic human body. Philosophical posthumanism can take many forms, from ontological kinship with animals and the environment, to incorporating nonhuman facets into ideas of the self—whether it be an iPhone or a bionic limb. Posthumanism encompasses philosophical ideas about modern and emerging technology, as they relate to the human: artificial intelligence, genetically engineered bodies, cloning technology, potential machine bodies into which our minds could be placed (cyborgs). These are possibilities found in both science fiction (SF) and increasingly in scientific reality. How does the existence of these possibilities alter what it means to be human, alter how we think about ourselves as human beings? This is perhaps the central question of posthumanism.

Proponents of the "posthuman" futures I write about here, broadly speaking, seek to improve upon the organic human body, either by engineering it at the genetic level, or by fusing elements of the organic with mechanical and digital technology. The philosophy which advocates improving the human by substituting the technological for the organic is also known as transhumanism. The differences between the broader discourse of posthumanism and the specific field of transhumanism are commented upon further below.

The cyborg may be on the verge of becoming real. Scientists—the primary creators of posthuman futures, just as SF authors are the primary imaginers of them—have long been experimenting with technology's ability to improve our bodies. Kevin Warwick, professor of cybernetics, has been involved in a number of cyborgian experiments. One of the most significant occurred in the early 2000s, when he had a 100-electrode array implanted into the median nerve fibers of his left arm, with which—via the Internet—he could operate a robotic hand that was located over 3,000 miles away (Warwick was in Columbia University, New York and the hand in Reading University, UK). The array was also used to send

neural signals, via the Internet, to electrodes implanted in his wife's arm, resulting in stimulation of her nervous system (Warwick et al. 2004, pp. 186–88). The implications of these fledgling cyborgian movements continue to echo today. Warwick has said: "I, for one, am looking forward to upgrading my own capabilities. … I want to have all sorts of different senses fed directly into my brain and to be able to communicate by thought signals alone"; "it's a cyborg life for me!" (Warwick 2001, pp. 43–44) The cyborg is the posthuman par excellence, the fusion of human will and manmade limbs.

It is important to note that the posthuman does not necessarily entail a world devoid of humans. It implies the survival of something human, albeit in a revised form. N. Katherine Hayles writes that "the posthuman should not be depicted as an apocalyptic break with the past. Rather, it exists in a relation of overlapping innovation and replication … . Technology as a strategy of survival and evolutionary fitness cannot be alien to the human" (Hayles 2003, p. 134). The "post-" in posthumanism can be treated in the same manner as Jean-François Lyotard treats the prefix in postmodernism. The "post-" does not signify a simple division with modernism. Lyotard writes that the postmodern should be understood as a development beyond, but also something that comes from within, the modern; it is a process of "anamorphosis" (Lyotard 1993, pp. 47–48, 50). The posthuman can be understood in the same way.

Overlapping circles can be drawn between Objectivism and posthumanist thought. Much of the twentieth century's ideological and real conflict begins with arguments over the interests of society as against the interests of the self—with Rand at the vanguard of those promoting self-interest. In the twenty-first century, the philosophical ground is shifting to the battle of the self versus technology. Technology is increasingly the force which binds human society, by setting and expanding the limits of human connectedness, as well as expanding individual lifespan and capability. Posthuman theory will therefore become an ever-more important way of analyzing twenty-first-century culture and subjectivity. Objectivism and posthumanism are far from a perfect fit philosophically; there is tension, especially considering the Randian notion of man as heroic in himself (that is, without technological augmentation) and the democratic aspirations of much posthumanist thought (set against Rand's individual-alone). However, the strains are linked through facets such as a belief in the primacy of the mind, as well as a veneration of progress through technological advancement, a faith in a Nietzschean

Superman, and a belief in the comparative dystopia of now. According to any directive philosophy for living, the future is a comparative utopia when the edicts of that particular philosophy are followed.

In Rand, the role of the mind as man's key asset—indeed, essence—is foregrounded. In *Atlas Shrugged*, her heroic protagonist, John Galt, reverses Descartes's famous assertion, declaring: "I am, therefore I'll think" (*Atlas Shrugged*, p. 1058). For Rand, thinking was not the first proof of existence. Rather, one existed, therefore thinking was needed to survive, and reasoned thought was a conscious choice. The creator is distinguished by his or her superior mental faculties; physical labor is secondary.

A similar belief in the mind as human essence underlies much posthumanist thought. As Hayles, one of the primary theorists of the posthuman, has pointed out, one of the first philosophical steps on the road to posthuman conception, is a grading of the body as subordinate to the will, ideas, and thoughts of the mind. The organic body becomes, for posthumanists, mankind's "original prosthesis." It is therefore desirable to replace the organic body with a better prosthesis, one more able to fulfill the mind's wishes (Hayles 1999, p. 3).

Rand's belief system is marked at its core by an intellectual investment in technology, an assertion that man's progress is indicated by technological development; moreover, that technological progression is at the heart of humanity's worth. Rand's descriptions of technological creations as the physical embodiments of human thought—we could say its "offspring"—foreshadow Hans Moravec's concept of "mind children." Moravec, a robotics expert and transhumanist, writes of mind children as the technological creations of man's mind, which may come to take on lives of their own (Moravec 1988).

Such descriptions by Rand come to the fore in her 1938 novella *Anthem*, a creation myth which conflates technological creation with the liberation of the individual. Set in a future dystopia where humankind has technologically regressed, its hero is Equality 7-2521, a rebel who rediscovers electricity. When Equality brings his creation, a lightbulb, to the World Council of Scholars, he appeals to them that "the future of mankind" lies with electricity (*Anthem*, p. 70). Instead of praising Equality, however, the scholars condemn him, vowing to suppress his invention so as not to make the candle-makers jobless.

From the standpoint of posthumanism, and how Rand buttresses a posthumanist philosophy, it is important to note that in *Anthem*, as

elsewhere in Rand, human invention is framed as the conquest of nature: man's mind over the matter of the earth. Equality 7-2521's discovery of electricity is described as "[t]he power of the sky … made to do men's bidding"; it is "the key to the earth"—technology is that which "ease[s] the toil of men," and that is good (*Anthem*, pp. 60, 71). There is no dividing line between the invention and the inventor; the invention is as much an extension of the inventor as his own body. Equality speaks of his creation, saying, "this wire is as a part of our body, as a vein torn from us, glowing with our blood. Are we proud of this thread of metal, or of our hands which made it, or is there a line to divide these two?" The technological creation is endowed with the features of organic life; it is "a living heart that gives us strength" (*Anthem*, pp. 61, 76).

In Rand, the self is integrated with the product of self. The implication everywhere is that the self is not limited to the organic. Technology and invention become extensions of the mind and body, just as the body itself is an agent of the ego.

Investing in Technology

At the end of *Anthem*, Equality renames himself Prometheus, after "he [who] taught men to be gods." Prometheus vows to re-establish civilization by having children with another rebel, Liberty 5-3000, whom he renames Gaea, as she is "to be the mother of a new kind of gods" (*Anthem*, p. 99).

Frankenstein, of course, was the Modern Prometheus, while technologies today which challenge our assumptions about life or manipulate the boundaries of life are frequently compared to the work of Mary Shelley's fictional life-creator. Rand, however, takes only a positive view of technological advancement and scientific experimentation, when in the hands of the individual and not the collective. Men should be gods, according to her, for their minds are creative.

In his book *The Fourth Discontinuity*, Bruce Mazlish makes the case for the "co-evolution" of humans and machines. Humans have always used tools, and machines have developed as we have developed; indeed, they have been key to our development and vice versa. Humans and machines belong to the same cycle of life. Humans are not simply products of evolution but also agents of it; as Mazlish states, in Darwinian terms, machine evolution is closer to domestic than natural selection. We are bringing the artificial to the point of sentience; whether machines will

soon evolve independent of humans is "a pressing issue" (Mazlish 1993, pp. 4–8). In this scenario, men are gods of sorts, as Rand imagined.

Since the Industrial Revolution, according to Mazlish, human evolution has seemed to point in a new direction. This is "where humans pass, or begin to pass, the boundary between the animal and the mechanical. … Humans themselves become more mechanical." And why wouldn't we? Integration of machines into our lives extends our capacity exponentially; technological development is very much linked to our ability to be all we can be (Mazlish 1993, pp. 10, 12). Rand likewise identifies the Industrial Revolution as man's breaking point with his primitive past. It represents the ushering in of a new order based on progress and technological advancement, paving the way for the triumph of reason and, ultimately, Objectivism. At least in this sense, posthumanist theorists and Objectivists view human historical trajectories in a similar manner.

As the above narrative suggests, Rand's work itself provides a backdrop for technological futures and in turn posthumanism. A significant part of my case for the overlapping circles between Objectivism and posthumanism, however, is Rand's real-world influence on the innovators who are forging our technological destiny, whose works constitute precursors to posthuman futures. Rand's intellectual investment in technology has undoubtedly aided the acceptance of her ideas among technology entrepreneurs and libertarian transhumanists. Internet innovators such as PayPal co-founder Peter Thiel and Wikipedia co-founder Jimmy Wales count Rand as an inspiration. Transhumanism's libertarian element owes much to Rand. The founding principles of the libertarian-transhumanist Extropian movement stem in part from the writings of Rand and Hayek. The Extropians advocate "extropy," the opposite of entropy. Their principles call for "a rational, action-based optimism" combined with a transcendence of natural limits through "intelligent technology" (Max More, "Extropian Principles," qtd. in Hughes 2004, p. 166). Patri Friedman, Milton Friedman's grandson, Rand fan, and a well-known transhumanist, is co-founder of the Seasteading Institute, an organization with the aim of establishing floating cities on the oceans. These would be locations where innovators could experiment with new methods of social relations and new technologies, free from the obstruction of existing governments. In *Atlas Shrugged*, the productive vanish from society to establish their own "Atlantis," as Rand calls it, a pure-capitalist community hidden in a valley dubbed Galt's Gulch. The similarities between seasteads and Galt's Gulch have not gone unnoticed.

Seasteading and the Extropians are two examples which are further investigated through an Objectivist–posthumanist lens in this book.

Nietzsche's Superman, as I mentioned, informs both Rand's ideal man and the posthuman; this connection is explored below. The specter of another Nietzschean concept hangs over Rand and posthumanism, however: the will to nothingness. Given that our current historical trajectory suggests that man may one day be superseded by his technological creations, does Rand's intellectual investment in technology constitute an ultimate will to nothing for humanity? Can Rand's work be considered a negation of the true organic self? This question is too large to be given much attention in this volume, but the specter of it remains present.

Objectivists, of course, would say that Rand's philosophy does the opposite of negate the human; Objectivism exposes the true human self: the thinking individual mind. Yet, for all her valorization of man, Rand herself was not always so sure that the human was the best form of life that there could be on earth. She wrote in her journal, on July 18, 1945: "Perhaps we are really in the process of evolving from apes to Supermen—and the rational faculty is the dominant characteristic of the better species, the Superman" (*Journals*, p. 285). If Supermen are to be made real on earth, they will likely be men of steel, technological bodies, posthumans. The future awaits, and it begins with Ayn Rand.

Chapter Breakdown

This book is an introduction to the overlaps between the work of Ayn Rand and the sphere of the posthuman. It is an argument for Rand's presence within the context of the posthuman. More widely conceived, it is also about ways of thinking about Objectivism and posthumanism together, relating the two fields to each other. The book is in many ways something quite inchoate: an evidentiary statement, perhaps; an account of certain links and an elaboration upon them. My hope is that it may be a spur for future thought.

My study is not simply a study of Rand's fiction as a product unto itself. It is as much or more about *where the fiction goes*. By this I mean: I consider the nature of the impetus Rand has provided to so many, and how her ideas have contributed toward certain ends. My method combines close textual analysis of Rand's work with an examination of other sources and contextual factors. Comparison between Rand's fiction

and other fiction illuminates much of my argument. Chapters 2 and 3 are primarily about the inspiration Rand has provided in the real-world fields of the posthuman. Chapters 4–6 look at the relationship between Rand and posthumanist science fiction, and how her work has been put to use here.

Chapter 2 may be considered an extension of the introduction. If this introduction offers a teaser, Chapter 2 is designed to provide a more complete overview of the field of posthumanism, and Rand's relationship to it. The chapter summarizes our current technological moment, and Rand's place among those who have brought us to this point. Are we really headed toward a time in which human and machine merge, or where we are altered fundamentally by artificial genetic reconfiguration? To some who hold such a vision, of biology integrated with—or supplanted by—technology, Rand's work is part of the fire burning beneath the dream. Rand's views on technology are undoubtedly part of the reason she has provided this particular inspiration. This chapter exposits those views, which I believe lead toward posthuman conception. Two facets of the Randian worldview are described: (i) *man conquering nature is good, it is a true expression of man's unique value*; and (ii) *technology is an extension of human will and as such has immense value*. These views are wrapped up in Rand's broader belief that the individual mind is the core of productivity, and that capitalism is the only economic system commensurate with free minds.

Chapter 3 goes deeper into the philosophical relationships between Objectivism and posthumanism. It considers the two major strains of posthumanist thought, as identified by Jeanine Thweatt-Bates in her useful book on the subject, *Cyborg Selves* (2012), and overviews their philosophical relationship to Rand: (i) Donna Haraway's cyborg, and (ii) the transhuman. Transhumanism is part of the broad discourse of posthumanism, but it also has a separate and more concrete meaning. The posthuman is a concept of subjectivity, and posthumanism a diverse philosophical field ruminating on the nature of modern and future life. While the posthuman can mean an enhanced human being, such as a cyborg, it is also more generally about *the relationship* between the human and the non-human (the machine). Hayles, for instance, writes that, because of how technology and new fields of science have changed how we *think* about ourselves, "even a biologically unaltered *Homo sapiens* counts as posthuman" (Hayles 1999, p. 4). If the posthuman is a concept of subjectivity, the transhuman is a specific

being—an enhancement over the "ordinary" biological human—and transhumanism is a movement with definitive aims: life extension, immortality, expanded ability through genetic and technological augmentation. Transhumanism has far more in common with Rand than other philosophies of posthumanity. This fact is demonstrated by exploring the similar relationship Objectivism and transhumanism hold with Nietzsche, as well as covering how transhumanism and Objectivism themselves interact.

In Chapter 4, the analysis of Rand in the context of the trans-/posthuman turns to fiction. I delineate the relationship between Rand's work and two discrete forms of posthumanist science fiction; what I call Rand noir vs. Rand incorporated. "Classic" posthumanist SF—the mold of cyberpunk—depends upon the existence of a Randian precursor, high capitalism; these texts have their origin in a time when Randian views were clearly at work within US policy circles: the 1980s. However, unlike Rand's utopian vision of pure capitalism, cyberpunk's capitalist apex is distinctly dystopian. I therefore call it *Rand noir*. The relationship of this work to Rand is indirect. The last few decades, however, have also seen the advent of a number of works depicting transhumanism and posthumanism which interact directly with Rand's fiction. These include *Andromeda* (2000–2005), a television series developed from notes left behind by *Star Trek* creator Gene Roddenberry; the videogame *BioShock* (2007), developed by 2K Games; and *The Transhumanist Wager* (2013), a novel by Zoltan Istvan. In contrast to earlier posthumanist SF—which is marked by postmodern ambivalence—these texts take up a position, and put forward an argument, with regard to the issues they are airing: issues of the human future, man in relation to machine, and the nature of Objectivism itself. As they address or incorporate Rand's vision, this position-taking is a logical result. The absolutism of Rand demands an argument in response—not ambivalence. I call these works *Rand incorporated*, since this describes what they do: incorporate Ayn Rand directly into their themes and plots.

Chapters 4–6 together may be considered an extended case study, comparing classic Rand noir works of posthumanist science fiction with works that interact directly with Ayn Rand. All of this analysis speaks to Rand's presence within the sphere of posthumanism. Chapter 4 looks at three "Rand noir" texts—Ridley Scott's 1982 film *Blade Runner*, Mamoru Oshii's 1995 anime *Ghost in the Shell*, and William Gibson's