

Libertarian Thoughts Reborn

by John Hospers

I was born in Pella, a town of about 5,000 in central Iowa. It began as a Dutch colony in 1847, settled by a group of emigrants from Holland who were rebelling against certain Dutch laws and regulations of the State Church of Holland. My great-grandfather, John Hospers, was leader of the Second Emigration to Iowa in 1849. He and his wife and eight children made the move to Iowa on the suggestion of a missionary who said that this portion of Iowa had the richest soil in the world.

My great-grandfather, whose diary of the journey I still possess, was en route from Holland to Iowa for about two months. He lost two children on the way when scarlet fever broke out on the ship. He landed in New York and traveled by boat up the Hudson to Albany, where he buried yet another child who had contracted scarlet fever. Then via the Erie Canal to Buffalo, and a Great Lakes steamboat to Chicago (described as "a flourishing city of 23,000 souls"), finally overland to his Iowa destination. Here were thousands of acres of land waiting, as he thought, to be cultivated for human use.

My great-grandmother, born in 1839, was still alive when I was a child (she lived to be 100). I remember her descriptions of the endless vistas of land, of felling trees and the labor required to build on it, and the howling of wolves in the distance at night before she went to sleep. (We conversed in Dutch, which she spoke much better than English.)

Concepts like "government assistance" were entirely alien to these settlers. Life was precarious, but when illness or natural catastrophe struck, relatives and neighbors were there to give assistance; it would not have occurred to them to ask money from the government any more than to rob their neighbors' houses. God had given them this rich land, was that not enough? When I grew up there was some envy of the rich, but no bitterness or resentment. If Henry Ford was a millionaire, it was because he had earned it through inventiveness and industry, and my father, proud owner of a Ford, was grateful to him for helping to make the horse-and-buggy days obsolete.

I vividly remember the Roosevelt election landslide of 1936. One of my uncles, owner of a clothing store in Newton, thirty miles away, deplored the results of the election, and was sure that from then on

taxes would gradually rise as people became more dependent on government for services. My uncle's close friend, Fred Maytag, manufactured (and his company still manufactures) washing machines and refrigerators. Maytag feared that the risks involved in starting an industry or invention would become so great because of high taxes, that the entire industry would go bankrupt, thus leaving thousands of workers unemployed. "This is the end of freedom in America!" he predicted.

Though the political complexion of Pella could be described as *laissez faire*, the same could not be said of attitudes toward religion. While members of other sects (or no sect at all) were not harassed – the Constitution respected freedom of religion, and the Dutch emigrants were second to none in their respect for the Constitution – most people in the community were members of the Reformed Church of America ("the Dutch Reformed Church"). Dissenters were viewed as outsiders, but also as the potential beneficiaries of spiritual reformation.

There were at least a dozen Reformed churches in the community. Theirs was not a revivalist-style of worship of the dancing-for-Jesus type – the residents had only contempt for such shenanigans; rather, church was more like a catechism in which one learned The Truth and was told how to act on it. It was almost a case of "if you accept such-and-such premises, these are the conclusions that follow," except that one was expected also to accept the premises. These premises became increasingly questionable to me as I came to think on my own. For example, I was taught that Jesus is the Son of God, co-eternal with Him, but at the same time that he lived on the earth for some 33 years and died like anyone else. I wondered how Jesus could be a son – isn't a son an offspring of a father, and didn't the father have to be there first? And yet, we were taught, this son, like the Father, had been present before the creation. How could a biological organism living at some particular place and time also exist at all places and times? I would learn later from reading Santayana that the word 'eternal' is ambiguous, meaning either timeless, like the number system and the truths of mathematics, or everlasting, that is, existing throughout time, like the material universe, so-and-so many years. But this still didn't solve the problem of how a being – who spoke and issued commands – could be both timeless and everlasting, as the received doctrines taught.

Much of the religious teaching we received seemed to be not in the Bible itself, but a creation of the doctrine-makers like those who wrote the Creed of Nicea in 385, deciding which books were to be included in the Christian Bible, and through careful selection of

words trying to cast some light on theological questions such as how a temporal Jesus could also have been a timeless God. It was all very puzzling, and I became increasingly skeptical about it all.

It did, however, give me a keen appetite for philosophy, which as yet I knew nothing about. In college I came to read David Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, which presented in rich detail the same problems that had tormented me. I still wonder how I could have survived without it. It was my one consolation at a time when I was being inundated with conflicting views.

Meanwhile there were other fascinating subjects. At age ten, chancing to read the school encyclopedia's article on astronomy, I devoured everything I could find to read on the subject, soon exhausting the resources of the town library and the college library. By the time I was a freshman in college (Central College, in Pella), the dean, who taught the astronomy course, turned it over to me, saying "You know more about it than I do." And so at age eighteen I was teaching a course for college juniors and seniors. I delighted in every minute of it, and decided that explaining complex concepts was something I wanted to do forever. I would take the class to the college observatory late at night and show them the rings of Saturn in the telescope, and certain double stars we had discussed in class. I would take the class imaginatively through millions of light-years of space, and it seemed to be as much of an adventure for them as it was for me.

Astronomy, however, was not a prominent subject in American colleges. A cousin who was majoring in literature advised me to shift my major subject to something 'more practical', with the result that two years later I had my Master's degree in literature from the University of Iowa, equipped, I hoped, to teach Shakespeare and Shelley to not-so-eager undergraduates.

Then fate took another quick and unexpected turn. I received a generous scholarship from Columbia University, and decided to pursue the Ph.D. in my favorite but hitherto neglected subject, philosophy. Equipped with the degree in literature, aesthetics was a natural division of philosophy in which to pursue a major. By the end of the second year at Columbia I had finished my Ph.D. dissertation, *Meaning and Truth in the Arts*, which was published by the University of North Carolina Press. It was often cited in the literature and remained in print for about 35 years.

I taught Humanities at the undergraduate school of Columbia University, leading the class through the 'great classics of Western civilization' (ancient Greek the first semester and the moderns the second semester). All the while, I was drinking in the cultural life of

New York – theater, concert halls and opera were only a few minutes away by subway. But an invitation to a more permanent job came from the University of Minnesota, through my Iowa University professor, Wilfrid Sellars. I taught aesthetics, ethics, philosophy in literature, epistemology, and other subjects at Minnesota, and wrote a fairly lengthy book, *Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, which became quite influential. It is now, in 2003, in its fourth edition, and a paperback edition remains in considerable use in the United Kingdom.

When an invitation came from City University of New York, however, I found it impossible to say no. The most dramatic event of the decade for me was meeting Ayn Rand. She gave a talk at Brooklyn College in 1960, on "Faith and Force: the Destroyers of the Modern World" (later printed), after which I asked her to lunch. She said she could spare an hour for me – but more than four hours later we were still sitting there immersed in philosophical conversation. I described our conversations in a two-part article in *Liberty*, "Conversations with Ayn Rand" (1990), and will not repeat the description here.

She was indeed a philosopher of stature, I decided at once, but more versed in traditional metaphysics and ethics than in "philosophy with a linguistic turn" in which I was more at home. It seemed to me that many philosophical issues have their origin in the use and misuse of language, and it was difficult to share that orientation with someone of a different philosophical background. If she had only been trained in Oxford instead of Leningrad, I thought. I think I understood where she was coming from more than she understood where I was. On some issues, such as 'truths of logic' vs. contingent truths, and ways in which aesthetic value can be called objective, we never did come to agreement.

Nevertheless, this was not the end of our exchanges: I was invited to one of the NBI lectures, and within a week thereafter I was invited to her apartment for discussion – just the two of us, no one else. We met regularly many times thereafter, starting at about 8 p.m. and continuing till 2, 4, or even 6 in the morning. Meanwhile I was reading *Atlas Shrugged* (I was ashamed to confess to her although I had heard a lot about it the length of the book was forbidding and I had not read it before) – teaching in the daytime hours, writing on my ethics book in the evening, and spending the wee small hours eagerly devouring *Atlas*.

We agreed to spend the first few discussion sessions on *Atlas*. I was lost in admiration of the development, the structure, the climaxes, the dramatic speeches, and gave her the reasons for my admiration. I had assumed that many people had already shared

such reflections with her, but in fact, to my surprise, almost no one had. Instead, there were either carping critics who read without insight into what she was about, or mindless enthusiasts from whom she gleaned nothing. I was quite sure that they had read it only superficially; and that most of the content had escaped them. After a devastating review of it appeared in the *National Review*, I heard Buckley say on television that he had never read the book.

In any case, Ayn kept inviting me back. She saw my marked copy of *Atlas* and said, "May I trade you?" removing mine and putting a new signed copy of her own in its place. I noticed (and she noticed that I noticed) 'little things' such as the fact that reference to the god Atlas occurred only once in the entire novel, and why section headings had been given the titles that she gave them. She gave a knowing smile when I said "I don't want to pull a Dr. Stadler on you, but..." In turn, I appreciated her description of a conversation she had had long ago with Isabel Paterson, in which Isabel had planted a seed of *Atlas* in her mind: "What would happen if all the producers went on strike?"

As to the content of the novel, however, the things that critics had ridiculed became for me the main source of its power: its underlying philosophy. For me it was as if something with great life and energy was being reborn. The political and economic beliefs in which I had been brought up, were now living again as an explicit philosophy rather than as a largely unexamined set of assumptions never discussed in family gatherings but always there lurking in the background. Now with Ayn Rand, they came to life, and I seemed to come to new life with them.

One evening after a long discussion she said to me, "You are not at all like the liberals of today. You have a nineteenth-century mind, and I intend that as a compliment. You do believe in liberty; now why don't you do something about it?" At first I thought she meant that I should give up teaching and do something else. But no: "You are in the greatest profession in the world. Mostly you are unrewarded for what you do. But you deal with IDEAS. The world is full of bad ideas, ideas that could mean the end of the world itself. And the only substitute for bad ideas is good ideas. The world is starving for good ideas. In your life you should have many opportunities to acquaint people with good ideas."

Here, I thought, I am sitting with someone who grew up in Russia, in the shadow of the arch-exemplars of bad ideas, Lenin and Stalin. And she has expressed in her works what happens when bad ideas are accepted on a massive scale, and, she has just spent twelve years of her life writing *Atlas*, which presents it for all of the world to see. First, "just a little bit of evil," in the form of the state giving to

some (as a token of 'government generosity') by robbing others, perhaps in some small little-noticed way. But then the disease spreads, and the state gains a stranglehold on people's lives so that they come to depend on it and can no longer exist without it. And then the state comes in for the kill, destroying the civilizations it proposed to save. (In years that followed I would read the "Gulag" trilogy and many other works by Solzhenitsyn, reemphasizing her point about the decline and fall of nations,)

Ayn condemned all existing governments as intrusive, as restricting people's freedom and violating their rights. But she didn't find them all equally intrusive. She thought highly of the America envisioned by the founders, minus the slavery. She saw it as the nearest approach thus far in history to a 'constitution of liberty', a republic, not a democracy, its citizens possessing the right to do as they chose as long as these choices involved no violation of the rights of others.

I was somewhat skeptical of people's references to 'government with the consent of the governed': certainly not all of them had consented. Most people have not consented to the system in which they were born; and if you can't get unanimous consent even in a small roomful of people; how can you get *everyone's* consent to the constitution of a nation? Some people will approve of capital punishment, others will condemn it totally. Not everyone will agree on what 'cruel and unusual punishment' means. People have conflicting desires and convictions, and perhaps no one gets exactly the system that he wants.

There is, of course, an enormous difference between life in the United States and life in the Soviet Union, a most conspicuous difference being that people are free to leave the one but not the other. But she did say, and later wrote, that in any enterprise involving two or more persons, the voluntary consent of all parties is required. But I was uneasy: if there has to be unanimous consent in starting a business or forming a club, why not also in the formation of a government? If numbers are what makes the difference, why not say so outright? And if numbers don't make the difference, why doesn't the unanimity rule apply not only to clubs but to the millions of American colonists in 1789?

I never seemed to get a clear answer on this, but perhaps, I thought, I was missing something essential to the argument; and I had learned, when I continued the questioning, not to push her too far, lest the mood of pleasant intellectual interchange be lost.

Through the passing weeks, memories of people I had met, and bits of conversation with them, and speculation about what they

would think or say, would intermingle in my mind: Ayn Rand, Hank Rearden, Fred Maytag. What a combination! One evening I was invited by Ayn to join Ludwig von Mises and his wife, and Henry Hazlitt and his wife for an evening's conversation in her apartment. I felt honored, and enjoyed the occasion although no new thoughts were born that evening. I had met Hazlitt before, when I had a chance to praise him for his *Economics in One Lesson*. We exchanged letters and phone calls occasionally around the time that he moved from Washington Square to Connecticut. Ayn had chastised him for not reviewing her *Objectivist Ethics* in his book on the welfare state. He responded that he didn't understand her views enough to comment publicly on them. She was less than pleased by this: how could he not understand her when she wrote in plain English? But I think their views were ultimately irreconcilable: Hazlitt was very much a utilitarian, and favored a laissez faire society simply because it had more total utility than any alternative.

As for Mises, Ayn admired him greatly and gave me a copy of his book *Socialism*, though the one I came most to treasure was *Human Action*. I wish I had attended his Thursday evening seminars on economics at NYU – but I was very busy as it was, and many of these Thursday evenings were spent in discussions with Rand. I did meet Mises again at one of the last lectures he gave, at Long Beach State College in the late 1960s. He was well into his 80s then and ever so sweet and accommodating to students no matter how ill-informed their questions, but never enough to blunt the precision of the points he was making. I deeply regretted that I had never studied under him.

As program chairman of the American Society for Aesthetics, I had invited Ayn to address their annual meeting in Boston. As critic I could not simply say how great her remarks were and then sit down, so I offered criticisms on her new paper *Art and Sense of Life* which my colleagues considered quite mild. But apparently she thought I had betrayed her. She cut me off after that, as she had already done with so many others, interpreting disagreement as betrayal. I never saw her again. As the months went by, I came to miss her enormously. I missed especially her parting words after each meeting: not "Good night," but "Good premises."

Not long after that I accepted a position as chairman of the philosophy department at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. Among other things I became faculty adviser to the Ayn Rand Club there. And, in the course of time a representative of the newly formed California Libertarian Party suggested that I go to Denver where there would be a meeting of freedom-oriented people throughout the nation to discuss whether a national

Libertarian Party should be formed with Dave Nolan, the founder of the Colorado party, in charge. (I wrote about this in a 1998 paper in *Full Context* and wrote at length about the 1972 presidential campaign in an article in *Liberty*, Vol. 6 No. 2.)

I went to the exploratory meeting on a June weekend in Denver in 1972. My book *Libertarianism* had been published the previous year, and some of the delegates in Denver had copies of it and even quoted from it on the convention floor. There were two days of discussion on platform and principles, and I was delegated to write the party's Statement of Principles. It was then argued whether or not this party in its infancy should float a candidate for U.S. president, and it was decided that the response should be yes. I was somewhat overwhelmed when I got the nomination: there were people there far better known in libertarian circles, both Ed Clark and Ed Crane were there at the convention. But the outcome, I think, was the result of the fact that my book had already been trumpeted as a kind of 'textbook of libertarianism'.

I was a little bit thrilled, and a little bit terrorized. One day I was a college professor, and the next day a candidate for the nation's highest office. I knew I would never attain to that office – anyway I was a complete unknown – and was not at all sure that a virtually unknown party having a presidential candidate so early on, was a good idea. But, I thought, perhaps initiating a political party that stood for liberty more unambiguously than the existing ones might succeed, and even lead to something bigger, as the dissolution of the Whig Party had done for the newborn Republican Party in 1856.

Ayn Rand had said to me: "if you believe in freedom, why don't you do something about it?" Here, suddenly, was an unexpected chance to do something, however small. Perhaps it would all come to nothing – a flash in the pan. But then again, perhaps not. We would never know unless we tried.

At any rate, having a captive audience in a college classroom was worlds away from a public meeting devoted to a specific agenda. To be a political candidate was to be a target of ignorant and often hostile questioning, when one had thirty seconds or less to answer, as often happened on radio programs I was involved in during the campaign. "What will you do for me if elected?" someone asked, and I would reply "I'll leave you alone to live your life as you choose." Or: "How are you going to have education without government?" I would be asked, explaining that there are few if any communities who would not gladly pay something voluntarily for the education of their children, and reminding them that in the entire Constitution there was not one mention of government in connection with education. But it would take many a lesson in

simple economics, I decided, to convince most people of something that seemed obvious to those of us who had studied it. It would be a long haul, to say the least. But gradually I resurrected a bit of the preacher in me and learned to give brief (but necessarily incomplete) answers, and to construct bon mots to throw back at the challenger.

And thus passed the campaign of 1972: one day Dallas, the next day Houston, the following day Tulsa, then Chicago and so on to New York and Boston. Most exciting of all was Seattle: Tonie Nathan, the vice-presidential candidate, and I were pictured on millions of brochures that went out to every voter in the state, along with the Statement of Principles. Sometimes I would be recognized walking on the sidewalks of Seattle.

There were many radio interviews, TV interviews, and many meetings thereafter on college campuses and university lecture halls, especially in California.

The biggest surprise of the campaign, heard by millions of listeners and viewers, and intoned by Vice-President Spiro Agnew (as prescribed in the Constitution), was the announcement, "...and one electoral vote to John Hospers for president, and one to Theodora Nathan for vice-president." I had known about this for several weeks but kept it secret – Roger MacBride, an elector from Virginia (he became the presidential candidate in 1976), threw his vote from Republican to Libertarian in a sudden unexpected move. In the next few weeks I was flooded with a myriad of letters and telephone calls – "Congratulations!" and "Remember, I voted for you!"

I had met Mises and Hazlitt, but not Murray Rothbard, the encyclopedic libertarian scholar. Rothbard was hardly an object of great affection in Randian circles, and she had never once mentioned him to me. But we met one day at a lunch at USC, and I was afraid that my association with Rand might cause some hostility; besides, he was a hundred times the libertarian scholar that I was. I told him on meeting him that it was he and not I who should have been the presidential candidate. He said he didn't want the job, and wished me well. As things turned out, though an anarchist he became prominent in Libertarian Party circles for the next decade or more. I read several of his books: the one that I admired the most was the shorter book *Power and Market*. But I also greatly admired his *Man, Economy, and State*, though disagreeing with parts of his *Ethics of Liberty*, even devoting a meeting of the Karl Hess Club to a presentation of my partially dissenting view. (I had read some economics, but never had even one course in the subject.)

Then, at seventy years of age, came my compulsory retirement from teaching. I took this event as a personal loss, for I believed I was still able to conduct classes as well as ever. I totally revised my book *Human Conduct*, the manuscript of the first edition of which I had delivered on foot back in 1961 from Ayn Rand's apartment to the Harcourt Brace office few blocks away, promising her that I would mention her ethical views if there were ever a second or third edition (a promise which I kept). I continued to write, though my 1998 article *A Libertarian View of Open Borders* in the *Journal of Libertarian Studies* made me some enemies within the Libertarian Party. These sins may have been partially atoned for in my essay "Thoughts on Democracy" in Tibor Machan's 2002 anthology *Democracy and Liberty*. Not long thereafter I was invited to Indianapolis, where Tibor Machan interviewed me for an hour-long video on my life and work, which is listed in the *Classics of Liberty* series published by the Liberty Fund of Indianapolis.

In 2002 I returned to USC to attend an ongoing seminar. In Philosophy Hall, where I had taught so many classes through the years, fresh young faces were writing their final exams. Since I had now been retired for more than ten years, they did not know me and I did not know them. My portrait hung on the stairs leading to the Hoose Library of Philosophy. I spoke with Ross, the head librarian: did anyone remember me after all these years? Yes, he said, but they remember you as presidential candidate more than as head of our department. Do they read any of my books, which are here on the library shelves? Yes, he said, they are out most of the time, and some of your articles, such as the one on truth in fiction and the one on free-will and psychoanalysis, are still read quite a bit. What about my essay on artistic creativity, which was the presidential address I gave to the American Society for Aesthetics in 1983, here in this auditorium? No, that was probably too far back for our students to remember. What about the magazine I inherited when I came, *The Personalist*, in which I published manuscripts from some then-unknown philosophers such as Tibor Machan and Doug Rasmussen, which no one had been willing to publish before because of their libertarian slant? Well no, he suspected that only the authors of those articles would still remember them after that much time.

Time passes, I reflected with some disappointment, and in the end all is forgotten. Has the result been worth the effort? It was all so important to me at the time, and now it is as if none of it had ever existed. Meanwhile time speeds on, or struggles on, or slouches on, as the case may be, and most of people's fond hopes and dreams remain unrealized. Well, don't expect to live for others and

don't expect them to live for you – didn't Ayn Rand teach you that at least, among many other things, all those years?

But that was only one of the things. Another was: in general, bad ideas have bad consequences, and good ideas have good consequences. Twenty years ago a student of mine at USC, George Squyres, suddenly quit school and did manual labor for years, like Howard Roark. He never graduated, and I didn't hear from him again until the summer of 2002, when I ran into him at the national Libertarian Party meeting in Indianapolis. He is even now heading a committee dedicated to revamping the Libertarian Party platform after some years of comparative inattention. He has chaired a committee designed to set forth the tenets of libertarianism in bold strokes and expand its influence on society, so as to help it become what we, the starry-eyed visionaries of 1972, had dreamed of but failed to achieve. Perhaps we hadn't given our movement enough publicity, or perhaps the time was not yet ripe. We knew all along that it would be a long haul, didn't we?

And so it is: hope springs eternal, and perhaps this hope can still be realized, here in America, while we are alive and able to witness for ourselves the unfolding of events, perhaps even able in some degree to influence them.

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