

# Intellectual Isolationism

By Richard Mgrdechian

I know I could probably be shot for saying this in a libertarian forum, but the truth is, I've never read anything by Ayn Rand. Not **The Fountainhead**. Not **Atlas Shrugged**. Nothing. That being said, I'm certainly aware of her work and the sort of messages they convey in terms of individualism, collectivism, objectivism, second-handers and so forth, but there is no way I could ever claim to be an expert on any of these things—at least not when it comes to what the precise definitions of them actually are.

Yet, despite this limitation, I recently published a novel that—at least according to several people I've spoken to—seemed to incorporate quite a few of these same concepts. Of course, it made no explicit mention of any of these terms and was not in any way meant to be a competing or derivative work; it was simply based on my own longstanding beliefs about how the world works, where I see our society heading, the concepts of right and wrong, the kinds of people I respect and those whom I despise. In fact, only after completing the novel and getting some feedback from friends, did I even think about learning a little about Rand's work to try to find the parallels between what she did so well and what it was that I was really trying to say.

So how is it I could end up writing a book that was similar to hers in many ways (quality, popularity, relevance and longevity notwithstanding) without knowing anything about her work until my novel was done and over with? How is it that I could come up with a concept—good competition, a central theme of the book—that incorporated much about her ideas of individualism and objectivism before I ever knew these words even existed? And how is it that I could come up with another concept—bad competition, another central theme—that was so similar to her ideas of collectivism and second-handers without ever having heard these terms before? It turns out that the answer to these questions can be summarized in two words—Intellectual Isolationism.

The fact of the matter is I was never very good at learning from books. I was never very good at learning from lectures. I was never very good at learning by being told about something. And I certainly was never very good at learning by simply repeating what it was that other people had to say.

No, for some reason I always had to do things the hard way—to reinvent everything I ever wanted to understand myself. And by thinking a little bit more about why this is, one thing has become very clear to me: for better or worse, libertarians always seem to have a need to do things on their own.

So given this not-too-surprising revelation, I thought it might be worth sharing my particular approach to problem-solving in the hope that some people might find it intriguing enough to adapt

and build off of in order to possibly develop new and better ideas in whatever fields they may have an interest in.

To me, one of the biggest problems in terms of learning anything through the usual channels—whether it be physics through a physics book, writing through a writing class, politics through a political science program or whatever else it may be—is that you end up going through the exact same thought processes that other people have been going through for tens, hundreds or even thousands of years.

Go to the same schools, take the same classes, be exposed to the same materials, work with the same axioms and assumptions, approach the same problems in the same ways as everyone else does and there is little doubt that you'll end up thinking just like everyone else—at least when it comes to your particular field of study.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not saying this is necessarily a bad thing—after all, there is certainly a need for this consistent body of cumulative knowledge and expertise. However, being part of this intellectual establishment can also be very limiting, especially when it comes to how much creativity can be applied to any given problem, including those that haven't been solved properly. After all, once you're convinced that you already know something, what's the use in trying to figure it out again?

On the other hand, an outsider has the ability to come in without the same bias and look at a situation completely from scratch—and it is this simple dynamic which explains why so many new ideas tend to come from outside the mainstream. Sure, the overwhelming majority of incremental developments in any field will always come from people with some sort of specialized training, but the

real leaps—the major changes in thinking—often come from those people outside the field.

Sometimes a new set of eyes is all it takes. I certainly found that to be helpful in the writing of my book—especially never having done something like that before. But the same thing is also true in business. A company hires outside consultants not because they necessarily know more about the business than the management does, but because they come in with a different perspective and may see problems or opportunities that the people who are so focused on the monotony of running the day-to-day operations simply may not.

Fundamentally, it is this approach of looking at a problem completely from scratch which is the essence of what I mean by Intellectual Isolationism. More specifically, it is the process of learning as much

—Continued next page

as possible about the basics—the most basic of basics—of what it is you want to understand and then stepping away from whatever else is out there in order to logically and incrementally derive everything you'll ever think about that subject all on your own.

In other words, don't "learn" the same things everyone else does. Sure, read about them, but never take what you read or hear in terms of knowledge, wisdom or understanding at face value. Always find a way to derive it, or at least derive as much as you can about it, all on your own. Step back and begin to rethink everything based on first principles—on the most fundamental elements possible. By not knowing what you should know—or at least by not taking it for granted—you just may end up creating something better than what was already out there. But even if you don't develop any new ideas—and in the vast majority of cases, you won't—you'll still have the most thorough understanding of something that you possibly can.

Want a good example? Take a look at the case of Albert Einstein. Einstein—who was working as a clerk in the Swiss patent office because he couldn't get a position as a researcher—was enamored with the concept of physical fields ever since his father gave him a compass when he was five years old. As he grew older, this infatuation with action at a distance led him to look at physics and ask a fundamental question: What would a beam of light look like if he was running alongside of it?

Interestingly, it was a question that had never been asked before simply because other physicists had all subscribed to the laws of motion that had been in place since the days of Newton. They all assumed them to be true and absolute, but Einstein didn't. And thanks to his incredible understanding of first principles—of the basics—he systematically took them apart piece-by-piece and the rest is history (including his famous quote that "imagination is more important than knowledge.")

Okay, so much for Einstein. Now let's look at an example that's a little less extreme and talk about some of the ways that I've employed the tools of Intellectual Isolationism. One of these would certainly be with respect to the issues we touched on earlier—i.e., the parallels between the concepts mentioned in my book and the objectivism of Ayn Rand—and this would be a perfect example of independently converging on an existing answer (or an existing ideology) based on the use of first principles.

But even beyond that, in **3000 Years** I tried to look at a lot of things, including science, from a new perspective and along the way ultimately came up with the idea for a time-travel technology which I called *time suppression*. But unlike the case of other time travel stories, it wasn't just some black box, it wasn't a wormhole—it wasn't something that just happened. In fact, it was just the opposite. It was something that was derived and explained from the ground up based on looking at Special Relativity from an entirely different perspective—that of changing the electrical characteristics of space in order to slow the speed of light and therefore the passage of time.

Is it a fictitious technology? Of course. Is it interesting? Most of the people I've spoken to think so. Is it Earth shattering? Not really—but it is a new way of looking at things that may ultimately inspire someone a lot smarter than me to question what may have been taken for granted for just a little bit too long. And doing so would necessarily lead to one of two outcomes—a new insight into how the world works, or another confirmation that the physical theories currently in vogue are likely to be correct.

In the same way, through the use of Intellectual Isolationism, I've not only reinforced my understanding of so much of what I had initially learned in more conventional ways, but I've also developed quite a few of my own ideas including new theories on human behavior, a new framework for analyzing political policy and debate, some interesting thoughts on the nature of gravity and so forth. No doubt some of the more complex ideas are probably wrong, but I also have no doubt that some of them—or at least some elements of them—are likely to be right. And if they ultimately do prove to be correct, great; if not, I'm just one of the countless thousands of people—some of whom are well known; the majority of which are completely obscure—who tried to expand our thinking in some new direction that just wasn't quite right. But it would still be worth a try.

However, despite all of its benefits, we should also keep in mind that the method of Intellectual Isolationism isn't necessarily for everyone—a medical doctor for instance. In that situation, the overriding rule is to "do no harm" and there is no way any sort of iterative process could ever possibly fit within that kind of constraint. In the same way, one of the potential problems with Intellectual Isolationism is the ever-present possibility that it may inadvertently lead to other forms of isolationism, in particular, a disconnect from the people and resources needed to take whatever ideas you may come up with from a concept into a reality.

In the end though, the advice I would give to anyone interested in doing things their own way would be to explore the path of Intellectual Isolationism—at least in some areas. Decide what interests you, and then figure it out for yourself. Create your own framework for understanding it completely from scratch. Start with the strongest possible understanding of the most basic elements—of first principals—and then use them to derive everything else. But make absolutely sure that you do understand as much as you can about the fundamentals—or risk understanding nothing at all.

At the same time, keep an open mind. After all, sometimes you'll be right and sometimes you'll be wrong. And when you are wrong, accept it and go back and see *why* you were wrong. Was it something about your understanding of the basics that wasn't quite right? Was it a mistake in logic somewhere along the line? Whatever the reason, go back and find another way to derive the right answer from the ground up. After all, as with anything, practice can only improve the chances of your getting it right the next time around.

But as you do this, be sure to maintain as many of your external relationships as possible. Be sure to keep in contact with other people in the field. Be sure to keep that network alive, because if you ever want the rest of the world to know about something you've managed to figure out, you'll need those conduits to get it there. Isolationism can be a great tool; just don't let it permeate too many elements of your life.

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