Interview with Stephen Hicks

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Dr. Stephen Hicks is Associate Professor and Chairman of the Department of Philosophy at Rockford College, a liberal arts college in Illinois. He has been Visiting Professor of Business Ethics at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., a Visiting Fellow at the Social Philosophy & Policy Center in Bowling Green, Ohio, Senior Fellow at The Objectivist Center in Poughkeepsie, New York, and a Salvatori Fellow at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C.

He has published in academic journals as well as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Baltimore Sun*, and *Reader's Digest*, and has spoken to many business and professional groups. He is co-editor with David Kelley of *Readings for Logical Analysis* (W. W. Norton, 1998), now in its second edition.

At Rockford College he is also Director of the college's Honors Program in Liberal Arts, a "great books" program that teaches the intellectual history of Western civilization.

Q: Tell us about your childhood, where you grew up, what did your parents do and what influences your early environment had, good or bad on your later development.

Hicks: I was born in Toronto, and did most of my growing up in a smaller city called Guelph, an hour west of Toronto. No doubt the strongest influence my parents had was in encouraging me to read. My parents both read a lot and widely, and so there were always lots of books around. Other than my intense interest in reading, I had a fairly normal childhood—lots of sports and music lessons, alternately loving and hating school, going to summer camp, playing with my friends and goofing off.

Q: How did you discover the works of Ayn Rand?

Hicks: That was also a result of my parents. I remember that when I was about thirteen I picked Atlas Shrugged out of my parents' bookcase and asked my mother about it. She said it was a good book and that I should read it in a few years, so I filed the name and title away in my memory. About five years later I was going to Europe for a post-high school graduation trip. At the airport, my father asked if I had anything to read on the plane. I hadn't, so we went to the airport bookstore. *The Fountainhead* caught my eye, and my father bought it for me. Once I started it I couldn't put it down, and I read it four or five times on that trip. Most of my strongest memories of sites in Europe are associated with the chapters from *The Fountainhead* I was reading at the time.

Q: What was your initial reaction to her ideas and novels? Was it the "Of course!" experience—or were you hard to convince?

Hicks: Definitely the "Of course!" experience. In response to the ideas I felt agreement, but what I remember being most blown away by was the idea of living, thinking, and feeling at the level and intensity of the characters.

Q: You were active promoting campus Objectivism in Canada in the 1980s, including a brief stint at the helm of *The Promethean*. Do you regard those many hours spent proselytizing, working on newsletters and organizing club activities as time well spent?

Hicks: I enjoyed that experience a lot. Socially, through the club I made friends I

otherwise would not have. I also acquired better organizational skills and learned something about marketing and campus administrative politics. Editing *The Promethean* was valuable because that was the first time that I did writing projects that were entirely my own—not, for example, essays assigned in class—and I learned a great deal about how to write clearly and concisely. It was fun.

Q: How and when did you immigrate to the United States?

Hicks: I came to the U.S. in 1985 to start graduate school at Indiana University. At that time my interests were in philosophy of science, logic, and epistemology. My undergraduate advisors, knowing my plans for my future studies and knowing that Indiana's philosophy department specialized in those areas, had suggested that I put Indiana high on my list. Then, when I finished my dissertation in 1991, both my personal preference and the job market dictated that I would stay in the U.S.

Q: How did you enjoy graduate school at Indiana?

Hicks: I enjoyed it greatly. I had decided to go there without having seen the campus or the town, and remember being pleasantly surprised by their beauty. I enjoyed my work as a teaching assistant, learning how to teach and grade. And, for the most part, I enjoyed my coursework. One value to me of Indiana's department was I did not encounter any hostility from my professors on account of my interests in Objectivism. Mostly this was because the department's focus was on logic and epistemological and metaphysical issues, and so all that really mattered to them was competence in those areas. That I happened to have, from most of my professors' perspectives, wacky political views, didn't really matter.

Q: Your thesis on foundationalism owes quite a bit to David Kelley's work on perception, which establishes the contemporary paradigm for direct realist theories. Did that make the thesis easier, or harder to write?

Hicks: Chapter Three of my dissertation draws heavily on philosopher David Kelley's *The Evidence of the Senses*, and Chapter Four draws heavily on psychologist J. J Gibson's *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Both cases made writing the thesis enormously easier: anyone you learn a lot from makes your work easier. I also learned much from Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. While I disagreed with all of Rorty's major conclusions, the range of material that he integrates and the level on which he argues helped me by making me confront a powerful and articulate argument for the opposite of what I was arguing.

Q: Objectivism is often characterized as a modernistic philosophy—an Enlightenment-style system of thought. Yet Objectivism rejects many of the tenets of Enlightenment philosophy. It rejects the representationalism of Descartes, Locke and Hume, it rejects the materialism of Hobbes and Holbach, it rejects the common deism and mind-body dualism of the period. Given so many differences, what can be gained by characterizing Objectivism as compatible with an Enlightenment outlook? The epistemological similarities—the endorsement of reason and the rejection of tradition and revelation—can only be characterized at such a high level of generality, doesn't that make the affinity essentially empty, from a theoretical point of view?

Hicks: High levels of generality are essential at any level of theorizing. There are, for example, many differences among Christians over points of doctrine, but there is nonetheless much information that comes with knowing that someone is a Christian and not a Sikh or an atheist. There are many differences among animals, but knowing that something is an animal and not a plant or mineral is intellectually valuable. The same holds for philosophical schools. The Enlightenment's broad philosophy of reason, naturalism, and individualism was a radical

departure from the Medieval era's faith, supernaturalism, and feudalism. Seeing the bigger picture is necessary to see why some thinkers were allies and some were enemies. The Cartesians and the Lockeans, for example, did not agree in their accounts of reason, but they nonetheless saw themselves as allies in the battle against those intellectuals who advocated faith and tradition. Today, similarly, when we are trying to understand our own intellectual and cultural landscape, knowing the broad philosophical frameworks that most thinkers work within helps us to isolate the essential issues, debates, and determine who our best candidates for alliances are and who are our most pressing enemies.

Q: Reading post-modern thinkers such as Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard seem to me to be a waste of time, even for Objectivist scholars. When they are not being incoherent, they are being unintelligible. And when they are not being unintelligible, they are just obviously wrong. And most philosophers don't give them the time of day. So why should we?

Hicks: I would never urge anyone except scholars to read those figures. Life is short. However, anyone who is doing any sort of intellectual work today needs to be familiar with what those figures stand for. Their ideas animate much of what is going in the humanities, so to know what is going on in one's field, be able to defend against objections to one's own views, and be able to attack opposing positions, one has to know one's enemies. That means reading them. I don't want to say anything kind about those four, for I think their core positions are false and destructive from start to finish; but they are less often incoherent and unintelligible than they are sometimes made out to be. They are all enormously difficult to read, partly because that is the nature of scholarly philosophy, but mostly because they advocate views that are alien to most people's common sense realism. Then there is the issue of style. While Lyotard and occasionally Foucault can be decent reading stylistically, Heidegger and Derrida are notorious for being among the worst examples of Continental impenetra-bility.

Q: Was Kant the most evil man in history as Rand maintains, or can such a sweeping value judgement be inappropriate? How could you compare the evil of Stalin and Pol Pot to the evil of Kant—are they even commensurable attributes, in terms of the Objectivist epistemology?

Hicks: Sweeping value judgments can be appropriate, but the more sweeping the judgment the more homework you have to do first. This is to me an enormously complex subject, so let me just indicate a few broad things to think about. Given that Kant's philosophy is an enormously destructive intellectual step, there are two questions about Kant in particular that one needs to ask before judging his moral status.

First, what evaluation can one make of the thinking that led to his conclusions? Partly this means knowing the intellectual framework Kant had inherited from the history of philosophy and was working within: Given the serious and seemingly intractable problems that empiricism and rationalism had run into, and given that science and religion were in heated and anguished conflict, was Kant's philosophy an understandable attempt at a solution? And partly it means getting a sense of his psycho-epistemological style from reading his writings and arguments: Is he someone who is really trying to solve problems, to get at the heart of the issues, to explain himself clearly?

Second, granted that Kant's philosophy has destructive consequences, what knowledge ahead of time did Kant have or could he have had of those consequences? This connects with your question about Stalin and Pol Pot. Comparing a philosopher who knowingly advocates destructive views with, say, a politician who knowingly puts them into practice is analogous to comparing the guilt of a criminal who is the brains of the operation but does not participate in doing the actual

deed with his cohort who did not conceive of the plan but who performs the deed while knowing what he is doing. Both are guilty to the extent that both knew what they were doing and both are guilty to the extent that the deed could not have been done without both of them.

So to return again to Kant in particular, the judgments that need to be made are to what extent the post-Kantian horrors could not have happened but for Kant and to what extent Kant knew what consequences could result from his philosophy.

That said, I think that any apologist for Kant needs to do a lot of fast talking. Any philosopher under any circumstances—and especially one as brilliant as Kant—who concludes that reality is unknowable, that on the most important matters faith is superior to reason, and that happiness is irrelevant to morality—any such philosopher has to be aware at some level that he is playing with fire on a major scale.

As for whether Kant is THE most evil thinker in history, that too is a delicate judgment to make. I think Kant gets the nod on the basis of the fundamentality of his conclusions and arguments, but in terms of explicit destructiveness I think that Rousseau, Hegel, and Heidegger are also major contenders.

Q: In an interview in TOC's newsletter, *Navigator* (Vol. 2 No. 6), Roger Donway asked you a question regarding how did the irrationalists come to dominate the humanities, and why were the Enlightenment intellectuals unable to prevent it? You responded that such a topic was planned for TOC's Summer Seminar so we would have to wait till then. Well, we were breathlessly hanging on that one! For those of us who were unable to attend this year could you give us a sketch of your main points?

Hicks: Enlightenment philosophy, for all its greatness, was and still is plagued with two weaknesses—it has not been able to articulate and defend its individualism or its confidence in reason. Even sympathetic thinkers were and still are uneasy about individualism in ethics, politics, and economics, not being fully convinced that it is compatible with social values such as cooperation and peace. And even during the Enlightenment the skepticisms of Descartes and Hume seemed unanswerable. This meant that toward the end of the 18th century some of the steam had been taken out of the Enlightenment juggernaut, and, mixing my metaphors here, that the intellectual world was ripe for a counter-revolution. That counter-revolution took off primarily in the German states in the late 18th century, with thinkers such as Hamann, Herder, and Kant, and accelerated in the early 19th century with thinkers such as Fichte and Hegel. Since then, German philosophy has been the framework of much of the western intellectual world. An excerpt from my lectures, specifically the section about Hamann, Herder, and Kant, appeared in the October 1999 issue of *Navigator* (2:13).

Q: Leonard Peikoff's philosophy of history has often been criticized as being too deterministic or mechanistic. While he gives lip service to the free will of men, the causal role of basic ideas is always primary. Is that view correct?

Hicks: I have not done my homework on Dr. Peikoff recently and so I can't comment at any length on his philosophy of history. My impression from reading his *The Ominous Parallels* over fifteen years ago was that he was very good on explaining the role of the German intellectuals—especially the philosophers—in Germany; but that he was weaker in drawing the parallels to the American scene. The impact of German intellectuals on America has been enormous, and Dr. Peikoff gets credit for discussing many of those impacts. However, America also has very strong Enlightenment roots and traditions, many of which are still flourishing and have remained immune to counter-Enlightenment influences. I think that Dr. Peikoff did not attend to those roots and traditions nearly enough in his book, and so

his overall conclusion about the prospects for America is in my judgment much too dark and pessimistic.

Your question about Dr. Peikoff's views is broader than the particular cases of Nazi Germany and America, though. I need to re-phrase your question, though, for I believe that there should be no opposition between holding that individuals have free will and that the basic ideas they hold are causal primaries. The basic ideas that individuals come to accept are of crucial importance in their lives—those ideas set the broadest framework within which individuals live. Those ideas set the agenda for what kind of world they take themselves to be living in, what values and actions they take to be appropriate, what they think of themselves as human beings, and how they will conduct themselves cognitively. Ideas thus are causal agents—as accepted and applied by individuals with free will. And this is a tricky part when one attempts to explain an individual's life or even a whole culture's history: Ideas are always held by some particular human beings with varying degrees of understanding and commitment, and they are applied by those human beings with varying degrees of consistency. From a given set of abstract ideas, then, wide variations in practice and application are possible.

For example, given the prevalence of Lockean ideas in America in the mid-1700s, the American Revolution did not have to happen—the choices and initiative of Washington, Jefferson, and all of the other revolutionaries were necessary for it to occur, and they could have made many different choices about whether, when, and how to proceed. On the other hand, given the prevalence of Lockean ideas in America in the mid-1700s, some things clearly were not possible then: the American Revolution could not have taken the form that, say, the French or Russian revolutions did. Given the ideas they lived and breathed, Washington and Jefferson could not have acted the way that Robespierre and Lenin did.

The errors to avoid here are, on the one hand, slipping into a Hegelian view of ideas as causal agents operating on and through human beings—and my sense is that at the level of cultural explanation, Dr. Peikoff sometimes comes close to this position. The error on the other hand is taking individual free will or the incredible variety of human history to mean that history has no logic, that anything can happen at any time.

Q: In the Vol. 2 No. 13 issue of *Navigator* you hint as to how the roots of the Enlightenment movement were poisoned by a false dichotomy between Kant and several anti-reason religionists. Do you see any new fundamental false dichotomies in our present culture?

Hicks: In our culture the clearest false dichotomy is the battle between the postmodernist counter-cultural left and the religious conservative right. When you read the conservatives, they offer you the choice—either a return to traditional values or collapse into nihilism. And when you read the postmodernists, they offer you the same choice—either accept that nothing abides or pretend to believe in the discredited old ways.

Q: If so, how would you philosophically resolve that dichotomy and what expedient measures would you advise that could persuade academia or the public to re-assess the issue(s)?

Hicks: Now that's not asking for much. The philosophical answer to both requires first identifying the common premise to both: Both sides accept the premise that neither truth nor values can be found in the natural world. Religious philosophers argue that the natural world is essentially empty, that by itself it is a realm of chaos and nihilism, and that to find real truth, order, goodness, and beauty we must go to a higher realm. The postmodernists argue that there is no higher realm, and so we might as well embrace this realm of chaos and nihilism.

Dostoevsky presciently nailed the premise with his line in *The Brothers Karamazov*: "If God is dead, then everything is

permitted." The religious philosophers don't want everything to be permitted, so they cling to a desperate faith in God. The post-modernists know that the gods have been discredited, so they believe that anything goes.

So the philosophical answer to both sides requires finding truth and value in the natural world. This requires developing an objectivist theory of knowledge and an objectivist ethics—and then marketing it effectively. With Ayn Rand's philosophy we have an outstanding start on that project.

Q: Are there any areas of Rand's philosophy that you think urgently need development?

Hicks: The only urgent needs I see are in epistemology. With David Kelley's *The Evidence of the Senses* we have an excellent treatise on sensation and perception, and with Ayn Rand's *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology* we have an excellent treatise on concepts. What are needed next are comparable treatises on propositions and theories. If we focus on the hierarchy of integration in human cognition, the order is as follows: Sensations are integrated into percepts, percepts are integrated into concepts, concepts are integrated into propositions, and propositions are integrated into theories and narratives. Kelley's and Rand's books cover the first two stages, so what we need are articles and books on the next two stages. Those books will develop the issues covered in linguistics (grammar, syntax, semantics) and logic (induction and deduction, with the attendant roles of imagination and creativity).

Q: In the far future, do you think Rand will be considered the founder of a whole new philosophy or just viewed as a minor branch of the Aristotelian tradition?

Hicks: Neither. Rand is not wholly original since she agrees with and in some cases is indebted to much of the Aristotelian tradition. But she is innovative enough on the fundamental issues, especially in epistemology and ethics, not to be a minor variation. All philosophical schools are either Platonic, Aristotelian, or Sophistic—the major alternatives were staked out by the Greeks 2,400 years about. The best way I can think of to make the stature comparison briefly is by an analogy: What Kant is to Platonic philosophy, Rand is to Aristotelian philosophy.

Q: Why are Objectivists, in general, so apathetic when it comes to activism? Why would they rather sit in dens writing posts about deontology on the Internet rather than teaching, or writing articles for print publication, or lobbying, or fundraising for causes?

Hicks: Are Objectivists apathetic? My sense is that the movement was in the doldrums in the 70s and early 80s, due to the fallout from the Rand/Branden split. But since the late 80s there has been a upsurge in all areas—from the number of Objectivist intellectuals to the number of publications to the range of activities being undertaken to the amount of money being raised for Objectivist organizations. Those all strike me as a signs of great energy and enthusiasm. And I wouldn't belittle anyone who writes posts about deontology on the Internet, either. Lively Internet discussions are signs of health for a philosophy.

Q: We like your analysis of the politics of post-modernism being primary, and the philosophy secondary; it seems a lot like much recent academic feminist theory, with the emancipatory motive as primary, then you have the feminist empiricists, post-modernists and standpoint theorists debating the rationalizations. What similarities do you see between post-modernists and feminists?

Hicks: The label "feminist" does not carry much information anymore. There are philosophical, biological, psychological, and social issues about the nature and status of women and their relations to men. To learn that someone is labeled a feminist means only that in some sense or other the person is in favor of liberty or equality or justice or rights

for women. Yet as soon as you ask the question of what the person means by liberty, equality, justice, rights, or you ask for the person's view on what it is to be a woman, then people splinter into dozens of groups representing the full range of philosophical positions. We then get all the adjective feminisms: liberal feminism, individualist feminism, radical feminism, gender feminism, socialist feminism, androgynous feminism, postmodern feminism, and so on. So the interesting questions are always about the adjectives—that's where the substantive issues are.

That said, there are many self-described feminists who use postmodern argumentative strategies, and many who don't. Those feminists who do are, like most major postmodernists, far left in their politics. For them, deconstructive techniques and other skeptical and relativist arguments are simply weapons to use in the ongoing battle against the white male capitalist technocratic elite that is responsible for having made their lives so pathetic and miserable.

As one example, Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin use pomo epistemological arguments to support censorship of pornography. In America one of the principles used in First Amendment defenses of free speech is the speech/act distinction. The argument the pomo feminists use against that distinction is based on the premise that reality is constructed linguistically: who we are and how we became who we are is a function of the words that we were raised by, those words creating and shaping our psychological identities and the social reality within which we live. So, the argument runs, if pornography is part of society's vocabulary—especially violent and demeaning pornography directed against women—then each generation of women will be constructed to be accepting of that socially and sexually subordinated role. What drives that argument is the postmodernist version of the primacy of consciousness: language is not primarily responsive to a pre-existing reality but rather constitutive of reality.

Q: You wrote an article for the April 16, 1991 *The Wall Street Journal* titled, "Global Problems are Too Big for Little Kids." You stated that "They are not able to put in context issues of international race relations when they are struggling with how to deal with schoolyard bullies…" With this idea of the inability of small children to deal with adult concerns, what do you think of the public school's agenda of sex education where kids in grade school are forced to deal with issues of homosexuality and alternate lifestyles? Is this appropriate? (If not, what is the agenda here?)

Hicks: The primary purpose of schooling is to develop children's cognitive capacities—to teach them general skills of reading, writing, and mathematics as well as more specific subjects such as literature, science, and history. And just as important as all of those, the purpose of schooling is to teach children how to think independently, logically, and creatively.

Other things that the child needs to learn in order to function as an adult—such as nutrition, hygiene, manners and civil behavior, responsibility, and time-management—should be taught primarily in the home. Certainly the schools should reinforce those lessons, but time is short: the schools are a specialized institution, and they need to focus on their core mission of cognitive development. If there is strong evidence that some parents are negligent in teaching their children hygiene or civility, then those children should be sent to the school's counselor for extra help.

As for sex, I am not a developmental psychologist, so I will defer to those experts' judgments about when issues of sexuality can and should be introduced to children in school. I can only say that in my own case, I was fairly oblivious to sex until around puberty, so before that time lessons about homosexuality or alternative sexual lifestyles would have had no relevance to me. They would have been a waste of time or have simply confused me.

The only point I'll make is the obvious one: topics should be introduced to children when they need to know and are cognitively

and emotionally advanced enough to be able to deal with them. Any gross violation of that principle by a teacher is either a result of ignorance and incompetence or an attempt at indoctrination. In either case, the effects are destructive to the children involved, and the so-called teacher should be fired.

Q: What colleges would you recommend to an aspiring student wishing to major in philosophy?

Hicks: My first piece of advice would be to look first at liberal arts colleges. All of my post-high school education was at large state universities in Canada and the U.S.—the phenomenon of the liberal arts college is almost non-existent in Canada. I am now teaching at a liberal arts college in Illinois, and that has been an extremely enjoyable learning experience for me to discover how much more can be accomplished in that atmosphere. Classes are much smaller—my introductory classes typically have 20-25 students, sometimes fewer, and my upper level classes typically have 5-10 students. Since the number of students in my classes is smaller, I can do things with them that I would not be able to do at a large school—I can interact with them personally much more, both in class and in my office, I can give them more writing to do—students learn so much more from writing essays and essay exams than they do from, say, multiple-choice tests—but reading and grading essays is time-consuming for professors.

So if an aspiring philosophy student wants a good education, I strongly recommend looking for a college that promises small classes and lots of student-professor contact.

My other piece of advice is more specific to philosophy: Look for philosophy departments that are strong in the history of philosophy, and look for departments whose members advocate different philosophical approaches. Both of those will serve well an aspiring philosopher.

Q: Any advice to young Ph.D.'s who are looking for, or trying to maintain, an academic position in a university?

Hicks: First and foremost, be yourself: maintain your integrity. If you sell out when you're young and especially full of energy and commitment, it's game over. You won't get your sense of integrity back, and you'll find that your feeling of energy and commitment will dissipate over time.

This definitely does not require martyrdom. It does not mean that you have to go out of your way to provoke senior colleagues with whom you have differences and it doesn't mean that you have to trumpet your minority views and charge the barricades of the status quo. Sometimes those tactics may be useful, but not always.

The first order of business is to demonstrate that you are extremely competent in your field, and that you are passionate about it. If you do so, then your colleagues (most of them, anyway) will respect you and like you even if they disagree with you. If they respect you, then your having minority views will count for less against you.

Q: Currently you are working with TOC on a project. Can you tell us how the project came to be and what it is about?

Hicks: For the 1999-2000 academic year, I am at TOC while on sabbatical from Rockford College. My sabbatical project is to write a book on postmodernism. The working title is *The Postmodern Mind.*

I gave two lectures on post-modernism at the 1998 IOS Summer Seminar in Colorado; they are available from TOC's Principal Source under the title "Postmodernism." Those two lectures were my first run-through of the arguments I am developing in the book. Right now, I have three chapters of a projected six finished, and the other three are blocked out.

Q: TOC recently moved into new office space and has enlarged its mission. What do you think of all the new changes?

Hicks: The new physical facilities are outstanding. The move to the newer, larger offices is a sign of what TOC has accomplished over the years, and this is clearly shown in the support of its members. The move has also been a huge psychological boost for TOC's permanent staff. As IOS grew, its staff was working in increasingly cramped quarters in a so-so part of town. Now the space problem has been solved (for now!), the new offices are beautiful and light-filled, and in a much more pleasant part of town.

The enlarged and re-focused mission is also a sign of TOC's growth and adaptation. I am not the best person to ask about the administrative changes, but the new divisional structures of *Navigator* under Roger Donway, Principal Source under Russ LaValle, and Research and Training under Will Thomas all make sense to me. The introduction of the Atlas Society, headed by Bob Bidinotto, is certainly the most radical and ambitious addition to the original IOS mission. Hundreds of thousands of Rand's readers are out there, and up until now TOC has had no systematic plan in place for reaching them. So I think the Atlas Society is an endeavor well worth trying.

Q: Are there any good books you have come across in your research that you could recommend to our readers?

Hicks: In my recent reading, which has mostly been related to my book on postmodernism, three books come to mind that are interesting, well-written, and accessible to *Full Context*'s audience: John Ellis's *Literature Lost* (Yale, 1997), John Weiss's *Ideology of Death* (Ivan Dee, 1996), and Arthur Herman's *The Idea of Decline* in Western History (Free Press, 1997).

Q: What kinds of projects are you planning when your finish your project with TOC?

Hicks: I have two projects in mind, one in philosophy of history, the other in ethical theory. I love intellectual history, and that raises fascinating questions about the role ideas have had in shaping human history, and more generally questions about why human history has gone the way it has. Centuries go by, and the history of every other species stays pretty much the same, but human history is so varied and changeable. Why so? And of course the questions about the rise and fall of the great civilizations are fascinating: What made ancient China so vigorous? And classical Greece and Rome, and Renaissance Italy, and so on? And what caused them to slip into decline? Do the same factors explain the rise of the United States to its current position as world leader? Are any of the same factors predictive of America's continued prominence or of its decline? I love those questions.

As for ethical theory, I am very interested in working out Objectivism's naturalistic approach to ethics and exploring ways in which it intersects with recent work in biology, psychology, and sociology. Most people writing in those fields now approach the study of human beings as naturalistic organisms, and a lively subset of them are very interested in working out what that means for ethics. I am interested in those issues, and I think there can be some fruitful cross-pollination between Objectivism and those disciplines.

Q: What kind of things do you like to do for recreation?

Hicks: I enjoy aerobics, gardening, getting caught up on movies I've missed, reading fiction and biographies. I'm always looking for recommendations of novels to read and new authors to explore!

Q: Who are your heroes and why?

Hicks: Ayn Rand, definitely and for obvious reasons. In different and more limited ways, John Locke and Friedrich Nietzsche are important to me. Locke because of his achievements in political theory. Nietzsche because, even though I agree with very little

of his positive views, in some of my moods he can be a very inspiring read. Winston Churchill, for being the most tenacious defender against aggression that I know of. George Washington, for his impeccable integrity in conducting himself both as general and as president. And Aristotle, the greatest mind of all time.

Q: What is one of the greatest lessons you have learned from life so far?

Hicks: I am thinking of two things, and I can't decide on the spot which was the greatest lesson to me.

The first lesson is about motivation. Whatever I'm doing, I get a lot more done if I keep the big picture in the back of my mind and recall it when necessary to keep myself focused and enjoying what I'm doing. Any profession has occasional or even regular unpleasant details that must be attended to, and it's easy to lose motivation and damage the whole project just because of not wanting to deal with those details. In my case, for example, I spend a lot of time writing, and many days when I wake up I don't particularly feel like it. There are old adages such as "90% of writing is applying the seat of the pants to the seat of the chair," and "Writers don't like to write; they like to have written," both of which have a lot of truth. But for me it's keeping in mind my larger value-motivation: knowing what matters to me in my life and how my writing connects to those things.

The other lesson is about honesty. I remember thinking about this when I was in my teens and was starting more seriously to re-examine some of my beliefs and to realize how broad the band of opinion was on the major issues. I recall realizing that if I was really going to try to sort things out and get at the truth—though I also recall skeptical moments about whether there were truths on the biggest questions—then I would likely encounter truths that had unsettling implications, that I would have to risk making mistakes and having to admit to myself that I'd made them, that I'd likely have to change my mind about things that mattered to me.

So I remember deciding not to be afraid of those moments, feeling that what mattered most was getting the facts straight and living in the real world, wherever that took me. I remember as part of that having the sense that if I always lived in the real world, everything would likely come out well in the end—no guarantees, but most likely. I've always liked the line, "The truth shall set you free."

That lesson has served me well professionally. I think it serves anyone well, but a philosopher has to have a ruthless honesty about evidence and arguments, a willingness to seek out the best arguments for the positions that he disagrees with and the best arguments against the positions he agrees with. Reality comes first. I don't think anyone can be a philosopher any other way.

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