

Metaphysics and Fantasy  
by Rodney Schroeter

“I think Ditko believes it’s okay for him to create a separate world if it is guided by some sort of logic (at least to him)... What does this mean? Well, if there was another universe, it would have to follow internal rules of its own and adhere to them.”

The above was posted June 3, 2008, by Nick Caputo, on the Ditko-Kirby Yahoo Groups list.

I’ve read comments from people who question why Ditko would do fantasy stories. Objectivism is reality-oriented, the thinking goes; fantasy is non-reality; there seems to be a conflict.

I think Nick’s quote is a “breakthrough” on this question. Though I’d offer disagreements on a few points (too technical and/or minor to describe here), his statement was good enough to get me to put my thoughts on the screen. As usual, the process of attempting a coherent article has helped clarify my own thinking on this subject.

Nick’s statement makes assumptions about Ditko. But let’s not settle for assumptions. Ditko’s a student of Objectivism. So am I. And while I’m explaining the application of Objectivist principles as I understand them and apply them, I can’t and won’t try to tell you, “See, this is what’s going through Ditko’s (or any other Objectivist’s) mind.”

Certain basic principles define Objectivism. For example, in the field of esthetics, Ayn Rand identified what art is, what its cognitive function is, and why a human consciousness needs art. An Objectivist, by definition, is one who understands, agrees with, and applies those basic principles (though it is forever possible to enhance that understanding, and learn something new about details, applications, implications, or connections with other principles--facts which I’ve learned to my great pleasure).

So, you might think, it is a simple matter to ask, “Would an Objectivist enjoy fantasy in art or literature?”

But the answer would be, “That depends,” because the question is not answerable in black and white terms.

(I wish I could tell if anyone is surprised by that statement.)

Ayn Rand described several specific artists and works of art that she liked. For example: Victor Hugo, early James Bond movies, early Mickey Spillane adventures, the TV mini-series *Roots*, and Agatha Christie mysteries.

But a “good Objectivist” will not necessarily seek out or enjoy these same specifics, to the same degree, or at all. That’s because within the basic principles of Objectivism, there is room for personal preferences in how to apply those principles. Objectivism has nothing to say about whether one **ought to** like a specific artist or art work. Nor does it demand or prohibit a person from enjoying a certain art form or genre, such as westerns, Kung Fu movies, silent films, Classical music, comics, plays, science fiction, or fantasy.

Have you ever heard arguments over the difference between science fiction and fantasy? And whether it’s even possible to distinguish the two? I think I have it figured out, and you can keep the following distinction in mind as you consider fantastic fiction of any color or stripe; see if my theory holds up or not.

Science fiction is based on the laws of metaphysics that we deal with. Fantasy is based on a different metaphysics.

At that very basic level, there's not enough detail in the definition that would preclude me from enjoying a work of fantasy. There has to be something more, to decide whether I like it or not.

At first, I thought I'd identified that "something more": It has to have some relevance to my life. But that didn't answer anything; what makes it relevant or not? What's the difference between a fantasy novel that I'm eager to keep reading, and one that, if I dropped it in the creek after reading half of it, would evoke nothing but apathy as I watched it float away?

Then, I thought, ah yes!--I have it now. (And I hope, reading this a few years from now, I'll have even more in-depth thoughts on this point.) That is: Whatever the differences in the metaphysics of this invented fantasy universe, there is still a need for a human epistemology, or something close to it, and rules governing that epistemology.

Ayn Rand stated the connection between metaphysics (the basic nature of existence) and epistemology (the nature of human thought) as, "Existence is Identity; Consciousness is Identification."

The Law of Identity here is the much-quoted "A is A", the Aristotelian formulation which is so simple, yet causes so much perplexity.

Rand said that, if the Law of Identity broke down, then human epistemology would also break down--it would be impossible to think.

Now, if that sounds a little fuzzy, that's OK; it was not something I grasped at first. For a long time, I knew she claimed it to be so, but I couldn't really see it. And it took works of fantasy fiction to make this point about reality something I could understand, for me to blink in amazement and say, "Oh... **yeah!** **Now** I get it!" (And I hope, years from now, etc., etc.)

Think about it. Where, in reality, can you go to find an example of metaphysics breaking down, and see the resultant uselessness of human thought? I would say, there ain't no such place. In all of existence, there is identity, and causality, and perfect order.

(Yes, I am slightly familiar with chaos theory and quantum mechanics, and would spiral way off onto a hyperdimensional tangent if I tried to address them. I'll simply mention David Harriman, an Objectivist who has done some interesting work on the philosophy of science.)

It's two examples from Stephen King that I recall giving me a clue about this. (My memories of these stories are emphatically open to correction.) First, The Langoliers: Passengers go through a "tear in the fabric of reality" (or some such common thing), and find themselves in an alternate universe which is in a state of metaphysical decay. The universe they're stuck in is not only dying, but being eaten up by Pac-Man like creatures.

What do you do when something like that happens?

That's my point--there's no way to know. Reality itself is breaking down, and there's no way to discover what to do about it.

In The Langoliers, one character is a blind girl who... just knows... what needs to be done. She tells the others what to do, they do it, and just barely escape those eater-monsters.

Also by King is The Library Policeman. A man has an overdue library book, and a large "person," obviously not constrained by our laws of metaphysics, comes after him.

What do you do when that sort of thing comes along?

The story's character... just knows... to wad up a big fistful of licorice, throw it at the policeman, and wipe him out.

(These two stories appeared in the anthology Four Past Midnight.)

This “just knows” element is a substitute for human epistemology, when reality breaks down--something that never happens in reality. (However, that breakdown can be simulated by man-made means; more on this later.)

I do enjoy King to an extent; for example, he constructs a riveting story. But when that “just knows” element is a major factor, the story loses that much relevance to me.

I don't think this breakdown of epistemology is present in the Harry Potter stories. (Believe it or not, it was not the Ayn Rand Institute's op-ed pieces that turned me on to Harry Potter; it was my wife.) The world of Harry Potter operates by a metaphysics other than our own; it's definitely a fantasy. But that other metaphysics has its rules. To return to Nick's quote: "...if there was another universe, it would have to follow internal rules of its own and adhere to them." In other words, that universe would have to have an identity.

As long as that identity holds, so long as A is A, human thought is still possible. And Rowling's characters are human, at least in several important respects: Knowledge must be acquired by constant choice and effort; knowledge is not automatically correct; the search for truth defines one's moral character.

With that last point, we've gone from metaphysics and epistemology, to ethics. I can't resist mentioning that I consider the fifth book, The Order of the Phoenix, to be the most impressive of the Potter books, building on the above three branches of philosophy and moving into the fourth: politics. That novel presents a very sophisticated plotline showing how a school can become a tool of political oppression.

For this reason, I find the Potter books highly relevant to my life. I consider them written in a clear-minded style, well constructed, with characters I actually like--all of which adds to my enjoyment of them.

There is another type of fantasy I find helpful in clarifying my understanding of reality. That is a world where the laws of metaphysics might or might not be the same as our own; but the nature of the sentient beings in it are metaphysically different.

Like Monsters, Inc. (My take on that movie's theme: The laugh of joy carries with it more power than the scream of terror. I think that's a pretty healthy theme for kids (of any age).)

Objectivist ethics is based on the nature of reality, the nature of man, and the nature of human consciousness.

But imagine conscious beings that had a different nature, and/or a different type of consciousness. Would their ethics be different? Suppose vampires really existed. Suppose a being had to have fresh blood to survive. That does raise some ethical questions!

The best writers of speculative fiction will get the reader thinking along these “what if” lines on a very basic level, and the reader so inclined to ponder such things might find the thought process more than an exercise confined to another world.

Some people describe fantasy fiction as an escape from reality. I've been able to enjoy fantasy over my lifetime, but I've been able to use it to enhance my understanding of reality. Use it as an escape? No thanks. I'll continue to enjoy well-written fantasy in order to better understand and keep in touch with reality.

For further reading:

Two articles in Philosophy: Who Needs It, by Ayn Rand: “An Open Letter To Boris Spassky,” and “The Metaphysical Versus the Man-Made.” It took me years to be able to directly relate the first one to my theme in this article; I hope you'll see the connection more

easily.

Rodney Schroeter

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This article was originally written for Ditkomania, a fanzine dedicated to the work of Steve Ditkko.