

Episode 110: Tal Tsfany and Ayn Rand

Announcer ([00:04](#)):

Welcome to the Bill Walton Show, featuring conversations with leaders, entrepreneurs, artists, and thinkers. Fresh perspectives on money, culture, politics, and human flourishing. Interesting people. Interesting things.

Bill Walton ([00:24](#)):

Welcome to the Bill Walton Show. I'm here today, back again with Tal Tsfany, who's president and CEO of the Ayn Rand Institute. And we want to talk about what Paul Krugman wrote recently in the New York Times and about what he does or doesn't understand about freedom.

Krugman recently wrote *When Libertarianism Goes Bad*. "Liberty doesn't mean the freedom to infect other people with COVID-19. Donald Trump's, of course, disastrous leadership is an important factor, but I also blame Ayn Rand or more generally libertarianism gone bad, a misunderstanding of what freedom is all about."

This was Paul Krugman in the New York times, October 22nd. So this invited the questions. I think Krugman is wrong about everything and I know Tal Tsfany can help me show him the error of his ways. Tal, welcome.

Tal Tsfany ([01:27](#)):

Thank you. Glad to be here again.

Bill Walton ([01:31](#)):

After this piece came out, you challenged Krugman to a debate. Where are we? How did all this come about? And what's the [crosstalk 00:01:39]?

Tal Tsfany ([01:38](#)):

So first, the piece was not called *When Libertarianism Goes Bad*. It was called *How Many People Will Ayn Rand Kill*. So, that is first. Secondly, he didn't bother to read what Ayn Rand said about pandemics and what is the role of government in a situation of an epidemic or pandemic. He didn't do the work. He didn't do the research to understand what she had to say about it. And so we called him up on it.

Just to give you an idea of how corrupt this journalism type is, she said the opposite. She said that if you really understand what individual rights mean, then you understand that if somebody could infect you, then it's the role of the government to intervene but in a reactive way, to quarantine people that are testing positive. So she had a full solution for that and it's not what we're doing right now in America. But I think most-

Bill Walton ([02:45](#)):

What was her solution? I'm dying to hear what the better solution then what we're implementing right now.

Tal Tsfany ([02:53](#)):

Well, she starts from the principle. The principle is what are individual rights. You don't get threaten my life, to diminish my life, to stop me from exercising my human capacity to think, to reason, to act, to keep my property, and so on. That is the principle. If you carry a disease that infects my life, and there is a question which is very complicated and we need to deal with that in the realm of law is what is the threshold? Because if I had the flu three, four years ago, and somebody came into an airplane with a red nose, I was not, "Oh my god. He's going to kill me." Because flu does kill people. So there's some kind of a threshold that we have to decide on as a society of what constitutes a risk.

But let's say that COVID is a risk for some people. We're reading stats that if you're older than 70, 80 years old, it can go up to 10, 14%, the mortality rate. That's significant. You don't want to sit next to someone who has a 15% chance of killing you. So you're threatening my life. So we delegate the protection of your life to a monopoly of force called government. And they need, when it's proven that somebody actually is threatening my life, to then stop them from doing it.

So the idea is test everyone, or at least give a lot of incentive to test, and if you turn out positive, quarantine, because otherwise you're threatening people's lives. So I'm all for tracing and then quarantining people who test positive and are a risk. But if you're not, who is the government to tell you where to go and what to do if you're not risking?

So this whole misunderstanding of, "No, the standard is my life and the government has to prove that I'm a risk to somebody else to limit any of my actions." In her world, the government has no say in to open or close my business. It's none of their business, unless I am actively risking someone's life. And there are many, many things we have to deal with. It's a very complicated philosophical issue.

But what he says, I just wanted to give ... Well, first he didn't read what she had to say about it. He assumed, because he doesn't know her or understand her, in my mind, level of genius. Secondly, he said in one of the remarks, somebody told him, "But she doesn't say that. She says the opposite." And then he replies, "It doesn't matter what she said. It matters what people think she said." And you asked me once, if you remember, about subjectivism. This is subjectivism for you. It doesn't matter what happens in reality. It matters what I think or what other people think is the reality.

Bill Walton ([05:55](#)):

Well, let me jump ahead. A little sneak preview of us talking about objectivism versus subjectivism. I guess subjectivism is the view of the truth resides only in the mind?

Tal Tsfany ([06:07](#)):

Yes. It's coming from the mind and it's projected into reality. Yes.

Bill Walton ([06:13](#)):

And this leads to moral relativism.

Tal Tsfany ([06:16](#)):

Yes.

Bill Walton ([06:16](#)):

And this leads to your behavior. You set your own standards for moral right and wrong.

Tal Tsfany ([06:24](#)):

It's a little bit more nuanced. If you look at the subjective philosophers, they say no, but we have to have moral codes. So where do they come from? This is where you started having collectivism. Because if you and I cannot reason by ourselves or define a code of morality that is somewhat objective, then the collective mind will do it, and this is where we deteriorated. It started with Kant, of course, beforehand, but Kant really elevated that, and then Hegel and many other German philosophers who created what we call now the left.

And every communism, fascism, Nazi-ism, if you think about it, socialism, are all forms of, if you and I cannot reason and not be independent in our understanding of morality and how to derive moral code from reality, then we revert back to what everybody else thinks. Or maybe when we can't know what everybody else thinks of what the majority thinks. Then we have a ruler who will tell us what the majority thinks.

Bill Walton ([07:27](#)):

Well, yeah. And a majority thinking something does not make it true. It just makes it what the majority thinks. Many of us, me, read Ayn Rand when I was younger. Fountainhead, Atlas Shrugged. Atlas Shrugged's a long haul to get through, but it's still a pretty good book. And there's a certain joyousness to Ayn Rand's philosophy, that there's no greater moral good than achieving one's happiness. But this happiness requires a rational respect for reality. It really celebrates the individual as the object of happiness.

You'd think with the feel-good society that American West has been in for the last 70 years or 80 years, that that would have more appeal, yet ... I went to Woodstock and that was forever ago, and everybody pretended we were all independent, but then you see all these kids that grew up and they're now fans of rule by experts and government locking us down. Talk about the joy you find in Ayn Rand's philosophy.

Tal Tsfany ([08:44](#)):

My life before Ayn Rand and after discovering Ayn Rand pretty late in my life- I was turning 40. It was 10 years ago that I first picked up Atlas Shrugged and then read the Fountainhead. I would say it was elevated to levels I couldn't think are possible because she gave me a model of what it means to live a human life, a prosperous life, a happy life. She defines everything so clearly. She says something like happiness is that state of consciousness, which proceeds from the achievement of one's values. And then she breaks it down, why we as human beings have to go through the action of pursuing values in order to derive happiness. This is who we are. This is our faculty.

I think, for me, she is the happiness philosopher. If people really understand what she means, she regards you as the individual, the sovereign, the independent mind who has the capacity and the moral duty, if you will, to go and pursue your happiness in many domains, in the domains of creative productivity, which is what we do with the power of a conceptual mind. Everything around you was created by someone. It was an idea and integration of reality, then put into practice. The microphone, your screen, the pictures behind you. It's all products of the human mind doing what the human mind does. So productive, and capacity, and then of course, relationships, romantic relationships.

She was the most romantic person ever. And friendships, and deriving value from relationship with other people, the [crosstalk 00:10:24] of leisure, fun, art. People don't know about this unbelievable breakthrough in the world of aesthetics that she wrote called the romantic manifesto, where she explained what is good art and what is bad art. What is art for? So the scope of what Rand offers you is unknown. And hopefully the time between when society will understand what Rand brings

to the table and now hopefully will shrink, because she can bring another Renaissance as far as I'm concerned.

Bill Walton ([11:02](#)):

We're not merely a product of our experiences or our background, but hers are very illuminating. Where she's born in Russia in 1905, and grew up to end up in the Russia ruled by Lenin, and then Stalin, and then escape. When'd she escape? In the late '20s?

Tal Tsfany ([11:18](#)):

1926, she moved. [crosstalk 00:11:18] She moved to the [crosstalk 00:11:24].

Bill Walton ([11:18](#)):

Yeah. Then she didn't go to New York, to Brooklyn; she heads to Hollywood. She ends up in Hollywood and within a couple of days, she gets hired by Cecil B DeMille, and within a couple of days after that, she meets the love of her life, who's an actor in one of the films, and then she spent a tremendous amount of time writing screenplays. Really a good story. So her background is very human, very appealing.

Tal Tsfany ([11:53](#)):

And it's heroic, I think, if you see what you had to go through, if you read her biographical interviews or listen to them. She was starving, literally starving, eating what she could afford, but not giving up and working 12, 14, 16 hours a day, writing. Getting her English to be the best it could be. And you see her accent remained very heavy. She never improved it, but her vocabulary? It's very hard to find other authors with that level of expression. And she was so hard working. If you look at what she was able to achieve in one lifetime, it's ...

Bill Walton ([12:39](#)):

Did she write about or talk about what Lenin did to Russia? Which is what we're seeing today, which is where you stop treating people as individuals and individual souls with rights accruing to them, versus groups and classes. One of the first things Lenin did was, he demonized whole groups of people. And we think about the Russians, but it wasn't just Russians. It was shopkeepers. It was this class. It was that class. And you look at what's happening in America with the Balkanization of sex, gender, race, you name the category. We were no longer individuals, but we are a lumped into whatever classification we've been given.

Tal Tsfany ([13:25](#)):

You're right. There's so many enemies to the individual. Anything other than you. Anything other than you and your own free will. It's not just the gender and sex, and now you're all about your genes. It's the fact that people like Sam Harris even will tell you that you don't have free will.

Bill Walton ([13:45](#)):

[crosstalk 00:13:45] Sam Harris is another podcaster that's-

Tal Tsfany ([13:47](#)):

Sam Harris has a podcast. They're very famous. People in the Silicon Valley that I spent years and years with, unbelievable engineers, and then you go eat lunch, and then you talk about philosophy and

politics. And you're like, "You want to tell me that everything you just talked about in the board meeting and created is not you?" And they say, "No, no, no. It's my genes. It's my environment. It's my teachers. It's anything but me, because we're taught that we don't really have free will." By the way, [crosstalk 00:14:24] think about how the left is trying to ...

Bill Walton ([14:26](#)):

That's Marxist determinism. Everything is material and that's [crosstalk 00:14:31] problems we have today. I'm sorry. I keep ... Continue.

Tal Tsfany ([14:35](#)):

No, this is exactly what it is. It's determinism. And that leads to many other issues that then you see. It just what defines what the left is all about. It's anything other than individualism and responsibility. Obama saying you didn't build it. So who did, if I didn't? Somebody had to, right?

It's the collective mind. It's we, it's not the you. Ayn Rand has this beautiful little novelette called Anthem where we forgot the word I. You're not allowed to say the word our. It was taken out of the vocabulary. It's forbidden. And as you know, words are tools of [inaudible 00:15:17]. So what happens when you take ... And when I go and speak to high schoolers and middle school kids, I ask them, "Do you think this is fiction?" Because she describes a world and a dystopian future where it's all about the collective. There's no I.

And then Ego, the hero, rediscovers what it means to have I. And it's attacked from all different directions, the you. Because if life is about you, it means a lot of things. We have to leave you alone. You're the king, not us. Not anyone can tell you what to do, how to pursue your happiness. And this is the genius of the founding fathers. This is why she loved America so much. She was in love with America. [Crosstalk 00:16:00] She was disappointed to come from Russia to Hollywood, to find that Hollywood is promoting communism.

Bill Walton ([16:06](#)):

I want to talk with you about the source of all of this, which I believe is God, but she doesn't think that, and we can talk about that. But before I jump into that, she did the say this about America: "I can say," and she uses big words, "Not as a patriotic bromide, but with full knowledge of the necessary metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, political, and aesthetic routes, that the United States is the greatest, the noblest, and, in its original founding principles, the only moral country in the history of the world." Wow.

Tal Tsfany ([16:44](#)):

Isn't that a love letter to a country?

Bill Walton ([16:49](#)):

Yeah. Given the 1619 Project where everybody is now saying- Not everybody, New York times is saying that slavery is the founding principle of America. I would love to have Ayn Rand alive today to have a little chat with the New York Times about the 1619 project.

Tal Tsfany ([17:09](#)):

I wonder how would she would react? You hear her Q&A sessions in the Ford Hall Forum she used to do every year from the '60s to early '80s, and, oh my god, what she does with those questions is unbelievable.

Bill Walton ([17:23](#)):

Well, she also wrote a tremendous ... The thing I think is interesting, I read recently that she's got the famous speech by John Galt in Atlas Shrugged that runs for 60 pages. And I just found out that that's double the length of the Communist Manifesto. She not only out-thought them. She out-talked them.

Tal Tsfany ([17:44](#)):

Individualist manifesto, that's what it is.

Bill Walton ([17:48](#)):

We need to talk about the role of God and all this, because she was fairly silent. She was an atheist, but she was silent in her novels and a lot of her writings about God. And I believe that we do have a creator, but he turned around and gave man dominion. And so it makes us a first mover in that sense. We don't create, but we do make, and what we do with all of our attributes has just been wonderful. We've got six minutes left. We can discuss the existence of God.

Tal Tsfany ([18:29](#)):

Let me say this in a positive way. She was just a proponent of the individual [[crosstalk 00:18:34](#)] and our ability to reason. We talked about subjectivism. She thinks this is one permutation of philosophy. The other one is what she called intrinsicism. By that she means the truth is not with you, it's in reality and you have to discover it. It needs to be revealed to you. And she says, "No. That's wrong as well."

We need to be scientists all the way. Nothing is given. You have the human consciousness and reality. There is a method for the human consciousness to know reality, and that's the scientific method. You observe, you use your senses, your percepts, and then your concepts. And as long as you ground it in reality, that's the breakthrough that I think she did in ethics. She said if you understand how the human mind functions and you see it's efficacy in understanding it, we can derive morality from reality.

We don't need 10 commandments and we don't need to believe anything on faith. Faith is the enemy of reason. And this is why she derived a whole set of ideas and morals, if you will. She has, in a way, seven virtues, because she explains each one's virtues to the function of the human mind and why you need to be productive, why you need to have honesty and integrity. Because you cannot fake reality. It's like throwing sand in your engine. So she offers between the intrinsic, what she called it, and the subjective, what you call an objective morality.

And I can tell you one thing, Bill, that when I was six years old, my grandmother asked me to put the yarmulke on in Israel. And she says, "It's time for you to put the yarmulke on because God is looking from above. You need to respect." And I went to my uncle's room. I remember I was shaking. And I said, "God, if you're going to show up and prove to me that you exist, I will be the most religious person in the world." Because I'm serious about ideas, and I was always. I don't know why I am. But he chose not to show up. And my inclination, as a kid, and I don't know why, just the way I am, I went back to my mother said, "I cannot believe in something that I have no proof to."

Now, I understand that a lot of people, what we call the metaphysical level can not deal with the idea of who created all of this. This is unbelievable. And so there's a separate question about the universe and big questions, metaphysical questions, about how did it come to be. Did it come to be? Is it

eternal? Is it infinite or finite? If you put those things aside, again, what you need to remember about Rand, she is an advocate of reason. She wanted to call one of the ideas, not call it objectivism, but reasonism. But it doesn't sound good.

So this is what she is. I think she's an advocate of reason. She is an Aristotelian, taking Aristotle to a whole new level, in my mind. It's like what Einstein did to Newton, Ayn Rand is doing to Aristotle. And think what happened to humanity, when we rediscovered Aristotle. Brought back the age of reason, the scientific revolution, the political revolution of America, the industrial revolution of America. And that's all Aristotle. And it's not Plato who is the one looking up to the sky and looking for revelations. So she is-

Bill Walton ([22:03](#)):

He believed in the philosopher king to rule us.

Tal Tsfany ([22:07](#)):

Well, if you think about it, if you cannot, by yourself ...

Bill Walton ([22:12](#)):

We live in a Platonian in a world right now, not in an Aristotelian world.

Tal Tsfany ([22:18](#)):

Oh, we're declining back. There's a great, great book by-

Bill Walton ([22:21](#)):

You and I agree on so much. I want to leave the God part aside, but I think that god's the source of all this, and even our reason there was a product of his, but then I guess we're back at first causes and we don't need to worry about that. We need- [crosstalk 00:22:38]

Tal Tsfany ([22:38](#)):

No, I think there is a metaphysical question, but you're right. We can agree or disagree about a metaphysical question, but what I find that there's a lot of people who do have this belief that we were created by God, still, in a way, compensate. All the way up in philosophy. You think about metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and politics. They get to the right conclusions. I think the metaphysical basis, they have to rethink it, but regardless, a lot of people get to really good conclusions and fight for the right things in an ethical perspective.

Bill Walton ([23:14](#)):

And that's where I think you find common ground.

Tal Tsfany ([23:17](#)):

I agree.

Bill Walton ([23:17](#)):

I think at least as a practical matter. And back to practical matter, we opened with this a bit and Paul Krugman. I do want to get at this idea. She wrote on civil disobedience, and she said it may be justifiable,

in some cases, when an individual disobeys a law in order to bring the issue to the court as a test case, and she goes on and on.

At what point with say, masks, or lock-downs, or other ideas, which are highly debatable, even though some people think they aren't, and there's strong science on one, at least, and I don't want to get into that particularly. But at what point do we say, look, enough is enough? We need to engage in 1776 all over again.

Tal Tsfany ([24:12](#)):

That's a great question. I think one needs to understand the context of what we're dealing with. So when you find that the government is in a place where it's completely risking your life and diminishing your life, you have to think about what it will mean to revolt or to disobey. And we're not in an age where with muskets, we can revolt against the king. So I think it can all be thought if you have a program, preferably a legitimate program, where you can find a way to, in a non-violent way, try to push the government and its policies to a different direction. And I think a lot can be done before we talk about taking our guns and disobeying.

We have to remember that the achievement of applying individual rights in a political context is a huge achievement. And it's not given. If you look at history, 99% of it is complete anarchy. And we need to be very, very careful. At one point, if somebody is endangering your life, you have to think really hard and get active. And a lot of people need to get active. We did everything we can to scream and shout and explain. And a lot of people, we put out a white paper of what will be an American response to the pandemic.

If we had enough intellectuals ... And by the way, if you think about how society has changed, it's not with guns. It's political activism, it's intellectual activism, that brings about the change. People don't remember, but 100, 150 years before America, we started having those new ideas about individualism that then manifested itself in a revolution. So first you have to be armed with great ideas and then to be very, very smart and careful about the way you go about it. Because we gave the government the monopoly on force. They have nuclear bombs. They have F16s and 15s or whatever they have right now. You cannot fight with them, but you can change the minds of the people who govern the monopoly on force.

Bill Walton ([26:39](#)):

[crosstalk 00:26:39] I hear a lot of people talking now, "Well, we're going to have a revolution and buy ammunition." That, to me, would be catastrophic.

Tal Tsfany ([26:48](#)):

It's going to be horrible. You're going to have way bigger problems [crosstalk 00:26:55].

Bill Walton ([26:55](#)):

If you believe the hard left, as I do, is nihilistic [crosstalk 00:27:01] and they don't really have a big plan to change things, they just want to tear things down, getting into an armed conflict or doing something radically stupid like that in the 21st century would bring about their aim, which is the destruction of the West.

Tal Tsfany ([27:14](#)):

It will be more destruction. But let me say something positive, which I find so [crosstalk 00:27:26] Let's do that.

Bill Walton ([27:26](#)):

Let's do positive.

Tal Tsfany ([27:27](#)):

Right. So Rand said something. Why is evil, evil? It's because it's incompetent. It's not able to understand reality and deal with it. So remember this one thing: evil is impotent. And in the end of the day, we, the people who really understand how to deal with reality, to reason, to build, we know how to do things way better than those nihilists, who don't know how to build anything.

It takes us years to build a statue, like David behind me, it takes a second to destroy it. But they don't know how to build anything. As long as we are here to produce, they can loot us, and mooch us, and all of that that is well described in Atlas, but we are the source of energy and they're impotent. So I'm not afraid.

Bill Walton ([28:18](#)):

Boy. I so completely agree and, Tal, thank you. That's a great way to end our most recent conversation, and will be continued to our next one [crosstalk 00:28:32].

Tal Tsfany ([28:30](#)):

Every time we talk, it feels like we have so much more to talk about.

Bill Walton ([28:35](#)):

We've got another 19 shows to do, and we got to get into the God discussion, but we'll save that for next time. So Tal Tsfany, President and CEO of the Ayn Rand Institute. Highly recommend you get involved with them and take a look at their website and all the writings and seminars that they produce. They're performing a great service for freedom and the individual.

And so, thanks to you all for listening. We'd love to hear what you think. Let us know in [Parlor 00:29:07], Facebook and Twitter, where you can find the Bill Walton Show. For previous episodes, you can find us on Apple podcasts, Spotify, and YouTube, and of course at thebillwaltonshow.com. Thanks.

Announcer ([29:18](#)):

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