Ayn Rand, in Spades

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I'm walking our sushi order back to the cafe table at the Reading Terminal Market in Philadelphia when I notice that **Adam Wildavsky** is talking to a fan. His name is Kumar, a retired pharmaceutical rep from India by way of Ohio. He's a bridge player like Wildavsky, here for the **Spring Nationals**, and he's sitting in my seat.

Wildavsky, tall and gaunt with a trim brown beard, is listening to Kumar's questions, nodding placidly in a birdlike dip. He has attached his portable back-support pillow to his chair, as he does to every chair, because he spends most of his life sitting down. He is a computer programmer -- specifically, an adherent to a hyperefficient system called "Extreme Programming" -- and he is also one of the best bridge players in the United States. Kumar has just been eliminated from the Spring Nationals' main event**, the Vanderbilt Knockout**. Wildavsky's team, on the other hand, is moving on to Round 3 this afternoon.

"Kumar wants to know **the secret to being a better bridge player**," Wildavsky explains. His eyes gleam briefly, mischievously. "Of course, you know what I told him."

Of course, I do. The secret to success in bridge is also the secret to success in life, and anyone who meets Adam Wildavsky soon learns it.

As it happens, Wildavsky has enjoyed a lot of success in bridge recently. At the American Contract Bridge League's Fall Nationals, his team took the coveted **Reisinger Board-a-Match**. And then Wildavsky partnered with **Ivar Stakgold**, a bridge legend, to win the New York Regional Board-a-Match title. These tournaments, like most major bridge wins, earned Wildavsky merely honor. Occasionally, though, tournament wins earn him cash. Wildavsky made $4,000 when he won the Bridge Pro Tour's New York Open on Dec. 27, 2002. After the win, he was quoted in a Pro Tour press release as saying, "Prize money will attract younger players and hopefully revitalize the game." Then he added, somewhat mysteriously, "Money is the root of all good."

Attentive readers will recognize the quote: it's the keystone of Francisco D'Anconia's defense of capitalism in **Ayn Rand**'s very long novel "Atlas Shrugged."

Adam Wildavsky is an Objectivist, a follower of Rand's controversial philosophy of staunch individualism, selfishness and unrestrained capitalism. Rand developed Objectivism, in part, to codify the ideal of the heroic man that had emerged in her fiction: a man who is unapologetically self-interested, dismissing all needless emotion and mystic hereafters, certainly anti-Communist, usually very tall and very gaunt, for some reason -- one who creates his moral worth through productive endeavor, be it the building of skyscrapers or railroads, the writing of very long novels or, presumably, the winning of major bridge competitions.

It is this heroic ideal that Wildavsky is trying to explain to Kumar at the Reading Terminal Market over sushi.

"One of Rand's basic premises is that man has free will," Wildavsky is saying, "which is expressed primarily through a single choice: to think or not to think."

"I know, I know," Kumar says. "That is my problem. I think too much."

"No!" Wildavsky corrects him. You should always think, he says. Weak players, he says, follow "bridge nursery rhymes" -- and here he waggles his head, reciting, "Second hand low, third hand

high, fourth takes if he can" -- instead of looking objectively at what the situation requires.

When discussing the advantage that his Objectivism brings him, Wildavsky often returns to the same motif: reason must trump emotion. This is more than an abstract motto. It is, as he plays, a constant, rigorous, exhausting inner struggle: to resist guesswork and gut reaction and "spacing out," to analyze each hand in itself, each bid, play after play after play.

At first glance, bridge isn't the most obvious game for an Objectivist. A deck of cards is divided equally between two partnerships -- North/South, East/West -- each of which works to win a set number of tricks above a book of six tricks. The number of tricks and the trump suit are established before play by an auction. A player bids four hearts, for example, if he thinks he and his partner can make 10 tricks with hearts as the trump suit.

But the bids and their sequence are also an intricate code through which each player tries to reveal the contents of his hand to his partner. This is not a lonely, tall, gaunt genius building a skyscraper or even conquering a crossword puzzle. It is an intimate relationship of trust and mutual reliance. Some partnerships last longer than many marriages. More end in anger; the game is notorious for its bad breakups among partners, its ability to inspire frustration, recrimination and rage. Kumar says that he began playing bridge 30 years ago with his wife. And then, with an apologetic glance weighted with bad memories, he gently explains, "I am sorry to say I have difficulty playing with her now."

But Wildavsky is always tranquil, always silent. He refuses to rehash hands at the table or to listen as other partners chew one another out, an uncommon deaf-muteness he has named "the Keller Convention," after Helen Keller. It wasn't always this way. He used to be a "terror" at the table, he tells me. Then he stopped looking at the game emotionally and started looking at it Objectively. "Selfishiness is what led me to the idea that it would be profitable to be nice to my partner," he says.

It most likely helps that his partner in the Vanderbilt, **Doug Doub**, is also an Objectivist. Counting himself, Wildavsky estimates there are three Objectivists among the 100 top players in the United States.

Meanwhile, at the Reading Terminal Market, Kumar thanks Wildavsky, shaking his hand vigorously. "I learned a lot."

"You're welcome," Wildavsky says. He has offered Kumar some additional recommendations from the Rand oeuvre. "Let me know how you enjoy 'The Virtue of Selfishness,'" he says as Kumar departs.

Adam Wildavsky, 43, has been playing bridge since he was in high school in Oakland, Calif. He continued playing at M.I.T., where he studied computer science. It was there that someone gave him a copy of "Atlas Shrugged," and he has been an Objectivist ever since.

But it is only recently that he has been publicly weaving together his two passions, dropping references to Rand into an article for Bridge Today, where he is an occasional contributor, and crediting Objectivism for his success when speaking to the bridge media. In December, his Reisinger win was lauded by **Alan Truscott**, bridge columnist for The New York Times, as "a triumph for the Objectivism of Ayn Rand."

But the response has not always been positive. Last year, Wildavsky released a manifesto of sorts, a 300-word mission statement now posted on his Web site. "I owe a large portion of my success in bridge, and in life, to novelist Ayn Rand," it begins. "To be successful a bridge player . . . should always have a reason for his actions. Rand put it succinctly -- 'Emotions are not a means of cognition.'"

Hardly inflammatory stuff, yet the first time Wildavsky deployed his essay within the bridge

community -- via the electronic newsletter of the bridge Web site, okbridge.com -- the letters swiftly followed.

"Have no doubt, whatever Adam Wildavsky may tell you, that the teachings of Ayn Rand are extremist," wrote a reader named Brian Meadows.

"The 47 lines about Ayn Rand should never have appeared," echoed Stefan (no last name given), with a bridge player's characteristic exactitude. "I'm disgusted."

But the heroic man does not require acceptance. Consider "Atlas Shrugged." After Francisco D'Anconia delivers his "Money is the root of all good" speech to a party of government moochers, fey intellectuals and moneyed socialists, he leaves them all to rejoin his fellow titans of industry and science in a place called Galt's Gulch. The gulch is the Objectivist utopia, a refuge for the heroic thinkers whom the world has rejected. In many ways it resembles a bridge tournament: thick with C.E.O.'s (**Warren Buffett** is a renowned player of the game, and **Bill Gates** made an appearance at last year's World Championships in Montreal) and as far away from the real world as it gets.

On this day, utopia is the Philadelphia Downtown Marriott, site of the **league's Spring Nationals** -- more than 100 events over 10 days, drawing more than 5,000 players. They play in two four-hour sessions a day. The elite then head up to the suite of the league's president for cocktails and a deli platter. Many more gather at the hotel bar for drinks and the constant reliving of hands.

Adam Wildavsky strides into this world on long legs, with a box of clementines from the Reading Terminal Market that he drops off in his room before heading down to the fifth floor, the bridge floor. (Wildavsky is on the Zone diet. He wants to lose a few, he says, though he looks plenty skinny to me. I guess we can all stand to be a bit gaunter.)

Wildavsky is joining his six-man team for the afternoon's play of the Vanderbilt. It's the same team that won the Reisinger, including Doub. Today, they're playing against a five-handed team that includes one of the best players from Argentina and also one of the famous Hackett twins from England, Justin or Jason, Wildavsky isn't sure which.

One of Rand's favorite adjectives is "indifferent": it describes a kind of Objectivist Zen state of selfish focus, and it describes Wildavsky perfectly. He seems beatifically clueless of the anxiety that permeates the hotel. He introduces me to a man who is apparently one of the top players in the world, a short man with angry eyes and gray hair. The man seems frustrated that I have not heard of him and shakes my hand reluctantly. His hand feels angry somehow, clawlike and clammy, and his mind is clearly elsewhere: on the game to come or maybe some game from years ago. Bridge players are a haunted lot, possessing long memories, particularly for the hands that went wrong. They have their own language, a swingy patois full of metaphors and eponyms that sounds like a cross between a science textbook and scat.

(Consider this passage from **Edgar Kaplan** and Alfred Sheinwold's "How to Play Winning Bridge": "Five-card majors, pre-emptive jumps, weak two-bids, controlled psychics -- all have been widely used by many others. We are advocates not of the separate ingredients but of the whole concoction.")

Wildavsky introduces me to **Ivar Stakgold**, his friend and partner from the New York Regional. Ivar resembles a distinguished foreign character actor, the kind of guy who would be getting the Max von Sydow roles were he not busy being an applied mathematician and bridge legend. "I knew Edgar Kaplan when I was a young man," he says. "I contributed a little bit to the **Kaplan-Sheinwold** system. You know it? Yes. Anyway, in 1997, **Edgar Kaplan** passed away." He pauses, a little sadly. "There was a memorial service, and I said a few words, as people will do. And this young man," he says, indicating Wildavsky, "approached me and said he was interested in playing the Kaplan-Sheinwold system, which not many people were doing. I had not played serious bridge for

years. It was a sad event, but something good came out of it. He brought me back into this terrible world."

Later, I will ask Wildavsky about this story. Why did he invite Stakgold to be his partner? Was it gratifying to bring someone of Stakgold's caliber back to bridge? In an e-mail message, Wildavsky scolds me for my sentimentalism. Kaplan-Sheinwold experts are hard to come by, he writes, especially ones that play well. "Look for the selfish motive!" he instructs.

When Wildavsky gets his cards, he leans back against his portable back pillow and tries to get his legs under the stubby little table. There is a moment of study and rearranging of his hand. Then, with a decisive inner nod, he sits up, gently arching his head and neck forward. Bidding begins, but it is silent -- each player indicating his bid or his pass by pulling the appropriate laminated card from a little box mounted to his right. Each player shows his bid card -- one spade, say, or two no-trump or pass -- then places it face up on the table. There are perhaps two-dozen tables in this sectioned-off bit of ballroom, and for the course of the tournament, the room is full of the airy shuffling of bid cards, punctuated by the puff of an asthma inhaler, a call for the card caddy or one partner quietly chastising another in between games. Wildavsky and Doub are playing against **Michael Polowan** and the **Hackett twin** -- Jason, it turns out.

All is going smoothly until **Hackett** pulls out the stop card, indicating he is going to skip a level of bidding. Wildavsky waits 10 seconds and then shows his pass card. He does this because he knows the rules, and the rules say he has to wait 10 seconds. But Hackett thinks that Wildavsky waited too long, and he raises his hand to call the director.

Bridge is at once gentlemanly self-policing and deeply suspicious. You can't sigh funny or scratch your nose or wait a second too long, or else you risk being accused of sending "unauthorized information" to your partner. You must aspire to an even, expressionless tempo -- a kind of robotism that, at later levels, is enhanced by screens that prevent partners from seeing one another, requiring them to pass their bids through a small hole, like secret messages between prisoners in adjoining cells.

The director comes over. The players hunch and whisper their recollections of what happened, a quick Rashomon of silent seconds counted, who did what when. Finally the director determines the delay will not affect the outcome. Wildavsky and Doub end up winning the session, helping their team to a net gain of 37 International Match Points.

Some people get angry when the director is called on them. But Wildavsky doesn't seem to mind at all. That's exactly what should happen, he tells me later. It is when people are afraid to call the director that the system doesn't work.

And Wildavsky likes systems -- especially, it seems, if they are somewhat antique, like Kaplan-Sheinwold, or a little counterintuitive, like extreme programming, which boosts efficiency by having two programmers work the same problem at once. ("That's something of a tough sell to management," he says.) And he seems to like systems that are clear and final, even if they are occasionally opaque to the outsider, like bridge and like Objectivism.

Objectivists believe in absolute laws, whether of nature or of morality. This is Ayn Rand's promise that "A is A": up is not down, good (capitalism) is not evil (Communism), unemployment insurance promotes unemployment, three hearts cannot be bid after three spades and selfishness trumps all.

Although sometimes it doesn't. Later that evening, Wildavsky and Doub allow their opponents to make a three no-trump contract, and at the end of the night, they are out of the running. It's not easy to watch the team take in the surprise and sadness of this unexpected defeat. There is some sullenness, some verging-upon-tears. But Wildavsky bobs gently from toe to toe, a little shaken but generally calm.

"If I played perfectly every time," he says, "what would be the point?"

Wildavsky seems to have forgotten all about the loss when I meet him later at the hotel bar. "Objectivism is a reality-based philosophy," he will say later. "We realize that time only moves in one direction. Whatever is in the past is not undoable."

We run into Wildavsky's fellow bridge players **Sheri Winestock** and **Uday Ivatury**, who are having cocktails and talking about Objectivism. Winestock is married to **Fred Gitelman**, another Objectivist bridge player, and together they write and distribute bridge educational software through their business, Bridge Base.

Ivatury, meanwhile, is a computer programmer who helped found the Pipeline with **James Gleick** (also a bridge player) and is not any kind of Objectivist. In fact, Ivatury openly, smilingly, claims that he is trying to deconvert Winestock away from right-wing fanaticism. He has been needling Gitelman and Winestock about **Bridge Base**: if they're such hard-line capitalists, why are they giving this program away?

"Uday doesn't understand that selfishness is not always about money," Winestock says. "The game I love is dying. If I help bring people into the game, that is good for me."

Wildavsky nods. "You can do things for other people so long as it's not a sacrifice."

Some weeks later, I press Wildavsky on a similar point: if Objectivism truly gives him an edge in bridge, why share it with the competition? He gives me two answers, both of which I think are true. First: "I just decided that my philosophy is the most important thing that makes me what I am, and it couldn't hurt to let people know."

The second explanation: it has to do with Sept. 11 and the sense that day provoked in Wildavsky that our society is under attack, not just from collectivism within but also from a kind of destructive nihilism without. "It's more clear now that the survival of Western civilization is at stake," he says. A more Objectivist world would be a better place for Adam Wildavsky to live, and that would trump whatever advantage he might lose in bridge.

At the end of the night, back at the bar, Wildavsky runs into Michael Polowan, **Jason Hackett's** partner during the controversy over the 10-second delay. "I want to give you some advice," Wildavsky says. "There is a rule that I don't think Jason understands." Wildavsky goes on to explain that under A.C.B.L. rules, he was correct to wait the full 10 seconds and posits that perhaps Jason was mistakenly following the European rules on waiting. Polowan rolls his eyes slightly, probably thinking, sour grapes. But I don't think that's it at all. As a bridge player, as a programmer, as a philosopher, Wildavsky is always fine-tuning the system. Why? Look for the selfish motive.