

Ayn Rand versus the Public School Systems of America: The Case against Objectivism in Public School Education

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ABSTRACT

Ayn Rand's Objectivist philosophy is a complete antithesis to the present-day public education system, particularly in the areas of metaphysics, ethics, and politics. Rand's philosophy, if implemented, would further erode an already troubled system, seeking only to educate the more affluent (those who could pay for their own education) in a selfish, elitist manner. While there can be no argument that public education is in a state of crisis, the answer is not a reversal of the tenets upon which it was founded; free and appropriate education should still be for all. A more feasible solution lies within the return of the men of the mind, those who have left public school and urban education in favor of more lucrative or less frustrating pursuits. When educational innovators establish a collective to repair our broken schools, excellence will be restored.

Introduction

Are we our brother's keeper? It is the question that Ayn Rand sought to answer in her philosophy of Objectivism and her magnum opus of *Atlas Shrugged* (1957). Rand's Objectivist philosophy is very clear in its celebration of the individual and his or her personal pursuit of enlightenment, and she is particularly opposed to the current state of public school education. Upon reviewing the Objectivist position on public school

education, one is struck by the idea that Objectivists do not view the current educational system as repairable; in fact, it would appear that they are patiently waiting in the wings until its final collapse, much like John Galt, before they step forward with a Capitalist plan for its improvement. Unfortunately, Rand and other Objectivists disregard, perhaps intentionally, how their plan would disenfranchise the average student: one who cannot afford to personally fund their education, as Capitalism would suggest. In defense of these students, it is necessary to form an argument against the Objectivist view, and to work to improve the current structure for their sake.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of the article is to construct a defense of public school education through the filter of Rand's Objectivist philosophy, specifically the Objectivist tenets of metaphysics, ethics, and politics.

On Metaphysics – Objective Reality

In *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), the characters of Dagny Taggart and Hank Rearden fail to see reality for what it really is – they engage in a form of “subjective realism”, undaunted by the crumbling nature of society, they press forward in the respective industries. Their belief that they can effectively move the world forward despite growing chaos and the presence of a destroyer is in contrast to Galt's metaphysical awareness that society is crumbling under socialist dictates and greed. Hank Rearden's insistence on believing in the good of the common man and Dagny Taggart's refusal to walk away from Taggart Transcontinental in the midst of tightening regulatory controls blinds them both to the true metaphysical reality and makes them slaves to the parasitic nature of the government and its edicts. Only in the face of complete collapse does either character become fully aware of their inability to shape their individual realities.

Metaphysics in Education

The objective reality that Rand pits her main characters of Dagny and Hank against underlies a wave of pessimism. If it were not for the Dagnys and Hanks of the world, how could a struggling society ever emerge from troubled times? According to Rand, “If things are what they are – and that the task of man's consciousness is to perceive reality, not create it or invent it” (Ayn Rand Institute, 1995b, p. 2), how would a

society improve or continue to move forward? What good exists in a society if the dreamers, innovators, and visionaries simply resign due to disintegrating conditions? Rather than seeing the world for what it is, why not see it for what it *can be* and actually do something about its current state? Many present-day institutions are endangered by a growing lack of intellectual resources – men of the mind who are seemingly disappearing. The field of public school education stands as a prime example of a microcosmic society teetering on the brink of collapse. Multiple factors contributed to its decline: the government-based policy of No Child Left Behind sent a shockwave through public schools that left many gifted yet uncertified teachers scrambling for more secure employment once their (emergency) permits expired. Accountability through standardized testing has led to a “watered down” version of teaching that deviates further from a college-ready curriculum and closer to the test itself. In schools where the needs are greatest, the help is the most scarce; inner-city (low socioeconomic) schools are saddled with the burden of low test scores and government mandates to raise them, or else. In the face of these odds, we the educators are faced with a dilemma – do we “withdraw” and watch our urban schools implode, or do we dig in, as Hank Rearden did to fix the broken furnace, to salvage the profession we love?

A cry for help is being uttered from these battered institutions, and one is left to wonder where all the fixers, doers, heroes, and “men of the mind” have gone. In the face of growing pressure to achieve with fewer resources, many of education’s best and brightest have also withdrawn: capable men have fled to the more affluent suburban classrooms or erected charter schools to escape the mandates of public school accountability (and perhaps to “cherry pick” students who are guaranteed to produce positive results); brilliant minds rebel against the low salary and high certification requirements and avoid teaching altogether; other talented individuals opt for consultant work or educational sales. Still others who are in a position to retire have done so. The compound effect of their departures has left many of our most disparate schools bereft of resources and hope. Yet the real victims are the children of the public schools that are left behind. These students have no choice in how or where they are educated – they are academically marginalized on a daily basis while those who *could* make a difference choose not to – their reluctance to lend their genius to struggling schools is tantamount to the philosophy of John Galt and the inhabitants of Galt’s Gulch, where only after a total collapse of society do they decide to grace the world with their genius.

In order to save public schools and reverse their downward spiral, I do not believe that we can afford to subscribe to Rand’s philosophy of an objective reality. Yes, we see things as they are, but we cannot “obey” nature and allow our educational structures to fall because “that’s just the way it is.” The application of Rand’s theory leaves too many lives hanging in the balance – the lives of impressionable students who would compel us to see things in education for what they are, and then work to improve them, believing all along that while the work may be hard, it can and must be done for the sake of the children.

On Ethics

Rand's Objectivist position holds that

man – every man – is an end in himself, not a means to the ends of others; he must live for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself; he must work for his rational self-interest, with the achievement of his own happiness as the highest moral purpose of his life. (Ayn Rand Institute, 1995, pp. 1-2)

Rand rejects the principle of altruism, or the basic code that “man has no right to exist for his own sake, that service to others is the only moral justification of his existence, and that self-sacrifice is his highest moral duty, virtue, and value” (Ayn Rand Institute, 1995a, p. 2). In *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), Galt's declaration, "I swear -- by my life and my love of it -- that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine" (Rand, 1957, p. 1069) and the actions of Galt and the gulch inhabitants were a rejection of altruism; Galt and the other innovators undoubtedly saw the ill-fated “aristocracy of pull” as a succubus that demanded the will of others as their means of survival and improvement. Rand's writings (post *Atlas Shrugged*) indict public education as a socialist system doomed by its altruistic virtues of a moral obligation to provide a free and appropriate education to every child. Rand's celebration of the individual and his rational mind finds the concept of Montessori schools as a cure for the ills of the current educational system:

The middle class has created an antidote which is perhaps the most helpful movement in recent years: the spontaneous, unorganized, grass—roots revival of the Montessori system of education—a system aimed at the development of a child's cognitive, i.e., rational faculty. (Ayn Rand Institute, 2002, p. 7)

Rand's support of the Montessori system encompasses the following ideals:

- Structure – Children of varying age ranges may be grouped together in a classroom where the standard desk arrangement may not be present. Students learn *at their own pace, choose their own activities (or choose to do nothing), and progress when necessary*, not when the teacher demands it.
- Homework – Generally, none is assigned
- Assessment/Evaluation –Teachers keep detailed records of student interests and choices, charting their progress, development, and improvement instead of measuring students against a fixed universal standard. Simple right and wrong answers run contrary to the philosophy of Montessori education.”
- Technology – Since Montessori schools encourage students to explore their interests, experiences with technology may vary more than a

traditional school which establishes specific technology standards. One student might decide to investigate methods of online research, while another with no interest in computers will not hone this skill. (Montessori Schools, 2006, pp. 1-2)

Rand's hallmark of the celebration of the individual and free will is prominently featured throughout the Montessori philosophy. Yet criticism of the Montessori Method has been steadfast and not without merit. When compared to public education, Montessori deviates from the mean in several areas:

- Most Montessori schools assess a tuition-related fee, thereby excluding any potential students whose parents cannot afford the cost (and earning an elitist reputation)
- Montessori espouses a more idealistic than pragmatic view of education. "In fact, Maria Montessori's own writings have been referred to as 'romantic rhetoric', inapplicable to real world settings" (Montessori Schools, 2006, p. 3).
- The Montessori philosophy that everything a child does is considered as "work" leads to confusion about the difference between work and play, and the over emphasis on work lacks the key component of socialization that children need to be successful in social settings
- Montessori schools lack diversity (undoubtedly due to their omission of non-paying students) and often demographically resemble "private, elite academies of the rich and privileged" (Montessori Schools, 2006, p. 3). This educational environment sorely underprepares its students for the diversity that they will ultimately face in future educational and professional settings
- Montessori provides only a rudimentary plan to address students with learning differences (special education)

Ethics in Education

The hallmark of public school education is to provide a free and appropriate education to all students who enter the school doors. "Public schools are the only schools that must meet the needs of all students. They do not turn children or families away. Public schools serve children with physical, emotional, and mental disabilities, those who are extremely gifted and those who are learning challenged, right along with children without special needs. (Top 10 Reasons to Support Public Education, n.d., p. 1)

In short, no child can be left behind in a public school. Rand's endorsement of the Montessori Method would instantly leave an even more sizable percentage of the populace disenfranchised, creating a subculture of citizens relegated to the most menial

tasks of society, or worse, to a life of crime. While public education may stumble in its good intentions, at its core it remains an institution of hope and opportunity for the uneducated masses. Much like Rand's tumultuous society in *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), much of what is needed to improve public schools could be found when men of the mind – creative thinkers and innovators – return to invigorate the schools most in need of assistance.

On Politics

Rand's Objectivist position on politics "rejects any form of collectivism, such as fascism or socialism. It also rejects the current 'mixed economy' notion that the government should regulate the economy and redistribute wealth" (Ayn Rand Institute, 1995b, p. 3). Instead, Rand believes in a capitalist economy,

an economic system in which investment in and ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange of wealth is made and maintained chiefly by private individuals or corporations, esp. as contrasted to cooperatively or state-owned means of wealth. (Capitalism, 2006, p. 1)

To apply Rand's view to the field of education would present a speedy rejection of Texas's "Robin Hood" school funding plan.

Politics in Education

The Robin Hood plan was a nickname given to legislation enacted by the U.S. state of Texas in 1993 to provide court-mandated equitable school financing for all school districts in the state. Similar to the legend of Robin Hood, who 'robbed from the rich and gave to the poor', the law 'recaptured' property tax revenue from property-wealthy school districts, in an effort to equalize the financing of all districts throughout Texas. (Robin Hood Plan, 2007, p.1)

In Rand's Capitalist vision, education and the funding thereof would be undertaken as a "private profit making enterprise". Under Capitalism, free education would be "provided by private individuals, i.e., parents paying for their child's education, i.e., individuals acting as a group, e.g., church groups and non-religious groups" (Education, n.d., p.1). The error in Rand's Capitalist agenda for education lies in the fact that one, parents who cannot afford to pay for their child's education are left with few or

no options, and two, group funding of education, e.g., churches, has the potential of slanting the curriculum to suit their own agenda (curiously, the latter is an argument that Rand and other Objectivist philosophers have made about the current government-subsidized public school system). Capitalist supporters possess a myopic view of the pitfalls associated with applying a Capitalist economy to public school funding: when asked about those “who cannot afford to pay for their education”, the author of Capitalism.org refers to the underprivileged as “those select few” and offers only the suggestion that this “minority” resort to private charity (Education, n.d. p. 2). Interestingly, Rand herself was against the concept of charity. In a 1964 interview that Rand granted Playboy magazine, she stated that her views on charity were very simple. She considered neither it a major virtue nor a moral duty. To Rand, there was nothing wrong in helping other people, if and when they were worthy of the help and you (the individual) could afford to help them. Rand’s support of a Capitalist economy intentionally disregards the fundamental rights of public schoolchildren to an easily-accessed education, elevating it just beyond their desperate grasp.

Jonathan Kozol, author of *Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools* (1992), toured the public school systems of East St. Louis, Chicago, New York City, Camden, and Washington D.C. During his visits, Kozol was struck by the vast “disparities in education between schools of different classes and races” (urban vs. suburban). Kozol writes,

One would not have thought that children in America would ever have to choose between a teacher or a playground or sufficient toilet paper. Like grain in a time of famine, the immense resources which the nation does in fact possess go not to the child in the greatest need but to the child of the highest bidder. (Kozol, 1992, p. 72)

Adaptation of Rand’s laissez-faire Capitalism would relegate public schoolchildren to the same fate as the citizens of New York in *Atlas Shrugged* (1957); the innocents who languish away while the men of the mind and means turn a blind eye to their suffering, choosing instead to only “save the world” after a total collapse has ensued.

Concluding Remarks

Rand’s Objectivist theory and its specific views of metaphysics, ethics, and politics stand in total opposition to the public education system of today. While there is absolute room for improvement in present-day public schools, Rand’s recommendations of an education rooted in selfishness that is accessible only to those who have the means to pay for it, is a callous disregard for the lives of our current students and potential leaders, our future “men of the mind”.

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