

Ayn Rand Says: Mend Thy Selfless Ways!

Carmelita Thompson

PhD Student in Educational Leadership

Whitlowe R. Green College of Education
Prairie View A & M University
Prairie View, Texas

Educational Diagnostician

Bellville Independent School District
Bellville, Texas

William Allan Kritsonis, PhD

Professor and Faculty Mentor

PhD Program in Educational Leadership
Whitlowe R. Green College of Education
Prairie View A & M University
Prairie View, Texas

Member of the Texas A & M University System

Visiting Lecturer (2005)

Oxford Round Table
University of Oxford, Oxford, England

Distinguished Alumnus (2004)

Central Washington University
College of Education and Professional Studies

ABSTRACT

The definition of selfish means too much concern with one's own welfare or interest and having little or no concern for others. This term is depicted as a negative image of selfish people who are brutish and oblivious to the consequences that their actions may have to other people. Selfish people abuse others to satisfy their personal needs. Ayn Rand (1964) and her "Objectivist" philosophy deem this assertion as absurd. Since selfishness is a concern with one's own self interest, which is the attainment of the ultimate moral value, Rand (1964) insists selfishness is a virtue and selflessness is a vice.

Introduction

Ayn Rand's (1964) "Objectivism" philosophy was probably her most controversial. She rejected classical arguments for altruism and asserted that man must pursue his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life. The happiness of others should not take precedence over one's own happiness. Ayn Rand makes a compelling argument that counters the conventional understanding of selflessness as an altruistic framework. Rand views selfishness as a virtue and selflessness as a vice.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to discuss Rand's view that man should pursue his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life. Productive achievement is a noble activity and an absolute. Man should view being selfish, the pursuit of his own happiness, as the ultimate moral value. A selfless man, one not motivated by concern for one's self, is a flawed individual.

Ethics

Traditional ethics praise acts that are selfless and call selfish acts amoral or immoral. A self-interested person is viewed as a person that may potentially harm others in pursuit of their own happiness. Rand's ethical view is the exact opposite of the traditional view of ethics. She believes that self-interest is the standard of morality and selflessness is immorality. Ayn Rand's ethics identifies the good and evil according to the rational standard of value of man's life *qua* man. "What is morality, or ethics? It is a code of values to guide man's choices and actions-the choices and actions that determine the purpose and the course of life" (Rand, 1964, p. 13). Rand's "Objectivist" ethics focuses on what is good for each individual human being. According to Rand, ethics is rational.

The "Objectivist" ethics hold man's life as the standard of value and man's own life as his ethical purpose. The standard is an abstract principle that serves as a measurement or gauge to guide man's choices in the achievement of the specific purpose. The survival of the *qua* man is an abstract principle that applies this concrete specific purpose, the purpose of living life properly to every individual man. "Man must choose his actions, values and goals by the standard of that which is proper to man-in order to achieve, maintain, fulfill and enjoy that ultimate value, that end in itself, which is his own life" (Rand, 1964, p. 27). The "Objectivist" ethics allows man to earn success for his life based upon his standard of value that is ethical and selfish. The three values of the

“Objectivist” ethics are reason, purpose, and self-esteem with their corresponding virtues being rationality, productiveness and pride.

Productive Work

Productiveness is one of the seven virtues in the “Objectivist” ethics. Rand believes there are five interconnected areas that allow man to experience the enjoyment of his life: productive work, human relationships, recreation, art, and sex. Rand defines productive work as the central purpose of a rational man’s life. One of the two essentials of the method of survival proper to a rational being is productive work.

Productive work is the road of a man’s unlimited achievement and calls upon the highest attributes of his character: his creative ability, his ambitiousness, his self assertiveness, his refusal to bear uncontested disasters, his dedication to the goal of reshaping the earth in the image of his values. (Rand, 1964, p. 29)

If a man values productive work, his happiness is the measure of success. Man gains his basic sense of control over existence through productive work. “Productive work is the most fundamental of these: through his work man gains his basic sense of control over existence—his sense of efficacy—which is the necessary foundation of the ability to enjoy any other value” (Rand, 1964, p. 72). According to Rand, productivity is a matter of life or death.

In order to survive, man has to create and produce everything he needs. His well-being depends on his success in life. Productivity is the cardinal moral value and is unleashed to the fullest extent possible in free-market capitalism Rand identifies this type of system as a social system based on the recognition of individual rights and property rights (The Condensed Edition of Ayn Rand’s *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 2006). Every man speaks, thinks, and works for himself. The man who regards the universe as a place filled with opportunities, challenges to conquer and earn the pride of a constantly expanding efficacy is a man with the ability to obtain productiveness. In reference to pride in *Atlas Shrugged*, John Galt states, “Pride is the recognition of the fact that you are your own highest value and, like all of men’s values, it has to be earned—that of any achievement...” (Rand, 1957, p. 934). Rand’s view of the ethical relevance of productivity may enable individuals to become happier and more productive by allowing them to concentrate on their personal goals and accomplishments. John Galt says,

Productiveness is your acceptance of morality, your recognition of the fact that you choose to live—that productive work is the process by which man’s consciousness controls his existence, a constant process of acquiring knowledge and shaping matter to fit one’s purpose... (Rand, 1957, p. 933)

Rand's view of ethics and the ethical roots of productivity allow man to become more productive and happier in the selfish pursuit of the achievement of his own happiness.

Self-Esteem

Man must choose proper values in order to achieve, maintain, fulfill and enjoy his life. The three cardinal values of "Objectivist" ethics are: reason, purpose, and self-esteem. Rand states, "Only a rationally selfish man, a man of *self-esteem*, is capable of love—because he is the only man capable of holding firm, consistent, uncompromising, unbetrayed values" (Rand, 1964, p. 35). Self-esteem means a feeling of pride in oneself. This is a perfect "Objectivist" concept because it forces man to focus on himself.

Nathaniel Branden noted that a man of self-esteem is a man in love with himself and his life. In *Atlas Shrugged*, John Galt says this about self-esteem in his speech,

...the first precondition of self-esteem is that radiant selfishness of soul which desires the best in all things, in values of matter and spirit, a soul that above all else seeks to achieve its own moral perfection, valuing nothing higher than itself... (Rand, 1957, p. 934)

Self-esteem is the consequence, expression, and reward of a mind fully committed to reason. Commitment to reason is the commitment to the maintenance of full intellectual focus and one's understanding and expansion of knowledge, to the principle that one's actions must be consistent with one's convictions. The man of self-esteem has a psychological need for constant growth. Self-esteem is a value that can be maintained only by action. One must be engaged in a process to constantly increase one's efficacy. "The great merit of capitalism is its unique appropriateness to the requirements of human survival and to man's need to grow" (Rand, 1964, p. 143). A man's self-esteem encourages him to seek growth. Capitalism creates the optimum social conditions leaving man free to think, act, produce, rewards effort and achievement, and penalize passivity.

Morality

Man must have a moral code to define what is good and what is evil. This moral code is asserted in regard to persons, actions, conduct, and morality in general. Rand (1964) believed that good and evil could be ascertained as black and white. (The catch phrase is actually in the reverse order). Upon defining what is good and what is evil, what is black and what is white; one has no justification for choosing a mixture. There is

no justification for gray and one should not choose any part of that which one knows is evil.

If a moral code offers contradictions, gray areas, it should be rejected. A moral code cannot offer uncertainty and obscure confusion to disguise a doctrine of moral grayness. Rand (1964) does concede that there are many reasons that most people are morally imperfect such as altruistic morality, contradictory premises, and values. That does not invalidate the need for moral “whiteness”, in fact, it makes the need greater. The dialogue that exists considers that there are “two sides to every issue” and there are complex issues in which both sides are right. Rand insists, “The basic error in all these various confusions is the same: it consists of forgetting that morality deals only with issues open to man’s choice—which means: forgetting the difference between “unable” and “unwilling” (Rand, 1964, p. 89). Man has the ability to choose to be wholly good or wholly evil, there is no gray. “Just as, in epistemology, the cult of uncertainty is a revolt against reason—so, in ethics, the cult of moral grayness is a revolt against moral values. Both are a revolt against the absolutism of reality” (Rand, 1964, p. 90). Rand believes that man must choose one or the other.

Errors of knowledge are not breaches of morality; no proper moral code can demand infallibility or omniscience. But if, in order to escape the responsibility of moral judgment, a man closes his eyes and mind, if he evades the facts of the issue and struggles not to know, he cannot be regarded as ‘gray’; morally, he is as ‘black’ as they come. (The Condensed Edition of Ayn Rand’s *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 2006, topic 7)

When it comes to morality, man must choose black or white. If someone asks me if I think in black and white, I will answer, “You’re damn right I do!”

Rights

According to Rand, capitalism is the foundation that protects the principle of individual rights.

Rights are a moral concept—the concept that provides a logical transition from the principles guiding an individual’s actions to the principles guiding his relationship with others—the concept that preserves and protects individual morality in a social context—the link between the moral code of man and the legal code of society, between ethics and politics. *Individual rights are the means of subordinating society to moral law.* (Rand, 1964, p. 108)

A right is a moral principle defining a man’s individual freedom of action in a social context.

All political systems are based on some code of ethics. Rand states that the altruist-collectivist ethics, mystical or social, are amoral. The United States was the first moral society in history with the implementation of the subordination of society to moral law. “The principle of man’s individual right’s represented the extension of morality into the social system—as limitation on the power of the state, as man’s protection against the brute force of the collective, as the subordination of might to right” (Rand, 1964, p. 109). Previous systems regarded man’s life as belonging to society and as a sacrificial means to the ends of others. Rand states,

The United States held that man’s life is his by right (that means: by moral principle and by his nature), that a right is the property of an individual, that society as such has no rights, and that the only moral purpose of a government is the protection of individual rights. (Rand, 1964, p. 110)

Rand defines a right as a moral principle which sanctions a man’s freedom of action in a social context. Man has a fundamental right to his own life.

Life is a process of self-sustaining and self-generated action; the right to life means the right to engage in self-sustaining and self-generated action—which means: the freedom to take all the actions required by the nature of a rational being for the support, the furtherance, the fulfillment and the enjoyment of his own life. (Rand, 1964, p. 110)

According to Rand, man is an end in himself and the source of man’s rights is the law of identity.

The rights of man are extended to the right to property. This means that man has a right to earn, keep, use, and dispose of material value. Rand states, “The source of man’s rights is not divine law or congressional law, but the law of identity” (Rand, 1964, p. 111). According to Rand, rights are logically derived from man’s nature. The government is not involved in the creation of rights (The Condensed Edition of Ayn Rand’s *The Virtue of Selfishness*, 2006). The Declaration of Independence states, in so many words, that the government exists to protect man’s individual rights by protecting him from physical harm. Rand referenced the Constitution and The Bill of Rights-which were written to protect man from the government. The purpose of the government is to protect man’s rights. According to Rand, America’s contradiction was the altruistic-collectivist ethics. “Altruism is incompatible with freedom, with capitalism and with individual rights. One cannot combine the pursuit of happiness with the moral status of a sacrificial animal” (Rand, 1964, p. 112). Ayn Rand believes that laws are made to protect individual rights, economically advantaged should not assist the economically disadvantaged, and man’s individual rights are violated when the government imposes such laws (1964).

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, man must act for his own rational self-interest. In Rand's view, simply stated, putting other's interests before one's own interest is silly. Man's ultimate moral value should be his own self interest which is his own happiness. Happiness is a state of guiltless joy. Selflessness, putting the interest of other's before your own, is rather absurd. Man can not help others if he can not help himself. Man has a responsibility to be happy and successful. Human flourishing and selfishness should be celebrated as a virtue. The argument is compelling. A man must be an ethical individual that is very productive. A productive man has high self-esteem and good moral values. As man understands his individual rights, he understands the tremendous amount of responsibility he has as a citizen. All men must be selfish in order to obtain his best life.

References

- Rand, A. (1957). *Atlas shrugged*. New York: Penguin Putnam, Incorporated.
Rand, A. (1964). *The virtue of selfishness (Condensed Edition)*. New York: Penguin Putnam, Incorporated. Retrieved February 19, 2006, from www.btinternet.com/~glynhughes/squashed/rand.htm