

## **Atlas Shrugged: Unnecessarily Selfish**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**The purpose of this article is to examine the philosophy of objectivism and altruism as presented in *Atlas Shrugged* (1957). The center of Ayn Rand's philosophy is that man must be selfish in order to achieve happiness and success rejecting one's own heart, soul, and acceptance of the existence of a higher being. This philosophy contradicts many of the essential views of American society and the legacy of improving the next generation as well as those of religious faiths that center on servant hood. These fundamental values have made our nation a beckon for democracy and an economic power but most importantly a nation that provides the world assistance through missions, education, and finance. Rand's philosophy of objectivism and selfishness seems to beg the question of what is success and happiness if not something to be shared with others.**

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### **Introduction**

Rand's novel, *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), is a strong reminder of the importance of the balance of government and the significant impact of the constitutional safe guards our society has implemented to protect the rights of property and more importantly the rights of an individual. Her views take more of a dark turn with her objectivist philosophy along with her support of selfishness and the need to put oneself first above all else in order to

reach the highest levels of success and happiness. Although the novel makes some excellent observations regarding the importance of capitalism Rand's anti religious views including not sacrificing for others makes one question the true meaning of happiness.

### **Purpose of the Article**

The purpose of this article is to examine the philosophy of objectivism and altruism as presented in *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) by Ayn Rand. The center of Ayn Rand's philosophy is that man must be selfish in order to achieve happiness and success rejecting one's own heart, soul, and acceptance of the existence of a higher being. This philosophy contradicts many of the essential views of American society and the legacy of improving the next generation as well as those of religious faiths that center on servant hood. These fundamental values have made our nation a beckon for democracy and an economic power but most importantly a nation that provides the world assistance through missions, education, and finance. Rand's philosophy of objectivism and selfishness seems to beg the question of what is success and happiness if not something to be shared with others.

### **Ayn Rand**

Ayn Rand was born in St. Petersburg, Russia, on February 2, 1905. At the age of nine she discovered her love of writing and decided to pursue a career as an author. As an eyewitness to both the Kerensky and Bolshevik Revolution and the establishment of Communism she suffered the results of an oppressive government. The final Communist victory brought the confiscation of her father's pharmacy and periods of near-starvation. *The Ayn Rand Institute* (1995). Leaving Soviet Russia in 1925 she was determined never to return to her home country. She was granted an extension to her visa and later married an actor, Frank O'Conner in 1929. She began writing *The Fountainhead* in 1935. In the character of the architect Howard Roark, she presented for the first time the kind of hero whose depiction was the chief goal of her writing: the ideal man, man as "he could be and ought to be" *The Ayn Rand Institute* (1995). She published many novels and works following *The Fountainhead* (1935) but most consider *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), her last work of fiction, her greatest accomplishment.

## **Atlas Shrugged**

In *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), the economy is collapsing; the government lead by the State Science Institute continues to issue restrictive and unrealistic regulations. Dagny Taggart the Vice President of Operations for Taggart Transcontinental Railroad is determined not to allow her railroad to be destroyed by the looters. As the population becomes overwhelmed with despair they ask “Who is John Galt?” as if having an understanding that the answer to the question will provide a solution to the present state of chaos. The most important character in the novel, John Galt, has organized a systematic withdraw of the most brilliant minds in society in an effort to prove that man cannot be successful by any means other than one’s mind and by doing so breaking the looters hold on the government and economy.

## **Men of the Mind**

John Galt removed the most exceptional minds to prove to the world that society could not exist without them. “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.672) is the oath the men were asked to recite when they committed to leave their present lives. In that world there are only two types of people the ones who serve and satisfy themselves exclusively and those who work to serve others.

In this fictional story the heroes of the novel had no choice but to depart from the present state of affairs. This philosophy appears rational in a world where there are only looters and those who follow the objectivist philosophy. The question to consider is would their philosophy of objectivism be rational in a non-fictional world.

## **Altruism**

Rand’s philosophy conflicts with altruism because of the practice of being unselfish when considering the welfare of others. Since she viewed sacrifice as a surrender of values and objectivism does not consider compromise an option, she viewed helping others as not in ones self interest.

A sacrifice is the surrender of a value. Full sacrifice is full surrender of all values. If you wish to achieve full virtue, you must seek no gratitude in return for your sacrifice, no praise, no love, no admiration, no self-esteem, not even the pride of being virtuous: the faintest trace of any gain dilutes your virtue. (Rand, 1957, p. 941)

Parts of Rand's philosophy such as those stated in these sentences are acceptable and applicable in a fictional story such as *Atlas Shrugged* where the looters have seized property from the capitalists for their own greed and survival. Sentences such as these are unrealistic in the universe as it truly exists. Most religions including Christianity and people who chose to live by a moral code do not advocate sacrificing their values for the good of the lost, but rather helping because of these values and acknowledging the strength it takes to not sacrifice their own values when helping others. As an atheist Ayn Rand did not have a God in her universe nor did she write *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) with a concept of a higher being and the understanding of faith as a center of belief. Not understanding the nature of God and the promise of love and mercy Ayn Rand could not see the meaning of sacrifice and virtues of such acts. Christianity is set on the foundation of the greatest sacrifice that can be made "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John, 3:16). Ayn Rand's interpretation of altruism is illustrated in the words of Lillian Reardon when she states that loving some one for their vices was the real tribute of love therefore sacrificing one's values. Christian beliefs would reject this premise and adhere that because of Christian teachings a person can love a person in spite of the vices, sins, or other weakness because of God's grace and mercy. Verses such as the following give direction as to the relationship with others "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (Matthew, 18:35). So watch yourselves. "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him" (Luke, 17:3).

### **Objectivist**

The objectivist philosopher would have people believe that most live by the idea that standards or ethics are based on a whim. John Galt expands this concept when he states that "the battle is only over the question of whose whim: society's or the dictator's or God's" (Rand, 1961, p. 15). The objectivist fails to acknowledge the independence of our society and the independence of man. People in free and democratic societies have arrived at that state of freedom by making decisions based on truth and reality. Ayn Rand was a magnificent writer that had the ability to express her views as an authority on morality, ethics, and the concept of rational self interest; selfishness.

### **Genuinely Selfishness**

At the heart of the objectivist ethics is the ideal of selfishness. The following sentences capture the essence of selfishness and how it benefits the practitioner. Difficult sentences for a person or a society that has been built with the core belief that serving and

positive leadership improves everyone. “True success comes only when every generation continues to develop the next generation” (Maxwell, 1995, p.188). How can people who live by the following ideas develop or leave anything for the generations that follow?

Because a genuinely selfish man chooses his goals by the guidance of reason the interests of rational men do not clash-other men may often benefit of from his actions. But the benefit of other is not his primary purpose or goal; his own benefit is his primary purpose and the conscious goal directing his action. (Rand, 1961, p. 67)

### **What is Happiness?**

Through out the novel a common theme connecting many characters is the need to find happiness as a result of accomplishments and gaining material wealth. Although most would agree that accomplishments can make a person happy most would also agree that accomplishments without anyone to share them with would be a short lived fulfillment. To live a worthwhile, meaningful life, a person must be part of something greater than himself. The following passages examine the reflections of a man who has spent his life in the pursuit of happiness that places more value on accomplishment and wealth than on relationships and people. “I am sorry I disappointed you mother. You’re not sorry. You could have been here if you’d made the effort for anybody but your self? You’re not interested in any of us or in anything we do” (Rand, 1957, p. 40). “He had given Lillian none of his time for months-no, he thought, for years; for the eight years of their marriage. He had no interest to spare for her interest, not even enough to learn just what they were” (Rand, 1957, p. 123).

Hank Reardon was unhappy in is marriage and with the relationship he had with his mother and brother but never acknowledged the fact that his lack of commitment to his family and his selfishness for his own interest and endeavors had eroded his relationships. Progressive leadership and management philosophies adhere to the required balance necessary to be successful as a person and professional. A major part of present day beliefs is that the climb to the top does not need to be a lonely one for the climber and those he loves.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In conclusion, Atlas Shrugged is an excellent novel with a wonderful story that mixes action, romance, and makes some excellent points regarding the value of capitalism. But readers are advised to remember that the novel is fiction and the characters who are super intelligent, attractive and powerful in their own area are

fictional super heroes in a novel. The Constitution of the United States of America begins with the words “We the People of the United States” the key word being “We”. Our founding fathers understood the importance of people, all people and intended for our nation to be established with those ideals. The philosophy of objectivism centers around selfishness and not being part of the “We”. There is no doubt our nation was built on the strength of individuals but as Americans our true strength is as a people.

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