

**Do for Self:
The Individual's Divine Right to Self-Actualization
According to Ayn Rand's Novel *The Virtue of
Selfishness***

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ABSTRACT

This article explores principles of Ayn Rand's objectivist philosophy. Acting selfish is a bold and morally imperative act in defiance of the altruistic-collectivist traditions imposed on the individual by government and religion. The author maintains that the individual's first responsibility is the achievement of her own happiness and the preservation of her life according to her own hierarchy of value and ethics.

Introduction

Recall your latest airplane travel. As the airplane ascended above terra firma, the flight attendants gave safety instructions and demonstrated to the passengers potentially life saving procedures to take in the event of an emergency. We are told that if we are traveling with small children or other passengers that require assistance, we are to put on our protective masks first, then to assist those who may require our help. So is the premise underlying Rand's philosophy of *The Virtue of Selfishness*. The individual must practice reasonable and moral judgment in the pursuit of a livelihood before she can act

selflessly, extending goodwill and charity to her neighbor. When human beings disregard their divine ability to think and create, society stagnates and is likely to crumble into a socialist system.

Purpose of Article

The purpose of this article is to discuss how selfishness used as an ethical compass to enrich and empower one's own life is a moral imperative for every compassionate, reasoning person. Self-actualization can only be achieved through selfishness. Only after one has come into self-realization is she enfranchised into society.

A Majority of One

Rand's objectivist philosophy called for the individual citizen to examine the constrictions the world's morality had put on the individual citizen's conscience. She challenged the individual to first examine her own motives, values and ethics, and to act in an according, reasonable manner in her interchange with fellow humanity. In Rand's objectivism, the individual's ethics should never be subjugated for the needs of society because the morals imposed by society are arbitrary and injurious to the divine right of liberty through self-actualization, since society is composed of a select number of powerful men and structured on their whims. By the human's nature, man alone out of all known creatures, has the ability to think, to reason, and the act on his values. This unique ability, this metaphysical gift of human existence, requires the individual to do so. Rand "stress[ed] that the fact that living entities exist and function necessitates the existence of values and of an ultimate value which for any given living entity is its own life" (Rand, 1964, p. 18). Mere existence itself encompasses an innate awareness of affective interaction with other humans and obliges the individual to act on her consciousness.

There has never been a more vehement champion of rugged individualism, laissez-faire economics, the primacy of property rights, or the businessman as cultural hero. In her eyes, America as the founders conceived it was the one moral society in the history of the world, and her appointed task was to save it and the world from the bane of collectivist, altruist, and subjectivist immorality. (Valiunas, 2005, p. 59)

Consciousness and Choice

Awareness is inseparable from the individual's ability to think. Objectivism holds the individual responsible for the results of her reasoning, or thoughts, and corresponding actions resulting from such reason. However, the individual can choose to live in an apathetic, unfocused state of consciousness, but to do so results in the voluntary surrender of reason, liberty, and ethics. Rand believed that "nothing is given to man on earth except a potential and the material on which to actualize it" (Rand, 1964, p. 23). That potential is only realized by the individual's choice to learn, to discover, and to produce which are guided by her ethics – the determination of what is good or evil. The insurmountable vice of humankind is choosing not to think. The suspension of her reason and the shirking of her potential is the source of all that is *evil* in the world. Rand glorified in the power of the human mind. To her, the mind was the creator and destroyer of life.

Causal Explanations for an Objectivist Epistemology

What are the causal explanations for following such ethics? Objectivism encompasses economic, political, ethical, and metaphysical epistemology. It attempts to hold the individual accountable for her own productivity, values and beliefs. "Causal structures are critical for any society: they define what is easy, possible, difficult, or unattainable as societies define social roles, allocate resources, or transfer culture" (Losh, 2003, p. 18). Causal structures represent constructed facts as objective truths. Shades of differences across causal belief systems attempt to articulate what is subjective opinion, what is fantasy, what is disjointed rambling insanity, and what is legitimate, and what is genius. Causal structures also delineate what the acceptable methods to discover truth are. Cultural differences on what are true and how to find truth causes frustrations. Objectivism seeks to see life as it truly is. Unless the individual is free to interpret the world as she sees it, then she is hostage to a forced group-think. The causal structures of society are in contravention with her values and ethics, creating a moral dilemma.

Objectivist philosophy holds reason above diverse causal perspectives of the preceding and present centuries such as:

God (the divine) did it, a fatalistic perspective that places outcomes beyond human control, except for human placation or service as a divine instrument; there are *rational laws* to be discovered (and people can discover them); citing recognized authorities, whether scripture, famous scientists, Nostradamus, or philosophers; and, proof by anecdote or carefully selected examples, often used in astrology and other magical systems, but also in religious, and even *scientific* treatises. (Losh, 2003, p. 20)

If an individual refuses to use the ability to think and reason, then the causal explanations offered by the collectivist community will become her values and beliefs. Likewise, in education if the student is not allowed to discover and learn, to inquire, and is not permitted to act on her own values, then the causal explanations that serve the leaders of society supplant her ability to reason and impose a subjective moral code.

A collectivist society's moral code that forbids and restricts morality is in itself a contradiction. The assignment of "good" or "bad" or "gray" (meaning it could be good or bad depending on the situation at hand and who the judgment will benefit) in the self-serving interest of leaders is unconscionable to the ethical individual. The individual has the divine right to discover what is good and right for herself. One must not evade the issue of moral judgment. Moral "grayness" results in sloppy epistemology, designed to disguise its true meaning. "Some people believe... a restatement as "Nobody is perfect in this world" -- i.e., everybody is a mixture of good and evil, and therefore, morally "gray." ...people accept it as some sort of natural fact, without further thought. They forget that morality deals only with issues open to man's choice (i.e., to his free will)-and, therefore, no statistical generalizations are valid in this matter (Rand 88)."

The Moral Challenge

In *Equality and Proportionality*, Knapp troubleshoots Rand's perspective on the responsibility of the moral individual.

...it can be agreed that in virtue of possessing moral standing that individuals have moral claims on us and deserve our moral concern or respect. The disagreements emerge when we try to specify what exactly the legitimate claims of those with moral standings are.... (Knapp, 2007, p.180)

Even with individuals whose moral standing is questionable (bad or "gray"), the society struggles with the justification for the moral concern and respect the individuals are shown by pointing out descriptive differences between the "good," "bad," and "gray". An over-simplified solution dealing with "gray matter" individuals is to say that those who are not our moral equals lack the rationality we possess.

There is no minute difference that separates those who are rational, possess a conception of the good and a sense of justice, are capable of shaping their lives according to a plan, and so, from those who are not. So no matter where an account of moral standing draws a precise line...it will not be a line that puts everyone who satisfies the criterion on one side and everyone else on the other. (Knapp, 2007, p. 190)

All individuals deserve equitable and moral treatment by virtue of being free rational beings. Freedom is ascribed to others because we have a moral duty to do so as reasoning moral human beings.

The Ethical Individual

On ethics, Rand firmly supported the individual's right to decide whether or when they wished to help others. Rand rejected the altruistic concept of an individual as her sister's keeper. The altruistic-collectivist society does not have the right to impose its ethics on the individual. Doing so would usurp the individual's right to reason in deciding when and if she will contribute to her neighbor's well-being. The altruistic-collectivist government uses such causal explanations to uphold its international trade agreements, and even to provide vouchers from the public coffers for students to attend private school. Is this the responsibility of society as a whole, or is it the responsibility of concerned parents? Rand eloquently affirmed her disdain for governmental social programs,

nature does not guarantee automatic security, success and survival to any human being, it is only the dictatorial presumptuousness and the moral cannibalism of the altruist-collectivist code that permits man to suppose (or idly to daydream) that *he* can somehow guarantee such security at the expense of others. (Rand, 1964, p. 94)

A Call to Re-examine Government for the People

It is institutionalized gang-rule, rather than government, that thwarts creativity and productivity of its citizens by attempting to limit the individual's ability to think independently and logically. The individual's mind is her basic tool of survival. Liberty requires that she think and act accordingly. Government's true role in support of the people is to *enforce* rules of conduct, not to impose mental slavery. Government should be foremost concerned with protecting the individual from mob rule, lynch law and private vendettas by protecting human rights under an objective code of rules. "The proper function of government falls into three categories... *the police*, to protect men from criminals – *the armed services*, to protect men from foreign invaders – *the law courts*, to settle disputes among men according to objective laws" (Rand, 1964, p. 131). It is an individual's responsibility as a citizen of a democratic society to demand checks and controls on the governmental bureaucracy. Free, reasoning citizens should constantly monitor the government's control, lest we have a democratic implosion.

The Strongest Link

Rand asserts that the moral concept of “rights” transitions from principles guiding a singular person’s action to the principles guiding interaction with others. “Rights” protect and preserve the individual’s morality in a social situation. They are the connection between an individual’s moral code and the legal code of the greater society. “*Individual rights are the means of subordinating society to moral law*” (Rand, 1964, p. 108). The thinking individual is the strongest link in a moral society. If the government is composed of men, and men are often fallible and mistaken, then society must work to uphold individual rights. If individual rights are stripped away, collectivism will reign supreme.

America was praised by Rand for being the only true democratic society because it has recognized and upheld the individual’s rights as a moral imperative. America has preserved the individual from tyranny by collectivist systems. From its inception, our nation has regarded man as an end in himself, and society as a means of voluntary co-existence of logical, moral citizens, whereas altruist-collectivist societies have esteemed the collective whims of society over the individual’s autonomy.

It’s All about Me

“Since every purposeful action is motivated by some value or goal that the actor desires, one always acts *selfishly*, whether one knows it or not” (Rand, 1964, p. 66). Acting selfishly is an unselfish act if its aim is an ethical outcome. Selfishness is a conscious choice. The individual is guided by her ethics, which in-turn shape life’s values and purpose. Rand offers the individual herself as the determinant moral purpose of life. The preservation of her life, and her happiness are the primary moral purposes of life. The individual is the first recipient of her productivity and moral actions.

Being concerned for your own survival is a courageous act. To be selfish requires the recognition of one’s own hierarchy of values formed to serve one’s happiness, and foremost, the audacity to never sacrifice one’s self for the group. A morally courageous, selfish woman, will not act in contradiction to her own beliefs and values. To do otherwise would be self-sabotage and surrendering to the dictates of a self-serving community.

The selfishness of a man who is willing to die, if necessary, fighting for his freedom, lies in the fact that he is unwilling to go on living in a world where he is no longer able to act on his own judgment – that is, a world where *human* conditions of existence are no longer possible to him. (Rand, 1964, p. 68)

According to Rand, whether an action is selfish or unselfish is determined objectively and logically by the individual, without a flood of passion in the individual. Passion is not a criterion for cognition. She goes on to emphasize that if the individual is solely motivated by a feeling of compassion, charity, duty or altruism, the result of her action is that the individual has sacrificed her values and goals for short-lived pleasure, or worse, the wishes and needs of an inferior individual that she values less than the thing she gave up. Objectivism seeks to guard the individual from acting against her own satisfaction by surrendering to altruistic-collectivist ideals which favor the society over the individual.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion the objectivist philosophy advocates acting morally in one's own interest first. The virtue of selfishness has been misinterpreted by the altruistic-socialist bureaucracies and organized religions to serve their own ends. Humanity itself requires the individual to think and reason and to produce. For the reasoning citizen to create and pursue happiness, she must be aware of her value system and the ethics of her interaction with a society which would sacrifice her life, for the subjective interests of the whole.

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