

Ayn Rand's Philosophy in *Atlas Shrugged*: Does it Really Mesh with the Beliefs and Values of the Conservative Right in America?

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Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* is a novel, epic in length, that crystalizes her values and beliefs concerning society and an individual's place in it. It's a novel popular among the political right in America, as well as staunch capitalists, as it's often pointed to as a work championing the idea of freedom, small (or no) government, and the idea of *selfishness* as a virtue.

Having only recently read this novel for the very first time, yet for decades feeling its influence within the sphere of political discourse, I would like to discuss Rand's mode thinking; its merits, misclaims, and what I think is a gross oversight on the part of many American conservatives in failing to recognize Rand's scathing critique of religion, as well as cronyism.

First, some background: the novel takes place in what was, in Rand's day, contemporary 1950's America. The implementation of a series of government rules and regulations, which are (on the surface) aimed at leveling the playing field among its citizens, ends up destroying the country. By the end of the novel, the nation that had once sparked the image of "the American dream" has turned into a non-functioning dystopia.

Rand often uses her characters as a mouthpiece for her philosophy. These characters will suddenly go on page-long rants espousing what is no doubt the direct expression of Rand's world-views. In the following excerpt John Galt, the alpha-hero (There are a handful of heroes and one heroine within the story.) outlines the fundamentals of Rand's philosophy:

"There is only one fundamental alternative in the universe: existence or non-existence—and it pertains to a single class of entities: to living organisms. The existence of inanimate matter is unconditional, the existence of life is not: it depends on a specific course of action. Matter is

indestructible, it changes its forms, but it cannot cease to exist. It is only a living organism that faces a constant alternative: the issue of life or death. Life is a process of self-sustaining and self-generated action. If an organism fails in that action, it dies; its chemical elements remain, but its life goes out of existence. It is only the concept of 'Life' that makes the concept of 'Value' possible. It is only to a living entity that things can be good or evil. (p. 1012)

For Rand, the idea of "value" is intertwined with that of "life". An action or object is good inasmuch as it promotes the life, and living, of an organism. Evil is that which promotes the destruction of a living entity. In this way, the idea of good and evil are concepts that solely pertain to the realm of living beings.

She continues:

A plant must feed itself in order to live; the sunlight, the water, the chemicals it needs are the values its nature has set it to pursue; its life is the standard of value directing its actions. But a plant has no choice of action; there are alternatives in the conditions it encounters, but there is no alternative in its function: it acts automatically to further its life, it cannot act for its own destruction. (p.1013)

A plant, for which "the good" are those things and practices which sustain its life, is unable to act in any way other than that which benefits it. There is no conscious choice involved in a plants actions.

An animal is equipped for sustaining its life; its senses provide it with an automatic code of action, an automatic knowledge of what is good for it or evil. It has no power to extend its knowledge or

to evade it. In conditions where its knowledge proves inadequate, it dies. But so long as it lives, it acts on its knowledge, with automatic safety and no power of choice, it is unable to ignore its own good, unable to decide to choose the evil and act as its own destroyer. (p.1013)

Unlike plants, there is an element of decision making on the part of animals. However, there is no choice with regard to “the good”, as an animal is predisposed to choose the path that benefits it most, and can't or won't act in its own disinterest.

Man has no automatic code of survival. His particular distinction from all other living species is the necessity to act in the face of alternatives by means of *volitional choice*. He has no automatic knowledge of what is good for him or evil, what values his life depends on, what course of action it requires. Are you prattling about an instinct of self-preservation? An *instinct* of self-preservation is precisely what man does not possess. An 'instinct' is an unerring and automatic form of knowledge. A desire is not an instinct. A desire to live does not give you the knowledge required for living. And even man's desire to live is not automatic: your secret evil today is that *that* is the desire you do not hold. Your fear of death is not a love for life and will not give you the knowledge needed to keep it. Man must obtain his knowledge and choose his actions by a process of thinking, which nature will not force him to perform. Man has the power to act as his own destroyer—and that is the way he has acted through most of his history. (p.1013)

What sets man apart from animal is the idea of choice. The actions of an animal come from instinct; like a software program designed to automate the decisions to best benefit the organism. Man, on the other hand, experiences freedom in regard to his choices. This level of freedom is such to the extent that we have the ability to act towards our own destruction.

While reading *Atlas Shrugged* I often felt that Rand, either consciously or not, was quick to make use of the false dilemma fallacy. It is clear that for her the world is one of black *or* white, and she seemingly has little appreciation or grasp of the nuances of life

that a true philosopher would gladly grapple with. This dichotomy of thought can be seen in her division of man and animal. She lumps earthworms, dolphins and higher primates under the heading of “animal”, which is not at all strange, until she reveals that her reason for doing so is her belief that they are devoid of the ability to choose. This is not what distinguishes man from animal, as higher primates *can* choose from a multitude of options. Like man, animals with high cognitive ability are able to choose from an array of options that, like man, lead to either their benefit or self-betrayal. What separates man from other animals is simply the extent to which he can predict the future consequences of his actions.

It's born out of a strong memory of the past, an acute awareness of the present moment, and a predictive ability of the future that takes into account patterns, probability, reason and logic, and the relatedness of those three divisions of time. Coco the gorilla may not match us in our abilities, but to an extent that calls Rand's definition of man into question, Coco can indeed do all of the above. We humans, in relation to animals, are on the strong edge of what is a continuum in regard to our abilities regarding choice. Furthermore, within our own species each one of us has a place on that continuum.

She continues the above long quote with:

A living entity that regarded its means of survival as evil, would not survive. A plant that struggled to mangle its roots, a bird that fought to break its wings would not remain for long in the existence they affronted. But the history of man has been a struggle to deny and to destroy his mind. (p.1013)

My response to the last sentence of that quote, and particularly to its logical fallacy of overgeneralization, is: sometimes, but not always. Were the regimes of Pol Pot or Mao, guilty of this charge? Yes. But they seem to be the exception, and not the rule. Here we see Rand characterize the history of humanity as one of willful and purposeful self-destruction. This view is another consequence of Rand's tendency toward a dangerous either-or approach: “humanity” defined in terms that portray it as either all bad or all good, the former being the characterizations she chooses. Absent are the nuances that reflect the true state of humanity. Present are the gross generalities and mischaracterizations that make the foundations of her

philosophy shaky from the start.

But let's let her continue:

A code of values accepted by choice is a code of morality. (p. 1013)

It appears that our choices define our code of morality. I agree that our choices can indeed reflect our code of morality, and assuming we are being true to our code, they should. What then is the end to which our choices and our code of morality lead us?

There is a morality of reason, a morality proper to man, and Man's Life is its standard of value. ...All that which is proper to the life of a rational being is the good; all that which destroys it is the evil. (p.1014)

By "Man's Life" Rand is talking about the life of an individual. Your life is the standard of value. "The good", in short, is conducive to life; "the evil", in opposition. In the following quote she goes into more specifics as to the measure of an action or thing as good or evil:

Happiness is the successful state of life, pain is an agent of death. Happiness is that state of consciousness which proceeds from the achievement of one's values. ...By the grace of reality and the nature of life, man—every man—is an end in himself, he exists for his own sake, and the achievement of his own happiness is his highest moral purpose. (p.1014)

Thus, "Happiness" is the measure of the good, and "pain" is the measure of evil. Essentially, if it feels good and makes you happy (and doesn't infringe on others' freedom); it's moral. Our highest calling, for Rand, is our happiness. I would agree that our happiness can be an indicator of "the good", but by no means *the* defining measure. I can't help but feel that this simplistic - quite animalistic - measure, leaves man in an ethical state not much better than that of an animal.

However, an appealing quality of this mode of thinking is the notion of freedom in letting a person define their "good". Something in its Existentialism appeals to me. Yet a philosophy that forces me to support a mother of five's wish take up mainlining

heroin between breast feedings, because it makes her happy, does not. In this sense, I start to lean towards Utilitarianism and to the idea of the greater good, which takes into account the mother's children and the impact of her actions upon them. Rand goes out of her way to make the distinction between animal and man, and then appears to put forth a philosophy that supports acting in a way no better than the lowest - cognitively bottom-of-the-barrel - animal, all because it makes one happy.

Just as your body has two fundamental sensations, pleasure and pain, as signs of its welfare or injury, as a barometer of its basic alternative, life or death, so your consciousness has two fundamental emotions, joy and suffering, in answer to the same alternative. Your emotions are estimates of that which furthers your life or threatens it, lightning calculators giving you a sum of your profit or loss. (p.1021)

An individual's freedom trumps all for Rand:

Do you ask what moral obligation I owe to my fellow men? None—except the obligation I owe to myself, to material objects and to all of existence: rationality. I deal with men as my nature and theirs demands: by means of reason. I seek or desire nothing from them except such relations as they care to enter of their own voluntary choice. (p.1022)

Rand's viewpoint almost certainly influenced by her early years growing up in communist Russia (as we'll see later), and heavily influenced by religion's oppressive nature. In particular the self-sacrificing help-your-neighbor aspects of Christianity:

For centuries, the battle of morality was fought between those who claimed that your life belongs to God and those who claimed that it belongs to your neighbors—between those who preached that the good is self-sacrifice for the sake of ghosts in heaven and those who preached that the good is self-sacrifice for the sake of incompetents on earth. And no one came to say that your life belongs to you and that the good is to live it. (p. 1011-1012)

I tend to agree with Rand's criticism of religion as a means of control. In light of this, the vigor with which she throws off the yoke of guilt-inspired oppression that is so often a theme among the claimants of a higher power, is refreshing. And even more so, when one considers how radical such a secular stance was in Rand's day.

Rand attacks the conception of man that Christianity pushes; that man is evil and hopeless from the get go; that our nature is flawed and we are broken before our birth:

Damnation is the start of your morality, destruction is its purpose, means and end. Your code begins by damning man as evil, then demands that he practice a good which it defines as impossible for him to practice. It demands, as his first proof of virtue, that he accept his own depravity without proof. It demands that he start, not with a standard of value, but with a standard of evil, which is himself, by means of which he is then to define the good: the good is that which he is not. (p.1025)

The name of this monstrous absurdity is Original Sin, "A sin without volition is a slap at morality and an insolent contradiction in terms: that which is outside the possibility of choice is outside the province of morality. If man is evil by birth, he has no will, no power to change it; if he has no will, he can be neither good nor evil; a robot is amoral. To hold, as man's sin, a fact not open to his choice is a mockery of morality. To hold man's nature as his sin is a mockery of nature. To punish him for a crime he committed before he was born is a mockery of justice. To hold him guilty in a matter where no innocence exists is a mockery of reason. To destroy morality, nature, justice and reason by means of a single concept is a feat of evil hardly to be matched. Yet that is the root of your code. (p.1025)

Considering her conception of man's greatest good: personal freedom; it's obvious that the tenants of religion would stand in opposition to her view. They appear to be calling for contradiction of what Rand believes is a good and proper life:

A morality that dares to tell you to find happiness

in the renunciation of your happiness—to value the failure of your values—is an insolent negation of morality. A doctrine that gives you, as an ideal, the role of a sacrificial animal seeking slaughter on the altars of others, is giving you death as your standard. (p.1014)

Much of religion preaches self-sacrifice, and the main character, if you will, of Christendom is Jesus, who sacrificed his life for man's salvation. To live for others, like Jesus, is the height of virtue that Christianity purports:

If you search your code for guidance, for an answer to the question: 'What is the good?'—the only answer you will find is 'The good of others.' The good is whatever others wish, whatever you feel they feel they wish, or whatever you feel they ought to feel. 'The good of others' is a magic formula that transforms anything into gold, a formula to be recited as a guarantee of moral glory and as a fumigator for any action, even the slaughter of a continent. Your standard of virtue is not an object, not an act, not a principle, but an intention. You need no proof, no reasons, no success, you need not achieve in fact the good of others—all you need to know is that your motive was the good of others, not your own. Your only definition of the good is a negation: the good is the 'non-good for me.' (p.1030)

For Rand, though, such selfless expectations contradict man's nature and one's very life.

Force is the whip with which we are goaded into acting against our own nature. Fear of the eternal fires of hell, or (in this life) the danger of physical punishment and/or imprisonment are the threats that force us to act in contrast to our true nature. That is, to act towards our own destruction:

To interpose the threat of physical destruction between a man and his perception of reality, is to negate and paralyze his means of survival; to force him to act against his own judgment, is like forcing him to act against his own sight. Whoever, to whatever purpose or extent, initiates the use of force, is a killer acting on the premise of death in a manner wider than murder: the premise of destroying man's capacity to live. (p.1023).

Those issuing the threats are those who coerce such beliefs in religion: religious leaders, or “mystics”, as Rand calls them. This control over believers doesn't come from a place of compassion or care, but of oppression:

For centuries, the mystics of spirit had existed by running a protection racket—by making life on earth unbearable, then charging you for consolation and relief, by forbidding all the virtues that make existence possible, then riding on the shoulders of your guilt, by declaring production and joy to be sins, then collecting blackmail from the sinners. (p.1038)

Make no mistake about the character of mystics. To undercut your consciousness has always been their only purpose throughout the ages —and power, the power to rule you by force, has always been their only lust. (p.1044)

This deception is not limited to the religious profiteer, but those Rand calls the “mystics of muscle” whose purpose is to control the economic side of life by pointing to the good of society, as opposed to the individual, as the chief concern:

The good, say the mystics of spirit, is God, a being whose only definition is that he is beyond man's power to conceive—a definition that invalidates man's consciousness and nullifies his concepts of existence. The good, say the mystics of muscle, is Society—a thing which they define as an organism that possesses no physical form, a super-being embodied in no one in particular and everyone in general except yourself. Man's mind, say the mystics of spirit, must be subordinated to the will of God, Man's mind, say the mystics of muscle, must be subordinated to the will of Society. Man's standard of value, say the mystics of spirit, is the pleasure of God, whose standards are beyond man's power of comprehension and must be accepted on faith. Man's standard of value, say the mystics of muscle, is the pleasure of Society, whose standards are beyond man's right of judgment and must be obeyed as a primary absolute. The purpose of man's life, say both, is to become an abject zombie who serves a purpose he

does not know, for reasons he is not to question. His reward, say the mystics of spirit, will be given to him beyond the grave. His reward, say the mystics of muscle, will be given on earth—to his great-grandchildren. (p.1027)

The push for control over the individual is the similarity between these two types of “mystics”; both the religious leader as well as the politician:

As products of the split between man's soul and body, there are two kinds of teachers of the Morality of Death: the mystics of spirit and the mystics of muscle, whom you call the spiritualists and the materialists, those who believe in consciousness without existence and those who believe in existence without consciousness. Both demand the surrender of your mind, one to their revelations, the other to their reflexes. No matter how loudly they posture in the roles of irreconcilable antagonists, their moral codes are alike, and so are their aims: in matter—the enslavement of man's body, in spirit—the destruction of his mind. (p.1027)

Hers is a viewpoint almost certainly tinged by her early years growing up in communist Russia. How well socialism does or doesn't work is beyond the scope of this paper, however it's made clear in this novel that Rand has a very cynical view of it. Her cynicism stems not just from its efficacy, or lack thereof, but in that she believes the leaders who institute it are charlatans, in the same way she thinks religious leaders are. The whole charade, be it the forced sharing of all profits in a socialist society, or the ever present theme of self-sacrifice in Christianity, are aimed at deceiving the masses. They are ruses of those in charge, implemented to remain in charge, and rob man of his right to freedom and the control over his own will and destiny:

From the rites of the jungle witch-doctors, which distorted reality into grotesque absurdities, stunted the minds of their victims and kept them in terror of the supernatural for stagnant stretches of centuries—to the supernatural doctrines of the Middle Ages, which kept men huddling on the mud floors of their hovels, in terror that the devil might steal the soup they had worked

eighteen hours to earn—to the seedy little smiling professor who assures you that your brain has no capacity to think, that you have no means of perception and must blindly obey the omnipotent will of that supernatural force: Society—all of it is the same performance for the same and only purpose: to reduce you to the kind of pulp that has surrendered the validity of its consciousness. (p.1044)

As I have mentioned, Rand doesn't seem to view the world in shades; it's black or white, right or wrong. One can see this in the novel. Towards the end of the novel one of the antagonists – a foil for Rand's ideas – cries out in frustration to the unbearable truth of John Galt's beliefs, "nobody is fully right or wrong! There isn't any black or white! You don't have a monopoly on truth! (p.1112)"

This tendency toward the either/or logical fallacy can be seen in how opposed she is to the idea of losing even a degree of freedom. For her, that is something she cannot tolerate.

Freedom is a good thing, and I too support it. However, given the nature of what constitutes a society, unabashed freedom is just not practical. Within societies there are requirements, such as taxes, that go to pay for roads, healthcare, and the police department. But the fact that tax is indeed forcibly taken under penalty of imprisonment is unacceptable to Rand.

I'm not of the belief that people would willingly pay tax, which I think is a necessary (yet relatively minor) inconvenience, if it was gathered through a donation system. Rand's seeming certainty in what an ideal society would stem from total individual freedom, appears childish impracticality to me. The establishment of a society presupposes that, at the very least, *some* level of individual freedom is curtailed. A *totally* free society is a contradiction in terms.

This call to unfettered freedom certainly looks good in theory, and is often the mantra of many a conservative politician. Even better for them though, is the idea of unfettered freedom from regulations that political-donation-giving corporations would enjoy. According to Rand's philosophy, a company president in New York that decides to frack in Ohio, despite the fact that it will contaminate the ground water, should be free to do so. After all, they aren't forcing Ohioans to stay and drink the water. Ohioans are perfectly free to move to somewhere else if they find the poisonous

water a problem. The idea of a politician trying to control the company president would be, for Rand, an attempt to subvert his will, and rob him of the freedom of choice that would better him, and make him happy. It would be forcing him to act in his own self-destruction to forfeit his fracking designs in Ohio. In the final scene of the novel, one of the protagonists is reworking the Constitution, " ...adding a new clause to its pages: 'Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of production and trade . . .'" (p.1168)

The practicality of Rand's philosophy in terms of any real-world application is more than questionable. That notwithstanding, let us turn our attention to those among the political elite that champion it. For there is a glaring disconnect between Rand's philosophy and their own beliefs and values.

Throughout her novel, Rand is critical of, and clearly against, the idea of cronyism in politics. The heroine, Dagny Taggart—a strong-willed, independent business woman who thrives on challenge—is in stark contrast to her brother, James; a poor excuse for a businessman, whose tenuous success is only the result of mutual favors among his band of cronies.

Rand's ideal is a nation governed with individual freedom as its primary end. It's an ideal that does not leave room for the corrupting influence of campaign donations to politicians by multinational corporations. Still, American conservatives—whose corporate donations far exceed that of their more populist counterparts, and whose policy decisions are directly influenced by the needs of those same donors; the very essence of cronyism—still regard this novel as an embodiment of their political philosophy.

Among conservatives, the term "freedom" is bandied about, but it's not the individual freedom that Rand advocates, but freedom for their corporate donors, often in the form of more lax environmental regulations, or tax breaks under the guise of job-creation capital. It's this very cronyism at play that Rand—whom they revere—is decidedly against.

This same political party, if not chiefly made up of the Religious Right, greatly appeals to it. Yet, as we have seen in this essay, Rand was against religion, and its widespread use in coercion. It would seem that conservative proponents of Rand are either ill-informed as to her opposition to faith-based politics, or are themselves faithless and using it as a coercive strategy by appealing to their religious base via swing issues, and religious posturing.

I'll end with a quote from protagonist John Galt. This oath summarizes the convictions of the citizens who would exist in Rand's ideal society:

"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." (p.1069)

That is, if indeed a group of such individuals could be termed "a society."

Works Cited

Rand, A. (1957). *Atlas Shrugged*. New York :Plume.