



Ayn Rand (1905–1982)

By Carrie-Ann Biondi

Born Alisa Rosenbaum on February 2, 1905, in St. Petersburg, Russia, Ayn Rand would go on to become one of the most famous and polarizing defenders of liberty to wield a pen. Enamored with stories featuring swashbuckling heroes, French literature, and American film, Rand knew from a young age that she wanted to be a writer. Her aim was to depict the ideal man with an uncompromising heroic vision. To achieve this, Rand worked out over many years a philosophical system she would later call Objectivism.

That philosophical system was radically at odds with the communism that swept aside the life Rand had known as a young girl. Her family's pharmacy business was ruined by Bolshevik soldiers after the Russian Revolution

of 1917. She studied history at the University of Petrograd and film at the State Institute for Cinematography. Rand detested communism and knew that she would never be allowed to create in Russia the kind of art that she yearned to produce. Escaping Russia in 1926 at the invitation of relatives in Chicago, Illinois, Rand—who regarded herself as American in her soul—emigrated to the United States to pursue her dream of becoming a writer.

After working in Hollywood as a screenwriter in the film industry and managing RKO's wardrobe department, she had a play produced on Broadway in 1935: *Night of January 16th*. Rand then published *We the Living* (1936) and *Anthem* (1938). While these works are noteworthy, it was with the publication of her sagas celebrating reason, freedom, and individualism—*The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957)—that Rand earned prominence. After penning her magnum opus, she turned to writing hundreds of non-fiction articles, essays, and speeches on various philosophical, cultural, and political issues. Rand died in New York City—the setting of her last two novels—on March 6, 1982.

Rand's approach to the cause of human liberty is distinctive not only because she vividly brings to life through literature how ideas have consequences and freedom can unleash the best of the human spirit. She also takes unpopular concepts—such as capitalism and egoism—and defends them on *moral* grounds. Key tenets of Objectivism include: humans have a volitional, rational, and conceptual nature that allows us to know reality through our senses and the use of reason; one's own happiness is one's highest moral purpose; people should be free to trade the fruits of their work; and limited government is justified for the protection of individual rights.

Human nature and life

Imagine that a friend of yours gives you a rose bush. You're under no obligation to keep it, but you choose to undertake the task of caring for this botanical beauty. What should you do first? It's a good idea to start learning everything you can about the nature of your rose bush. Without that, you won't know what your next step should be. This becomes urgent because you observe that your rose bush is a living being and it's already wilting. Unlike a rock, which can endure through all time so long as nothing comes along to pulverize it, living

things will die at the end of their natural lifespans. And they will die a whole lot sooner without proper care. What a responsibility! You quickly learn from research and your own trial and error that rose-tending includes ensuring they have water, sunlight, nutrients, soil, and daily monitoring so you can adjust those inputs as necessary.

Here we have the seeds of one of Rand's fundamental insights about human liberty: its value is grounded in human nature. Unlike some other defenders of liberty, who regard its worth as "self-evident," Rand does not assume that it is valuable for us. Whether liberty is valuable at all, what it means for us, and how to achieve it are grounded in our nature. Just like a rose bush needs proper conditions in relation to its nature to live, so do we.

Humans are unlike rose bushes, though, in significant ways. Plants and nonhuman animals have only stimulus-response mechanisms or instinct as their automatic guides to survival. Certain aspects of us are like this. When wind blows in our eyes, we blink. Babies cry out when they are hungry. Things exist with their own natures and are there to be perceived, so when we open our eyes (or use any of our senses), we cannot help but perceive those objects. Beyond such basic functions, humans must seek out the knowledge they need to survive. Such knowledge is not inbuilt or automatic.

Rand holds that we have volitional, rational, and conceptual faculties in addition to the nutritive and sensory faculties we share with plants or animals. This means we must choose carefully to observe the world and properly use our reasoning faculty when forming concepts in order to know anything. Observing the world includes observing and understanding ourselves, since we are part of this world. From choosing what to focus on in our field of awareness to choosing to widen our scope of awareness to carefully integrating new knowledge or revising former beliefs in light of new experiences, we need to choose to know.

We then need to choose to act on our knowledge—at least if we want to live. I can sit and look at an apple on a tree and cry, but that won't alleviate my hunger. I must choose to pay attention to facts about me (e.g., I am hungry and will die without food), my world (e.g., apples satisfy my hunger and don't kill me, unlike those berries that caused Bob to die yesterday), and the causal relationship concerning how the world can work for me (e.g., I need to go over

to the tree, pick the apple, and eat it). Let's see how Rand goes from human nature to what's good for humans and what that has to do with liberty.

Objective value, virtue, and happiness

Revisiting rocks versus roses will show why Rand thinks we need a concept of value. She argues that, unlike lifeless things such as rocks, all life depends for its survival on properly taking in and processing fuel from its environment to survive by the standard of its life. You wouldn't drink motor oil or pour it on your rose bush, for that would cause disability, disease, or death. On the other hand, both you and the rose bush need water; it is a value for each of you. She concludes in "The Objectivist Ethics" that "the concept of 'Life' ... makes the concept of 'Value' possible" (p. 16). It is only by reference to life and what supports it that we can understand what value is. A universe without living beings would be a universe without values. Human nature requires not just values but also ethics, which is a standard by which we—as volitional beings—choose to act.

The standard of what is good and bad is relative to a species' nature—roses, humans, and cats would all have different standards—but this does not make values or ethics relativistic. Contrary to ethical relativists, who hold that ethics is relative to whatever an individual or culture believes is good, Rand grounds the human good in objective facts about human nature, which exists apart from what anyone happens to believe about it. There can be variability within species, so we also need to consider objective facts about each individual. For example, all humans need food to survive. Eating almonds is good for me, since the protein gives me sustenance. However, eating almonds would kill my sister, since she has a nut allergy. These facts are what make certain things objectively valuable (or not) for us.

A human being's choice to live does not mean merely breathing or surviving at any cost just to stave off death. We have physical, emotional, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of our selves that create a variety of needs, such as food, thinking, work, love, friendship, and art. Life is the ultimate value, but that is rather abstract. Rand explains in "The Objectivist Ethics" that the three values of reason, purpose, and self-esteem are "the means to and the realization of one's ultimate value" of life (p. 25).

In *The Fountainhead*, Howard Roark tells Gail Wynand that “the meaning of life” is “your work... The material the earth offers you and what you make of it” (Rand, 1943/1971: 552). This applies not just to one’s chosen vocation, but to the work of *being human*. Things in the world aren’t the only material the earth offers us. We also have our unique life and the consciousness that our life makes possible. Rand holds in “The Objectivist Ethics” that we are beings of “self-made soul” (p. 27), so we need to forge our characters. One’s long-term human survival can be achieved only through *ways of being*, which Rand called virtues. It’s through thinking and choosing—one choice at a time, every day—that one becomes a certain kind of person.

Rand identifies seven virtues by which we achieve our values. *Rationality* is man’s basic virtue. By cultivating it, we develop our ability to think and attain the value of reason, which is our means of survival. *Independence* is forming and living by the judgments of one’s mind. *Integrity* is never sacrificing one’s principles for another’s wishes. *Honesty* is seeing reality for what it is and not faking it. *Justice* is granting what is earned to those who deserve it and never granting what is unearned to those who haven’t. *Productiveness* is recognizing that we need to work, bringing into existence material and spiritual values to achieve the value of purpose and the sense of meaning in life that makes it worth living. *Pride* is devotion to becoming our best self to achieve the value of self-esteem. These are virtues only because they are how we gain and keep the values that constitute our life.

Human nature may be the *standard* by which we evaluate what is good or bad for us, but that is different from the *purpose* for which we choose to live. Each person holds his own life as his highest moral purpose and lives in order to achieve his own happiness. Rand defines happiness in “The Objectivist Ethics” as “that state of consciousness which proceeds from the achievement of one’s values... a state of non-contradictory joy” (pp. 28-29). Rand calls this view *egoism*. An egoist regards oneself as the *ultimate*—not the *only*—beneficiary of one’s actions. Heroes in all of Rand’s novels risk their lives for the sake of values they hold dear, and those values include their loved ones. They can honor the value of others only when they first honor themselves and create a self to share. This is what Howard Roark means when he tells Dominique Francon in *The Fountainhead*: “To say ‘I love you’ one must know first how to say the ‘I’”

(Rand, 1943/1971: 377). Rand defends assisting strangers in emergencies and everyday contexts out of good will toward other living beings, so long as we don't sacrifice our values.

Whether we seek knowledge and values, develop virtues, or pursue happiness, these all involve choice and production. Central to Rand's view is that humans must choose to focus and think in order to create the material and spiritual values needed to live. Production precedes consumption. As she explains in "What Is Capitalism?" while the "action required to sustain his life is primarily intellectual: everything man needs has to be... produced by his effort. Production is the application of reason to the problem of survival" (pp. 16-17). Both choice and production require liberty. One of the main themes of *Atlas Shrugged* is that one's mind not only cannot be forced by another to think, but it also needs to be free to acquire and act on one's knowledge to see what the consequences are for one's life.

The moral foundation of capitalism

Thinking and acting rationally as an individual may be necessary for human life. However, doing so is often not sufficient for achieving that outcome. One could choose to live alone on a desert island, but it would be a difficult, precarious way of life with limited options. Rand argues that our best shot at a wonderful life depends on living in a society under certain conditions. Living with others carries with it risks. Other people can be difficult. They might disagree with us, hurt us, or take what we create. It is only among and because of others, though, that we can be rewarded with some of life's greatest goods.

Rand points to numerous benefits of social life, focusing especially on knowledge and trade. As conceptual beings, we can represent the world to ourselves, create language, and share our thoughts with others. We can exchange with them what we create. Today's giants stand on the shoulders of those who went before. Look around you right now: electric light, computers, smart-phones. It can be easy in a social context to take for granted human ingenuity and what it makes possible. But roads, sanitation trucks, music, and loaves of bread don't grow on trees. Think of all the prior knowledge and creations that each one of these products builds on. It would take hours to identify a fraction

of the productive journeys of those products, not to mention the lifetimes of study and experimentation needed to reach this point.

A person's mind may be the source of wealth, but it takes the additional factor of a *free* market to convert those ideas into products, jobs, and a vibrant economy. Individuals can come up with all kinds of ideas, but others need to be willing to pay for those ideas (and products)—or refuse to buy them, if they don't find the products valuable. Consider what happens when force is introduced into the creation and transfer of goods. If I were compelled to design the next smartphone, I'd stare blankly at a piece of paper or produce junk. My mind cannot be forced to think. If you were compelled to buy a shoddy smartphone, you might leave it unused or throw it out. Force disconnects the producer from the information needed about his product that only voluntary transactions can provide. Compulsion kills innovation: quality degrades, incentives dwindle, and fewer useful products would be created. Liberty is needed for markets to exist and thrive.

Rand defends free markets as our best hope for securing ourselves against future need and bringing leisure within the reach of multitudes. Think how many hours of your life you now have at your disposal to do with what you wish because you can place clothes in a washing machine for one hour a week instead of washing them by hand for 8 to 10 back-breaking hours each week. What do you do with all of that time? Perhaps you listen to music, write a book chapter, or solve an engineering problem at work. Now multiply that by the many time- and labour-saving devices you own.

This is not a separate economic argument for liberty. Rand doesn't view economics and ethics as being at odds. She holds that the moral is the practical and that free markets are moral. Her fictional works are extended illustrations of this view. Some may be shocked to hear the word moral used in the same sentence as free markets, as they might associate markets with a predatory system. Defending free markets on moral grounds requires fighting against millennia of prejudice against manual labour and money-making. Consider the Biblical proverb that asserts that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to gain entrance to Heaven or how Shylock is scorned for loaning money for his own profit in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.

Contrary to popular belief, achievement in the free market requires the best—not the worst—within us. Rand argues in “The Objectivist Ethics” that the “principle of trade” is the only just way to engage in human relationships and promote social harmony: “[T]here is no conflict of interests among men who do not desire the unearned, who do not make sacrifices or accept them, who deal with one another as *traders*, giving value for value... A trader ... does not treat men as masters and slaves, but as independent equals” (p. 31). Leaving others free to compete in markets to be as productive as they can be makes possible an ever-growing system of knowledge, goods, and services that each of us benefits from.

This precludes the ill-gotten goods of predation because the *way* of acquiring goods in a free market—not the mere having of material stuff at any cost—is itself a good. Predation is not in anyone’s rational self-interest. Say that you are plundering the productivity of others. Once you have used them, taken what they created, and destroyed them, then what will you do? How will you live? You took the fish, killed the fisherman, and still don’t know how to fish. You can either stand there hungry and dying, or think, learn how to fish, and live. Or you could learn how to produce something a fisherman wants (e.g., shoes) and trade him shoes for fish to mutual benefit.

Rand calls this social system—with the trader principle at its center—*capitalism*. She reclaims this word from communists, who follow Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in giving it a pejorative connotation. Communists define capitalism as private ownership of the means of production—by which they mean things like land, machines, and factories—that exploits the labour force with “wage slavery.” Rand argues that communists begin the causal story of wealth mid-stream, treating capital as goods that fall from the sky. Where does the factory or machine come from? The root of the word capitalism is *caput*, which is Latin for head, leader, or source. Using one’s head—or mind—is what capitalists do. They are the source of the capital—that is, the various ideas, goods, and services—that they bring into existence by taking advantage of opportunities for value-creation through reason and consent.

Some might call this “good capitalism.” “Bad capitalism,” though, is not capitalism, but rather criminal predation or political cronyism whereby people expropriate goods through force, fraud, or deception. Those seeking to gain

goods this way are those Rand depicts as villains in her novels. Rand's capitalist heroes don't fit a "dog-eat-dog" stereotype nor do they seek political favours. They activate economic potency rather than exercise political pull, taking risks to create new things with the possibility that they may fail. When free to think and trade, they innovate, produce job opportunities, and increase living standards, leading to win-win outcomes.

Political liberty, individual rights, and the rule of objective law

However essential are producers' roles in creating and sustaining a free market that is in everyone's self-interest, they could not do this effectively without the appropriate legal and political context. The intellectual freedom needed to think and act for one's survival depends on the political freedom to keep the fruits of one's work. Without a political and legal system to protect freedom of contract, few people would take the risks involved in producing or trading and the economy would shrink.

Rand argues that human nature requires individual rights. She explains in "The Nature of Government" that rights are a moral principle used to protect individuals in a social context: "The right to life is the source of all rights—and the right to property is their only implementation... The man who produces while others dispose of his product, is a slave" (p. 322). The individual right to private property is the way to respect and protect one's life.

Liberty is not the freedom to do whatever one wants. It includes limiting the harmful effects of others' irrational actions, including being free from the initiation of force and in being able to seek redress in case one's rights have been violated. For Rand, this means rejecting anarchy. She argues in "The Nature of Government" that anarchic conditions don't support life: without "organized protection against" the initiation of force, individuals would have "to go about armed... or join a protective gang," with that society devolving "into the chaos of gang-rule" (p. 330). Political society is justified only to the extent necessary to protect individual rights, which means "placing the retaliatory use of physical force under objective control," so that a state holds "a monopoly on the legal use of physical force" in a given territory (p. 331).

Rejecting anarchy leaves open what kind of political society is needed to protect individuals. The proper functions of government will determine its

scope: police to protect individuals from criminals, military to protect them from foreign invaders, and law courts to settle disputes between them. Rand endorses limited government that separates powers and has a system of checks and balances. This is the sort of political society that the American Founders created: republicanism, which is a constitutionally limited representative democracy.

While a political society has its proper purpose and parameters, it takes a legal system to give it life. At a political society's foundation is the "rule of law." This is a formal principle whereby a political system embodies its rules in a public, written form by means of an authorized procedure in a constitution and statutes. Social conduct is guided and judged in relation to those impartial laws and not by arbitrary dictates of individuals.

Such a formal principle is insufficient, though, to govern properly. One could create substantively unjust laws while still applying this formal principle of the rule of law. Imagine that a bill permitting the enslavement of anyone by anyone is passed by majority vote. This would be an impartial rule of law, but it violates individual rights. Rand states in "The Nature of Government" that a legal system must be "based on *objectively* valid principles" if it is to be morally legitimate (p. 336).

Rand's legacy of liberty

In *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand paints a world where happiness is attainable through the use of one's mind to pursue one's passion and to overcome obstacles with reality-oriented determination. It's a world where achievement is possible, self-esteem is earned through productive work, voluntary interactions foster rewarding relationships, and human liberty is safeguarded through the protection of individual rights. Rand's legacy of liberty is that the inspiring vision of her work—just like that of Roark's for one young man in *The Fountainhead*—can give us "the courage to face a lifetime" (p. 507). So long as there are individuals committed to their own happiness, reaching for the best within themselves, and creating the social and political institutions needed for achieving these values in a free and responsible way, Rand's work will continue to speak to countless numbers of people.

Suggestions for Further Reading

By Ayn Rand

Fiction

Anthem (1938/1946). New American Library.

Atlas Shrugged (1957/1985). New American Library.

The Fountainhead (1943/1971). New American Library.

Night of January 16th (1934/1987). New American Library.

We the Living (1936/1959). New American Library.

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Secondary Literature

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About the author

Carrie-Ann Biondi is an adolescent program manager and coach at Higher Ground Education and a humanities guide at Academy of Thought and Industry. She taught a wide range of philosophy courses at the college level for 25 years, most recently at Marymount Manhattan College, NY. Her research and publications focus on ancient philosophy, the philosophy of education, and popular culture and philosophy. She has a BA in American studies from Hofstra University, an MA in American culture studies from Bowling Green State University, and both an MA and a PhD in philosophy from Bowling Green State University.