

INTRODUCTION TO
AYN RAND'S
OBJECTIVISM



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1

Who Is Ayn Rand?

Ayn Rand (1905–1982) was an American novelist and philosopher, and the creator of Objectivism, which she called “a philosophy for living on earth.”

Rand’s most widely read novels are *The Fountainhead*, a story about an independent and uncompromising architect; and *Atlas Shrugged*, a story about the role of the mind in human life and about what happens to the world when the thinkers and producers mysteriously disappear. Her most popular nonfiction books are *The Virtue of Selfishness*, a series of essays about the foundations and principles of the morality of self-interest; and *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, a series of essays about what capitalism is and why it is the only moral social system.

Rand was born in Russia, where she attended grade school and university; studied history, philosophy, and screenwriting; and witnessed the Bolshevik Revolution and the birth of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. In 1925, she left the burgeoning communist state, telling Soviet authorities she was going for a brief visit with relatives in America, and never returned.

She soon made her way to Hollywood, where she worked as a screenwriter, married actor Frank O’Connor, and wrote her first novel, *We The Living*. She then moved to New York City, where she wrote *Anthem* (a novelette), *The Fountainhead*, *Atlas Shrugged*, numerous articles and essays, and several nonfiction books in which she defined and elaborated the principles of Objectivism.

Rand’s staunch advocacy of reason (as against faith and whim), self-interest (as against self-sacrifice), individualism and individual rights (as against collectivism and “group rights”), and capitalism (as against all

forms of statism) make her both the most controversial and most important philosopher of the 20th century.

Describing Objectivism, Rand wrote: “My philosophy, in essence, is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute.”

For a good biography of Rand, see Jeffery Britting's *Ayn Rand* or Scott McConnell's *100 Voices: An Oral History of Ayn Rand*. For a brief presentation of the principles of Objectivism, see “What is Objectivism?” For the application of these principles to cultural and political issues of the day, subscribe to *The Objective Standard*, the preeminent source for commentary from an Objectivist perspective.

2

What Is Objectivism?

It is widely believed today that our moral, cultural, and political alternatives are limited either to the ideas of the secular, relativistic left—or to those of the religious, absolutist right—or to some compromised mixture of the two. In other words, one’s ideas are supposedly either extremely “liberal” or extremely “conservative” or somewhere in between. Ayn Rand’s philosophy, Objectivism, rejects this false alternative and offers an entirely different view of the world.

Objectivism is fully secular *and* absolutist; it is neither liberal nor conservative nor anywhere in between. It recognizes and upholds the secular (this-worldly) source and nature of moral principles and the secular moral foundations of a fully free, fully civilized society.

Morally, Objectivism advocates the virtues of rational self-interest—virtues such as independent thinking, productiveness, justice, honesty, and self-responsibility. Culturally, Objectivism advocates scientific advancement, industrial progress, objective (as opposed to “progressive” or faith-based) education, romantic art—and, above all, reverence for the faculty that makes all such values possible: reason. Politically, Objectivism advocates pure, laissez-faire capitalism—the social system of individual rights and strictly limited government—along with the whole moral and philosophical structure on which it depends.

Rand described Objectivism as “a philosophy for living on earth.” The reason why it is a philosophy for living on Earth is that its every principle is *derived* from the observable facts of reality and the demonstrable requirements of human life and happiness.

As a philosophical system, Objectivism includes a view of the nature of reality, of man's means of knowledge, of man's nature and means of survival, of a proper morality, of a proper social system, and of the nature and value of art. Rand presented her philosophy in her many fiction and nonfiction books, such as *The Fountainhead*, *Atlas Shrugged*, *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, *The Virtue of Selfishness*, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, and *The Romantic Manifesto*.

There is a great deal to Objectivism, much more than can be addressed in a book, let alone an essay. Moreover, neither I nor anyone else—other than Rand—can speak for Objectivism; the philosophy is precisely the body of philosophical principles set forth in her works. What follows, therefore, is an essentialized condensation of Objectivism as I see it. Any errors in the presentation are mine.

The Nature of Reality

Objectivism holds that reality is an *absolute*—that facts are facts, regardless of anyone's hopes, fears, or desires. There is a world independent of our minds to which our thinking must correspond if our ideas are to be true and therefore of practical use in living our lives, pursuing our values, and protecting our rights.

Thus, Objectivism rejects the idea that reality is ultimately determined by personal opinion or social convention or “divine decree.” An individual's ideas or beliefs do not make reality what it is, nor can they directly change anything about it; they either correspond to the facts of reality, or they do not. A person might think that the sun revolves around the earth (as some people do); that does not make it so.

Likewise, the accepted ideas or norms of a society or culture have no effect on the nature of reality; they either comport with the facts of reality, or they do not. Some cultures maintain that the earth is flat, that slavery is good, and that women are mentally inferior to men. Such beliefs do not alter the nature of what is; they contradict it; they are false.

As to the alleged existence of a “supernatural” being who creates and controls reality, no evidence or rational argument supports such a thing. Things *in nature* can be evidence only for the existence of things *in nature* (as, for instance, the fossil record is evidence for evolution); they cannot be evidence for the existence of things “outside of nature” or “above nature” or “beyond nature.” Nature is *all* there is; it is the *sum* of what exists; something “outside of nature” would be “outside of existence”—that is: nonexistent. Nature is not evidence for the existence of “super-nature.” There is no evidence

for the existence of a “supernatural” being; there are only books, traditions, and people that *say* he exists. Evidence-free assertions, appeals to tradition, and appeals to authority are not rational arguments; they are textbook logical fallacies.

Neither individual beliefs nor widespread agreement nor a “supernatural” being’s will has any effect on the nature of the world. Reality is not created or controlled by consciousness. Reality just *is*. Existence just exists—and everything in it is something specific; everything is what it is and can act only in accordance with its identity. A rose is a rose; it can bloom; it cannot speak. A dictatorship is a dictatorship; it destroys life; it cannot promote life. Faith is faith (i.e., the acceptance of ideas in the absence of evidence); it leads to baseless beliefs; it cannot provide knowledge.

The practical significance of this point is that if people want to achieve their goals—such as gaining knowledge, amassing wealth, achieving happiness, establishing and maintaining liberty—they must recognize and embrace the nature of reality. Reality does not bend to our desires; we must conform to its laws. If we want knowledge, we must observe reality and think; if we want wealth, we must produce it; if we want to enjoy life, we must think, plan, and act accordingly; if we want liberty, we must identify and enact its cause. We cannot achieve such goals by wishing, voting, or praying.

Man’s Means of Knowledge

Objectivism holds that *reason*—the faculty that operates by way of observation and logic—is man’s means of knowledge. Man gains knowledge by perceiving reality with his five senses, forming concepts and principles on the basis of what he perceives, checking his ideas for consistency with reality, and correcting any contradictions he discovers in his thinking. This is how scientists discover facts in their various fields, from the principles of agriculture to the existence of atoms to the structure of DNA; it is how inventors and engineers design life-enhancing machines and devices, from automobiles to heart pumps to MP3 players; it is how businessmen establish ways to produce and deliver goods and services, from refrigerators to movies to wireless Internet access; it is how doctors diagnose and cure (or treat) diseases, from polio to sickle cell anemia to breast cancer; it is how children learn language, math, and manners; it is how philosophers discover the nature of the universe, the nature of man, and the proper principles of morality, politics, and esthetics. Reason is the means by which everyone learns about the world, himself, and his needs. Human

knowledge—*all* human knowledge—is a product of perceptual observation and logical inference therefrom.

Thus, Objectivism rejects all forms of *mysticism*—the idea that knowledge can be acquired by non-sensory, nonrational means (such as faith, intuition, ESP, or any other form of “just knowing”). Objectivism equally rejects *skepticism*—the idea that knowledge is impossible, that it cannot be acquired by any means. Man clearly can acquire knowledge, has done so, and continues to do so; this is evident in the fact that he has accomplished all that he has.

In short, man has a means of knowledge; it is reason—and reason *alone*. If people want to know what is true or good or right, they must observe reality and use logic.

Man's Nature and Means of Survival

Objectivism holds that man has *free will*—the ability to think or not to think, to use reason or not to use it, to go by facts or to go by feelings. A person does not *have* to use reason; the choice is his to make. Whatever an individual's choice, however, the fact remains that man *is* the rational animal; reason is his only means of knowledge and therefore his basic means of survival. A person who refuses to use reason cannot live and flourish.

Man survives by observing reality, identifying the nature of things, discovering causal relationships, and making the logical connections necessary to produce the things he needs in order to live. Insofar as a person chooses to use reason, he is able to identify and pursue the things he needs for survival and happiness—things such as knowledge, food, shelter, medical care, art, recreation, romance, and freedom. Insofar as a person does *not* choose to use reason, he is unable to identify or pursue these requirements; he either dies or survives parasitically on the minds of those who *do* choose to use reason. In any case, reason is man's basic means of survival, and free will—the choice to use reason or not—is the essence of his nature.

Thus, Objectivism rejects the notion that man's nature is inherently corrupt (i.e., the idea of “original sin,” or the Hobbesian view of man as a brute), making his character necessarily depraved or barbaric. Objectivism also rejects the idea that man has no nature at all (i.e., the twisted, modern interpretation of man as a “blank slate”), making his character the consequence of social forces, such as upbringing or economic conditions. A person's character is neither inherently bad nor the product of social forces; rather, it is a consequence of his *choices*. If an individual chooses to face facts, to think rationally, to be

productive, and so on—and thereby develops a good character—that is his achievement. If an individual chooses not to face facts, not to think, not to produce, and so on—and thus develops a bad character—that is his fault.

Man has free will, and this fact is what gives rise to his need of morality: a code of values to guide his choices and actions.

A Proper Morality

Objectivism holds that the purpose of morality is to provide people with principled guidance for living and achieving happiness on earth. The proper standard of moral value is *man's life*—meaning: the factual requirements of his life as set by his nature. And because human beings are individuals, each with his own body, his own mind, his *own* life, this standard pertains to human beings as *individuals* (not as cogs in a utilitarian collective). According to this principle, the good is that which supports or promotes an individual's life; the evil is that which retards or destroys it. Being moral consists in taking the actions necessary to sustain and further one's life—actions such as thinking rationally and planning for the future, being honest and having integrity, producing goods or services and trading them with others, judging people rationally (according to the relevant facts) and treating them accordingly, and so on. In a word, Objectivism holds that being moral consists in being *rationally selfish* or *egoistic*.

Rational egoism, the centerpiece of Objectivism, holds that each individual should act in his own best interest and is the proper beneficiary of his own moral action. This principle is the recognition of the fact that in order to live, people *must* take self-interested action and reap the benefits thereof. Human life *requires* egoism. (I use “rational egoism” and “egoism” interchangeably for reasons that will become clear.)

Thus, Objectivism rejects the morality of *altruism*—the idea that being moral consists in self-sacrificially serving others (whether the poor, the “common good,” “mother nature,” or “God”). Objectivism also rejects the idea that *predation*—the sacrificing of others for one's own alleged benefit—can promote one's life and happiness. And Objectivism rejects *hedonism*—the idea that being moral consists in acting in whatever manner gives one pleasure (or doing whatever one feels like doing).

Consider altruism first.

Altruism, contrary to widespread misconception, is not the morality of “being nice to people” or “doing things for others”; rather, it is the morality of

self-sacrifice—that is, of serving others at the *expense* of one's own life-serving values. The basic principle of altruism is that to be moral, an action must be *selfless*: Insofar as a person acts selflessly, he is moral; insofar as he does not, he is not. If he gives up a value for no gain whatsoever, he is being moral; if he gains something from an action, he is *not* being moral. For instance, if a volunteer social worker gives away his time and effort in exchange for nothing at all, he is being moral. If a software developer creates a product that people love and trades it with them for a profit, he is not being moral. So says altruism. Not so says egoism.

Egoism, which also is widely misconstrued, is not the morality of “stabbing people in the back to get what one wants” or “acting on one's unfettered desires.” These are caricatures of egoism perpetrated by pushers of altruism who want people to believe that the only alternatives are: sacrifice yourself or sacrifice others. These, according to Objectivism, are *not* the only alternatives.

Egoism is the morality of *non-sacrifice*; it rejects all forms of human sacrifice—both self-sacrifice and the sacrifice of others—as a matter of principle. It holds that being moral consists in rationally pursuing one's life-promoting values, neither sacrificing oneself to others nor sacrificing others to oneself.

Egoism upholds the *principle of non-sacrifice*—the idea that one should never surrender a greater value for the sake of a lesser value. This principle is the recognition of the fact that giving up the requirements of one's life and happiness is inimical to one's life and happiness. Of course, life requires that people regularly forgo lesser values for the sake of greater ones; however, these are *gains*, not sacrifices. A *sacrifice* is the giving up of something that is *more* important to one's life and happiness for the sake of something that is *less* important to one's life and happiness; thus, it results in a net *loss*.

To live, people must pursue values, not give them up. According to egoism, therefore, insofar as a person pursues his life-serving values and refuses to sacrifice them, he is acting morally; insofar as he does not, he is not acting morally. If he produces values and trades them with others for a profit (whether material or spiritual), he is thereby being moral; he is gaining values on which his life and happiness depend. If he gives his values away for no gain whatsoever (neither material nor spiritual), he is thereby being immoral; he is relinquishing values on which his life and happiness depend.

On this view, a software developer who trades his product with others for a profit is thereby being moral. A volunteer social worker who gives away his time and effort for nothing at all is thereby being immoral. Likewise, a parent who values his child's education more than he values a new sports car, and who

forgoes the car in order to pay for the education, is being moral; a parent who values the education more than the car, but forgoes paying for the education in order to purchase the car, is being immoral. Similarly, a soldier who fights for freedom on the grounds that life without liberty is not worth living (“Give me liberty, or give me death!”) is being moral; one who fights in obedience to an alleged “supernatural” being’s commands is not. And so forth.

There is a black-and-white difference between trading values for gains and giving up values for nothing. Egoism calls for the first; altruism calls for the second.

Egoism is based on and derived from the requirements of human life on earth; thus, people *can* practice it consistently and *must* do so—if they want to live and make the most of their lives. Altruism cannot be practiced consistently. A person who accepts the morality of altruism has to cheat on it just to stay alive; for instance, he must selfishly earn a paycheck so that he can buy food.

Given the many values on which human life and happiness depend—from material values, such as food, shelter, clothing, medical care, automobiles, and computers, to spiritual values, such as knowledge, self-esteem, art, friendship, romantic love, and liberty—people need a great deal of guidance in making choices and taking actions. They need moral principles that are *conducive* to the goal of living fully and happily. In answer to this need, egoism provides a whole system of integrated, noncontradictory principles, the sole purpose of which is to teach man how to live and enjoy himself. In answer to this same need, altruism says: Don’t be selfish; sacrifice your values; give up your needs. If people want to live and be happy, only one of these moralities will do.

Altruism is not good for one’s life. If accepted and practiced *consistently*, it leads to death. This is what Jesus did. If accepted and practiced *inconsistently*, it retards one’s life and leads to guilt. This is what most altruists do. An altruist might not die from his morality—so long as he cheats on it—but neither will he live fully. Insofar as a person acts against the requirements of his life and happiness, he will not make the most of his life; he will not achieve the kind of happiness possible to man.

Egoism *is* good for one’s life. If accepted and practiced *consistently*, it leads to a life of happiness. If accepted and practiced *inconsistently*—well, there is no *reason* to be inconsistent here. Why *not* live a life of happiness? Why sacrifice *at all*? What *reason* is there to do so? In the entire history of philosophy, the number of rational answers to this question is exactly zero.

There is no reason to act in a self-sacrificial manner, which is why no one has ever provided one. Nor is there any rational justification for sacrificing others, which is why no one has ever provided one of these, either.

Predation (the sacrificing of others for one's own alleged benefit) is no more in one's best interest than is altruism. Happiness, like everything in the world, is something specific; it has a nature. Happiness is the state of mind that follows from the successful pursuit of rational, life-serving values. Genuine happiness comes from achieving values, not from stealing them; from thinking rationally and being productive, not from relinquishing one's mind and becoming a parasite on the thought and effort of others; from earning romance and making passionate love, not from raping people. To willfully become a parasite on the minds, efforts, and bodies of other people—to deliberately reduce oneself to the status of a subhuman creature—is the most selfless thing a person can do. That predators choose to ignore or deny this fact does not exempt them from it. Just as the sun does not revolve around the earth (regardless of what one believes), so too a person cannot achieve happiness by sacrificing other people (regardless of what he claims).

The assertions of predators to the effect that they *can* achieve happiness by sacrificing others are just that: assertions. They are not based on evidence (a criminal's makeshift smile and stolen money are not evidence of his happiness). They do not prove anything (proof is logical inference on the basis of evidence). Moreover, such claims flatly contradict the demonstrable fact that rational thought, productive achievement, genuine (earned) self-esteem, and certainty of one's moral worth are requirements of happiness.

Ultimately, however, in a rational society, the evasions and assertions of predators are of little concern to good people. As I will indicate in the section on politics, a rational society has an efficient means of dealing appropriately with such creatures.

Finally, as to the morality of hedonism, just because someone gets pleasure from or feels like doing something does not mean that it is in his best interest to do it. This is why rational parents encourage their children to think before they act, to recognize that choices have consequences beyond the immediate moment, to learn and embrace the long-range requirements of human life and happiness. It is also why rational adults do not act on their every urge or desire, and why bums and drug addicts are not happy people.

Genuine happiness comes from identifying and pursuing the long-range material and spiritual requirements of one's life as set by one's nature. For guidance in understanding and achieving these highly complex needs, whereas egoism provides an entire system of rational explanations and principles,

hedonism says: Pay no attention to your nature or needs; do whatever gives you pleasure; do whatever you feel like doing. Hedonism, in other words, under the guise of self-interest, counsels self-destruction.

It all comes down to standards. The standard of value according to altruism is self-sacrifice. The standard of value according to a predator is his whim. The standard of value according to hedonism is pleasure or feelings. The standard of value according to Objectivism and rational egoism is the requirements of man's life.

By the standard of man's life, each individual should live his own life for his own sake. He should think rationally and pursue his own life-promoting goals, such as a wonderful career, a passionate romantic relationship, enjoyable recreational activities, great friendships, a rational culture, and a social system that protects his right to do so.

Human life does not require human sacrifice; people *can* live without giving up their minds, their values, their lives; people *can* live without murdering, assaulting, or defrauding one another. Nor can human sacrifice promote human life or happiness; it can lead only to suffering and death. If people want to live and be happy, they must neither sacrifice themselves nor sacrifice others; rather, they must pursue life-serving values and respect the rights of others to do the same. This is the basic principle of rational egoism—and the moral foundation for a proper social system.

A Proper Social System

In the realm of politics, Objectivism recognizes that in order to *take* life-promoting action, a person must be *free* to do so; he must be free to act on the judgment of his mind, his basic means of living. The only thing that can stop him from doing so is other people, and the only way they can stop him is by means of *physical force*. Thus, in order to live peacefully together in a society—in order to live together as civilized beings, rather than as barbarians—people must refrain from using physical force against one another. This fact gives rise to the principle of *individual rights*, which is the principle of egoism applied to politics.

The principle of individual rights is the recognition of the fact that each person is morally an end in himself, not a means to the ends of others; therefore, he morally must be left free to act on his own judgment for his own sake, so long as he does not violate that same right of others. This principle is

not a matter of personal opinion or social convention or “divine revelation”; it is a matter of the factual requirements of human life in a social context.

A *moral* society—a *civilized* society—is one in which the initiation of physical force against human beings is prohibited by law. And the only social system in which such force is so prohibited—consistently and on principle—is pure, laissez-faire capitalism.

Capitalism—which, contrary to widespread miseducation, is not merely an economic system—is the social system of individual rights, including property rights, protected by a strictly limited government. In a laissez-faire society, if people want to deal with one another, they may do so only on *voluntary* terms, by uncoerced agreement. If they want to receive goods or services from others, they may offer to exchange value for value to mutual benefit; however, they may *not* seek to gain any value from others by means of physical force. People are fully free to act on their own judgment and thus to produce, keep, use, and dispose of their own property as they see fit; the only thing they are *not* “free” to do is to violate the rights of others. In a capitalist society, individual rights cannot *legally* be violated by anyone—including the government.

The sole purpose of the government in such a system is to protect the individual rights of its citizens by means of the police (to deal with domestic criminals), the military (to deal with foreign aggressors), and the courts of law (to adjudicate disputes). Although the government holds a monopoly on the legal use of force, it is constitutionally forbidden to use *initiatory* force in any way whatsoever—and constitutionally required to use *retaliatory* force as necessary to protect the rights of its citizens.

For instance, the government is *forbidden* to seize the property of innocent people (e.g., eminent domain), to forcibly redistribute wealth (e.g., welfare), to dictate the terms of private contracts (e.g., minimum wage and antitrust laws), to restrict freedom of speech (e.g., campaign finance “reform”), to mandate motherhood (e.g., antiabortion laws), to block scientific advancement (e.g., embryonic stem-cell research), to force citizens to fund religious organizations (e.g., faith-based initiatives), and to mandate “community” or “national” service (e.g., mandatory “volunteerism”). Simultaneously, the government is *required* to enforce laws against murder, assault, rape, child abuse, fraud, extortion, copyright infringement, slander, and the like. The government is also *required* to summarily dispose of foreign aggressors who initiate or threaten to initiate force against its citizens or their interests.

Capitalism—not the mongrel system of the United States today, but *genuine* capitalism—is the only social system that consistently prohibits anyone, including the government, from assaulting people or stealing their

property. It is the only system that respects and protects individual rights as a matter of unwavering principle. In other words, capitalism is the only system that *institutionalizes* the requirements of human life in a social context. No other social system on earth does this. Thus, if man's life is the standard of moral value, capitalism is the only moral social system.

In advocating laissez-faire capitalism, Objectivism opposes the politics of conservatism—such as the notion that we are our “brothers’ keepers” and therefore must sacrificially serve strangers (e.g., Republican welfare programs); the notion that successful businessmen should be regulated (i.e., coerced) “at least to some extent” for the sake of the “little guy” (as if the so-called little guy cannot succeed in life by his own rational thinking); the notion that students in government-run schools should be indoctrinated with “intelligent design” theory or required to pray; the notion that scientists should be forbidden to engage in embryonic stem-cell research while men, women, and children suffer from agonizing diseases that might otherwise be cured (“We mustn’t play God”)—and that those suffering from such diseases should be forced to “live” when they desperately want to die (“We mustn’t play God”); the notion that homosexuals should be prohibited from experiencing the joy of sex (“God disapproves”); and the notion that America’s military should sacrificially spread “freedom” (“God’s gift to mankind”), much less “democracy” (i.e., unlimited majority rule) to savages rather than selfishly and swiftly destroy America’s major enemies (“Love your enemies”).

Objectivism equally opposes the politics of so-called liberalism—such as the notion that people have a “right” to be *given* goods or services (which obviously requires that someone be *forced* to provide them); the notion that government agencies, private businesses, and schools should be required to implement racist policies, such as “affirmative action” and “diversity training”; the notion that students in government-run schools should be indoctrinated with the relativism known as “multiculturalism” or the religion known as “environmentalism”; the notion that people should be forced to fund ideas or art of which they disapprove (e.g., via “public” radio or “public” grants); and the notion that America has no right to “interfere with” or “impose Western values on” (let alone destroy) regimes that are responsible for the slaughter of Americans.

Finally, Objectivism emphatically opposes the politics of libertarianism—the anti-intellectual movement that claims to advocate “liberty,” while flagrantly ignoring or denying the moral and philosophical foundations on which liberty depends. Liberty cannot even be *defined*, let alone defended, apart from answers to questions such as: What is the nature of reality?

What is man's means of knowledge? What is the nature of the good? What are rights, and where do they come from? To say, as libertarians do, that the "non-initiation-of-force principle" is an "axiom" or that liberty can be defended on any old philosophical base—whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, atheist, altruist, egoistic, subjectivist, relativist, postmodernist—or on no base at all—is simply absurd. (This is not to say that everyone who calls himself a libertarian is anti-intellectual; rather, it is to say that any attempt to defend liberty while ignoring or denying its intellectual foundations is anti-intellectual.)

Contrary to conservatism, "liberalism," and libertarianism, the politics of freedom *depends* on the ethics of egoism—which depends on the philosophy of reason—which is grounded in the basic nature of reality: the fact that things (including human beings) are what they are and can act (and live) only in accordance with their identities. The politics of freedom is the politics of self-interest; it cannot be defended with the ethics of self-sacrifice—or with a philosophy of unreason, unreality, or "super-nature"—or with no philosophy at all.

Objectivists are not conservatives, but, as Rand put it, "radicals for capitalism" (i.e., advocates of its *root* or *foundation*). Objectivists are not "liberals," but absolutists for freedom. Objectivists are not libertarians, but fundamentalists for liberty. This is because Objectivists are radicals for *reason*—the foundation of which is: reality.

Let us turn now to art, which, according to Objectivism, like ethics and politics, rests on a rational, objective foundation and serves a specific life-promoting purpose.

The Nature and Value of Art

Objectivism holds that art is a requirement of human life and happiness. Art is a selective re-creation of reality according to an artist's deepest, most fundamental convictions—such as his views of the nature of the universe, the nature of man, what is knowable, what matters most, what is possible. The purpose of art is to give physical form to such profound abstractions, to make them concrete and observable, and thereby to provide people with a perceptual representation of a particular idea or worldview. This enables people to examine the idea as a physical reality and thus to better understand what it means in practice. In this way, art provides spiritual guidance and fuel for living and achieving one's goals. Whether a sculpture of a ballerina

depicting the skill and grace possible to man—or a novel about great industrialists showing the productive achievement possible to man—or a landscape of a countryside portraying the world as open to man's investigation and enjoyment—or a painting of a dismal, psychedelic pool hall portraying the world as unstable and inhospitable to man—art brings highly abstract convictions to the perceptual level.

Like everything in the world, art is something specific; thus, it is both knowable and definable. And, like everything man-made, it is properly judged as good or bad by the standard of the requirements of human life on earth.

Thus, Objectivism rejects the idea that art is whatever any self-proclaimed or allegedly “accomplished” artist happens to slap together or place in a gallery. Neither paint randomly splattered on a canvas, nor a bicycle wheel “cleverly” fastened to a stool, nor a word salad neatly printed on a page is art. Such things are not “bad” art; they are not art at all. Art is not the emotional spewing of irrational impulses, but the selective recreation of reality. Because man grasps reality only by means of reason, the creation of art requires the intense use of this faculty; it requires thought, concentration, mental connections, and the transformation of highly abstract concepts and values into the material of perceptual reality. This is not the province of buffoonery; it is the province of genius—and should be recognized and guarded as such.

Objectivism also rejects the idea that, within the range of what is art, no objective criteria exist for judging certain works as better than others. Like every legitimate value, a work of art—whether a painting, sculpture, novel, movie, or symphony—is a value precisely to the extent that it serves some requirement of a rational being's life. Although there is plenty of room for different tastes within the range of genuine art, there are also within that range objectively better and worse works of art—better and worse by the standards of rationality and man's spiritual needs.

For instance, because the essence of man's nature is that he possesses free will, the best art—*romantic* art—reflects this fact; it depicts man as in control of his life, as capable of reshaping his world according to his values, as the self-made soul that he is. For the sake of example here, let us isolate a particular aspect of a work of art: its subject matter. All else being equal (style, composition, technique, etc.), a painting of a hideous woman screaming in terror on the deck of a sinking ship says one thing; a painting of a beautiful woman masterfully handling a catamaran on a windy day says another. Objectively speaking, two such paintings do not have “equal” value; they do not “equally” serve the purpose of art; and they are not “equally” enjoyed by rational people.

Good art—like everything else on which human life and happiness depend—is a product of rational thought and creative effort. This is yet another reason to embrace and advocate capitalism—and the entire philosophy of reason on which it is based. In a rational, capitalist society, artists are fully free to think and to create as they see fit; nothing stands in their way; the right to freedom of expression is recognized as an absolute. Because the guiding social principle in such a society is that of trade—and because there is no “public” funding of the arts—artists who produce works that rational people value tend to thrive; those who produce works that rational people do not value tend to find other professions.

In sum, the key principles of Objectivism are: Reality is an absolute, reason is man's only means of knowledge, man has free will (the choice to think or not), self-interest is moral, individual rights are absolute, capitalism is moral, and good art is crucial to good living.

To see the origin of these principles in Rand's fiction, read *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*. For a book-length nonfiction presentation of the principles of Objectivism, see Leonard Peikoff's *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*. For the application of these principles to cultural and political issues of the day, subscribe to *The Objective Standard*, the preeminent source for commentary from an Objectivist perspective.

3

The Beauty of Ayn Rand’s Ethics

Ayn Rand opposed the morality of self-sacrifice, which is inherent in most philosophic systems and all religions. She advocated instead a morality of self-interest—the Objectivist ethics—which, as she explained in her essay “Causality Versus Duty,” is neatly summed up by the Spanish proverb “God said: ‘Take what you want, and pay for it.’”¹

Rand was an atheist, so her use of “God” here is metaphorical. By “God said” she means “reality dictates.” She is referring to the immutable fact that if you want to achieve an effect (an end), you must enact its cause (the means). This is the law of causality applied to human values. Our values—whether a wonderful career, a romantic relationship, good friendships, life-enhancing hobbies, or political freedom—do not come to us automatically, nor do we pursue them automatically. If we want these things, we must choose to act in certain ways and not in others. This is the way reality is. This principle is an *absolute*. “God said.”

“Take what you want” refers to the fact that human values are *chosen*. The realm of human values—the realm of morality—is the realm of choice. A proper morality is not about “divine commandments” (there is no God) or “categorical imperatives” (there’s no such thing) or “duties” (they don’t exist). Rather, it is about what you want out of life and what you must do to get what you want. A proper morality is a set of principles to guide your choices and actions toward a lifetime of happiness.

Importantly, as Rand emphasized, this does not make morality subjective. What promotes a person’s life is dictated not by his feelings divorced from facts, but by the factual requirements of his life and happiness—given his nature as a human being. Just as a rabbit can’t live and prosper by jumping off cliffs, and just as an eagle can’t live and prosper by burrowing underground, so a person can’t live and prosper by acting contrary to the requirements of *his* life.

We are complex beings of body and mind, matter and spirit, and the requirements of our life and happiness derive from both aspects of this

integrated whole. If we want to know what these requirements are, we must identify the relevant facts. Given our nature, we need certain values in order to live and prosper. We need material values such as food, clothing, shelter, and medicine; we need spiritual values, such as self-respect, self-confidence, friendship, and romantic love; and we need political values, such as the rule of law and political freedom—which enable us to pursue our material and spiritual values. Consequently, in order to live and prosper, we must uphold and employ the one *fundamental* value that makes our identification and pursuit of all our other values possible: reason.

Reason is our means of observing reality, forming concepts, identifying causal relationships, avoiding contradictions, and forming principles about what is good and bad for our life. Reason is our only means of knowledge and our basic means of living. Thus, if our goal is a lifetime of happiness, we must uphold reason as an absolute; we must be rational as a matter of principle.

Being rational doesn't mean never erring; humans are fallible beings, and occasional errors are part of life. Nor does it mean repressing or ignoring one's feelings; that would not be rational, as feelings are a crucial kind of fact. Rather, being rational means committing oneself, as a matter of principle, to identifying the available and relevant facts concerning one's alternatives in life, to acting on one's best judgment given what one knows at any given time, and to correcting any errors one commits if and when one discovers them.

Seen in this light, "Take what you want" doesn't mean: "Go by your emotions without respect for facts and logic." It means: "Use your rational judgment to figure out which goals and courses of action will result in a lifetime of happiness, and proceed accordingly." It means: "Take what you *rationally* want."

"Pay for it" refers to the fact that if we want to achieve our goals, we must *work* to achieve them, we must *enact* their causes. So says the law of causality. This is not a burden but a blessing: Choosing values and working to achieve them—whether a career in computer programming, a romantic relationship with the girl or guy of our dreams, a sailing trip around the world, or a summer home in the Catskills—is not a process to bemoan. It is part and parcel of living a wonderful life.

A proper morality is a crucial tool for living and loving life, and the Objectivist ethics is just such a morality. Its values of reason, purpose, and self-esteem—along with its virtues of rationality, productiveness, honesty, integrity, independence, justice, and pride—are, one and all, in service of this end. They are our means of taking what we want and paying for it.

Such is the beauty of the Objectivist ethics.²

4

Atlas Shrugged and Ayn Rand's Morality of Egoism

Author's note: This is an expanded version of a talk I've delivered on various college campuses over the past several years.

Because of its seemingly prophetic nature with respect to current events, Ayn Rand's 1957 novel *Atlas Shrugged* is receiving more attention and selling at greater volume today than it did when it was first published fifty-five years ago. That's a good thing, because the ideas set forth in *Atlas* are crucial to personal happiness, social harmony, and political freedom.

Atlas Shrugged is first and foremost a brilliant suspense story about a man who said he would stop the motor of the world and did. But the book is much more than a great novel. Integrated into the story is a revolutionary philosophy—a philosophy not for pie-in-the-sky debates or academic word games or preparing for an “afterlife,” but for understanding reality, achieving values, and living on earth.

Rand's philosophy, which she named Objectivism, includes a view of the nature of reality, of man's means of knowledge, of man's nature and means of survival, of a proper morality, of a proper social system, and of the nature and value of art. It is a comprehensive philosophy, which, after writing *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand elaborated in several nonfiction books. But it all came together initially in *Atlas*, in which Rand dramatized her philosophy—along with the ideas that oppose it.

While writing *Atlas*, Rand made a journal entry in which she said, “My most important job is the formulation of a *rational morality of and for man, of and for his life, of and for this earth.*”¹ She proceeded to formulate just such a morality, and to show what it means in practice.

Tonight, we're going to focus on the morality presented in *Atlas Shrugged*, but I want to do so without spoiling the novel for those of you who haven't yet read it. And since it is impossible to say much of substance about *Atlas* without giving away key elements of its plot and the mystery of the novel, I'm going

to limit my discussion of the book to a brief indication of its plot—without giving away anything pivotal—after which I'll discuss Rand's morality of egoism directly.

Atlas Shrugged is a story about a future world in which the entire globe, with the exception of America, has fallen under the rule of various "People's States" or dictatorships. America, the only country that is not yet fully socialized, is sliding rapidly in that direction, as it increasingly accepts the ideas that lead to dictatorship, ideas such as self-sacrifice is noble, self-interest is evil, and greedy producers and businessmen have a moral obligation to serve the "greater good" of society.

Given this cultural climate, the economy becomes increasingly regulated by the government, and the country slides further and further into economic chaos: Factories shut down, trains stop running, businesses close their doors, people starve—just what you would expect if the U.S. government started acting like the government of the USSR.

But then, something strange starts happening. America's top producers—various scientists, inventors, businessmen, and artists—start to disappear. One by one, they simply vanish. And no one knows where they've gone or why.

Consequently, the supply of goods and services—from scientific discoveries to copper to wheat to automobiles to oil to medicine to entertainment—reduces to a trickle and eventually comes to a halt. Life as Americans once knew it ceases to exist. The country is in ruins.

Where did the producers go and why? Were they killed? Were they kidnapped? Do they return? How is this resolved?

Read the book. You'll be riveted.

As I said, I don't want to give away the story, but I will mention its theme. The theme of *Atlas Shrugged* is the role of the mind in man's existence. The novel dramatizes the fact that the reasoning mind is the basic source of the values on which human life depends. And this is not only the theme of *Atlas*; it is also the essence of Rand's philosophy of Objectivism: Reason—the faculty that operates by means of observation, concepts, and logic—is the source of all knowledge, values, and prosperity.

In this same vein, the theme of my talk tonight is the role of the mind—specifically *your* mind—in understanding, evaluating, and embracing a moral code.

Suppose you are offered two moral codes from which to choose—and whichever one you choose, you have to live by it for the rest of your life. The first code tells you that your life is supremely important—that it is properly the single most important thing in the world to you. This code says that

you should live a wonderful, joy-filled life, and it provides an abundance of guidance about how to do so: how to make your life great; how to choose your goals, organize your values, and prioritize the things that are important to you; how to succeed in school, in friendships, and in romance; how to choose a career that you'll love and how to succeed in it. And so on. In short, this first moral code provides you guidance for achieving a lifetime of happiness and prosperity.

The second moral code offers an entirely different kind of guidance. It tells you *not* that you should live a wonderful life, *not* that you should pursue and achieve your goals and values—but, rather, that your life is *unimportant*, that you should *sacrifice* your values, that you should give them up for the “sake” of others, that you should abandon the pursuit of personal happiness and accept the kind of “life” that results from doing so. That's it. That's the guidance provided by the second code.

All else being equal, which moral code would you choose—and why?

I suspect that, on serious reflection, you would choose the first code. I further suspect that your reasoning would be something on the order of: “We're talking about my *life* here. If it's true that embracing the first code will make my life wonderful, and embracing the second will make it miserable, then this is a no-brainer.”

I think that's good reasoning. Let's see if it holds up under scrutiny as we flesh out the respective natures and implications of these two codes.

The first code is Rand's morality of rational egoism, which lies at the heart of *Atlas Shrugged* and is the centerpiece of Objectivism. The second code is the traditional ethics of altruism—which is the cause of all the trouble in *Atlas Shrugged* and is the ethics on which we all were raised. In order to be clear about what Rand's egoism is, I want to compare and contrast it with altruism. This will serve to highlight the value of Rand's ideas and help to dispel potential misconceptions about her views. It will also show how destructive altruism is and why we desperately need to replace it with rational egoism—both personally and culturally. (I will be using the terms “egoism” and “rational egoism” interchangeably for reasons that will become clear as we proceed.)

Let me stress that I cannot present the whole of Rand's morality in one evening—that would be impossible. What I'm going to do is just indicate its *essence*, by discussing a few of its key principles. My aim is to show you that there is something enormously important here—something important to *your life and happiness*—and to inspire you to look further into the subject on your own.

To begin, observe that each of you brought a morality with you tonight. It is right there in your head—whether you are conscious of it or not. Each of you has a set of ideas about what is good and bad, right and wrong—about what you should and shouldn't do. And you refer to these ideas, implicitly or explicitly, when making choices and taking actions in your daily life. Should I study for the test, or cheat on it, or not worry about it? What career should I choose—and how should I choose it? Is environmentalism a good movement or a bad one? What should I do this weekend? How should I spend my time? Whom should I befriend? Whom can I trust? Is homosexuality wrong? Does a fetus have rights? What is the proper way to deal with terrorists?

The answers one gives to such questions depend on one's morality. This is what a morality is: a set of ideas and principles to guide one's choices, evaluations, and actions.

Because as human beings we *have to* make choices—because we have free will—a morality of some kind is unavoidable to us. Morality is truly inescapable. Our only choice in this regard is whether we acquire our morality through conscious deliberation—or by default, through social osmosis.

If we acquire our morality by default, we will most likely accept the dominant morality in the culture today: *altruism*—the idea that being moral consists in being *selfless*. “Don't be selfish!”—“Put others first!”—“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”—“Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”—“Volunteer to serve in your community.”—“Sacrifice for the greater good.” And so on.

This is the morality that surrounded all of us growing up—and that still surrounds us today. It is the morality taught in church, synagogue, and school—offered in books, movies, and on TV—and encouraged by most parents.

Interestingly, however, although our culture is steeped in this morality, the actual meaning of altruism, in the minds of most people, is quite vague. Is a doctor acting altruistically when he cares for his patients? Or is he seeking to *gain* from doing so? Are parents being altruistic when they pay for their children's education? Or is it in their best interest to do so? Are American soldiers acting altruistically when they defend our freedom? Or is defending our freedom in their self-interest? Are you acting altruistically when you throw a birthday party for your best friend? Or do you do so because he or she is a great value *to you*—and thus, something is in it *for you*?

What exactly is the difference between *self-less* action and *self-interested* action? What is the difference between altruism and egoism?

To understand how each differs from the other, we need to understand the basic theory of each code and what each calls for in practice. To begin clarifying this issue, let us turn first to altruism.

Altruism is the morality that holds self-sacrificial service as the standard of moral value and as the sole justification for one's existence. Here, in the words of altruistic philosopher W. G. Maclagan, is the basic principle: According to altruism, "the moral importance of being alive lies in its constituting the condition of our ability to serve ends that are not reducible to our personal satisfactions."² This means that the moral importance of your life corresponds to your acts of *selflessness*—acts that do not satisfy your personal needs. Insofar as you do *not* act selflessly, your life has *no* moral significance. Quoting Maclagan again, altruism holds that we have "a duty to relieve the stress and promote the happiness of our fellows. . . . [We] should discount altogether [our] own pleasure or happiness as such when . . . deciding what course of action to pursue. . . . [Our] own happiness is, as such, a matter of no moral concern to [us] whatsoever."³

Ayn Rand was not exaggerating when she said, "The basic principle of altruism is that man has no right to exist for his own sake, that service to others is the only justification of his existence, and that self-sacrifice is his highest moral duty, virtue, and value."⁴ That *is* the theoretical meaning of altruism. And the altruistic philosophers know it—and state it forthrightly. (We'll hear from more of them a little later.)

Now, what does altruism mean in practice? Suppose a person accepts altruism as true and strives to practice it consistently. What will become of his life?

A widely-used college philosophy text gives us a good indication. As I read this passage, bear in mind that this is not someone speaking for or against altruism. This is just a textbook writer's depiction of what altruism means in practice.

A *pure* altruist doesn't consider her own welfare at all but only that of others. If she had a choice between an action that would produce a great benefit for herself (such as enabling her to go to college) and an action that would produce no benefit for herself but a small benefit for someone else (such as enabling him to go to a concert this evening), she should do the second. She should be *selfless*, considering herself not at all: she should face death rather than subject another person to a minor discomfort. She is committed to serving others only and to pass up any benefits to herself.⁵

That illustrates the practical meaning of altruism—and indicates why no one practices it consistently.

Observe, however, that whether practiced consistently or inconsistently, the basic *principle* of altruism remains the same: The only moral justification of your existence is self-sacrificial service to others. That some people subscribe to altruism but fail to uphold it consistently does not make their moral code different in *kind* from that of a person who practices it consistently; the difference is only one of *degree*. The consistent altruist is acting with a bizarre form of “integrity”—the kind of integrity that leads to his suffering and death. The inconsistent altruist is acting with plain-old hypocrisy—albeit a necessary hypocrisy given his moral code.

And not only is the altruist's *morality* the same in kind; the *consequences* of accepting it are the same in kind, too. To the extent that a person acts selflessly, he thereby thwarts his life and happiness. He might not die because of it, but he certainly will not live fully; he will not make the most of his life; he will not achieve the kind of happiness that is possible to him.

Have *you* accepted the principle of altruism? If so, how is it affecting your life?

Have you ever done something for the sake of others—at the expense of what you really thought was best for your *own* life? For instance: Have you ever accepted an invitation to dine with someone whose company you do not enjoy—because you didn't want to hurt his or her feelings? Have you ever skipped an event—such as a ski trip or a weekend at the beach with your friends—in order to spend time with family members you'd really rather not see? Have you ever remained in a relationship that you know is not in your best interest—because you think that he or she couldn't handle the breakup?

Conversely, have you ever felt guilty for *not* sacrificing for others? Have you ever felt ashamed for doing something that was in your own best interest? For instance, have you felt guilty for not giving change to a beggar on a street corner? Or guilty for pursuing a degree in business or art or something you love—rather than doing something allegedly “noble,” such as joining the Peace Corps?

These are just some of the consequences of accepting the morality of altruism.

Altruism is not good for your life: If you practice it consistently, it leads to death. That's what Jesus did. If you accept it and practice it inconsistently, it retards your life and leads to guilt. This is what most altruists do.

Rational egoism, as the name suggests, and as we will see, *is* good for your life. It says that you should *pursue* your life-serving values and should *not*

sacrifice yourself for the sake of others. Practiced consistently, it leads to a life of happiness. Practiced inconsistently—well, *why* be inconsistent here? Why *not* live a life of happiness? Why sacrifice *at all*? What *reason* is there to do so? (We will address the profound lack of an answer to this question later.)

At this point, we can begin to see why Rand called altruism “The Morality of Death.” To fully grasp why it is the morality of death, however, we must understand that the essence of altruism is not “serving others” but *self-sacrifice*. So I want to reiterate this point with emphasis.

Altruism does *not* call merely for “serving others”; it calls for *self-sacrificially* serving others. Otherwise, Michael Dell would have to be considered more altruistic than Mother Teresa. Why? Because Michael Dell serves millions more people than Mother Teresa ever did.

There is a difference, of course, in the way he serves people. Whereas Mother Teresa “served” people by exchanging her time and effort for *nothing*, Michael Dell serves people by *trading* with them—by exchanging value for value to mutual advantage—an exchange in which both sides *gain*.

Trading value for value is not the same thing as *giving up* values for nothing. There is a black-and-white difference between pursuing values and giving them up—between achieving values and relinquishing them—between exchanging a *lesser* value for a *greater* one—and vice versa.

In an effort to make their creed seem more palatable, pushers of altruism will try to blur this distinction in your mind. It is important not to let them get away with it. Don't be duped!

Altruists claim, for instance, that parents “sacrifice” when they pay for their children to attend college. But this is ridiculous: Presumably, parents value their children's education more than they value the money they spend on it. If so, then the sacrifice would be for them to forgo their children's education and spend the money on a lesser value—such as a Ferrari.

Altruists also claim that romantic love requires “sacrifices.” But this is ridiculous, too: “Honey, I'd really rather be with another woman, but here I am sacrificially spending my time with you.” Or: “I'd really rather have spent this money on a new set of golf clubs, but instead I sacrificially bought you this necklace for your birthday.” Or: “It's our anniversary—so I'm fixing you your favorite dish for a candlelit dinner—even though I'd rather be playing poker with the guys.”

Is that love? Only if love is sacrificial.

Altruists also claim that American soldiers sacrifice by serving in the military. Not so. Our non-drafted soldiers serve for a number of self-interested reasons. Here are three: (1) They serve for the same reason that the

Founding Fathers formed this country—because they value liberty, because they realize that liberty is a requirement of human life, which is the reason why Patrick Henry ended his famous speech with “Give me Liberty or give me Death!” His was not an ode to sacrifice; it was an ode to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. (2) Our soldiers serve in exchange for payment and education—which are clearly in their self-interest. (3) They serve because they are fascinated by military science and want to make a career of it—another selfish motive.

Do some of these soldiers die in battle? Unfortunately, yes. Theirs is a dangerous job. But American soldiers don't *willfully* give up their lives: They don't walk out on the battlefield and say, “Shoot me!” Nor do they strap bombs to their bodies and detonate themselves in enemy camps. On the contrary, they do everything they can to beat the enemy, win the war, and *remain alive*—even when the Bush and Obama administrations tie their hands with altruistic restrictions on how they can fight.

The point is that a sacrifice is not “any choice or action that precludes some other choice or action.” A sacrifice is not “any old exchange.” A sacrifice is, as Rand put it, “the surrender of a greater value for the sake of a lesser one or of a non-value.”⁶

Whether or not one is committing a sacrifice depends on what is *more* important and what is *less* important to one's life. To make this determination, of course, one must know the relative importance of one's values in regard to one's life. But if one does establish this hierarchy, one *can* proceed non-sacrificially—and consistently so.

For example, if you know that your education is more important to your life than is, say, a night on the town with your friends, then if you stay home in order to study for a crucial exam—rather than going out with your buddies—that is not a sacrifice. The sacrifice would be to hit the town and botch the exam.

Life requires that we regularly forgo lesser values for the sake of greater ones. But these are *gains*, not sacrifices. A sacrifice consists in giving up something that is *more* important for the sake of something that is *less* important; thus, it results in a net loss.

Altruism, the morality of self-sacrifice, is the morality of *personal loss*—and it does not countenance personal gain. This is not a caricature of altruism; it is the *essence* of the morality. As arch-altruist Peter Singer (the famed utilitarian philosopher at Princeton University) explains, “to the extent that [people] are motivated by the prospect of obtaining a reward or avoiding a punishment, they are not acting altruistically. . . .”⁷ Arch-altruist Thomas

Nagel (a philosophy professor at New York University) concurs: Altruism entails “a willingness to act in consideration of the interests of other persons, without the need of ulterior motives”—“ulterior motives” meaning, of course, personal gains.⁸

To understand the difference between egoistic action and altruistic action, we must grasp the difference between a trade and a sacrifice—between a gain and a loss—and we must not allow altruists to blur this distinction in our mind. Egoism, as we will see, calls for personal gains. Altruism, as we have seen, calls for personal losses.

Now, despite its destructive nature, altruism is accepted to some extent by almost everyone today. Of course, no one upholds it *consistently*—at least not for long. Rather, most people accept it as true—and then cheat on it.

All the major religions—Christianity, Judaism, Islam—advocate altruism; their holy books demand it. All so-called “secular humanist” philosophies—utilitarianism, postmodernism, egalitarianism—call for altruism as well. (Note that “secular humanists” do not call themselves “secular egoists” or “secular individualists.”)

“Alter” is Latin for “other”; “altruism” means “other-ism”; it holds that you should sacrifice for others. From the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim points of view, the significant “others” are “God” and “the poor”; in the Old Testament, for instance, God says: “I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land” (Deuteronomy 15:11). From the utilitarian point of view, the “other” is “everyone in general”; the utilitarian principle is “the greatest good for the greatest number.” From the postmodern and egalitarian points of view, the “other” is anyone with less wealth or opportunity than you have; in other words, the better off you are, the more you should sacrifice for others—the worse off you are, the more others should sacrifice for you.

Sacrifice. Sacrifice. Sacrifice. Everyone believes it is the moral thing to do. And no philosopher has been willing to challenge this idea.

Except Ayn Rand:

[T]here is one word—a single word—which can blast the morality of altruism out of existence and which it cannot withstand—the word: “*Why?*” *Why* must man live for the sake of others? *Why* must he be a sacrificial animal? *Why* is that the good? There is no earthly reason for it—and, ladies and gentlemen, in the whole history of philosophy no *earthly* reason has ever been given.⁹

On examination, this is true. No reason has ever been given as to why people should sacrifice for others. Of course, *alleged* reasons have been given, but not legitimate ones. So let's consider the alleged reasons—of which there are approximately six—each of which involves a logical fallacy.

1. *"You should sacrifice because God (or some other voice from another dimension) says so."* This is not a reason—certainly not an earthly one. At best, it is an appeal to authority—that is, to the "authorities" who claim to speak for God. Just because a preacher or a book makes a claim does not mean the claim is true. The Bible claims, among other things, that a bush spoke. More fundamentally, this non-reason is an arbitrary claim because there is no evidence for the existence of a god. But even those who believe in a god can recognize the fallacy of appealing to an authority.

2. *"You should sacrifice because that's the general consensus."* This is not a reason but an appeal to the masses. Matters of truth and morality are not determined by consensus. That slavery should be legal used to be the general consensus in America, and is still the consensus in parts of Africa. That did not and does not make it so. Nor does consensus legitimize the notion that you or anyone else should sacrifice or be sacrificed.

3. *"You should sacrifice because other people need the benefit of your sacrifice."* This is an appeal to pity. Even if other people did need the benefit of your sacrifice, it would not follow that this is a reason to sacrifice. More importantly, however, the notion that people need the benefit of your sacrifice is false. What people need is to produce values and to trade them with others who produce values. And to do so, they and others must be *free* to produce and trade according to their own judgment. This, not human sacrifice, is what human life requires. (I'll touch on the relationship between freedom and egoism a little later.)

4. *"You should sacrifice because if you don't, you will be beaten, or fined, or thrown in jail, or in some other way physically assaulted."* The threat of force is not a reason; it is the opposite of a reason. If the force wielders could offer a reason why you should sacrifice, then they would not have to use force; they could use persuasion instead of coercion.

5. *"You should sacrifice because, well, when you grow up or wise up you'll see that you should."* This is not a reason, but a personal attack and an insult. It says, in effect, "If you don't see the virtue of sacrifice, then you're childish or stupid"—as if demanding a reason in support of a moral conviction could indicate a lack of maturity or intelligence.

6. *"You should sacrifice because only a miscreant or a scoundrel would challenge this established fact."* This kind of claim assumes that you regard

others' opinions of you as more important than your own judgment of truth. It is also an example of what Ayn Rand called "The Argument from Intimidation": the attempt to substitute psychological pressure for rational argument. Like the personal attack, it is an attempt to avoid having to present a rational case for a position for which no rational case can be made.

That's it. Such are the "reasons" offered in support of the claim that you should sacrifice. Don't take my word for it; ask around. Ask your philosophy professors. Ask a priest or rabbi. You will find that all the "reasons" offered are variants of these—each of which, so far from being a "reason," is a textbook logical fallacy. (Most even have fancy Latin names.)

Ayn Rand demanded *reasons* for her convictions. So should we.

She set out to discover a *rational* morality—one based on observable facts and logic. Rather than starting with the question "Which of the existing codes of value should I accept?"—she began with the question, "What are values and why does man need them?" This question pointed her away from the established views—and toward the facts of reality.

Looking at reality, Rand observed that a value is that which one acts to gain or keep. You can see the truth of this in your own life: You act to gain and keep money; you value it. You act to gain and keep good grades; you value them. You act to choose and develop a fulfilling career. You seek to meet the right guy or girl and build a wonderful relationship. And so on.

Looking at reality, Rand also saw that only living organisms take self-generated, goal-directed action. Trees, tigers, and people take actions toward goals. Rocks, rivers, and hammers do not. Trees, for example, extend their roots into the ground and their branches and leaves toward the sky; they value nutrients and sunlight. Tigers hunt antelope, and nap under trees; they value food and shade. And people act to gain *their* values, such as nutrition, education, a career, romance, and so on.

Further, Rand saw that the ultimate reason living organisms take such actions is to further their *life*. She discovered that an organism's life is its ultimate goal and standard of value—and that *man's* life is the standard of *moral* value: the standard by which one judges what is good and what is evil. Man's life—meaning: that which is required to sustain and further the life of a human being—constitutes the standard of moral value.

Now, the validation of the principle that life is the standard of value has a number of aspects, and we don't have time to consider all of them tonight. For our purposes here, I want to focus briefly on just a few.

By pursuing the question "Why does man need values?"—Ayn Rand kept her thinking *fact-oriented*. If man needs values, then the *reason* he needs them

will go a long way toward establishing which values are legitimate and which are not. If man doesn't need values, well, then, he doesn't need them—and there is no point in pursuing the issue at all. What Rand discovered is that man *does* need values—and the reason he needs them is in order to *live*. *Life*, she discovered, is the ultimate goal of our actions; life is the final end toward which all our other values are properly the means.

Granted, because we have free will we can take antilife actions—and, as we have seen, altruism senselessly calls for us to do just that. But the point is that we don't *need* to take antilife actions, unless we want to die—in which case, we don't really need to take any action at all. We don't need to do anything in order to die; if that's what we want, we can simply stop acting altogether and we will soon wither away.

If we want to live, however, we must pursue life-serving values—and we must do so by choice.

Free will enables us to choose our values. This is what gives rise to the field of morality. Morality *is* the realm of chosen values. But whatever our choices, these facts remain: The only reason we *can* pursue values is because we are alive, and the only reason we *need* to pursue values is in order to live.

This two-pronged principle of Rand's philosophy is essential to understanding how the Objectivist morality is grounded in the immutable facts of reality: (1) Only life makes values *possible*—since nonliving things cannot pursue values; and (2) only life makes values *necessary*—since only living things need to pursue values.

Observing reality, we can see that this is true: A rock doesn't have values. It *can't* act to gain or keep things; it just stays still—unless some outside force, such as a wave or a hammer, hits and moves it. And it doesn't *need* to gain or keep things, because its continued existence is *unconditional*. A rock can change forms—for instance, it can be crushed and turned to sand, or melted and turned to liquid—but it cannot go out of existence. The continued existence of a *living organism*, however, is *conditional*—and this is what gives rise to the possibility and need of values. A tree must achieve certain ends—or else it will die. Its chemical elements will remain, but its life will go out of existence. A tiger must achieve certain ends, too, or it will meet the same fate. And a person—if he is to remain alive—must achieve certain ends as well.

The Objectivist ethics—recognizing all of this—holds *human life* as the standard of moral value. It holds that acting in accordance with the requirements of human life is moral, and acting in contradiction to those requirements is immoral. It is a fact-based, black-and-white ethics.

Now, combining the principle that human life is the standard of moral value with the observable fact that people are individuals—each with his *own* body, his *own* mind, his *own* life—we reach another principle of the Objectivist ethics: Each individual's *own* life is his *own* ultimate value. This means that each individual is *morally* an end in himself—not a means to the ends of others. Accordingly, he has no moral “duty” to sacrifice himself for the sake of others. Nor does he have a moral “right” to sacrifice others for his own sake. On principle, neither self-sacrifice nor the sacrifice of others is moral, because, on principle, *human sacrifice as such is immoral*.

Human life does not require people to sacrifice themselves for the sake of others; nor does it require people to sacrifice others for their own sake. Human life simply does not require human sacrifice; people *can* live without giving up their minds, their values, their lives; people *can* live without killing, beating, robbing, or defrauding one another.

Moreover, human sacrifice cannot promote human life and happiness; it can lead only to suffering and death. If people want to live and be happy they must neither sacrifice themselves nor sacrifice others; rather, they must pursue life-serving values and respect the rights of others to do the same. And, given the role of morality in human life, in order to do so, they must accept the morality that *advocates* doing so.

In a sentence, the Objectivist ethics holds that human sacrifice is immoral—and that each person should pursue his own life-serving values and respect the rights of others to do the same. This is the basic principle of rational egoism. And the reason it sounds so good is because it *is* good; it is *right*; it is *true*. This principle is derived from the observable facts of reality and the demonstrable requirements of human life. Where else could valid moral principles come from? And what other purpose could they serve?

We can now see why Ayn Rand said, “The purpose of morality is to teach you, not to suffer and die, but to enjoy yourself and live.” Morality, properly conceived, is not a hindrance to a life of happiness; rather, it is the *means* to such a life.

So let us turn to the question of *how* to enjoy yourself and live. If that is the right thing to do, then what—according to the Objectivist ethics—is the means to that end?

First and foremost, in order to live and achieve happiness, we have to use *reason*. Hence the technically redundant word “rational” in “rational egoism.” Reason is our means of understanding the world, ourselves, and our needs. It is the faculty that operates by means of perceptual observation and conceptual

abstraction—by means of our five senses and our ability to think logically, to make causal connections, and to form principles.

It is by means of reason that we identify what things are, what properties they have, and how we can use them for our life-serving purposes. For example, it is by the use of reason that we learn about plants, soil, the principles of agriculture, and how to produce food. It is by means of reason that we learn about wool, silk, and how to make looms and produce clothing. It is by means of reason that we learn the principles of chemistry and biology and how to produce medicine and perform surgery; the principles of engineering and how to build homes and skyscrapers; the principles of aerodynamics and how to make and fly jumbo jets; the principles of physics and how to produce and control nuclear energy. And so on.

On a more personal level, it is by means of reason that we are able to develop fulfilling careers, to engage in rewarding hobbies, and to establish and maintain good friendships. And it is by means of reason that we are able to achieve success in romance.

Since this last is perhaps less obvious than the others, let's focus on it for a minute.

To establish and maintain a good romantic relationship, you have to take into account all the relevant facts pertaining to that goal. To begin with, you have to know what kind of relationship will actually be good for your life; you were not born with this knowledge, nor do you gain it automatically. To acquire it, you have to observe reality and think logically. Further, you have to find someone who suits your needs and lives up to your standards. To do so, you have to judge peoples' characters and qualities accurately—which requires reason. Once found, you have to treat the person justly—as he or she deserves to be treated. To do this, you have to understand and apply the principle of justice (which we will discuss shortly). Your means of understanding and applying it is reason.

To succeed in romance, you have to discover and act in accordance with a lot of facts and principles. You must think and act rationally. If you choose a lover irrationally, or treat your lover irrationally, then your love life will be doomed. I'm sure you all know of people who approach relationships irrationally—and what the results are.

The Objectivist ethics recognizes that reason is our basic means of living and achieving happiness. Thus, it upholds reason as our guide in *all* areas of life: material, spiritual, personal, social, sexual, professional, recreational—you name it.

Now, what about emotions? Where do they fit into the picture?

The Objectivist ethics recognizes and upholds the crucial role of emotions in human life and happiness. Emotions are our psychological means of enjoying life—which is the whole purpose of living. But, toward that end, it is important to treat emotions for what they *are* and not to expect them to be what they are *not*.

What exactly are emotions? They are automatic consequences of our *value judgments*. They arise from our *evaluations* of the things, people, and events in our lives. For instance, if you apply for a job that you consider ideal for your career path, and you get it, you will experience positive, joyful emotions. If you don't get it, you will experience feelings of frustration or disappointment. Similarly, if you have not seen your good friend for a long time and you run into him in a restaurant, you will be thrilled to see him. If, however, he informs you that he has joined the Church of Scientology, you will become highly upset. If he later tells you he was kidding, you will feel somewhat relieved. Likewise, if your favorite team wins a big game, you will react one way. If your team loses, you will react another way—especially if you bet a lot of money on the game.

Your emotions reflect what is important to you; they are, as Rand put it, “lightning-like estimates of the things around you, calculated according to your values.” As such, they are *crucial* to your life. If you did not experience the emotion of desire, you would have no motivation to take any actions at all—and you would soon die. If you never experienced joy, you would have no reason to remain alive; a life devoid of joy is not a life worth living. We *need* emotions.

But emotions are not our means of knowledge. They cannot tell us which berries are edible or how to build a hut, how to perform heart surgery or how to make an iPod, who is honest or who has a right to do what, what to do about terrorism or what will make us happy. Only reason can tell us such things.

Thus, rational egoism holds that we should respect each of our mental faculties for what it *is*. Unlike emotionalist moralities—which treat emotions as if they can tell us what is true and what is good and what is right—the Objectivist morality recognizes emotions for exactly what they are and treats them accordingly. To expect emotions to be what they are not—or to do what they cannot—is to misuse them. Just as we do not call child-abusers “pro-child,” so we should not call emotion-abusers “pro-emotion.” They are not.

The Objectivist ethics *is* pro-emotion—and it is the only moral code that is so. It is both 100 percent pro-reason—and 100 percent pro-emotion. It calls for the proper use of each mental faculty at all times on the grounds that human life and happiness *depend* on their proper use.

Reason is our only means of knowledge—and thus our basic means of living. Emotions are automatic consequences of our value judgments—and thus our psychological means of enjoying life. Properly understood, reason and emotions are not warring aspects of human nature; rather, they are a harmonious, life-serving team.

The Objectivist ethics holds that you should pursue your life-serving values with the *whole* of your life in mind, including all of your needs—physical, intellectual, and emotional—over your entire life span. Your basic means of doing so is reason.

Thus, egoism does *not* call for “doing whatever one pleases” or “doing whatever one feels like doing” or “stabbing others in the back to get what one wants.” Those are caricatures of egoism perpetrated by pushers of altruism who seek to equate egoism with hedonism, subjectivism, and predation. Again, don't be duped! Egoism is *not* hedonism; it does not say: “Do whatever gives you *pleasure* regardless of its effects on your life.” Egoism is *not* subjectivism; it does not say: “Do whatever you *feel* like doing regardless of the consequences.” And egoism is *not* predation; it not only denies that you *should* achieve values by abusing others; it fundamentally denies that you even *can* achieve life-serving values through dishonesty, injustice, or coercion.

Egoism does not hold pleasure or feelings or conquest as the standard of value. It holds *life* as the standard of value—and reason as your basic means of living. Thus, an egoist strives always to act in his long-term best interest—as judged by his use of reason. In other words, an egoist is *rationally goal-oriented*, which brings us to another key aspect of Rand's morality: the value of *purpose*.

A purpose is a conscious, intentional goal. A person acting purposefully is *after* something—as against meandering or wandering aimlessly. The rational pursuit of life-serving goals is the essence of good living; purpose is a hallmark of self-interest.

If we want to make the most of our days and years—if we want to be *fully* selfish—we have to be consciously goal-directed in every area of our life where choice applies. For instance, we have to choose a career that we will love. We have to think rationally about how to succeed in it. We need to plan long range and work hard to achieve excellence and happiness in our chosen field. We also have to choose and pursue interesting hobbies and recreational activities that will bring us great joy—whether making music or riding horses or surfing or blogging or the like. And, as mentioned earlier, we have to pursue friendships and romance. Such purposes are essential to a life of happiness.

Our purposes in life, according to the Objectivist ethics, are what make life *meaningful*. They are what fill our lives with intensity and subtlety and joy. They are the stuff of good living. And if our purposes are to serve their purpose, they must be chosen and pursued *rationally*. Reason and purpose go hand in hand. Having rational purposes is essential to our life and happiness.

Another value Rand identified as crucial to human life and happiness is *self-esteem*—the conviction that one is able to live and worthy of happiness. I won't say much about this, since it is a relatively obvious requirement of life and happiness. Suffice it here to say that we are not born with self-esteem; we have to *earn* it. And the only way to earn it is by thinking rationally and acting purposefully.

These three values—reason, purpose, and self-esteem—are, as Rand put it, “the three values which, together, are the means to and the realization of one's ultimate value, one's own life.”¹⁰ To live as human beings we have to think (reason); we have to choose and pursue life-promoting goals (purpose); and we have to achieve and maintain the conviction that we are able to live and worthy of happiness (self-esteem). All three are necessary for success in each area of our life.

Building on these basic values, let's turn to some key *social* principles Ayn Rand identified. We will look first at the Objectivist principle of *justice*.

“Justice,” writes Rand, “is the recognition of the fact that you cannot fake the character of men as you cannot fake the character of nature. . . .”¹¹ Because people have free will, a person's character is what he chooses to make it. We can either recognize this fact or fail to do so—but, either way, the fact remains. A person has the character he has; he is responsible for it; and his character, whether good or bad, can affect our life accordingly. A person of *good* character can generate good ideas, create life-serving products, provide friendship or romance, become an honest politician, or in some other way have a positive impact on our life. A person of *bad* character can generate evil ideas, destroy life-serving values, deceive us, assault us, steal our property, push for life-thwarting laws, or even murder us.

Justice is the virtue of judging people rationally—according to the available and relevant *facts*—and treating them accordingly—as they *deserve* to be treated. This is the basic principle of selfish human interaction. In order to live, to protect our rights, and to achieve happiness, we have to *judge* people. “The precept: ‘Judge not, that ye be not judged,’” writes Ayn Rand, “is an abdication of moral responsibility. . . . The moral principle to adopt in this issue, is: ‘Judge, and be prepared to be judged.’” Quoting Rand further:

Nothing can corrupt and disintegrate a culture or a man's character as thoroughly as does the precept of *moral agnosticism*, the idea that one must never pass moral judgment on others, that one must be morally tolerant of anything, that the good consists of never distinguishing good from evil.

It is obvious who profits and who loses by such a precept. It is not justice or equal treatment that you grant to men when you abstain equally from praising men's virtues and from condemning men's vices. When your impartial attitude declares, in effect, that neither the good nor the evil may expect anything from you—whom do you betray and whom do you encourage?¹²

Only one kind of person has anything to fear from moral judgment; the rest of us can only benefit from it. Being just consists in acknowledging this fact and acting accordingly.

To live successfully, happily, and freely, we have to judge our friends, our parents, our employers and employees, our professors, and our politicians. We have to judge *everyone* who has an impact on our life. We have to judge them rationally—and treat them accordingly.

In a sense, this is so obvious that it seems silly to have to say it. But given the commonly accepted views on morality—from the biblical tenet: “Judge not that ye be not judged” to the relativist mantra: “Who are you to judge?”—not only does it have to be mentioned; it has to be stressed. *Judging people rationally and treating them accordingly is a requirement of human life.*

While those who do not care about human life might be indifferent to this fact, those of us who want to live need to take it very seriously. We need to uphold and advocate the principle of justice, and not only when it comes to condemning those who are evil, but also, and more importantly, when it comes to praising, rewarding, and defending those who are good—those who think rationally and produce the values on which human life depends: scientists who discover the laws of nature, inventors who create new life-promoting devices and medicines, businessmen who produce and market life-promoting goods and services, artists who create spiritual values that fuel our souls and bring us joy, and so on. Justice demands that we recognize such people as *good*—good *because* they self-interestedly use reason and produce life-serving values.

By studying Ayn Rand's ethics—in addition to learning a great deal more about her ideas on reason, purpose, self-esteem, and justice—you will discover the objective meaning and selfish necessity of the virtues of honesty, integrity, productiveness, and pride. In each case, Rand points to the facts that give rise to the need of such virtues; she shows why your life and happiness depend on

them; and she provides an integrated philosophical system for guiding your actions accordingly.

I've merely indicated the kind of guidance offered by egoism. But in light of what we've seen so far, consider for a moment how it compares to the guidance offered by altruism. Given the many values on which human life and happiness depend—from material values, such as food, shelter, clothing, medical care, automobiles, and computers; to spiritual values, such as knowledge, self-esteem, art, friendship, and romantic love—we need a great deal of guidance in making choices and taking actions. We need moral principles that are conducive to the goal of living fully and happily over the course of years and decades. In answer to this need, egoism provides a whole system of integrated, noncontradictory principles, the sole purpose of which is to teach us how to live and enjoy life. In answer to this same need, altruism says: Don't be selfish; sacrifice your values; give up your dreams.

If we want to live and be happy, only one of these moralities will do.

And just as egoism is the only morality that provides proper guidance for our personal lives, so it is the only morality that provides a proper foundation for a civilized society. Let us turn briefly to the politics implied by egoism.

Like every ethical code, egoism has definite political implications. Just as the morality of self-sacrifice lays the groundwork for a particular kind of political system—one in which the government forces people to sacrifice (e.g., socialism, communism, fascism, theocracy)—so the morality of self-interest lays the groundwork for a certain kind of political system—one in which the government plays an entirely different role.

The basic question in politics is: What are the requirements of human life in a social context? What, in principle, must people do—or refrain from doing—in order to live together in a civilized manner? Here, Ayn Rand makes another crucial identification. Since we need to think rationally and act accordingly in order to live, we need to be *able* to act on our judgment. The only thing that can stop us from acting on our judgment is other people. And the only way they can stop us is by means of *physical force*. Quoting Rand:

It is only by means of physical force that one man can deprive another of his life, or enslave him, or rob him, or prevent him from pursuing his own goals, or compel him to act against his own rational judgment.

The precondition of a civilized society is the barring of physical force from social relationships—thus establishing the principle that if men wish to deal with one another, they may do so only by means of *reason*: by discussion, persuasion and voluntary, uncoerced agreement.¹³

If someone puts a gun to your head and tells you what to do, you cannot act on your judgment. The threat of death makes your judgment irrelevant; you now have to act on the gunman's judgment. If he says, "Give me your wallet," you have to give him your wallet. If he says, "Take off your clothes," you have to do that. If he says, "Don't object to my decrees," you must not object. You have to do whatever he says, or you'll get shot in the head. Your own judgment—your basic means of survival—has been overridden and is now useless.

And it makes no difference whether the gunman is a lone thug, or a group of thugs, or the KGB, or the senators and president of our rapidly deteriorating America. Whenever and to whatever extent physical force is used against you or me or anyone, the victim cannot act on his judgment, his basic means of living; thus, he cannot live fully as a human being. This is why rational egoism holds that the initiation of force against people is *evil*. It is evil because it is *antilife*.

On the basis of this identification, Rand established the objective case for individual rights. Since physical force used against a person is factually contrary to the requirements of his life—and since life *is* the standard of value—we need a moral principle to protect us from those who attempt to use force against us. That principle involves the concept of *rights*. Quoting Rand:

"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 a man and the legal code of a society, between ethics and politics. *Individual rights are the means of subordinating society to moral law. . . .*

A "right" is a moral principle defining and sanctioning a man's freedom of action in a social context.¹⁴

The key word here is *action*. Just as life is the standard of value and requires *goal-directed action*, so the *right* to life is the basic right and pertains to *freedom of action*. The right to life is the right to act as one's life requires—which means, according to one's basic means of survival—which means, on the judgment of one's own mind.

All other rights are derivatives of this fundamental right: The right to *liberty* is the right to be free from coercive interference by others. The right to *property* is the right to keep, use, and dispose of the product of one's effort. The right to the *pursuit of happiness* is the right to seek the goals and values of

one's choice. The right to *freedom of speech* is the right to express one's views regardless of what others think of them.

And because a right is a sanction to action, it is *not* a sanction to be given goods or services. There can be no such thing as a "right" to be given goods or services. If a person had a "right" to be given food, or a house, or medical care, or an education, what would this imply with regard to other people? It would imply that others have to be *forced* to provide him with these goods or services. It would imply that *some* people must produce while others dispose of their product. As Rand put it: "The man who produces while others dispose of his product is a slave."

If some men are entitled by right to the products of the work of others, it means that those others are deprived of rights and condemned to slave labor. Any alleged "right" of one man which necessitates the violation of the rights of another, is not and cannot be a right. No man can have a right to impose an unchosen obligation, an unwarranted duty or an involuntary servitude on another man. There can be no such thing as "*the right to enslave*."¹⁵

The North fought (and thankfully won) a legitimate war against the South on the principle that there can be no right to enslave. Rand made explicit the fundamental reason this principle is *true*. The reason each individual's life should *legally* belong to him is that each individual's life does in *factmorally* belong to him. Each individual is morally an end in himself—not a means to the ends of others. Each individual has a moral right to act on his own judgment for his own sake—and to keep, use, and dispose of the product of his effort—so long as he respects the same right of others.

The Objectivist ethics recognizes that to live as civilized beings—rather than as masters and slaves—we need a social system that protects each individual's rights to his life, liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness. The only social system that does so—consistently and on principle—is *laissez-faire capitalism*. Quoting Rand:

[Laissez-faire capitalism] is a system where men deal with one another, not as victims and executioners, nor as masters and slaves, but as *traders*, by free, voluntary exchange to mutual benefit. It is a system where no man may obtain any values from others by resorting to physical force, and *no man may initiate the use of physical force against others*.¹⁶

The only function of the government, in such a society, is the task of protecting man's rights, *i.e.*, the task of protecting him from physical force;

the government acts as the agent of man's right of self-defense, and may use force only in retaliation and only against those who initiate its use.¹⁷

The citizens of a laissez-faire society delegate the use of retaliatory force to the government and thus make domestic peace possible.

Of course, in an emergency situation, or when the police are not available, or when there is no time to rely on the government, citizens are morally and legally justified in using retaliatory force as necessary. (If someone comes running at you with a bowie knife, you are morally and legally justified in shooting him.) But in order to live together as civilized beings, rather than as feuding hillbillies, people must leave such force to the government whenever possible. As Rand put it, "The government is the means of placing the retaliatory use of force under *objective control*."¹⁸

In a capitalist society, if someone physically harms a person or damages his property or threatens to do either—and if this can be demonstrated by means of evidence—then the victim has grounds for legal recourse and, when appropriate, compensation. For instance, if someone defrauds a man, or threatens to murder him, or dumps trash in his yard, or poisons his water supply, or infringes on his patent—or in any other way causes him or his property specific harm—then the perpetrator has violated the man's rights. And if the man (or an agent on his behalf) can demonstrate that the perpetrator has done so, then he has a case against the rights violator and can seek justice in a court of law.

Properly understood, capitalism is all about enabling people to act on their own judgment, and to keep, use, and dispose of the product of their effort. It is all about stopping people from physically harming others or their property. It is all about recognizing and respecting individual rights. In other words, it is all about the requirements of human life in a social context.

Capitalism is the only social system that permits everyone to act fully according to his own judgment and thus to live fully as a human being. No other social system on earth does this. Thus, if human life is the standard of moral value, capitalism is the only moral social system.

Whereas rational egoism guides our choices and actions in pursuit of our life-serving goals and long-term happiness, laissez-faire capitalism protects individual rights by banning the initiation of physical force from social relationships. The two go hand in hand. Egoism makes human *existence* possible; capitalism makes human *coexistence* possible. Quoting Ayn Rand: "What greater virtue can one ascribe to a social system than the fact that it leaves no possibility for any man to serve his own interests by enslaving other

men? What nobler system could be desired by anyone whose goal is man's well-being?"¹⁹

Rand has much more to say about individual rights and capitalism; I have just touched on her revolutionary principles in this regard. *Atlas Shrugged* is a hymn to capitalism and the moral foundations on which it depends. And Rand's book *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* is a series of essays demonstrating the vital nature of the social system, and blasting common fallacies about it. For a good understanding of the principles of capitalism, I highly recommend both books.

Reflecting on what we've discussed so far, Rand's morality of selfishness holds that, in order to live as human beings, we must pursue our life-serving values and respect the rights of others to do the same. Put negatively: We must neither sacrifice ourselves to others—nor sacrifice others to ourselves. One of the heroes in *Atlas Shrugged* put it in the form of an oath: "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." That is an oath we can all live by. But to do so, we have to repudiate the morality of sacrifice.

Rand's morality of selfishness is all about living and loving life. It is the morality of pursuing values and refusing to surrender a greater value for a lesser one. It is the morality of *non-sacrifice*. There is no reason to act in a self-sacrificial manner, which is why no one has ever given a reason to do so. Nor is there any rational justification for sacrificing others, which is why no one has ever offered one of these, either. But there *is* a reason to act in a self-interested manner: Your life and happiness depend on it.

Since we necessarily operate on a code of values of some kind while making choices in life—since morality *is* inescapable—here is the alternative that we all face in this regard: We can passively accept a morality through social osmosis—or we can think the matter through for ourselves and decide what makes sense given the observable facts. We can accept appeals to authority, tradition, popular opinion, intimidation, and the like—or we can insist on *reasons* in support of the morality we choose to accept. In other words, we can rely on the views and opinions of others—or we can rely on the judgment of our own mind.

This brings us to the final point I want to make tonight—and to what I regard as the single most important aspect of the Objectivist ethics: the principle that you should rely on your own observations and your own use of logic, the principle that you should not accept ideas just because others accept them, the principle that you should think for yourself.

Since your mind is your only means of knowledge and your basic means of achieving your goals and values, rational egoism says that—if you want to live and be happy—you must *never* surrender your mind. You must never sacrifice your judgment to anyone or anything—neither to faith, nor feelings, nor friends, nor parents, nor professors, nor Ayn Rand. And no one is more adamant about this than Rand. As she put it, “The most selfish of all things is the independent mind that recognizes no authority higher than its own and no value higher than its judgment of truth.”²⁰

This is the Objectivist principle of *independence*. An independent thinker relies on his *own* judgment to determine what is true or false, good or bad, right or wrong. He does not turn to others to see what he should believe or value. He may learn from others—if they are rational and have something to teach him. He may take their advice—if it makes sense to him. And he may listen to their arguments—so long as they present evidence for their claims and proceed logically. But he always makes the final judgment by means of his own thinking. In regard to any important issue, he asks himself: “What are the facts? What does the evidence say? What do *I* think?” His primary orientation is not toward other people—not toward his peers or his parents or his professors—but toward reality. And his means of assessing reality is his own use of reason.

Because rational egoism recognizes that the individual's mind is his basic means of living, it holds rational, *independent* thinking as the essence of being moral. Unlike altruism, it does not call for you to accept its principles on faith or because others say so. Rational egoism is not a dogma. It is not a set of commandments or “categorical imperatives” from on high for you to obey.

In one of Rand's essays, she tells a story of an old black woman who, in answer to a man who was telling her that she's *got to* do something or other, says, “Mister, there's nothing I've *got to* do except die.”²¹ Rational egoism does not say that anyone has *got to* do anything. It says only that *if* you want to live and achieve happiness—then you must observe facts, use your mind, pursue your goals, not sacrifice greater values for the sake of lesser ones, uphold the principle of individual rights, and so on. That is not dogma. It is logic. It is recognition of the law of cause and effect.

And just as Rand's ethics is not dogmatic—so it is not relativistic. It is *absolute*. It is absolute because it is based on and derived from reality—from observable facts, from the laws of nature, from the requirements of human life.

Rand exposed the false alternative of dogmatism vs. relativism. In the light of her philosophy, we are no longer faced with the ugly option of Jerry Falwell's morality vs. Jerry Springer's—or that of Bill Bennett vs. that of Bill

Clinton. We now know of an *objective* ethics: one that is secular, observation-based, demonstrably true—and, best of all, *good* for you.

If you want to live a wonderful, value-laden life, you need a morality that supports that goal and guides you to act accordingly. You need a morality that upholds the value of rational, self-interested, purposeful action. Rational egoism is the only morality that does so. If you want to live in a society in which you are free to lead your life as you see fit—a society in which no one, including the government, may force you to act against your own judgment—you need a morality that is conducive to that goal. You need a morality that provides a foundation for the principle of individual rights. The only morality that does so is the Objectivist ethics.

The moral code you accept underlies and shapes everything you do in life. It determines whether you live a richly meaningful, truly happy life—or something less. And it determines whether you advocate a fully free, civilized society—or some other kind of society. I have given you just a brief sketch of Rand's ethics. There is a great deal more to it. Hopefully, I have inspired you to look further into the subject on your own.

I urge you to take a closer look at the morality that says you should live your life to the fullest and achieve the greatest happiness possible. Use your own judgment in assessing it. See if it makes sense to you. Read *Atlas Shrugged*, which is a spellbinding mystery at the heart of which is the conflict between altruism and egoism. Not only will you discover what happened to the earlier-mentioned disappearing producers; you'll also see Ayn Rand's ethics dramatized in ways that today will cause a feeling of *déjà vu*. Or, for a nonfiction introduction to rational egoism, read Rand's book *The Virtue of Selfishness*, which is a series of essays elaborating the groundbreaking principles of the Objectivist ethics—or my book *Loving Life: The Morality of Self-Interest and the Facts that Support It*, which is a systematic introduction to the ethics.

If you are not rationally convinced by the arguments, then do not accept them. To sacrifice your own judgment would be the most selfless thing you could do. I would never advocate such a thing—and neither would Ayn Rand. You should accept only those ideas that make sense to you.

But if you read up on this issue and *are* convinced—as I think you will be—then you can start living your life fully in accordance with the only moral code that is conducive to that goal: rational egoism—the morality Ayn Rand so appropriately called “The Morality of Life.”

5

Ayn Rand's Theory of Rights: The Moral Foundation of a Free Society

What are rights? Where do they come from? One's answers to these questions determine whether one is capable of defending a free society. If one does not know the nature and source of rights, one cannot know whether rights are real or imagined. And if rights are not real, there is no foundation for freedom; governments and societies may do as they please.

The traditional answers to the above questions fall into three categories: (1) Rights are *moral* laws specifying what a person *should* be free to do, and they come from *God*. (2) Rights are *political* laws specifying what a person *is* free to do, and they are created by *governments*. (3) Rights are *moral* laws specifying what a person *should* be free to do, and they are *inherent in man's nature*. But each of these theories is demonstrably false, and a person or society attempting to defend freedom on such grounds will ultimately fail—as Americans are failing today.

Ayn Rand's answers to the above questions, however, are demonstrably true—and those who come to understand her answers thereby equip themselves to defend freedom on solid, philosophic ground.

Toward understanding Rand's theory of rights and its crucial value in the cause of freedom, let us begin with a brief overview of the traditional theories and their essential deficiencies. Then we will turn to Rand's theory, see how it solves the various problems left unsolved by the other theories, and discover how it grounds rights in observable facts.

Traditional Theories of Rights and Why They Are Wrong

God-Given Rights

The idea that rights come from God is particularly popular among conservatives and Republicans. According to this theory, an all-powerful, infallible, all-good being makes moral law and gives man rights; thus rights exist prior to and apart from any man-made law and cannot be granted or repealed by government. As Sarah Palin puts it: “The Constitution didn’t give us our rights. Our rights came from God, and they’re inalienable. The Constitution created a national government to protect our God-given, unalienable rights.”¹ Rush Limbaugh agrees: “You have individual rights, as granted by God, who created you, and our founding documents enshrine them: Life, liberty, pursuit of happiness. Those rights don’t come from other men or governments. . . . They come from our Creator.”² Newt Gingrich challenges anyone to identify another possible source of inalienable rights: “If you are not endowed by your Creator with certain inalienable rights where do they come from?”³ And James Dobson warns: “If you say that rights do not come from God, and they come from the state, they can be taken away.”⁴

But the theory that rights come from God is hopeless. To begin with, there is no evidence for the existence of such a being, much less for the existence of rights that somehow emanate from his will. Whether one believes in God is beside the point here. Either way, the fact remains that there is no evidence for God’s existence, which is why it is supposed to be accepted on faith—in the *absence* of evidence. Rights in support of which there is no evidence are not rights but fantasies.

Further, what would it mean for an all-powerful, infallible, and all-good being to give man rights? Surely, if God existed and possessed such qualities, he could at any time repeal those rights and kill people at will (as he does in the stories of the Old Testament) or command or permit certain people to kill, enslave, or rape others (as he does in the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). And if God—who is supposed to be infallible, all good, and the maker of moral law—did commit or permit such acts, then such acts would, by definition, be morally good. “Rights” that can be revoked are not rights but permissions. And a “theory” of rights that permits murder, enslavement, and rape is not a theory of rights but a mockery of them.

The supposition that rights come from God entails additional problems (e.g., which “God”—Yahweh? Brahman? Allah?), but the foregoing flaws are sufficient to disqualify it. The “theory” amounts not to a rational theory about a demonstrable source of inalienable rights, but to a fantasy about supernatural permissions.

To say that rights come from God is to say that there is no evidence in support of their existence, that there is no basis for them in perceptual reality, that they are not rationally provable. This is not a sound theory of rights; it cannot serve as a solid foundation on which to advocate or defend liberty.

Government-Granted Rights

Leftists and modern “liberals” cash in on this apparent absence of evidence. There is no such thing as rights, they say, at least not in the sense of absolute moral prerogatives to live one’s own life, by one’s own judgment, in pursuit of one’s own happiness. Rights, say the left, do not precede political laws but *follow* from them: Governments create laws, and the laws, in turn, dictate the rights and non-rights of the people who live under those governments. “Absent a government,” writes E. J. Dionne, “there are no rights.”⁵ Stephen Holmes and Cass Sunstein elaborate: “[R]ights are powers granted by the political community”; thus, “an interest qualifies as a right when an effective legal system treats it as such by using collective resources to defend it.” Holmes and Sunstein conclude by favorably quoting Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham, who famously said a “right” is a “child of the law”⁶ and thus that “imprescriptible rights” (i.e., inalienable rights) are “rhetorical nonsense, nonsense upon stilts.”⁷

Rights, on this account, are governmental decrees: If the government says that you have a right to take a particular action (or to be provided with a particular good or service), then you do; if the government says you don’t, then you don’t.

But this notion of rights entails a fundamental contradiction. The idea that rights are permissions granted by a government (or a legal system or a political community or the like) contradicts the very *purpose* of the concept of rights. Rights are fundamentally a *moral* concept; they pertain to that which a person *should* be free to do. The essential function of the concept is to specify those actions that no one—including government—can *morally* preclude one from taking. Whether rights actually exist is beside the point here. The purpose of the concept—its function in thought and communication—is to identify the actions (real or imagined) that a person morally must be free to take and to

distinguish them from the actions that he morally may be prohibited from taking. To say that rights are governmental decrees is to imply, among other absurdities, that Islamic theocracies do nothing wrong in stoning adulterous women or hanging homosexuals—and that the Nazis did nothing wrong in torturing and killing millions of Jews—because, well, the governments involved deem such people to be right-less.

“Rights” that can be granted or nullified by governments are not rights but political policies (or laws), and they logically should be identified as such. To call them “rights” is to abuse language.⁸

The notion that governments create rights is not a viable foundation on which to advocate or defend liberty.

Natural Rights

Well aware of the dangers of governments dictating what “rights” people have and have not, Enlightenment thinkers, classical liberals, and the Founding Fathers sought to ground rights in *nature*. Rights, they posited, are born not of man-made law but of *natural law*—specifically, natural *moral* law: natural law concerning how people should and should not act. As John Locke put it, there is “a law of nature,” and this law “teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions.”⁹ The Founders agreed. “Man,” wrote Thomas Jefferson, is “endowed by nature with rights,”¹⁰ and these rights are a matter of “moral law”;¹¹ thus they are “inherent,” “inalienable,” and “unchangeable.”¹² A free people claim “their rights as derived from the laws of nature, and not as the gift of their chief magistrate.”¹³

This is the view held by many “constitutional conservatives,” Tea Partiers, and others who admirably seek to defend freedom. But this theory does not withstand scrutiny, either.

The “natural” law to which Locke, Jefferson, and the other Enlightenment thinkers refer is not natural law but “supernatural” law. It comes not from nature but from “God.” As Locke put it in the extended version of the passage quoted above: There is a “law of nature,” and this law

teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions: for men being all the workmanship of one omnipotent, and infinitely wise maker; all the servants of one sovereign master, sent into

the world by his order, and about his business; they are his property, whose workmanship they are, made to last during his, not one another's pleasure.¹⁴

In other words, the "law of nature" that gives rise to man's rights is the law of God: *He* ordains that we are *his* property and must serve *his* purposes; thus, men may not make us serve *their* purposes.¹⁵

Jefferson and the other Founders held essentially the same view. "The moral law of our nature," wrote Jefferson, is "the moral law to which man has been subjected by his Creator."¹⁶

Under the law of nature, all men are born free, every one comes into the world with a right to his own person, which includes the liberty of moving and using it at his own will. This is what is called personal liberty, and is given him by the Author of nature.¹⁷

Alexander Hamilton wrote:

Good and wise men, in all ages . . . have supposed that the deity, from the relations we stand in to himself and to each other, has constituted an eternal and immutable law, which is indispensably obligatory upon all mankind, prior to any human institution whatever. This is what is called the law of nature. . . . Upon this law depend the natural rights of mankind.¹⁸

George Mason wrote: "The laws of nature are the laws of God, Whose authority can be superseded by no power on earth."¹⁹ And John Adams wrote that man possesses rights "antecedent to all earthly government—Rights, that cannot be repealed or restrained by human laws—Rights, derived from the great Legislator of the universe."²⁰

This is the generally accepted view of the source and meaning of "natural" rights. But the idea that rights come from a law of nature created by God is beset with all the same problems as the idea that rights come from God—because it is the same idea, albeit with God's involvement one step removed.

If natural rights come from God, then proof of their existence depends on proof of God's existence—and further, on proof that God somehow makes rights exist and cannot repeal them. But, again, there is no evidence for the existence of God, much less for the existence of natural moral laws or inalienable rights that somehow emanate from his will.

To accept the existence of "God" is ultimately to accept it on *faith*; accordingly, to accept the idea that "rights" somehow "come from God" is to rest one's case for rights on faith. This will not do. As Ayn Rand observed:

[T]o rest one's case on *faith* means to concede . . . that one has no rational arguments to offer . . . that there are no rational arguments to support the American system, no rational justification for freedom, justice, property, individual rights, that these rest on a mystic revelation and can be accepted only *on faith*—that in reason and logic the enemy is right.²¹

This is undeniably true.

With all due respect to Locke and the Founders (and the respect due is *monumental*), the idea that rights come from God or from a law of nature created by God not only fails to meet the requirement of demonstrability; it also concedes that reason and logic are on the side of tyrants.

Neither the notion that rights come from God—nor the notion that they come from government—nor the notion that they come from a law of nature created by God is viable. None of these theories identifies a demonstrable, observation-based source for rights. None explains *rationally* why people should be free to live (the right to *life*); to act on their own judgment, free of coercion (*liberty*); to keep, use, and dispose of the product of their effort (*property*); and to pursue the goals and values of their own choosing (*the pursuit of happiness*). None supplies an objective foundation for freedom.

In the absence of demonstrable proof of the existence of rights, proponents of rights have nothing to support their claims—and the modern intellectuals know it. As philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre bluntly and mockingly puts it:

[T]hose rights which are alleged to belong to human beings as such and which are cited as a reason for holding that people ought not to be interfered with in their pursuit of life, liberty and happiness. . . . the rights which are spoken of in the eighteenth century as natural rights or as the rights of man. . . . there are no such rights, and belief in them is one with belief in witches and unicorns.

The best reason for asserting so bluntly that there are no such rights is indeed of precisely the same type as the best reason which we possess for asserting that there are no witches and the best reason which we possess for asserting that there are no unicorns: every attempt to give good reasons for believing that there *are* such rights has failed.²²

If we want to defend rights, we need to be able to do more than just *say* that we have them. We need to be able *rationally* to explain where rights come from and why we have them. Toward that end, we need a rational account of natural moral law—moral law derived not from “super-nature” but from

actual nature—moral law not merely asserted but proven—proven by means of evidence and logic.

Ayn Rand provided just that.

Like Locke and the Founders, Rand held that individuals have a right to life, liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness. But she arrived at this conclusion in a very different manner than did they or any other natural rights advocates. Whereas traditional conceptions of rights are based (ultimately) on presumptions of God, Rand's conception is rooted in observations of fact. Her theory of rights derives from her more fundamental theory of morality—which derives from her observations of reality, of the nature of values, and of the requirements of life. Thus, to understand Rand's theory of rights, we must begin with a brief survey of her theory of morality and the observable facts that give rise to it.

Ayn Rand's Observation-Based Morality

Our purpose here is not to flesh out Rand's entire moral theory, which would require a book, but rather to examine certain aspects of her ethics that are essential to understanding her theory of rights. Thus, I want to stress that the following streamlined survey is no substitute for a thorough study of her ethics.²³

Morality or ethics, observed Rand, "is a code of values to guide man's choices and actions—the choices and actions that determine the purpose and the course of his life."²⁴ And the first step toward understanding a *code* of values, she reasoned, is to understand the *nature* of values. Thus, Rand's approach to morality began not with the question: Which of the existing codes should I accept?—but rather with the questions: "What are *values*? Why does man need them?"²⁵ These questions directed her thinking away from the established views and toward the facts of reality.

Looking at reality, Rand observed that a "value" is "that which one acts to gain and/or keep."²⁶ We can see the truth of this all around us: People act to gain and keep money; they value money. Students act to gain and keep good grades; they value good grades. Churchgoers act to gain or keep a relationship with "God"; they value that relationship. People act to develop fulfilling careers, to establish and maintain romantic relationships, to gain and keep freedom, and so on. The things one acts to gain or keep are one's values. And the key word here is: *acts*. Values are objects of *actions*. (Please take special note of this, as it is a crucial aspect of Rand's derivation of moral

principles—including the principle of rights. We will observe the relationship of actions and values repeatedly and with mounting significance throughout the remainder of this essay.)

Looking at reality, Rand further saw that this phenomenon involves not only human beings but *all* living things—and *only* living things. We can see this: Trees, tigers, and people take actions toward goals. Rocks, rivers, and hammers do not. Trees, for example, extend their roots into the ground and their branches and leaves toward the sky; they value minerals, water, and sunlight. Tigers hunt antelope and nap under trees; they value meat and shade. This pattern continues throughout the plant and animal kingdom: *All living things take self-generated, goal-directed action.*

Nonliving things, on the other hand, take no such action. They can be moved, but they cannot act—not in the self-generated, goal-directed sense that living things do. A rock just remains wherever it is unless some outside force, such as a wave or a hammer, hits and moves it. A river flows, but its motion is not self-generated; water moves only by means of some outside force—in this case, the gravitational pull of the earth. And a hammer does not, by itself, smash rocks or drive nails; it does not generate its own action.

Rand observed that the reason inanimate objects do not act in the same sense that living things do is that they have no needs and therefore no corresponding means of action. Only living organisms have needs, goals, or values; accordingly, only they have a means of acting toward such ends.

Having clarified that a value is that which one acts to gain or keep—and that only living things pursue values—Rand proceeded to ask: *Why* do living things seek values? What are values *for*? “The concept ‘value’ is not a primary,” Rand observed. “It presupposes an answer to the question: of value to *whom* and for *what*? It presupposes an entity capable of acting to achieve a goal in the face of an alternative.” A tree faces the alternative of reaching water and sunlight—or not. A tiger faces the alternative of catching and keeping its prey—or not. And a person faces the alternative of achieving *his* goals—or not. The objects a living thing acts to gain or keep are *its* values—values *to it*.

That answers the question: “to whom?” But the question “for what?” remains.

What *difference* does it make whether an organism achieves its goals? What happens if it succeeds? What happens if it fails? What *ultimately* is at stake? Here is Rand’s key passage on the issue:

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 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.²⁷

The reason why living things need values is: to *live*. The answer to the question “for *what?*” is: for *life*. Life is conditional: If a living thing takes the actions necessary to remain alive, it remains alive; if, for whatever reason, it fails to take those actions, it dies. And human beings are no exception to this principle. People need values for the same reason plants and animals do: in order to sustain and further their life.

On the basis of such observations, Rand discovered that an organism's life is its ultimate value and thus its *standard* of value—the standard by which all of its other values and actions are to be evaluated. A tree's standard of value is the requirements of its life as set by *its* nature. A tiger's standard of value is the requirements of its life as set by *its* nature. And a man's standard of value is the requirements of his life as set by *his* nature.

Now, our purpose here is not to examine every nuance of the proof that an organism's life is its standard of value, nor to address every objection that might be raised to the idea.²⁸ Rather, our purpose is to survey the *essential* facts that give rise to the principle, to see generally how they anchor it in perceptual reality, and ultimately to see how this principle underlies and gives rise to the principle of rights. Toward that end, we will focus on a few crucial components.

By pursuing the question “Why does man need values?” Rand kept her thinking *fact-oriented*. If man needs values, then the *reason* he needs them will go a long way toward establishing which values are legitimate and which are not. If man doesn't need values, well, then, he doesn't need them—and there is no point in pursuing the issue at all.²⁹ Rand discovered that man *does* need values, and the reason he needs them is in order to *live*. Moral values—values in the realm of human *choice*—are facts in relation to the requirements of man's life.

Because we possess free will, we choose our values; thus, we *can* choose either objectively legitimate, life-serving values (e.g., to pursue a wonderful career, to remain with a worthy spouse, to establish and maintain a civilized society)—or objectively illegitimate, life-thwarting values (e.g., to shoot heroin, to stay with an abusive spouse, or to advocate communism or sharia). But whatever our choices, these facts remain: The only reason we *can* pursue

values is because we are alive, and the only reason we *need* to pursue values is in order to live. This observation-based, two-pronged principle is essential to understanding how morality—and, in turn, the principle of rights—is grounded in the immutable facts of reality: Only life makes values *possible*, and only life makes values *necessary*. Or: We have to *be alive* in order to pursue values, and we have to pursue values in order to *stay alive*.

These are metaphysically given facts—facts about the fundamental nature of reality, about how the world is regardless of what anyone hopes, feels, prays, or chooses. And they give rise to a crucial epistemological principle—a principle pertaining to the correct and incorrect use of the concept of “value.” Quoting Rand:

Metaphysically, *life* is the only phenomenon that is an end in itself: a value gained and kept by a constant process of action. Epistemologically, the concept of “value” is genetically dependent upon and derived from the antecedent concept of “life.” To speak of “value” as apart from “life” is worse than a contradiction in terms. “It is only the concept of ‘Life’ that makes the concept of ‘Value’ possible.”³⁰

The reason that to speak of value as apart from life is worse than a contradiction in terms is that to do so is to tear the concept of value away from its conceptual foundation—the foundation on which it hierarchically depends and in relation to which it has objective meaning. Ripped away from the concept of life, the concept of value has no grounding in reality; it is severed from its factual base and thus amounts to a subjective utterance. To speak of value as apart from life is to commit what Rand called “the fallacy of concept stealing,” which consists in using a concept while ignoring or denying a more fundamental concept on which it logically depends.³¹

The concept of value is *rooted in* the concept of life. Value means “that toward which a living thing acts.” And *moral* value—value proper to human beings—means “that toward which a person acts in accordance with the requirements of human life.”

Rand further observed that because human beings are individuals—each with his own body, his own mind, his own life—this standard applies to human beings as individuals. Man’s life is the standard of moral value—and each individual’s *own* life is his *own* ultimate value. Each individual is morally an end in himself—not a means to the ends of others.³² The moral principle here is *egoism*.

Egoism is the recognition of the fact that each individual should act to promote his own life and is the proper beneficiary of his own moral action.³³

The validity of this principle is implicit in the very *nature* of values. A value is the object of an action taken by a living organism to sustain and further *its* life. Again, the fact that people can choose antilife values doesn't change the roots of the concept of value or the fact that the only demonstrably legitimate values are those that promote one's life.

Importantly, egoism (properly understood) is *not* hedonism or subjectivism; it does not hold "pleasure" or "feelings" as the standard of value. A person may find *pleasure* in actions that are not good for his life; for instance, a ballerina might enjoy eating lots of cake and ice cream, but if doing so causes her to gain too much weight, it will ruin her career as a ballerina. Likewise, a person may *feel* like doing something that is not good for his life; for instance, a salesman might feel like sleeping in one morning, but if doing so means missing a crucial meeting and losing a major customer, it is not in his best interest to do so.

Looking at reality, Rand saw that although experiencing pleasure—and, more broadly, achieving happiness—are crucial aspects of human life, they are not and cannot be the standard of moral value. "Happiness," observed Rand, "can properly be the purpose of ethics, but not the standard. The task of ethics is to define man's proper code of values and thus to give him the means of achieving happiness." She elaborated on the relationship as follows:

The maintenance of life and the pursuit of happiness are not two separate issues. To hold one's own life as one's ultimate value, and one's own happiness as one's highest purpose are two aspects of the same achievement. Existentially, the activity of pursuing rational goals is the activity of maintaining one's life; psychologically, its result, reward and concomitant is an emotional state of happiness. . . .

But the relationship of cause to effect cannot be reversed. It is only by accepting "man's life" as one's primary and by pursuing the rational values it requires that one can achieve happiness—not by taking "happiness" as some undefined, irreducible primary and then attempting to live by its guidance. If you achieve that which is the good by a rational standard of value, it will necessarily make you happy; but that which makes you happy, by some undefined emotional standard, is not necessarily the good.³⁴

On the basis of such observations, Rand arrived at and validated the dual principle that man's life is the objective standard of moral value, and the achievement of happiness is the moral purpose of each individual's life.

This brings us to the question: How can we know which actions will serve our life and happiness? What must we do to live and prosper? To answer this

question, Rand again looked at reality and formulated principles on the basis of observation.

Rand saw that man, like all living things, has a *means* of survival. Whereas plants survive by means of an automatic *vegetative* process (photosynthesis), and whereas animals survive by means of automatic *instinctive* processes (hunting, fleeing, nest-building, etc.), man survives by *volitional* means—by *choosing* to use his mind to identify and pursue the requirements of his life.

While the choice of whether to use one's mind is up to the individual (one can choose to exert mental effort or not to do so), the basic requirements of man's life are set by his nature. They are metaphysically given facts. We need food, clothing, shelter, medicine, and other material goods in order to live and prosper. We also need self-confidence, personal goals, romantic love, and other spiritual values in order to thrive. More fundamentally, we need *knowledge* of such needs and *knowledge* of how to acquire them. So the question becomes: What must we do to gain such knowledge and acquire such values?

Rand observed that first and foremost we must use *reason*, the faculty that identifies and integrates the material provided by man's senses. Reason is our means of understanding the world, ourselves, and our needs; thus, if we want to gain such understanding, we must use it; we must observe reality and think.

Man cannot survive, as animals do, by the guidance of mere percepts. A sensation of hunger will tell him that he needs food (if he has learned to identify it as "hunger"), but it will not tell him how to obtain his food and it will not tell him what food is good for him or poisonous. He cannot provide for his simplest physical needs without a process of thought. He needs a process of thought to discover how to plant and grow his food or how to make weapons for hunting. His percepts might lead him to a cave, if one is available—but to build the simplest shelter, he needs a process of thought. No percepts and no "instincts" will tell him how to light a fire, how to weave cloth, how to forge tools, how to make a wheel, how to make an airplane, how to perform an appendectomy, how to produce an electric light bulb or an electronic tube or a cyclotron or a box of matches. Yet his life depends on such knowledge—and only a volitional act of his consciousness, a process of thought, can provide it.³⁵

And reason is not only our means of gaining knowledge of our *physical* needs; it is also our means of gaining knowledge of our *spiritual* needs. It is by means of reason that we learn what self-confidence is, why we need it, and how to gain it; the importance of long-range goals, which ones will serve our life and happiness, and which ones will not; the nature of love, and how to

build and maintain a wonderful romantic relationship; and so on. We are not born with any such knowledge; if and to the extent that we gain it, we do so by means of reason.

On the basis of such observations, Rand identified reason as our fundamental means of living, our basic life-serving value, and thus our basic *moral* value. If we want to live and prosper, we must use reason: We must observe reality and think; we must integrate our observations into concepts, generalizations, and principles that correspond to reality; and we must act accordingly.

Here again is the *action* thread, but now with another element folded in: Whereas all living things must act in order to live, human beings must act *rationally*. This does not mean we must always be correct or never make errors—that would be an impossible standard. We are neither omniscient nor infallible; our knowledge is limited to whatever we have learned at any given time, and we can err in our thought processes, conclusions, and judgments. This, however, is not a problem, because we can always gain additional knowledge or correct errors by applying or reapplying reason—by looking at reality, integrating our observations into concepts and generalizations, and checking for contradictions in our thinking.

The moral principle is: If we are to live and prosper, we must always act on our *rational* judgment—our basic means of living.³⁶ And this brings us to the question: What can *stop* us from acting on our judgment?

Looking at reality, Rand observed that the only thing that can stop a person from acting on his judgment is other people; and the only way they can stop him is by means of *physical force*.³⁷ To see this vividly, suppose you are alone on an island. What can stop you from acting on your judgment? Nothing can. If you decide that you should go fishing or pick some berries or build a shelter, you are free to do so. But suppose another person rows up to the island, hops off his boat, and ties you to a tree. Clearly, you are no longer free to act on your judgment. If you had planned to go fishing, you can't go. If you had planned to build a shelter, you can't build it. Whatever your plans were, they are now ruined, and, if you are not freed from bondage, you will soon die.

The brute's force has come between your thinking and your acting, between your planning and your doing. You can no longer act on your judgment; you can no longer act as your life requires; you can no longer live as a human being. Of course, the brute could feed you and keep you breathing; but a "life" of bondage is not a human life. *A human life is a life guided by the judgment of one's mind.*

In order to live as a human being, a person must be able to act on his own judgment; the only thing that can stop him from doing so is other people; and the only way they can stop him is by means of physical force.

This principle holds regardless of location, regardless of the kind of force used (a gun to the head, fraud, the threat of incarceration, etc.), regardless of who uses the force (an individual, a group, or a government), and regardless of the extent to which force is used. A few examples will bear this out.

Suppose a woman is walking to the store intent on using her money to buy groceries, and a thug jumps out from an alley, puts a gun to her head, and says, "Give me your purse or die." Now the woman can't act according to her plan. Either she is going to give her purse to the thief, or she is going to get shot in the head. Either way, she's not going grocery shopping. If she hands her purse to the thief, and if he flees without shooting her, she can resume acting on her judgment—but, importantly, *not* with respect to the stolen money. Although the thief is gone, the effect of his force remains. By keeping the woman's money, he continues to prevent her from spending it, and, *to that extent*, he continues to stop her from acting on her judgment. This ongoing force does not thwart her life totally, but it does thwart her life partially: If she had her money, she would either spend it or save it; but because the thief has her money, she can do neither. She cannot use her money as she chooses, and her life is, to that extent, retarded.

To whatever *degree* physical force is used against a person, it impedes his ability to act on his judgment, his basic means of living.

Take another example. Suppose a man reads an advertisement for a used car and goes to check it out. The owner assures the man that the car's odometer reading is correct; this, however, is not true, and the owner knows it because he turned back the mileage himself. As far as the man can tell, though, the owner is being honest, and everything seems to be in order; so he buys the car and drives it away. But notice that the man is *not* driving the car he bargained for; he is not driving the car he was *willing* to buy. Unbeknownst to him, he is driving a different car—one with higher mileage than the one for which he was willing to pay. By lying to the man about the car's mileage and by selling it to him on the basis of that false information, the crook has defrauded the man. Because the man's willingness to exchange his money for the car was based partly on the crook's lie, the crook has gained and is now keeping the man's money against his will. In so doing, the crook is physically forcing the man to act against his judgment. By fraudulently taking and keeping the man's money, the crook is physically preventing him from spending or saving it as he otherwise would.

Fraud, the act of gaining or keeping someone's property by means of deception, is a form of indirect physical force. It *is* physical force, because, although indirect, it physically impedes the victim's ability to act fully on his judgment. Other types of indirect physical force include *extortion*, the act of gaining or keeping someone's property by distant threat of force; *copyright and patent infringements*, acts of misusing someone's intellectual property (and thus impinging on his ability to act on it); *slander*, the act of making false statements that damage a person's reputation (and thereby retarding his ability to act on it); *unilateral breach of contract*, the act of refusing to deliver goods or services one has agreed to deliver; and so forth. In all such cases, although the force is indirect, it is still physical: When and to the degree it is used, it physically prevents the victim from acting according to his judgment.

Whether direct or indirect, physical force used against a person stops him from living fully as a human being: To the extent it is used, it prevents him from employing his means of survival—the judgment of his mind.

Importantly, lone thugs and crooks are not the only perpetrators of physical force; nor are they the most dangerous. As history makes clear, the most dangerous agents of force, by far, are governments. "A government," observed Rand, "holds a legal monopoly on the use of physical force."

No individual or private group or private organization has the legal power to initiate the use of physical force against other individuals or groups and to compel them to act against their own voluntary choice. Only a government holds that power. The nature of governmental action is: *coercive* action. The nature of political power is: the power to force obedience under threat of physical injury—the threat of property expropriation, imprisonment, or death.³⁸

Everyone today knows that governments such as Nazi, communist, and theocratic regimes have tortured, slaughtered, and otherwise ruined the lives of hundreds of millions of people (and counting). A person forced by a government into a eugenics lab or a concentration camp cannot live as a human being, because he cannot act on the judgment of his mind. A person forced by a government to become a farmer or a dancer or a physicist cannot live as a human being, because he cannot act on his judgment. And a woman forced by a government to wear a burka or to stay with her husband or to stay at home cannot live as a human being, because she cannot act on hers.

But governments can and unfortunately do use physical force against people in subtler, less-obvious ways as well.

Consider, for instance, Anna Tomalis of Clarksville Maryland. In 2004, when Anna was ten years old, she was diagnosed with a rare form of liver cancer. After surgery and chemotherapy failed to halt the cancer, her doctors told her there was nothing more they could do. So Anna and her parents searched the web and discovered experimental drugs that, in clinical trials, had extended the lives of patients with the same kind of cancer. Anna and her parents were relieved: In their judgment, these experimental drugs were worth the risks involved in her taking them.

But the U.S. government forbade the dying girl to take the drugs because the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) hadn't approved them. Asked in an interview what she thought about this situation, Anna replied: "I know there are other drugs out there for me. I'm not happy with it. I don't think it's right." Anna's mother pleaded with Congress to pass a proposed bill that would have enabled Anna to take the drugs: "Please help her. She wants to survive."³⁹ But Congress did not pass the bill.

Anna wrote to the FDA requesting a "compassionate-use exemption," which, if granted, would permit her to take the drugs. But the FDA bureaucrats took their time. Months passed before they reviewed Anna's request and granted her permission. By then it was too late. Although the drugs might have saved or extended Anna's life if she had been free to take them earlier, at this point the cancer had spread too far, and the drugs could not stop it. After receiving only one round of treatment, she died of the disease. She was then thirteen.

The issue of people being forced to act against their judgment is a matter of life and death. In some cases, such force results in a subhuman existence. In other cases, it means going out of existence. In all cases, it thwarts people's basic means of living and thus stops them from living fully as human beings.

Consider a few more of the countless instances of force used against Americans on a daily basis. We are saddled with laws that force everyone to purchase health insurance (ObamaCare), laws that force bankers to lend money to people they deem un-creditworthy (Community Reinvestment Act), laws that force citizens to bail out bankers who go bankrupt (TARP), laws that force homeowners to hand over their property for the "greater good" (eminent domain), laws that forbid businessmen from merging their companies (antitrust), laws that forbid couriers from delivering mail (postal monopoly), laws that force people to pay for the education of other people's children (government-run schools), laws that force younger Americans to pay for the health care and retirement of older Americans (Medicare and Social Security), laws that force students to "volunteer" in their communities, laws

that forbid employers and employees from contracting in accordance with their own judgment (minimum wage laws), laws that force automakers to “contract” with labor unions on terms that are detrimental to their businesses (National Labor Relations Act)—and on and on. In all such cases, people are forced to act against their own judgment—against their basic means of living; thus they are unable to live fully as human beings.

Of course, people can remain *alive* under these kinds and degrees of force; but insofar as *any* force is used against them, they cannot live *fully* as human beings. A human life *is* a life guided by the judgment of one's mind.

On the basis of such observations, Ayn Rand established the *objective*, fact-based case for individual rights.

Ayn Rand's Observation-Based Principle of Rights

Rand reasoned that because man's life is the standard of moral value, because each person should act to sustain and further his own life, and because physical force used against a person stops him from acting on his basic means of living, we need a moral principle to protect ourselves from people and governments that attempt to use force against us. That principle involves the concept of *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 a man and the legal code of a society, between ethics and politics. *Individual rights are the means of subordinating society to moral law.*⁴⁰

The moral law that Rand speaks of here is the principle of egoism—the observation-based moral truth that each individual should act to promote his own life and is the proper beneficiary of his own actions. Individual rights are the means of subordinating society to the *truth* of egoism.

A “right,” Rand continues, “is a moral principle defining and sanctioning a man's freedom of action in a social context.”⁴¹ Again, the key word is *action*. Just as on the personal level we need principles of action to guide us in pursuing our life-serving values, so on the social level we need principles of *interaction* to protect us from those who attempt to interfere with our plans. And just as our ultimate value is our own life, so our fundamental right is our right to our own life.

There is only *one* fundamental right (all others are its consequences or corollaries): a man's 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. (Such is the meaning of the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.)⁴²

Note Rand's reference to the observable fact that life is a process of self-sustaining and self-generated action. Again, this is a metaphysically given fact; it's the way the world *is*, regardless of what anyone hopes, feels, prays, or does. Life *depends* on such action—and *human* life depends on *rational* action, action in accordance with one's own judgment. Because each individual's life requires self-generated, goal-directed action in accordance with his own judgment, each individual *morally* must be left free to act on his own judgment—and each individual *morally* must leave others free to act on theirs.

Rand further observed that because a right is a sanction to *action*, it is not and cannot be a sanction to be *given* goods or services. If a person had a "right" to be given food, or a house, or medical care, or an education, or the like, that would imply that other people must be *forced* to provide him with these goods or services. It would mean that some people must produce while others dispose of their product. As Rand put it: "The man who produces while others dispose of his product is a slave."

If some men are entitled by right to the products of the work of others, it means that those others are deprived of rights and condemned to slave labor. Any alleged "right" of one man which necessitates the violation of the rights of another, is not and cannot be a right. No man can have a right to impose an unchosen obligation, an unwarranted duty or an involuntary servitude on another man. There can be no such thing as "*the right to enslave*."⁴³

The North fought (and thankfully won) a vital war against the South on the principle that there can be no such thing as the right to enslave. Rand made explicit the fundamental reason this principle is *true*. The reason each individual's life should *legally* belong to him is that each individual's life does in fact *morally* belong to him. Each individual is morally an end in himself—not a means to the ends of others. Each individual has a moral right to act on his own judgment for his own sake—and to keep, use, and dispose of the product of his effort—so long as he respects the same right of others.

This brings us to the question: What binds a person to respect the rights of others? Again, Rand's answer is derived from observable facts—many of which we have seen in this essay (and others of which may be seen in a fleshed-out presentation of the morality of egoism).

In essence, what obligates a person to respect the rights of others is his own self-interest. If a person wants to live and be happy, he must recognize and respect the metaphysically given facts of reality (e.g., the fact that everything, including man, has a specific nature), the nature of man (i.e., the kind of being he is), the basic requirements of human life and happiness (e.g., reason, short- and long-term goals, self-esteem), and the social conditions that make peaceful human coexistence possible (e.g., individual rights, freedom, the rule of law).

Granted, although this truth is based on observation and logic, it is nevertheless highly abstract; to grasp it one must exert substantial mental effort—and not everyone will choose to exert that effort. But the abstract nature of a truth does not alter its truth. Just as the abstract nature of the principles of physics and biology does not change the fact that those principles are true, so, too, the abstract nature of the principles of morality does not change the fact that these principles are true. Just as driving one's car off a cliff or failing to treat one's cancer will have a negative effect on one's life regardless of whether one understands the principles involved there, so, too, being irrational or violating rights will have a negative effect on one's life regardless of whether one understands the principles here.

Violating rights does not and cannot lead to happiness; it necessarily retards one's life, leads to unhappiness, and may lead to incarceration or premature death. The evidence of this is all around us: from the "life and happiness" of Bernie Madoff (Wall Street Ponzi-schemer) to that of John Gotti (Mafia "boss"), from the "life and happiness" of Timothy McVeigh (Oklahoma City bomber) to that of Dillon Klebold and Eric Harris (Columbine murderers), from the "life and happiness" of Bashar al-Assad and Mu'ammarr Gadhafi to that of sundry swindlers and petty thieves who must constantly worry about being caught, who know that they have chosen to survive not as rational producers but as pathetic parasites on such producers, and whose lives and souls are correspondingly damaged. Protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, these are not happy people.

But even if rights-violators could fool themselves into believing that they are happy (which they can't), the fact remains that by violating the rights of others, they thereby relinquish some or all of their own rights; and rights-respecting people and governments morally may deal with them accordingly. (Rand's views on the nature and need of government and on the proper

application of the principle of rights to the various areas of social and political life are a subject for another day. Our concern in this essay is limited to her derivation of and the essential meaning of the principle of rights.)

Respecting the rights of others, observed Rand, “is an obligation imposed, not by the state, but by the nature of reality”; it is a matter of “*consistency*, which, in this case, means the obligation to respect the rights of others, if one wishes one’s own rights to be recognized and protected.”⁴⁴ A person cannot rationally claim the protection of a principle that he repudiates in action.

We have seen the essential elements of Rand’s observation-based derivation of the principle of individual rights: the truth that each individual morally must be left free to act on his own judgment, so long as he does not violate the same right of others. This principle does not come from God or from government; nor is it self-evident or “inherent” in man’s nature. Rather, it is derived from observation and logic. It is discovered and formulated by looking at reality—focusing on relevant facts about the nature of values, the requirements of life, the nature of man, the propriety of egoism, the value of reason, man’s need to act on his judgment, and the antilife nature of physical force—all the while integrating one’s observations into concepts, generalizations, and moral principles. This is what Rand did. And this is why her theory is true.

Importantly, Rand’s theory does not (as some people mistakenly believe) fall into the category of “natural rights” theory. Hers is a different theory altogether. First, whereas natural rights theory holds that rights are moral laws emanating from “super-nature” (i.e., “God”), Rand showed that rights are moral principles derived from *actual* nature. On that count, if “natural rights” theory did not have a long history of actually being God-given rights theory, it might have been appropriate to categorize Rand’s theory as one of natural rights. But natural rights theory *does* have that problematic history; thus it is improper to include Rand’s theory in that category.⁴⁵

Second, “natural rights” theory holds that rights are “inherent” in man’s nature—meaning, “inborn” and a part of man by virtue of the fact that he is man. But rights are not inherent or inborn⁴⁶—which is why (a) there is no evidence to suggest that they are, and (b) belief that they are is mocked as “one with belief in witches and unicorns.”

Rand’s theory holds *not* that rights are “inherent,” but that they are *objective*—not that they are “inborn,” but that they are conceptual

identifications of the factual requirements of human life in a social context. Her theory is, as this essay has endeavored to show, demonstrably true.

Unfortunately, although Rand's theory is demonstrably true, and although it solves the problems that are inherent in the traditional theories, few people today are willing to recognize and embrace it. Because our culture is steeped in the notion that self-interest is evil—and because Rand's theory is based on the fact that self-interest is *good*—many people, even upon reading or hearing Rand's argument, will ignore or deny it and continue clinging to the old saw that rights come from "God" or are somehow "inherent" in human nature. But ignoring or denying Rand's proof cannot change the fact that *real* rights—*defensible* rights—hierarchically depend on and are indeed logical extensions of egoism.

Whereas the principle of egoism is the recognition of the fact that each person should act to promote his life and is the proper beneficiary of his own life-serving actions, the principle of rights is the recognition of the fact that in order for a person to uphold the principle of egoism, he must be *free* to act on his judgment. The former principle gives rise to the latter.

Just as the concept of life makes the concept of value both possible and necessary, so too the principle of egoism makes the principle of rights both possible and necessary. And just as to speak of value as apart from life is worse than a contradiction in terms, so to speak of rights as apart from egoism is worse than a contradiction in terms—and for the same reason. "Rights" torn from their foundation in egoism are not rights but stolen concepts—concepts lifted from the foundation that gives rise to them, the foundation that connects them to reality, the foundation on which they hierarchically depend and in which they have objective meaning.

People are free to use words as they wish, but they are not free to wish away facts. Apart from egoism, rights simply have no foundation in reality.

We who want to defend man's rights to life, liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness—we who want to live fully as human beings—must embrace and advocate the underlying ideas that support and give rise to the principle of rights. We must embrace and advocate Rand's demonstrably true theory of rights.

Ayn Rand: America's Comeback Philosopher

Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan have labeled themselves “America’s Comeback Team”—a political tagline that would be great were it grounded in a philosophical base that gave it objective, moral meaning.

What, politically speaking, does America need to “come back” to? And what, culturally speaking, is necessary for the country to support that goal?

America was founded on the principle of individual rights—the idea that each individual is an end in himself and has a moral prerogative to live his own life (the right to life); to act on his own judgment, un-coerced by others, including government (liberty); to keep and use the product of his effort (property); and to pursue the values and goals of his choosing (pursuit of happiness).

Today, however, legal, regulatory, or bureaucratic obstacles involved in any effort to start or operate a business, to purchase health insurance, to plan for one’s retirement, to educate one’s children, to criticize Islam for advocating violence, or so much as to choose a lightbulb indicate how far we’ve strayed from that founding ideal.

If America is to make a comeback—and if what we are to come back to is recognition and protection of individual rights—then Americans must embrace more than a political tagline; we must embrace a philosophy that undergirds individual rights and that gives rise to a government that does one and only one thing: protects rights.

Although the philosophy of the Founding Fathers was sufficient ground on which to *establish* the Land of Liberty, it was not sufficient to *maintain* liberty. The founders advocated the principle of individual rights, but they did not fully understand the moral and philosophical foundations of that principle; they did not understand how rights are grounded in observable fact.

Nor did the thinkers who followed them. This is why respect for rights has been eroding for more than a century.

If America is to “come back” to the recognition and protection of rights, Americans must discover and embrace the philosophical foundation that undergirds that ideal, the foundation that grounds the principle of rights in perceptual fact and gives rise to the principle that the only proper purpose of government is to protect rights by banning force from social relationships.

The philosophy that provides this foundation is Ayn Rand's philosophy of Objectivism.

To see why, let us look at Rand's philosophy in contrast to the predominant philosophies of the day: *religion*, the basic philosophy of conservatism; and *subjectivism*, the basic philosophy of modern “liberalism.” We'll consider the essential views of each of these philosophies with respect to the nature of reality, man's means of knowledge, the nature of morality, the nature of rights, and the proper purpose of government. At each stage, we'll highlight ways in which their respective positions support or undermine the ideal of liberty.

As a brief essay, this is, of course, not a comprehensive treatment of these philosophies; rather, it is an indication of the essentials of each, showing how Objectivism stands in contrast to religion and subjectivism and why it alone supports a culture of freedom.

The Nature of Reality

Objectivism stands in sharp contrast to religion and subjectivism from the outset because, whereas religion holds that there are *two* realities (nature and supernature), and whereas subjectivism holds that there is *no* reality (only personal opinion and social convention), Objectivism holds that there is *one* reality (this one before our eyes). Let's flesh out these differences and their significance with respect to liberty.

Rand's philosophy holds that reality is real, that “existence exists,” and that it is the given, the starting point and touchstone for all philosophical inquiry. There is not and cannot be anything apart from, prior to, or that is the cause of reality or existence or the universe (these are synonyms here). A thing apart from reality is not real; it is pretend. A thing such as a “God” who existed “prior to the universe” and who “created” the universe is a contradiction in terms: Where, prior to the universe, did he exist? What did he use to create existence? If reality can't exist without a creator, how can the creator exist

without a creator? Who created him? What created that? And so on. Such questions show the futility of the notion that a being created reality.

According to Objectivism, existence or the universe as such has no creator. Existence is the primary, the given, the thing that has always existed and that needs no causal explanation. Things *within* the universe can and often need to be explained; the universe itself cannot and need not be. Existence simply exists.

In looking outward at reality, we can see that everything that exists is something specific; everything has properties that make it what it is; everything has a nature—water is water; a trout is a trout; a gain is a gain; a right is a right; a theocracy is a theocracy; and so on. This is the law of identity: A thing is what it is.

We can also see that a thing can act only in accordance with its identity. Water can flow; it cannot turn into wine. A trout can nourish a few men; it cannot nourish thousands. A theocracy can destroy human life; it cannot promote it. And so on. This is the law of causality, which is the law of identity applied to action: A thing cannot act in contradiction to its nature.

This is Rand's basic view of the nature of reality: There is a reality; there is only *one* reality; it is the given; everything in it has a nature and can act only in accordance with its nature. This, according to Objectivism, is the foundation to which our thinking must adhere if it is to be correct and the foundation in which we must ground our policies and practices if they are to be legitimate.

Religion, in contrast, holds that there are *two* realities: the reality we perceive or the natural world; and a higher, more-important but unperceivable reality—the “supernatural” world or the realm of “God.” In this view, the higher, unperceivable reality creates and rules the lower, perceivable one; and things in the lower reality *can* act in contradiction to what they are—if God wills it. So, for instance, water can turn into wine, if God wills it; a trout can nourish thousands of people, if God wills it; a theocracy can promote human life, if God wills it. In short, anything can do anything, if God wills it.

This is the basic religious view of reality: There are two realms, nature and “supernature”—the perceivable world and “God”—and things in the natural world can and must act in accordance with the will of God. This, according to religion, is the foundation to which our thinking must adhere and in which we must ground our policies and practices.

Whereas religion *adds* a world to the one we perceive, subjectivism *subtracts* one. According to subjectivism, there is *no* reality; there is only personal opinion or social convention. Personal subjectivism reveres the first;

social subjectivism reverses the second. (Because personal subjectivism is not a cultural force, our main concern here will be social subjectivism.)

According to subjectivism, there is nothing independent of or apart from man's consciousness; rather, man's consciousness *creates* what we call "reality." As the renowned subjectivist Richard Rorty put it, "the idea . . . of an antecedently existing reality . . . the idea that there [is] a reality 'out there' with an intrinsic nature to be respected and corresponded to [is] not a manifestation of sound common sense."¹ Thus: "Nothing grounds our practices, nothing legitimizes them, nothing shows them to be in touch with the way things are";² nothing "has authority over human beings."³ Consequently: "There's no court of appeal higher than a democratic consensus."⁴

In this view, things are whatever society says they are, and they act however society says they act. If society says that paper is money, then paper is money. If society says we can create wealth by printing money, then we can. If society says Islam is a religion of peace, then it is. If society says men can produce while wearing regulatory shackles, then they can. If society says government can create jobs, then it can. And so on.

This is the basic (social) subjectivist view of reality: There is no reality; there is only social convention or democratic consensus; and this is the "foundation" to which our thinking must adhere and in which we must ground our policies and practices.

Why do these views of reality matter with respect to liberty?

They matter because if we see that there is *one* reality, and if we acknowledge that we all have access to it via our senses, then we can keep our thinking tied *to* that reality; we can derive our policies and practices *from* that reality; and we can embrace policies and practices that serve our needs *in* reality.

For instance, if we see that certain facts of reality give rise to the need of a principle specifying that in order to live and prosper each individual must be left free to act on his own judgment and must leave others free to act on theirs, then we can know that policies and practices that recognize and uphold this principle are based on and carry the authority of an absolute reality.

If, however, we suppose there are *two* realities—the one we perceive and another more important one we can't perceive—then we have no solid or common ground in which to base our thinking, policies, or practices. Adhering to a "reality" we can't perceive means adhering to whatever we—or some alleged "authorities"—arbitrarily say corresponds to the unperceivable "reality."

This is why religionists of all kinds throughout history have been at war with one another, slaughtering each other over their different beliefs about the

more important yet unperceivable reality. And this is why religionists today seek to convert or kill infidels; to “correct” or kill homosexuals; to subjugate women; and to prohibit people from using drugs, or researching stem cells, or criticizing religion, or doing countless other things that people want or need to do.

Likewise, if we pretend that there is *no* reality and thus that *nothing* grounds our thinking or legitimizes our policies or practices, then we cannot plausibly claim that individuals have rights, or that liberty is good, or that property is owned, or that the pursuit of happiness is proper, or that individuals own their lives. This is why, on the premise of subjectivism, as Rorty puts it:

[W]hen the secret police come, when the torturers violate the innocent, there is nothing to be said to them of the form “There is something within you which you are betraying. Though you embody the practices of a totalitarian society which will endure forever, there is something beyond those practices which condemns you.”⁵

And *this* is why leftist ideologies—ideologies based on the idea that the collective will dictates “truth”—have tortured and slaughtered hundreds of millions of people, and counting.

If we care about liberty, views on the nature of reality matter.

Man's Means of Knowledge

Objectivism holds that man gains knowledge by means of reason; he grasps truth by observing reality and integrating what he perceives into concepts, generalizations, and principles. For instance, he perceives reality and sees dogs, cats, birds, and death; he integrates his perceptions into concepts, such as “dog,” “animal,” and “mortal”; he integrates his concepts into generalizations, such as “dogs require food” and “animals are mortal”; he forms principles, such as “animals, including man, must take certain actions in order to remain alive,” and “man requires freedom in order to live and prosper.” Knowledge, according to Objectivism, is gained by a process of reason: observing reality and making mental integrations on the basis of perceptual observations.

Religion, in contrast, holds that man gains *some* knowledge by looking at reality, but that he gains the *most important* knowledge—such as knowledge of right and wrong—by turning to God.

According to religion, knowledge of morality, virtue, rights, and the like comes not from observation and logic but from revelation and faith. Revelation is “just knowing” some “truth” because “God” implanted the knowledge in

one's mind. Faith is acceptance of ideas that are unsupported by or contrary to evidence.

It is on the basis of revelation and faith that people accept ideas such as that a bush spoke; that a virgin gave birth; that a man arose from his grave three days after he died; that the earth is only six thousand years old; that homosexuality is evil and deserving of death; that when someone strikes you, you should turn the other cheek; that you are your brother's keeper; that it is permissible and even ideal for a grown man to marry a six-year-old; and that if someone draws a picture of a prophet or in any way offends "God," he should be killed. There is no evidence in support of such ideas; and many of them patently contradict observable facts; nevertheless, religious people accept them as true.

Subjectivism holds that knowledge of reality is impossible, for the simple fact that there is no reality. The best we can do, according to subjectivism, is to know what we feel and, more importantly, what the democratic consensus says is "true." In this view, if the consensus is that a bush spoke, or that a dead man arose from his grave, or that "climate change" warrants regulation, or that industrial progress is evil, then the proposition in question is "true"—or as close as we can get to that notion.

Why do these views of knowledge matter for liberty one way or the other?

If man gains knowledge by means of reason—by looking at reality and using logic—then people can figure out what is true and what is not, what corresponds to reality and what doesn't; thus they can form policies and practices in accordance with reality. For instance, if we look at the world, apply logic, and conclude that man's basic means of living is the judgment of his mind—and that in order for him to act on his judgment he must be free from physical force—then we can codify such knowledge into principles and policies that enable men to live and prosper.

If, however, important knowledge comes from revelation or faith, then we cannot form or uphold principles such as "the individual has a right to act on his judgment." If a person's chosen actions conflict with what others "just know" via faith to be impermissible, then, on the premise that faith is a means of knowledge, he cannot have a right to act on his judgment. If no evidence need be presented in support of an idea's "truth," if ideas can be true because one has faith that they are true, then any principle can be validated or invalidated at any time by means of anyone's act of faith. If a religionist has faith that infidels must be killed, or that pornography must be banned, or that men may beat their wives, or that U.S. diplomats should be sodomized and murdered, or that entitlement programs are morally mandatory, then no

amount of evidence to the contrary is going to change his mind. Faith is, by definition, impervious to evidence.

Similarly, if, as subjectivism holds, knowledge of reality is a myth, if the best we can do is go by personal feelings or social consensus, then, in any disagreement between an individual and a group, or between a minority and majority, the group or majority will be viewed as in the right. So, for instance, if society dictates that all men should be farmers and thus that everyone should leave the cities, move to the country, and engage in agriculture—as the “Democratic Kampuchea” society of Cambodia dictated in the 1970s—then that is what everyone should do. If society further dictates that anyone who resists should be shot on the spot, then this is what should happen. If someone dares to point out that observation and logic dictate that this will lead to mass starvation, his claim, on the premise of social subjectivism, is ridiculous. The consensus has spoken. The result of this particular consensus was the starvation and slaughter of more than 1.4 million men, women, and children.

Views of knowledge matter to liberty.

The Nature of Morality

Here, we'll consider each philosophy with respect to its standard of moral value, its view of the proper beneficiary of values, and its view of moral virtue.

The Standard of Moral Value

Objectivism holds that the standard of moral value is the requirements of man's life on earth. Rand arrived at this principle by asking and answering the questions: What are values? Why does man need them? Looking at reality, she saw that values are the things we act to gain or keep—things such as food, medical care, good grades, a fulfilling career, friendships, romance, and freedom—and that the ultimate reason we need to pursue values is in order to live and prosper.⁶

On the principle that the standard of moral value is the requirements of human life, values such as reason, knowledge, productive work, trade, liberty, and the like are good because they sustain and further human life. Conversely, faith, ignorance, parasitism, theft, tyranny, and the like are bad because they throttle or destroy human life.

Religion, in contrast, holds that the standard of moral value is God's will. If God wills that it is good to have faith in him and to obey his commands,

then it is. On the premises of religion, all moral principles follow from this one. As Bishop Robert C. Mortimer explains:

When a man's conscience tells him that a thing is right, which is in fact what God wills, his conscience is true and its judgment correct; when a man's conscience tells him a thing is right which is, in fact, contrary to God's will, his conscience is false and telling him a lie.⁷

Thus, if God tells a man that he should sacrifice his son as a burnt offering (as God told Abraham in the Bible), then that is what the man should do. If God later tells the man to spare the boy (as the story goes), then that is what the man should do. Likewise, if God tells people that they should kill infidels, or love their neighbors, or kill their enemies, or love their enemies, or sell all that they have and give the proceeds to the poor, or whatever, then that is what people should do. And if his commandments contradict each other, that is okay because he is God.

Social subjectivism holds that the standard of moral value is social consensus. If a group of people or a society forms a consensus to the effect that slavery is permissible, or genital mutilation is good, or homosexuality should be forbidden, or everyone should be a farmer, or banks must be regulated—then, for that society, the policy is good. If the consensus says otherwise, then *that* is good. The consensus is by definition right.

Views of the standard of moral value clearly matter to the cause of liberty.

The Proper Beneficiary of Values

Objectivism holds that the proper beneficiary of values is the individual who acts for and earns the values in question. If you earn a paycheck, the paycheck is properly yours to keep and use as you see fit. If you build a business, the business is properly yours to keep and run as you see fit. If you write a book or invent a gadget or paint a portrait, then that book, gadget, or portrait is properly yours to keep, use, sell, or dispose of as you see fit.

Religion, in contrast, holds that the proper beneficiary of an action is whoever “God” says it is. And, because God is unperceivable (because nonexistent), this means that the proper beneficiary is whoever religious scripture or God's earthly authorities say it is.

So, for instance, if scripture, clergy, rabbis, or mullahs say, as they often do, that those who did not produce values are nevertheless the proper beneficiaries of the values, then they are. If God says, as he does in the Old Testament, “I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and

toward the poor and needy in your land,” then the poor and the needy are the proper beneficiaries of your wealth. If Jesus says, as he does in the New Testament, “Sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor,” then the proper beneficiaries of your goods are the poor who didn’t earn them. If, as St. Gregory says in his Pastoral Rule, “when we administer necessities of any kind to the indigent, we do not bestow our own, but render them what is theirs,”⁸ then the proper beneficiaries of the goods and services we produce are not ourselves but the indigent who need them.

Subjectivism, of course, holds that the proper beneficiary of values is whoever a democratic consensus says it is. Thus, whatever values one has, however one gained them, and however important they are to one’s life and happiness, society nevertheless gets to dictate who will have them. If society says, “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs,” then, on the premise of subjectivism, that is the proper policy regarding the proper beneficiary of values.

Clearly, views about the proper beneficiary of values matter to the cause of liberty.

Moral Virtue

Objectivism holds that morality “is a code of values to guide man’s choices and actions—the choices and actions that determine the purpose and the course of his life.”⁹ Rand emphasizes that “the purpose of morality is to teach you, not to suffer and die, but to enjoy yourself and live.”¹⁰ Accordingly, Rand’s philosophy holds that being moral consists in pursuing the values on which one’s life and happiness depend, and in refusing ever to commit a sacrifice—refusing ever to surrender a greater value for the sake of a lesser value.

For instance, if you want to build a business manufacturing dollhouses and thus need to save all your hard-earned money so that you can invest it in this goal, then, according to Objectivism, you should do that. If a friend asks you to lend him money so that he can open a bakery, and if, in your judgment, lending him money would mean surrendering a value that is more important to your life (your business) for the sake of a value that is less important to your life (his business), then Objectivism says you should not lend him the money. If, however, you have enough money to non-sacrificially do both, you care for your friend, you have a reasonable expectation that his business will succeed, and you want to help him in this manner, then, according to Objectivism, you should lend him money.

Likewise, if you lecture for a living and normally charge a fee for delivering a speech, but you want to deliver a speech to a particular group that cannot afford to pay your fee, say, a group of struggling artists or students, then, according to Objectivism, so long as delivering the speech does not preclude you from doing something more important to your life with that time, and so long as you expect to receive sufficient spiritual value from the engagement, delivering the speech free of charge is perfectly selfish, non-sacrificial, and thus moral.

Objectivism holds that pursuing your life-serving values is moral because doing so promotes your life. It holds that surrendering greater values for the sake of lesser values is immoral because doing so throttles your life. And it holds that helping people can be moral or immoral, depending on whether, all things considered, doing so adds value to or subtracts value from your life.

This is the essence of the Objectivist view of self-interest, self-sacrifice, and the propriety of helping others: Always act in a manner that promotes your life—whether materially or spiritually or both. This principle applies not only to career, but also to romance, friendships, recreational activities, charity, and every aspect of life where choice applies. The goal is to fill your days and years with the values that will enable you to achieve a lifetime of happiness. This is what Rand means by her famous “virtue of selfishness”: the commitment to acting consistently in a manner that will promote your life and fill it with joy.

Objectivism holds that moral virtues are principled actions in service of this all-encompassing goal. These include, most fundamentally: *rationality*—“the recognition and acceptance of reason as one’s only source of knowledge, one’s only judge of values and one’s only guide to action”;¹¹ *productiveness*—acceptance of the responsibility of producing goods or services in support of one’s life; *justice*—the commitment to judging people rationally, according to the relevant facts, and treating them accordingly, as they deserve to be treated;¹² *independence*—“acceptance of the responsibility of forming one’s own judgments and of living by the work of one’s own mind.”¹³ There is much more to Rand’s view of virtue, but this is the essence of it.¹⁴

Religion, in contrast, holds that the purpose of morality is to honor or please “God.” Accordingly, its basic moral virtues are faith in God and obedience to his commandments. Again, because God is unperceivable, this ultimately means acceptance of and obedience to the dictates of those who claim to speak for him, whether in scripture or from the pulpit or on the Internet or TV. On the premise of religion, if God, through his spokesman, says you should love your enemies, or slay the unbelievers, or murder your

child, or love your neighbor, or marry a six-year-old, or give to the poor, then that is what you should do.

Subjectivism holds that the purpose of morality is to ensure that people adhere to the dictates of the democratic consensus. Moral virtue, in this view, is whatever the consensus says it is. If the majority says that Socrates must drink hemlock, or that Jews must go to gas chambers, or that everyone must purchase health insurance, or that a tax is not a tax, or that we must reduce our “carbon footprint,” or whatever, then, on the premise of subjectivism, that is what “morally” must be done.

Views on moral virtue clearly matter to the cause of liberty.

To sum up our brief survey of the moral tenets of these three philosophies: Objectivism holds that being moral consists in thinking rationally and pursuing one's life-serving values. Religion holds that being moral consists in having faith in “God” and obeying his commandments, whatever they may be. And (social) subjectivism holds that being moral consists in doing whatever the collective says you should do.

What are the implications of the foregoing ideas with respect to rights?

The Nature of Rights

Objectivism holds that rights are logical implications of the virtue of selfishness. If people morally *should* act in accordance with their own best judgment and are the proper beneficiaries of their own productive actions, then it follows that they morally must be *free* to do so. The principle of rights is the idea that each individual *should* be free to act on his judgment and to keep and use the product of his efforts, so long as he does not violate the same rights of others.

Rand saw rights as recognitions of the factual requirements of human life in a social context. She observed that in order to live and prosper, a human being must be free to act on his basic means of living and prospering: the judgment of his mind. She further saw that the only thing that can stop a person from acting on his judgment is physical force. These facts (among others), Rand realized, give rise to the need of a principle prohibiting people from initiating force against other people. That principle is the principle of rights, which holds that no one may initiate the use of physical force (including indirect force, such as fraud) against anyone.

Religion, in contrast, holds that rights, insofar as there are such things, are gifts from “God” and are thus subject (as is everything) to his commands. Again, because God is unperceivable, rights in this view are whatever God's

earthly representatives say they are. If scripture says or implies that it is right for grown men to marry six-year-olds, then men have a right to do so. If scripture says or implies that homosexuals have no right to live, then they have no right to live. If scripture says or implies that people who did not produce values are nevertheless the rightful owners of the values in question, then they are the rightful owners. If God's representatives say that contraception, or stem cell research, or in vitro fertilization, or interracial marriage, or the like is against God's will, then people have no right to engage in the activity in question.

Social subjectivism holds that there is no such thing as rights, because there is only social convention. In this view, what we call a "right" is just a permission granted by society via democratic consensus. If society says that citizens have a right to a particular action or good—whether liberty, or education, or freedom of speech, or health care, or a house—then citizens have a "right" to that action or good. If and when the consensus changes, people's "rights" change with it.

Needless to say, views of rights have direct significance in the cause of liberty.

The Proper Purpose of Government

In concert with its view of individual rights, the evil of force, and the necessity of selfish action, Objectivism holds that the proper purpose of government is to protect rights by barring force so that people can act on their judgment, live, and prosper. In this view, government is justified in doing one thing and one thing only: protecting the rights of all individuals by banning force from social relations and by using force only in retaliation and only against those who initiate (or threaten) force.

According to Objectivism, government properly passes and enforces laws against murder, rape, burglary, assault, fraud, extortion, defamation, and the like because all such actions involve initiatory force (whether direct or indirect) against people. Conversely, government properly refrains from regulating the economy, redistributing wealth, censoring speech, and in any other way initiating force against people because to initiate force against people is to violate their rights.

The political result of widespread acceptance of Objectivism would be a fully free society—a society in which everyone is fully free to act in accordance with his own judgment for his own sake; a society in which no one, including

the government, may initiate force against anyone; a society in which everyone is able to live fully as a human being: by the judgment of his own mind.

Religion, in contrast, holds that the proper purpose of government is to ensure that people obey the will of "God." According to religion, insofar as people have rights, they have them because God granted them. God's will, not the requirements of human life in a social context, is the political absolute. Again, because God is unperceivable, this standard defaults to religious scripture or to God's other alleged earthly representatives: clergy, priests, rabbis, mullahs, popes, witch doctors.

Government, in this view, is to enforce divine commandments, and, because these commandments must be taken on faith, people and cultures inherently and endlessly disagree as to what God's commandments are and how they should be enforced. Medieval Christians, for instance, had faith that they should take scripture seriously, live by its laws, and punish transgressions as the Bible demands. This led to governments burning "heretics" at the stake, slaughtering whole cities full of unbelievers, and engaging in countless other atrocities. Many modern-day Muslims continue to take scripture seriously and thus engage in similar atrocities, as we see increasingly in the news.

Religionists in America today typically have faith that God's commandments should be followed but not to a T; thus they advocate that government enforce only some of God's commandments, not all of them. For instance, they call for outlawing pornography, outlawing homosexuality, outlawing abortion, outlawing certain kinds of scientific research, outlawing certain drugs, forcibly redistributing wealth, and the like; but they refrain from calling for death to unbelievers or homosexuals or abortion doctors—at least for now.

Subjectivism holds that the purpose of government is to enforce the democratic consensus. For instance, if the consensus is that individuals have rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and that these rights are to be protected by the government, then that is what the government should do. If, however, the consensus is that people have rights to health care, homes, education, and the like—which is, of course, the consensus—then the proper purpose of government is to force the producers and providers of these goods and services to produce and provide them for those who need them.

Views of the proper purpose of government clearly matter to liberty.

In our brief analysis of these three philosophies, we can see that *philosophy matters to liberty*. We can also see that only one of these philosophies undergirds a free society. Only one supports the American ideal. Only one can enable America to “come back” to liberty.

If Americans want America to make a comeback, then we need a philosophy that anchors the American ideal in moral absolutes and perceptual reality. This is what Ayn Rand's philosophy of Objectivism does.

Rand's philosophy sounds reasonable because it *is* reasonable; it is based on facts you can see and understand, and it consists of principles you can grasp and apply to real, everyday problems and pursuits in life. Objectivism sounds civil because it *is* civil; it calls for a society in which physical force is banned from social relations so that people can live and prosper. Rand's philosophy sounds American because it *is* American; it is the only philosophy that undergirds the American ideal of individual rights.

Ayn Rand is America's comeback philosopher, and Objectivism is America's comeback philosophy. If you love liberty, let it be known.¹⁵

Endnotes

3. The Beauty of Ayn Rand's Ethics

1. See Ayn Rand, "Causality Versus Duty" in *Philosophy: Who Needs It* (New York: Signet, 1982), 95–101.
2. For more on the Objectivist ethics, see Ayn Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," in *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: Signet, 1964), 13–39. See also Craig Biddle, *Loving Life: The Morality of Self-Interest and the Facts that Support It* (Richmond, VA: Glen Allen Press, 2002).

4. *Atlas Shrugged* and Ayn Rand's Morality of Egoism

1. Ayn Rand, *Journals of Ayn Rand*, edited by David Harriman (New York: Dutton, 1997), p. 610.
2. W. G. Maclagan, "Self and Others: A Defense of Altruism," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 15 (April 1954): p. 122. Maclagan was an early 20th-century Scottish philosopher who taught at the University of Glasgow and was an ardent advocate of altruism.
3. Maclagan, "Self and Others," pp. 109 ? 11.
4. Ayn Rand, *Philosophy: Who Needs It* (New York: Penguin, 1984), p. 61.
5. John Hospers, *Philosophical Analysis* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1997), p. 259.
6. Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: Signet, 1962), p. 50.
7. Peter Singer, *A Darwinian Left* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 56.
8. Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 79.
9. Rand, *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, pp. 61–62.
10. Rand, *Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 27.
11. Ayn Rand, *For the New Intellectual* (New York: Signet, 1963), p. 129.
12. Rand, *Virtue of Selfishness*, pp. 82–83.
13. Rand, *Virtue of Selfishness*, pp. 126.
14. Rand, *Virtue of Selfishness*, pp. 108–10.
15. Rand, *Virtue of Selfishness*, pp. 110–13.
16. Ayn Rand, *The Voice of Reason* (New York: Meridian, 1989), p. 4.
17. Ayn Rand, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (New York: Signet, 1967), p. 19.
18. Rand, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, p. 19.
19. Rand, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, p. 136.
20. Rand, *For the New Intellectual*, p. 142.
21. Rand, *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 99.

4. Ayn Rand's Theory of Rights

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1. Sarah Palin's speech at the Win America Back Conference, Independence, MO, May 1, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zLcQnvpamZU>.
2. Rush Limbaugh, "The Smallest Minority on Earth," March 31, 2009, http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/home/daily/site_033109/content/01125110.guest.html.
3. Newt Gingrich, "A Conservative Plan for Victory," *Front Page Magazine*, April 6, 2005, <http://www.frontpagemag.com/Articles/ReadArticle.asp?ID=17624>.
4. "A Moment of Silence For Glenn Beck and James Dobson," January 26, 2009, http://malcantro.newsvine.com/_news/2009/01/26/2354412-a-moment-of-silence-for-glenn-beck-and-james-dobson.
5. E. J. Dionne Jr., "The Price of Liberty," *Washington Post*, April 15, 2003, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&contentId=A26667-2003Apr14¬Found=true>.
6. Stephen Holmes and Cass R. Sunstein, *The Cost of Rights: Why Liberty Depends on Taxes* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), p. 17.
7. Quoted in Sidney Hook, *The Paradoxes of Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), p. 8.
8. The phrases "civil rights," "procedural rights," "legal rights," and the like properly include qualifiers in recognition of the fact that the concept of "rights" *proper* is a moral concept.
9. John Locke, *Second Treatise of Civil Government* (1690), chap. 2, sec. 6, <http://www.constitution.org/jl/2ndtr02.htm>.
10. Thomas Jefferson to William Johnson, June 12, 1823, in *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, edited by Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert Ellery (Washington, DC: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1905), <http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch15s67.html>.
11. Thomas Jefferson, *Opinion on French Treaties*, 1793, TeachingAmericanHistory.org, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=623>.
12. First Draft of the Declaration of Independence, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Princeton University, <http://www.princeton.edu/~tjpapers/declaration/declaration.html>; letter to Major John Cartwright, June 5, 1824, *Letters of Thomas Jefferson*, University of Virginia Library, <http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=JefLett.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=276&division=div1>.
13. Thomas Jefferson, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, 1774, in *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, <http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch14s10.html>.
14. Locke, *Second Treatise*, chap. 2, sec. 6.
15. This meaning is corroborated throughout Locke's writing, including in his definition of natural law as "The command of the divine will, knowable by the light of nature, indicating what is and is not consonant with a rational nature, and by that very fact commanding or prohibiting." (*Questions Concerning the Law of Nature* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2nd ed., 2008], p. 101.)

16. Jefferson, *Opinion on French Treaties*.
17. Thomas Jefferson, legal argument in the case of Howell vs. Netherland 2, 1770, in the *Works of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 1, federal ed. (New York and London, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904–5), http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=800&chapter=85803&layout=html&Itemid=27.
18. *The Works of Alexander Hamilton: Miscellanies, 1774–1789, Vol. 2*, edited by John C. Hamilton (New York: John F. Trow, 1854), p. 43.
19. Quoted in Scott Douglas Gerber, *To Secure These Rights: The Declaration of Independence and Constitutional Interpretation* (New York: NYU Press, 1996), p. 106.
20. John Adams, *Papers of John Adams*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 112.
21. Ayn Rand, “Conservatism: An Obituary,” in *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (New York: Signet, 1967), p. 197.
22. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 68–70.
23. For elaboration, see Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: Signet, 1964); Craig Biddle, *Loving Life: The Morality of Self-Interest and the Facts that Support It* (Richmond: Glen Allen Press, 2002); Tara Smith, *Viable Values: A Study of Life as the Root and Reward of Morality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000); Tara Smith, *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics: The Virtuous Egoist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
24. Ayn Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” in *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 13.
25. Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” p. 16.
26. Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” p. 16.
27. Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” p. 16.
28. For a fuller discussion of this derivation, see Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness*; Biddle, *Loving Life*; and Smith, *Viable Values*.
29. This question, incidentally, slashes away the entire duty-based approach to ethics that Immanuel Kant and company advocate. If man needs values, then he must need them for some life-serving purpose. What else could “need” mean? If man doesn't need values, then there is no point in telling him which code of values he should adopt.
30. Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” p. 18.
31. Cf. Ayn Rand, “Philosophical Detection,” in *Philosophy: Who Needs It* (New York: Signet, 1984), p. 22, footnote.
32. See Ayn Rand, “Introducing Objectivism,” in *The Voice of Reason* (New York: Meridian, 1990), p. 4.
33. See Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton, 1991), pp. 229–30.
34. Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” pp. 32–33.
35. Rand, “The Objectivist Ethics,” pp. 22–23.
36. Of course, a person can act irrationally on occasion and still remain alive. But such actions are nevertheless contrary to the requirements of his life; they do not advance it; they retard, stifle, or thwart it to some extent. For instance, one can shoot heroin into one's veins occasionally and not die immediately, but, unless there is some genuine medicinal value in doing so, the drug will have a negative effect on one's life. Likewise, one can fail to exert the effort necessary to achieve the career or the lifestyle

one wants, but then one will not thrive to the extent that one could have if one had exerted the effort.

37. Cf. Ayn Rand, *For the New Intellectual* (New York: Signet, 1963), p. 134.
38. Ayn Rand, "America's Persecuted Minority: Big Business," in *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (New York: Signet, 1967), p. 46.
39. Rob Hotakainen, "In the Face of Death: Terminally Ill Patients Want Quicker Access to Experimental Drugs," *Boulder Weekly*, May 29, 2008, <http://boulderweekly.com/archives/20080529/onlineexclusivebandofsisters.html>.
40. Ayn Rand, "Man's Rights," in *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 108.
41. Rand, "Man's Rights," p. 110.
42. Rand, "Man's Rights," p. 110.
43. Rand, "Man's Rights," p. 113.
44. Ayn Rand, "The Wreckage of the Consensus," in *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, p. 227.
45. Some natural rights theorists have claimed that natural moral law—and thus natural rights—are inherent in reality apart from or regardless of God's existence. For instance, Hugo Grotius, the 17th-century Dutch Jurist, who influenced Locke, wrote that natural moral law "would have a degree of validity even if we should concede that which cannot be conceded without the utmost wickedness, that there is no God, or that the affairs of men are of no concern to him." But, to my knowledge, neither Grotius nor anyone else (with the exception of Ayn Rand) has ever shown what these natural moral laws are, proven their specific content, or demonstrated how they give rise to rights.
46. And it's a good thing that rights are *not* inherent. If rights were somehow inherent in man by virtue of his being man, then we could never punish people who violate rights—because using retaliatory force against them would violate the "rights" that they "inherently" have and that they thus always retain by virtue of being human. Because Rand's theory is based on and derived from the observable requirements of man's life, it is not afflicted with contradictions regarding those requirements. On Rand's theory, rights are inalienable, in that others cannot take away or nullify one's rights; but they are also *forfeitable*, in that one can relinquish one's own rights by violating the rights of others. If and to the extent that a person violates the rights of others, he relinquishes his own rights and may be punished accordingly. His choice to violate rights places him outside the purpose of the principle and thus the scope of its protection. Again, one cannot claim the protection of a principle that one repudiates in action.

5. Ayn Rand: America's Comeback Philosopher

1. Richard Rorty, *Achieving our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 29. Rorty is here interpreting John Dewey and doing so favorably.
2. "From Logic to Language to Play," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 59 (1986): pp. 747–53.
3. Rorty, *Achieving our Country*, p. 27. Rorty is here interpreting Walt Whitman and doing so favorably.

4. Richard Rorty, "The Next Left," interview by Scott Stossel, *Atlantic Unbound*, April 23, 1998.
5. Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. xlii.
6. Rand's induction of this principle involves several steps; for details see Ayn Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," in *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: Signet, 1962); or Craig Biddle, *Loving Life: The Morality of Self-Interest and the Facts that Support It* (Richmond: Glen Allen Press, 2002).
7. Robert C. Mortimer, *Christian Ethics* (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1950), p. 8.
8. "St. Gregory's Pastoral Rule [chapter XXI]" in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church; Socrates, Sozomenus Church Histories* (1890), edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace.
9. Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," p. 13.
10. Ayn Rand, *For the New Intellectual*, (New York: Signet, 1963), p. 123.
11. Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," pp. 27–28.
12. Cf. Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand* (New York: Meridian, 1993), p. 276.
13. Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," p. 28.
14. For a detailed overview of the Objectivist virtues, see Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics"; or Biddle, *Loving Life*, chapter 6, "Objective Moral Virtues: Principled Actions."
15. To learn more about America's Comeback Philosophy, read Rand's novel *Atlas Shrugged* and her nonfiction books *The Virtue of Selfishness*, *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, and *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*.