

Ayn Rand's Philosophical Significance

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Ayn Rand held a wide variety of interconnected philosophical views. What is most impressive about them is as much the interconnectedness as the value of each component separately. Some of the component parts of her philosophy were original with her; some were not original and she knew it (especially in case of Aristotle); and some were not original but she may have thought them to be original.

She shared H. W. B. Joseph's view of logic and ontology (in his *Logic*) and the ontological realism of Cook Wilson (in his *Statement and Inference*), though it is doubtful that she had read either of these works. She was in enthusiastic agreement with the metaphysical character and objective status of the Aristotelian Laws of Thought, as expressed by Brand Blanshard in his *Reason and Analysis*, though she almost never explicitly referred to it. As for contemporary ethics, she considered it an impossible morass, and as far as I can tell never read in this area and did not talk about it expect to condemn it.

It was her political philosophy, occupying the center stage in *Atlas Shrugged*, that made her most famous. Though political theory was only a small part of her overall philosophy, it became the best known (the tail wagging the dog). The idea of limited government was, of course, not original with her; it had been worked out in John Stuart Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* and in a more purely libertarian manner by Herbert Spencer in *Social Statics* and *Man versus the State*, as well as other books in the 17th and 18th centuries. Her economic theory came largely from Ludwig von Mises' *Human Action* and *Socialism*, and was a perfect fit when incorporated into her philosophy.

Her ethical theory, however, was quite original. She called herself an ethical egoist, but if her ethics is to be called egoistic at all, it is a very different brand of egoism from the traditional variety. Epicurus, for example, was a traditional egoist, believing that each person should pursue his own self-interest over a life span (long-range self-interest). Rand didn't think much of Epicurus because his egoism took a specific form, hedonism ("We should all try to maximize our own pleasure"), and Rand condemned

all forms of hedonism. She distinguished pleasure sharply from happiness, pleasure consisting of a series of episodes rather than a coherent whole, and when she talked about self-interest it was always "rational self-interest" – though it is not always clear what the adjective "rational" added to the noun "self-interest." One might suggest that "rational" means guided by reason, but that is just what Epicurus believed himself to be recommending. The word "rational" was not often carefully defined in this context: sometimes it referred to the kind of egoism that was guided by the principle of human rights, thus excluding egoistic actions that were not so guided. But sometimes (so it seemed to me) the word "rational" acted as a kind of safeguard against egoistic action she found unacceptable. For example, it is possible that a certain act of theft might be to a person's self-interest under certain circumstances, e.g. if there was no chance of being detected and to act produced certain good consequences (such as Raskolnikov robbing the rich old lady in order to put himself through college). This might indeed to his self-interest, but it would not (Rand would say) be an example or rational self-interest.

Utilitarians had argued that if happiness (or flourishing, or eudaimonia, etc.) is a good worth having, then it its good no matter who has it. Therefore, they argued, we should work for everyone's happiness: each of our actions should be calculated to increase the general happiness. Rand, of course, questioned this inference: even if your happiness is as worth-while as mine in some cosmic scheme of things, this gives me no reason to pursue yours. You may get happiness from mountain-climbing, but this provides me no reason to assist you in that enterprise. I should pursue my interest and you yours. So far, Rand's view is not distinguishable from that of traditional egoism.

But now comes the distinctively Randian twist, which makes some readers question whether Rand was an egoist at all. A few examples will illustrate this point:

Suppose I could somehow induce legislators to provide me (and no one else) with a million dollars from the public treasury each year. This added income would be immensely gratifying to me. But Rand would not approve such a scheme, at least if the gift was simply random or capricious (it might be all right if I was president of the republic, and had earned it). Why should it go just to me? But if it went to everyone, the whole economic system would be quickly destroyed.

Some critics of egoism have suggested that an egoist ought to want everyone else to be an altruist. As an egoist, wouldn't my interest be better served if everyone else were trained to do nothing but serve me, bending to

my every whim? Should I indoctrinate others to be altruists, who considered it their sacred duty to serve me? But Rand would have no truck with such “narcissistic egoism.” There would be no way to make it adoptable by everyone. Suppose that A, an egoist, believes that others should serve him, A. B, an egoist, believes that others should serve him, B. What now should C do – serve A? Serve B? Or, more likely, serve himself, C? Such egoism (more properly called egotism) could not be held by everyone, You can’t have all chiefs and no braves. Rand wants everyone to be an egoist.

Still, Rand is not an egoist in any traditional sense. Suppose someone is serving time in prison for a crime I have committed. Should I turn myself in, thereby allowing the innocent person to go free? Many people—shall we call them egoists?—Wouldn’t turn themselves in, believing that years in prison would be very enjoyable for them—much more happiness can be achieved on the outside, even knowing that someone else is being punished for my crime (my qualms of conscience don’t last nearly as long as your prison sentence). But I am quite sure that Rand would say that I should see to it that the innocent person goes free, even at great cost to myself. I am more sure that she would want justice done in this case, than that she would assert that going to prison would be my self-interest.

Strange egoism, one might say. The traditional egoist might well say “let him suffer in prison while I enjoy myself on the outside.” But Rand believed that one should never violate the rights of another. I have violated your right to live freely. If I kill you or injure you or rob you of your possession, I have violated your rights to these things, and it is as wrong to deprive you of these things as it would be wrong for you to deprive me of them. Justice is impartial. You may not violate my rights and I may not violate yours. The traditional egoist doesn’t mind violating the rights of others if doing so would promote self-interest (as surely it would in some cases), but for Rand the violation of rights is the ultimate no-no. In the end, teleology gives way to deontology.

Egoists would violate rights if it was in their own self-interest. Utilitarians would do so if the single violation didn’t greatly affect the fabric of the whole society. But Randians would not do so at all: rights are not negotiable. It might not be to my interest to abolish slavery, if I am a slave owner; and it might in some cases promote utility (e.g. if the slave-owners or their society profited more from the practice than the slaves suffered), but it is always a violation of rights, and rights are not negotiable. Once something is a violation of rights, no further discussion of its morality is necessary.

The view that resembles Rand's is not traditional egoism, or utilitarianism, but Kant's Second Categorical Imperative: one should treat everyone, not as a means to one's own ends, nor to the ends of society, but as an end in himself. It is not clear that Kant's second imperative and Rand's principle have the same extension: Rand's principle prohibits only acts which are forced on others, whereas Kant's seems to have a somewhat wider range. If I cultivate the girl only to gain a job from her rich father, and then drop her after I have achieved this goal, I have certainly used her as a means to my end, but I don't think have gone so far as to violate her rights (depending how broadly I conceive her rights). In any case, the main Randian prohibition is against using people as unwilling vehicles for achieving one's own ends. I must not sacrifice myself to others, that is, I must not be an altruist. This is the part that traditional egoism would agree with. But equally, says Rand, I must not sacrifice others to myself. Your life is a sacrosanct as mine. I may not forcibly interfere with your life any more than you may forcibly interfere with mine.

This certainly sounds more like a principle of justice than it does a principle of egoism. Each person is an end in himself, and I may not violate your freedom and you may not violate mine – this is surely not in any obvious way a principle that one would be inclined to call egoistic: it is more a principle of universal non-interference: let the chips fall where they may. Rand defended the principle eloquently from the very beginning. Way back in 1940 she wrote, in *Ayn Rand's Journals* (Dutton, 1997 pp. 149-150):

Either you believe that each individual man has value, dignity, and certain inalienable rights which cannot be sacrificed for any cause, for any purpose, for any collective, for any number of other men whatsoever. Or else you believe that a number of men—it doesn't matter what you call it: a collective, a class, a race, or a state—holds all rights, and any individual can be sacrificed if some collective good—it doesn't matter what you call it: better distribution of wealth, racial purity, or the Millennium—demands it.

And if you—in the privacy of your own mind—believe so strongly in some particular good of yours that you would be willing to deprive men of all rights for the sake of this good, then you are as guilty of the horrors of today as Hitler and Stalin.