

Younkins, Edward W., *Exploring Atlas Shrugged: Ayn Rand's*

*Magnum Opus*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021.

*Exploring Atlas Shrugged: Ayn Rand's Magnum Opus* (2021) brings together under one cover a collection of articles that Edward W. Younkins has written about *Atlas Shrugged*. This book represents a continuation of his unique quest both to inform the general reader of the wealth of literature that deals with business and to enlighten university faculty about the relevance and power of that literature to instruct business students in ways that traditional methods cannot.<sup>1</sup>

In the preface to a different work of his, *Exploring Capitalist Fiction*, Younkins relates that he was inspired to write that book based on feedback from a graduate student in his “Business through Literature” course. In order to write that book, he had to choose from among eighty books that he had used in his course over the years.<sup>2</sup> Although there is considerable literature dealing with various aspects of business, no work of fiction on business is more philosophically and literarily integrated, as momentous in scope, nor as influential as Ayn Rand’s masterwork, *Atlas Shrugged*. As Younkins mentions in *Exploring Atlas Shrugged*, Rand’s magnum opus is now a part of the curriculum of dozens of courses taught at colleges and universities across America (pp. 22, 118, and 143). Hence, there was a need for the singular focus of *Exploring Atlas Shrugged*, and no one is more singularly equipped to author that book than Edward Younkins.

This volume leads with an “Introduction” that contextualizes the importance of *Atlas Shrugged* and provides a detailed overview of each chapter. Chapter 1 gives a synopsis of the novel. Chapter 2 examines *Atlas Shrugged* as both philosophy and literature. In Chapter 3, Younkins looks at it as a treatise on economics before turning in Chapter 4 to consider it as a story about business. Chapter 5 discusses it as a novel about and a blueprint for social change. In the “Appendix,” Younkins provides an overview of the philosophy of Objectivism.

Younkins tells the reader that *Atlas Shrugged* “takes place in a slightly modified United States” (p. 4). In one sense, it draws from a number of periods in U.S. history from the late 1800s to the 1970s; in

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<sup>1</sup> Younkins’s other works in this endeavor include *Exploring Capitalist Fiction: Business through Literature and Film* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), a pioneering work in which he authored twenty-five essays on novels, plays, and films that deal with business; and *Capitalism and Commerce in Imaginative Literature* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), a compilation of twenty-eight essays for which he was editor and contributor.

<sup>2</sup> Younkins, *Exploring Capitalist Fiction*, pp. xiii-xiv.

yet another sense, it is timeless. Its story is one of revolution. Its theme is given as the role of the mind in existence, particularly as it relates to production (p. 30). It is also a defense of capitalism and an indictment of government intervention. In a larger sense, *Atlas Shrugged* is a dramatic portrayal of Objectivism, the philosophy of its author, Ayn Rand (p. 27).

The main plot of the novel is that men of mind go on strike, which results in hastening the economy's inevitable collapse that is destined to occur due to increasing government intervention in the economy—intervention that stifles production and freedom in general (p. 30). Businessmen are portrayed as adhering to conflicting world views. These views are reflected in two categories of businessmen: producers and looters. Looting businessmen lobby for favors from government at the expense of others (p. 29). Looters use the morality of altruism as a club against producers. Altruism is a morality of perpetual sacrifice of oneself to others. Looters impose upon productive businessmen an unearned guilt for their virtues—their principal virtue being productiveness (p. 30).

The plot is built around the novel's characters. *Atlas Shrugged* portrays the businessman as capable of being heroic (p. 27). Two business leaders, Dagny Taggart and Hank Rearden, are key protagonists throughout the novel. Dagny is Vice-President and Chief Operating Officer of Taggart Transcontinental and Rearden is a steel magnate and inventor of a new metal. Both characters are trying to keep their businesses afloat as men of mind disappear. A subplot is the search by Rearden and Dagny for the identity and whereabouts of the inventor of an abandoned motor. Another is Dagny's quest to find an unknown "destroyer" who she is convinced is robbing the country of its captains of industry (p. 33). Abstract principles are made concrete. Virtues are embodied in the characters and revealed through their actions. *Atlas Shrugged* demonstrates that philosophy is important and comprehensible (p. 28).

Chapter 2 surveys the contributions of a number of scholars as they pertain to "*Atlas Shrugged* as Philosophy and Literature." Younkens explains that, according to Leonard Peikoff, one of the defining features of *Atlas Shrugged* is integration, and Chris Sciabarra points out that the novel is an "organic whole" (p. 55). Younkens concludes, similarly, that Rand is a "practitioner of synthesis and unity." *Atlas Shrugged* "concretizes abstractions and draws abstractions from a number of concretes." It "dramatizes grand themes and presents an entire and integrated view of how people should live their lives" (p. 75).

*Atlas Shrugged's* philosophical structure is broadly represented by the titles of its three parts: "Non-contradiction," "Either-Or," and "A is A." Younkens notes that, according to Douglas Rasmussen, these are not simply laws of thought, but are also metaphysical, reflecting the basic nature of reality and of being (pp. 57-58). As the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly conceptually abstract and complex. Younkens summarizes Greg Salmieri explanation that Part One of the novel

presents a concrete example of the mind's role in physical production via the building of the John Galt railroad line, Dagny's remarkable achievement made possible by Rearden's newly invented metal. Part Two is more abstract than Part One, portraying the conflicting moral codes, with one premised on life and the other on death. Part Three includes a three-hour speech that presents, from a moral and a metaphysical perspective, these two opposing views on existence (p. 58). The speech is comprised of three parts: the morality of life (which is the ethical code of the creators), the morality of death (which is the code of the destroyers), and the necessity of choosing the former (p. 72).

*Atlas Shrugged* is not only philosophically integrated, but literarily integrated as well. Most of the important events are presented dramatically, with the less significant ones being narrated. Younkins notes Andrew Bernstein's observations of how Rand employs well literary devices such as symbolism and irony. For instance, she uses the dollar sign to symbolize, among other things, a free economy (p. 61). Irony permeates the novel, as evidenced by Dagny's *perception* of the strike as a sign of surrender by the men of mind to the looters versus the *reality* of the strike as a springboard for a cultural, philosophical, social, political, and economic renaissance (p. 62). In addition, Rand's novel invokes a number of Greek mythical figures and inverts their meaning. For example, instead of having her modern-day Prometheus hero relegated to daily suffering by having his regenerated liver being eaten by vultures, she has him unbind his chains and withdraw his fire until men "withdraw their vultures" (p. 63). In effect, Rand reverses the fate of doomed mythical heroes, endowing her literary counterparts with free will, rationality, and positive outcomes.

Younkins points out that Rand also juxtaposes opposites in *Atlas Shrugged*. This is done via dual characterizations. For instance, there are two steel magnates, Rearden and Orren Boyle. They are characters with opposing philosophical premises. The contrasting scenes involving them reflect those differences and the practical differences the ideas make (p. 64). Rand's approach to virtue, like Aristotle's, focuses on traits that define what is good and on what will foster a good life (p. 68). Her heroes are purposeful; they strive for betterment, to create products and to make profits (p. 66). The villains, in contrast, endeavor to reverse cause and effect (p. 67).

Productivity is at the heart of an ethical life. Production is primary. It precedes consumption and is the means by which other products are acquired. Although the focus of *Atlas Shrugged* is on the virtues of the heroic businessmen, the men of mind are not limited to those in the "business" sphere, but they are found in all fields of creative endeavor. Similarly, productivity is not limited to the output of businesses (in the narrow sense). Ideas are fundamental to creative acts, whether originated by artists, artisans, businessmen, etc. Ideas and material production are inseparable, just as are the mind and the body. Younkins draws our attention to Sciabarra's claim that Rand rejects Cartesian dualism as antithetical to the reality of human *being*. Man is

an integrated whole and his attributes are only separable for analytical purposes (p. 74).

In Chapter 3, “Economics in *Atlas Shrugged*,” Younkins states that the novel “presents a thorough defense of a totally unregulated market system” (p. 81). *Atlas* could be considered a literary dissertation on economics. The overarching theme in the book is that the mind is the source of wealth creation. Producers create, discover, and innovate. The person who brings forth a new idea to the world is a “permanent benefactor” of mankind (p. 82). Regardless of how much money he makes in return, it under-represents his contribution. Typically, physical goods cannot be shared (or their ability to be shared is limited). In contrast, there is no limit to the number of people who can share an idea.

Through its heroes, *Atlas Shrugged* depicts the characteristics required of an entrepreneur in a free market. Those include the ability to economize, plan, forecast, take risks, experiment; manage material, machines, and men; and the tenacity to persist in the face of obstacles and setbacks (p. 83). Producers engage others as traders. The trader principle is the principle of justice, which is the voluntary exchange of value for value. Once again, as seen with productivity, Rand does not limit this principle to the business sphere. The trader principle is one that applies to all forms of social interaction (among adults), whether that involves friendship or romantic love (p. 84). Money is an instrument of exchange, but it is not the cause of wealth. It is the effect brought about by those who produce. Money should be or should be tied to an objective criterion of value, such as gold (p. 88). Money is the reward for productive work. Productive work is a virtue. An honest person’s consumption does not exceed his production (p. 87).

A mixed economy is one in which there is a mixture of private markets and government intervention. It can lead to “crony capitalism” in which the “pyramid of ability” is replaced by the “aristocracy of political pull” (p. 90). A number of government regulations, which Younkins delineates in this chapter, are introduced in *Atlas Shrugged*, and their deleterious effects on the economy and on freedom are dramatized (pp. 90-93). Regulations are not limited to those imposed by government. The actions of private pacts—such as those of the National Alliance of Railroads—depict how certain interventionist policies caused by voluntary associations can result in the erosion of production and of freedom (p. 90). The rapidly degrading mixed economy portrayed in *Atlas Shrugged* is contrasted with a voluntary society of strikers in which self-interest, individual rights, and the trader principle rule and happiness and flourishing prevail (pp. 93-94).

Chapter 4, “Business in *Atlas Shrugged*,” details ways in which Rand’s magnum opus is a novel about business. It dramatizes the theme that wealth is a product of the human mind. Of course, products are created when resources are combined in such a way that the value of the product exceeds (or expected to exceed) the value of the resources used in creating it. Natural material (such as oil) becomes a resource once a productive use is discovered for it. Prior to that, it has no value (or may

have a negative value). Non-renewable resources are finite; however, the potential of the human mind is not. The reward for wealth-creation is profit. *Atlas Shrugged* shows that energy is the nexus of productive activity, whether in oil fields, coal mines, railroads, steel production, etc. Government intervention into the energy industry leads to blackouts, shortages, and so on (p. 101).

Unlike “crony capitalists,” who lobby the government for special privileges such as receipt of subsidies or stifling the production of competitors, authentic businessmen practice virtues (e.g., integrity, independence, justice, productivity) that foster success (pp. 103-4). The only “social responsibility” that producers have is to respect others’ rights and earn profits. There is no “special morality” for businessmen to “give back” in order to earn moral absolution (p. 105). This notion of “giving back” reflects the altruist creed.

Younkins argues that *Atlas Shrugged* is a powerful resource for educating students about business. Fiction can be more realistic than facts and more palatable than theory. Literature is replete with novels, films, and plays that cast businessmen in an unfavorable light. *Atlas Shrugged* is an antidote to such negative characterizations, offering the opportunity for students to envision business situations that they may eventually encounter and to learn how to rationally, ethically respond to them. In effect, their personal ethical codes may be developed and/or transformed by reading and discussing the novel. Younkins discusses how he has incorporated *Atlas Shrugged* into a course he teaches, noting how others have also done so (pp. 118 n. 8 and 122).

In Chapter 5, “*Atlas Shrugged* and Social Change,” Younkins points out that the novel has sold in excess of eight million copies. In a 1991 survey conducted by the Library of Congress and the Book of the Month Club, *Atlas Shrugged* ranked second after the *Bible* in terms of its influence on people’s lives (p. 126). Younkins states, “Ideas are the most powerful forces in the world and the motive power of human progress” (p. 130). *Atlas Shrugged* is a novel of ideas and has the potential to inspire change. In the novel, businessmen are agents for social change by withdrawing their minds and products in hopes of ushering in a post-collapse renaissance (p. 136). According to Younkins, *Atlas Shrugged* can also be a vehicle for change in the real world by serving as a source of education and being life-altering at the individual level (p. 138). It can also lead to social change, if its message is understood by a sufficient number of people.

Younkins notes how Sciabarra explains that in *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand integrates three analytical levels: personal, cultural, and structural (p. 131). Similarly, a free-market revolution must address all three levels to be successful (p. 132). The customary position of libertarians of simply opposing state intervention is inadequate. A broader frame of reference is required. Top-down political change in the economic sphere is not sufficient nor is it feasible unless personal, cultural, and social prerequisites are met. Although *Atlas Shrugged* has been personally

transformative for a great number of people, real change in the broader context has not been forthcoming, according to Yaron Brook (p. 133).

In his “Introduction,” Younkins mentions that many have viewed *Atlas Shrugged* as a “blueprint for the future” (p. 23). Yet in Chapter 5, Younkins also remarks that he finds the ending of the novel puzzling in that it is inadequate insofar as being an instrument for effectuating the ideal of capitalism. It is unrealistic to think that a three-hour speech can win over enough people to effect change. Younkins indicates that it is far from likely that change can occur in one momentous sweep. Real change requires a good deal of time and energy. An incremental approach is more realistic and required (pp. 139-40). Younkins, however, credits *Atlas Shrugged* as being influential in the Tea Party Movement. It has also served as a foundation for the Ayn Rand Institute and The Atlas Society (p. 142). He provides a list of the kinds of governmental changes that need to be undertaken to move toward a freer economy, such as abolishing the income tax and the central banking system (p. 139)—but of course, it is the “how” that is tricky.

The “Appendix” succinctly captures the essence of Rand’s philosophy of Objectivism. Younkins focuses particular attention on those philosophical concepts that are related to *Atlas Shrugged*. He points out that philosophy follows a hierarchy: metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. These precede politics and economics (p. 148).

Since the publication of *Atlas Shrugged*, many have acknowledged how “prophetic” the novel has been. I would venture to say that there are many parallels between the state of affairs described in the novel and the current situation in the U.S. as well as in other countries, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic was declared in 2020. In the U.S., businesses have been unequally affected. Some (typically larger) chains were allowed to remain open and flourished, while to varying degrees, other smaller businesses were required to shutter, forcing many smaller, marginal establishments permanently out of business.

As for the men of mind going on strike, this may be an effective method of hastening an economic collapse in many cases. However, Younkins’s comments on the shortcomings of *Atlas Shrugged* as a blueprint for change has challenged my thinking about this type of strike as a mechanism to rectify rights violations. I realize that a strike of the men of mind is not a “one size fits all” strategy for all violations of rights. For instance, in the current environment, it is usually the men of mind who are being censored.<sup>3</sup> They are being “forced to strike” in that they are being constrained from engaging in public discourse. There have

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<sup>3</sup> Arjun Walia, “Stanford Medical Prof: Scientists Are Being Censored For Sharing ‘Alternative’ Info About COVID,” *LewRockwell.com* (February 9, 2021), accessed online at: [https://www.lewrockwell.com/2021/02/no\\_author/stanford-medical-prof-scientists-are-being-censored-for-sharing-alternative-info-about-covid/](https://www.lewrockwell.com/2021/02/no_author/stanford-medical-prof-scientists-are-being-censored-for-sharing-alternative-info-about-covid/).

been a number of responses—most notably, legal challenges—to the limits imposed on freedom. More recently, Canadian truckers have gone on strike against mandates, and truckers in other countries have been inspired by their lead to do so as well. The convoys have been met with government resistance in Canada as well as France.<sup>4</sup>

By virtue of Rand’s theme—the importance of man’s mind in wealth-creation—she focuses on captains of industry. What, though, about the everyman who depends on those of greater intellect to take action? In real life, the “extraordinary ordinary man” cannot simply sit by as his freedoms are stripped from him. He, too, must act (with a non-initiation-of-force caveat). Such a person cannot wait for those of superior intellect to do the heavy lifting on his behalf. Just like the Canadian truckers, he must also be engaged.

For instructors using this book in a course, I would encourage them to have students start with the “Appendix,” particularly for those who are unfamiliar with *Atlas Shrugged* and/or Objectivism. (I have a personal preference for abstractions, so I may be biased in this regard.). For instance, it might be helpful initially to turn to the “Appendix” for a few fundamental definitions, such as metaphysics and epistemology (p. 148), concept (p. 152), value (p. 157), trader (p. 161), and individual rights (p. 162). Prior to Chapter 1, “Synopsis of *Atlas Shrugged*,” discussion of the axiomatic concepts of existence, consciousness, and identity (p. 149) would be helpful, since they form the bases for objectivity and are related to the progression of the novel’s story. A person new to Objectivism may not have encountered the notion of “context” and how it differs from “relativism.” For instance, Objectivism acknowledges that the application of moral principles is contextual. That moral principles can be absolute, yet contextual is an important contribution of Objectivism (p. 160), which may be foreign to some students who either have been schooled in the idea that moral principles are absolute regardless of context and/or have been taught that they are relative and groundless.

Younkins’s overview of Objectivism offers a number of insights. For instance, in his discussion of the is-ought gap (p. 154), he notes that “the key to understanding ethics is found in the concept of value—it is . . . located in epistemology” (p. 157). This is a unique approach to ethics and, along with Rand’s theory of concepts, revolutionary.

*Exploring Atlas Shrugged: Ayn Rand’s Magnum Opus* is a significant contribution and highly recommended for instructors, students, and the general reader. Younkins’s volume can serve as an instructor’s resource for those teaching *Atlas Shrugged*, as a companion text for students in those courses, or as a stand-alone book for readers

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<sup>4</sup> Patricia Knight, “Video Appears to Show Police Horses Trampling Canadian Trucker Protesters,” *MSN* (February 18, 2022), accessed online at: <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/video-appears-to-show-police-horses-trampling-canadian-trucker-protesters/ar-AAU3isX>.

who are familiar with the book and are interested in a fresh examination of this timeless novel from a thematic, structural, and character-development point of view.

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