



Nothing to Shrug At: Ayn Rand, Objectivism, and Worldview

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With the release of Alan Greenspan’s new book, *The Age of Turbulence*, praising Ayn Rand’s influence on the former Federal Reserve chairman’s thinking, and the new film based on her book *Atlas Shrugged* starring Angelina Jolie set to come out next year, **Ayn Rand is more popular** than ever. Her books, actually, have remained top sellers—*Atlas Shrugged* being second only to the Bible. But since the business scandals earlier this decade and Greenspan’s expressed admiration, her ideas—namely, objectivism—have gained more traction. But the *consequences* of those ideas should give Christians great pause.

According to the *New York Times*, Greenspan met Rand when he was 25 and married a member of her inner circle, known as the Collective. He found Rand’s “moral defense of capitalism” appealing. Later, Rand’s magazine, *The Objectivist*, published several of Greenspan’s essays.

Greenspan is not alone in his veneration. Fifty years after its publication and 25 years after Rand’s death, *Atlas Shrugged* sells hundreds of thousands of copies every year and is read everywhere from college campuses to Wall Street. Given its popularity and its impact, Christians should be acquainted with Rand’s work and, especially, her worldview: **objectivism**. It is one of those stealth worldviews that has a way of infiltrating our culture, particularly the business community. It is social Darwinism writ large. We need to know how to answer those who uphold objectivism as a way of life.

Briefly, objectivism teaches that man’s “highest value” and “moral purpose” is his own happiness. By “happiness,” Rand meant “rational self-interest.” For her, “virtue” consisted of doing those things that “secured” your life and well-being. As theologian John Piper put it, Rand’s work manifests a “complete rejection of a divine or supernatural dimension to reality.”

The absence of God causes Rand to get human nature wrong, as well—specifically, in her view of altruism. She viewed altruism and self-sacrifice as vices. They represent a betrayal of what should be a person’s “highest values,” that is, his life and well-being. Similarly, justice is possible only if you “never

seek or grant the unearned and undeserved, neither in matter nor in spirit . . .” You see how this contradicts the Christian worldview—and the way things really are.

So, if altruism and self-sacrifice are out, then how are people supposed to relate to one another? Through exchanges that promote **mutual advantage**, Rand says; it is what she called “trade”—in other words, as if each of the parties were businesses, not people. If all of this sounds like rationalizing self-centeredness to you, you are not alone. As the *New York Times* recently described it, *Atlas Shrugged* is “Ayn Rand’s glorification of the right of individuals to live entirely for their own interest.”

Nevertheless, today Ayn Rand and her ideas enjoy a sort of **cult following**. (When we recently published a “BreakPoint” commentary about her at Townhall.com, it immediately garnered more than 200 comments, nearly all of them in vehement defense of Rand. I think I hit a nerve.) Many in the business community regard *Atlas Shrugged* as their bible.

Rand’s proponents claim she did show concern for the other—that creating businesses and wealth in turn helps others. There is some credence to that: that is, entrepreneurship provides jobs and helps the economy. But basing your worldview *solely* on the bottom line—how things benefit the self alone—ultimately devalues and degrades the **human dignity** of others.

If everyone is trying to climb to the top of the heap, a lot of people’s rights are going to get trampled, and it is not going to be a viable way for everyone to live, only for the elite and the powerful. After all, where would ethics arise in this view? The survival of the strongest would be the ultimate virtue. This cannot lead anywhere except to the totalitarian impulse. As Solzhenitsyn put it in his famous speech “A World Split Apart”:

“A society which is based on the letter of the law and never reaches any higher is taking very scarce advantage of the high level of human possibilities. The letter of the law is too cold and formal to have a beneficial influence on society. Whenever the tissue of life is woven of legalistic relations, there is an atmosphere of moral mediocrity, paralyzing man’s noblest impulses.”

And basing standards on the whim of the “producers,” as Rand called them, fails to take into account the **fallenness of man**. It is presumptuous, to say the least, to think that “pure capitalism” is possible—the creators and producers are not necessarily beneficent, and sin will take hold.

Consider how objectivism plays out in its application. It not only affects one’s professional life, but one’s personal life as well. Rand exemplified the selfish motivation that objectivism upholds. For example, when she was about 50, she seduced a married protégé—half her age—convincing him and her own husband to agree to Rand and the young student engaging in a sexual affair.

Her abusive behavior is “demonstrably connected to Rand’s own ‘philosophical’ premises,” said Scott Ryan, who wrote a book on her philosophy. “She wasn’t a nice person,” Darla Moore, vice president of the private investment firm Rainwater Inc., told the *New York Times*. “But what a gift she’s given us”—yes, that is, **how not to live** one’s life. But I don’t think that is what Moore meant.

And much as corporate leaders would like to credit Rand for influencing their good business sense and success, objectivism does not lead to public good—only private gain. As the *Times* described it,

corporate executives say *Atlas Shrugged* “gave form and substance to their inchoate thoughts, showing there is no conflict between private ambition and public benefit.”

They are kidding themselves. One successful CEO who considers the book crucial to his success is John Mackey of Whole Foods—that’s the same Mackey currently under SEC investigation for posting under a pseudonym on Yahoo’s Finance blog, praising his company’s stock and bashing that of rivals. Sure, he announced that as of this past January his take of Whole Foods’s income would be only \$1 a year—but it was not objectivism that led to that decision.

Interestingly, after the Enron, Worldcom, Tyco, and other business scandals earlier this decade, the Objectivist Center and other Rand followers scrambled to disassociate themselves with those companies’ fallen leaders. As *USA Today* noted, they reread the 1,000-plus page novel “to remind themselves that self-interest is not only the right thing to do from an economic standpoint but is moral, as well.” They viewed themselves as “heroes . . . who do far more to lift the world’s standard of living, cure disease and end starvation than Mother Teresa and altruists who believe a full life requires self-sacrifice and serving the needs of others.”

Again, that would be in a perfect world, where “pure capitalism” were possible—that world does not exist. Rather, objectivism invites adherents to succumb to their base desires solely for their own benefit. “Ayn Rand creates a perfect capitalism, which in my mind relies too heavily on individual integrity to work,” said Nicolas Boillot, president of ad agency Hart-Boillot. “There are those who are looking for a quick buck and willing to compromise their integrity for a price. Perfect capitalism is as attractive and impossible as perfect communism. The greedy and lazy will ruin either system for the rest.”

And Rand’s recipe for success does not explain the success of early industrialists like Milton Hershey, “who during the Depression provided employees of his chocolate company with free medical care and paid off the mortgages of every church in town.”

Compare that to Rand-fan Neal Patterson, CEO of Cerner, a health care information technology company, who sent a warning to his managers that “their cars were too seldom in the company parking lot before 8:00 a.m. and after 5:00 p.m.” Seems families also have to be sacrificed on the objectivist altar—not only in workers’ approach to labor, but also in the way the materialistic consumerism, bolstered by “producers” telling people what they supposedly “need,” eclipses human relationships.

Rand’s influence continues in younger generations today. Every year, the Ayn Rand Institute gives 400,000 copies of *Atlas Shrugged* free to Advanced Placement high school programs. If you know a student who is reading the book, tell them about the shortcomings of the novel and the objectivist worldview.

In a defense of *Atlas Shrugged* in 1957, Alan Greenspan wrote, “Creative individuals and undeviating purpose and rationality achieve joy and fulfillment. Parasites who persistently avoid either purpose or reason perish as they should.” Where would such a statement leave Mother Teresa—or those whom she served? I shudder to think.



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