

## ANALYSIS PAPER

### *Ayn Rand's For the New Intellectual*

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#### **I. The General Argument**

In the language of Objectivism, morality is synonymous with rational self-interest. Rand does not care for the good society, rather the quality of the individual lives which constitute it. Such value is qualified by two core principles: individual sovereignty (freedom or independence) and rationality (cognition, intellectualism, integration).

At the crux of her argument, Rand compels man to elevate himself beyond the rank of animals, operating solely on sensation and perception, by harnessing his unique faculty of cognition. The individual must integrate his body and mind to observe objective reality and form novel abstractions. This process defines Rand's rationality, the alternative to which is "the state of an unachieved human stature" (21). Rand bolsters her claim through negative polemic of 'sub-human' alternatives: the Witch Doctor, who operates entirely in the conceptual realm, Attila, who clings to perception of the physical world alone, and all of their real-life philosopher counterparts.

Rand prioritizes the choice for cognition above all else, including the accuracy of one's thoughts. "There are two sides to every issue: one side is right and the other is wrong, but the middle is always evil. The man who is wrong still retains some respect for truth, if only by accepting the responsibility of choice" (216). In name, the intellectual man is interchangeable with the independent man, as he who is capable of forming novel thoughts will be the one to forge his own path. Rand critiques present society for finding virtue in agreeableness. It is better to disagree and be wrong, but independently so, as "independence is the only gauge of human virtue and value" (65).

With these tenets, Objectivism demonizes collectivism and altruism for both shaming independence and deprioritizing intellect. The former is ingrained in their nature of valuing others equal to and over the self,

but the latter appears more subtly. As altruism assigns virtue to alleviating the suffering of others, it gives emotions primary importance to the human experience. Yet Randian rationalism asserts the supremacy of cognition; even if we were to act for others, we should prioritize aid by creation of thoughts. Regarding collectivism, Rand demonstrates the injustice of working by ability and receiving by need with anecdotal evidence of striking factory workers. The system demands from rather than rewards the skilled, snuffing innovation and work ethic, and unduly provides for those who claim higher needs. It is natural order for resentment to build, until workers strike for the right to reap the fruits of their own labor.

This preferred system, capitalism, is a mechanism which intertwines intellectual and fiscal sovereignty of the individual. “The free mind and free market are corollaries” (25), as intellectual freedom requires political freedom, which in turn necessitates economic freedom. The Randian economy operates entirely on trade, where one specializes based on their ability and makes deals for all else they need. Such reliance is morally acceptable so long as actions maximally benefit the self, independent of their expense to others.

## **II. Classification of the Argument**

Despite naming the philosophy Objectivism, Rand builds her doctrine on two non-objective goods: happiness and freedom. In clear deontological language, Rand states “my happiness needs no higher aim to vindicate. My happiness is not the means to any end. It is the end. It is its own goal. It is its own purpose” (52). Though happiness answers to many names, Rand would not have prescribed a hedonistic vision of pain over pleasure, as operating for emotions is sub-intellectual and sub-human. Instead, she adopts a eudemonic definition of happiness. For a fulfilled human life, one must choose to exercise their rational faculties. Conversely, independence is described as a right and a duty: “the first *right* on earth is the *right* of the ego. Man’s first *duty* is to himself” (82). Yet Rand’s high regard for integration requires such abstract concepts to be tied to the physical world. Thus, money is prescribed as the objective “barometer of society’s virtue”, creating a teleological calculus for deontological freedom.

Rand also straddles both sides of the act-rule dichotomy. Being in favor of individual sovereignty, she denies Objectivism as a universal maxim for all. “Let no man posture as an advocate of freedom if he claims the right to establish *his* version of a good society” (44). However, for the individual, Rand prescribes the rule to always behave rationally. In a complex world, this choice may require compromise in one act to maximize long-term benefits. Even so, concession is never for the sake of others, but in the interest of the future self.

### **III. Critique: Close Reading and Concluding Statement**

“Capitalism demands the best of every man – his rationality – and rewards him accordingly. It leaves every man free to choose the work he likes, to specialize in it, to trade his product for the product of others, and to go as far on the road of achievement as his ability and ambition will carry him. His success depends on the *objective* value of his work and on the rationality of those who recognize that value” (25).

With her opening statement, Rand implies the in-built nature of rationality. Since everybody has the capability to rationalize, those who choose not to engage with it are acting immorally. As retributive justice, the system will provide them no benefits. I fundamentally disagree with this framing of cognition as a choice. It is paradoxical to state that all possess rationality, yet some are capable of blatantly rejecting the supposedly rational choice to embrace it. Either some people are inherently incapable of cognition and are destined to be lesser humans despite any efforts on their part, or people merely differ in the way that they enact rational faculties. The former relationship between self-worth and predetermined qualities counters principles of justice and free will that I believe to be true.

Further, I stand by the natural law of human adaptability. Rand states that those who do not use cognition are permanently ridded of their claim to it. However, people can continuously develop themselves and learn from others, just as Rand acknowledges that discourse between two Intellectuals can always result in growth. Cognition, abstraction, and rationalization are dynamic and non-binary skills. It is not the case that they are either present or absent, rather each exists on a spectrum of developmental strength. Further,

even if cognition were a choice, it would not be locked in time. Perhaps the individual will fail to embrace rationalism until he first meets an Intellectual. Why should he be punished for his lack of experience, over which he does not have control? Certainly, people cannot seek to acquire a virtue if they are not aware that it exists.

Rand then claims that capitalism “leaves every man *free* to choose the work he likes, to specialize in it, to go as far on the road of achievement as his ability and ambition will carry him.” This description of freedom assumes fairness in circumstance. What happens to an intellectual who is monetarily disadvantaged from birth? In the same vein, one’s abilities are crafted by his experiences, which are never entirely in his control. Rand is preaching for a meritocratic society in which rationality and ability are inherent and static. I believe that paradigms of distributive justice must exist within such a meritocracy in order to give all individuals an equal and fair chance to success.

“His success depends on the *objective* value of his work.” This statement relies on Rand’s poorly substantiated claim to an objective reality. For all its use, she never addresses how to reconcile individual truth with the objective, external world. As a student of neuroscience, I believe in the plasticity of the human brain. I see cognition as alterable by experience and perception, and thus wonder how we can know objective reality beyond what we perceive.

“And [his success depends] on the rationality of those who recognize that value.” This final claim reveals the inherent tension of practicing Objectivism in a society: dependence. Rand’s commitment to freedom requires her to never impress her doctrine onto another, yet the above statement clearly identifies a need for people to view intellectualism in her manner and to adopt her mode of livelihood. It is for these logical gaps as well as my underlying beliefs in equality, fair treatment via distributive justice, and the malleable nature of humankind, that I do not subscribe to Randian ethics.