

# Grading Ayn Rand

David Barrows

Aurora Philosophy Institute

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# Agenda

Introduction

Philosophy

Assessment

Final Grade

# Ayn Rand

Born Alissa Zinovievna Rosenbaum, a middle class Jewish family in St. Petersburg, Russia, 1905

Bolsheviks confiscated father's pharmacy business

Faced desperate conditions, occasionally nearly starving

In 1925 Rand visited relatives in the United States

Left with no intention of returning

Developed an interest in screenwriting and American action movies

Rand became an atheist but still viewed as Jewish

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# Loved, Hated, Controversial

Best-selling author of *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*

Remains a fascinating and enigmatic presence

Mainstreamed enough to have been honored by a U.S. Postal Service stamp in 1999

Novels figure prominently in readers' lists of the 20th century's greatest books

Remains an outlier and an oddity on the cultural scene, a cult figure with worshippers and critics

Intellectuals dismiss her as a writer of glorified pulp fiction and pseudo-philosophy with an appeal for impressionable teens

Politically, Rand is an outsider: Liberals dislike pro-capitalist position

Conservatives dislike militant atheism, abortion, pornography

Conservatives and liberals dislike focus on individualism

She arose in an era of competing totalitarian ideologies and declared that Communism and Nazism were not opposites but evil twins, and that their true opposite was freedom

Rejected the libertarian movement

Would open the conversation “Tell me your premises”

Some have argued Rand was proud, vindictive, insulting, dismissive

Others she was idealistic, candid, precise, and charming

Reading Rand's philosophy can be an exhilarating

For all her popularity few professional philosophers have taken her work seriously

Most of the philosophical work on Rand appears in non-academic journals or books

Rand entries: the Stanford, Penguin, Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Rand's defense of "selfishness" (rational self-interest) and rejection of altruism (living for others' sake) reason for popularity with the general reader, and her unpopularity with some philosophers

A moral justification for pursuing life of their own and liberation from unearned guilt

In an era when collectivism was seen as the way of the future, she asserted the worth of the individual and right to exist for herself

In an age of existential doubt, she offered a celebration of creativity of the human mind, of the joy of life

A big personality

# Philosophy

# Objectivism

Follow reason, not whims or faith

Work hard to achieve a life of purpose and productivity

Earn genuine self-esteem

Prosper by treating others as individuals, trading value for value

Humans as heroic beings

Happiness as the moral purpose of life

Reason as the only absolute

Reality exists independently of consciousness

Direct contact with reality through sense perception

Attain objective knowledge from perception through the process of concept formation and inductive logic



# Objectivist Epistemology

## Implications

Primary emphasis of free will is the choice to think or not to think

Primary virtue in Objectivist ethics is rationality

Rand opposed racism

Proponent of Feminism

Rand advocated the right to legal abortion, free speech, non violence

# Objectivist Epistemology

## Consciousness

The faculty of perceiving that which exists

To be conscious is to be conscious of something

Consciousness cannot be distinguished or conceptualized except in relation to an independent reality

The mind does not create reality; it is a means of discovering reality

Consciousness is identification

Metaphysical principle that existence is identity

Consciousness possesses a specific and finite identity like everything else that exists

Emotions are not tools of cognition

# Morality

Necessary means to long-term survival

Not a social contract

Dictated by necessity to think and produce to survive

Happiness is the ultimate value

A life of emotional fulfillment in worthwhile goals and activities

Happiness necessarily involves virtue

Rationality: commitment to maintain mental focus in all issues and choices

# Virtue

Charity, kindness, generosity, and forgiveness are not major virtues or moral duty

Whether, and how much, one should help others depends on their place in one's rationally defined hierarchy of values

Never morally appropriate is to make a sacrifice, to surrender something of value to oneself for the sake of something of less or no value

Never moral to knowingly risk one's life for a stranger

Never sacrifice happiness for another, whether stranger or friend

Appropriate to help a stranger only in an emergency and only when the risk to our own life or well-being is minimal

People unable to work must rely on voluntary charity, implying that it may be appropriate to support strangers in non-emergency situations

# Hero

Protagonists are men and women in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century industrial America

Novels exhibit the importance of striving to be the best

Heroes of integrity, lead colorful and remarkable lives, succeed because of their uncompromising virtue

The conditional nature of life that gives rise to moral values

Basic alternative facing any living entity is life or death

Metaphysically, life is the only phenomenon that is an end in itself: a value gained and kept by a constant process of action

Survival is the organism's ultimate value, the final goal to which all lesser goals are the means

To choose to live is to accept one's life as one's ethical purpose

Values are determined by objective life-needs

Values are objective and ethics is a requirement of human survival

# Rights, Capitalism, the Trader Principle, and Government

Force and mind are opposites; morality ends where a gun begins

Ideal society of independent individuals who respect each other's rights to life, liberty, and property

Trade value for value, materially and spiritually

Individual rights are the means of subordinating society to moral law

Criticizes both conservatives and liberals (as these terms are understood in American politics) for wanting government to control the realm they regard as important: the spiritual or moral realm in the case of conservatives, and the material or economic realm in the case of liberals

U.S. conservatives focus on economics (free market). Choose to ignore issues such as abortion, pornography, atheism, etc.

Both sides lack understanding of human need to be free in both realms

Laissez-faire capitalism separation of state and economics, same reasons as the separation of state and church

Government regulation of the market is responsible for corrupting state and market institutions

Regulation creates the opportunity for the trading of favors between politicians , religious leaders, and businesses (referred to as “state capture”, Public Choice Theory in Political Science and Public Administration)



# Government

Minimal, limited to protection from criminals and foreign aggressors, enforcing individual rights and contracts with the help of the police and armed forces, using objectively defined civil and criminal laws and courts

All progress is the human mind, and the mind does not function well when forced

Objects to any form of censorship including legal restrictions on pornography, opinion or worship



# Aesthetics

Actions need guidance by a vision of the fundamental nature of the universe and the efficacy of human thought and activity

Function of art is to meet this psychological need by expressing abstract conceptual values and metaphysical truths in concrete form

Role of art transform metaphysical ideas by reproduction of reality to a physical form-a work of art-easily comprehended

# Assessment

Metaphysics

Epistemology

Ethics

Politics

Aesthetics

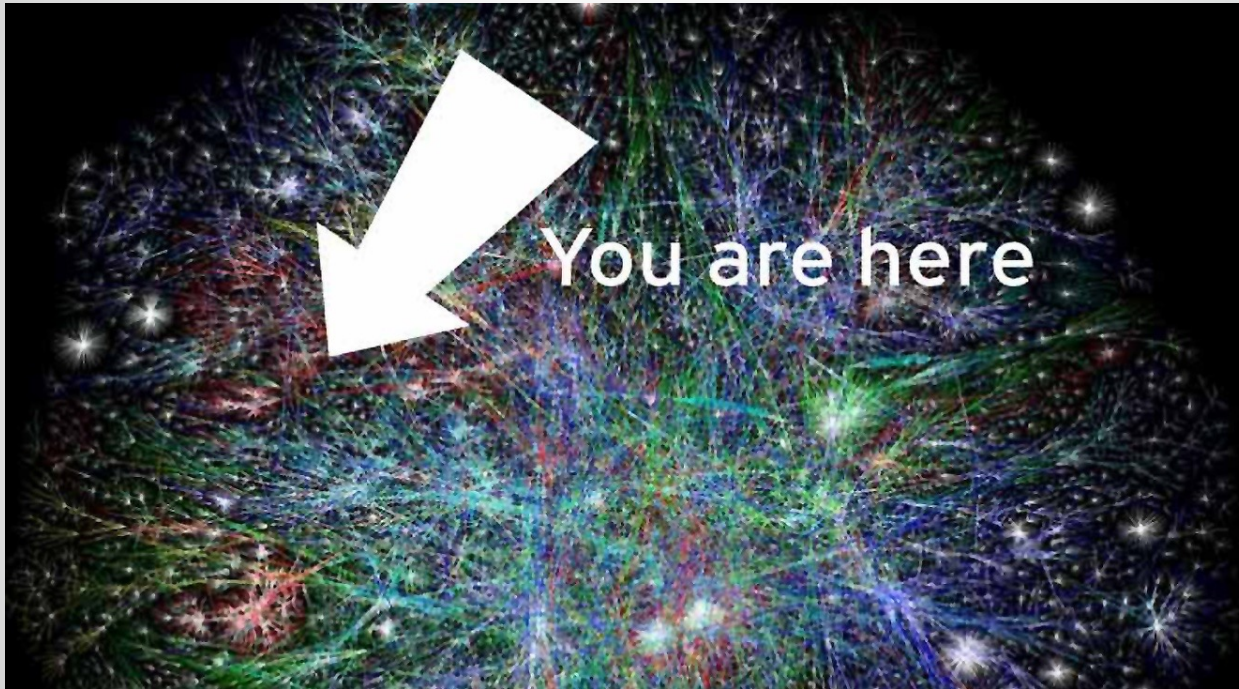
Metaphysics

Grade A+

# Existence Precedes Essence

Central claim of existentialism

Reverses the traditional philosophical view that the essence (the nature) of a thing is more fundamental and immutable than its existence (the mere fact of being)



The observable universe is a sphere  
Diameter of about 93 billion light-years

# Homo Habilis: Creator of the Universe

One of the earliest humans, lived about 2.4 million to 1.4 million years ago in Africa

Its “consciousness” created the Universe (essence precedes existence)

Anthropocentric:

For the 13+ billion years before Homo Sapiens appeared on this one planet there was no experience whatsoever - nothing was seen, touched, felt, known, etc.

Without capacity to detect anything, or to distinguish it from nothing, there is no real difference between a universe without consciousness and a universe that does not exist

Inconceivable

Epistemology

Grade B



# Rational Thinking

Economics, Cognitive Science, Biology, etc, assume that both humans and animals have unlimited information, unlimited computational power and unlimited time to make a decision.

Unbounded rationality: decisions which follow the axioms of the expected utility theory are optimal and fully rational .

Unbounded rationality cannot be applied in real world decision making

Humans and animals have limited resources: they need to make inferences under uncertainty, limited knowledge, computational power and time

Bounded rationality incorporates heuristics (or rules of thumb) gathered by experience and memory to process decisions

Decision-makers are satisficers (Simon)

Framing Effect: a cognitive bias (Tversky and Kahneman)

- People react differently to some choices depending on how that choice is presented
- Avoid risk when a positive frame is presented but seek risks when a negative frame is presented
- Framing effects also occur in primates

# Perceptual Decision-Making Strategies

Mouse and human perceptual decision-making might entail alternating between a series of different strategies. (Princeton University published in Nature Neuroscience)

Mice and humans switch between engaged and disengaged strategies

Disengaged states may require less energy

Due to finite energy budget to perform tasks



# Behavioral Genetics

Broad conclusions from behavioral genetic research include:

- All behavioral traits and disorders are influenced by genes
- Environmental influences tend to make members of the same family more different, rather than more similar
- The influence of genes tends to increase in relative importance as individuals age

Ethics  
Grade B+

# Utopian Vision

Imaginary society possesses perfect qualities for its members

Sir Thomas Moore, 1516, fictional island society in the New World

Some believe Moore's Utopia was satire: intended to reveal more about England than an ideal society

In common parlance, "impossible", "far-fetched" or "deluded"

Hypothetical utopias focus on equality in economics, government, justice. But many examples of techno-dystopias, Brave New World and 1984

Method and structure of implementation vary based on ideology

“There is nothing like a dream to create the future. Utopia to-day, flesh and blood tomorrow.” — Victor Hugo

“Progress is the realization of Utopias.” —Oscar Wilde

Marx used the word "utopia" to denote unscientific social theories

# Rands Utopian Vision

Thomas Paine:

- Rights cannot be granted by any charter because this would legally imply they can also be revoked
- Rights would be reduced to privileges

Winston Churchill:

- “Democracy is the worst form of government – except for all the others that have been tried”
- Applies to the capitalist system as well

Isaac Asimov law of Robots:

- Robots shall avoid actions or situations that could cause it to come to harm itself

On an airplane:

- Oxygen and the air pressure are always being monitored.
- In the event of a decompression, an oxygen mask will automatically appear
- If you are travelling with a child or someone who requires assistance, secure your mask then assist the other person

Camus "there is only one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide"

The surprising dark side of empathy:

- Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of others by imagining oneself in their place
- Too in tune with other people's emotions too much of the time, can lead to exhaustion, apathy, even aggression and cruelty. (BBC 2022)

# Rand's Utopian Vision

As good as any

In its pure form, Rand's philosophy would work very well if humans were never helpless and dependent through no fault of their own

Based on premises it is noble, kind hearted and consistent

Free women and men living in harmony

Racial and sexual equality

Freedom of speech

Presents a vision of a better world

Many components have been achieved as a result of her work

# How to Live a Long Life

## Martin Niemoller

German Lutheran pastor : initially nationalist and pro Nazi

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a socialist

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a trade unionist

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Jew

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me

Arrested 1934 sent to Dachau. Released by the Allies 1945

# Ralph Waldo Emerson

“It is not the length of life, but the depth”



Politics  
Grade B+

# John Locke

The Enlightenment included a range of ideas:

- Value of human happiness
- Pursuit of knowledge obtained by reason
- Evidence of the senses
- Liberty, progress, toleration, fraternity, constitutional government and separation of church and state
- Natural rights were inalienable

Like Hobbes, Locke believed that human nature allows people to be selfish..

All people equal and independent, and a natural right to defend his "life, health, liberty, or possessions"

Like Hobbes, unused property is wasteful and an offence against nature

Property is a natural right:

- Property precedes government and government cannot "dispose of the estates of the subjects arbitrarily"

Influenced United States Declaration of Independence

- However, added Happiness and excluded Property

# Proponent of Slavery and Colonization

Locke investor and beneficiary of the slave-trading Royal Africa company

His contribution to Fundamental constitutions of Carolina established a quasi feudal aristocracy

- Carolinian planters absolute power over their enslaved chattel property
- Constitutions pledged that "every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his negro slaves"

## Locke Supported Child Labour

"Essay on the Poor Law", the children of labouring people are an ordinary burden to the parish, and are usually maintained in idleness, so that their labour also is generally lost to the public till they are 12 or 14 years old

Working schools be set up in each parish for poor children so that they will be from infancy [three years old] inured to work

# John Locke Philosopher

English philosopher and physician, widely regarded as one of the most influential Enlightenment thinkers and the "Father of Liberalism"

Rand philosophy based, in part, on Locke

Rand against racism and child labour

Locke considered one of the greatest philosophers

But not Rand

Locke's parents were Protestant Puritans

Education: Oxford University (B.A., M.A., Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery)

A case of *Argumentum ad hominem*

# Market Failure

Individual pursuit of self-interest may lead to results that are not efficient— and may be improved through intervention

Market failures:

- Public goods
- Information asymmetry
- Oligopoly and Monopoly: non competitive markets
- Externalities (pollution)

At apex of free enterprise capitalism America passed antitrust legislation (Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 and the Clayton Act of 1914)

# Selected Forms of Government

Which one (or combination) is the Best

## Power structure

- Anarchy
- Confederation
- Unitary state
- Federation
- Democratic representation
- Oligarchy
- Aristocracy
- Republic
- Theocracy
- People's Republic
- Monarchy
- World government

# Selected Forms of Government

Socio-economic attributes: A lot of “isms”

- Capitalism
- Colonialism
- Feudalism
- Communism
- Federalism
- Socialism: Means of production are commonly owned by the people and undertaken for use rather than profit

# A Plethora of Choice Power Structures and Socio-Economic Attributes

Why have we not found the right combination?

Because the right combination does not exist



# People are the Problem, not the System

A former moderator suing YouTube, failing to protect workers who remove violent videos. Prior to employment plaintiff was required to watch murders, abortions, child rape, animal mutilation and suicides. Then it got worse

Modern slavery occurs "when a person is under the control of another person who applies violence and force: About 40.3 million slaves around the world.10 million are children

Missing women shortfall in the number of women relative to expected number (Sen)

- Mainland China 50 million women "missing" – that should be there but are not
- Adding South and West Asia results in "missing" women higher than 100 million
- Caused by sex-selective abortions, female infanticide, and inadequate healthcare and nutrition for female children

# Conclusion

# Objectivism

Best countries incorporate Rand's ideals (Human Development Index, Transparency International)

- Capitalist: government promotes entrepreneurship
- Limited state ownership of means of production
- Democracy, freedom of expression
- Rule of Law
- Promote equality
- Property rights

With the addition of a social safety net: humans dependent through no fault of their own

Rand

Final Grade

B+