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Final Essay

My philosophy, in essence, is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute.

—Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* 35th anniversary edition

“*Shoot, it’s 2 o’clock...*” I thought as I hurriedly took the last drag of my cigarette. I flicked it to the ground where it landed on a half melted pool of snow; there was no name on it, only a trademark. Stamped in gold on the thin, white paper, there stood the sign of the dollar. I had three minutes to print out my response paper and climb the six flights of stairs to the third floor of Debartolo Hall before the digital clock of the building caught up to my wristwatch. As I entered the classroom with unsuccessful discreetness at 2:01 PM, Professor Ruccio shot me a look and matter-of-factly stated, “Glad you could join us...”, before continuing his daily opening comments. “...and now for a little background information and context. Ayn Rand founded the philosophy of Objectivism, a school of thought which focused on life on earth, grounded in reality, and aimed at defining man's nature and the nature of the world in which he lives. Rand presented her philosophy through her novels *The Fountainhead*, *Atlas Shrugged*, and nonfiction works such as *The Objectivist Newsletter*, *The Objectivist*, *The Ayn Rand Letter*, and *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*. Objectivism holds that reality exists independent from consciousness, and individual persons are in contact with this reality through sensory perception. Human beings can gain objective knowledge from perception through the process of concept formation. The proper moral purpose of one's life is the pursuit of one's own happiness, or rational self-interest and the only social system consistent with this morality is full respect for individual rights, embodied in pure laissez-faire capitalism.” I had settled down and was finally able to begin jotting notes around “sensory perception”. I turned to my left to look over at

Patrick's notes, but his hopelessly illegible handwriting made me surrender my efforts to catch up to the Professor's introduction of our latest book. Comforted by the fact that I could look up the information on Wikipedia, if I ever needed it in the future, I relaxed and focused on simply listening. Just then, I sat up with a start and suddenly realized something was very, very wrong...that was definitely not Patrick's shoulder I had looked over...

“Rand was born in Russia in 1905....” continued Professor Ruccio. “Her life changed drastically when her father's pharmacy was broken into by the Bolsheviks and his livelihood was declared the property of the state. She fled the Soviet Union in 1926 and arrived later that year in Hollywood. According to a 2007 *New York Times* article, while peering through a gate at the set of a silent movie, ‘King of Kings’, Rand was offered a ride around the set by the director Cecil B. DeMille. He then offered her a job as an extra on the film and later a position as a junior screenwriter. She sold a number of screenplays and sporadically wrote several unsuccessful novels. In 1943, however, she got her big break with *The Fountainhead*, a novel about an idealistic young architect who chooses to struggle in obscurity rather than compromise his artistic and personal vision. Fans of the novel began a word-of-mouth campaign that helped sales enormously. Shortly after, *Atlas Shrugged*, the book you all have just completed, was published in 1957.”

“Now, truth in advertising, I never knew Ayn Rand. But your classmate, Mr. Greenspan, was a very close and dear friend of hers and insisted we add her novel to the curriculum. I normally would not let a student's opinion influence my syllabus, but given the obvious relevance to the rest of books we have read in class and its relevance to our current economic situation, I decided to make an exception. Mr. Greenspan met Ms. Rand, at the age of 25, after having married a member of her inner circle, the Collective. He was attracted to her novel *Atlas*

Shrugged for its moral defense of capitalism and once described it in a letter to *The New York Times* as ‘a celebration of life and happiness. Justice is unrelenting. Creative individuals and undeviating purpose and rationality achieve joy and fulfillment.’ So...you all read the book, what did you think?”

I started to my left in disbelief...there, sitting in Patrick’s usual spot, was Adam Smith. As I looked around the room I realized that none of my classmates were present. Where Belen normally sat was Deirdre McCloskey, next to her, Stephen Resnick, next to him a bald Richard Wolff. *What is going on? What are they all doing here?* Next to Professor Wolff sat Thorstein Veblen, Kevin Phillips, Karl Polanyi, Naomi Klein and in the far corner, Alan Greenspan.

After a long pause Professor Ruccio insisted: “She’s speaking to each of you! She’s challenging each of your theories! Adam, start us off, what struck you most?”

Glancing at the professor over his spectacles, Smith thought for a moment before responding. “I suppose...I suppose what stuck me most about her philosophy was her objective approach to knowledge and values. I view the economy to have a natural order. The tendency to exchange is intrinsic in human nature. When a society allows this natural tendency to exchange to take place through the social and technical division of labor, measured, prudent self-interest will lead to the increase of the wealth of a nation...”

“...Stop” interrupted Ruccio. “We read your book. We know what your perception of the economy is. Bring in Rand; what did you find you agreed with her on?”

“Well, we both agreed that self-interest is the proper motivation for actions as opposed to a superimposed code of ethics or virtues. Furthermore, we both suggest that only people guided by self-interest are able to contribute to the greater good. The innovations of Dagny Taggart and Hank Rearden, for example, benefited their entire community. The John Galt Line, a product of

Rearden's stronger, cheaper metal and Dagny's groundbreaking engineering, provided faster, more efficient transportation for the entire country. Both persons were motivated by self-interest. Jim Taggart and his 'Washington boys', on the other hand, acted based solely on an external code of conduct and produced nothing but a series of directives that were supposedly intended to bring fairness into society. In reality, these directives drove the wealth of the nation drastically down and stunted ingenuity and the creative capacities of able individuals."

"Good. So, you both agree that pursuing one's own interests leads to increased productivity, which in turn causes growth and increases the wealth of a nation. How about the means of achieving this productivity? Do both your economies go about increasing productivity and growth in the same way?"

"In my economy, the key to growth is increasing the productivity of labor. Regarding productivity, the social and technical division of labor can be a very positive thing. The division of labor brings about a clear increase in efficiency, dexterity and skill. These factors, along with a significant decrease in wasted time, increase innovation. Take my pin-factory as an example of the increased efficiency that results from labor division: in one day, a single man could scarcely make one pin, at most twenty. Conversely, I have seen ten men in a pin factory in which work was divided make up to twelve pounds of pins in a day. At about four thousand pins a pound, that's forty-eight thousand pins in a day! Additionally, I illustrate how the division of labor is conducive not only to efficiency but also to innovation through my example of the little boy whose sole job was to open and shut the communication between the boiler and the cylinder in the first fire-engines. Motivated by his preference to play with friends rather than work, he found that by tying a string from the handle of the valve to another part of the machine, the valve would open and close without his assistance. The simplicity of his job allowed him to focus on new,

better way to get it done. The division of labor, therefore, leads to increased innovation and productivity of labor, which are the keys to growth.”

“How is productivity, then, achieved in Rand’s economy?”

“Rand furthers my criteria for increasing wealth and production by emphasizing the importance of reason in realizing productive knowledge. She argues that while knowledge exists objectively, an individual must use reason to become fully aware of this knowledge and to be able to use it to satisfy his or her personal ends. A man or woman therefore needs objective principles grounded in the facts of reality to serve as a benchmark in the pursuit of what makes him or her happy.”

“...For example...?”

“For example...when Dagny Taggart discovers a more efficient way to construct the bridge on the John Galt Line! She does not develop that innovation as a result of having divided the work among several engineers who were able to focus on improving their sole piece of the bridge. She, a whole person, used the principles of engineering to reason through an entire problem and come up with a revolutionary solution...because she wanted to, because it made her happy to achieve something productive.”

“So what do you conclude?”

“I conclude...that while we both agree the pursuit of one’s self interest leads to productivity and growth, our economies have different means of achieving innovative productivity that increases the wealth of our nation. In other words, while the everyday person is the hero in my economic story, the *thinking* person is the hero in Ayn Rand’s story.”

“Sure, fine. Anybody care to comment on Smith’s conclusion?”

Veblen, dressed in a flannel button-down shirt, a beanie, and plastic rimmed glasses, tentatively raised his hand, glancing around to see if anyone else had anything to say.

“Go ahead, Thor.”

“Yeah, I was just thinking that Smith’s interpretation of the hero in Rand’s economic story parallels pretty well the hero in my own economy, the industrial engineer. Dagny Taggert, whose occupation also happens to be an engineer, exemplifies the productive qualities of workmanship which make up the fiber of my economic hero. Dagny solves problems using labor and critical and practical thinking to reach concrete ends. She practices the technical and sustained application of thinking and doing. Her morality and values are not tied up in conspicuous consumption, but rather in the very qualities that make her a productive member of society. She personifies the industrial process involved in problem-solving which is the driving force of the economy.”

“That fits in fairly well, but I wonder where you could find the divide between your hero and Rand’s?”

“I suppose Rand’s hero would not be limited to engineers...Hugh Akston, the philosopher Dagny Taggert encounters in the Wisconsin diner, is obviously also one of the fallen heroes of the novel. I suppose she puts more of an emphasis on having the measure of reason than the raw ability to engineer.”

The class began to get a little restless. I had lost track of the time, and was completely wrapped up in the reactions I could see forming in my new classmates’ faces.

“She’s just as bad as the Neo-Classicals!” exclaimed McCloskey. “Instead of Prudence Only, she’s emphasizing Reason Only. You just cannot justify a capitalist system without having all seven virtues! This is absolutely necessary to address within economic theory and within

contemporary society. It is not enough that she states capitalism is good. She must go further and claim capitalism is not only compatible with all seven virtues, but that Prudence along with Temperance, Justice, Courage, Love, Faith, and Hope are *promoted* by capitalism. She does not mention virtues at all. For Rand, from reason stems happiness, and happiness is the only measure of an individual's moral compass."

"I appreciate that Rand is trying to embed the economy" chimed in Polanyi. "She's saying that reasonable, and therefore moral, people, when left alone to innovate and produce will make for a wealthy nation. But not *everyone* is reasonable! We cannot have a system that strives to mold society, society must mold our economic system! The reasonable in *Atlas Shrugged* were few...Francisco, Hank, Dagny, the rest of the engineers...they were far outweighed by the sheep-like masses. So few people cannot determine what is best for a society on the whole."

"Don't make me mad..." threatened McCloskey. "We've had this conversation before...capitalism can of course be considered to be embedded in society!"

"Embedded in society? Of course not! The entire system is fictitious! John Galt's entire method was based on shock doctrine! Except instead of waiting for a natural disaster to implement a free-market capitalist system, he created his *own* disaster!" argued Klein.

"We're getting a little unfocused here!" urged Professor Ruccio. "Not that *that* ever happens in this class. Alright, we have 10 minutes left, let's wrap this up. Who hasn't said anything yet this class?" He looked straight at me. "Well? What have you gotten out of this discussion?"

My hands started sweating. My head started spinning. What could I possibly say in front of this class? What in the world could I add to this conversation?

“It...it was the only book we’ve read that made me feel that it is OK to be successful...successful in the sense that I grew up understanding it to mean. It is OK to strive to be great; it is OK to want to work hard and be creative and make money just for the sake of being productive and enjoying its rewards. Not only is it OK, but I would be a good person for it. It was the only book I’ve read this semester that has restored a shred of pride in the foundation of the American economy. I almost cried while reading Francisco d’Anconia’s monologue refuting that money was the root of all evil. It was the only book I’ve read this semester that I’ve felt in my gut has made perfect sense with every point it made.”

From across the room, Mr. Greenspan looked at me with nostalgic eyes and a sad knowing smile...