

## Introduction to Ayn Rand and Objectivism

### BIOGRAPHY

Ayn Rand was born in St. Petersburg, Russia in 1905. At an early age, (6) she taught herself to read. At the age of nine, she decided to make fiction writing her career. She admired the European writers Walter Scott (*Ivanhoe*) and Victor Hugo (*Les Miserables*) and thought of herself as a European writer. She thoroughly opposed the mysticism and collectivism of Russian culture. When she was in high school, she witnessed the Kerensky revolution which she supported and the Bolshevik revolution which she opposed.

- **Kerensky Revolution:** Its immediate result was the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II, the collapse of Imperial Russia and the end of the Romanov dynasty. Tsarism was replaced by a Russian Provisional Government under Prince Georgy Lvov, an alliance between liberals and socialists who wanted to instigate political reform, creating a democratically-elected executive and constituent assembly. The cause of the revolution is a matter of debate between modern historians, but most agree the deepest cause was attributed to Imperial Russia's failure, throughout the 19th and early 20th century, to modernize its archaic social, economic and political structures.
- **Bolshevik Revolution:** The October Revolution in Petrograd overthrew the Russian Provisional Government and gave the power to the local soviets dominated by Bolsheviks. As the revolution was not universally recognized outside of Petrograd there followed the struggles of the Russian Civil War (1917–1922) and the creation of the Soviet Union in 1922.

In order to escape the fighting, her family moved to the Crimea, where she finished high school and first learned of American history, which greatly influenced her perspective of what a nation of free men should be. Her family returned to Russia in 1924 where she began her studies in philosophy and history at the University of Petrograd; however, by that time communists took over the university and eliminated free enquiry and imposed its own ideologies. So in 1925, she obtained permission to leave the USSR to visit relatives in the US – she had no intention of returning to Russia.

In 1926, she got a job in Hollywood as a script reader. In 1929 she married Frank O'Connor, an actor she met at the studio. After struggling at several non-writing jobs, she finally sold her first screen play entitled *Red Pawn*. She published *We the Living* in 1936, but was not well received by American intellectuals and reviewers. She started writing *The Fountainhead* in 1935, but it wasn't published until 1943. While she was writing the *Fountainhead*, she also wrote and published *Anthem* in 1938. *Atlas Shrugged* is considered Rand's masterpiece and was published in 1957. She died in New York city in 1982.

### THE ESSENTIALS OF OBJECTIVISM

*"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

Ayn Rand named her philosophy "Objectivism" and described it as a philosophy for living on earth. Objectivism is an integrated system of thought that defines the abstract principles by which man must think and act if he is to live the life proper to man.

**Comment [1]:** A key concept in *Anthem*. The title *Anthem* was originally *Ego*, and in essence, the book itself is a tribute, or "anthem" if you will, to man's ego. Now this is not a direct criticism of men and their inflated egos; rather, it's a broader philosophical tribute to man and his brain – the most important physiological attribute that separates us from the rest of the animal kingdom.

The basic principles of Objectivism can be summarized as follows:

1. **Metaphysics:** “Reality, the external world, exists independent of man’s consciousness, independent of any observer’s knowledge, beliefs, feelings, desires or fears. This means that A is A, that facts are facts, that things are what they are, and that the task of man’s consciousness is to *perceive* reality, *not* to create or invent it.” Thus, Objectivism **rejects** any belief in the **supernatural** —and any claim that **individuals or groups create their own reality**.
2. **Epistemology:** “Man’s reason is **fully competent to know the facts of reality**. Reason, the conceptual faculty, is the faculty that identifies and integrates the material provided by man’s senses [sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch]. Reason is man’s only means of acquiring knowledge.” Thus, objectivism rejects mysticism (any acceptance of faith or feeling as a means of knowledge), and rejects skepticism (the claim that certainty or knowledge is impossible).
3. **Human Nature:** Man is a rational being. Reason, as man’s only means of knowledge, is his basic means of survival. But the exercise of reason depends on each individual’s choice. “Man is a being of volitional consciousness.” “That which you call your soul or spirit is your consciousness, and that which you call ‘free will’ is your mind’s freedom to think or not, the only will you have, your only freedom. [This is] the choice that controls all the choices you make and determines your life and character.” **Thus, Objectivism rejects any form of determinism, the belief that man is a victim of forces beyond his control.**
4. **Ethics:** “Reason is man’s only proper judge of values and his only proper guide to action. The **proper standard of ethics is: man’s survival *qua* man—i.e., that which is required by man’s nature for his survival *as a rational being***. Rationality is man’s basic virtue. Man – every man – is an end in himself, not a means to the ends of others; he must live for his own sake, neither sacrificing himself to others nor sacrificing others to himself; he must work for his *rational* self-interest, with the achievement of his own happiness as the highest moral purpose of his life.” Thus, **Objectivism rejects any form of altruism** – the claim that morality consists in living for others or for society.
5. **Politics:** “The basic *social* principle of the Objectivist ethics is that no man has the right to seek values from others by means of physical force – i.e., **no man or group has the right to *initiate* the use of physical force against others**. Men have the right to use force *only* against those who **initiate its use**. Men must deal with one another as *traders*, giving value for value, by free, mutual consent to mutual benefit. Capitalism is a system based on the recognition of individual rights, including property rights, in which the only function of the government is to protect individual rights.” **Thus, Objectivism rejects any form of collectivism**, such as fascism or socialism. It also rejects the current “mixed economy” notion that government should regulate the economy and redistribute wealth.

**Comment [J2]:** Follow the flow chart: this premise can only be validated if one accepts Rand’s assumption above about metaphysics – that reality is independent of man’s consciousness. It places consciousness and spirituality as an abstract, which falls outside the realm of conceptual reality – in other words, man’s ability to know, to reason, only come from the senses and any other form of knowledge is rejected.

**Comment [J3]:** An echo of Maslow who stated that survival is the most basic need a person must fulfill before he/she fulfills all other needs.

**Comment [J4]:** Another important point echoed in *Anthem*. Rand’s objectivism rejects any form of collectivism (a basic principle in socialism) and instead focuses on the individual instead of the good of the group. **Socialism vs Capitalism**

**Comment [J5]:** In an ideal society this is certainly a valid premise; however, the assumption is that man *will* initiate physical force – you can’t have your cake and eat it too – in other words, you can’t have one without the other. It assumes man’s rational nature will overcome his base instincts. Furthermore, who defines what actions are *initiated* and which ones are in defense?