

Should “Atlas Shrug”?

A Brief Christian Response to Ayn Rand’s Objectivist Philosophy

By Eric V. Snow

“Who is John Galt”? Well then, correspondingly, just who is Ayn Rand? What is Objectivism? How should Christians respond to unique Rand’s brand of atheism? By advocating laissez-faire capitalism and by attacking altruism, she certainly poses a different kind of threat than (say) Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Sam Harris. Since the film “Atlas Shrugged Part 1” is now hitting America’s movie theaters, it’s timely for Christians to review some of the fundamental errors in Ayn Rand’s Objectivist philosophy. Although her philosophy is indeed correct in certain limited areas of epistemology, metaphysics, and (astonishingly) even ethics, Objectivism is wrong to deny God’s existence, the Bible as God’s revelation to mankind, and the duty for voluntary self-sacrifice to God and the poor.

Building upon the philosophy proclaimed in the 1943 novel “The Fountainhead” about the career struggles and ultimate success of the architect Howard Roark, Ayn Rand, the Russian-American philosophical novelist (1905-82), published the novel “Atlas Shrugged” in 1957. Its basic plot describes the worldwide and especially American economic collapse that results from a “strike” by the productive rich businessmen and other innovators in society. Much like the approach of her countryman Dostoevsky in “The Brothers Karamazov,” “Atlas Shrugged” lays out the author’s philosophical position through the characters’ actions, dialogs, and speeches. Although it states an overall intellectual position much more completely than “The Fountainhead” did, it’s less successful as a novel since its characters’ development and actions are so subordinated to proclaiming a message. Despite its happy ending, the novel also has a generally pessimistic, depressing air as it describes in such detail for so many pages the world’s and especially America’s general economic decline and collapse as various wrong-

headed laws and regulations are implemented and more of the productive rich and capable go on strike. Although a full review of Ayn Rand's philosophy from an intellectual Christian perspective would require a book that rivals the length of "Atlas Shrugged," this essay will only hit upon a few obvious errors and limitations in Rand's philosophy. However, it's necessary to give the devil his due when he's right: In certain areas, Ayn Rand's philosophy is much more correct than the skeptical, subjectivist secular philosophy that reigns in our culture today, which is largely traceable back to the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776). (Corresponding to her original Russian nationality, Ayn Rand focused so much more of her fire upon the Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) than upon Hume. But in the English-speaking world, Hume is surely more influential overall, especially when considering that so often Kant's philosophy took Hume's positions as his starting point. He's been called the "Prussian Hume" for good reason. Hume also is a better writer than Kant, which surely promoted his influence among those who can read English). It's a major error for Christians to try to refute atheism by attacking human reason broadly, such as found in Dinesh D'Souza's "What's So Great About Christianity." Christianity isn't proven to be true by (say) attacking the metaphysical reliability of the law of cause and effect, as Hume did. Human reason has its place, just as sex does, but we need to keep both from jumping the tracks that mark God's will for us, which is His law as revealed by Scripture.

Ayn Rand's most fundamental error is to assume the truth of the broader skeptical culture concerning the arguments for God's existence and the Bible's historical accuracy. She spends an enormous amount of effort in attacking Christian ethics, as it proclaims the need to sacrifice ourselves to help the weak and to serve God, and the place of suffering in serving a useful purpose (as Christians believe) in strengthening our character. But she hardly ever felt the need to refute the traditional proofs for God's existence. Apparently she knew nothing about the standard evidence for a rational faith in the Bible as a revelation from an almighty God based upon archeological discoveries, its historical accuracy, and fulfilled prophecies. I would publicly challenge any Objectivist to refute in detail, page by page, even my own essay that reviews such evidence, which is posted on the apologetics page of this Web site: [http://www.lionofjudah1.org/Apologeticshtml/Is the Bible the Word of God.htm](http://www.lionofjudah1.org/Apologeticshtml/Is%20the%20Bible%20the%20Word%20of%20God.htm) How

much do those advocating Objectivism know about such writers as C.S. Lewis, Josh McDowell, Lee Strobel, Henry Morris, Duane Gish, J.P. Moreland, Francis Schaeffer, Phillip E. Johnson, R.C. Sproul, Norman Giesler, Gleason Archer, etc.? How much of the Objectivist position is based upon simple raw ignorance of Christian apologetics? Could even the likes of Dr. Leonard Peikoff, Ayn Rand's intellectual and literary heir, be stunned and lose if had to debate publicly the likes of Dr. Duane Gish about the theory of evolution's scientific merits?

Ironically, Rand took for granted the religious foundation left her from David Hume and Immanuel Kant, that western philosophy had refuted natural theology in the Thomist mold (as based in principle upon Romans 1:19-21). She accepted the conclusions of her philosophical archenemy, Kant in "The Critique of Pure Reason," who refuted (to the reigning culture's satisfaction) the three traditional arguments (the ontological, the cosmological, and the teleological, based on design) for God's existence. (The true philosophical antipode to Kant is the medieval theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274), who used Greek reason to help support the Christian faith. It's no coincidence, as Western culture has increasingly rejected medieval scholasticism's general synthesis reason and faith, that it has become both more irreligious and less rational in the past three centuries). For someone who supposedly thought through her intellectual foundation to the nth degree, she knew astonishingly so little about the theory of evolution, despite it's our civilization's reigning myth for refuting the argument from design. "Darwin's Black Box," by Michael Behe, which it analyzes irreducible biological complexity using an ingenious "mousetrap" analogy, demonstrates that the argument from design is still a live issue. Contrary to Darwinism's advocates, updated versions of William Paley's argument from design based upon finding a watch on a beach is still fully intellectually credible. Although her truly fanatical atheism utterly depends upon the truth of this metaphysical construct that masquerades as a scientific theory, she admitted ("Philosophy: Who Needs It," p. 45): "I am not a student of the theory of evolution and, therefore, I am neither its supporter nor its opponent." One of Objectivism's most fundamental weaknesses comes from assuming the truth of the general secular culture's skepticism about the rationality of faith in God and the Bible as His revelation.

Objectivism also describes even the high Middle Ages (c. 1050 to 1300) using the crudest kind of Enlightenment-era historical bias. Ironically, Aristotle had more intellectual influence than Plato when Scholasticism was at its height than during the Renaissance. It's not accurate to claim that the Medievals, including even someone like Augustine, told men "to reject their mind as an impotent tool" ("For the New Intellectual," p. 24). Admitting the limits of human reason isn't the same as claiming it to be completely useless. Clearly enough, Roman Catholicism upheld all sorts of entrenched doctrinal errors based upon tradition that required the Protestant Reformers Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli to start to clean up as they turned to the Bible as the ultimate source of authority. Catholicism also plainly spilled a lot of blood during the wars of religion it promoted against the Muslims and various religious dissidents. It unleashed the Inquisition against suspected heretics in its midst. But in response, note that Dinesh D'Souza's "What's So Great About Christianity" usefully recounts how the Medieval church atrocities spilled far less blood than the godless Communists did historically. The Medieval church was a piker compared to Stalin, Mao, and Hitler, despite it had far more centuries to deceive and oppress people than the 20th century's totalitarians had.

Furthermore, the church eventually nurtured in its universities a core of intellectuals who provided the foundation for the scientific revolution and the Renaissance. After all, in what civilization did modern science first arise? It wasn't in China, India, or Islam, despite their generally greater wealth and political stability/unity. The Medieval Muslim philosophers never managed to break clearly with Aristotle's awesome authority intellectually so as to point out his scientific errors. Islam's leading theologians fell into a nearly blind rejection of Aristotle and belief in objective scientific law. But even before the time of Galileo, the West's scholars eventually managed to figure out a way to accept where Aristotle was right while also pointing out to where he was wrong. After all, from where did da Vinci and Galileo get many of their ideas, such as about physics? It wasn't merely Aristotle's Organon. Look back to whom they built upon in their writings, to their 14th-century predecessors at the University of Paris, especially Buridan and Oresme. To dismiss such men who advanced physics beyond its ancient classical foundation

as mere “witch doctors” simply isn’t credible, except among those who remain unaware about the historical research of Stanley Jaki and Pierre Duhem into Medieval science. How Christianity's concept of the rationality of God was tied to the rise of science in the West is best stated by the English philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947):

“I do not think, however, that I have even yet brought out the greatest contribution of medievalism to the formation of the scientific movement. I mean the inexpugnable belief that every detailed occurrence can be correlated with its antecedents in a perfectly definite manner, exemplifying general principles. . . . When we compare this tone of thought in Europe with the attitude of other civilisations when left to themselves, there seems but one source for its origin. It must come from the medieval insistence on the rationality of God, conceived as with the personal energy of Jehovah and with the rationality of a Greek philosopher. Every detail was supervised and ordered: the search could only result in the vindication of the faith in rationality.”

Likewise, the claim that educated people in Europe thought the world was flat can easily be refuted from the pages of Thomas Aquinas’ “Summa Theologica”: They had no need for Columbus to prove the world was round in order to believe that it was, which is an easily exploded historical myth. The late Medieval period can’t be merely dismissed as the preserve of obscurantism, dogmatism, and bloodshed.

Most importantly, Objectivism supplies no solution to why could be called mankind’s “existential dilemma.” That is, we are all alive now, but know we will all die one day. So then, what will we do about it? Can we find a way to escape death and live forever? If so, how? The Bible reveals a solution, by accepting Jesus as personal Savior, so that after we die, we will be resurrected to glory (or translated, as the case may be, should we be alive when Jesus returns). After all, Jesus died, and then returned from the dead. He experienced death, and then came back from it. He is the resurrection and the bread of life. If He hadn’t actually miraculously risen from the dead, the behavior of His earliest disciples wouldn’t have been transformed from dejected, cowardly fear (during which Peter denied his Savior

three times) into indomitable lions who faced large crowds and publicly challenged their nation's leadership for crucifying the Messiah. Hence, the reports of Jesus' resurrection are historically reliable. If the Bible is what it says it is, then Christians are offered eternal life. It has a solution to death, but Rand's philosophy doesn't. At best, assuming it was fully right, it only makes the lives of its adherents more pleasant before the grave overtakes them. Unlike Christianity, Objectivism offers its adherents only death.

Let's commend Ayn Rand for believing morality is absolute, which she argued for in her essay, "The Cult of Moral Grayness" in her collection of essays, "The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism." So far as it goes, she's right to find a basis for values in man's relationship with nature, that indeed "ought" can be derived from "is." As she explains (her emphasis, p. 17): "An organism's life is its standard of value: that which furthers its life is the good, that which threatens it is the evil. . . . Thus the validation of value judgments is to be achieved by reference to the facts of reality. The fact that a living entity is, determines what it ought to do." However, Objectivism falls short by not discovering that the values that man needs for a rational life (including a rational happiness, not just mere survival) in relationship to the world are only there because God built them into nature and set up that relationship. (Objectivism plainly agrees with the spirit of the 19th-century British philosopher John Stuart Mill's statement that it's better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied, that not all pleasures or means of survival are commensurate or morally equal). It's for this reason that the pagan gentiles, who knew nothing about God's word, could still obey some of its dictates, based upon their human reason and psychological needs (Romans 2:14-15):

"When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them."

Furthermore, Objectivist morality emphasizes justice at the grave expense of mercy, which Christianity unites through the sacrificial atoning sacrifice of Jesus upon the cross. It's a major

reason why so many objectivists in the “Ayn Rand cult” of New York in the 1960s were so often generally unhappy people: They would condemn others as well as themselves, and find no way to get forgiveness for the inevitable moral faults that they felt they committed according to their own absolute moral code. To have unconditional love for someone need not lead to condoning or ignoring their sins or moral faults: Love must be tough (cf. Hebrews 12:5-11), not mere squishy “kindness” as C.S. Lewis defined it in “The Problem of Pain.” True love seeks the improvement of the one so loved, not merely the removal of his, her, or its pain.

Despite being an atheist, Ayn Rand, however is to be praised for never complaining about the problem of evil: She never morally condemns God for giving humanity free will. Indeed, she denied the spirit of most of her fellow atheists and agnostics by optimistically upholding what she called the benevolent universe premise, that pain need not be an intrinsic, fundamental part of mankind’s relationship to the universe. Since death and much pain from bad health simply can’t be avoided in this life before Jesus’ return, she was unduly optimistic. As it is written, it’s appointed once for all men to die (Hebrews 9:27). Rand’s follower, Robert Hessen, fails to realize this when writing, “The misery in which women lived before capitalism, might have made them cherish the New Testament injunction: ‘Love not the world, nor the things that are in the world.’ But the productive splendor of capitalism vanquished that view” (“Capitalism the Unknown Ideal,” p. 117). But does materialism ever fully satisfy us? Does having modern luxuries solve the problems of death, bad family relationships, and even much bad health? Does having indoor plumbing fix bad marriages? Does having electricity ultimately prevent death? However, there’s some Scriptural foundation ironically Rand’s optimism: Revelation 21:4 shows that evil is indeed a temporary intruder in the universe. After having served its ultimate purpose, the evil that entered the world when Satan rebelled and when Adam and Eve sinned will one day be banished by the power of God. Because Objectivism upholds a code of moral absolutes that it attempts to objectively derive from nature and mankind’s relationship with it, it parts company from most atheists and agnostics, who opportunistically attack God for allowing evil despite they also deny evil exists based upon moral relativism. (Of course, if one believes nothing is immoral, then it would be consistent to believe it’s fine for

God to allow anything and everything “bad” to happen. If it’s always immoral to judge and condemn others, then it’s also immoral to judge and condemn God for anything He does or doesn’t do). In this regard, Objectivism isn’t totally wrong, but definitely falls short, by properly but selectively perceiving how life need not be miserable all the time, but it passes over how inevitably we’ll all grow sick and die, even if we’ve all lived rational lives by its moral code.

Rand was gravely wrong to confuse the sacrifice of physical values with the sacrifice of one’s moral beliefs. When a Christian martyr chooses to die instead of denying Christ, as has happened so often in history, that’s no different in spirit than Howard Roark’s decision to choose to work in a quarry rather than build a large skyscraper that incorporated compromises in design that he deemed unacceptable. The sincere Christian simply believes that his relationship with his Savior, which is founded on specific beliefs about Him, should never be publicly denied, even at the expense of his continued life. For those Christians who could have worshiped Caesar, and then saved their physical lives, that would be a betrayal like John Galt’s choosing to stop striking to please his torturers in order to avoid the pain of the electric shocks administered to him near the end of the novel “Atlas Shrugged.”

Rand also routinely described altruism in exaggerated terms that assumed it had to incorporate the use of force to accomplish its objectives, such as in her definition of socialism’s goals in “For the New Intellectual” (her emphasis, p. 43): “Socialism is the doctrine that man has no right to exist for his own sake, that his life and his work do not belong to *him*, but belong to society, that the only justification of his existence is his service to society, and that society may dispose of him in any way it pleases for the sake of whatever it deems to be its own tribal collective good.” But true Christianity follows the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount: If Christians are really supposed to be pacifists and to turn the cheek, they obviously shouldn’t be forcing people to care for the poor in violation of the eighth commandment. An officer of the Salvation Army who robbed people door to door in order to really help the poor is plainly acting immorally: The end doesn’t justify the means. If we say altruism should always be voluntary, at least on this side of the millennium, so many of Rand’s objections fall to the ground. Consider this

exaggeration, from the same book, p. 54: “The primordial morality of altruism, with its consequences of slavery, brute force, stagnant terror, and sacrificial furnaces.” How does the Salvation Army’s voluntarily helping the worthy poor to not starve in the streets necessarily cause the kinds of miseries unleashed by Communist dictators?

Another deep error of Ayn Rand’s was to assume that all Christians everywhere at all times had to give up everything to the poor and weak, if they lived by what the Bible teaches, in order to be saved. She always equated altruism with sacrificing everything to someone else, leaving nothing for oneself. For example, notice how Rand describes altruism so exaggeratedly in this passage from John Galt’s speech in “Atlas Shrugged,” her emphasis:

“You fear the man who has a dollar less than you, that dollar is rightfully his, he makes you feel like a moral defrauder. You hate the man who has a dollar more than you, that dollar is rightfully yours, he makes you feel that you are morally defrauded. The man below is a source of your guilt, the man above is a source of your frustration. You do not know what to surrender or demand, when to give and when to grab, what pleasure in life is rightfully yours and what debt is still unpaid by others--you struggle to evade, as 'theory,' the knowledge that by the moral standard you've accepted, you are guilty every moment of your life, there is no mouthful of food you swallow that is not needed by someone somewhere on earth--and you give up the problem in blind resentment, you conclude that moral perfection is not to be achieved or desired, that you will muddle through by snatching as snatch can . . .”

Now self-sacrifice and good works on the model of Mother Teresa’s in Calcutta should be greatly admired. But a proper interpretation of the Bible when all the relevant passages are considered, not just that concerning what Jesus told the young rich ruler, shows most Christians need not live as she did in order to receive salvation. There’s a difference between having the faith and the corresponding good works that show one’s truly saved and going beyond the normal call of duty. For example, note that the standard amount to be given to the poor under the Old Testament law works out to an annualized basis of 2.7% of gross income, since the third tithe was only collected

every third and sixth years in a seven-year cycle. "Tough love" also has a role to play when wisely but charitably attempting to aid the poor (cf. II Thess. 3:6-11). The old Victorian distinction between the worthy and unworthy poor is fully sound, although naturally many gradations among a continuum exist between both groups. For example, to give cash to a known unrecovered alcoholic homeless man will likely increase his misery eventually, not reduce it. Christians indeed do have a duty to care for the poor, but it's hardly an unlimited responsibility that requires them to feel constantly guilty for every dollar that they don't give away above their bare survival needs.

Finally, a key flaw in Rand's general perspective is how unimportant family life is in forming people's characters and general personalities. Although she generally perceives marriage as a good institution, her heroes almost never have children of their own. That shouldn't be a surprise, when she had no children of her own. (She also had an abortion, which explains much of her deeply ironic enmity against the pro-life position). Although one can play games with the words, much like the psychological egoists do who believe nobody is ever really self-sacrificing, it's obvious that raising young children requires great sacrifices from their parents until they become truly self-supporting. Altruism, unconditional love, and undeserved transfers are the order of the day within the family unit, not rational selfishness based on mutually agreed exchanges. The struggles involved in teaching children to become responsible adults are among the most important in most people's lives. For nearly all people, what they do in raising children well or badly is much more significant in affecting the future course of society than what they do at their occupations on a daily basis. Furthermore, even the important professions such as medicine and law, for which their practitioners often make life-and-death decisions on a daily basis, turn people into narrow specialists; good children rearing and married life use much more of the whole person's capabilities and talents than even these professions. The classic problems caused by neglecting family life at the expense of work, such as portrayed in "Death of a Salesman" and "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit," receive no attention in Rand's work. Ironically for a female writer, she puts forth a male-oriented view of self-esteem, which is derived from achievements at work, not personal relationships well maintained.

In conclusion, Christians can easily intellectually derail the John Galt line of Ayn Rand's Objectivist philosophy. As an atheistic Jew, she plainly never seriously investigated the intellectual foundation for Christianity, including the newer proofs for God's existence, the flaws in the theory of evolution, and the historical evidence for the Bible's accuracy and inspiration. She was unaware of the Medieval period's positive intellectual developments. She described absurdly altruism as unlimited and as necessarily incorporating the use of force against those not sacrificing enough. She ignored the importance and necessary self-sacrifice of family life in forming people's characters and developing our whole personalities. True, in certain cases her philosophy is correct, such as when it attacks the general relativistic skepticism of the reigning philosophical culture in epistemology, metaphysics, and even ethics. Her general philosophy is certainly preferable to David Hume's and Immanuel Kant's, but it's dreadfully inferior to Thomas Aquinas' general position. Finally, although it claims to celebrate life, Objectivism can only offer death to its adherents. Jesus Christ offers life to those who are called, repent, and believe (John 11:25): "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."