

# A Conversation About Rand's Writings

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## 1. Introduction

Debi: Welcome, I'm Debi Ghate, Vice President of Education and Research here at the Ayn Rand Institute in Irvine.

Elan: This is Elan Journo. I'm Director of Policy Research at the Ayn Rand Institute. I look at foreign policy and government, and I write and speak for the Institute. I'm pleased to be here with Debi to talk about Ayn Rand's books.

Debi: What we're going to do today is have a conversation about some of the fiction and nonfiction that Ayn Rand wrote, and we hope that this will help introduce some of her writing to you.

Elan: We're going to explore some of the themes in Ayn Rand's works, and the intriguing material that she covers in those. We're going to connect it to some of her novels, for those who have read them, and bring to light the ideas and philosophic import in her work.

Debi: Our purpose is to show the range of Ayn Rand's writings.

Elan: There's a lot to explore—and we'll touch on some books, and perhaps not others.

Debi: So let's get started!

Debi: People know Ayn Rand as a novelist. She wrote four major novels: *Anthem*, *We The Living*, *The Fountainhead*, and *Atlas Shrugged*. In addition to that, Rand wrote a lot of essays over her career—essays that touched on all kinds of issues that were relevant to the culture in her time. Now, her writing was done thirty to forty years ago, and so often people wonder, is that relevant to what we are facing today? How is it relevant? And why be interested in somebody's writings when it's about the past?

Elan: I think a key to that is to recognize that Ayn Rand approached a lot of these issues in a way that picked out a timeless element, either a theme or a point that has resonance today and will be illuminating, even if the issues and the concrete news that she's commenting on is now far in the past. To give an example, even to this day I often revisit some of her articles—those on the Vietnam War, some of her articles on the Watergate issue and the principles involved there, not the ones most commonly understood. There is really value that lasts despite the passage of time in those works.

Debi: Yes, Watergate, you just mentioned that—she was talking about events that were happening at the time. Now, some of the other events she discussed that seem like they're from the past, yet have these kind of timeless elements them—for instance, she wrote about Berlin and about World War II.

Elan: And the student rebellions of the '60s . . . Woodstock.

Debi: Yes, the hippies. She wrote about the hippies. So there's a segment of her writing that takes current issues from that time period and analyzes them. But the reason that it feels as though there's a timeless element to it is because what Ayn Rand is dealing with are philosophical ideas. And because she's talking about philosophy, the idea behind her analysis is just as true today as it was thirty, forty years ago.

Elan: And to expand on that, she is a philosopher. She does deal with the strictly philosophical questions, too. An example is: she looks at the role of duty in morality. A lot of people and a lot of moral theories—take duty as central, they put it front-and-center. On her analysis, the conclusion she reaches is: we have to rethink that, because duty, properly understood, is destructive. She has a whole analysis in the essay called "Causality Versus Duty," and she presents her own view of what morality should look like. And that's a question of morality; it's applicable in all times,

in all places, to all people.

Debi: Yes, it is. One of the books we won't have a chance to cover today is called *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*. Now, epistemology sounds like a very technical philosophical subject, and it is. It's how one acquires knowledge, how one develops and acquires knowledge. So Ayn Rand actually has her own theory of concepts and how we form them. She actually covers technical philosophical issues as well.

## 2. What's on the shelf? Overview of Rand's nonfiction

Elan: Debi, you know, the title of this book has always been associated in my memory with a funny story that a friend of mine told me. We were both in London at the time, and Ayn Rand's books are pretty rare over there. And so he was telling a colleague at work about the title of the book and he was reading it at lunch time. And the other person he was talking to was dumbfounded because he thought, "You mean the virtue of *selflessness*? That's obvious; why would anyone write a book about that?" And, he had to show them and make them read it carefully, because the title was *The Virtue of Selfishness*. And at that point, that was a conversation point, because the other person thought, "Who would write a book like that? That is just staggering. That has got to be a typo. Who would allow a typo on the cover of a book like this?" Then, that started them into deep conversation, because what Ayn Rand said in the opening pages is, I titled this book very deliberately with the goal of getting people to question their view of this concept.

Debi: You know, the *virtue* of selfishness . . . I think Ayn Rand actually viewed a lot of things as virtuous that most people wouldn't. So, selfishness was one of them. Selfishness is just viewed as one of the most . . . it's what leads to the unraveling of our society, when people are selfish and greedy and all those things. But for her it's a virtue. So, that title is definitely provocative. But so are the other titles.

Elan: Right, right. I mean, the one that I remember worrying about carrying it around on campus, because if someone saw it . . .

Debi: Really?

Elan: It's *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*. She says it's unknown, contrary to what people think they know, and that it's an ideal—it's something to aspire to. Both, we don't live in it, and it's something we should do. So, you open the pages and you realize this is something that is good, even as you're hearing it denounced everywhere from the Vatican to the White House.

Debi: Capitalism is one of those terms that is known, so people hear "capitalism" and they think they know it. Part of what Ayn Rand lays out is a very different view of capitalism, a full laissez-faire capitalism. That is just something the world hasn't seen yet. So, another intriguing title. The next one that I can think of is also pretty intriguing. It's one that I wasn't for sure what it was about when I saw it. That's *The Romantic Manifesto*. So, I had heard of the *Communist Manifesto*, which is the manifesto most people are familiar with. What was that? That was the plan, the communist plan, laying out exactly how communism would work and why it was the right worldview. So, here we have Ayn Rand who is talking about a Romantic manifesto. What does she mean by Romantic?

Elan: It's a book about her view of art and its role in life. Also, the urgent need for putting what she regarded as Romantic art, which is a school of art, and that it needed a philosophic basis. It was falling apart. This is a symptom of her view of society. So, it's like the *Communist Manifesto*, except the *Communist Manifesto* was a radical book in changing society. This is a radical book in what art needs as a foundation for its future, if it's to survive and have that positive role in man's life.

Debi: She had a certain view about what art was good art and what art was bad art and why—why it was important to care about it—what the relationship was to one's life.

Elan: . . . Which is totally anathema. If you walk into the Tate Museum or any other major museum . . . art having

standards? If it's on the wall, it's art. She says, "No way."

Debi: The next one that stands out is for me is *For the New Intellectual—New Intellectual*.

Elan: Yeah, and if you have been on campus, you might wonder, why new? I mean, we have lots of intellectuals, some people say we have too many, and she had a distinctive view of both their role in society, their importance, and the fact that the ones we have are not the kind who are really advocating the right ideas and supporting freedom and capitalism. They are undermining it. And this is part of her view of what is going on in the world. She had a radical view of the role of ideas and shaping society and therefore the importance of having intellectuals as steering the culture and that their abdication of that responsibility is disastrous.

Debi: So, here we have her message to . . . the New Intellectual, in her view, is somebody who is going to pursue an intellectual career in a certain way. And what that means, and what its implications are, and how one actually can see ideas actually change the world as opposed to talking about ideas changing the world. So she's got her message for the people who are going to do that, the New Intellectuals, and yes, she has some comments on the current intellectual state of her time. So, another interesting title, and then we have one about the New Left.

Elan: The subtitle is really where the . . . that's the striking point. She said, *The New Left: The Anti-Industrial Revolution*. And if people remember their history, the Industrial Revolution was a momentous period in human civilization of bringing enormous wealth in industry and so forth and revolutionizing the world in every respect. She says the New Left, which everyone heralded as "this is the blossoming of freedom in society, the liberation of all mankind." She says, "No. These people are going to . . . their aim is to tear down the industrial world and take us back to living in primitive society—primitive nature, actually."

Debi: Right. So, at a time where everybody else in the world was really praising the stopping . . . they wanted to stop progress in a number of different ways, here you have Ayn Rand actually championing progress. And what she does and the way she views industrialization and its role in the world, and how it's not just something that happens by magic—it actually requires a lot of effort, and it requires the best in people to produce. Yet there is this real lack of understanding or appreciation for that whole process and how it comes about. So yeah, just understanding the role of industry and the role it has in our lives. I think that is something she made clear in a way no one else did.

Elan: Yeah, I mean, it's hard to believe, but she . . . I think one of the editions had a cover of a factory on it. And I remember thinking, "Oh, factory, boring. Who could be interested?" And then, having read the book, I came away thinking, "Wow, a factory is a monument to the advancement of human civilization. Skyscrapers—those are something that symbolize our progress." And there are people in this world who want to tear that down.

Debi: Now, you may not be able to tell this from the title of the collection, but Ayn Rand herself said that this collection she wrote for college students and for people who work with college students. It's for those people who were looking for a voice of reason to turn to.

Elan: And you can understand that better if you realize that at the time there were massive student protests and a lot of concern about what's happening to the next generation. She says to understand these upheavals you have to understand what's happening in the schools—the impact of progressive education as an ideology, and in the university. You have to understand the role of and the impact of ideas from the Left, particularly the New Left, and how that shapes people's actions and views.

Debi: Now, part of the reason she appears to be able to see these issues in a way that nobody else is, is she placed a certain value on philosophy. And, actually, the last of her nonfiction titles, that I want to raise at least, is one that I thought should have a question mark in it when I first saw it, *Philosophy: Who Needs It*. It doesn't have a question mark at the end of it.

Elan: Why is that?

Debi: Well, everybody, actually, whether they explicitly know it or not, operates on, and needs to operate on, a philosophy—a set of ideas that guide your life. In fact, not doing so would lead to death. That's pretty dramatic. So, we think of philosophy as being something that academics do in the university setting—it's ivory tower, it's detached, it's about "up in the mind." For Ayn Rand, her view was that philosophy is what makes the world move. It's what you need to understand in order to live life. It's not about the floating abstraction. It's about how to actually take action day to day.

Elan: Yeah, and what's striking is it has both perspectives. It has both the impact of philosophy on a society, on a civilization at a macro level—but then it spoke to me personally, not just my time of life while reading it, but it says, "You—your life is in your hands, and you need to realize that choices you make have an implication for what you do and you should be conscious about that. And that is the role of philosophy. You either have it and choose it, or you put your life out of control and abdicate.

Debi: So, that's the nonfiction, but I found the titles of the fiction to be equally intriguing.

### 3. What's on the shelf? Overview of Rand's fiction

Elan: *Anthem*? So, what is . . . an *Anthem* is a song celebrating some ideal or country, typically. What is she singing an *Anthem* to? And it is a lyrical book. It's almost like a poem relative to her other fiction works. You read it, and you will be surprised to find that it's an *Anthem* to the ego in man's life, in a radically new conception of what that is. We mentioned *The Virtue of Selfishness*, and that is a radical conception of morality based on an individual's life. Here she dramatizes it. And it pits the individual and his value—sings the praises of that—in contrast to a society that crushes individuals. It's a society where there is no "I." There is no pronoun "I." There is just "we."

Debi: What she shows in the book is what happens to an individual when the concept "I" is gone, when there is no way to . . . there is no individual apart from other individuals—what the consequences are to an active-minded person and what happens on, as you said, a macro level, to the society at large. So yeah, her *Anthem* is to the meaning and glory of man's ego. That's a very different anthem from the typical one.

Elan: Yeah, I mean, what's really interesting is just that word on the setting. A lot of other authors have written books about the future where things go wrong, and in a certain way *Anthem* is like that. Whereas they portray the future as highly technological and advanced, she says, "Well, if you crush the individual, all of that goes away." And it is a surprisingly backward society, and it's logically tied to the theme. So it's interesting that she sees the future as backwards when you subtract the individual.

Debi: The next book is *We The Living*. Now, *We The Living*, if you think about it, this was a book that was set in Communist Russia. It's about a young engineering student who has some aspirations, where she understands her life to be, actually, a sacred treasure. But here she is in a setting where the society around her is doing its best to completely, again, but not in such a futuristic type setting, but something that really happened in history, Communist Russia, to wipe out that individual in favor of the collective. And here is the story of what happens to an individual like Kira in such a setting. Yet, the book is called *We the Living*, not *We the Being Crushed*.

Elan: Yeah, I think . . . one of the ways she put it is, here is what happens when these ideals of the communist system—the collectivist outlook in philosophy—when they are realized, and she thought they were realized. What does that do to those who most want to live and succeed in the world? And it's striking that those are the people who suffer most. And the ones who rise—and this is really part of her warning to America—those who rise are the worst among men. And that is inherent in a system that crushes individual freedom.

Debi: So, what about the next title?

Elan: Yeah. With *The Fountainhead*, it's the "fountainhead" of what? There is a real question in the title and I think she answers that in a fascinating way, by showing the role of individualism, not politically so much in the way *We The Living* is a political book, but in an individual's own life.

Debi: In his soul.

Elan: In his soul. There is a logical dimension to it. She pits two characters who are as different as they could be in terms of . . . one is truly first-handed, which is her view that you take the world on yourself, and the other is . . .

Debi: Anything but.

Elan: . . . anything but, yeah.

Debi: The other is somebody who borrows his vision. He borrows his ideas. He will do whatever it is that he thinks is expected of him. So he has no self-guided set of actions here. And this book really shows what it requires to be an individual, to be an individual with integrity in a society that just does not value independence or integrity. So it's the "fountainhead" of man's independence and what it takes for him to create that soul.

Elan: Yeah, and even . . . you could expand on that and say the "fountainhead" of his virtue—the means by which he can achieve the values he wants and his success, and the importance of sticking to your own vision, your first-handed vision, not letting other people kind of intercede for you.

Debi: And then the final title is *Atlas Shrugged*. You know, we know from Greek mythology, there is a figure of Atlas who is holding up the world. Now, what does it mean to hold up the world? And, what happens if Atlas were ever to let go, if he were to actually shrug the world from his shoulders? That is what that novel is about.

Elan: It really sets in motion a lot of questions for people when they read the book. Some of those you just indicated: Who is Atlas? Who is really creating the values in society? Who are the heroes? In our culture, we have a very clear view of what heroes are. A lot of people would say someone like Mother Teresa is a hero, you know, and Ayn Rand's vision of what a hero is, is the farthest thing from Mother Teresa, and yet it's still different from what people think an individualist—egoist type character would be. I mean, she sings the praises of an industrialist, an inventor . . . a railroad executive.

Debi: A composer . . . a banker.

Elan: A philosopher.

Debi: So she's writing about people that are actually accomplishing a fair bit, but in her view, these are what normal people should be like—yet they are anything but normal people. And what would happen if what we view as Atlases . . . what happens if they shrug?

Elan: What would be the reasons for them to do that? There is a real mystery in this story, and I wanted to touch on that. Because as much as it's a projection of heroes, it isn't a simplistic morality tale in the way that if you have read morality tales there is stock characters. These are people you would want to meet. You get enmeshed in their lives and their adventures. It's an exciting book. I recently re-read it. I could not put it down. I have read it a few times, which just says there is something inherently captivating about the story telling, the suspense. The questions that I know the answer to with having read it before, but yet the logic of it pulls you in, and then the dynamism of these characters and what obstacles they face and how they face up to those. But, in the end, it leaves with a positive of the vision of a human spirit that you cannot find elsewhere. In a story that weaves that into every detail and subplot. It's an experience. There are certain books you read and you toss away. You won't remember them. This is a book that will alter your view, will make you question things about your life. What is good and bad in life, good and evil, and the people around you.

Debi: And, not just raise the questions. I think this is a really important point. If she just raised the questions, I think that would be intriguing. But, it's more than intriguing. It's inspiring and it's something that a lot of people when they report, I read *Atlas Shrugged* and it changed my life in this way or that way. They can explain to you why that is. So, that the novel actually raises questions for them, but Rand through that novel, provides answers. She provides her

view of what a correct moral code entails. By presenting what sounds like a very abstract set of ideas, it actually shows you how it applies to one's life and how one can change course if one chooses to.

Elan: The way I remember the experience reading it as a teenager is it holds up for you a world and what it could be. It says to you, you could achieve this. It's within your means, and this is what a good society could look like. It's a world you want to live in and help realize.

#### **4. A closer look at *The Virtue of Selfishness***

Debi: Let's take a closer look at some of these books now. The one we started with the story with your friend, *The Virtue of Selfishness*. What is inside the cover of that? Let's look at that because that is an intriguing title, *The Virtue of Selfishness*. What Ayn Rand is talking about in that book is her ethics. We have a series of essays where she lays out what her view of ethics is and how it would work in the world. One of the interesting starting points for me is, "The Ethics of Emergencies." Now, we often hear about ethics put in the terms of emergencies. You hear of ethical dilemmas, right? You and I are in a life boat, we have food for one of us, there is no help insight, who should get the food, me or you? How do we decide that? So, often we hear about ethics being put in terms of these very rare situations where we have to choose who should sacrifice, me or you. Now Rand rejected that view of ethics. In the essay, she does answer the question about what one should do in a emergency, but her view is that ethics is not about the emergency situation, ethics is about how one interacts with other people in day to day life. Ethics provides a guide to decide what actions to take and not take because of the other people. So, from her point of view, ethics is not about the emergency situation. It's about life.

Elan: Yes, it's even more than how to deal with other people. That's definitely an important part. I think it's even more, how do you guide your own life, your own individual course in life and the necessary judgment that goes in with that? I think she is also pushing back on the conventional view, which you have indicated is wrapped up with the idea that sacrifice is inevitable. The question is to whom and for what? Is it society or the other person in the lifeboat? And, she is saying that is inherently not a guiding philosophy because it's not very practical. That creates this view of morality is divorced from day to day life from your own values.

Debi: The only time you think of morality is in an emergency when you're faced suddenly with the question, what should I do? I'm in an emergency. Now what do I do? Her view is, you don't wait for the emergency to decide how to approach those questions.

Elan: Typically, morality is – as she says in the essay – collectivized ethics. She turns to that. It's wrapped up in what does society want of you? What is your role? How do you adjust yourself to society? You hear this politically in, will society let the hungry go hungry? Who will take care of the sick? She says you're conceiving of the issue from a collective view. You should think about it's the individual's own life. He is responsible for thinking about how to achieve his ends, to succeed and be happy and accomplish what he wants to do in his life. That is not wrapped up in any required sacrifices. In fact, she says morality should be free of them.

Debi: There is an example that is coming to mind from the fiction. We mentioned the novels that Ayn Rand wrote. In one of the novels, *Atlas Shrugged*, we actually see this issue if collectivized ethics come up. Here is an example that I always found very interesting and it just explained the issue for me. There is an industrialist who creates a new metal. It's a new metal that is better, it's stronger, it can be used in all kinds of new ways. It's a revolutionary metal here. What happens is the question becomes who should control the access and use of that metal? Shouldn't that metal be available to everybody? If it's so good, shouldn't that be available to everyone? So, why should only this industrialist be able to sell that metal? What about the public good in everyone else? Now, in this case, we have an industrialist who eventually stands up and says, the "public good be damned." So, that tells you something about Ayn Rand's answer to the question. But, it was interesting in *Atlas Shrugged* we see her ethics played out through the story.

Elan: This collectivized view is pervasive in the culture, not just in ethics. You indicated a political example too in

that of Henry Rearden the industrialist. I think she had a view of collectivism as really on the rise in America and as having no place in it. I think the essay "Racism" really brings that to light.

Debi: Yeah, it does. "Racism," what Ayn Rand is analyzing there is what happens when people take the physiological characteristics of a person and judge that person by those things that he doesn't control at all: his physiology, his genetics, his background. Ayn Rand actually called that one of the lowest, crudest, most primitive forms of collectivism. She rejected any kind of racist type of approach to an individual and judging people by that nature. We see that played out in her fiction too.

Elan: It's fascinating because in *We The Living*, which is set in soviet Russia, is an example of a society ruled by this idea of collectivism. Even though they are not judging people by skin color, or by more obvious things like a tribal identity, they are judging people by un-chosen characteristics. In a sense being collectivists or a form of that, and it's just as bad. It's horrific. The example is Kira Argounova who is purged from a university or there is a threat of that kind of thing, because of who her parents and ancestors were; which is, in essence, the same kind of thinking that the clansmen have about black people being inferior. It's their un-chosen characteristic, which is a form of collectivism.

Debi: We see in the novel, we see Kira and the other characters as being asked over and over again, or being branded over and over again, because of what the family, the father and the grandfather and the generations prior have done. It doesn't matter what Kira has done. It doesn't matter what her potential is, what she is capable of. It's a prejudgment based on things that have nothing to do with her own life or success.

Elan: You could turn it the other way too. In elevating the proletariat, which is the communist version, the proletariat is good because it's to downdraught it. That is a form of judging people by membership in a group, which not even clearly that is a group, but that is the view, on the Marxist view. I thought the other interesting essay that really struck me is that it starts with a question. A lot of Ayn Rand's work prompts questions, and I think here she is really offering a fascinating answer. "Doesn't life require a compromise?"

Debi: Right, you hear that all the time. Life requires compromise. That is how we get along with one another. You give a little, I give a little, and we are all happy and we get along together. Marriage requires compromise. Work requires compromise right. Ayn Rand's view is she rejected that life requires compromise the way most people describe compromise. Now, she describes that there is a legitimate form of coming to an agreement on something, and then there is a form of what is called compromise where one person is actually giving up or sacrificing a moral principle. In that case, she says, compromise is not an option.

Elan: A great example is, I want to sell you my car and I want twenty-five thousand dollars for it.

Debi: That's too much.

Elan: Sorry, but that is what I want. So, we can agree that you have to pay some price. That is sort of the basic groundwork, the principle that we agree to. Then, we can compromise within that. I think that is a legitimist context for compromising on a detail.

Debi: Now, here is a situation where I would say that would not be true. What if you have two cars and I want one of them. So, I come over to you with a gun and say, you have got two cars. I need one. Give me one. You still have a car. If you give me one, you still have a car.

Elan: Right, but I think there our analysis would say I have caved in and in a sense sacrificed the principle or abandoned the idea that if we are going to trade, that is part of what you have to do. Agree to the idea that it's my property. You have to exchange value for it and give me money. You're basically just taking it. There is no trade. It's not a compromise.

Debi: There is no agreement of principle if you're at the other end of my gun.

Elan: That is right. The other thing that is really striking here is you mentioned that the subject of the book is ethics. One thing people, after talking about compromise, will say, well, there are a lot of cases where we clash. We have conflict all over the place. She addresses that.

Debi: She does. There is an essay about the conflicts in man's interest and whether or not they would really be such conflicts in a rational society. Ayn Rand's view is that there would not. If people are actually operating in a rational society, they may have competing claims, but that doesn't mean that their claims are in conflict with one another. There is an example in the essay that helped me understand this point. Say you and I are competing for a job.

Elan: I get it.

Debi We'll see! We are competing for it. We will see. We are both competing for the job and let's say you get it. Is there any conflict between the two of us over this situation?

Elan: Before reading the essay, I would have said obviously. Her answer is, not if you really understand what it means to have a conception of your interest. I think there is a lot that she sheds light on to suggest that people don't understand that your interests are not obvious. This goes to the issue of the title of the book, *Selfishness*. Selfishness, people think, is the easiest thing to do - you have to just grab at things. Her claim is no. Understanding what is in your self interest is a long-range conceptual prospective that requires thinking. It requires bringing a large context to your thoughts. So, in the example of pursuing a job, I feel hard done by, but, my feeling or my whim if it's such, is not a guide for what is in my interest. In fact, the larger context would say, it's better to be in a society where we can compete for a job than in a society like *We The Living*, where you're either handed a job or you have to go and beg for one and pull strings and so forth. So, there is a whole context assessing, have I lost out here? You can multiply the examples, it's not just in the case of a job.

## **5. A closer look at *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal***

Debi: So, let's turn to one of the other books and take a look inside the cover there: *Capitalism The Unknown Ideal*. Now, most people think they know what capitalism is. Isn't that what we have now? We have capitalism. It's kind of something we hold our nose and go about. It's one of those evil necessities that allows us to have the standard of living that we do. But, capitalism for most people has some very negative associations with it. It's people who are greedy, bloodsucking, Wall Street types that will cut any corners to get what they want. Now, that is what people typically hold as capitalism. What Ayn Rand's title implies is that perhaps capitalism in the way you think you know it is wrong. Maybe there is a system, and she lays this out in her book. Proper capitalism looks different and it actually is an ideal, not something that we put up with. So, that is what she is covering in this set of essays. Now, when we step back from the book, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, and we look at *Atlas Shrugged*. We see a certain kind of set of characters in there that are worth talking about for a minute. So, a lot of business men in *Atlas Shrugged*, which already makes it an unusual book because it's about business men and what they do. Now, you have two kinds of people in there. You have Hank Rearden who we come to see as a hero and Dagny Taggart, we come to see her as a hero. What are they doing? They are engaged in a certain kind of productive activity that requires them to take all kinds of actions and make all kinds of decisions. We see people who are generating wealth who are creating values. There is a set of activities that they are engaged in that we associate as business. But, then there are these other people in the book that are also labeled businessmen. But, instantly we can see that what they are doing is very different. What are they doing?

Elan: It's not productive activity. The sharp contrast is Henry Rearden is an industrialist in the steel industry. He spends years developing an new kind of metal that is valuable. And, it takes a lot of thought, investment and long range planning. One of the competitors in the industry is a man called Orren Boyle and he spends years cultivating political relationships. He is not essentially doing productive work. He is looking for handouts, subsidies, advantages through his political pull. There are other characters like him. He is the sharpest example of that. We see that in real life too. This is part of what happens in people's view of capitalism. They see there are business men who do both kinds of things. Orren Boyle is exactly the kind of guy who would cut a corner. That does happen and he is a



schemer. He is not concerned with his long-range success. He doesn't value his customer and doesn't deliver his orders. It's to that extent that he is not engaged in business.

Debi: In *Capitalism The Unknown Ideal*, in the real world setting, Ayn Rand is describing these two types of people that get lumped together and are certainly not of equal standing, according to Rand. One of the essays that grabbed my attention, just from the title, was called "America's Persecuted Minority: Big Business." Now in the time period that Ayn Rand is writing, there is a lot of talk about minority groups. There is talk about the blacks, about women's rights, so "minority" is a term that people have become familiar with. But what Ayn Rand says in this essay is, there is a minority group of big business that is actually attacked and vilified in a way that, if these kinds of attacks and vilification were occurring with one of the other minority groups, people would stand up and not tolerate it. Here, in this case, because it's businessmen, we tolerate it. This is the group that actually produces what it takes for us to enjoy our standard of living. We rely on them for a lot of things that we just take for granted day-to-day. For Rand that persecuted minority is the Rearden. It's the Dagny Taggart. It's the people who are actually these productive businessmen. Now, there are real life equivalents of those and she talks about them in an essay in this book.

Elan: That is the "Notes on the History of American Free Enterprise." The history actually is unknown and therefore that is part of what happens to capitalism's reputation and moral standing. That is part of what she addresses.

Debi: In "America's Persecuted Minority," what Rand is sharing with us is her view that the businessmen that we count on, we count on them to keep producing all these things that we enjoy. Yet, we persecute them. We vilify them. We attack them. So, she has a very strong defense of that kind of proper businessman the way she views it. Now, why do people lump together this group of really virtuous people with the kind of people that we associated that slimy side of "capitalism?" She does another essay in there called "The Pull Peddlers." What pull is being peddled? What does that mean exactly?

Elan: I think this refers to the mechanism in a mixed economy. Not a Laissez-Faire economy not capitalism, but the kind of society we have today, where there is some freedom, but large regulation and control and subsidies and handouts for business, in which the pull is political favor. The peddling is done by those in Washington who have access to . . . well, I can give you a subsidy. I can help you with a tax break. I can do this kind of favor for you. It's sort of horse trading. It's ugly. It's sort of thing in *Atlas Shrugged* this occurs – the archetype practitioners are Orren Boyle and Jim Taggart who in the story is running the railroad. This is exactly what happens in a society where the governments power extends beyond its proper function. I think that is a topic we will touch on. Meaning, it's not merely protecting the freedom of individuals to act and produce. It's actually going into the economy and setting controls and regulations and telling businessmen what to do in ways that are inappropriate and wrong, and contrary to protection of freedom. That creates the ability for government to play favorites and pick winners and losers. It brings to the surface the worst kinds of businessmen, the Orren Boyle types. The ones we see today, who deservedly have a bad name, but we shouldn't assume that all businessmen really have this motivation. There are businessmen who want to produce and excel at it. In fact, we wouldn't be here without them.

Debi: The mixed economy that we have, as you mentioned, it brings out the pull peddlers up to the top, because of each of the systems. So, in *Atlas Shrugged*, even Hank Rearden at one point hires a man in Washington. He doesn't want to have to deal with that, but how are you going to work in this system unless you have a man in Washington? So, even a Hank Rearden has to turn attention to how this gaming system works.

Elan: It's fascinating because it even pushes the good people to have to deal with a bad system. It pollutes the whole economy. It's a parallel with *We The Living* here because it's exactly this kind of statist system, where in the soviet model it's a total system and it really does bring out the worst. It's inherent in having a society where the state has so much power to dispose of people not just their wealth and simple redistribute it in our society, in the mixed economy. But, in the soviets it's there to dispose of your life. So, when that power is put in the hands of government, it brings the ones who want unearned benefits from the state. Those are the pull peddlers and the pull traders.

Debi: So, for me, the fact that these two essays are in one collection, I find that to be very interesting. Let's not put

together America's persecuted minority with the pull peddlers and call them one group of people, businessmen. They are very different. Those two essays help bring out the differences in them.

Debi: So, we just talked about one of the important topics that Rand covers in this collection. That is her view of businessmen and her assessment of what a proper businessman is versus the pull peddlers. That is just one of the topics where she does that kind of, here is the ideal. Here is what you think you know, but here is actually a very different way of looking at it that actually yields a different result. So, some of the other topics she covers, I think would be interesting to hit them so we have a sense of what else is in this collection. First, "What is Capitalism?" Isn't the US a capitalist country? We describe it that way.

Elan: Most people think of us that way.

Debi: Yeah, most people think of us that way, yet don't we have this very system of subsidies and favors and pull peddling that Rand is discussing? So, if that is not capitalism, what is capitalism? She actually lays that out in detail in terms of what that system would really look like if it was truly Laissez-Faire. What about government? In this essay she has got an essay on the proper role of government.

Elan: That is an issue that people rarely think about because they take the society that we live in as normal and part of nature and always being this way. Yet, the nature, the proper nature of the government is an important question that needs to be rethought and that is part of the thrust of her essay. You don't understand exactly what government should be. You're just looking at what government is and the way it is, is destructive. It's inimical to freedom. A proper society looks very different. The other one that comes to mind in this context is Rights. Everyone thinks they have rights to this, rights to that, rights to healthcare, rights to an education.

Debi: Rights to minimum wage. Right to a job. Right to . . . yes.

Elan: You just proliferate them. She says, stop. No, this is not what a right is. She has a specific, precise definition of individual rights. That is very unusual for someone to go to that. That is the sort of thing the Founding Fathers were doing, re thinking about that concept. She is saying, people don't understand that. There may be a handful of people engaged in this work that do. Everybody needs to rethink what they believe about these issues.

Debi: Rand says in the essay, "Man's Rights," yes, individuals do have rights. So, yes rights are a proper concept, but only if we define them properly and consistently with man's nature in the context of this political system, capitalism.

Elan: You have a right to be free to act, but you don't have a right to gain goods and so forth. That puts a sharp dividing line between the kind of rights we have today and the kinds that a proper government should be protecting.

Debi: Just a final example of some of the things that she covers here where her perspective really brings into question the commonly held view, conservatism. I mean most people associate conservatives with being the pro-capitalist political wing.

Elan: They themselves present themselves that way. A lot of them believe that they are the champions of capitalism.

Debi: Rand's view is very different. There is an essay in the collection called, "Conservatism: An Obituary." Now, according to Rand, if you really pursue the conservative agenda, it would be the end of capitalism. So that essay lays that out a little bit more and explains why she thinks conservatives are no defenders of capitalism.

Elan: They have been important and instrumental in bringing down capitalism and expanding the mixed economy in the welfare state and all of the institutions we have talked about in terms of the pull peddling and the curtailment of freedom.

## 6. A closer look at *Philosophy: Who Needs It*

Debi: Let's talk about one of the other books that is in that collection that we discussed. This one sounds like it should be a question, the title of it. But, it really isn't a question. It's a statement: "Philosophy, Who Needs It."

Elan: She has a view that everyone needs philosophy. There is no escape from having a philosophic view or views in various forms. The question she puts is, do you choose them consciously? Are they consistent with each other? And, are you really questioning them? Or, are you letting things float into your mind overtime, absorbing views, and acting in a way that you're not fully in control of your life? You're being guided by ideas that you have not really chosen.

Debi: So Rand places value on philosophy, and she herself is a philosopher. And here, you know, I think it's important to recognize that there are some philosophers that she had tremendous admiration for, and her work, in a sense, grows out of a certain tradition. She was highly respectful of Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition. But as philosophy moves into the twentieth century, the quality of the philosophical ideas that are under discussion really deteriorates.

Elan: I think part of her analysis of why philosophy is so important, is that she sees it as a force in the world, as a power in human life. When you have good ideas—and she thinks America is the climax of a tradition of valuable philosophic ideas—when you have good ideas, that brings you freedom; it brings you progress. When you have bad ideas, or philosophy that's detached from the world and from life—that's part of her critique of some of the twentieth century's thinkers—you get into trouble. And that's part of what she's talking about when she's analyzing contemporary events. She's saying this is the playing out of Progressive ideas, which comes from a certain tradition, which she's critical of. Here, this is an offshoot of another view in contemporary philosophy which, again, she's critical of.

Debi: So because of her view of contemporary philosophy, Ayn Rand actually has sympathy when she hears how people today react when they hear the term "philosophy." Most people thing—and she understands why this is the case—most people think, "Philosophy has nothing to do with me."

Elan: Yes. She thinks part of that is the responsibility of philosophers active at that time, who have given the discipline a tarnished reputation.

Debi: They don't have anything to offer that's of use to the lay reader. But, the fact is that in order to operate in life, in order to live life, there are ideas that guide us, implicitly or explicitly. To that extent, every person does have a philosophy. Her answer is, every person does need philosophy. It's a matter of life or death.

Elan: I think part of the evidence that people rely on, or bring into their thoughts, philosophic views, and act on them actually: Think of some of the catch phrases we hear all the time, even some of us have used them. "It's true for you. It's not true for me." "Who can be certain?" Nobody. Or, "it's just human nature, what can you do?"

Debi: "Nobody is perfect."

Elan: "Nobody is perfect."

Debi: Rand actually talks about these examples in that title essay, "Philosophy Who Needs It". And, her view is those themselves are statements that stand on philosophy. Those are conclusions that come from certain ideas and certain view of life and a certain view of man. So, even right there, those abstract kind of statements and conclusions that people are using are an expression of philosophy.

Elan: They are using philosophy, but not realizing it. She puts the challenge to everyone reading it. It's your life. It matters. Choose correctly. Choose wisely. Pick ideas that you believe will lead you to success.

Debi: Following that lead essay, we have a number of articles where Rand is taking this idea that philosophy is inescapable and essential, and she shows us that in a number of different instances. So, no matter what field we are looking at, philosophy actually interplays with it and underlies it. So, let's talk about some of the other essays to give people a sense of what that relationship is.

Elan: "Take Egalitarianism and Inflation." The time she was writing, inflation was a severe problem; and who knows it might be coming back? At the time, what she brought to light is that in light of those economic problems that were racking the country, it was philosophy going unseen and un-identified that was really a major driving force behind that kind of problem.

Debi: Another essay where Rand looks at it from the prospective of the educational establishment, "The Stimulus and the Response." Anyone who has taken psychology at the university level is familiar with B.F. Skinner and the stimulus and the response theory. When you step back and you actually look at what BF Skinner is saying, Rand says that is just plain outrageous. It's ridiculous. How is it that an idea like that can come the prominent view in a field. So, she traces how that happens and how it's that philosophy makes possible the rise of a view like B.F. Skinners in the field of psychology.

Elan: Take "An Open Letter to Boris Spasky." I assume a lot of people don't know his name. He was a chess player from the Soviet Union. The thrust of her article is look at the role of chess in the Soviet system and how popular it is and the fact that so many bright people go to chess in that system. There is a profound point behind that, which is when you live in that kind of dictatorial society, chess becomes a kind of escape for the mind, the active type mentality. And, that this is a consequence of philosophic ideas, put into practice in a social system like communism, or the Soviet one particularly.

Debi: So, Rand's point is that philosophy actually enters every area of life, and she can help show what that connection is and how it plays out. There is a case that she addresses that I think is worth pausing on. That case is America. There is an article at the end of the collection called "Don't Let It Go." What is Rand talking about here? For Rand, America is a great philosophical achievement and America is actually something that she spends a fair bit of time in her writing, highlighting, and really praising its virtues. So, America is a philosophical achievement for Rand, and it has a certain cultural "sense of life." The essay explains what she means by a "sense of life." But, a sense of life in and of itself is not enough to carry a culture and to maintain a philosophic achievement.

Elan: What she is identifying is that America was a once in human history kind of event where philosophic ideas were brought by the Founding Fathers and their work in political science and political philosophy. We have been riding on that for a long time and that has influenced the way Americans live and think. It's at a level that is not explicit. It is very unstable and vulnerable to the influence of outside influences. The thrust of a lot of her critic of American culture is that it's being undermined by an alien philosophic outlook, a foreign, anti-American in certain ways, moral view, political view. That encapsulates the thrust of what she is doing here in terms of showing the role of philosophy both positive in America's founding, but also negative in how it is influencing our society.

Debi: Unless those ideas become explicitly identified and explicitly rooted out, that whole sense of life, that philosophic achievement, will be undone. It will be let go of. So, this is a call to action from Rand to actually look at those ideas and to make sure that we don't let it go.

## **7. What else is on the shelf?**

Debi: Well, it seems as though we barely scratched the surface here with Rand's writings because she has so many essays on so many different topics and newspaper columns and other articles that one could look at. For instance, one of my personal favorites is an article about Marilyn Monroe. Why would Rand write about Marilyn Monroe? She thought that Monroe was treated very unjustly for what she was projecting on screen. That said something about the culture that she wanted to comment on. So, she comes to the defense of Marilyn Monroe.

Elan: I wish we had time to talk about Ayn Rand's writings about the Apollo mission, and the achievement it represented and the way in which man's reason was vindicated and its power to reach to the stars was shown in such a dramatic form. The range of writings that Ayn Rand produced is enormous and in itself fascinating. As an ardent atheist, she loved Christmas. She wrote explaining why she did. She celebrated it. Or, in education, she was an opponent of the progressive movement, which took over education in America. She saw the damage that did to the mind. In her estimation, was so important in life. She was proponent for an alternative. The Montessori Method, which she believed was a way to foster the mind of children. So, if you visit Ayn Rand's works and you explore them, there is just so much there to appreciate and learn from.

## 8. Conclusion

Debi: Well, we've come to the end of our conversation today.

Elan: I wish we'd had more time to cover Ayn Rand's works. There's just so much more than we have space for.

Debi: For instance, Ayn Rand wrote a collection called *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology* where she lays out her theory of knowledge.

Elan: She also published her own periodicals: *The Objectivist*, *The Objectivist Newsletter*, *The Ayn Rand Letter*. In them, she wrote on practically every major issue of the day, drawing out timeless lessons.

Debi: In addition, there are publications that show us the interesting responses she gave to questions that readers sent in, along with information about the events she spoke at. It gives us a sense of what happened during the period where she was an active speaker and writer.

Elan: And after Ayn Rand passed away there was a string of books based on her own development. For example, a collection of excerpts from her journals. We can learn about the creation of *Atlas Shrugged* and how Ayn Rand's unique characters came into shape.

Debi: We can also read a collection of her letters, and that's fascinating because we see her engaged with other intellectuals of her time, with politicians such as Barry Goldwater, philosophers, and fans. Ayn Rand very patiently answers questions from all these people, and it really gives us an insight into what kind of person she was.

Elan: There are other books that really give us a sense of Ayn Rand as a thinker. One example is a book called *Ayn Rand Answers*. It's a collection of her responses to questions from audiences. Because they are live responses, one gets a sense of how quick she was to integrate the information that she needed.

Debi: These additional materials reveal the personal and intellectual Ayn Rand in a way that the articles we talked about just hint at. Finally, for anyone who likes the fiction, *The Early Ayn Rand* includes some shorter items, and they're collected in one place there.

Elan: Two books that came out in the last few years give us a sense of Ayn Rand's views of how to write fiction and nonfiction. It's fascinating to see her reveal her thinking processes, both about how to communicate her radical philosophical ideas, and how she views writing fiction from her own distinctive outlook.

Debi: The book about fiction is called *The Art of Fiction*. In it, she provides us with the questions she asked herself when developing the characters that we talked about. We get a sense of how she developed them and what her purpose was in creating them.

Elan: I think all of this just underlines that there's a lot here to explore. And much of what we've covered will be intriguing to people. I encourage them to explore those works that we've covered, and the ones we haven't had time for.

Debi: Within this section you will see that there are some "more to explore" items. We've gathered some information

to give you a sense of where you might want to go next. Also, here at Ayn Rand Campus, there is a range of courses on topics we've been talking about. We encourage you to explore them.

Elan: Thank you for joining us.

Debi: Thanks for joining us.

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