

Hank Rearden and the Exaltation of the Individual

Andrew Valentini

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John Galt begins his polemical radio speech with the seemingly obvious truism “I am the man who loves his life” (1, p. 1009). Such a statement is often void of intellectual merit and even contradictory in the nature of its ordinary, passing usage but when understood in the context of Ayn Rand’s system of philosophy and the general conflict present throughout *Atlas Shrugged*, this aphorism must be recognized as the highest expression of individualism and the underlying philosophy which pervades it. Such a statement is necessary to open Galt’s speech because all of the preceding declarations made throughout its entirety are referential to this underlying maxim which draws a clear distinction between the heroic industrial capitalist class that Galt represents and the collectivist looter class that advocates a perverted set of values through their moral code. In Galt’s speech, he attributes the spreading and blind acceptance of such a code to the “mystics” and their premises on human nature which first subordinate the individual to collective thought and then stagnate productivity so that their utopian world can be brought about. To arrive at a greater understanding of what this love of life entails, why its principles form a moral code that is opposed to that of the mystics, and how Ayn Rand’s system of philosophy expresses this, the mystics’ premises on human nature, the corrupted moral code which results from these, and the broader consequences of this will first be explained in greater detail and will then be analyzed through the character of Hank Rearden; a man who actively struggles to discern his own moral code from that of the mystics.

The first doctrine on human nature the mystics profess in order to convince individuals of their moral code and bring about their utopian society is that every aspect of reality, including our own consciousness, can be explained as deterministic material so the individual’s mind is therefore incapable of formulating objective truths. Because they reject the individual’s mind as an axiom for understanding reality, these mystics turn to society’s collective activity as a means of creating moral principles and explaining historical progression. In doing so, these mystics convince individuals that their own faculties of reason must be subordinated to the mind of society, for this is recognized as the only method to bring about a utopian society, thereby creating an obedient and unquestioning populace. The looting class is thus defined by a ‘sacrificial’ submission to the collective societal spirit and

is guided by its unchallenged definitions of morality, justice, and virtue constructed by their code. The dwindling industrial capitalist class that John Galt represents objects to this on the basis of an affirmed love for life that does not renounce the individual for any purpose and recognizes any such attempt to mean “self-immolation, self-abnegation, self-denial, self-destruction—which means: the self as the standard of evil, the selfless as a standard of the good”, thereby emphasizing why such a statement was necessary for John Galt to begin his speech with (2, p. 61). Those who accept the moral code of the mystics and surrender their minds are incapable of affirming such a love, for it is a profound affirmation of the individual’s paramount value; it is a “love in the actual meaning of the word, which is the opposite of the meaning they give it—love as a response to values, love of the good for being the good... Love for man at his highest potential” that such a code seeks to dismantle (3, p. 186).

With the individual squandered and its faculties of reason surrendered to collective thought by the mystics and their destructive moral code, humans are left with a thoughtless mind that is then easily filled with the auxiliary doctrines of such a code that the mystics profess. With the population’s manufactured mind in control, these mystics then turn it against the people’s own bodies by preaching a second doctrine on human nature; that such a mind belongs to a higher realm of existence than the shamefully productive body and its selfish motives. In doing so, the mystics stagnate industrial and economic production, fully controlling the population and able to begin building their utopian society. By accepting the mystics’ first premise on human nature; that the individual’s mind is fallible and therefore must be surrendered to collective thought in order to bring about a just society, and their second; that the body and its industrial production are to be despised since it does not work to achieve such a goal, the population’s disdain is turned toward those remaining individuals who reject such premises, those who choose to continue production in order to uphold the world under the ever-increasing restrictions and mandates rather than surrender their minds and believe in the fantasies told by those imposing such a condition upon the world through their moral code. Those few individuals who reject the standards being imposed upon them do so out of a love for life as John Galt heroically declares; a love that entails an understanding of the individual’s paramount value, the virtue of material production, and the inseparable connection between these two because “Productive work is the road of man’s unlimited achievement and calls upon the highest attributes of his character: his creative ability, his ambitiousness, his self-assertiveness, his refusal to bear uncontested disasters, his dedication to the goal of reshaping the earth in the image of his values” (4, p. 29). Those individuals who do not sacrifice their minds to the vast collectivism operating under the guise of public welfare are then declared selfish because they choose to continue producing over surrendering themselves to the delusions of bringing about a greater world formed by the mystics.

One character who recognizes the paramount value of the individual and chooses to love their life is Hank Rearden. Because Hank Rearden initially struggles with the mystics' premises on human nature and their moral code, his development throughout *Atlas Shrugged* offers readers a crucial perspective into the implications of these premises and their societal consequences. He initially endures constant torment from the looting class and his own family who accept such a code and berate him for being a greedy industrialist. Rearden can never bring himself to accept the looter's principles on the basis of a fundamental opposing disposition which is initially left unexamined but he allows the torment to proceed without objection and therefore is incapable of recognizing his own genius and allows his family to continually disrespect him: "He took it for granted—wordlessly, in the manner of a feeling absorbed in childhood, left unquestioned and unnamed—that he had dedicated himself, like the martyr of some dark religion, to the service of a faith which was his passionate love, but which made him an outcast among men, whose sympathy he was not to expect" (1, p. 128). To liberate Rearden from such chains, Francisco, one of the remaining individuals, praises Rearden's value and forces him to consider his reasons for sanctioning his family's actions and the code set forth by the mystics' premises on human nature.

By finally analyzing these dispositions with the assistance of Francisco, Rearden rationalizes his own code of morality which is fundamentally opposed to what is professed by the mystics and he recognizes that in choosing to permit the Morality of Death and his family's maltreatment, he is sanctioning such a code, which ultimately "means the moral man's approval of his own martyrdom, his agreement to accept—in return for his achievements—curses, robbery, and enslavement. It means a man's willingness to embrace his exploiters, to pay them ransom for his virtues, to condone and help perpetuate the ethical code which feeds off those virtues, which expects them and counts on them at the very moment it is damning them as sin and condemning their exponents to hell-fire" (5, p. 333). This culminates in Rearden's speech at his anniversary party, where he professes his then rationalized rejections of the mystics' premises on human nature and their collective moral code, proclaiming "I refuse to apologize for my ability—I refuse to apologize for my success—I refuse to apologize for my money" and from this point on in the story, he is no longer chained to the guilt associated with the looter's framework and thereby professes his love of his own life which entails an embrace for his rational self-interest (1, p. 480).

Beginning his speech, John Galt proclaims "I am the man who loves his life" to encapsulate the philosophy of the revolting industrial capitalists in a single statement and to rationalize the basis for their rejection of the looters' premises on human nature and the moral code that results from them. This love of life commends the individual's paramount value, therefore recognizing the flaw present in any moral code that seeks to subordinate this fundamental axiom. Hank Rearden represents a man who shares such a rejection but is

initially unable to rationalize the necessary foundation contained in John Galt's maxim so readers are given a crucial look into how complicity in a world dominated by the mystics' moral code affects a man. Rearden is initially abused by his family and berated by the public for being a greedy industrialist so he is unable to acknowledge his own virtue but, with the guidance of Francisco, is later liberated from such impediments to his ability by proclaiming this love for his own life and allowing the necessary physical actions to proceed from such a philosophy, eventually leading him to Galt's Gulch.

Bibliography

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